



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE :
ADDRESSING YOUTH DATING VIOLENCE

Engaging Caregivers of Teens to Prevent Teen Dating Violence

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Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence (Shift) is located at the University of Calgary in the Faculty of Social Work. Shift aims to advance effective primary prevention strategies that change norms, practices, policies, and legislation to stop violence before it starts and advance gender equality. For ten years, Shift has conducted research and partnered with diverse stakeholders and systems to create the social conditions that prevent violence – at home, across the country, and around the world.

Over the past three years Shift researchers have specifically focused on engaging parents/primary caregivers as a primary prevention strategy to prevent teen dating violence. Included in this work was a literature review to identify programs/initiatives that engage caregivers in the prevention of teen dating violence, understand the extent to which caregivers participate in these programs/initiatives, and to understand factors that impede and promote their participation. This brief summarizes our most recent findings.

We are excited to partner with PREVNet to share our findings and support the scaling of effective approaches with caregivers. If you would like to learn more about Shift's initiative to engage caregivers to prevent teen dating violence, or if you have any questions about this brief, please contact us through our website: preventdomesticviolence.ca

Throughout the document, we use the term “caregivers” to describe the parents and primary caregivers of teens.

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Teen Dating Violence and the Role of Parents/Caregivers

Approximately 1 in 3 Canadian youth who had dated experienced and/or used teen dating violence (TDV) in the past 12 months¹. Both victimization and perpetration rates were highest among non-binary youth (as compared to cisgender male and female participants)². Overall, use and experience of TDV was related to being a member of a marginalized group (e.g., racialized group)³. TDV negatively affects the physical, emotional, and social wellbeing of teens and their families, including depression, anxiety, suicidality, problematic substance use, sexual health issues, eating disorders, and injury⁴. Although TDV is pervasive and harmful, many caregivers of teens are not aware of TDV, nor are they discussing TDV and TDV prevention with their teen children⁵. This is concerning as research demonstrates that caregivers can play an important role in preventing TDV by teaching their teen children the skills and knowledge to develop and maintain healthy relationships⁶.

Review of Programs/Initiatives that Engage Caregivers of Teens to Prevent Teen Dating Violence

A literature review⁷ to understand effective ways of engaging caregivers in TDV prevention showed that there are currently four initiatives/programs based in the United States^a that seek to involve caregivers in the prevention of TDV^b. These programs are:

- Families for Safe Dates
- Juntos Opuestos a la Violence Entre Novios (JOVEN/Together Against Dating Violence)
- Start Strong: Build Healthy Teen Relationships *and*
- Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Relationships.

Families for Safe Dates⁸: This program targets all caregivers regardless of their children's risk of experiencing or perpetrating TDV (i.e., universal program). The goal of this program is to increase caregivers' knowledge and communication about TDV. Activity booklets are mailed to parents/caregivers that are meant to be completed with their teens (e.g., card games, checklists for effective communication, etc.). Caregivers found this approach was helpful and easy to engage with.

Juntos Opuestos a la Violence Entre Novios (JOVEN/Together Against Dating Violence)⁹: This is the only program that targets a specific ethnocultural background. The goal of this program is to discuss "Hispanic cultural norms" around gender and dating and increase knowledge about TDV. Teens and their caregivers are involved in this program. Music, videos, and discussions are used to facilitate conversations about TDV.

^a None of the studies included in the review were based in Canada.

^b Although many community organizations/groups, advocacy groups, and different levels of government offer programs that aim to engage parents/caregivers in TDV prevention, the literature review conducted by Shift focused exclusively on academic articles.

Start Strong: Build Healthy Teen Relationships¹⁰: This initiative aims to educate and engage youth in schools and in out-of-school settings, educate and engage teen influencers (e.g., caregivers and mentors), change policy and environmental factors, and implement communications/social marketing strategies to prevent and address TDV. There are currently 11 Start Strong sites across the United States.

Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Relationships¹¹: This initiative includes prevention strategies for teens, peers, families, schools, and neighbourhoods to prevent TDV. It focuses on teaching teens healthy relationship skills before they start dating and reducing behaviours that increase the risk of dating violence. This initiative targets schools and communities with high crime rates and lower economic status. The initiative includes youth programs, parent programs, training for educators, and a communications program, among other components.

