



# Teaching Adolescents About Abusive Dating

## Integrating the Safe Dates curriculum into Essex County, N.J., vocational schools' health education program

### SUMMARY

One in four adolescents report verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from a dating partner each year. And about 10 percent of students nationwide report being physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past 12 months, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>1</sup>

From 2008 to 2011, the School-Based Youth Services Program integrated the [Safe Dates](#) curriculum into ninth-grade health education classes at four high schools in the Essex County Vocational School District in New Jersey. The program—managed by the [University Hospital](#) of the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey—provides counseling, employment, health education, and other services to encourage teens to make positive life choices.

Safe Dates was part of Dating 101: Keep It Safe, a project that targeted the four vocational schools in Essex County: Newark Tech, North Thirteenth Street Tech, Bloomfield Tech, and West Caldwell Center. Most of the students attending those schools reside in Newark, East Orange, Orange, or Irvington—cities with high poverty rates and significant levels of community violence. In 2008, those four cities accounted for 10 percent of juvenile crime in the state.

Dating 101: Keep It Safe was funded through [New Jersey Health Initiatives](#), a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). For more information on [New Jersey Health Initiatives](#), see [Program Results Report](#).

### Results

The project director reported these results to RWJF:

- As of June 2011, 1,468 ninth-grade students at the four schools had completed the 10-session Safe Dates curriculum.

---

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Understanding Teen Violence Fact Sheet 2010.” Available [online](#).

- The project team, led by LaDonna Young, prevention program coordinator, trained nine health and physical education teachers and 26 peer leaders to deliver the Safe Dates curriculum. The peers were participants in Teens Networking Today for Tomorrow, a longstanding effort of the School-Based Youth Services Program. Peer leadership “was the strength of the project. It was very, very effective,” said Project Director Mary-Ellen Mess.
- Freshmen and sophomore classes attended “There Is No Excuse for Dating Abuse,” a play offered as a part of Safe Dates. Students also participated in a poster contest illustrating the play’s theme. A public awards ceremony recognized their contributions, and the Essex County Hall of Records displayed the posters during Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October 2010.
- Some 50 to 75 parents participated in four meetings each school year designed to build awareness of Safe Dates, encourage them to attend the play, and alert them to social services for adults and children confronting domestic violence.
- The project team, assisted by the Department of Preventive Medicine and Community Health at New Jersey Medical School, used pre- and post-tests and interviews with teachers and students to evaluate project outcomes. Among the findings:
  - Students who completed the curriculum showed improved awareness of dating abuse and strategies to avoid being either a victim or a perpetrator.
  - Of 25 freshman and sophomore students interviewed:
    - 56 percent said that Safe Dates taught them the definition of abuse. More than three-quarters of those respondents said they had not known that abuse can be verbal, for example.
    - 72 percent said they would be less likely to stay in an abusive relationship.
    - 84 percent said they would be less likely to abuse a dating partner.

“The main point of this program was to help kids define abuse,” said Mess. She noted that the project’s most startling result was a sudden realization among some teens that they were in an abusive relationship. “It was as if a light bulb went on in their heads, because they now had a reference point to say, ‘This is not OK.’ ”

  - All four teachers interviewed agreed that Safe Dates should continue, and that involving peer facilitators in delivering portions of the curriculum was important.
- Project staff made presentations encouraging other educators to tackle teen dating abuse. For example, staff promoted Safe Dates at an annual meeting of the National Staff Development Council, and at meetings of the New Jersey Education Association; the New Jersey Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance; and New Jersey School-Based Youth Services Directors.

## Lessons Learned

1. **Include enough lead time to recruit and train educators so a project is ready to launch when the school year starts.** Because Dating 101: Keep It Safe began in July, project staff had to begin presenting Safe Dates to students before completing the training of teachers and peer leaders. (Project Director Mess)
2. **Encourage and train teachers to explore the emotional context of students' lives and handle sensitive information.** Safe Dates “is an interactive program, and the real learning comes from classroom discussions,” said Mess. “Activities need to encourage students to talk about feelings ... You will be talking about sexual assault, and you may have a kid who decides that it is a good place to say ‘I have experienced it.’”

Project staff modeled the skills teachers and peers could use to facilitate such discussions, and referred students and teachers to services for those affected by dating abuse. Service providers, in turn, need to know about the Safe Dates curriculum. (Project Director Mess)

## Funding

RWJF supported this project from July 2008 to June 2011 with a grant of \$396,857 to the Foundation of the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey.

## Afterward

Safe Dates remains a component of the ninth-grade health curriculum in Essex County's vocational schools. The Dating 101: Keep It Safe team plans to continue to train peer facilitators, conduct parent outreach and education, and highlight support services.

The team is seeking funding to expand Dating 101: Keep it Safe. In August 2011, Mess submitted a grant proposal to the Verizon Foundation to use mass text messaging to deliver tips on safe dating.

---

### Prepared by: Hanna Matras

Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman and Molly McKaughan

Program Officer: Marco V. Navarro

Grant ID # 64598

Program area: New Jersey

---