What are some effective strategies to prevent teen dating violence?
Youth Action Strategies in the Primary Prevention of Teen Dating Violence

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This article describes a school-based youth-driven teen dating violence prevention project. The project objectives are to provide opportunities for students to plan presentations and activities; develop knowledge and awareness about unhealthy gender norms, seen as an important root cause of relationship violence, particularly for teenagers; and identify ways to cope with and influence their environment with respect to this issue. This project was conducted in a rural Wisconsin community over the course of 5 years.

It started as a multischool “drop-in” program with students from various high schools but eventually evolved into a youth action team at an alternative high school as a for-credit service learning class. Evaluation findings show the project to have promise in changing individual attitudes and beliefs while promoting bystander intervention. This youth-led health approach provides excellent opportunities for youth to become involved and empowered, and collaborating with schools can also be a successful strategy. Because unhealthy gender norms are so deeply entrenched, it is important to document and celebrate the smallest positive shifts in attitudes and behaviors.

KEYWORDS alternative high school, case study, gender norms, primary prevention, teen dating violence

Dating violence is commonly suggested to be a type of intimate partner violence (IPV) occurring between two people in a close relationship. The
needs assessment to identify risk, protective, and causal factors that should be addressed. To complete this needs assessment four focus groups were held with teens, professionals, parents, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth. Risk factors that emerged included (1) ongoing family violence, (2) economic problems, (3) mental health issues, and (4) unhealthy gender norms. All four focus groups identified the importance of gender stereotypes, such as that a male has the right or “duty” to be the controlling partner, or that a female’s worth is largely determined by having and keeping a male partner.

According to a World Health Organization report, males who hold traditional gender norms have a higher likelihood of committing IPV (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). It is also suggested that “sexual violence occurs in part due to peer support for sexually adversarial attitudes and behaviors amongst groups of men” (Brown et al., n.d.). Building on the notion that unhealthy gender norms are an important risk factor associated with teen dating violence, the health belief model (HBM) has been identified as a possible approach for primary prevention programs (Aiken, Gerend, & Jackson, 2001). The HBM is an extensively studied model of health behavior change that suggests that individuals who perceive themselves at risk for a health threat will take actions to reduce risky behaviors or to engage in healthy alternative behaviors. Donna Garske, with Transforming Communities, argued that gender norms support individuals’ knowledge-attitudes-beliefs-behaviors (KABBs), including those related to relationships (Garske, 2004). Garske suggested that changing unhealthy gender norms will reduce the risk of unhealthy relationships and teen dating violence.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM**

Two types of youth action strategies are most commonly cited in the literature. The first focuses upon social action and civic engagement where service learning opportunities and volunteering in a range of organizations is employed. This is done primarily to enhance the individual youth’s
experience in the world while assisting people in need or building community. The second has been called transformational youth action because it strives to alter the social conditions in a community that perpetuate a social problem. This transformational approach challenges the status quo and is concerned with changing political structures (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Borrowing in part from both types of youth action strategies, the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), in the rural Wisconsin county of Chippewa, was born.

Background
The YAC began during the 2004-2005 school year, with the goal of working to prevent teen dating violence through the collaboration of high school students across the county. The YAC met in the evenings and weekends; and, not surprisingly, the meetings were often poorly attended, impeding setting goals for the group and gaining momentum. In considering solutions, the program designers were influenced by the importance of “saturating” versus “sprinkling,” which the Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center (2008) eloquently described:

Addressing the most relevant risk and resilience factors and doing so in a way that will have the intended impact within identified neighborhoods, communities, schools, or cities requires bringing programs, practices, and policies to scale with adequate staffing, training, and funding. Too often, efforts are scattered, and precious resources are dissipated. Over time, it is critical to have enough saturation of programs, practices, and policies to have an impact on an identified population (e.g., a specific neighborhood, 14-19 year olds, etc.) and to be able to bring that investment to scale so outcomes can be sustained and violence will be prevented, rather than simply displaced to another location. (p. 4)

In 2005 and 2006 the YAC moved to the alternative high school, Chippewa Valley High School (CVHS), as an after-school program. Holding the group with just one school’s students as members meant shifting from an attempt to influence as many youth as possible—a “sprinkling” approach—to focusing on “saturating” that smaller group of teens for a more profound and longer-lasting impact.

