

Shifting Boundaries: Lessons on Relationships for Students in Middle School

Reviewer Comments:

Reviewer 1.

Strengths: Shifting Boundaries combines student education sessions at the individual level with an environmental level school environment assessment and improvement project. Students are empowered as legitimate voices in identifying problem areas and in participating in solutions.

The Shifting Boundaries curriculum works differently from many curricula that focus primarily on changing knowledge and attitudes. The curriculum guides students through a multi-session discussion/application of the concept of boundaries—this makes this component of the abstract concept of healthy relationships concrete. Shifting Boundaries examines behavioral practices and works back from those to evaluate the power differentials that underlie those behaviors. Because the Shifting Boundaries strategy works differently from many traditional curricula, I wasn't sure that the assessment matrix was able to capture its unique strengths. For the first time I wished for an extra credit category—if one were available, I would have awarded points for using student-based data to evaluate the school environment and to make structural changes that promote safety.

Limitations: Guidance for teachers implementing the program was quite limited. Perhaps this was because the study project used interventionists (probably well-versed in the dynamics of TDV and harassment) to implement the curriculum. I was also concerned that the Respecting Boundaries Agreement put an unfair amount of responsibility on the targets of abusive behavior to participate in preventing those violations.

Reviewer 2.

Shifting Boundaries seems to be an effective curriculum for preventing teen dating violence and sexual harassment, although it does not build healthy relationship or healthy sexuality skills aside from setting boundaries and personal space. The 7th grade curriculum increases the emphasis on examining unhealthy relationship behaviors, but does not necessarily create an opportunity for youth to develop health relationship behaviors.

One of the strong points of the curriculum is that it covers three levels of the social ecology, depending on which model you observe. It absolutely covers the individual, relationship, and organizational level.

Though follow-up activities aren't specifically listed in the curriculum, the hot/cool spot activity allows the teacher/instructor to meet with school officials to determine follow-up to improve the environment of the school. The evaluation also mentions several follow-up activities that are not specifically mentioned in the curriculum, such as posters to increase awareness (though not PP) and using temporary school-based restraining orders. It also mentions the discussion of the construction of gender roles, though this is not clear to the reviewer in the curriculum.

The curriculum is very interactive for the participants and includes multiple learning styles as well as the opportunity to develop and practice new skills.

The curriculum is based on the Theory of Reasoned Action, which fits nicely with the activities contained within. The activities appear to be based on scientific research.

The curriculum is for 6th and 7th graders, and while the activities and content appear to be developmentally appropriate, the problem behavior has been documented to occur prior to this age. Additionally, the skills and behaviors covered by the curriculum would most likely be well understood and beneficial to a younger age group.

The evaluation also mentions the need to examine curricula with a younger audience since youth as young as 6th grade are already experiencing dating violence and harassment.

The curriculum does not appear to take diverse cultural beliefs, practices and community norms of program participants into account. It is a one size fits all curriculum that was designed for one community and was evaluated in that community. The evaluators were uncertain whether the curriculum would be as effective with another community. The curriculum could be improved by incorporating elements of cultural diversity into the activities, particularly in the hot/cold spot activity.

Assuming the evaluation materials used in the formal evaluation are available to implementation sites, the evaluation appears to assess both process and outcome measures effectively.

The program materials are supportive for teachers and instructors, although there is little extra information for teachers in terms of effective teaching strategies and extra support to inform and enhance instruction. Overall, however, it seems to be a straightforward, easy to implement curriculum.

The evaluation shows effectiveness of the curriculum in one urban community, though the researchers were unsure whether the results could be spread to other communities.

Reviewer 3.

The University of Chicago research team that completed the evaluation study provided with this submission implemented a randomized controlled trial evaluation design, and most findings about the effectiveness of the program in increasing pro-social behavioral intentions and reducing dating and sexual violence and harassment were statistically significant in the expected direction. Some findings were statistically significant in the opposite direction—for example, the treatment group experienced more sexual harassment and victimization in terms of prevalence, and total violence prevalence increased at six-month follow-up. These unexpected findings, however, could have been due to statistical error or sample attrition. Overall, behavioral outcomes improved for the treatment group: frequency of sexual harassment and violence victimization and perpetration; prevalence and frequency of sexual harassment peer victimization and perpetration; frequency of all-violence harassment and victimization and perpetration by a peer; and prevalence and frequency of sexual victimization by a dating partner were all lower than for the control group. Because this study took the form of an experimental design, we can be reasonably certain that Shifting Boundaries was the main cause of the changes observed between the treatment and control groups. The authors did report sample attrition was an issue in the study, which compromises the validity of the results; however, they attempted to rectify this problem through the use of additional covariates. Therefore, Shifting Boundaries appears to have had a positive impact on preventing violence victimization and perpetration by several measures, at least in the short-term. It should be noted that long-term follow up measurement has not been conducted for the treatment and control groups; therefore, it is difficult to know if the program's effects persist long-term.

The curriculum itself is well-organized and there are useful discussion activities. During the activity mapping “hot” and “cool” places in school, it seems that students would be more invested if they were given the opportunity to implement changes to make the “cool” areas of the school feel more safe and welcoming. The students themselves should be involved in designing and making the changes, as opposed to simply passing off their ideas to a parent or teacher group or even other student leaders. For maximum program effect, those who brainstorm the ideas should actually be involved in carrying them out.

Bystander intervention practice activities are lacking in the lesson plans. It is important for students to have the opportunity to actually practice these skills in a safe situation, as intervention is often very difficult to carry out in a real-life situation.

It is good that the curriculum asks students to think about how certain remarks, situations, or places may violate the boundaries of people of different genders, ages, races and ethnicities differently. However, this broader consideration of others' realities would be more effective if the curriculum included some discussion and activities around reducing discrimination and cruelty toward those in the minority.