

Strategic Communications for Adolescent Dating Abuse

Introduction

Berkeley Media Studies Group partnered with the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (the Partnership), the state's domestic violence coalition, to understand the current narratives that inform how educational leaders in California conceptualize adolescent dating violence and prevention and develop a strategic communications plan for engaging education leaders in ending teen dating violence. To that end, BMSG assessed how dating violence prevention appears in the news and in educators' professional journals, and conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. BMSG identified gaps between the public conversation unfolding around teen dating violence and the solutions-focused conversation that the Partnership envisions. Those gaps inform the recommendations included in the strategic communications plan.

This handout is adapted from the strategic communications plan.

Goal

To shift educational leaders' understanding of teen dating abuse and motivate them to become prevention champions whose leadership will promote schools that support safe and healthy youth relationships.

- How do school administrators understand teen dating violence and prevention?
- What narratives could shift administrators' understanding toward prevention?
- How can we shift administrators' understanding and help them become champions of prevention?

News Analysis

BMSG assessed media portrayals of teen dating violence in 48 key California newspapers published between 2012 and 2014 and took a sample of one-half of the articles that we found for a final sample of 70 articles. BMSG also reviewed recent articles from education journals that reach California school administrators (including *School Administrator*, the *American School Board Journal*, and *Education Week*), and key documents about the topic provided by the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence.

Overall, teen dating violence rarely appeared in California newspapers and was scarce in the professional sources that reach administrators. When the issue did appear in news coverage, BMSG found that, unlike most news about violence generally, solutions were included in stories on teen dating violence, but they focused on education and awareness-raising events as opposed to the range of policy approaches the Partnership advocates. Also unlike stories about violence generally, advocates have a strong presence in stories on teen dating violence.

New Messages to Reach Education Leaders

Stakeholders, advocacy documents, and the news often frame teen dating violence in the context of safety and protection. For example, advocacy documents focused on ending dating violence routinely discuss the importance of “protecting young people and preventing abuse.” Though important and well-established, this type of safety-focused framing may have unintended consequences, evoking punishment and criminalization rather than prevention.

The Partnership and its constituents are increasingly interested in amplifying frames that focus on developing and maintaining healthy relationships as a strategy to prevent dating abuse. This frame periodically appeared in the news and interviews that informed this communications plan, but that language was almost always paired with language that evokes safety, as when an interview subject discussed the importance of “educat[ing] kids about what a healthy relationship looks like and the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship.”

Whenever possible, and especially when it starts the conversation or sets the frame, the Partnership should amplify and strengthen prevention-focused messages that emphasize the importance of healthy relationships. However, since the safety frame is so well established, the Partnership and its constituents are likely to encounter it while communicating with school administrators, reporters and others. It will then be helpful to have a “pivot phrase” that acknowledges the safety frame but shifts the conversation towards a focus on healthy relationships. For example, after hearing that frame, an advocate could say, “Of course safety is important, but in the long term we also need to make sure kids have the tools to create healthy relationships.” After pivoting, the rest of the message can focus on healthy relationships frame.

Theme: Schools have a responsibility to give students the skills they need to succeed in the classroom and in life.

This theme makes schools part of the solution, rather than merely a site of potential violence. It highlights their duty to steward and support the young people they serve by giving them the tools they need to be successful in their lives. It can also be a mechanism to tie teen dating violence to social emotional learning, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), positive school climate development, or other issues that are already of interest and concern for education leaders.

Theme: Healthy relationships are the foundation for a strong and healthy community.

This theme presents teen dating violence prevention as an investment in the future. Advocates can draw on local pride to make the case for policies that will impact their community by evoking “a strong future for California” or “a healthy and strong Mariposa County.”

This theme also creates opportunities to talk about the widespread impact of healthy relationships. For example, healthy relationships impact teens’ success in school with ramifications for community economic stability and safety that extend far beyond an individual person or couple.

Theme: Together we can prevent teen dating violence.

When stakeholders who are immersed in this issue spoke with us, they painted a hopeful picture of the many strategies that schools can use to prevent teen dating violence. As one interview subject put it, “Violence is teachable, and we can unteach it.” This message confirms for school administrators that violence among their students isn’t inevitable, and that they have a role to play in

prevention. This is a welcoming frame that invites allies to participate in the solution while expressing a core American value, “Can-do spirit”, that reinforces a strong positive belief in success.

Theme: Students can't learn if they're hurting or don't feel safe.

This message links safety to educational outcomes, along the lines of messages used to advocate for policies that ensured school breakfast for all children (i.e. “When kids are hungry and distracted, they're not learning”). It is an answer to administrators' concerns that resources devoted to teen dating violence distract from schools educational mission, as when one interview subject observed, “Health education doesn't raise test scores.” This theme creates opportunities to talk about how schools are affected (in terms of attendance records, test scores, drop out rates, etc.) when teen dating violence is not addressed.

