On the Ground With Prevention Educators: Reducing Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault

A review of

Programs to Reduce Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault: Perspectives on What Works
by Arlene N. Weisz and Beverly M. Black
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Reviewed by
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Intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault are widespread social scourges that have serious deleterious consequences for victims. Nearly 25 percent of women who responded to the National Victimization of Women Survey reported physical and/or sexual victimization by a current or former intimate partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The same survey found that one in six women had experienced attempted or completed rape (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The growing consensus among researchers that preventing violence requires intervening before it begins (Whitaker et al., 2006) suggests that prevention programs are vital for at-risk youth. However, empirical research on what works is very limited in quantity, program detail, and methodological rigor. Hence, there is a need to identify likely
“best” practices and programs that should be subjected to rigorous empirical evaluation. Expert opinion may be a viable source of assistance in meeting this need. There is likewise a need to unpack these programs in order to better understand their components, especially which components may be contributing to their efficacy.

The intent of Programs to Reduce Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault is to provide the practice community with a wide range of expert opinion on prevention programming. The information provided by the text will prove useful to prevention educators, aspiring prevention educators, and anyone with an interest in the current state of domestic violence and sexual assault prevention work. The book is based on interviews with representatives of 52 dating violence and sexual assault prevention programs in 22 states and Washington, DC. To obtain the sample, the authors solicited 80 statewide coalitions for the names of exemplary prevention programs and staff. The authors to some extent undersell their methodology; their method is reasonable, given that the goal of the study was to obtain expert opinion from exemplary programs, not provide an accurate picture of the current state of prevention programming in the United States.

After introducing the book and the study design, the authors examine the programs’ theories, goals, recruitment issues, membership, structure, content, diversity, curriculum, use of peer leadership, community involvement, evaluation, ideal educators, and benefits and challenges. The book concludes with an overview and wish list. Each chapter briefly summarizes the relevant empirical research on the issue, organizes the interviewees’ responses, and concludes with a useful summary of its contents. The writing is clear, although at times somewhat dry.

Of particular interest are the chapters “Theoretical Considerations” (Chapter 3), “Program Content” (Chapter 8), “Curricula Development” (Chapter 10), and “Evaluation” (Chapter 13). Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the study findings and empirical research on social learning theory (including cognitive-behavioral therapy), feminist theory, and empowerment theory. Attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and the theory of planned behavior are also briefly mentioned. Chapter 8 provides detailed information about actual program presentations. Many of the programs cover the definitions and types of violence, healthy relationships, and respect; as well, the programs try to combat myths, especially about victim blaming and gender role stereotypes. Most of the programs cover sexual harassment.

Chapter 8 also contains an interesting and detailed description of one program’s activity involving a power and control wheel and an egg (p. 101). In this activity, participants learn about different types of abuse. Standing in a circle, each participant holds a string connected to a single toilet paper roll in the center of the circle suspending a raw egg. The goal is not to drop the egg. Like relationships, this requires cooperation and communication. The message is enhanced by the fact that each participant also holds a label indicating a particular kind of abuse (emotional, economic, physical, sexual, etc.). As a story is told providing examples of each type of abuse, each participant must drop his or her string
when that participant’s type of abuse is mentioned. This makes it harder for the remaining participants to successfully support the egg, just as abuse makes it harder to sustain a relationship.

Chapter 10 (“Curricula Development”) describes the processes interviewees used to develop their curricula, the use of manuals, how curricula are modified, and the role of improvisation. Chapter 13 (“Evaluation of Prevention Programs”) describes the limitations of the sample’s use of program evaluation. Many programs lacked the time and money to conduct an evaluation or even analyze the results. Further, many of those conducting evaluations examined only knowledge and attitudes rather than behavior change. The authors also point out in Chapter 13 an excellent free resource for prevention educators, *Measuring Violence-Related Attitudes, Behaviors and Influences Among Youths: A Compendium of Assessment Tools* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005).

Chapters 14 (“Qualities of Ideal Prevention Educators”) and 15 (“Rewarding, Troubling, and Challenging Aspects”) are important for those considering a career in prevention education.

There are one or two aspects of the book I found to be problematic. The chapter titled “Theoretical Considerations” could have provided a more in-depth review of the logic of the theories used as well as the assumptions that underpin them. More troubling was the authors’ take on the relationship between research and the field. In constructing a relatively unnecessary defense of their methods, the authors fail to critique a status quo in which only some practitioners make use of findings from quantitative research (p. 5) and prefer to consult with expert colleagues. That programs (a) do no harm and (b) work can be adequately verified only by empirical research. This gap between research and practice, in part engendered by the failure of the psychology and social work professions to adequately mandate evidence-based practice, will surely result in the retention of less-than-optimal and potentially harmful practices. Drake, Hovmand, Jonson-Reid, and Zayas (2007) have recommended, for example, that this situation can be improved in social work via making evidence-based practice a paradigmatic component of social work education.

More important, the authors might have done a better job of connecting their data with quantitative empirical research. In Chapter 13 (“Evaluation of Prevention Programs”), the authors discuss the proportion of their sample that conducted empirical assessments of whether programs were working but do not discuss the proportion of programs with empirical evidence to support this claim. It is also important to know the extent to which using state coalitions to identify exemplary programs converges with the empirical research literature. Which programs with empirical support in the research literature were also nominated by the state coalitions? Were any programs discredited by empirical research still nominated? These important questions, which bear on the viability of expert opinion, remain unanswered. Also helpful would have been a “best of the best” selection and a comprehensive, detailed explanation of one or two programs that the authors thought were exemplary.
Overall, *Programs to Reduce Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault* provides readers with an in-depth look at exemplary programs addressing the prevention of teen dating violence and sexual assault in the United States. The study on which the book is based is its main source of information, although that information is supplemented with reviews of relevant literature. The data used for the book are not representative of prevention programs in general but are, arguably, representative of programs that state coalitions nominate as “exemplary.” The authors might have done a better job of linking these nominated programs to empirically supported programs, but *Programs to Reduce Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault* is nonetheless a valuable contribution to the literature. Thus, it positions itself as a useful source of information and inspiration for practitioners.

### References


