

BATTERED WOMEN'S SUPPORT SERVICES

**FOCUS GROUP WITH YOUNG WOMEN:
PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

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Demographics

We asked a group of six young women and girls, aged 19-27, to discuss this question with us,

“How can we shape our message, of preventing/stopping violence against women and girls, to reach you as a young woman?”

Our dialogue included asking their perspectives on including men and boys in prevention work, and was organized into three areas, being: a) Who should receive, and present, this message? b) What should the content of the message focus on? c) How can this message reach youth more effectively?

The dialogue is summarized below.

A. Who should receive, and who should present, this message?

Audience:

Feedback from group was, overwhelmingly so, that information about violence against women really needs to start at an early age if it is going to be effective. All of the young women in the focus group agreed that education about violence and abuse in relationships should begin at the grade 6 or 7 level. They identified that “sex education” starts at this level- so it is well recognized that intimate relationships are beginning to happen at this age. They said that no one really talks to students about intimate relationship dynamics and experiences, which they acknowledge constitutes a major part of their lives, until grade 11 or 12 (if at all).

Presenter:

The young women in the focus group believe that youth must be able to relate to the person presenting the information about violence against women. They feel it is easier to relate to someone closer in age, that youth should be delivering the message, or someone just slightly older than the audience.

They agreed that it would be powerful to hear this information from a male. It would be helpful to hear a guy talking to girls about being confident in herself, and how she should expect to be treated by men in relationships. It would also be very effective to have a man, who used to be abusive, to show how and why he used to control women, and to talk about how and why he has changed.

B. What should the content of the message focus on?

Healthy Relationships vs. Abusive Relationships

The young women in the group had many ideas about what the message should include. They believe youth should be educated on what a good, healthy relationship is. Similarly, there should be education on what abuse is; the different types and forms of abuse. The message should include what the “signs” are to watch out for, the tactics guys use, and how control works. They feel that girls don't recognize emotional abuse as abuse, and don't know that they don't need to accept it in their relationships. Girls should also be taught that violence and abuse escalates.

Puberty is an already challenging part of developing, and how males treat girls during this time is hard. It's a really confusing time for girls. Kids should be taught about these things in elementary school.

Talk to girls, and boys about communication skills, the value of learning how to communicate, and that you have a right to be able to communicate in your relationships. Talk to youth about expectations in a relationship, boundaries, and values.

Self-Esteem and the Media

The group felt very strongly that, for girls, the message should include talking about self-esteem and self-respect. They agreed that girls need to build their own lives for themselves, and not be afraid to leave someone if he isn't treating them right. Girls need to know they don't deserve to be treated poorly. Education should include tips on how to build self-esteem, how to respect yourself, and to emphasize the good things about yourself. Girls should hear they should not to give up on the things that they love to do, and not to let anyone "call them down". The participants all identified that a lack of self-esteem and worth is at the root of this problem. One young woman is quoted in saying "If you don't love yourself, you'll allow yourself to get abused".

Some girls expressed they feel that the media has an influence on self-esteem level. They feel that self-esteem is based on material things and external resources, instead of coming from inside. Girls sometimes compare themselves to women in the media, more so than guys will directly. Guys listen to their friends more. However, getting male attention is of major importance for girls and a large contributing factor to developing "self-esteem". Girls hide what they know in order to fit in or be liked by guys. Some girls also feel that the media informs men and boys how to treat women, and they also learn this from their friends and their families as well. In general, girls feel that boys really value their friends' opinions on matters.

They feel that education should include that men's abuse comes from them, that it is about themselves, and not because of girls. We should talk to men and boys about their own self-esteem issues and problems, figure out why they are abusive themselves, and learn from their experiences.

Gender roles and socialization

The young women in the focus group believe that education about gender relations/studies should be part of high school curriculum. Education about socialization of women, gender roles, and media representation of women should be part of youth education. The girls recognize that social standards are different for girls than they are for boys. Boys get away with treating girls differently, or poorly. Cheating, for example, is a more acceptable behavior for boys than it is for girls. *The young women in this focus group believe that having the opportunity to examine and expose these double standards helps to change them.*

C. How can this message reach youth more effectively?

We brainstormed a variety of ideas that the women in the focus group felt would be an effective way to reach youth. In general they thought that it's important that materials used are relevant and up to date.

Their ideas are:

1. Interactive lessons. Skits, role plays, small plays.

Visuals help to catch attention. Education at the grade 6/7 level needs to be fun and interesting, and for older grades, shock and scare tactics work well (referenced anti-drinking and driving commercials showing accidents, etc...). Participants thought that showing jail as a consequence, and what the impact of violence on children who witness abuse can be powerful.

2. The message to the guys should be relatable.

The participants believe that guys are usually protective of the women in their families (mothers, sisters, daughters), so a way of reaching them could be to say "you wouldn't treat your mother/sister/daughter like this..." or "how would you like this if this was your sister..."

3. Media can play a role in reaching youth:

Magazines with articles that tell "real" women's and girls' experiences (personal stories) to learn from and inspire.

Questionnaires- girls love these. They are a good way to help see things you might not have noticed about yourself. Girls can evaluate their level of self-esteem, or understand the abuse in their relationship. One young woman was quoted saying, "A lot of people don't see what's going on until they are asked to".

On line discussion boards, websites, and chat rooms for youth to seek support and share their experiences.

Campaign style messages- billboards, buses about violence against women.

Amnesty's campaign of "see no evil, hear no evil..." stuck in their minds and brings awareness to the issue.

Films, documentaries (like Al Gore and Global Warming really made an impact on them).

Celebrity spokespeople- someone with power to speak out against VAW, someone that people will listen to.

4. Group exercises in class:

Separate the class by gender and ask them the same questions about relationship experiences, and then bring them together and talk about what each other said. Could be eye opening to hear what the other gender says.

The group exercise (seen on Oprah or Tyra) “cross the line”- where a large group (class) of youth is asked questions, such as: “Have you ever been abused by a boyfriend?”, “Have you ever been called down, bullied?”, or questions around self-esteem and confidence and then have to cross the line (to the other side of the room), to illuminate how many have experienced the same things could be powerful.

In general, small group discussions are less intimidating. It's easier to be honest around less people, and people you feel more comfortable around. Offer groups for teens to have a space to talk about this stuff. Face to face conversations/counseling can be effective in preventing abuse.

5. Other:

Information and resources about violence and abuse should be more accessible. More pamphlets in clinics, schools, family centres, community centres, neighborhood houses, etc... About what an abusive relationship/healthy relationship is...and where to go for help.

MAKE EDUCATION ON VIOLENCE MANDATORY AND ONGOING IN SCHOOLS.