
Katie M. Edwards, PhD,1 Kara Anne Rodenhizer, MS,2 and Robert P. Eckstein, PsyD2

Abstract
We examined school personnel’s engagement in bystander action in situations of teen dating violence (DV), sexual violence (SV), and sexual harassment (SH). We conducted focus groups with 22 school personnel from three high schools in New Hampshire. School personnel identified their own barriers to intervening in situations of teen DV, SV, and SH (e.g., not having the time or ability to intervene). School personnel also discussed the ways in which they intervened before (e.g., talking with teens about healthy relationships), during (e.g., breaking up fights between dating partners) and after (e.g., comforting victims) instances of teen DV, SV, and SH. These data can be used to support the development of bystander training for school personnel as one component of comprehensive DV, SV, and SH prevention

1Department of Psychology and Prevention Innovations Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, USA
2University of New Hampshire, Durham, USA

Corresponding Author:
Katie M. Edwards, Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, 15 Academic Way, Durham, NH 03824, USA.
Email: katie.edwards@unh.edu
for teens. In addition, these data provide information that can be used to develop measures that assess school personnel bystander action barriers and behaviors in instances of teen DV, SV, and SH.

**Keywords**
dating violence, sexual assault, teachers, schools, bystander, helping

Researchers continue to document the endemic rates and deleterious consequences of dating violence (DV), sexual violence (SV), and sexual harassment (SH) among high school students (Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra, 2014; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016)

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly recognizing the role that school personnel (e.g., school administrators, teachers, coaches) and parents can play in the prevention of teen DV, SV, and SH (CDC, 2016; Charmaraman, Jones, Stein, & Espelage, 2013; Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014; Yoon & Barton, 2008). Moreover, research using convenience samples of high school youth has found that 40% to 66% of teen DV occurs in the presence of witnesses (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008; Molidor & Tolman, 1998) and 28% to 42% to (Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011) of DV occurs on school property. Furthermore, in a nationally representative sample of children aged 6 to 17 years, 18% (attempted or completed rape) to 68% (hitting or kicking private parts) of SV occurred on school property and 72% of SH occurred on school property (Turner et al., 2011). Furthermore, Young, Grey, and Boyd (2008) found that among high school students, sexual assaults were most likely to happen at school (39.3%), followed by someone else’s house (24.3%), at a party (12.1%), at the victim’s house (11.2%), or other (13.1%). Taken together, the findings suggest that school personnel have opportunities to directly intervene in instances of DV, SV, and SH among teens.

The idea that school personnel can play a critical role in preventing DV, SV, and SH is consistent with increasing recognition that all community members have a role to play in preventing violence. Frequently referred to as bystanders, these are individuals who witness or hear about an emergency or potentially violent incident (Banyard, Edwards, Seibold, 2017; Banyard, 2013). Bystanders have the potential to prevent violence from occurring in high risk situations, stop violence once it has started, and provide support to victims in the aftermath of a violent incident (Banyard, Edwards, Seibold, 2017; Banyard, 2013). Bystanders can also take proactive steps (e.g., informal conversations
with peers) to shift social norms to be intolerant of violence and promote positive bystander action (used interchangeably with helping in this article; Banyard, Edwards, Seibold, 2017; Banyard, 2013).

To date, there is a scarcity of research that has examined school personnel’s perceptions of DV, SV, and SH, and even less regarding school personnel’s perception and observations of DV, SV, and SH bystander action. Indeed, we were only able to locate two published studies (i.e., Gonzalez-Guarda et al., 2014; Khubchandani et al., 2012) that examined school personnel’s perceptions of DV, SV, and SH; none of these studies specifically examined bystander action among school personnel.

Thus, the current study utilized a qualitative approach to shed light on school personnel’s perceptions of their and other personnel’s bystander action behaviors in situations of teen DV, SV, and SH. Data obtained from the current study could be used to inform future research, measurement development, and prevention efforts.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 22 school personnel from three high schools in New Hampshire (one rural, two urban). Although we did not ask participants to complete demographic surveys, based on school data and field notes from researchers, the school personnel who participated in the focus groups were primarily White, female, and middle aged (30-50 years old) and held various positions: counselor, nurse, social worker, and teachers of social studies, health, science, and other subject areas.

