

## **EXPECT RESPECT: A SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM PROMOTING SAFE AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUTH**

### **HISTORY/OVERVIEW**

On any normal day in the Austin Independent School District, approximately forty students in different schools pick up their passes from the Guidance Office. At the scheduled time they will show their pass to their teacher and head for the group room—usually a much-sought-after, and hard to come-by space for students to meet privately during the school day. For one class period each week group members bridge the gaps of race and culture as they talk about dating, sexuality, masculinity, violence and other issues. Diverse in many ways, they share a common bond, personal experiences of dating, sexual or family violence. The groups' facilitators are counselors employed by SafePlace, the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survival Center in Austin, Texas.

In another part of town, a professional trainer from SafePlace sits at a table with a committee of administrators and teachers at an elementary school. Well into the school year, they discuss the details of a new policy to reduce and prevent bullying among children. They work to make it user-friendly so that all parents, students and staff will be able to understand their role in making the campus safer for everybody. During the meeting a teacher shares her enthusiasm for the curriculum she is using to help the students take a stand when they see someone being mistreated. The school counselor reads a letter from a student who says she wants to kill herself because she is repeatedly tormented by her peers. Before the meeting ends, they schedule upcoming staff and parent training sessions on peer sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, the calls continue to come in to SafePlace and the waiting list grows. Another child has made an outcry of abuse to an adult at school. A father saw bruises on his daughter's arm and is afraid for her safety. A teacher is aware that a young man is having trouble coping with a recent sexual assault. These cases will be prioritized, and within days or weeks a SafePlace counselor will go out to each school to visit, to talk about safety, and often to get authorities involved in protecting the student. Some students will be referred into a group at their school and others will be seen individually. Each student's situation will be different, but all will get a similar message, that help is available.

The Expect Respect program at SafePlace began providing school-based services in 1988, in response to requests from school counselors seeking support for girls in abusive dating relationships. (SafePlace has been providing services to survivors of domestic and sexual violence in the Austin area for over 25 years and is one of the largest and most comprehensive service providers of its kind in the United States.) Initially, two counselors from SafePlace began holding weekly groups in several high schools. More and more girls came forward to join the groups—most referred by school staff and some by friends—to participate in the confidential sessions. In subsequent years, additional schools requested girls' groups as well as groups for boys who had experienced family violence or were using violent or coercive behavior toward girls and girlfriends. In 2002, 400 students participated in counseling and groups, 2,500 in classroom presentations, and

over 2,000 adults received training and materials to help them respond effectively and prevent violence in young people's lives.

## **GOALS**

The Expect Respect Program aims to:

- Support youth in healing from past abuse;
- Raise expectations for equality and respect in relationships;
- Enhance safety and respect on school campuses; and
- Promote youth leadership in violence prevention.

## **PROGRAM COMPONENTS**

- **Individual Counseling and Support Groups** serve youth in grades K-12 who have experienced sexual, dating or family violence or are involved in an abusive dating relationship. In elementary school, children who have experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence meet in separate groups for ten weeks. In middle and high schools, boys' and girls' groups meet separately for 24 weeks, focusing on healthy dating relationships.
- **Classroom Presentations** designed to stimulate awareness and discussion among students are provided by request for students in grades 6-12 and for youth in other community settings. Topics include sexual harassment, dating violence, and healthy relationships. Volunteer presenters are recruited from the community.
- **Professional Training** is offered to educators, parents, and other professionals on a variety of issues including bullying, sexual harassment and dating violence. Selected schools also participate in the **Bullying and Sexual Harassment Prevention Program**, which involves all members of the school community in reducing bullying and harassment and improving overall school climate. This program has multiple components, including a climate survey, policy development, curriculum and staff and parent training.
- **Teen Volunteer Program.** Youth in 7th-12th grades attend a six-hour training in which they participate in activities, discussions and projects to expand their knowledge, understanding, and leadership skills in the area of violence prevention. Teen volunteers develop and put into action plans for awareness-raising activities that can be done throughout the year at school and in the community.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS AND INNOVATION**

- **Providing accessible services for children and youth who have been hurt or exposed to violence.** The most vulnerable victims of sexual and domestic violence are not in shelters or other treatment programs. They are sitting in classrooms, unnoticed, unidentified, and unsafe when they return home in the afternoon. These children in particular, because of the social isolation that often accompanies family violence, have little opportunity outside of school to speak to adults who can help. If a child has been threatened with harm or harm to a loved one for telling, he or she may suffer in silence until a trusted adult reaches out to

him or her. This program demonstrates that despite all the complexities involved, agencies and schools can work together to protect and to support children in the greatest danger.