Overall, research shows that caregiver involvement in programs and initiatives to prevent TDV is not evaluated well and/or levels of engagement are low¹². The exception to this finding is research on the Families for Safe Dates Program, which showed that caregivers reported greater belief that they have the potential to influence their child's dating abuse behaviour and increased confidence that they have the skills for talking to their child about dating abuse¹³. However, efforts to involve caregivers in any type of prevention program only reach about 30% of families and drop out rates are high (40-60%)¹⁴. These limitations make it difficult to identify evidence-based strategies that have consistently been proven effective through rigorous scientific research. In light of these challenges, below is a list of approaches informed by research that show promise in engaging caregivers in TDV prevention.

Ways to Engage Caregivers in TDV Prevention

- **Comprehensive approaches that target multiple aspects of teens' lives may be more effective than programs that solely target teens and/or their caregivers.** TDV is a complex issue and attention must be placed on the multiple contexts in which youth live, learn, and play. Targeting these contexts includes a need to involve caregivers, schools, and public spaces. As demonstrated through the Start Strong and Dating Matters initiatives, creating a culture of TDV prevention by training educators and caregivers, and facilitating campaigns to increase the public's awareness and attitudes on the issue, in addition to delivering programs to youth, may be an effective approach to strengthen the impact of caregiver engagement.
- **Change the format of caregivers' learning experiences to make it easy for them to participate.** Reasons for low engagement among caregivers in traditional programs include lack of time, low access to resources (e.g., childcare), the commute to the program, and caregivers' perception that programs are intrusive¹⁵. As demonstrated through the Families for Safe Dates program, self-administered, home-based approaches, with telephone involvement may help to address caregivers' barriers to participation.

- **Look beyond the school environment to engage caregivers.** Many of the programs/initiatives that aim to engage caregivers in TDV prevention rely on school-led programs. However, low caregiver engagement suggests that schools may not be the most effective settings to engage caregivers in TDV prevention. There is a need to involve different environments to reach caregivers. This approach may include partnering with settings where caregivers naturally go, such as workplaces and faith settings.
- **Learning opportunities should consider the contexts of caregivers and teens.** The JOVEN program, for example, targets Latino families and includes a focus on cultural norms around gender and dating, as well as legal rights around immigration and domestic violence¹⁶. The Dating Matters initiative was implemented in “high risk” communities and a school- and community-wide, “surround sound” approach was used to support a marginalized population¹⁷. These strategies highlight that efforts to prevent TDV may not be a “one size fits all” approach. Instead, care should be taken to understand the lived realities of caregivers and teens and to respond to those diverse contexts in appropriate ways.

Unfortunately, the research does not currently show how this is effectively accomplished in diverse contexts. For example, there is a lack of programs/initiatives that focus on supporting caregivers with teens that identify as LGBTQS2+, teens with disabilities, Indigenous teens, and teens from different racialized backgrounds. Moving forward, there is a need to design and offer programs and approaches that target different cultures, backgrounds, and populations. These programs should also use a structural approach, which considers the ways social, political, economic, physical and cultural environments shape the experiences of groups and individuals.

- **Adopt gender transformative approaches.** Existing programs/initiatives that include a focus on engaging caregivers to prevent TDV generally do not include an explicit focus on helping caregivers and their teens to understand and examine the ways power and privilege, gender socialization, gender norms, and gender stereotypes are connected to TDV and TDV prevention. Approaches and programs that target caregivers to prevent TDV may be more effective by adopting gender transformative approaches that explicitly focus on changing attitudes, beliefs, and social norms that reinforce gender inequality¹⁸.

Below is a brief summary of Shift’s initiative to build the capacity for caregivers to prevent TDV to illuminate the ways in which lessons and gaps from the research can inform the practice field.

ConnectEd Parents: Shift's Approach to Engage Caregivers to Prevent Teen Dating Violence

The goal of the ConnectEd Parents approach is to go beyond traditional programming by building the capacity of key influencers/caregivers to implement non-programmatic approaches that effectively engage caregivers in TDV prevention.

