



MNCASA

Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Messaging Report:

Support for Healthy Relationships
and Sexual Violence Prevention
Education for Children and Youth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA) conducted research on sexual violence prevention messaging in 2017 and 2018. The purpose of this research was to test and recommend key messaging for use by those advocating healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education for children and youth in schools and community settings. Teaching healthy relationship skills, especially when paired with sexual violence prevention education (which includes information on bystander intervention, consent, gender norms, etc.), is one evidence-based approach to prevent sexual violence. During this period, MNCASA conducted individual in-depth interviews, an online focus group, a statewide survey, and message testing for both general and targeted audiences.

The recommended messaging, as well as key findings, are highlighted in this document. Information in this report can be used by organizations and individuals to promote healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education for children and youth in schools and community settings. MNCASA will use this information in its work to advocate for healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education for children and youth across the state of Minnesota. Additional resources accompanying this toolkit can be accessed on our website or by contacting MNCASA.

Top Tested Messages

The following messages were created using research findings, and tested with a survey directed at both a general audience and specifically targeted audiences. Each message was tested on its ability to encourage support and promotion of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention through school-based education for Minnesota students who are children and youth. Messages were also tested on inspiring respondents to take action and whether they learned new information. Messages were ranked by their ability to encourage support, promotion, and action across multiple audiences. Qualitative analysis of comments was also used to supplement quantitative analysis of the results.

Very few respondents noted that any of the messages contained new information to them.

This first message resonated the best across all audiences and describes a shared responsibility for protecting children. This message tested well across all criteria.

Until things change, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted or abused by age 18. Parents, schools, and communities share a responsibility to use proven strategies to protect all children from sexual violence so young people can build positive, healthy relationships throughout their lives.

The following messages tested very well across all criteria.

When children are the victims of sexual abuse, the offender is a person they know in 90% of the cases. Parents and schools need to know how to recognize signs of danger, such as when a child is being “groomed” for abuse, and teach about healthy relationships so all students in our communities can be protected from harm.

Sex education is too often limited to the biology of sex. Young people need more preparation for healthy relationships, dealing with peer pressure, negotiating personal boundaries, and seeking help from caring adults—lessons they need to hear multiple times at home, in schools, and from community members.

The following message was preferred by participants who self-selected as “Parent of middle- or high-school student” or “School administrator, teacher, or staff member.” It was cautioned that parents and educators don’t always agree on what is “age-appropriate.”

While curiosity about sex is part of normal child development, children are now exposed to sexualized media and images from a very early age, often without a caring adult present to offer suitable guidance. Therefore, parents and schools need to begin age-appropriate discussions about sexual health much earlier. We need to provide accurate information from a trusted source so young people are prepared to negotiate safe and respectful sexual relationships throughout their lives.

Key Findings

Sexual Violence and Sexual Violence Prevention Education

MNCASA investigated respondents’ overall awareness of sexual violence and sexual violence prevention education. These were the key findings:

- Respondents believe sexual violence is a problem, but it is happening “elsewhere”.
- Recognition of the urgency of the problem of sexual violence increases support for change.
- Minnesotans believe that more must be done to combat sexual violence.
- Many parents recognize education as the best form of sexual violence prevention and believe schools need to do more to reduce rates of sexual violence.

Inclusion of Healthy Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Education in Schools

MNCASA investigated respondents' awareness and perceptions of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education in schools. These were the key findings:

- There is little awareness of how and whether sexual violence is discussed in schools.
- Those that are aware of current sexual education felt schools were too focused on the biology of sex and any discussions begin too late.
- Parents react enthusiastically and positively to the idea of incorporating teaching about healthy relationships into the health education curriculum.
- Voters and decision makers across party lines see a role for both parents and schools in teaching about healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention. Generally, parents are seen to have primary responsibility and schools should have a reinforcing role.
- Curriculums that include parents' engagement or participation are preferred and could increase the impact of prevention education efforts.
- Curriculum specifics need to be shared with parents and key players to enlist support and move changes forward.
- A one-size-fits-all curriculum is insufficient.

Support for and Opposition to Sexual Violence Prevention Education

This research sought to understand different opinions on the issue and understand the main arguments for each opinion. The majority of participants throughout the survey were supportive of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education.

Three main points of opposition to teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education were found:

1. A broad and ideological opposition that schools should not play a role in educating children about relationships or sexual violence in the first place.
2. A belief that changes and additions to curriculums takes time away from other subjects and priorities at school.
3. A distrust of some teachers' ability to teach these subjects.