- **Engaging boys in counseling and groups.** “Mr. Freeman, how can I get into that young gentlemen’s club?” These are the words of an eighth grade boy who had heard about the Expect Respect boys' group from friends at his school. Expect Respect has been successful in making its boys’ groups appealing to young men by recognizing that they need and want a place where they can speak freely about themselves and their relationships. In the safety of the group setting, young men can let their guard down and learn alternatives to violent masculinity.
- **Implementing and evaluating school-wide primary prevention programs.** In 1997, SafePlace was funded by the Center’s for Disease Control and Prevention to develop, implement, and evaluate a primary prevention program for intimate partner violence. Focusing on the problems of bullying and sexual harassment as precursors to dating and sexual violence, this project involved students, parents and school personnel in six elementary schools. Evaluation results indicated that students increased their awareness and their willingness to intervene when they witnessed teasing, bullying or sexual harassment. Building on the lessons learned from this project, Expect Respect has continued implementing and evaluating school-wide strategies to reduce bullying and sexual harassment and to improve overall school climate.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Develop programs to meet existing needs.** The Expect Respect program began in response to a request for school-based counseling, and its growth has been driven by demand for additional services. By meeting an existing need, Expect Respect has made itself an integral part of the school district’s guidance and counseling program. The relationship that has evolved is mutually beneficial—with schools receiving the specialized counseling and support they need for their students and Safeplace gaining access to students for counseling and educational programs. While this may seem obvious to some, it is still worth asking the question, “What is the need from the school’s point of view?”
- **Use evaluation data.** Evaluation data is essential for demonstrating the impact of services as well as assessing the need for additional services. For example, an anonymous feedback form for students who receive an Expect Respect presentation in their classroom asks them to indicate whether they have witnessed sexual harassment at school or had a friend in an abusive relationship, etc. Feedback from school staff is also important to help you understand how the program is perceived and what additional services may be needed. It is also vital to use current and accurate research data in presentations and training, particularly to school staff to establish your credibility as an expert on your subject. While having multiple funding sources is always a benefit, tracking and reporting your evaluation data can be complicated unless you identify consistent output and outcome measures. In other words, decide how you will measure what your

program is doing and how you will know if it's successful and then use those indicators consistently for new grant proposals.

- **Take all opportunities to contribute, educate, share materials and information with partners, including schools and community-based agencies.** It is not always possible to say “yes” to every request, particularly requests that take time away from other important tasks. However, as you build your relationships with schools and other community groups, you must be present, an active participant in meetings, task forces, collaborations, etc. By doing so, you will not only to keep your issue on the radar screen but also build the formal and informal relationships that are necessary to work effectively in schools. In addition, make your materials available to others. The benefits of sharing them outweigh the risks that they will be copied unfairly or otherwise misused.
- **Use established materials (videos, curriculum, surveys, etc.) rather than creating new ones whenever possible.** Research existing materials before investing time and money in creating new ones. This is critical for programs that have to decide between developing a curriculum, for example, or using staff time for providing services. There are many excellent curricula available that are designed for school-based programs. Choose materials that fit your audience. For example, use a support group manual in a confidential group setting rather than in a classroom setting. Avoid videos on adult domestic violence when speaking to young people about dating relationships. In addition, select evaluation instruments that have been scientifically tested so that you can get the most out of your evaluation. If possible, find a researcher to help select an instrument or develop a new one. Contact your local sexual or domestic violence agency or state coalition for resources.
- **Create materials and programs that are easily replicated by others within and outside your field.** If you create something new that is useful to you, make it available to others. Create demand for your materials by keeping them current and attractive. Continue to review and revise brochures, handouts, manuals, newsletters and other resources as much as possible so they are relevant and easy-to-use. Put them out there in the community, on the web, and in local, state, and national resource guides. Create an information packet that you can easily send out in response to a request. Consider charging a fee for presentations and/or materials to help support your program.

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