Executive Summary
Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships (Start Strong) sought to prevent teen dating violence by teaching “tweens” and early teens (ages 11–14) about healthy relationships. The largest program ever funded to prevent teen dating violence, Start Strong worked in 11 communities across the country to develop and implement a comprehensive prevention model.

From 2008 to mid-2013, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) invested $17.08 million in this national program. Blue Shield of California Foundation (San Francisco), which has extensive experience in funding initiatives addressing domestic violence, provided an additional $1.5 million in funding and served as a partner on the program. Futures Without Violence, based in San Francisco and one of the nation’s leading organizations working to prevent domestic and sexual violence in the home and community, served as the Start Strong national program office. RTI International (formerly Research Triangle Institute) evaluated the program.

Read the full report. Learn more about the program here.

CONTEXT
Teen dating violence is a major public health problem. In 2007, before the program began, approximately 10 percent of students in grades 9–12 were hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Dating violence can damage self-esteem, result in poor school performance, and put young people at risk for serious long-term health consequences. Educating middle school students and engaging them in conversations about healthy and safe relationships has the potential to stop teen dating violence before it starts.
THE PROGRAM

Eleven *Start Strong* sites around the country received grants of about $1 million each to implement a community-based approach, using schools as a focal point and relying on teens to inform and guide programs. The lead agencies included several sexual and domestic violence prevention organizations, youth-focused organizations, a medical school, a hospital, a health system, and a public health agency. Community partners included hospitals, legal centers, public health agencies, theaters, and universities, in addition to organizations working in youth- and violence-related fields.

*Start Strong* had four core components:

- **Educate youth** (in schools and in out-of-school settings): Each site used an evidence-based curriculum—either Safe Dates or the Fourth R—in school to teach middle school students about healthy relationships. Some sites enhanced their work with after-school programming.

- **Engage influencers**: *Start Strong* educated older teens, parents, educators, and health care providers on talking to tweens and young teens early and often about the importance of healthy relationships. Involving older teens was especially important because middle school students tend to look up to them, and trust them to offer knowledge and advice without judging them.

- **Social marketing**: *Start Strong* sites used social marketing to deliver messages about relationship violence that resonate with tweens and young teens and influence behavior. In addition to online media, they connected with teens through popular culture topics via TV, movies, music, videos, and video games, as well as through traditional media, such as theater, posters, and magazines.

- **School policy change**: *Start Strong* sites partnered with school administrators and community leaders to create and implement school policies and practices that cultivate positive school climates that value healthy relationships and promote violence prevention. They also helped schools implement new policies and practices.

KEY RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The evaluators reported the following findings in in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*,¹ *Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships: Evaluation Summary*, and a report, *Creating a Window for Teen Dating Violence Prevention Policies Within the Start Strong Initiative*.

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- *Start Strong* significantly increased communication between middle school students and their parents, and relationship satisfaction with boyfriends or girlfriends, over the short-term (fall 2010 to spring 2011). (Source: *Journal of Adolescent Health*)

- *Start Strong* students reported less acceptance of teen dating violence and a decrease in negative gender stereotypes over the short- and long-term (long-term extended another year, to spring 2012). (Source: *Journal of Adolescent Health*)

- *Start Strong* students who reported being victims or perpetrators of teen dating violence, or both, in fall 2010, showed more positive results on some outcomes than students who had not experienced teen dating violence. These outcomes included a reduction in bullying behaviors, a more positive school climate, more positive attitudes towards gender equality, increased parent-child communication, and increased support and satisfaction in their boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. (Source: Evaluation Summary)

- Five of the 11 sites reported adopting new policies or enhancing existing policies, including strengthened laws pertaining to teen dating violence. (Source: *Creating a Window for Teen Dating Violence Prevention Policies Within the Start Strong Initiative*)

- All 11 sites established at least one practice change that was still in place in the school year after *Start Strong* ended. Practice changes included providing dating violence prevention education for all students, prevention activities for students at increased risk of dating violence, school staff training, and parent education on teen dating violence. (Source: Evaluation Summary)

**Evaluation Conclusions**

- “Results are promising and illustrate that a multicomponent, community-based initiative reduced risk factors predictive of” teen dating violence. (Source: “Evaluation of the Start Strong Initiative,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*)

- The 11 Start Strong sites had substantial policy impacts within the context of their teen dating violence prevention efforts. (Source: *Creating a Window for Teen Dating Violence Prevention Policies Within the Start Strong Initiative*)

Futures Without Violence compiled the following results on the activities of the *Start Strong* sites.

- *Start Strong* implemented curricula in middle schools to educate students about teen dating violence, and bolstered this with education through clubs, community groups, and other extracurricular activities. Of the 23,198 students who participated, 14,880 students participated in Safe Dates at seven sites and 8,318 participated in Fourth R at four sites.
● Out-of-school programming involved Boys & Girls Clubs, after-school programs, and youth theater.

● Start Strong sites educated and empowered parents, older teens, health care providers, and others to help tweens and young teens build healthy relationship skills.

AFTERWARD

Six of the 11 Start Strong sites—Austin, Texas; Boston; Bridgeport, Conn.; Idaho; Los Angeles; and Rhode Island—sustained significant parts of the program efforts. In many cases, the Start Strong approach has become a core element of the lead organization’s work (e.g., in Boston and Idaho). And one of the sites in Dating Matters (a CDC program) Oakland, Calif., has also sustained some of the work. Partners, such as schools, have sustained individual elements of the program at a few other sites.

Futures Without Violence continues to work in teen dating violence prevention, including as the national technical assistance provider for the U.S. Department of Justice’s Defending Childhood Initiative. As a result of Start Strong, Futures Without Violence has expanded its work with school systems and developed new partnerships with teacher associations and organizations working to improve the school climate.

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