Political ideology, not religious belief, was found to be the greatest driver behind the level of support for teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention skills. Political ideology was defined by participant self-identification as conservative, moderate, or liberal. The survey found the initial support for teaching healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention is strongest among: women, voters under age 40, younger non-college voters, Democrats, and individuals who never attend religious services. Strong support dropped off substantially among conservative voters, but support was relatively strong among religious, Christian voters.

PROJECT DETAILED REPORT

MNCASA conducted research in order to advocate for better education about healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention for children and youth in schools and communities within Minnesota. The focus of this research included parents, elected officials, school administrators, sexual violence advocates, and public health experts who had opinions on healthy relationship education and sexual violence prevention topics being included in Minnesota schools and community organizations.

Healthy relationship education includes information about what constitutes healthy and abusive behaviors, skills for healthy relationships, how to identify abusive behaviors, and when intervention is needed. Sexual violence prevention education focuses on increasing respect for all genders, addressing and changing social norms, and prevention techniques such as bystander intervention. Education about online safety, bystander intervention, coercion, and consent provides students with knowledge and skills to recognize sexual violence, not cause sexual harm to self and others, and identify support resources. MNCASA believes the inclusion of this type of curriculum will provide students with the knowledge to identify and prevent sexual violence in their schools and communities.

The project aimed to:

- Identify areas of agreement among target audiences around the inclusion of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention in schools and communities
- Develop messages that appeal to a broad constituency
- Broaden the framework for discussing healthy relationships

Other research has previously found that parents are supportive of healthy relationship education, and a small but vocal opposition group prevents curriculum from being included in all communities. In order to overcome this opposition, it is necessary to understand all opinions on the issue, and provide facts and messaging that will create common ground. This will allow better messaging to be utilized in creating change.

Use

This report is for individuals and organizations who want to better understand parents' and others' opinions across the state of Minnesota about healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education being taught in schools. This information is useful for those interested in advocating for healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education, or those in the process of implementing such curriculum in their schools and communities.

Project Methodology

The project had four main components:

1. Individual In-depth Interviews (IDIs)
2. Online Focus Group
3. Statewide Survey
4. Audience Message Testing

Information was gathered from key target audiences, including school administrators, elected officials, parents of school-aged children, sexual assault advocates, and health educators in Minnesota.

Individual In-Depth Interviews (IDIs):

Eleven in-depth, 1 on 1 interviews (IDIs) were done with key individuals. These key individuals were chosen due to their ability to make impactful decisions and their current involvement with sexual education. Selected interviewees included school board presidents and members, elected officials and legislators involved with education committees, and health educators. Efforts were made to gather a balanced group with regard to geography, urban/rural, racial or cultural diversity, partisanship, existing familiarity with the issue, and role or relation to the issue.

Interviews examined participants' existing views on sexual assault education and prevention, and explored potential strategies for broadening the framework for discussing healthy relationships and sexual health. These interviews were done to gather perspectives from those in decision making positions.

Online Focus Group:

Eighteen parents of middle-school or high school age children attending public schools participated in an online focus group in April 2017. Participants were selected using screening questions to ensure balanced representation reflective of Minnesota's population, including political party affiliation, ethnicity, education, employment, household income, and geography. An independent moderator facilitated the 90-minute discussion. Individuals were selected through a contracted survey database of registered voters. Prior to the 90-minute discussion, participants were told they would be discussing issues affecting Minnesotans and that the discussion may include some sensitive topics.

Statewide Survey:

An online survey of 400 registered Minnesota voters was conducted in May 2017. Participants were selected through a contracted survey database of registered voters, and responses were weighted to be demographically and geographically representative of Minnesota.

Audience Message Testing:

An online survey was completed between January and February 2018 to test the effectiveness of messages created with earlier findings for different audiences. Audiences included school administrators/teachers or staff members, school superintendents or school board members, parents/guardians of middle or high school students, and sexual violence advocates. The survey tested seven messages that were developed for use with all audiences, and five additional messages were designed for and tested with selected audiences.

Each message was tested on its ability to encourage support for and promotion of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education through school based-education for Minnesota students who are children and youth, ability to inspire respondents to take action, and whether they contained new information for the reader.

To ensure that specific audiences were reached, MNCASA and partners shared the survey with their contact lists. MNCASA reached advocates through their membership list, and the Minnesota Department of Education shared the survey with parents, school administrators, teachers, school staff, and school superintendents or school board members. The survey was also shared with the Minnesota Department of Health's Sexual Violence Prevention Network to reach those working in the sexual violence prevention field. In total, 169 individuals responded to the survey.



