

# InnovationLink

A series to explore solutions with school districts



## Preventing teen dating violence: We need to start early

*Once relationship violence has occurred, there is high likelihood that it will occur again. School districts should start talking about respect and love before dating begins.*

### Introduction

Adolescents experience physical, psychological, and sexual relationship violence at alarming rates. We know that we need to stop this kind of behavior. Associate Professor Amy Bonomi has studied the problem and recommends an innovative approach. She agrees that awareness campaigns are very much needed, but waiting to target high school and college students may be too late. Research shows that many adolescents become victims or perpetrators of violence in their early dating experiences.

Once relationship violence has occurred, there is high likelihood that it will occur again. School districts should start talking about respect and love before dating begins.

This issue of **InnovationLink** shares Dr. Bonomi's thoughts and findings on the subject of preventing teen dating violence.

### What we know about the problem

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define relationship violence

as actual or threatened physical and/or sexual violence used by an intimate partner to cause death, disability, injury, or harm to victims, and psychological abuse used to cause trauma in victims.

Approximately 11 percent of dating 8th- and 9th-graders are victims of sexually violent acts such as forced sex and forced intimate contact, and 35 percent are victims of nonsexual acts, such as being pushed, slapped, or kicked by a dating partner. Almost 3 percent of dating adolescents commit sexually violent acts, and almost 20 percent perpetrate nonsexual, physically violent acts among adolescents of this age group.

Victims are more likely than others to experience a range of adverse health consequences. For example, as compared to adolescent girls not exposed to relationship violence, those exposed to some form of relationship violence report lower quality of life and higher rates of:

- suicidal thoughts and attempts,
- pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,

- heavy smoking and alcohol use,
- driving under the influence of alcohol and cocaine use, and
- eating disorders.

### What research shows about solutions

To reduce the problem of relationship violence—and the associated costs to victims, families, and communities—researchers and educators must develop viable prevention models. These models should address relationship violence in youth before they start dating.

Early prevention increases the likelihood that violence can be prevented from the start and that important risk factors for relationship violence perpetration and victimization are addressed.

Research suggests that relationship violence occurrence is increased if youth—

- expect positive results from the use of violence,
- accept the use of violence to resolve conflict,
- have witnessed relationship violence

at home, and

- have traditional gender role expectations.

Intervening with youth on these risk factors increases the likelihood that they will grow into young adults who use prosocial conflict resolution and problem-solving behaviors. It increases the likelihood that they will have healthy beliefs about intimate relationships.

School-based preventive interventions are among the most promising approaches to violence prevention for adolescents. Schools provide an ideal context for organizing peer activities designed to promote and allow practice of prosocial interactions. In schools, educators are more likely to have access to high-risk youth due to mandatory school attendance and can help model prosocial behaviors for students. Health promotion and drama teachers can offer behavior change content as part of the curricula.

Well-designed and tested programs exist for 8th- and 9th- grade youth. While these programs have numerous strengths, relationship violence prevention programs that target younger youth may have larger effects.

Some violence prevention experts suggest targeting such programs to youth transitioning to middle school—6th and 7th grade—whether they have begun dating or not. Their reasons

“While these programs have numerous strengths, relationship violence prevention programs that target younger youth may have larger effects.”

are as follows:

- At this age, peers become the primary focus of relationships. This provides an ideal time to identify and influence negative beliefs and patterns of behavior related to relationship violence.
- Many youth in this age group have not begun dating, and therefore first-time acts of violence can be avoided.
- Many youth do not have fully developed beliefs and behavior patterns that put them at risk.
- Youth may be less likely to have fully developed beliefs about the right to victimize others based on gender stereotypes and ideas about domination.

#### Next steps

Dr. Bonomi, who joined the college's Department of Human Development and Family Science this autumn, is developing a program using an innovative theater approach to prevent relationship violence among middle

school-aged youth. It is based on social cognitive and learning theories which suggest that to shape youth behaviors successfully, youth require ongoing, interactive rehearsal of these behaviors. During rehearsal, they have the chance to change the way they think about the use of violence and to practice healthy conflict resolution.

The approach is unique because it focuses on adolescents of predating age and emphasizes ongoing behavioral rehearsal necessary for helping youth maintain prosocial behaviors across settings, relationships, and time.

Dr. Bonomi, MPH, PhD, is leading these efforts with her colleagues—Todd Herrenkohl, PhD, associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington, and David Grossman, MD, MPH, director of preventive care and senior investigator at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle.

Dr. Bonomi has been a co-investigator of more than \$3 million in federal funding and is the current principal investigator of a prestigious grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She was recently featured on CNN, MSNBC, and National Public Radio talking about her study of intimate partner abuse of insured women.

For a longer version of this piece with more about Dr. Bonomi's work, visit <http://ehe.osu.edu/bonomi.htm>

*Inspiring innovation in learning and living*

# InnovationLink

A series to explore solutions with school districts

*One New College One Compelling Goal*



127 Arps Hall  
1945 N. High St.  
Columbus, OH 43210

(614) 292-2581  
[ehe.osu.edu](http://ehe.osu.edu)

**InnovationLink** shares research findings and evidence-based practices meant to help explore solutions to complex problems faced by school districts. As a new college with a new vision, the diverse nature of our academic experts is our greatest strength. It creates the ability to spark new solutions and imagine new possibilities for learners of all ages, families, consumers, and communities. If you have requests for topics or feedback on this issue or this series, please let us know at our Office of Communications, 614-292-2581.