



Current Approaches to Prevention

Historically, efforts to prevent intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence targeted potential victims and taught this audience how to identify and protect themselves from abusers. Examples include early education programs teaching children how to say “no” and campus education classes teaching women how to reduce their risk of victimization. Few efforts targeted men and those that did tended to approach the audience as potential abusers. Experts and practitioners in the field have since criticized these earlier programs for placing the onus of preventing violence on victims, failing to address abusers responsibility for the violence, and alienating males by addressing them only as potential abusers of violence.

We have since learned that males are important allies in the field of violence prevention, and that both males and females, both children and parents, and both students and teachers – everyone – would benefit from learning about their role as a bystander to intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence. This creates a broader community context for prevention that not only includes everyone, but it also takes into account the various risk and protective factors that occur at each level with the social ecological model.

Two promising approaches to intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence prevention are the social norms approach and bystander engagement approach.

Social Norms Approach

The social norm theory suggests that people misperceive others’ attitudes and behaviors towards intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence as being more supportive than they actually are. For example, college males may believe it is fairly common on campus for men to try to get their dates intoxicated and pressure them into having sex. Research has shown one of the consequences of these misperceptions is that people change their behavior to better reflect what they believe to be the norm.[i] In other words, these misperceptions encourage unhealthy or problem attitudes and behavior and inhibit healthier attitudes and behaviors.

The social norms approach can be applied at all three levels of prevention. Examples include: universal social norms marketing campaigns to correct misperceptions and encourage healthier attitudes and behaviors; more selective interventions, such as interactive workshops, classes, or discussions among members of a particular group; and indicated interventions for individuals who have already engaged in problematic or unhealthy behavior, typically using motivational interviewing and stages of change theory to provide feedback to individuals.

Bystander Engagement Approach

Another consequence of people's misperceptions of others' attitudes and behaviors towards intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence is that these misperceptions can inhibit their willingness to intervene in violent situations. Our willingness to step up and speak out against intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence is critical to eliminating these types of violence. Silence only reinforces and encourages perpetrators violent behavior and leaves victims feeling isolated or at fault.

Researchers have studied the bystander engagement theory for years. Their work has found that whether or not someone decides to actively intervene in a violent situation is affected by a number of situational factors (e.g., the presence of other witnesses or the level or urgency or danger), individual characteristics (e.g., the demographics and relationship of those involved or a person's level of skill to safely intervene in violent situations), the person's feelings and attitudes about violence, and their perceived cost of intervening.[ii] The bystander engagement approach can address some of these factors in a way that participants are more likely to intervene by providing information on how widespread intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and dating violence are, education on the impact these types of violence have on victims, tips on how to respond to and support someone who discloses abuse, and skills to step up and speak out against behavior that contributes to violence.

Essentially, the bystander engagement approach creates a broader community context for violence prevention that includes not just victims or perpetrators of violence but their friends, family, peers, teachers, coworkers, and other community members.

i. Berkowitz, A. D. (2004). *The social norms approach: Theory, research, and annotated bibliography*. Retrieved from www.alanberkowitz.com/articles/social_norms.pdf.

ii. Foubert, J. D., Tabachnick, J., & Schewe, P. A. (2010). Encouraging Bystander Intervention for Sexual Violence Prevention. In K. L. Kaufman (Ed.), *The prevention of sexual violence: A practitioner's sourcebook*, (pp. 121-134). Holyoke, MA: NEARI Press.