Key Findings

Sexual Violence Awareness and Prevention

Sexual violence is seen as a problem happening “elsewhere.” In the focus group, parents identified sexual violence as a problem nationally and throughout the state. In the survey, 85% identified that “rates of sexual violence are too high.” Over a third of survey respondents said sexual violence is an “urgent problem.” In the focus group, however, parents noted that it is not as big of an issue in their own communities. Minnesotans acknowledge sexual violence is an urgent problem, but don’t believe it is present or recognize it in their own communities.

Awareness of the urgency of sexual violence increases support for change. Previous research has shown that voters are most motivated to seek a solution when they recognize the urgency of the problem. The survey found similar results as respondents who indicated sexual violence/assault as an “urgent” problem were far more likely to support healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education.

Minnesotans believe that more must be done to combat sexual violence. By overwhelming margins, voters recognize the need for action. Ninety percent of survey respondents said Minnesotans need to do more to reduce the rates of sexual assault and sexual violence, including 45% who “strongly” agreed. This belief transcended lines of geography, gender, partisanship, and religion. Only 9% indicated that government resources should not be invested in sexual violence prevention.

Many parents recognize the importance of education as the best form of prevention and believe schools need to do more to reduce rates of sexual violence. The research showed that overall, public school parents are conscious of the need for healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education and schools’ role in reducing violence. Eighty-seven percent of surveyed voters noted that schools should play a role in teaching healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention, and 81% believed schools in Minnesota need to do more to reduce the rates of sexual violence. Although some parents suggested the best prevention is deterrence, (“tougher jail times; higher penalties,” “tougher sentences for criminals”) most recognized that earlier education and a focus on healthy relationships are keys to preventing sexual violence.

People acknowledge that neither parents nor schools are providing children with a sufficient education about sexual violence prevention. Just 21% of voters thought that most or all parents talk with their children about sexual violence and prevention. A similar 20% believe such topics are currently addressed in public schools. Among the small percentage who believe that lessons are taught in home or at school, few rate that teaching as “excellent” (4% and 8%, respectively).

Inclusion of Healthy Relationships and Sexual Violence Prevention Education in Schools

There is little awareness of how (and whether) sexual violence is discussed in schools. The awareness of how (and whether) sexual violence is discussed in public schools was very limited in the individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) even among school board members and legislators who focus on health education. Among the decision makers not involved in education, awareness of the current curriculum was even lower, and they were uncertain about how it could be improved.

Those who are aware of current sexual education felt schools are too focused on the biology of sex and education begins too late. Parents in the focus groups noted they are often limited to what their children share with them, but said their children’s current health curriculum seems to be light on healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention, and is more focused on the biology of sex and disease prevention. Many were also frustrated that the subject of healthy relationships was not addressed in younger grades. In their interviews, trained health educators were quick to point out the gaps in the current curriculums and characterized them as sub-par. Optional supplemental programs offered throughout Minnesota were noted to have had success in some local communities, but are not transferrable across the state and all demographics.

They talk about consent, but it’s still presented as “no means no” which isn’t effective. And it’s basically a one-day lesson and then they move on. It also isn’t talked about until high school which is too late for child victims. -Parent

I feel like my kids learn more about personal relationships from what they see online than what they learn in school. We’ve had numerous conversations at home about this subject, but not all parents are willing or able to do that. -Parent

A one-size-fits-all curriculum is insufficient. Key individuals noted that different cultural and community norms require different framing and strategy when advocating for curriculum changes. Teachers and administrators discussed the need to ensure the curriculum is adaptable and able to connect with students from various backgrounds.

Parents react enthusiastically and positively to the idea of incorporating teaching about healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention into the health education curriculum. In the survey of parents, 87% agreed schools should play a role in teaching children about sexual assault and sexual violence, and how to prevent it.

Voters and decision makers across party lines see a duty for both schools and parents to teach about healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention. Generally, parents are seen to have the main responsibility but also think that schools should have a role by providing reinforcement. In the survey of parents, 87% said schools should have a role, but 46% still say that parents should have the sole responsibility for teaching their children about sexual violence and how to prevent it. Respondents identifying as conservatives were found to be much more hesitant about school involvement than moderates and liberals.

Although parents are seen to have the main responsibility, it was noted by many, especially the decision makers and key individuals interviewed, that schools need to have a role since some parents are not willing or are unable to provide this education, and information shared by parents may be incorrect.

