

Empowerment through education: Sexual assault resistance programs for girls and young women

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Charlene Y. Senn and Sara E. Crann from the University of Windsor discuss the importance of sexual assault resistance programs in equipping girls and young women with the knowledge and skills to reduce the risk of sexual assault

Sexual assault is a form of gender-based violence. While anyone can be a victim, research consistently finds that victims are most often girls and women (~85%), and 90% of perpetrators are boys and men. Research also shows that it is girls and young women between 14-24 years old who are at the highest risk for sexual assault. Despite over 50 years of high-quality research on sexual assault and widespread attention to the issue through movements like #MeToo, we have seen little progress in reducing sexual assault on a broad scale. Ending sexual assault requires a comprehensive strategy that includes:

- Effective programs for boys/men to reduce perpetration
- Bystander programs that support people of all genders to intervene in sexual assault situations
- Changes to cultural attitudes and norms that make sexual violence wholly unacceptable. (1)

However, evidence-based programs that reliably reduce perpetration are not yet available, few unwanted sexual advances are stopped by bystanders, (2) and while cultural norms around sexual violence are shifting, change is slow. (1) In the meantime, girls and women deserve to have access to education that can empower them with effective tools to defend themselves. Sexual assault resistance programs equip girls and young women (and other groups at high risk for sexual assault) with the knowledge and skills to increase the likelihood of getting out of an escalating situation quickly and safely or with fewer negative consequences.

Evidence-based sexual assault resistance education

Flip the Script with EAAA™ is a sexual assault resistance program for first-year university women (17-24 years old) developed and evaluated with Canadian Institutes of Health Research funding. It is the only program that significantly reduces sexual assault victimization by 50% for up to two years. (3,4) This means that for every 13 women who take the program, one attempted or completed rape is prevented within the following year.

The program, delivered in four three-hour units by highly trained young women facilitators, works by helping young women:

- More quickly identify a situation or someone's behaviour as dangerous;
- Prioritize her own safety and wellbeing over the feelings of others; and
- Use effective defensive strategies.

The program does not tell women what they 'should' do or hold women responsible for men's behaviour. In fact, our research shows that women who take the program blame themselves less if a sexual assault does happen.

Sexual assault resistance education for teens: The Girls Resist Project University-based prevention is insufficient, however, as it reaches only a small proportion of young women and because half of all rapes are experienced in adolescence. Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, we launched the Girls Resist Project to adapt and test the program's effectiveness for girls ages 14-18 to ensure that effective resistance education exists before girls leave high school.

To adapt the program, we conducted focus groups with 34 teen girls to learn about their relationships with boys and common social and dating situations. Based on what we learned, we made changes to the university program to increase its relevance for the younger girls (e.g., updating scenarios). Next, we delivered the lightly adapted program to 63 girls to evaluate key outcomes (e.g., reductions in rape myth acceptance and increased self-defense self-efficacy) and to gather feedback on the program. Using findings from these two studies and consultations with community partner organizations and a youth advisory committee, we fully adapted the program.

Like the university program, the 12-hour Girls program uses a mix of interactive and skill-building activities, discussions, video and audio clips, and demonstrations. The program is designed to give cis and transgender girls a physically and emotionally safe, supportive space to practice resistance skills and talk about healthy relationships and sexuality:

Assess (Unit 1) teaches girls to:

- Identify empirically supported risks of sexual violence in dating and acquaintance situations (e.g., a guy's persistence even in non-sexual situations); and
- Reorient their understanding of sexual assault from 'stranger danger' (<10% of assaults) to male acquaintances.

Acknowledge (Unit 2): helps girls to:

- Overcome their socialization to preserve relationships and 'be nice' at all costs;
- Overcome the emotional barriers to acknowledging when a person they know is coercive; and
- Trust that they know when something feels off.

Act (Unit 3) provides:

Verbal and physical self-defense strategies focused on acquaintances to protect their boundaries and bodies.

Relationships & Sexuality (Unit 4):

Builds confidence about girls' own relationship and sexual values from which to resist sexual pressure by partners of any gender. Learn more about this sexuality content.

We are currently testing the effectiveness of the Girls program in a randomized controlled trial in three cities in Ontario, Canada. Once we know the program is effective, we want to make it widely available to teen girls across Canada and beyond. To do this, we will develop and test implementation models for community organizations, public health, and schools.

If you are interested in bringing Flip the Script with EAAA™ to your community, go to SARECentre.org for more information or contact the SARE Centre at info@sarecentre.ca

References

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