

Engaging Boys & Young Men in Promoting Healthy Relationships and Non-Violence

Introduction

Although most men do not condone violence, most violence, against women or men, is committed by men (National Crime Victimization Survey, 2016). In contrast, most victims of domestic or partner violence are female (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). One in 10 adolescent girls have experienced physical or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner (Kann et al., 2014), with many more exposed to verbal and psychological aggression. By adulthood, 1 in 3 women have been victims of some form of physical violence by an intimate partner (NCADV, 2015).

Although targeting boys and men for preventive intervention would seem to provide the greatest return for our investment, most interventions have historically been victim-centered. Fortunately, a paradigmatic shift in our public health approach to violence prevention now calls for efforts to engage boys and young men in addressing this critical public health dilemma. A key premise of this approach is to establish male allies and leaders in pioneering culture change among boys and men at risk for perpetrating violence (Wells et al., 2013). Knowing that the first acts of violence perpetration typically occur in middle adolescence and escalate into late adolescence and young adulthood (Farrington, 2003) suggest that this alliance needs to happen earlier than later.

Looking at the Causes

Men who commit violence were not born perpetrators. They were boys first. Many were boys who themselves have witnessed or been victims of violence, which is a known risk factor for emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal functioning. For some, it can start very early in life, with violence between adults in the caregiving environment. One out of 4 children under the age of 6 have been exposed to some form of interpersonal violence (Briggs-Gowan, Ford, Fraleigh, McCarthy, & Carter, 2010). This early exposure can serve as a gateway experience for future exposure to and perpetration of violence in adolescence and adulthood (Grasso, Dierkhising, Branson, Ford, & Lee, 2015). As many as 2 out of 3 adolescents have witnessed or been the direct victim of violence (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005). Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that violence exposure begins early in life and can persist across the lifespan, and even across generations. Although the causes of this persistence are not fully understood, the impact of early violence exposure on interpersonal functioning likely has a lot to do with it.



"Men are so well positioned in our society to positively influence our work to stop violence against women given their roles as fathers, coaches, mentors and policy makers. We are fortunate to have men in Connecticut who are committed to working collectively to help CCADV achieve its mission to address domestic violence and be a catalyst for change. We are hopeful that the "I Choose" campaign will provide a ripple effect and inspire more men to lead the way toward ending violence toward women and girls."

-Karen Jarmoc, CEO, CCADV



Another factor contributing to unhealthy interpersonal functioning, and in some cases, violence, has to do with our gender stereotyped culture, in which masculinity is narrowly associated with being emotionally stoic, strong, and domineering, and femininity with emotional lability, fragility, and caregiving. Socially constructed gender roles put heavy pressure on boys and men to perpetuate a system with different gender expectations of boys and girls. Boys are expected to be tough and set the standards, while girls are expected to subordinate themselves. The violent and dominant nature of the defined gender roles makes many men and boys uncomfortable. Therefore, boys, girls, men and women are increasingly urged to come together to talk about the roles of males and females. Yet generally, boys and men are more comfortable discussing gender and violence related issues amongst themselves (Belbase, Heiberg & Pillars, 2010).

Promising Interventions

Are there ways to intervene with violence-exposed youth to reverse or catch up their deficits in interpersonal functioning? Can we engage boys and young men in breaking the boundaries of our gender stereotyped culture that prevent some men from making and maintaining healthy relationships? Can we empower boys and young men to take an active role in addressing violence and promoting healthy relationships? There are some promising, new, evidence-informed approaches with these objectives in mind. Many of these incorporate aspects of the bystander framework focused on empowering and guiding bystanders to take initiative to address violent behavior when they see it (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Several programs specifically target boys and young men, including **Coaching Boys Into Men**, **Mentors in Violence Prevention**, and **The Council for Boys and Young Men**.

In Connecticut, the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) **“I Choose” Campaign** has been developed to engage men and boys in making positive life choices that don’t involve violence. It stems from the idea that violence is a choice - and with the right mentors and the right tools, boys can choose to rise above domestic violence. The campaign works toward educating boys about making good life choices: “I Choose respect;” “I Choose not to normalize violence towards women;” “I Choose to take a stand against domestic violence.” If boys have successful male role models, they can begin to understand how good choices can result in life affirming successes. Currently, with 3-year funding from the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence has partnered with the Connecticut Boys and Girls Clubs and the Youth Excellence Project to work with male youth in advancing the mission of the “I Choose” campaign.



