

# Dating Matters®: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships



## Dating Matters® is a Comprehensive Approach to Prevent Teen Dating Violence

Dating Matters® was developed as a comprehensive public health approach to the primary prevention of teen dating violence (TDV). It has been developed based on best available science and practice, and utilizes a combination of evidence-informed and evidence-based strategies. Each component was selected for specific purpose and reinforces messages by giving complementary skills to youth, their peers, parents, and educators, and supports these skills with policy. Below each programmatic component of Dating Matters® is described in addition to the rationale and risk factors targeted by the strategy.

The specific focus of Dating Matters® on 11-14 year old youth in high risk urban communities was developed to stop dating violence before it begins. Evidence suggests that middle school youth in an urban environment may be at increased risk for dating violence; however, to date, there has been little evidence about what works to prevent dating violence in urban communities with high crime and economic disadvantage. Dating Matters® seeks to address gaps in research and practice with emphasis on developing and implementing TDV prevention strategies specific for these communities.

## Why Healthy Relationships?

Dating Matters® seeks to promote healthy relationships as a method to preventing dating violence. The focus on healthy relationships reflects a recent shift in public health from an emphasis on disease prevention to one on health promotion. Moreover, CDC's Strategic Direction for intimate partner violence, the adult form of dating violence, calls for approaches to foster respectful, non-violent relationships, as well as other characteristics that constitute a healthy relationship, such as trust. A healthy relationship approach to violence prevention also allows for the constellation of risk factors that are associated with dating violence to be included. For example, a healthy relationship is not only free from violence, but also from substance abuse and sexual risk taking. As such, Dating Matters® targets these co-occurring behaviors under the umbrella of promoting healthy relationships.

## Safety of Program Participants

Across all Dating Matters® strategies, we have taken into account the potential for participants to have current or former experience with violence and are taking steps in curricula content, delivery, and training to provide resources/referrals and maintain their safety and emotional well-being.

## Youth and Parent Programs

Dating Matters® youth and parent-focused programs are a combination of evidence-based and evidence-informed curricula. Six curricula comprise the Dating Matters® youth and parent package: Youth curricula for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades; and Parent curricula for parents of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade youth. The youth and parent programs complement each other in content and skill development and the programs are also cohesive and complementary across grade levels. Curricula were selected or developed by taking into account the expression of and risk factors for TDV, such as peer violence, sexual risk behaviors, and substance use, and were intended to deliver a high dose of prevention in urban communities. The evidence-informed curricula, developed for this initiative, take into account best practices in prevention, a developmental conceptualization of youth relationships, and are informed by other evidence-based youth health curricula. Finally, these curricula benefited from focus group research and were piloted and revised prior to implementation. Communities also had the opportunity to integrate minor adaptations to the evidence-based curricula in collaboration with their community advisory boards.

### ***School-Based Youth-Directed Components***

The Dating Matters® student programs will be implemented during the school day with the intention of including all 6th, 7th, and 8th grade youth in each middle school. Curricula will be implemented during the school day for several reasons: (1) both dating violence perpetration and victimization are related to poor academic outcomes; (2) TDV prevention dovetails with other school-based prevention, such as sexual education and bullying prevention; and (3) implementing prevention during school allows for the universal application of a program and increases the likelihood that all youth in a particular community will receive the programs.

Students in 8th grade classrooms will receive Safe Dates, an evidence-based program for the prevention of TDV. Safe Dates was selected because of its demonstrated effects preventing multiple forms of TDV for boys and girls. Students in 6th and 7th grade classrooms will receive evidence-informed, CDC-developed curricula. These curricula were developed by considering research on the context and risk factors for TDV. These curricula build skills, such as emotion identification, healthy coping, communication, and conflict resolution that are relevant to the prevention of multiple forms of violence, such as bullying. The student programs utilize a variety of teaching styles to maintain student engagement, retention of information, and provide opportunities to practice skills. On the right is a brief description of the curricula for each grade.

### ***Parent-Directed Components***

Parents have a crucial role to play in preventing TDV. Dating Matters® parent programs build on the current evidence-base of effective programs for youth health to equip parents with skills to communicate with their child about dating violence and use positive parenting skills. Parent programs target the following risk factors for TDV: harsh parenting, low parental monitoring, negative parent-child interactions, and witnessing violence in the home.

