

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

Goldfarb E. and Lieberman L. Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2021; 68, 1: 13--27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>