

Positive Aspects of Masculinity Helps Improve Boys' Attitudes Toward Relationship Violence

Study evaluates a pilot violence prevention program for middle school boys

By [Megan Schumann](#) | May 21, 2019



A pilot prevention program improved attitudes of middle school boys related to the use of coercion and violence in relationships.

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A program aimed at reducing violence against women and girls by focusing on positive expressions of masculinity changed the attitudes of middle school boys who may have been prone to harassment and dating violence as they got older, according to a Rutgers University–New Brunswick and University of New Hampshire led study that was done in partnership with prevention practitioners in New England.

The [findings](#), published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, suggest the pilot program, “Reducing Sexism and Violence Program – Middle School Program (RSVP-MSP),” improved attitudes related to the use of coercion and violence in relationships. It also found that the program, geared towards middle school boys, changed beliefs that violence, including harassment and sexual and dating violence was acceptable.

“Most research on sexual and dating violence has focused on high school and college students – but research shows these forms of violence are also prevalent among middle school students,” said [Victoria Banyard](#), lead author and professor at Rutgers University–New Brunswick’s [School of Social Work](#).

Despite nationwide concerns about the rate of violence among middle school youth, there have

been few rigorously evaluated sexual and dating violence prevention initiatives for boys in this age range, particularly initiatives that emphasize the promotion of healthy masculinity, Banyard said.

The program, developed by the nonprofit Maine Boys to Men, taught 292 sixth through eighth-grade boys across four schools in weekly classroom-based workshops over four months. Banyard suggested that future research combine classroom workshops on masculinity with broader school-level violence prevention strategies.

It includes four, one-hour sessions that explore the normalization, pervasiveness, and harmful nature of gender role assumptions. The boys involved in the program learn about empathy, healthy relationships, gender-based violence and receive bystander intervention training through physical activity, peer-to-peer dialogue, storytelling, role play, multimedia and group discussions.

“By focusing on positive expressions of masculinity, such as the ability to be respectful in relationships, this program helps boys find positive ways to prevent violence and to cope with violence to which they may already have been exposed,” Banyard said.

Study co-authors include Patricia Greenberg, administrative manager and senior biostatistician at [Rutgers Biostatistics and Epidemiology Services Center](#), and researchers at the University of New Hampshire and Maine Boys to Men.

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