Entry into the YAC was controlled; students were invited to join by CVHS’s social worker. Students who rejected relationship violence and seemed to be potential positive role models for healthy relationships were invited to join. Attendance stayed fairly steady over the school years, with about 10 to 12 students beginning each year and about 4 to 8 at the end. This attrition stemmed from students graduating at midyear, returning to their regular school, or dropping out of school entirely. A few students were asked to leave the group because they used violence or relied on sexist gender norms. The students then changed the name from the Youth Advisory
The class was co-taught twice a week by the Domestic Violence Prevention Enhancements and Leadership Through Alliances (DELTA) coordinator.

TABLE 1 Prevention Principles and Application in Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prevention principles</th>
<th>YAC class application</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriately timed:</td>
<td>Does the program come at an appropriate point in the participant’s development and ability to change?</td>
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<td>The students in YAC have often experienced IPV and feel strongly about preventing it in their and others’ lives, so the timing is ideal. They are also young enough to have a better chance of changing unhealthy attitudes and behaviors compared with an adult.</td>
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<td>Sufficient dosage:</td>
<td>Is there adequate exposure to the program’s material?</td>
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<td>Turning YAC into a class meant working with the students over an entire school year, meeting for 50 minutes twice a week for 9 months.</td>
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<td>Comprehensive:</td>
<td>Do the program strategies include multiple components and affect multiple settings to address a wide range of risk and protective factors?</td>
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<tr>
<td>The YAC class and student-created presentations address unhealthy gender norms and youth leadership development as a comprehensive strategy of building self-esteem while enhancing student change with a “learning while teaching” approach.</td>
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<td>Positive relationships:</td>
<td>Are strong relationships fostered between adults and youth?</td>
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<td>The class has two coteachers, plus undergraduate interns, who work on establishing positive and supportive relationships with YAC members each year. One of the coteachers is the school social worker who interacts with YAC members daily in that capacity.</td>
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<td>Theory based:</td>
<td>Is the program based on theories shown to lead to change?</td>
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<td>The Project draws on theories about gender ideology and creating change through addressing the health beliefs model of changing knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.</td>
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<td>Varied teaching methods:</td>
<td>Does the program use different methods, addressing different learning styles?</td>
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| The YAC class uses different teaching methods, including discussion, lecture, activities, and media to address the students’ learning styles. In addition, students often attend conferences to broaden their knowledge and experiences.
and CVHS social worker, usually with the assistance of undergraduate social
work interns from nearby universities. The first semester focuses on the
knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors underlying unhealthy and
healthy relationships, and the role of gender norms in relationship violence.
Constructivist learning theory suggests that one of the best ways to learn and
retain information and skills is to teach about them (Brooks & Brooks, 1993),
therefore the YAC spends the second semester designing and giving presentations,
primarily to middle schoolers in the county. The class also works
within CVHS all year to raise awareness of teen dating violence and the
qualities of healthy relationships. Although this approach has had many
successes, the project also has faced many challenges along the design
journey, particularly learning the public health approach and planning
strategies, as well as working with teens in an alternative high school.

Learning the Public Health Approach

In 2003 the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV)
learned that the CDC was interested in demonstrating new and innovative
programs that focused on the primary prevention of IPV. The CDC’s new
program was called DELTA. These “alliances” were local coalitions that the
CDC was interested in working with, called coordinated community
response coalitions (CCRs). CCRs work to improve the systems involved with
domestic violence and sexual assault victims and perpetrators, including
criminal justice and victim services. Members are largely involved in the intervention
of IPV; one aspect of the DELTA project was to test whether CCRs
can also incorporate a primary prevention focus: can they respond to existing
IPV and try to address its risk and protective factors in order to prevent it.

After being awarded DELTA funding by the CDC, WCADV invited
communities across Wisconsin to submit proposals for projects focused on
the primary prevention of IPV. Chippewa County’s CCR had a strong history
of interest in prevention, particularly for a youth population. Although very
interested in promoting prevention of teen dating violence, the CCR was
challenged by the learning involved in creating this project. For many
members, thinking in terms of primary prevention meant putting aside their
daily intervention mind-set and learning new mind-sets like the public health
approach. Throughout the early years of the project, CCR members attended
trainings held by WCADV and the DELTA coordinator focused on the differences
between primary prevention and intervention strategies.

In 2007 a survey was conducted in which CCR members (N=46) were
asked whether scenarios described primary prevention strategies. Although
most members answered with the desirable response on 6 of the 8 scenarios,
67% (4) of the members thought that holding a candlelight vigil to raise
awareness was a primary prevention activity. Candlelight vigils focus on
supporting survivorship and do not seek to stop root causes, such as