

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships

Lessons Learned in School Policy and Environment

Program Overview

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships (Start Strong) was a four year teen dating violence prevention initiative that worked to educate and engage middle schoolers in eleven communities across the country. The middle school years are a critical window of opportunity to stop dating violence before it starts. Brain science tells us that the early adolescent brain is highly receptive; early adolescence is the formative period for social emotional skills, values and empathy, which develop rapidly in a very short time. This time of rapid change, along with the power of parents and teachers as influencers in young teens' lives allows interventions during this time to greatly influence healthy relationship behaviors and impact malleable risk factors for dating violence. Targeting this younger cohort has tremendous potential to interrupt the cycle of interpersonal violence that often starts during adolescence, preventing a lifelong chain of health and behavior problems.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in collaboration with Blue Shield of California Foundation and Futures Without Violence invested more than \$18 million to develop, implement and evaluate a comprehensive community health model of healthy relationships education and teen dating violence prevention. Underlying Start Strong's comprehensive model of prevention was a belief that no single intervention or curriculum would eliminate teen dating violence. Success required a multi-faceted approach that could be adapted to work in any community.

Each site implemented four key elements of success:

- Educate youth in in-school and out-of-school settings;
- Engage those who influence young teens (parents, caregivers, older teens, health professionals and others);
- Leverage social marketing, both online and on-the-ground; and
- Change school policy and environment.

Rationale

The Start Strong framework is a prevention strategy, designed to promote factors that protect against the onset of violence among middle school age youth. The Start Strong initiative met young people where they already spent their time, connecting them to positive peer influencers, increasing their sense of self-efficacy, and establishing a community climate that promoted healthy and safe teen relationships. In addition to establishing positive social norms, the program provided stimulating opportunities for teens to strengthen their self-esteem and build leadership skills.

Prevention Where Teens Are: School Policy and Environment

The issue of teen dating violence is deeply intertwined with school and academic interests. Young teens spend much of their time in school and at school activities; it's where they learn social norms and form relationships with one another. And when relationships or social norms are unhealthy, school can also be the place where abuse occurs and where symptoms of abuse manifest.

But while studies have shown that dating violence places youth at serious risk for academic problems like truancy and drop out¹, and that half of teen dating violence victims experience some dating abuse on school campuses², research also supports the positive potential that schools and school climate have to prevent and protect against teen dating violence.

What is School Climate?

School climate is the school's social and physical environment which impacts student academic engagement.

Research shows that school climate can positively influence health and learning for students³, and that positive perceptions of

Why is School Policy Important?

- It's the foundation for allocating time and resources
- Policy increases awareness and responsiveness
- It allows schools to monitor incidents and outcomes
- It leads to improved school safety
- Policy supports changes in social norms

¹ (National Youth Prevention Resource Center, 2000),

² (Molidor & Tolman, 1998)

school climate increase pro-social and academic achievement behaviors among high-risk students⁴. School climate enhancement methods—such as violence prevention curricula, peer-to-peer education and promotion of safe and drug-free schools—can all be effective in improving student outcomes⁵. And not surprisingly, poor school climate and unhealthy social norms can be just as harmful as positive climate can be helpful.

Harnessing the great potential that positive school climate has to protect teens against violence and reinforce healthy relationship behavior begins with school policy. Establishing a positive school environment requires a concerted effort and school-wide commitment, a level of activity that can be difficult to sustain without a policy that explicitly outlines and supports it. Like seatbelt laws or food nutrition labeling requirements, policies change what is seen as normal and expected. Policy change in schools can have that same effect on teens' healthy relationship behavior and on positive school climate more broadly.

