

Researchers evaluate a program for boys to avert sexual violence

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Cornell is helping to usher in new, more effective ways to prevent sexual violence.

A team from the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research (BCTR) is evaluating a curriculum for boys aged 12-14 aimed at preventing sexual violence. The program is a shift from previous approaches, which generally focused on helping people avoid becoming victims of sexual assault.

Instead, this approach aims to keep boys and [young men](#) from committing sexual violence in the first place.

"If you want to stop perpetration, this may be the best tack to take," said Mary Maley, extension associate for research synthesis and translation. "This is an innovative approach, because we're looking at reducing risk for perpetration, not reducing risk for becoming a victim."

BCTR is working in partnership with the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), which recently was awarded a \$1 million grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). New York state is one of five awardees nationwide to receive a CDC grant to evaluate various programs to prevent sexual assault.

BCTR is the research arm of the NYSDOH project. The team will spend this first year refining the methodology, developing research tools and protocols, and recruiting program sites and participants. Data collection

will begin in the fall of 2017.

The BCTR team will be working with a curriculum, the Council for Boys and Young Men, developed by the One Circle Foundation, which provides training and curricula that promote resiliency and healthy relationships. The basic idea is that male facilitators will set up and lead "councils" which consist of eight to 10 boys in seven to nine urban upstate sites.

Much of the content focuses on prosocial behavior. Councils will meet a few hours a week for several months, focusing on activities, dialogue and self-expression that challenge myths about what it means to be a "real man." They'll learn behavior that prevents violence, such as how to step in when they see bullying. They'll also work on activities that develop empathic behavior, communication and relationship skills, and the ability to respect difference. Another seven to nine sites will serve as study controls to enable the researchers to test the efficacy of the curriculum.

"The idea is that they're building strong relationships with each other and with a positive adult role model, so they're actually able to model what positive relationships can be," said Janis Whitlock, co-principal investigator and lead of the research team.

The middle school years are a prime time to help boys develop these skills, she said. This is the age at which they start to tune in to broader ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Many of the risk factors for sexual violence, such as hypermasculinity and endorsement of aggression, are attitudinal and start to develop at this age through many moments of interactions with other boys and men, Whitlock said.

"This is a perfect time to be giving them a variety of models to choose from, because boys in particular face fairly narrow models of what it means to be a man," she said.

Evaluation of this type of program comes at an opportune time, Whitlock said, as the definition of [sexual assault](#) has greatly expanded in recent years. Historically, sexual violence has meant penetration only. Now it includes unwanted touch, comments, penetration in various ways, and negative online behavior.

That's important, because [middle school](#) boys have the potential to be involved in minor forms of [sexual violence](#), such as unwanted touch, sexting and sharing of others' images online, Whitlock said.

In this environment, the CDC's vision was to evaluate the most innovative programs available, Whitlock said. "They wanted to push the envelope so we can get some traction on this issue, because it's not getting better."

The project continues a long and fruitful partnership between NYSDOH and BCTR, according to co-investigator Jane Powers. Together the two entities have collaborated over two decades to strengthen community support for youth using research-based programs and practices, she said.

"Results of this [research](#) will potentially improve the health and wellbeing of youth in New York state and beyond," Powers said.

Provided by Cornell University

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