



EVIDENCE BRIEF

Six Effective Strategies for Developing Gender-Based Violence Prevention Programming

This Evidence Brief summarizes six effective strategies for developing gender-based violence prevention programs for boys and young men.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "gender-based violence", "prevention", "intervention", "program", "boys", "men", and "high school".

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Gender is a social aspect of personhood, related to expectations about an individual's behaviour and presentation (i.e., gender roles and expressions). Although dominant gender frameworks suggest that there are only two genders ('man' and 'woman'), there is nothing inherently mandatory about this system.

Gender identity refers to how a person understands and experiences their own gender.

Gender expression refers to how a person chooses to present or express their gender, and can include clothing, appearance, and behaviour. A person's gender expression may or may not reflect their gender identity.

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence perpetrated against an individual based on their gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender.¹ GBV can take many forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, cyber, and economic violence, as well as neglect, discrimination, and harassment.¹ Women, girls, and gender-diverse people are at the highest risk of experiencing GBV.¹

Many GBV prevention programs address *specific forms* of GBV. For instance, most GBV prevention

interventions for boys and young men focus on reducing intimate partner violence and sexual violence. While there is relatively less evidence on programs that address broader forms of GBV, research suggests that the risk factors for perpetrating violence inside and outside of relationships are similar, which suggests that effective prevention efforts can address both.

Social norms are unspoken rules about what is considered 'normal' or acceptable behaviour in a group or society. According to social norms theory, *perceptions* of social norms are good predictors of behaviours and attitudes.²

Gender norms are social norms that define acceptable behaviour for women and men in a group or society.³ They are embedded in institutions, reproduced through social interaction, and shape access to resources and freedoms.³

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

01. CHALLENGE HARMFUL GENDER NORMS

Much of the literature on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention suggests that the most effective programs are **gender-transformative**.⁴ The goal of these interventions is to "*transform harmful gender norms and power dynamics into positive ones*"⁵, often through critical reflection and dialogue.⁶ Encourage boys to critically reflect on processes of socialization, the 'costs' associated with traditional forms of masculinity (e.g., higher rates of suicide, addiction, accident- or homicide-related death, and imprisonment), and the benefits of holding more gender-equitable attitudes.^{2,7}

Evidence suggests that programs that challenge harmful gender norms can lead to positive changes in attitudes and behaviour among boys and young men, including:^{2,8,9,10}

- increases in gender-equitable attitudes;
- decreased support for harassment and the use of violence in relationships;
- increased recognition of abusive behaviour;
- increases in positive bystander behaviour and/or intentions to intervene (see also #2, below); and
- reductions in relationship abuse and sexual violence perpetration.

02. BUILD BYSTANDER INTERVENTION SKILLS

Substantial research suggests that boys and young men who perceive others as being tolerant of GBV are more likely to engage in GBV and less likely to intervene when witnessing abusive behaviour.^{2,11} For example, one study suggests that boys aged 13-19 who witness peers engaged in abusive behaviours toward girls are more likely to perpetrate violence themselves.¹²

Effective bystander intervention programs provide boys and young men with the “tools, skills, options and confidence to be more effective interveners, and in the process, challenge and change existing social norms around men’s roles and responsibilities in a positive way”². In other words, these trainings not only reduce the risk of violence for young people and those in their social networks, but they also help reduce violence at the community-level by changing others’ perceptions of GBV as acceptable.¹² School-based bystander intervention programs have been associated with reductions in GBV acceptance and perpetration at the individual and school levels.¹³

Bystander intervention programs have also shown promise in increasing positive intervention behaviour and intentions to intervene, reducing sexual harassment, rape myth acceptance, and abuse perpetration.¹¹

03. CONSIDER TARGETED PROGRAMMING FOR BOYS EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE

Early exposure to violence, which includes both experiencing and witnessing violence, is one of the strongest predictors of GBV perpetration in men.¹⁴ Research suggests that teens who have experienced violence or violence-accepting attitudes are more likely to engage in relationship abuse,¹¹ and that exposure to adverse childhood experiences – or ACEs, such as sexual abuse, witnessing intimate partner violence, and growing up in a household with a parent who has a mental illness – is linked to physical dating violence victimization and perpetration.¹⁵

Organizations should consider developing tailored interventions for youth who have been exposed to violence, and fostering expectations for healthy, non-violent relationships.^{16,17} Consider creating “safe spaces for boys to examine the impact of trauma on their lives and to imagine together the possibility of nonviolent connections”¹⁸.

Evidence from Expect Respect Support Groups, a school-based violence prevention program for youth who have been exposed to violence, suggests that this approach can be effective, with an evaluation finding that boys (aged 11-18) who participated in the program reported declines in teen dating violence perpetration and victimization, as well as proactive and reactive aggression.¹⁷ In particular, the program’s support group format and extended duration (of 24 weeks) were linked to positive outcomes.¹⁹

04. ENGAGE ADULT ROLE MODELS AND “NEAR PEERS” AS FACILITATORS

Many effective GBV prevention programs for boys and young men engage athletic coaches and older peers (“near peers”) as facilitators, on the assumption that they can influence boys as mentors and role models (e.g., Coaching Boys Into Men, Mentors in Violence Prevention, Men of Strength Clubs). These programs

have shown to be effective in improving participants' ability to recognize abusive behaviour, and increasing positive bystander behaviour and intentions to intervene.^{2,9,10,11}

05. TAKE A STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH

A study²⁰ with practitioners working to engage boys and young men in GBV prevention worldwide found that it is important to take a respectful, nonjudgmental approach, and be hopeful about the roles of boys and young men in ending GBV. Hopefulness, in this context, means believing in boys' and men's "general 'goodness' [and] capacity to change"²⁰, and working to support healthier forms of masculinity.

Evidence suggests that programs that focus on "preference, hopes, and intentions" as opposed to "guilt, shame or fear" are more likely to lead to

behaviour and attitude change.² It is important to challenge harmful gender norms *and* to promote healthier, alternative models of masculinity. Locate the problem in the social environment and social norms, rather than within boys and young men themselves.²¹

06. INCORPORATE ACTIVE LEARNING

Effective GBV prevention interventions are youth-centred, and use active learning strategies, such as physical activity, storytelling, role plays, and group discussions.^{7,8} The inclusion of role-play activities can help boys learn and practice safe and effective bystander intervention skills in a comfortable environment.^{2,7,13} Programs should ensure that group discussions are youth-driven, with facilitators (not teachers); this ensures an open, judgment-free, and comfortable environment in which boys and young men can share and learn from each other.⁷

ENDNOTES

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