



Original article

“Coaching Boys into Men”: A Cluster-Randomized Controlled Trial of a Dating Violence Prevention Program

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Dating violence (DV)—physical, sexual, and psychological aggression in adolescent romantic relationships—is prevalent among youth. Despite broad calls for primary prevention, few programs with demonstrated effectiveness exist. This cluster-randomized trial examined the effectiveness of a DV perpetration prevention program targeting coaches and high school male athletes.

Methods: The unit of randomization was the high school (16 schools), and the unit of analysis was the athlete (N = 2,006 students). Primary outcomes were intentions to intervene, recognition of abusive behaviors, and gender-equitable attitudes. Secondary outcomes explored bystander behaviors and abuse perpetration. Regression models for clustered, longitudinal data assessed between-arm differences in over-time changes in mean levels of continuous outcomes in 1,798 athletes followed up at 3 months.

Results: Intervention athletes' changes in intentions to intervene were positive compared with control subjects, resulting in an estimated intervention effect of .12 (95% CI: .003, .24). Intervention athletes also reported higher levels of positive bystander intervention behavior than control subjects (.25, 95% CI: .13, .38). Changes in gender-equitable attitudes, recognition of abusive behaviors, and DV perpetration were not significant. Secondary analyses estimated intervention impacts according to intensity of program implementation. Compared with control subjects, athletes exposed to full-intensity implementation of the intervention demonstrated improvements in intentions to intervene (.16, 95% CI: .04, .27), recognition of abusive behaviors (.13, 95% CI: .003, .25), and positive bystander intervention (.28, 95% CI: .14, .41).

Conclusion: This cluster-randomized controlled trial supports the effectiveness of a school athletics-based prevention program as one promising strategy to reduce DV perpetration.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

DV is prevalent among adolescents. Recent prevention efforts target attitudes that legitimize violence perpetration by engaging men and boys to intervene when witnessing harmful behaviors. Evaluation of this athletic coach-delivered violence prevention program showed increases in high school male athletes' intentions to intervene and actual bystander intervention behaviors.

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Dating violence (DV)—physical, sexual, and psychological aggression in adolescent romantic relationships—is prevalent among youth, with one in three U.S. girls reporting physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner [1]. Despite broad calls for primary DV prevention [2,3], few programs with demonstrated effectiveness exist.

Attitudes that legitimize DV perpetration have been identified as modifiable perpetration risk factors [4–12]. Because DV perpetration often emerges in the context of male peers who demonstrate negative attitudes toward women and promote abuse perpetration [13–15], prevention requires addressing perpetrator attitudes and behaviors as well as the peer environment in which they are embedded. Studies suggest the utility of interventions rooted in social norms theory, which posits that individual behavior is informed by perceptions and misperceptions of others' attitudes and behaviors [13,16]. Engaging men and boys to promote nonviolent, gender-equitable attitudes is increasingly recognized by major global health organizations as a critical public health strategy to reduce violence against women [17–19].

Perceived peer tolerance for DV may reduce men's and boys' comfort and ability to intervene when witnessing such negative behaviors among their peers. The bystander approach—teaching individuals to intervene when faced with their peers' DV-related behaviors, rather than respond with apathy or tolerance—could be a powerful component of such social change [20,21]. In a college sample, inclusion of a bystander education component facilitated greater modification of harmful attitudes compared with standard sexual assault training [22]. Other sexual violence prevention programs have successfully engaged college students to intervene when witnessing peers' abusive behaviors [14,23–26]. A bystander approach to address DV has not been rigorously evaluated among high school students.

Male student athletes constitute an important target for DV prevention, given the relatively higher prevalence of DV perpetration and endorsement of attitudes supportive of violence against women among athletes [26,27]. Athletes also demonstrate greater leadership ability compared with nonathletes [28], suggesting that interventions with this population may diffuse through student populations [29–31]. Coaches are a natural ally for such interventions; their role as influential, nonparental role models renders them uniquely poised to positively impact how young men think and behave [29]. Thus, training coaches to teach adolescent male athletes to prevent DV may be a promising strategy to increase knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that reduce DV perpetration. Earlier successes of athletics-based DV interventions in college contexts [26], coupled with the high prevalence of such abuse among high school youth, point to the need for a cluster-randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact of training coaches to participate in DV prevention.

Methods

Recruitment and data collection

Five large urban school districts in Sacramento County, CA, were approached to participate in an evaluation of the “Coaching Boys into Men” (CBIM) program in October 2009; one district declined. Of the remaining four districts, three had 100% participation of their high schools, and 56% of high schools participated in the fourth district, for a total of 16 schools (i.e., clusters). Schools declined because of losing an athletics program owing to funding cuts, as well as focusing on other academic priorities. Each school's athletic director approached all head coaches of male and co-educational sports to participate each season (winter 2009–2010, spring 2010, and fall 2010). Of the coaches approached, 87% agreed to participate. The primary participation barrier reported by coaches was lack of time.

Student athletes received parental consent forms and an informational letter (available in multiple languages) from study staff about the study. Students who returned signed parental consent forms and completed youth assent forms were eligible to take the surveys. Girls were eligible, but completed a separate female-specific survey, not included in the present analyses. Fifteen-minute online surveys were collected at schools for intervention and control site student athletes (in grades 9 through 12) at the start of each sports season (winter, spring, fall) (time 1). Time 2 follow-up surveys were collected for these same athletes at the end of each sports season (approximately 12 weeks after time 1, following program implementation at the intervention sites). To facilitate anonymous matching of baseline and follow-up surveys for statistical analysis, youth self-created an identification code by responding to questions for which only they would know the answer. Students received a \$10 gift card for participating in each survey. Study methods were approved by the University of California Davis Human Subjects Research Committee and by each school district.

Intervention and control conditions

CBIM is intended to alter norms that foster DV perpetration by engaging athletic coaches as positive role models to deliver violence prevention messages to adolescent male athletes. The program consists of a 60-minute training for coaches led by a trained violence prevention advocate to introduce the Coaches Kit (available at <http://coachescorner.org>), which provides strategies for opening conversation about violence against women with athletes. Eleven “Training Cards” guide coaches to lead brief (10–15 min) weekly discussions with athletes about respect and DV prevention throughout the sports season. The advocate is available to assist coaches with concerns that arise during program delivery, including disclosures. Through this brief coach-led intervention, the CBIM program is intended to translate into measurable positive changes in athletes' attitudes and behaviors related to DV (Figure 1).

A parallel group of athletes in schools randomized to the control condition received coaching as usual, meaning the coaches were asked to interact with their athletes as they customarily do, without additional guidance. These students were assessed using identical surveys, measurement protocols, and research staff as for the intervention condition.

Outcomes

Primary knowledge, attitude, and behavior outcomes.

1. Recognition of abusive behavior: A scale developed by Silverman et al [32] to assess perceptions of the degree of abusiveness of specified relationship behaviors, such as “telling them which friends they can or can't see or talk to,” using a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from “not abusive” to “extremely abusive” (Cronbach $\alpha = .93$). Recognition of abusive behavior was modeled as a mean of responses to 12 items.
2. Gender-equitable attitudes: This scale includes questions modified from Barker's Gender-Equitable Norms Scale [33], such as “if a girl is raped it is often because she did not say no clearly enough.” Responses range from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” on a 5-point scale (Cronbach $\alpha = .80$), modeled as a mean of responses to 11 items.
3. Intentions to intervene when witnessing abusive behaviors: These investigator-developed items were pilot tested [34]. For

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