Erik & Angel from the Youth Excellence Project participating in the “I Choose” Campaign.

The **Youth Excellence Project** is a small program designed for adolescent boys who have endured significant life challenges such as violence, trauma, or loss. Most participating youths are in foster care or were adopted from foster care. According to the research literature, these boys not only face greater risk for subsequent exposure to violence and associated mental health problems, but also for perpetrating violence. The leaders of the program wish to reverse these odds. As part of the “I Choose” campaign, youth are empowered to use their own experiences with violence to grow and to become peer ambassadors against violence towards educating other youth and supporting victims. As a result, their messages can be very powerful.

Chris was 14-years-old when he joined the Youth Excellence Project after being referred by his DCF caseworker. With a history of witnessing domestic violence, severe physical abuse, and abandonment, Chris struggled with symptoms of traumatic stress. His participation in the Youth Excellence Project was a valuable supplement to the psychological treatment he was receiving and gave him opportunities to process some of his traumatic experiences and loss with supportive mentors. Like other youths, it also helped him to find a positive outlet for the pain he felt – to direct this energy towards promoting healthy relationships and preventing violence. In this capacity, Chris worked on a public service message that was recorded and published on social media.



[Click to view the video.](#)

Conclusion

Experiences like these may be enough to facilitate change among our vulnerable youth populations. This change need not necessarily mean turning every youth into a trained advocate against violence. Rather, it could mean educating and influencing these youth towards making them think twice before committing an act of violence. Or, it could mean empowering them to take action when they witness violence as a bystander. It could also mean encouraging youth to discontinue the unhealthy social trends, in schools and on social media, that perpetuate gender stereotypes and a culture that is permissive of violence. We at the Children’s Center on Family Violence implore you to find ways to engage boys and young men in an effort to be a part of this change.

References Cited

- Belbase, L., Heiberg, T. & Pillars, G. (2010). Engaging Boys to Stop Violence: A Step by Step Guide for Initiating Social Change. Save the Children Sweden.
- Briggs-Gowan, M. J., Ford, J. D., Fraleigh, L., McCarthy, K., & Carter, A. S. (2010). Prevalence of exposure to potentially traumatic events in a healthy birth cohort of very young children in the northeastern United States. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 23(6), 725-733. doi: 10.1002/jts.20593
- Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., Turner, H., & Hamby, S. L. (2005). The victimization of children and youth: A comprehensive, national survey. *Child Maltreatment*, 10(1), 5-25. doi: 10.1177/1077559504271287
- Grasso, D. J., Dierkhising, C. B., Branson, C. E., Ford, J. D., & Lee, R. (2015). Developmental Patterns of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Current Symptoms and Impairment in Youth Referred For Trauma-Specific Services. *J Abnorm Child Psychol*. doi: 10.1007/s10802-015-0086-8
- Kann, L., Kinchen, S., Shanklin, S. L., Flint, K. H., Hawkins, J., Harris, W. A., ... & Whittle, L. (2014). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2013.
- McMahon, S., & Banyard, V. L. (2012). When can I help? A conceptual framework for the prevention of sexual violence through bystander intervention. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 13(1), 3-14.
- NCADV. (2015). Domestic violence national statistics. Retrieved from www.ncadv.org
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). Prevalence and consequences of male-to-female and female-to-male intimate partner violence as measured by the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Violence against women*, 6(2), 142-161.
- U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (2017), Criminal Victimization, 2016. NCJ 251150. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv16.pdf>.
- Wells, L., Lorenzetti, L., Carolo, H., Dinner, T., Jones, C., Minerson, T., & Esina, E. (2013). Engaging men and boys in domestic violence prevention: Opportunities and promising approaches. Calgary, AB: The University of Calgary, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence.

LEARN MORE AT www.ctccfv.org

NEED HELP?

Professionals or parents looking for help can call the statewide domestic violence hotline. Counselors are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. All services are confidential, safe and free.

888.774.2900
ENGLISH

844.831.9200
ESPAÑOL

The Children's Center on Family Violence is a partnership between Connecticut Children's Medical Center and Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence. It was established in 2016 to respond to and reduce the number of children impacted by family violence through a trauma-informed, multidisciplinary, multiagency approach. Learn more about The Center and our work at www.ctccfv.org.