It's good to get that information from multiple sources, we talk to them about it at home, and getting it from the school reinforces it. -School Board Member

Curriculums that include parents are preferred, and could increase impact of prevention and education efforts. In the individual interviews and focus groups, it was discussed that including parents in the school curriculum could educate parents themselves, and make impacts in the home and community. Parents themselves expressed a desire for more resources on how to best teach children about the topics. Parental inclusion could involve assigning worksheets for students to fill out with their parents or activities that students complete with their families.

Curriculums' specifics need to be shared and incorporated in messaging to enlist support and move changes forward. People agreed with the concept of teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention skills, but many are hesitant to offer their full-fledged support until they can see what exactly they're endorsing. Sharing the goals and intentions of the curriculum, as well as concrete examples of how curriculums or individual lesson plans might change is helpful to interested parties. Any materials created to promote healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education must include concrete specifics about what changes are being proposed and how they would work.

Sharing Specifics of Healthy Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Curriculum

The project aimed to determine which aspects of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention curriculum need to be made clear in its promotion to gain support. As shown earlier in the research, clear guidelines and communication about the curriculum or lesson plans increases support for implementation. The research conducted with parents identified the following as important points to emphasize in promotion of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education curriculum or lesson plans:

1. Begin by raising awareness and have students recognize the extent of the problem
2. Age-appropriate and build year-to-year
3. Rely on tested strategies that are proven to work
4. Give parents and families a role in teaching

Less important to surveyed parents were local flexibility, integration into many school subjects, an 'opt-out' option, and a focus on the student's social and emotional well-being.

Opinion Themes

The research sought to understand the different opinions on the issue and understand the main arguments for each opinion. By understanding the thought process of each group, messages can be tailored to each opinion and find common ground.

Political ideology is the largest impact shaping opinions. Political ideology, not religious belief, was found to be the greatest driver behind the level of support for teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention skills. This was defined by participants' self-identification as conservative, moderate, or liberal. Strong support for healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education dropped off substantially among conservative voters, but support held relatively well among religious Christian voters.

Opposition:

Those who opposed curriculum changes were the minority throughout our testing. This group was often unchanged in their opinions throughout the testing and generally self-identified as conservative Republicans.

Three main points of opposition were identified:

- 1. A broad and ideological opposition to schools playing a role in educating children about relationships or sexual violence at all.** Respondents often credited a general distrust in the government/state and the school's ability to teach about the topics of relationships and sex. Pushback also centered on the belief that parents have the sole duty to teach their children about sex and relationships.
 - **Messaging Response:** Make a case that schools have a complimentary role to parents' responsibility. Teaching does not replace what parents do, but builds on it.
- 2. A belief that changes and additions to curriculums takes time away from other subjects and priorities at school.** Many schools have a reduced ability for contextual learning. IDIs with decision makers described a concern with the limited amount of classroom hours and school resources.
 - **Messaging Response:** Note that changes take time but are worth the cost compared to the benefits students and communities will receive; ramifications from sexual violence are costly to Minnesota.
- 3. A distrust of some teachers' ability to teach on these subjects.** Some parents in focus groups stated a concern about who specifically would be teaching this information. This was not related to the role of the school in providing the education but in the skills of individual teachers.
 - **Messaging Response:** Educators can access well-laid-out, and evidence-based curriculums and lesson plans.

Support:

Overall, the majority of participants throughout the survey were supportive of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education. The survey found the initial support for teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention is strongest among:

- Women (91% support, 59% strongly support)
- Voters under age 40 (92% support, 63% strongly support)
- Democrats (98% support, 72% strongly support)
- Independent women (92% support, 51% strongly support) more so than independent men (93% support, 33% strongly support)
- Individuals who never attend religious services (96% support, 62% strongly support)



Guidelines Used to Develop Messages

Based on the research above, the project found that the best messages to promote healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention:

- Critique the limitations of current curriculums as focusing only on the mechanics of sex
- Emphasize that these changes would help our children learn to better respect themselves and one another
- Stress that this teaching would reinforce, not replace, the teaching that parents do at home – because not all children have parents willing or able to have such conversations.

Use of Positive Messaging

The following messaging in support of teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention tested well in research. Over 80% found the following messages convincing, and up to 50% rated them very convincing.

