

Native American Women Bring Date Rape Prevention to the Classroom

Date rape and unhealthy relationships that lead to violence against teens and young women are significant problems on the Yankton Sioux reservation and in nearby areas in South Dakota. The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center identified these as serious problems and decided to create a program that would increase awareness and educate girls, starting at an early age. The Health Education Resource Center relied on its youth advisory council for expertise and for guidance on developing curricula and programs. The youth advisory council served as cultural brokers by sharing experiences about real-life situations involving dating and unhealthy relationships, a perspective the adult staff could not possibly have. The center developed a curriculum, complete with a guide for facilitators and teachers, and a workbook for young women that has been widely disseminated to schools, tribal youth programs, shelters in South Dakota, and across the country.

The health concern: In the late 1990s, date rape had become an increasing concern among teens living on or near the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, a rural, mostly farming community in the south central part of the state. Teens involved in the Youth Leadership Program at the non-profit felt that the issues surrounding date rape would be an important outreach effort around which the center could develop a program. The center had expertise in programs focusing on violence against women. Since 1991, the center's Domestic Violence Program had offered services and safe residence in its four-bedroom shelter for battered women and their children. Center staff knew it was important to target teen girls in order to prevent the cycle of violence against adult women. "Many of our young women get involved in unhealthy relationships," says center director Charon Asetoyer. "We want to be able to prevent the traumatization before it occurs."

The strategy: Health Education Resource Center staff realized that creating a dialogue and education about this issue with young girls should begin in the classroom, shelter, or community groups, or all of them combined. They also knew their best opportunity for creating a realistic teen dating violence prevention curriculum should start with the voices of the teens themselves. The teens had either experienced or seen many of their friends in unhealthy relationships that led to violence against young girls.

The action: The Health Education Resource Center held focus groups with members of the youth advisory council on issues the teens felt were of most concern including date rape and issues surrounding teen dating and healthy relationships. Youth advisory council members continued to meet on their own in the offices of the center and also provided feedback on the curriculum. For example, they noted that teen girls need information on how to date safely, how to identify a potentially dangerous dating situation, how to be assertive, and how to cope with an assault should it occur. "The need for prevention education was clear," Asetoyer says. Date rape and other violence against young women was and continues to be swept under the rug. Moreover, many young girls are unsure about or unaware of what an unhealthy relationship is and are afraid to talk about it, especially if it results in an assault. This situation resulted in the development of the Teen Dating Violence Prevention Curriculum, complete with a guide for facilitators and teachers and a workbook for young women. The curriculum includes discussions on what a healthy relationship is, how an abusive relationship can lead to teen violence, and 15 warning signs. The Health Education Resource Center has received 300 orders for the curriculum since it was released in 2001. Schools, tribal youth programs, and shelters in South Dakota and across the country have placed orders, and interest continues to build.

Why it works: As cultural brokers, the youth advisory council drove the content of the curriculum. The teens provided a perspective on real-life dating issues that Health Education Resource Center staff, as adults, could not. As a result, the center initiated a program that provides girls with the skills to identify and prevent dating violence. The program also allows young women who have been assaulted an opportunity to express their feelings and start the healing process.



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