**Procedure**

These data come from a larger study that included survey and focus group data collection with teens and focus group data collection with school personnel. In this article, we report on the teacher focus group data; the student data have been published in another article (Edwards, Rodenhizer-Stämpfli, Eckstein, 2015). We requested that school administrators (e.g., principal) working with us to coordinate the project invite individuals at their school who were familiar with DV and SV among; we also specifically requested that individuals in several positions (e.g., social worker, counselor, health teacher) be invited to participate in the focus groups. Following written informed consent, school personnel participated in a semistructured focus group that included questions to ascertain situations of DV, SV, and SH in
which school personnel had the opportunity to help. Specifically, participants were first asked to describe instances of DV, SV, and SH among teens at their school that they have heard about or seen; we asked these questions initially to get school personnel thinking about these topics. As school personnel described these instances, follow-up questions were asked to gauge how school personnel responded to these instances; we asked school personnel to speak about their own reactions/responses as well as the reaction and responses of other school personnel. Although we did not explicitly ask school personnel about barriers to bystander action in teen DV, SV, and SH situations, these topics came up in all focus groups.

We conducted one focus group in each of the three schools, for a total of three focus groups. The three focus groups ranged in size from six to eight individuals ($M = 7.33$, $SD = 1.80$) and lasted approximately 48.32 min ($SD = 19.88$ min, range: 26.37-65.11 min). Focus groups were audio-recorded. A research assistant (RA) transcribed the audio recordings verbatim with the exception of removing identifying information; a second RA checked the accuracy of the transcription.

**Analysis Plan**

The data were analyzed by using thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thematic analysis has been defined as a “method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 7). NVivo was used to facilitate the coding process. To increase credibility and validity of the analyses, the first and second author completed all steps of the coding detailed below and the third author participated in some of the discussion throughout the process in addition to reading all of the transcripts. Consistent with the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), we first read through the transcripts several times to immerse ourselves in, and obtain the gestalt of, the data. Second, we met on several occasions to discuss and generate initial codes using inductive methods. Third, we again read through all of the transcripts and coded them using NVivo. Fourth, we engaged in another series of meetings to aggregate the codes into potential themes. Fifth, we reread all of the transcripts to ensure that the coding units and overarching themes were congruent with the data and refinements were made as needed. Unless otherwise noted, in order to quality as a theme, supporting data needed to be present in at least two of the three focus groups. Of note, as we summarize the qualitative findings below, we provided sample quotations which were modified slightly at times to enhance readability (e.g., removing “like” and “umm”). We also specify whether the quote comes from the rural school (School 1) or one of the two urban schools (Schools 2 and 3).
Results

Two overarching themes emerged: (a) Although school personnel desire to help teens in situations of DV and SV, there are a few barriers to helping and (b) school personnel help in a variety of ways before, during, and after situations of DV and SV among teens.

School Personnel Bystander Action

Although we did not have questions to specifically inquire about barriers to helping in situations of teen DV, SV, and SH, barriers were cited in all three focus groups. Two primary barriers were identified among personnel—(a) negative consequences of intervening and (b) inability and/or lack of time to help.

Negative impact. In all three schools, personnel reported concerns about the negative impact of intervening. At the rural school (School 1), these negative impacts centered around mandated reporting. For example, one individual said,

You want them to talk, but you say “before you talk and we want you to talk but what you tell me I am probably going to have to report it” . . . there is a challenge to get people to keep opening up to you because you usually have to tell them [that] you will have to report it.

Another individual from this same school said, “You never know what kind of information they’re going to share with you . . . I want to protect myself as well . . . and my teaching credentials . . . someone may twist it . . .”

At one of the urban schools (School 2), the negative impact of intervening revolved around not knowing the teens well enough or having the level of rapport necessary to intervene (which school personnel anticipated would also lead to a negative or nonimpactful outcome). Examples of this included, “It is two different worlds when I intervene with a kid I know and when I don’t,” “for teachers it depends on how comfortable you are [with the teens involved],” “the students that I know in the hallway I’m usually much more successful at intervening with them. But [if] I don’t know them at all and they are in some heated discussion, it usually just blows up in my face,” and “you have to have rapport [for the helping to be effective].”

At the other urban school (School 3), although there was less in-depth discussion about negative consequences, there was agreement among school personnel that perceptions of negative outcomes of helping could serve as a barrier, for example, “When you’ve got 80 people around you, you have to be
careful because if you make a stand there, it can spiral really quickly out of control.”

Inability and/or lack of ability to help. In addition to perceived negative outcomes of helping, school personnel at all three schools, but especially the urban schools (Schools 2 and 3), reported lacking skills to help with teen DV, SV, and SH and/or being overwhelmed with a number of other responsibilities that took priority over helping with teen DV, SV, and SH. One school personnel at the rural school (School 1) said,

Sometimes I [just don’t] have time to really get into a lot of those things, maybe not at that moment because I have people that pile up in the hallway, but [I will] jot their name down [and] get back to them later.

