The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education: Dating and Intimate Partner Violence Prevention

School-based sex education plays a vital role in the sexual health and wellbeing of young people. The results of Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education found that sex education has the potential to impact so much in addition to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention.

Evaluations demonstrate a range of positive outcomes for programs that focus on dating violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) prevention among middle and high school youth.

- School-based efforts have the potential to play an important role in reducing DV and, in many cases, have shown to have positive long-term outcomes.
- There is strong evidence that programs can increase knowledge, change attitudes, and improve skills to reduce DV and IPV and can actually reduce the incidence of both DV and IPV.
- The most promising approaches to addressing DV and IPV for school-aged youth have focused on social justice, shifting norms around IPV and/or gender roles, and conflict management skills.
- Programs have used a variety of educational methods, including instruction that supports social-emotional learning (SEL), role-plays, incorporating lessons over multiple sessions and/or grade levels, theater, peer education, and enhanced building-level interventions. Effective programs have also addressed concepts related to sexual coercion, such as pressure, date rape, and exploitation.

Improved knowledge and attitudes about, and reporting of, DV and IPV

- There is extensive evidence that school-based programs have resulted in students gaining improved knowledge and attitudes related to DV and IPV, including reduction in rape myths, victim blaming, and sexist attitudes, and increased knowledge and attitudes about IPV.
- Students in these kinds of programs demonstrated improved communication skills and capacity for handling feelings of anger, increased awareness of laws and victim services, reduced acceptance of sexual coercion, increased intentions to reduce coercion, increased self-efficacy, and adherence to social norms that reject harassment.
- Efforts to help connect youth to school more generally may have the potential to influence longer-term outcomes beyond school performance.

Decreased DV and IPV perpetration and victimization

- Several large, rigorous studies show strong behavioral outcomes in the area of DV and IPV prevention, in programs specifically targeted towards grades 4 through 12; said programs have led to reductions in DV and IPV perpetration, victimization, emotional violence perpetration, verbal aggression, and referrals for harassment.
- Two specific programs that have demonstrated important long-term outcomes over multiple studies: The Fourth R: Skills for Youth Relationships and Safe Dates.

* The terms DV and IPV are used interchangeably in some studies.
Increased bystander intentions and behaviors

- Research on school-based bystander intervention programs has demonstrated increases in reported positive bystander behaviors.
- In alternative high schools in particular, an IPV prevention program showed strong improvements in students’ bystander skills, along with increases in gender-equitable attitudes and bystander interventions, leading to improved overall school climate and an improvement in the external reputation of the school.
- Among male athletes, a coach-led intervention showed increases in intentions to intervene, improved gender equitable attitudes, and improved bystander actions.

Recommendations for Schools and Educators

- Normalize IPV prevention as a priority at the elementary school level, keeping it solid throughout the remaining school-age years and increasing in complexity as students age.
- Incorporate gender equity, emotional and conflict management, and bystander intervention skills-building as normative core aspects of IPV prevention-related sex education.
- Approach IPV prevention from a social and emotional learning perspective for maximum impact.
- Be comprehensive and repetitive; allow lessons to proceed over multiple sessions and across multiple grades, whenever possible.
- The Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education can help educators to identify areas where they may need professional development to successfully teach this content. Links to professional development programs can be found at https://sexeducationcollaborative.org/offerings.

Reference