

Runaway girls reap strong benefits from nurse interventions

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A nurse intervention program that helps sexually exploited runaway girls re-connect to family, school and health care reduces trauma and restores healthy behaviors, according to a new study led by University of British Columbia researcher Elizabeth Saewyc and Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota nurse practitioner Laurel Edinburgh.

The study, published online this month in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#), and due out in print later this year, examined the effects of the Runaway Intervention Program (RIP) at Children's Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota. [Girls](#) and their families reported significant improvements in family and [school](#) relationships, self-esteem and grades after participating in RIP. The researchers also found significant reductions in [emotional distress](#), substance use, suicide attempts, and risky sexual behaviors.

"Runaways often become isolated from supportive family and school relationships, which are important for healthy development," says Saewyc, a professor in UBC's School of Nursing who also holds a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Public Health Chair in Youth Health. "When they are also sexually assaulted or exploited, where can they turn for help in coping with the trauma? RIP was designed to reintroduce protective relationships back into young girls' lives and help them heal."

Through the intervention program, nurses worked beyond the clinic to support girls and their families with home and school visits. In addition

to providing health exams and health education, they used creative problem-solving strategies to improve communication between family members, help girls stay in school, and find the support they need to be healthy.

"Remarkably, by six and 12 months into the program, the girls had improved so much that in most areas they were indistinguishable from girls in school who had never been abused," says Saewyc, who is also a scientist at the Child & Family Research Institute at BC Children's Hospital.

Edinburgh attributes the program's success to the individualized approach to health care, which may include interfacing with law enforcement and community services.

"Every runaway girl has a unique set of circumstances, issues and needs and therefore require individualized intervention in order to restore a supportive environment that would help them heal," says Edinburgh. "These could range widely from working with the school's police officer to make the school a safe environment, free from threats of gang members to helping find free piano lessons as a reward for ongoing school attendance.

"A vital element of the program is utilizing the specialized training of nurses to bring well-rounded health care to these girls, identifying their unique issues and working with each girl - and their support networks, including family, school and the community - to address them head on."

"CIHR understands the importance of helping sexually exploited runaway girls reconnect with family members and return to school to ensure positive and healthy development," says Dr. Joy Johnson, Scientific Director of CIHR's Institute of Gender and Health, which helped fund the study. "Abuse has a devastating effect on people's lives,

so it is essential to invest in programs that give victims an equal chance of success and hope for the future."

Source: University of British Columbia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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