A New Vision: The Model Policy

Having identified the importance of school climate in efforts to prevent teen dating violence, Futures Without Violence conducted school policy research during the Start Strong initiative's early phases. The goal of the research was to assess the status of adolescent dating abuse prevention policies in middle schools and identify promising approaches to strengthening prevention policy. When Start Strong began in 2008, most school dating violence policies focused on high school and emphasized disciplinary and intervention responses to extreme incidents of relationship violence. Such policies centered on legal rights and responsibilities, neglecting to address the promotion of healthy teen relationships or the prevention of teen dating violence.

“Policy must highlight the behaviors we wish to promote, not simply focus on those to be avoided.”
Kelly Miller, Start Strong Idaho

A diverse group of Start Strong leaders and experts from the field reviewed existing policies and developed a comprehensive model policy for middle schools⁶. The model policy incorporates prevention, early intervention and response, and promotes a standalone dating abuse policy that takes a school-wide approach. The recommended approach incorporates dating violence prevention along with other forms of peer-to-peer violence, including bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Traditional school policy addresses observable behavior problems like fights, bullying and sexual harassment, while commonly neglecting to address the underlying context of which those behaviors can be symptoms; school climate, interpersonal communication norms, and dating relationship dynamics. The model policy bridges that gap.

Investing in the prevention of violence and dating violence at school involves defining and teaching behavioral expectations; acknowledging and rewarding appropriate behavior, and establishing a consistent continuum of consequences for problem behavior. The focus of prevention is on establishing a positive social climate in which behavioral expectations are directly taught, constantly acknowledged, and actively monitored. The Start Strong model policy follows this tiered approach.

The core elements of the model school policy include:

- School-wide prevention education for students, including the adoption of an evidence-based curriculum on healthy relationships and teen dating violence prevention
- Identification of a Prevention Coordinator to ensure policy implementation and monitoring
- Training programs for school personnel
- Parent notification and engagement in supporting a positive school environment
- Strong partnerships with students, parents, staff, and community agencies
- Policy response that identifies and addresses early warning signs
- Innovative intervention strategies to respond to teen dating abuse
- Monitoring plans to assess and report data related to school climate and teen dating abuse

Policy as the Pathway to Sustainability

³ (Freiberg, 1998).

⁴ (Haynes, 1998; Kuperminc et al., 1997)

⁵ (Marshall, 2002), (Harris & Lowery, 2002)

⁶ For the full model policy and a complete list of participants, see <http://startstrong.futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/school-and-districtpolicies-and-appendix.pdf>

Start Strong was committed to sustainability from the start. This meant an emphasis on institutionalized change in practices and programs. The new practices that result from policy change reinforce new norms and behavior, which lead to ongoing support and lasting change. But while policy adoption is an essential element of systems change, it is by itself not enough to sustain a lasting teen dating violence prevention effort. To accomplish sustainable change, Start Strong leaders learned that policy change must be nested within a larger strategy, including implementation support, data collection, monitoring and evaluation.

Tips for Success

Language Matters: Words matter, so choose wisely. The Start Strong model policy used new language and concepts to reflect its emphasis on prevention and focus on middle schools. Loaded terms like “perpetrator” and “victim” are judgmental and conflict with the accepting intent of a healthy relationships policy. The policy team chose terms like “alleged offender” or “accused student” and “targeted student” instead. These terms avoid labeling students, while recognizing that students are not one or the other, but sometimes the targeted student and sometimes the alleged offender.

Words can also introduce new ideas, reinforce values and empower. For example, using the word “upstander” instead of “bystander” communicates that observing students have the power to recognize unhealthy situations and take appropriate action.

Other language choices reflected new trends. “Cyber bullying” was changed to “electronic abuse” to integrate both cyber bullying as well as sexting and other abusive behavior that takes place through technology, as well as to reflect the term most currently being used by state laws.

But it is also important to stay abreast of the larger conversation and incorporate preferred terms as they evolve, remaining aware that new language does not always stick. Start Strong’s original model policy used the newer, more age-encompassing “adolescent relationship abuse” (ARA) in place of “teen dating violence” (TDV). But because federal policies and funding grant programs to schools still use “teen dating violence”, the policy was revised to match.

