



Can Promoting Healthy Relationships in Middle School Prevent Teen Dating Violence?

Teen dating violence (TDV) is a growing public health concern. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, approximately 1 in 11 high school students (9.4%) report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend¹. In addition to undermining their individual growth and academic potential, dating violence and abuse puts young people at risk for serious injury and even death. It also increases their likelihood to engage in risky sexual behavior, substance abuse, unhealthy dieting behaviors, and suicidal ideation/attempts.

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships (Start Strong) was designed to reach middle school students, ages 11 to 14, before the incidence of dating violence reaches the levels seen in older teens. This multifaceted program aimed to promote healthy relationships and challenge social norms to prevent teen dating violence. Its core components were to: i) educate and engage youth in schools and out of school settings; ii) educate and engage teen influencers such as parents/caregivers, teachers and other mentors; iii) change policy and environmental factors; and iv) implement effective communications/social marketing strategies.

The *Start Strong* evaluation is one of the few, and largest, studies to take an in-depth look at TDV behaviors, attitudes, healthy relationship development, and prevention efforts involving middle school students. This independent evaluation, conducted by RTI International and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Blue Shield of California Foundation, offers new information on the dating behaviors and attitudes of middle school students and outcome findings to inform middle school prevention programs and teen dating violence prevention efforts.

1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 2011."





Prevention in middle school matters.

The outcome evaluation examined both student and teacher differences over time, in four *Start Strong* schools and four comparison schools, which did not have TDV prevention or healthy relationships programs. Data were collected at four waves (i.e., time points). Key findings included:

- Most students in the evaluation study were already dating, and many were experiencing dating violence at wave 1 (Fall 2010) while in 7th grade.
- *Start Strong* had a sustained positive effect on key factors linked to the prevention of teen dating violence. Students at *Start Strong* schools reported decreased acceptance of teen dating violence and more positive attitudes toward gender equality.
- *Start Strong* students with prior TDV experiences (victimization, perpetration, or both at wave 1), classified as high-risk, showed more positive results on some outcomes than students who did not report prior TDV victimization and/or perpetration.
- For at least one follow-up wave, high-risk students reported a reduction in bullying perpetration, a more positive school climate, more positive attitudes towards gender equality, and increased parent-child communication.
- No significant differences were detected between teachers at *Start Strong* teachers and comparison schools.

Policy change can make a difference.

The purpose of the policy evaluation was to assess the adoption and implementation of formal and informal policy related to TDV prevention and healthy relationship promotion in *Start Strong* sites. All 11 *Start Strong* sites participated in the policy evaluation over the course of two years (2010 to 2012). Key findings included:

- 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 TDV-related school district policies. Sites also provided technical assistance and awareness-building to inform changes to state legislation. State legislation was strengthened in three states.
- In addition, 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.
- *Start Strong* policy efforts raised support for TDV prevention, elevated the work of grantees, and led to other significant changes beyond written policy.
- Collaborations became more extensive and varied over the course of the initiative.





Prevention is possible.

There is a critical window of opportunity to teach young adolescents about healthy relationships and prevent TDV. We can speculate that continued and strengthened emphasis on improving student attitudes toward gender equality and challenging the acceptance of TDV might ultimately reduce dating violence behaviors among the *Start Strong* middle school students. Changing attitudes and behaviors is an important first step in transforming social norms about TDV. While there is a growing body of knowledge on TDV among older adolescents in high school, we need to better understand this young age group, especially adolescents who experience TDV at a young age. Findings also suggest greater emphasis on ongoing programming as well as on engaging teachers in school-based TDV prevention to increase effectiveness.

This evaluation reinforces the belief that young adolescents have enormous potential to respond positively to prevention strategies and multifaceted programs. It also identifies new pathways for how efforts can be sustained through policy and practice change to transform how teen dating violence is viewed and prevented.

About Start Strong and the Research

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships (Start Strong) was a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in collaboration with Blue Shield of California Foundation (BSCF) and Futures Without Violence. From 2008 to 2012, RWJF and BSCF invested \$18 million in 11 *Start Strong* sites across the country to promote healthy relationships among 11- to 14-year-olds and identify promising ways to prevent teen dating violence. RTI International conducted an independent evaluation of *Start Strong* on behalf of RWJF and BSCF. The *Start Strong* evaluation consisted of two parts: an outcome evaluation and a policy evaluation. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to assess the overall impact of *Start Strong* by looking at the effectiveness of the program among students and teachers; and the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of TDV prevention policy efforts in *Start Strong* sites.

