



Original article

Implementing a Targeted Teen Dating Abuse Prevention Program: Challenges and Successes Experienced by Expect Respect Facilitators



Barbara Ball, Ph.D.^{a,*}, Kristin M. Holland, Ph.D., M.P.H.^b, Khiya J. Marshall, Dr.P.H.^b,
 Caroline Lippy, Ph.D.^b, Sumati Jain, M.Ed.^a, Kathleen Souders, M.A.^a, and Ruth P. Westby, M.P.H.^b

^aSafePlace, Austin, Texas

^bDivision of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Expect Respect Support Groups (ERSGs) are a targeted 24-week dating abuse prevention program tailored to middle and high school students who have been exposed to violence. As part of a controlled evaluation, this qualitative study was designed to examine facilitators' experiences with program implementation and generate a deeper understanding of factors that enhance or challenge implementation and program outcomes.

Methods: Semistructured interviews with Expect Respect Support Group facilitators (three males and four females) were conducted at the midpoint and endpoint of the school year. Interview topics included working within the school system, strategies for establishing a productive group process, and individual- and group-level responses to the program.

Results: Facilitators indicated that school counselors' awareness of students' exposure to violence increased their ability to refer eligible students. Within a supportive school environment, successful groups harnessed the protective qualities of a positive peer group, supported members in questioning the normalcy of abuse, and provided opportunities for building healthy relationship skills. Challenges resulted from impediments to group cohesion including insufficient referrals, inconsistent attendance, and low levels of school support. Students who were frequently absent and disengaged from school were particularly challenging to engage in a school-based program.

Conclusions: This research demonstrates that successful implementation of a targeted school-based dating violence prevention program relies on building school support and awareness of teen dating violence, especially for appropriate identification and referral of at-risk students. High levels of school support enhance the development of a supportive group process and attitudinal and behavioral changes among participants.

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* Address correspondence to: Barbara Ball, Ph.D., SafePlace, P.O. Box 19454, Austin, TX 78760.

E-mail address: bball@safeplace.org (B. Ball).

Adolescent dating abuse is a serious public health concern that is associated with adolescent risk behaviors, such as alcohol and substance use, sexual risk taking, and poor academic performance [1]. Prevention of dating abuse is critical given its long lasting and serious consequences for adolescents' mental, physical, and reproductive health [2–4]; educational outcomes [5,6]; and the potential persistence of teen dating abuse across multiple relationships and into adulthood [7].

Research on risk factors for dating abuse suggests that there is a need for targeted prevention programs that engage youth who

have experienced maltreatment and other adverse childhood events, demonstrate aggressive behaviors and attitudes, or who are already involved in unhealthy dating relationships [8,9]. However, very few targeted dating abuse prevention programs have been evaluated and, in contrast to universal prevention programs, even fewer are offered within the school system [10,11]. Efforts to bring targeted prevention programming directly into schools where services can be accessed with fewer barriers and stigma mirror the national movement toward school-based delivery models for mental health and substance abuse services [12]. The nature of the school system in which the program is embedded [13,14] offers unique opportunities and challenges that impact program implementation and outcomes [15,16] and require further exploration, especially if a program addresses sensitive issues such as dating abuse.

Expect Respect is a 24-week support group program provided during the school days [17,18] for youth who have been exposed to violence in relationships with their family, peers, and/or dating partners. As part of a larger controlled outcome evaluation of Expect Respect Support Groups (ERSGs), we conducted a qualitative study to examine facilitators' experiences providing support groups in the school setting and generate a deeper understanding of factors that enhance or challenge program implementation and outcomes. Through interviews, we explored how facilitators (1) work with schools; (2) establish a supportive group process that fosters healthy relationship development; and (3) describe program outcomes for participants.

Expect Respect Support Group Model

ERSGs employ a curriculum-based support group model that strives to create a positive peer environment, increase relationships skills, and promote norms for equal and respectful relationships [19]. Middle and high school students are eligible for participation if they report domestic violence, child abuse, peer or dating abuse, and/or exposure to violence in the community. At intake, 75% of participants disclosed experiencing violence in more than one context and 15% of participants experienced pervasive violence and abuse across all contexts. Participants were among the highest risk students in their respective schools as indicated by significantly lower attendance and higher levels of aggressive behavior offenses.

Youth who grow up in abusive environments learn that relationships are unreliable and may come to expect abandonment, disrespect, and violence in all relationships [20,21]. However, experiencing supportive relationships with other peers and adults has the potential to alter ingrained expectations and help youth develop healthy relationship skills and norms [22]. Positive peer support may also protect youth from entering or staying in relationships with abusive partners [23,24], as peers help to define acceptable behaviors and function as "guardians" over dating relationships.

Boys and girls report being involved in dating violence as both perpetrators and victims [25–27]. ERSGs offer separate groups for boys and girls led by same-sex facilitators that are intended to increase participants' sense of emotional safety and comfort, allowing them to bond quickly and more freely explore gender-based relationship norms. The 24-session ERSG curriculum [17] includes five units: (1) developing group skills; (2) choosing equality and respect; (3) recognizing and healing from abusive relationships; (4) learning skills for healthy relationships including empathy, communication, boundaries, consent, and

handling rejection; and (5) promoting nonviolent relationships in the community. Support group facilitators are encouraged to work creatively with the curriculum, adapt activities and discussion topics to meet the specific needs of their group, and allow time for handling individual concerns and group dynamics.

ERSGs are implemented at middle and high schools through an agreement between SafePlace (the program developer and service provider) and a large urban school district in the Southwestern United States. Facilitators obtain each principal's agreement for providing ERSGs during the school days and work closely with a designated school contact person—a school counselor or social worker—who coordinates program referrals and provides logistical support (e.g., space, schedules, passes releasing students from class). Facilitators provide information to schools about teen dating abuse, distribute program information and referral criteria, and conduct individual intakes and weekly 55-minute support group sessions.

Methods

This study was guided by a grounded theory approach that explores individuals' experiences and the perceived causal conditions and consequences of a phenomenon [28,29]. ERSG facilitators were intentionally chosen to participate in in-depth interviews (theoretical sampling) to develop an understanding of the factors that enhance and challenge the implementation and outcomes of the program [13,30].

Participants

All seven ERSG facilitators (three males and four females; 100% participation rate) consented to participate in interviews at the midpoint and endpoint of the school year (December 2012; June 2013). ERSG facilitators were employed by SafePlace and included licensed social workers, counselors, and paraprofessionals with extensive experience in working with youth and training regarding teen dating violence and ERSG implementation. In the 2012–2013 school year, they provided 40 support groups for 306 students at 24 middle and high schools. The facilitators had an average of four years (range, 2–7 years) of experience conducting ERSGs.

Interview protocol

Interviews were conducted through telephone, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and, to minimize bias, were conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) evaluation staff rather than SafePlace staff. Interviews were recorded using WavePad iPad software (Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA), transcribed verbatim, and deidentified to protect the privacy of facilitators. Pseudonyms were assigned to identify facilitators and are used throughout this publication.

Interviews followed a semistructured format with open-ended questions developed a priori by CDC staff. Midyear interview questions focused on general information about groups, school context and referral process, facilitation strategies, and perceptions of individual- and group-level changes. End-of-year interview questions explored perceptions of group- and individual-level changes in greater detail. At both time points, facilitators were asked to think about one group and individual student that functioned well and one group and student that presented challenges. Finally, facilitators were asked to identify factors that contributed to implementation challenges and successes.

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