



Safe Dates Teaches Teenagers the Difference Between Healthy and Abusive Relationships

Implementing the Safe Dates curriculum in 13 New Jersey high schools

SUMMARY

One in four adolescents report verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from a dating partner each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹

The [Princeton Center for Leadership Training](#) (Princeton, N.J.) partnered with 13 high schools in New Jersey to implement Safe Dates: An Adolescent Dating Abuse Prevention Curriculum as part of regular classes (usually health and physical education classes) from July 2008 through June 2011.

Safe Dates is an evidence-based curriculum aimed at teaching teenagers how to recognize the difference between healthy relationships and manipulative or abusive relationships. It has been designated as a model program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and was selected for the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

Safe Dates consists of a 10-session curriculum,² a play about dating abuse written by Safe Dates developers, and a poster contest.

Key Results

- 8,144 students at 13 New Jersey high schools in eight counties completed Safe Dates between 2008 and 2011.
- The Princeton Center for Leadership Training trained 97 instructors to implement Safe Dates.

¹ *Understanding Teen Dating Violence*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010, available [online](#).

² The version of Safe Dates used in this project was nine sessions; the 10-session curriculum was introduced in 2010.

Key Findings

The Princeton Center for Leadership Training also assessed the Safe Dates project through logs completed by instructors after each Safe Dates session; student surveys and focus groups; and instructor and stakeholder surveys and focus groups. Among the findings:

- Nearly 80 percent of instructors were able to complete all of the sessions despite some challenges, including fitting the program into the school schedule, balancing teaching styles with following the program curriculum, and being able to devote enough time to all program elements.
- Students demonstrated a significant change in attitudes and knowledge about dating abuse.
- Students showed an increase in desirable attitudes, suggesting greater disapproval of abusive behaviors, but very little improvement in their likely responses to anger. Students retained key messages from the program, including recognizing signs of abuse and understanding that abuse includes more than just physical assault.
- Participating in Safe Dates did not increase students' perceptions about the negative consequences of dating abuse.
- Students unanimously agreed that Safe Dates should continue at their schools.
- Stakeholders were satisfied with their school's involvement with Safe Dates.
- Some 87.5 percent of stakeholders had already seen positive changes within their school.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) funded this work through its *New Jersey Health Initiatives* program. For more information about the program, see [Program Results Report](#).

THE PROJECT

The Princeton Center for Leadership Training recruited high schools, trained teachers and School-Based Youth Services Program staff to teach the Safe Dates curriculum, provided technical assistance during implementation, and assessed the project. The Princeton center subcontracted with HiTOPS, Inc., a Princeton-based teen health and education center, to help develop and facilitate training events and provide technical assistance.

The Princeton Center also worked with a team of stakeholders at each school (the principal, the guidance counselor, other student support personnel, and parent and student representatives), as well as teachers, to implement and help institutionalize Safe Dates.

“We work with schools to build programs so that they can sustain them in the long-term,” said Chavonne Lenoir, DrPH, project director and executive director of New Jersey programs for the Princeton Center for Leadership Training.

RESULTS

Project staff reported the following results in a report to RWJF.

- **8,144 students at 13 New Jersey high schools in eight counties completed Safe Dates between 2008 and 2011.** The Princeton Center for Leadership Training also trained instructors at one other school that was unable to implement the curriculum during the grant period. See the [Appendix](#) for a list of partner schools.
- **The Princeton Center for Leadership Training trained 97 Safe Dates instructors to teach the curriculum.** Staff also conducted annual advanced trainings, which 58 veteran instructors attended, with many of them returning to attend two or three advanced trainings.

Project Assessment and Findings

The Princeton Center for Leadership Training’s assessment of the Safe Dates project included:

- Logs completed by instructors after each Safe Dates session in which they checked off completed activities, reported how much time each activity took and the general reaction from the students [rated on a scale of one to five], and provided other feedback.
- Student surveys and focus groups:
 - 168 students at three high schools completed surveys at school before and after participating in Safe Dates activities.
 - 30 students from three different high schools participated in the focus groups.
- Instructor and stakeholder surveys and focus groups:
 - 16 veteran instructors from five schools participated in focus groups.
 - 10 stakeholders from eight schools completed online surveys.

The Princeton Center for Leadership Training reported the following findings in reports to RWJF.

Findings From Instructor Delivery Logs

- **Nearly 80 percent of instructors were able to complete all of the sessions.** The rest of the instructors were unable to do so due to time constraints, absences, or other school priorities.
- **Some 62 percent of instructors conducted the Safe Dates poster contest, and 54 percent did the play.** Reasons for not doing the contest or the play included time constraints and logistical challenges.

