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London program spreads into U.S.

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Aimed at high school students

A program pioneered in London to reduce dating violence among high school students has been so successful it's being picked up by five U.S. cities.

Using role playing to teach students how to handle difficult situations, the program has resulted in nearly a 25% drop in violence, according to research published in the journal of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

Boston, Providence, R.I., The Bronx, Wichita, Kansas and Boise, Idaho, have decided to test the program in their schools.

"To have a program developed in London tested in the U.S. makes us all very proud," said Peter Jaffe, a University of Western Ontario professor involved in the research project.

Each year between one in 10 and one in five high school teens are hit, slapped or beaten by an individual they're dating.

The violence prevention program, known as the Fourth R: Skills for Youth Relationships, was taught to 968 Grade 9 students at 10 randomly selected high schools in the Thames Valley district. Another 754 students at 10 other high schools were part of a control group that wasn't provided the training and materials.

"Students actually get a chance to practise what you say (and) what you do when you have a boyfriend or girlfriend who mistreats you or if you have a friend in that situation," said Jaffe.

"We can talk all the theory in the world, but when kids practise what to do in those circumstances, it makes a big difference."

The researchers from UWO and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health surveyed the students when they were at the end of Grade 11.

They found the rates of physical dating violence were greater in the control students (9.8%) than in the students who participated in the program (7.4%).

They also discovered the program had a greater impact on boys than it did on reducing dating violence in girls.

Jaffe, who is also academic director of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, said more research is needed to understand the gender difference.

"We don't know whether the program doesn't touch them (girls) in the same way," he said.

In addition to reducing dating violence, the aim of the curriculum was to increase condom use. The researchers found that sexually active boys who took the program had a 67.9% rate of condom use compared to 58.6% for boys who didn't have it.

Ray Hughes, national co-ordinator for the program that is offered in more than 400 Canadian schools, said it consists of 21 lessons. In part of the program, students are given information on what is and what isn't a healthy relationship.

"It is quite a grey area for them," Hughes said.

Some female students will say they're in a healthy relationship because their dating partner gets jealous when they talk to other guys and keeps track of where they are all the time.

"We help them recognize the early warning signs, the precursors to violence. That is critical. Let's not wait until it happens," Hughes said.