At one of the urban schools (School 3), not having the time and/or ability was evident in a number of responses, such as “This is way beyond my pay-grade and I don’t wanna screw up,” “If you respond to every little thing you would never be able to do your job,” and “It’s horrible to say, [but] you have to pick and choose your battles.”

Although not discussed in as much detail at the other urban school (School 2), there was group consensus (as evidenced by “right” and “that’s true”) to the comments “I’m not equipped to handle [teen DV] at all” and “[I can’t deal with that] while I’m trying to teach twenty-five other students”

School Personnel Bystander Action Behaviors

Despite barriers, school personnel identified ways in which they intervened to help teens before, during, and after situations of DV, SV, and SH, which were consistent across all three focus groups.

Bystander action before. School personnel discussed ways in which they take actions before instances of DV, SV, and SH in order to prevent them from happening in the first place. For example, at the rural school (School 1), individuals discussed how they “try to educate [teens] on healthy relationships” including education about “appropriate ways of communicating” and using “posters” and “handouts” to raise awareness about DV, SV, and SH. Although the urban schools engaged in less detailed discussions about prevention than the rural school, “brochures” to raise awareness about healthy relationships (School 1) and “talk with them” about resources for DV, SV, and SH (School 2) were mentioned as ways that school personnel engage in actions to prevent DV, SV, and SH.
Furthermore, at all of the schools, personnel mentioned that they encouraged teens to take action to prevent DV, SV, and SH: “I talk to my students [and say] ‘Do you stand up for things in the hallway?’” (School 3). At Schools 1 and 2, personnel said that they encouraged students to care about other students in their school. For example, at School 1, an individual said, “[Helping teens to build] that connection” and “[feel part of] a community.” At School 2, an individual discussed encouraging teens to bring about change among their peers: “The tide turned here [with] bullying [and it could happen for DV and SV] when you have a group of students that are taking the charge [to change norms] for themselves.”

**Bystander action during.** School personnel helped primarily by directly breaking up observed instances of DV (most often a couple engaging in verbal DV, and less commonly physical DV): “I’ve broken up fights before where it was me in between two people and all the kids just watched” (School 2). In response to witnessing DV, individuals at Schools 1 and 3 said that they “go up and say something right then and there . . . [but] usually the girl will stick up for the guy” (School 1), “[try] to get them to just calm down” (School 1), “[ask the teen] ‘Would you talk to your father [or] your mother like that?’” (School 3), and in response to teen punching his girlfriend in the face, the perpetrator “had to be restrained . . . [and the perpetrator] wouldn’t even respond to the female assistant principal [trying to de-escalate the situation]” (School 3).

**Bystander action after.** School personnel also reported that they offer guidance and education to victims, perpetrators, and friends of victims and perpetrators. Examples include “For the locker and wall punchers [who] come to see me for ice packs, I usually ask ‘what happened?’” (School 1), “[I] chatted with him. He won’t go to guidance. Because it’s a boy thing” (School 3), and “[A student will] tell you in confidence what is going on [and you] will talk to them” (School 2).

School personnel also discussed engaging parents and other school personnel, most commonly colleagues from the guidance office, as ways in which they try to help teens with DV and SV: “This is really heavy and I think you should talk to the student system program director or guidance” (School 3), “I get the parents” (School 2), “Students will talk to me [and I will say] ‘Let’s have a mission; I have another great resource in the school [who can help you’” (School 1).

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to examine school personnel’s bystander action in situations of DV, SV, and SH among teens. School personnel
identified two primary barriers to helping teens in situations of DV, SV, and SH, specifically concerns about the negative impact of intervening and not having the time or ability to help. These barriers are similar to what has been found in the bullying literature (Aceves, Hinshaw, Mendoza-Denton, & Page-Gould, 2009; Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Novick & Isaacs, 2010) and likely reflect school personnel’s lack of skills-based training in dealing with situations of DV, SV, and SH (Khubchandani et al., 2012). These data underscore the importance of school personnel workshops and trainings in order to reduce these barriers. For example, trainings could provide school personnel with specific strategies for intervening, especially in situations in which they do not know the teens very well and times when school personnel feel overwhelmed with other work-related responsibilities. It is also important that programming allow school personnel the opportunity to participate in role plays in light of research that teachers are more likely to engage in bystander action for bullying when they feel prepared to do so (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). Finally, although we did not directly measure school personnel’s attitudes toward DV, SV, and SH in this study, research suggests that teachers’ accepting attitudes toward bullying predict lower teacher bystander action (e.g., Hektner & Swenson, 2012). This, in conjunction with evidence from our focus groups that some school personnel lacked knowledge about DV, SV, and SH underscores the need for teacher training to address DV, SV, and SH myths and increase knowledge among school personnel about DV, SV, and SH.