Connect to Other Issues: In the policy realm, it is rare to start with a blank slate. Start Strong worked to leverage and find ways to intersect with work that was being done on policies or issues related to teen dating violence prevention. For instance, in Start Strong Bronx, the school district already had a policy on sexual harassment that was in the process of being revised. Instead of pushing for a stand-alone teen dating violence policy, Start Strong Bronx integrated teen dating violence prevention and intervention into the sexual harassment policy. Likewise in Indianapolis, Start Strong connected the issues of bullying and dating violence to build on some momentum within the district surrounding a new bullying initiative. And because an active Juvenile Justice Task Force involving local and state policy makers was interested in the issue, Start Strong Bridgeport connected teen dating violence prevention with juvenile justice issues.

Capacity Building Is Essential: Start Strong sites varied in their comfort level and experience with influencing school policy. Through basic training, peer support and hands-on technical assistance, sites quickly became effective advocates. With training, program coordinators and participants can learn to translate programmatic experiences into stories and case statements to propose and support policy change.

Some sites underwent communications and policy trainings, while others utilized outside resources and experts. For instance, Idaho hired a former Department of Education staffer to work on their policy. But whether through internal capacity building or contracting with outside experts, sites found that in order to successfully change policy, it was essential to prepare sufficiently.

Finding a Champion Makes Your Job Easier: Having vocal advocates in your community and school system is critical to success in influencing policy. They could be teachers, school administrators, parents, school nurses, counselors or even the superintendent of schools.

Be Agile: Have a strategy, but be ready to change it. Policy change can leap forward based on current events or unanticipated opportunities. And just as often, policy advancement can stall because of the loss of a champion or the emergence of new priorities such as a budget crisis or local controversy.

Definition of Success Varies: Policy change is part of a longer term effort to improve school climate and establish positive community norms, making measurable success somewhat of a moving target. Start Strong sites found it helpful to recognize victories at every stage in the process, and remember that keeping the teen dating violence issue a priority in the community is a success in itself.

For Start Strong Wichita, success was including teen dating violence in mandated annual teacher training. As a result of Start Strong Wichita's efforts, all school staff now receive annual training on sexual assault, bullying, and teen dating violence the week before school starts and all middle and high school students will receive training the first week in school.

In Idaho, the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, lead agency of Start Strong Idaho, contributed to policy on the state level. The Idaho House and Senate Education Committee unanimously passed legislation in January 2013 to require Idaho's secondary schools to have a policy on the prevention of and response to adolescent relationship abuse and sexual assault.

Tell a Good Story: Policymakers respond to authentic voices and stories, whether they come from a youth, staff person or parent of a teen affected by violence. Parents and youth can be especially effective allies and champions, particularly when they are willing to tell their personal stories. Start Strong sites found it helpful to work with youth so they could participate in conversations with elected officials and policymakers whenever possible.

In Rhode Island, Ann Burke, the mother of a high school girl who was killed by her boyfriend, was essential in passing a state law in Rhode Island requiring schools to have a teen dating violence policy, and also persuaded RI Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse to be vocal in his support of the teen dating violence prevention provision in VAWA.

Implement Policy: The existence of a law or policy, whether at the school district, state or federal level is often not enough. Prevention programs can have a role in putting implementation supports in place and making sure people in the community know about the policy.

Start Strong Austin, led by Safe Place, played a key role when in 2007, Texas enacted a law requiring school districts to adopt a dating violence policy. Safe Place helped Austin Independent School District (AISD) implement their policy and helps the district monitor it in an ongoing way. They worked with AISD to create an online portal⁷ that makes the policy accessible to the public, and allows community members to file complaints, report violations, and locate community resources to help deal with incidents.

And when Indiana passed "Heather's Law" in 2010, the State Department of Education was charged with creating a central website as a resource for local schools. Start Strong Indiana partnered with the Indiana Coalition to present model policies and resources to help guide the process.