## School-Based Youth-Directed Components

### **6th Grade\* (6 sessions)**

- Focuses on healthy relationships broadly
- Uses a social-emotional approach (e.g., emotion recognition, coping)
- Promotes and builds healthy relationship skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution)
- Combines primary and secondary prevention

### **7th Grade\* (7 sessions, reviews and builds on 6th grade skills)**

- Increased focus on dating relationships
- Uses a social-emotional approach (e.g., emotion recognition, coping)
- Promotes and builds healthy relationship skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution)
- Increased focus on sexual violence
- Addresses social norms associated with substance use

### **8th Grade (Safe Dates, 10 sessions with play and poster contest)**

- Only classroom-based program effective for preventing psychological, physical, and sexual violence among boys and girls
- Effects sustained at 4 year follow-up

*\*CDC-Developed*

## Parent-Directed Components

### 6th Grade (6 in-person sessions)

- *Parents Matter!* for Dating Matters
  - Adapted for Dating Matters in collaboration with program developer
  - Promotes positive parenting and effective parent-child communication on healthy relationship development and sexual topics
  - Supports parents in influencing the relational and sexual risk behaviors of youth and in modeling healthy relationships

### 7th Grade\* (3 in-person sessions, 3 at-home activities)

- Dating Matters for Parents
  - Supports parents in using positive parenting skills, communicating openly and effectively, appropriately monitoring and supervising, and resolving conflicts constructively

### 8th Grade (6 booklets mailed to families to complete at home)

- Families for Safe Dates
  - Focuses on parent-child interactions, fosters discussion of TDV
  - Associated with significant decrease in TDV victimization

\*CDC-Developed

Parents have a variety of responsibilities and demands on their time, which can make engaging them in prevention programs challenging. Therefore, Dating Matters® employs delivery mechanisms for the parent programs that are intended to increase a parent's ability to participate in the program. The program begins in 6th grade with a series of in-person, group-based sessions. Then, a combination of in-person, group-based sessions and at-home parent-child activities are used in the 7th grade sessions, while 8th grade is exclusively at-home parent-child activities. On the left is a brief description of the curricula for each grade.

## Educator Training

As many educators know, the academic success of America's youth is strongly linked with their health. But without staff training on teen dating violence and where to go for resources, educators are often unable understand the risk factors and warning signs associated with teen dating violence or their role in promoting healthy relationships. To address this need, Dating Matters®: Understanding Teen Dating Violence Prevention, a free, online training is available at [www.vetoviolence.org](http://www.vetoviolence.org). All of the educators in participating Dating Matters® schools are encouraged to complete the Dating Matters® online training.

## Communications Strategies

The parent, educator, and school-based youth-focused components of Dating Matters® will be complemented by the youth-focused communications campaign—*i2i™: What R U looking 4*. The campaign is intended to reinforce messages learned in the school curricula, but uses technology and language that is appealing and relevant for youth. The campaign was developed based on substantial formative research and focus group testing in each of the Dating Matters® communities. The campaign will be carried out using three main mechanisms described on the next page.





# Dating Matters™: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships

## Policy

Preventing TDV requires a comprehensive approach involving multiple partners working together to influence the norms and behaviors of individuals, families, peer groups, community organizations, neighborhoods, and our society at large. One important aspect of this comprehensive approach includes informing policies aimed at preventing TDV. Policy has proven to be central to improving public health because of its widespread impact.

CDC in collaboration with the National Association of County and City Health Officials developed the Dating Matters® Policy Package to provide local health departments with information on how to best inform TDV prevention policies in their communities. Communities first conduct an inventory of existing policies and policy gaps related to TDV prevention in the community. Then local health departments determine how to best inform local policies as part of the initiative. This is a crucial first step in learning more about which policies are effective at preventing TDV and promoting healthy teen relationships.

## Building Capacity of Local Public Health

Local health departments have the potential to be leaders in dating violence prevention in their communities. Dating Matters® uses a multi-pronged assessment to help local health departments build and improve their capacity to support implementation and sustainability of the initiative, as well as to address dating violence and healthy relationship initiatives more broadly within their communities.

## Importance of Evaluation and Surveillance

Because Dating Matters® uses a combination of evidence-informed and evidence-based approaches, it is critical that we evaluate both short and long-term impact of the initiative. Therefore, a rigorous evaluation is being conducted simultaneous to implementation in Baltimore, Ft. Lauderdale, Chicago, and Oakland. The evaluation will entail an outcome and process evaluation, as well as a cost-analysis of the comprehensive approach compared to dating violence standard practice (Safe Dates only). The evaluation will inform the dissemination of Dating Matters® prevention strategies to other communities. Communities are also working to identify school and community-level indicators of TDV within their communities. Indicator data that correlates with youth self-reports of TDV constitutes the first step in establishing a community-based TDV surveillance system.

By developing and implementing a comprehensive approach that engages youth, their parents, peers, educators, and communities, it is anticipated that Dating Matters® will decrease dating violence in high-risk urban communities and will equip young people with the skills they need to build healthy and safe relationships.

### Social media:

Each community will have a Facebook page to support their communication effort. The Facebook page will be managed by the Brand Ambassadors.

### Additional Digital Strategies:

Each community can elect to use additional digital media strategies (e.g. Instagram, Twitter) to support their efforts and complement their Facebook page.

### Brand Ambassador program:

The Brand Ambassador program will be the primary drivers of the i2i™ campaign. Brand Ambassadors will host i2i™ events and activities for students, create content for the Facebook page, and disseminate the i2i™ messages.

*\*Social media and other digital strategies will include youth 13 and older*

***It's Everyone's Responsibility to Stop Dating Violence.***