Well-Tested Messages which Support Healthy Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Education:

The following messages stood out across demographics. They were selected as the top arguments for healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education. The following statements shifted a few voters to change their opinion from not supportive to supportive of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education:

- Sex education is too often about the biology of sex; children need to learn more about healthy relationships, peer pressure, negotiating personal boundaries, and how to find accurate information and seek help from parents and others.
- This would help our children learn to better respect themselves and one another. Respect leads to the ability to set personal boundaries, advocate for oneself if those boundaries are violated, and understand the boundaries of others.
- This would reinforce the teaching that parents do at home; these are important lessons that kids need to hear - multiple times, and from multiple sources. And since some kids don't have parents who are willing or able to have those conversations, it's imperative that we teach students this in schools, too.

Well-Tested Messaging which Supports Healthy Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Education:

The project found a number of positive arguments in favor of teaching healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education in schools.

- Including healthy relationship skills in curriculum would make our kids and families safer. The motivation behind this effort is to make people safer and reduce the high rates of sexual violence in Minnesota.
- Including healthy relationship skills in curriculum would increase awareness of sexual violence and how to prevent it. One of the challenges of reducing the high rates of sexual violence in Minnesota is the lack of awareness of the extent of the problem. Parents recognize that many children are hearing little or nothing about sexual violence or building healthy relationships. By including it in the curriculum in a more sustained fashion, we raise awareness and build toward prevention.
- Including healthy relationship skills in curriculum would ensure that every child is exposed to teaching about healthy relationship skills. Not every child has role models or parents who are willing and able to teach their kids about healthy relationship skills and sexual assault; both parents and key leaders recognized the importance of teachers and adults in schools being role models for students.
- Including healthy relationship skills in curriculum would help our children learn to respect themselves and one another. Emphasizing respect of oneself and others was mentioned in nearly every individual interview. Respect leads to the ability to set personal boundaries, advocate for oneself if those boundaries are violated, and understand the boundaries of others. Parents brought up the need for promoting respect among their children as a basic health education tenet, but also as a strong argument to persuade others who might be hesitant to endorse these changes.

Use of Opposition Messaging

In an effort to test the impact of negative messages on respondents' opinions, the project tested messages critiquing the school's role in teaching about sexual violence generally and that the changes would take away from other subjects. These messages were not found to be convincing outside of the small but persistent minority of conservative voters who were already in opposition.

Recommended Messages

The following messages were created using research findings from IDIs, the online focus group, and the statewide survey of the project and tested via electronic survey of various audiences. Each message was tested on its ability to encourage support and promotion of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education through school-based education for Minnesota students who are children and youth. Messages were also tested on inspiring respondents to take action and whether they contained new information. Messages were ranked by their ability to encourage support, promotion, and action across multiple audiences. Qualitative analysis of comments was also used to supplement quantitative analysis of the results.

Very few respondents noted that any of the messages contained new information to them.

The message below resonated the best across all audiences and describes a shared responsibility for protecting children. This message tested well across all criteria.

Until things change, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted or abused by age 18. Parents, schools and communities share a responsibility to use proven strategies to protect all children from sexual violence so young people can build positive, healthy relationships throughout their lives.

The following messages tested very well across all criteria.

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The following message was preferred by participants who self-selected as “Parent of middle- or high-school student” or “School administrator, teacher, or staff member.” It was cautioned that parents and educators don’t always agree on what is “age-appropriate.”

While curiosity about sex is part of normal child development, children are now exposed to sexualized media and images from a very early age, often without a caring adult present to offer suitable guidance. Therefore, parents and schools need to begin age-appropriate discussions about sexual health much earlier. We need to provide accurate information from a trusted source so young people are prepared to negotiate safe and respectful sexual relationships throughout their lives.

CONCLUSION

When communicating regarding healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education focus on 1.) the health and safety of children and families, 2.) the limitations of the current healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education curriculums used in schools and community setting, 3.) speak to the inclusion of parents in the process, 4.) and stress that the teachings would reinforce, not replace, what parents do at home.

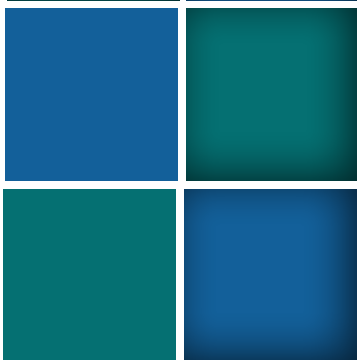
The inclusion of healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education in schools and communities is an important tool in sexual violence prevention. Using the findings and tools from this report will help reframe the issue, find consensus, and assist individuals and organizations in gaining policy support for implementing healthy relationship and sexual violence prevention education in school and community settings.



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