

Safer Relationships for Teens

Program builds self-confidence

by Joanne Littlefield

The car door slams. An echo of shouts rings out through the night. Pride hurt, feeling frightened and alone, a teen seeks refuge with a friend. Teens across Arizona are learning strategies designed to make their relationships healthier and to reduce violence. They've learned to walk away when someone makes them angry, to calm themselves down before resuming a conversation, and how to recognize signs of abuse in close relationships.

"Promoting Healthy Relationships" is a research and outreach project of The University of Arizona that includes a modified version of the "Safe Dates" educational curriculum originally developed by North Carolina Cooperative Extension. The program helps youth understand and feel more self-confident about how they would like to be treated by a partner and how they should treat a partner in a dating relationship.

Incorporating youth development strategies into programs that target specific risk behaviors — dating violence, for example — has been shown to increase the likelihood of success at preventing negative health outcomes. Thus the curriculum is presented within the context of a comprehensive youth development program.

Nationwide, more cases of domestic violence are being reported as a result of increased public education efforts and a heightened awareness on the part of community service workers, such as police and fire department employees. In the aftermath of these community wake-up calls, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has begun funding research, prevention, and intervention projects to address intimate partner violence and its associated issues.

Arizona's Promoting Healthy Relationships Project was funded through the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) as a demonstration project for the early intervention and prevention of sexual violence and intimate partner violence among racial and ethnic minority populations. Arizona is one of only three projects funded to focus on adolescent well-being.

"We also have the only two sites working with American Indians because of the relationship extension personnel have developed on the reservations," says project manager Donna Peterson, an associate research scientist in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, part of the UA College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

According to NCIPC the term "intimate partner violence" describes physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not always involve sexual intimacy. It does include date rape and extreme control over who a partner can see and when. For young and old, from all walks of life and from all cultural backgrounds, intimate partner violence can be a source of shame and confusion.

As an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, Peterson rounded out her psychology major as an intern at a domestic violence shelter. There, through day-to-day interaction with clients, she had the opportunity to more fully understand the complicated relationship dynamics that forced these women to seek refuge at the shelter.

Her subsequent research in family studies and human development and her work with Arizona Cooperative Extension led to her involvement in the UA project. It is a collaboration among Arizona Cooperative Extension, the Norton School, two American Indian tribes, several schools and some community-based organizations.

The goal is to promote the development of healthy relationships among youth through skill-building, preventing violent relationships, and intervening when patterns of violence have begun. The project also collects information to establish a baseline for what would be considered violent behavior between intimate partners within diverse communities.

The program helps youth understand and feel more self-confident about how they would like to be treated by a partner and how they should treat a partner in a dating relationship.

One of the bases for developing the curriculum was the Teen Opinion Poll-Arizona (TOP-AZ), a periodic survey conducted in Arizona since 1994 that assesses teens' behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes and their perceptions of peers, family life, and their communities. Ultimately, communities participating in TOP-AZ will be able to respond better to youth needs, build on youth strengths, and involve youth as partners in doing so.



Because TOP-AZ allowed university researchers and local communities access to a wealth of information about adolescents that could be useful in planning programs to benefit youth and promote positive development, deciding how best to put theory into practice and match it with the student data was the next step.

The Promoting Healthy Relationships team of university researchers, local program staff and extension agents understood that making the program culturally relevant was one way of ensuring a high rate of adoption. Rather than use the original "Safe Dates" curriculum, first developed in North Carolina for teens in an Anglo community, it was adapted for Arizona's ethnically diverse communities following focus groups with students and interviews with school staff and community members. Using qualitative data gathering methods, the team learned how to better implement the curriculum based on cultural needs.

Another hurdle to overcome was the complication of working with minors who might have some level of involvement in violent activities. Careful preparation included obtaining not only parental approval but active consent and assent from youth. It took more than a year and a half to get through approvals at the local, university and federal level. Community meetings, letters to parents and school officials were all required.

After all approvals were obtained it was time to implement the program in the four participating sites. Individuals living in each community were hired to work directly with the youth. "It was good that they were from the community and knew the people," says Peterson. The researchers were not at all surprised to discover that when minors knew and trusted the adults they were working with, they were more likely to discuss sensitive issues. Community members hoped the program would reduce the number of interpersonal violence incidents by helping their young people recognize signs of partner violence and identify strategies to avoid violent relationships.

The dating violence prevention curriculum was typically presented during the school day to students in 7th through 12th grade as determined by the local school and Promoting Healthy Relationships Project staff. Youth development program activities were also community-specific and were designed by local program staff, the youth, and in some cases, local community councils or organizations.

Activities primarily focused on specific community holiday/cultural events (e.g., Red Ribbon Week, Fourth of July), community needs (e.g., Diabetes Walk, community garden), or youth interests (e.g., rock climbing, summer recreation program, adventure-based learning activities, a video with dating violence scenarios).

In addition to developing and implementing the dating violence prevention program, evaluating the program to measure its success was a key component of this project. Program evaluation, guided by a community-based participatory research model and the Tribal Participatory Research Model, involved extensive process and outcome evaluation.

Process evaluation included participant and leader feedback surveys following each program session, participant attendance records, and a detailed program-monitoring log. The outcome evaluation involved pre- and post-program surveys for youth participants to collect information on

knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and healthy relationships. Focus groups were conducted with students and interviews were conducted with school staff and community members to hear their perceptions of the program and its impact on youth, parents, and the community.

A comparison of pre- and post-surveys by the evaluator showed statistically significant changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Survey results from project sites indicated that, before the program, from 27 percent to 45 percent of teens reported that a date had used physical force against them — a higher rate than reported by teens in other communities across the United States. Some examples of physical force included being pushed, shoved or slammed against a wall or being hit or kicked. Approximately 10 percent of the respondents said their boy/girlfriend would not let them do things with other people or did things just to make them jealous; 30 percent thought it was okay for a girl to hit a boy if he hit her first; 11 percent thought violence could improve a relationship; and 30 percent of those who had experienced physical force reported that at least one of the partners had been drinking alcohol or using drugs at the time.

The goal is to promote the development of healthy relationships among youth through skill-building, preventing violent relationships, and intervening when patterns of violence have begun.

Following the program one extension agent wrote that "teens were less likely to report that their partners made them tell them where they were every minute of the day and less likely to believe that some couples must use violence to solve their problems."

Teens were also more likely to agree that those who are victims of dating violence or who are violent to their dates need to get help from others; that a boy and a girl should have equal power in a dating relationship; and that when they are angry with someone, they should try to calm down before they talk to that person. They also indicated that they learned about walking away from a fight and talking to the other person in order to avoid fighting.

Fall 2005 marked the end of the five-year program, but work will continue in some locations with additional data collection to continue to assess its impact. Peterson notes that not only did young people experience a change in attitude from participation in the program, but the ripple effect was felt by the families as well by encouraging family discussions on the issues.

"Kids share this information with parents and as a result, in some cases, parents get healthy too," she says. ✨

CONTACT

Donna Peterson
520-621-7127
pdonna@ag.arizona.edu

Promoting Healthy Relationships Project
cals.arizona.edu/fcs/azyfc/phr/