When tied to schools' responsibility to maintain a safe environment, this message also articulates a foundational value that emerged from interviews; schools' duty to protect children. One interview subject, a long-time PTA leader, evoked this value when he observed, “There's nothing more important than the safety and well-being of children. Until that's taken care of, the rest of what we do in public education is just wasting time.”

The Partnership and its affiliates can also use this frame to connect solutions to teen dating violence with work on related policies or issues, including bullying or sexual harassment in schools.

Messengers and Audiences

The news analysis revealed the absence of diverse voices in the public conversation about teen dating violence: domestic violence advocates and health professionals dominate the news. The Partnership is committed to increasing the visibility of school representatives and youth voices, neither of whom regularly appeared in news coverage of teen dating violence.

Potential audiences or policy targets include:

- Teachers and administrators including school superintendents, and principals
- Professional organizations such as school administrators' associations, including the California Association of School Social Workers
- School board members and administration
- Representatives from local and state government (though our interview subjects did not specify which legislators most needed to be accessed to activate the change they wanted to see)
- Parent teacher organizations (PTA, etc.)
- Advocacy organizations and funders (like Partnership member organizations, as well as child advocacy groups, civil rights organizations, LGBTQ advocacy groups, the California Endowment, and the Office of Adolescent Health)
- Community based organizations
- Students
- Parents and families
- Mental health professionals
- Criminal justice representatives

Policy	Messenger	Policy target	Message	Value
Provide prevention education and youth engagement for students, focusing on high-risk students	Student	School board	Not all of my friends see healthy relationships at home. That's why what we see at school is so important. This program at school will make it easier for all of us to understand that we all deserve respect from one other.	Schools have a responsibility to equip kids with the skills they need.
Pass a resolution to improve school climate and build a culture of "upstanders"	Representative of a local youth-serving organization	School board	The kids I work with every day are the future of this community – and a strong, safe, and economically viable community is built by people who know what it means to be part of healthy, respectful relationships at every level. This resolution will help us model for kids the skills they need to be part of the community we all want to see.	Healthy relationships lay the foundation for a strong and healthy community. Investing the future
Designate resources to produce materials and trainings to engage parents	PTA representative	Budget committee	It's up to all of us – as parents, caregivers, teachers, and administrators – to ensure that our students learn about healthy relationships. These materials will support every parent in Mariposa County so we can work together for healthy relationships and healthy schools.	Can-do-spirit Together we can prevent teen dating violence.
Train staff to recognize and respond to signs of teen dating violence in students	Teacher	Superintendent	As a teacher, my first priority is helping my students learn – but my students can't learn if they don't feel safe and valued. As teachers we are in a unique position to protect and empower students, but only if we have the training to recognize the signs of teen dating violence.	Safety, teachers as protectors Kids can't learn if they don't feel safe.

Conducting Proactive and Reactive Media Advocacy

How can we inspire a conversation about teen dating violence among California's education leaders? When will news about teen dating violence have the biggest impact? What images, statistics, and voices will help reporters tell the stories that advocates want told?

Reactive example: Respond with a letter to the editor to any news or opinion item that mentions teen dating violence or related issues (bullying, etc.). Use the letter to connect what was reported to the Partnership's advocacy messages, or use letters to tactfully address problematic or inaccurate framing that appears. For example, one article about an awareness-raising event at a local high school began "although it's Valentine's Day month, February is not all hearts and flowers. It's also about black eyes and split lips."⁵ This could inspire a letter reminding readers of the non-physical behaviors that constitute dating abuse, and the need for training and curricula at local schools to help students, teachers, and administrators recognize them.

Proactive example: Prepare op-eds in advance of events. For example, an op-ed could draw connections between a vigil related to an incident of dating violence and a proposal for a school resolution to empower bystanders to take action before such tragedies occur. Contact op-ed page editors at selected newspapers in advance of the event.

Reactive example: If the local school board or the Department of Education (for example) takes action that reduces funding for teen dating violence prevention programs in schools, use it as an opportunity for an op-ed that can make a longer, more prominent argument in favor of supporting schools in their efforts to teach students about healthy relationships.

Proactive example: During school budget negotiations, request meetings in advance with editorial boards to ask them to editorialize in favor of sustained and/or increased funding for teen dating violence prevention and interventions in schools.

Reactive example: If an important news outlet consistently neglects school violence issues in its editorials, ask for an editorial board meeting to find out what would make teen dating violence prevention more compelling for them to write about.