

"Talking Relationships" in the Classroom: Starting a Conversation about Consent, Boundaries and Harassment

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What you need to know

Healthy relationships are the foundation for wellbeing. There is a need for school-based programming that addresses issues of healthy relationships – including communication, consent, boundaries, harassment, and dating – at the middle school level. The Toronto District School Board's Gender-Based Violence Prevention team has developed a new resource for middle school educators, with learning outcomes that align with curricular goals. The aim for the resource is to guide teachers in having engaging conversations with their students about these topics. The resource, along with findings from a program evaluation study, will be released soon.

What is Talking Relationships?

Talking Relationships is a new, soon-to-be released resource for middle school educators, created by the Gender-Based Violence Prevention (GBVP) team at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The resource includes guidelines and activities to engage students in meaningful conversations about healthy relationships. Topics include self-care, healthy communication, consent, boundaries, sexual harassment, and dating in the digital age, with lessons that align with curricular goals. We are currently engaging in a research study to determine the effectiveness of the program, and to learn more about how these issues play out in middle school.

Why is this important?

By high school, gendered harassment is a common experience, and issues around healthy dating and consent are relevant. Thus, the middle school years represent an important opportunity to broach these topics, and to shape knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours around these topics. Students are already having these conversations amongst themselves, and could use the guidance of safe and informed adults to navigate these topics. Many teachers are uncertain how to have these conversations with their students, and could benefit from training and support in offering this kind of programming in their classrooms. The aim is to promote healthy relationships and to prevent aggression, violence, and other negative behaviours.

How are we evaluating the program?

Six schools are participating in a research study evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Some schools are serving as controls; they are not receiving the program, and will implement their curriculum as usual. Schools receiving the program are receiving teacher training on creating safe spaces and a healthy school climate. Their Grade 7/8 classrooms are receiving eight lessons selected from the *Talking Relationships* resource.

Students at all six schools are completing a baseline survey prior to the implementation of the program; a survey after the completion of the program; and a survey two months later, to see if any gains are maintained. The survey measures knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in

multiple domains, including communication, consent, bullying, sexual harassment, and emotional wellbeing.

What have we learned so far?

Baseline data shows many students lack knowledge around issues of consent, boundaries, and sexual harassment. Students report perpetrating, experiencing, and witnessing a wide variety of sexual harassment behaviours at school and online. Students appear to be engaging well with the material. We will be publishing the results following the completion of the study.

Tips for effective practice / How can you use this research?

- Middle school is an important time to address issues of healthy relationships, consent, and harassment.
- It can be useful for schools to get a snapshot of what is happening in their student body prior to implementing a program, and then to evaluate how the program is affecting their students. Typically, this type of program evaluation includes a baseline or pre-survey, wherein students are asked about kinds of behaviours they engage in and experiences they have had at school.
- School-researcher (or school-agency-researcher) partnerships can be mutually beneficial. Schools and agencies can benefit from having a skilled researcher assist them in designing and implementing a study that will provide relevant data to improve programs. Researchers benefit from having access to important real-world data and learning from the expertise of educators and program developers. Both science and practice benefit from such collaborations.
- PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network) is comprised of hundreds of researchers and graduate students across the province, working with local agencies, programs, and schools to deepen the evidence base on building healthy relationships. PREVNet is a helpful resource for schools and agencies looking to access research support.

Additional resources

Gender-Based Violence Prevention at the Toronto District School Board: www.tdsb.ca/gbvp

PREVNet: www.prevnet.ca

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Keywords

- sexual harassment, gender-based violence, school interventions, prevention, program evaluation, middle school, adolescence