"A non-programmatic approach involves partnering with the places where parents naturally go (i.e., workplaces, minor sports associations, faith settings) and working with key influencers in these settings to nudge the design of environments to support the conditions that promote caregivers' engagement in TDV prevention".

Dozois, E., & Wells, L. (2020). Changing Contexts: A Framework for Engaging Male-Oriented Settings in Gender Equality and Violence Prevention – Practitioners' Guide. Shift, The Project to End Domestic Violence. Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/111885>

We have drawn on behavioural economics, social norms and social network theories, feminist theory, and organizational climate to design our non-programmatic approach, which involves four key features:

1. Emphasis on changing the **environments and social conditions** of caregivers (as opposed to focusing exclusively on building their attitudes and knowledge). Research shows that small contextual changes and nudges can promote behaviour change¹⁹. One example is how orchestras were able to overcome their biases in hiring. Historically, women were consistently discriminated against during the hiring process. To overcome their biases in hiring, orchestras started to use a physical screen to conceal the identity of the candidate from the jury. As more orchestras started to use the screen, female musicians in the top five symphony orchestras in the US went from 5% of all players to 25%²⁰. By changing the structure and process for hiring, orchestras were able to overcome their biases demonstrating that a focus on changing the environment (as opposed to training the jury to not be biased) was effective at changing behaviours. Building on this body of research, Shift's approach involves providing tools and facilitating a process where formal leaders in caregiver-oriented settings identify and design processes, structures, physical environments, practices, and relationships (a healthy social climate) that are likely to increase caregivers' motivation, their ability to learn about TDV prevention, and to talk to their teen children about it²¹.
2. Working with **key influencers** who are already influential in the places where caregivers go (as opposed to external professionals). Key influencers can be friends, colleagues, family members, and community leaders. The three degrees of influence theory shows that social influence goes far beyond the people with whom a person is directly connected.

In fact, our friends' friends' friends affect everything that we feel, think, and do²². This theory is accurate in a variety of behaviours, including obesity, happiness, smoking, voting patterns, sexual behaviours, and violence²³.

Thus, our approach builds the capacity of key influencers who are already in relationship with caregivers to spread information and offer ongoing support. Key influencers in parent-oriented settings can be identified through a peer-nomination process. They are then trained to facilitate conversations with caregivers about talking to their teen children about TDV prevention. Key influencers can also offer other types of emotional and technical support to build a helpful learning environment for caregivers. This may be an effective strategy to support caregivers to develop skills to teach their teen children about healthy relationships and foster the contagion of this behaviour across social networks.

3. Embedding **brief supports and interventions** within the settings where caregivers naturally go (as opposed to high-commitment, structured programs outside of caregivers' daily lives). One of the most significant barriers to caregivers' participation in structured programs is their lack of time²⁴. Our approach addresses this bottleneck by making the process of learning about TDV prevention an easy and attractive option for caregivers. We will share a series of informational texts and brief videos, and leverage the power of social media, to increase caregivers' involvement in learning about TDV prevention²⁵.
4. Using **action-oriented supports** (as opposed to focusing exclusively on building caregivers' knowledge and attitudes). Although building caregivers' knowledge and attitudes to increase their intention of preventing TDV is important, intention translates into actual behaviour change only 27-39% of the time²⁶. Simple commitment tools, reminders, and rewards can be effective at filling this intention-behaviour gap²⁷. Our approach will include these features to nudge parents towards actually talking to their teens about TDV prevention and healthy relationships.

These features of Shift's ConnectEd Parents approach focus on the ways in which caregivers, teens, and community leaders all play an important role in preventing TDV. By working with these key individuals and groups, and helping to facilitate change within parent-oriented settings, engagement of caregivers may increase, leading to more effective and positive prevention approaches compared to existing programs.

Next steps

Shift is currently finalizing the ConnectEd Parents approach and will test the approach with community settings, organizations, and groups. Shift's goal is to generate new theories, principles, and practices to move the field of healthy teen relationships towards non-programmatic approaches that effectively engage parents in the prevention of TDV.

Resources

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