Even in light of barriers, school personnel identified ways in which they have intervened to help teens in situations of DV, SV, and SH. It was promising that school personnel reported directly breaking up observed instances of DV, as this likely reduces the risk of serious harm or injury and models prosocial behavior to teens which they may be likely to emulate (Aceves et al., 2009). School personnel also reported that they offer guidance and education about DV, SV, and SH to victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, which appeared to be well received by teens based on school personnel’s perceptions. Nonetheless, this guidance and education is often limited to teens who voluntarily seek out the help of a guidance counselor or related school personnel, which research with teens suggests is generally a small proportion of teens (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2011).

School personnel also reported that they would often engage parents or other school personnel whom were better qualified to address DV, SV, and SH. Although this is a good practice, teens are likely to seek out specific school personnel and may not wish to be referred to another school personnel or parent. This further highlights the importance of increasing all school personnel’s awareness of, knowledge of, and skills to address DV and SV among teens. Furthermore, to date there are no quantitative measures that assess school personnel’s bystander action behaviors as well as school personnel’s
barriers to bystander action. The data in the current study could be used to inform the development of such measures, and indeed we are currently in the process of developing and evaluating such measures.

Even though these data provide important information on school personnel’s bystander actions in teens situations of DV, SV, and SH, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was relatively small; however, there was evidence of data saturation. Furthermore, the sample was ethnically and racially nondiverse, and future research would benefit from using larger and more diverse samples of school personnel. Tracy (2010) suggested eight criteria for excellent qualitative research. Based on her criteria, we acknowledge that our relatively small and nondiverse sample lessens the overall transferability and generalization of our findings.

Also, although the focus group format allowed for nuanced and detailed information on school personnel’s bystander action, some individuals may have felt uncomfortable sharing certain examples (e.g., bystander nonaction) in the presence of other individuals; thus, individual interviews may have been more appropriate than focus groups. It is also possible that school personnel who are the most engaged bystanders and those who are most invested in preventing DV, SV, and SH were more likely to attend the focus groups than individuals who are less engaged and less invested. Nevertheless, we encouraged school personnel to reflect not only on their own experiences but their perceptions of other school personnel’s experiences in their responses. Finally, we did not directly collect demographic information from participants and instead relied on researchers’ field notes and school demographic data.

Given their role as educators, school personnel are likely quite influential in shaping teens’ attitudes and behaviors, underscoring the importance of effective teacher bystander action in DV and SV prevention among teens. The current study provides insight into school personnel’s bystander behaviors and barriers to action in situations of teen DV, SV, and SH. The study highlights important directions for future research and bystander training, especially the importance of increasing school personnel’s efficacy to intervene appropriately and effectively in student situations of DV, SV, and SH. To our knowledge, no widely used, evidence-based DV and SV bystander prevention initiatives to date have been developed and evaluated for high school personnel. We hope these data encourage more dialogue and research on this understudied, yet critical, area of prevention.

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References


**Author Biographies**

**Katie M. Edwards**, PhD, is an assistant professor of psychology and women’s studies and faculty affiliate of Prevention Innovations Research Center and the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). Dr. Edwards’ interdisciplinary program of research focuses broadly on better understanding the causes and consequences of interpersonal violence, primarily intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault (SA) among adolescents and emerging adults. Dr. Edwards deeply values community partnerships, strong researcher and practitioner collaborations, and student engagement in all phases of the research.

**Kara Anne Rodenhizer**, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the social psychology program at the University of New Hampshire. Her research interests include: 1) Predictors of intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence (SV) perpetration; 2) IPV-related outcomes associated with exposure to sexually violent and sexually explicit media; 3) The role of the media in the sexual socialization of adolescents and emerging adults; and 4) Media literacy programming targeting portrayals of gendered violence in the media.

**Robert Eckstein**, PsyD, is a senior lecturer for the Department of Psychology and the Justice Studies Program, where he also serves as the Coordinator of Field Education. He is the co-author of *Bringing in the bystander: A Prevention Workshop for Establishing a Community of Responsibility*, an educational program aimed at implementing bystander intervention as a means of preventing violence against women.