

Success
Stories

Friendships That Work: A Positive Friendship Curriculum

The curriculum is an engaging process that invites youth to develop positive friendships skills that will translate to healthy future intimate relationships.



Challenge

There are an alarming number of teens and adults affected by intimate partner violence, and this violence is perpetuated across generations and through observations in all aspects of one's life. According to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency Focus, approximately 1 in 3 adolescent girls is a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner. This evidence indicates a need for primary prevention to promote healthy relationships and prevent violence. Additionally, many programs focus only on at-risk populations rather than the general population, and some evidence suggests that current approaches to intimate partner violence are geared more towards teaching youth what not to do, rather than the possibilities of what to do.

Solution

Friendships That Work: A Positive Friendship Curriculum ©Wettersten, 2012 aims to address the primary prevention nature of intimate partner violence by teaching elementary and middle-school-age students skills for positive behaviors, rather than what not to do in their friendships and relationships. The curriculum focuses on the

individual and relationship levels of the social ecological model by incorporating culturally relevant experiential learning activities with classroom lessons developed to engage students in learning how to listen, communicate, and interact positively with close friends, especially during times of conflict. This is because interaction with friends is one of the most naturally reinforcing activities in which children and early adolescents engage. The intent is that the positive skills developed through this curriculum will in turn effectively promote healthy future intimate relationships and prevent domestic violence. Early development of Friendships That Work began in 2005 by Dr. Kara B. Wettersten, with lesson concepts largely based on "The Sound Relational House" framework developed by Dr. John Gottman, and significant contributions from scholars in the area of adolescent relationship development and violence prevention. The curriculum has been partially funded by research funding from the University of North Dakota and by RPE funds, DELTA funds, and supplemental grants provided to the Community Violence Intervention Center to provide advisement and support toward curriculum efforts.

Highlights

Approximately 1 in 3 adolescent girls is abused by a dating partner, and 1 in 3 teens report knowing someone who has been abused by a dating partner.

Friendships That Work is a multi-session curriculum that incorporates culturally relevant experiential learning activities with interactive classroom instruction.

Lessons teach students how to interact positively and manage conflict with close friends. The intent is that the skills developed will also promote healthy future intimate relationships.

Results

Friendships That Work revolves around two key constructs that represent the core components of Gottman's theory: 1) How to engage in positive friendship interactions, and 2) How to handle conflict with friends, and is evaluated using the Healthy Adolescent Relationship Skills scale—a tool that is expected to provide a more complete measure of the desired curriculum objectives. During the 2012-2013 academic year, the curriculum was delivered to 441 students, and 11 teachers were trained through observation, in eight Grand Forks County schools through five, 50 minute sessions over the course of one week. Preliminary findings suggest that students who received the curriculum (as compared to students who did not receive the curriculum) showed higher levels on two of the six curriculum markers: classroom climate and positive aspects of adolescent relationships (engaging with a close friend, sharing life). Due to the primary prevention nature of the curriculum, the lasting effects are difficult to measure; however, the initial results are quite promising. Continued data evaluation and curriculum modifications to increase impact on the additional markers are occurring on an ongoing basis. In addition to the promising data, the collaboration and support of the curriculum is an equally promising result. Dr. Wettersten expressed, "the response to Friendships That Work has been quite positive. Teachers like it, and generally think more hands on and specific relationship skills should be taught."

"I'm amazed at how much kids learn in the experiential components of the curriculum. Even kids who are introverted are standing in front of the class giving examples of empathetic statements they can make with their friends. Same with learning how to do conflict well—they're learning to listen and ask questions, rather than be defensive or quiet."

-Kara B. Wettersten, Ph.D.

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