Collect Data: Accurate data is important to help advocates make the case for policy change. Monitoring and data collection are essential elements of policy change. The ability to monitor trends over time has lasting power to demonstrate the success of policies or the need for change.

As the National Program Office of Start Strong, Futures Without Violence worked with the Centers for Disease Control to revise and add teen dating violence related questions to the annual Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. With the input of Start Strong sites, the CDC was persuaded to add a question specifically on sexual violence within peer dating relationships. Previously, this type of information was not part of any ongoing data collection.

Small Successes Ripple on

Local conversations can quickly grow into powerful movements.

- 2006: Rep. John Lewis and Senator Mike Crapo supported a Congressional resolution designating one week in February as Teen Dating Violence week.
- 2010: Teen Dating Violence week was expanded to one month.
- 2013: Teen dating violence prevention was incorporated into the Violence Against Women Act. (*TDV was first added into VAWA in 2005, but more detailed prevention programs were added in 2013*).

⁷ AISD online portal: <http://www.austinisd.org/respectforall>

Start Strong Austin was also able to influence their city school district to include questions about hurtful and controlling behaviors in their Substance Use and Safety Survey to get a fuller picture of bullying and harassment in students' relationships.

Timing is Everything: Policy change is highly subject to outside influence. Any event or occurrence that attracts media attention or reaction from the public has the capacity to either grind policy change to a halt, or quickly usher it to success. Current events and media stories that attract attention to the issues of teen dating violence and relationship abuse are opportunities to turn community outrage or grief into constructive action. For instance, Start Strong Boston led by the Boston Public Health Commission, leveraged the buzz around the high profile dating violence incident between Chris Brown and Rihanna to jumpstart their policy efforts. And in Los Angeles, when a local student tragically lost her life at the hands of her boyfriend, Start Strong LA rallied the community to prevent further tragedy by ensuring the final passage of their teen dating violence prevention policy.

In addition to reacting to topical events, it is important to proactively leverage ongoing opportunities. October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month and April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month; all of these examples are opportunities to put teen dating violence prevention before policymakers. Always be on the lookout for opportunities to expand the conversation. As a result of interviews with stakeholders about their policy strategy, Start Strong Bronx learned of an opportunity to speak for two minutes to the New York City Education Panel, which meets once a month. This proved to be an excellent opportunity to raise the issue and connect it with other education issues.

A Word About Funding: The law prohibits private foundations from designating funds for lobbying. It is not within the scope of this document to discuss the legal parameters of lobbying for non-profits, but it is important to understand the rules in this arena.

Community Vignettes

First Steps: Start Strong Atlanta's team had little policy expertise at the beginning of the initiative, and because of a shake up in the school district, they had to spend additional time implementing the middle school curriculum, taking their focus away from policy. Nevertheless, due to Start Strong's leadership in Atlanta, they were seen as a key informant to the Georgia Commission on Family Violence's effort to develop a comprehensive state plan for ending family violence in Georgia.

As a result of this connection, the Georgia State Plan to End Family Violence (<http://www.gcfv.org/>) reflects the goals of Start Strong, such as expanding the use of evidence-informed teen dating violence curriculum in middle schools, and partnering with the State Department of Education to integrate teen dating violence information into existing bullying, health curriculum, and school climate initiatives.

Soup to Nuts: The Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, lead agency of Start Strong Idaho, saw strong policy change on the state level when the Idaho House and Senate Education Committee unanimously passed legislation in January 2013 to require Idaho's secondary schools to have a policy on the prevention and response to adolescent relationship abuse and sexual assault. The legislation subsequently passed the full House and Senate, going into full effect in July 2013. This change was the result of testimony by the Idaho Coalition and their partners who brought collaborative partners such as the Idaho Department of Education and St. Luke's Children's Hospital and engaged youth serving organizations. The Idaho Coalition also spent valuable time on making the case through talking about the scope and impact of abuse and how the promotion of healthy relationships and effective prevention policies is a way to stop teen dating violence. Through data, professional advocacy, and referencing existing policies, Idaho Coalition convinced state policymakers of the need for additional policy change.

