



# Context Matters: Reactive and Proactive Bystander Action to Prevent Sexual and Dating Violence in High Schools

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This study examined how adolescents take action to prevent sexual and dating violence, a concept referred to as “actionism” (in contrast to bystanders who do not intervene). The researchers examined factors that may influence two types of actionism. Reactive actionism involves responding in a situation where there is high risk of violence occurring or where it has already occurred, such as by speaking out to someone who was bragging about engaging in sexual violence behaviours. Proactive actionism involves acting before violence occurs and when no risk is present, such as by posting on social media to show that one does not support relationship violence. This study examined how factors related to individual youth and to their schools might affect their likelihood to engage in reactive and proactive actionism.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers surveyed 3,404 students at 25 American high schools. Participants answered questions about their reactive and proactive helping behaviours, in the context of adolescent sexual and dating violence. They also answered questions about potential factors that may relate to helping, such as knowledge of sexual assault and relationship abuse; acceptance of rape myths; history of experiencing violence; readiness to help; perception of peers’ helping behaviours; perceptions of school personnel’s helping behaviours; and empathy for victims. The researchers also computed variables that indicated the attitude norms for reactive and proactive actionism in each school. The researchers used statistical modelling to examine how these different factors predicted students’ reactive and proactive actionism.

## **WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:**

- Girls, sexual minority youth, and youth with more experiences of violence reported taking more proactive actions to prevent dating and sexual violence.
- Students in schools with supportive peer norms also reported more proactive actionism.
- This research suggests that both individual and school environment factors may play a role in dating and sexual violence prevention.



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### **WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?**

Participants were more likely to engage in proactive actionism in schools where there was perceived peer support for helping. Greater proactive actionism was also related to empathy and having positive views of helping.

Girls, students who identified as a sexual minority, and those who had experienced more victimization also demonstrated greater proactive actionism. The researchers theorized that youth who are at greater risk for victimization and those who have experienced victimization may have greater motivation for preventing violence.

There were no clear predictors of reactive actionism. The researchers posited that contextual factors, such as the individuals involved in the situation or where it takes place, may play a more important role in this kind of helping behaviour.

### **HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

This research highlights a number of factors for researchers and practitioners to target in supporting prevention efforts, including empathy and positive views of helping. These factors may increase young people's proactive actions, which in turn may help to change norms around dating and sexual violence. The current research suggests that different factors play a role in proactive compared to reactive helping, and thus programs may need multi-pronged strategies in order to prevent violence at different stages of risk. These findings also suggest that youth of different gender and sexual identities may have different levels of baseline helping behaviours, so prevention programs should find ways to target all participants effectively, including those who may not feel a personal connection to sexual and dating violence prevention.

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### **KEYWORDS**

Teen dating violence; Violence prevention;  
Bystander intervention; Actionism

### **FULL REFERENCE**

Banyard, V., Mitchell, K. J., Waterman, E. A., J. Rizzo, A., & Edwards, K. M. (2020). Context matters: reactive and proactive bystander action to prevent sexual and dating violence in high schools. *Journal of School Violence*, 19(4), 499-511.