Findings From Student Surveys

- **Students demonstrated a significant change in attitudes and knowledge about dating abuse.** For example, the percentage of students who could successfully identify 10 abusive behaviors increased from 27.4 percent to 53 percent after participating in Safe Dates.
- **Students showed an increase in desirable attitudes, suggesting greater disapproval of abusive behaviors, but very little improvement in their likely responses to anger.**
- **Participating in Safe Dates did not increase their perceptions about the negative consequences of dating abuse.**

Findings From Student Focus Groups

- **Incorporating dating violence into a high school curriculum is important, in order for teens to understand warning signs and the dangers of unhealthy relationships.**
- **Students retained key messages from the program, including recognizing signs of abuse and understanding that abuse includes more than just physical assault.**
- **The most memorable and effective Safe Dates activities were those that were more interactive.**
- **Safe Dates is most relevant for late middle school or early high school students.**
- **Students unanimously agreed that Safe Dates should continue at their schools.**

Findings From Stakeholder Surveys

- **Stakeholders were satisfied with their school's involvement with Safe Dates, with most responding that the topic was important, the activities engaged the students, and the curriculum was user-friendly.**
- **Some 87.5 percent of stakeholders had seen positive changes within their school, including an increase in student awareness of dating abuse and willingness to speak up about it.**

- **Some 75 percent of stakeholders felt dating violence education was very relevant and 25 percent said it was relevant.**

Findings From Instructor Focus Groups

- **There is value in teaching students about dating abuse.** Instructors noted an increase in student awareness of dating abuse. Some saw colleagues who were not directly involved with Safe Dates intervene when they recognized abusive behaviors.
- **Incorporating Safe Dates into the school day presented logistical challenges,** including fitting the program into the school schedule, and being able to devote enough time to all program elements.
- **More flexibility would allow instructors to incorporate individual teaching styles and modify the program to meet the needs of their students while maintaining its fidelity.**
- **Safe Dates had a positive impact on participating students,** but more needs to be done to reach the rest of the school and community.

LESSONS LEARNED

Challenges

The Princeton Center for Leadership Training and the participating schools were unable to accomplish the original goal of reaching 10,800 students.³ Reasons include:

- Transitions in school leadership that led to some schools discontinuing, delaying, or changing the program
- Partnering with one less school than planned in the first year
- How widely the schools implemented Safe Dates (e.g., only for selected classes, or for a grade level, or the entire school)
- A variable number of instructors at the schools and training some instructors later in the grant period

Lessons

1. **Keep stakeholders engaged in the program to increase their understanding of the need for and effectiveness of the program.** Being more involved in the work of the program through the stakeholder teams resulted in stakeholders being better able to provide assistance to instructors and advocate for program continuation. (Project Director)

³ This goal was adjusted to 8,500 students soon after funding, and the Princeton Center operated for most of the project with this goal.

2. **Train teachers on new curriculum to gain their buy-in and improve delivery of the curriculum.** “Providing training allowed Safe Dates instructors to relate to the materials better, and helped them connect with the resources available in their own schools and communities,” said Project Director Lenoir. The teachers were especially enthusiastic about the advanced training and the opportunity this gave them to collaborate and network with each other.
3. **To avoid miscommunication, provide clear expectations to partner schools that are restated multiple times.** During the first year of the grant, one school assumed they could implement a shortened version of Safe Dates, as indicated in the curriculum, and were unclear that as part of the grant, they were expected to implement all sessions. Also, completing the play and poster contest was not explicitly described as an expectation in the initial conversations with schools and as a result, their level of commitment to complete these program components was not very high. (Project Director)
4. **Build strong relationships with partner schools to better meet their needs and help them expand and grow the program.** Project staff communicated regularly with stakeholder teams and provided technical assistance to the instructors and schools. Staff tailored the technical assistance to the diverse needs of the schools. (Project Director)

AFTERWARD

Most of the participating high schools continue to offer Safe Dates, according to Lenoir. The Princeton Center for Leadership Training continues to work closely with these schools.

In 2011, New Jersey passed legislation that requires schools to provide education and prevention policies to help prevent teen dating abuse for all students in grades 7 to 12. The Princeton Center for Leadership Training is consulting with *New Jersey Health Initiatives* about ways to help schools comply with the law (as of September 2011). The Princeton Center for Leadership Training also now offers the Safe Dates program to other schools that are interested in the program.

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APPENDIX

Partner Schools

- Camden High School, Camden, N.J.
- Creative and Performing Arts High School, Camden, N.J.*
- Dwight Morrow High School, Englewood, N.J.
- Franklin High School, Somerset, N.J.
- Haddon Heights Junior/Senior High School, Haddon Heights, N.J.
- Highland Park High School, Highland Park, N.J.
- Hoboken High School, Hoboken, N.J.
- Hunterdon Central High School, Flemington, N.J.
- Middlesex High School, Middlesex, N.J.
- North Brunswick Township High School, North Brunswick, N.J.
- North Hunterdon High School, Annandale, N.J.
- Pemberton Township High School, Pemberton, N.J.
- Trenton Central High School, Trenton, N.J.
- Woodrow Wilson High School, Camden, N.J.

** Received training but did not implement Safe Dates during the grant period*

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