Connecting the Issues: In April 2010, Indiana passed "Heather's Law", a mandate to the State Department of Education to develop dating violence educational materials and policies for schools around the state to implement. Start Strong Indiana was asked to comment and share Start Strong's goals with the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence and other stakeholders supportive of Heather's Law. As a result, the law included basic principles of dating violence prevention and prioritized work with middle school students. After the law was signed, Start Strong Indy partnered with the Indiana Coalition to present model policies and resources to the State Department of Education which was charged with creating a central website as a resource for local schools. Start Strong Indiana created a shortened version of the Start Strong policy,

outlining the essential elements with links to resources as an easy guide for stakeholders. They also connected the issues of bullying and dating violence, which built momentum within the district surrounding a new bullying initiative.

Taking the Long View: In October 2011, after ten years of advocacy, the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education voted to approve a resolution to promote healthy relationships and prevent teen dating violence—and it was based on the Start Strong policy. The resolution coordinates teen dating and sexual violence response and education, training for school staff, prevention education for students, parent engagement and education strategies, notice of the policy, and data collection and reporting requirements. Start Strong Los Angeles, led by Peace Over Violence (POV), took the lead in advocating for the change. They began by learning the system and proceeded to make the case, building relationships with key champions and looking for opportunities, while remaining agile in the face of District staff changes and shifting priority issues.

Small Steps, Big Impact: After working effectively with the Wichita Public School system to implement evidence-based teen dating violence curriculum in middle schools, Start Strong Wichita was asked to conduct a teacher training on teen dating violence as a part of the mandated annual teacher training. School staff will continue to receive annual training on sexual assault, bullying, and teen dating violence the week before school starts and all middle and high school students will receive training the first week of school. The principals have to verify that their staff and students have received this presentation every year. This is an example of organizational change versus formal policy adoption.

Program Outcomes

On behalf of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Blue Shield of California Foundation, RTI International conducted an independent evaluation of Start Strong.⁸ The Start Strong evaluation is one of the few studies to look in-depth at the dating relationships of middle school students. Although it is not nationally representative, the study sample included more than 1,500 7th-grade students from diverse geographical locations. The study collected data on teen dating violence behaviors, as well as risk factors linked to dating violence, such as gender stereotypes, sexual harassment and the acceptance of teen dating violence. The baseline data provide important insights into teen dating violence behaviors and risk factors among middle school students. In fact, 75% of students surveyed reported having had a boyfriend or girlfriend. And teen dating violence is not happening behind closed doors; more than 1 in 3 (37%) of students surveyed reported having witnessed physical dating violence in the last 6 months.

The outcome evaluation of Start Strong found sustained positive impact in a number of variables studied. Compared with students in comparison schools, short term results reported for students in Start Strong schools included:

- Lower acceptance of teen dating violence
- More positive attitudes toward gender equality
- More parent-child communication about relationships
- More support and satisfaction in their boyfriend/girlfriend relationships

Sustained impact on attitudes was reported:

- Lower acceptance of teen dating violence
- More positive attitudes toward gender equality

The policy evaluation assessed the adoption, implementation and sustainability of teen dating violence prevention policy efforts in *Start Strong* sites over the course of two years (2010 to 2012).

- By fall 2012, six of the 11 *Start Strong* communities achieved significant policy wins.
- As a direct result of their work, five sites secured important changes to teen dating violence -related school district policies. Sites also provided technical assistance and increased awareness that informed changes to state legislation.
- State legislation was strengthened in three states.
- All 11 sites established one or more practice changes that remained in place in the school year after the completion of *Start Strong* funding. Practice change included prevention education, staff training and parent education.

⁸ The complete evaluation report and data can be found at www.rwjf.org