

MEN CAN STOP RAPE: THE STRENGTH CAMPAIGN

HISTORY/OVERVIEW

In February 2001, Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR) launched the ongoing Strength Campaign—an “awareness-to-action” media education initiative seeking to prevent rape and other forms of dating violence among DC high school youth. Organized around the theme line “My Strength Is Not for Hurting,” the campaign attempted to educate young men about their role as allies with women in preventing dating violence; promote positive, non-violent models of male strength; and empower youth to take action to end dating violence, promote healthy relationships based on equality and respect, and create safer school communities. MCSR pursued these goals through the use of bus and bus shelter ads throughout the District of Columbia, posters in all DC public high schools, a mini-magazine for students created around campaign themes, guidebooks distributed to all school personnel, and the provision of “Safe and Strong” workshops by MCSR speakers to students in DC high schools.

The Strength Campaign offers four useful insights to school personnel and violence prevention advocates interested in encouraging young men to take a stand against dating violence:

- Reach out to young men as potential allies.
- Make the connection between teen dating violence and other related issues.
- Involve young men in the development of the campaign.
- Build sustained relationships with school personnel and school district administrators, value their input, and utilize their wisdom and access to maximize the effectiveness of Campaign implementation.

Young men as potential allies: In developing the Strength Campaign, MCSR staff was guided by the belief that efforts to end men’s violence need to redefine what it means to be a strong man. Through the campaign, MCSR has attempted to mobilize young men to take a public stand against dating violence by offering the message that men can be strong without being violent. Co-Director Jonathan Stillerman puts it this way, “Sometimes when we talk about redefining masculinity, we throw the baby out with the bath water and decide that everything about traditional notions of manhood is bad and wrong. What that means is that you throw things out like strength, like assertiveness, like courage.” He goes on to articulate what MCSR has done differently, “The Strength Campaign . . . frames men’s capacity to have healthy, respectful, compassionate relationships as strength. One of the posters says, *‘My strength is not for hurting, so when I wasn’t sure how she felt, I asked.’* It’s not telling young men to stop some bad behavior. Instead, it is fostering a different way of relating.” He argues that the Strength Campaign attempts to “recreate social norms among young men so that they will feel more empowered to take a stand against men’s violence and to speak openly about respecting women and girls.”

Making connections with related issues: While focused on ending rape and other forms of dating violence, MCSR is among a growing number of organizations that make the connection between men’s violence against women and girls and a range of other

social problems. They argue that all of these public health problems are linked to common social norms and gender roles that encourage young men to prove their masculinity by engaging in high-risk behaviors. They support this contention by pointing to recent focus group findings from the Washington DC area, which make clear the influence of such social norms: 84% of DC public school students report an experience of sexual harassment by another student (Young Women's Project); 80% of boys ages 11-18 describe violence as a very important challenge in their lives; 57% of boys admit to not always using condoms because they do not really care if they get someone pregnant and many report not using family planning services because they are "too female"; 66% of boys cite peer pressure to have sex or be seen as a "player"; more than 25% of high school-age boys report having used alcohol or drugs before their last sexual experience; only 28% of boys ages 11-18 report frequent discussions with their parents about sex; 46% of parents with boys ages 11-18 talk to their child about sex compared to almost 70% of parents with girls of similar ages. Not surprisingly, boys in DC often want an older boy or man to talk to about sexual issues (In Our Own Words, DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001).

MCSR staff contends that making these connections was critical to the success of the campaign, saying, "The Summit Fund of Washington funded the campaign specifically as an effort to reduce teen pregnancies. They understood the connections between traditional notions of masculinity, risky sexual practices and teen pregnancy and fatherhood."

Involving young men in the development of the campaign: To ensure that the campaign images would resonate with young men's experiences, MCSR held a series of focus groups throughout the DC area. Three findings stand out: Firstly, as Co-Director Patrick Lemmon recalls, "One of the biggest things we found is that they didn't want to see people alone. They wanted to see groups of men. The comments suggested a fear that, 'if I speak out, if I change in this way, I will be alone.'" Secondly, the responses "from both young men and young women suggest that there was something powerful for young men about relationships and in seeing young men and women on the posters interacting." Thirdly, MCSR discovered that, "students had a hard time getting beyond their own homophobia," when the image used on a poster was of two young men standing side by side. Ultimately, MCSR replaced the image of two young men with a photo of four soccer players from the DC United professional soccer team. Jonathan Stillerman describes having a difficult time with the decision, saying, "We struggled because we didn't want to condone or promote young people's homophobia. That would be contrary to the goal of our work. But at the same time we didn't want them to be so distracted by homophobia that they missed the overarching message of the Campaign."

Building sustained relationships with school personnel and the school district: In explaining their success, MCSR staff stress the importance of building connections—to school staff, to other school-based initiatives, and to other programs working in the schools. Prior to launching the Strength Campaign, MCSR had worked hard to build relationships with individual schools, the school district, and school personnel. One of the first tasks was to receive approval from the DC Public Schools (DCPS)

Superintendent, Dr. Paul Vance. A number of people were especially important in securing this endorsement, including the Assistant Superintendent for DCPS Senior High Schools; the Program Director of the HIV/AIDS Education Program, and the Content Specialist for Health and Physical Education. When the campaign launched, a formal letter of endorsement from Superintendent Vance appeared in the Strength Campaign Handbook: A Guide for Faculty and Staff, hailing the Strength Campaign as "instrumental" in accomplishing the objectives of the Peaceable Schools Initiative.

Along with approval from the District Administration, MCSR needed and received invaluable support from those in the trenches—teachers, counselors, nurses, coaches, change-facilitators, and other faculty and staff. Because MCSR conducted awareness-to-action workshops in the majority of the DC public high schools prior to launching the campaign, the organization invited key faculty and staff with whom they already had contact to serve as members of the campaign's advisory committee. According to Stillerman, "Establishing the advisory committee opened doors and sent the message that MCSR valued the input and insights of teachers." The committee—comprised of 21 faculty, staff, and administrative officials, each representing at least one of the 17 DC public senior high schools—served a number of functions. Members not only advised MCSR staff about the content of the campaign's guidebook for faculty and staff, but also helped to devise strategies for the campaign's implementation, and served as in-school contacts. In other words, they were the people who brought the campaign to their individual schools—working with their principals, distributing the materials, coordinating the scheduling of Safe and Strong workshops, planning campaign-related events, and serving as consultants on behalf of their colleagues. All the members of the committee were committed to improving their school environment, and their commitment was vital to the success of the Strength Campaign.

Gaining national and international attention: There are many indications of the Strength Campaign's success. First and foremost, 85% of students who participated in the pre- and post-campaign survey described the campaign's messages as important to them, and more than 80% reported that the campaign both increased their confidence in preventing dating violence and taught them new ways to have healthy relationships. In addition, the response from allies outside Washington, DC has been overwhelming. Since its launch, more than 215 local, regional, and national organizations have purchased campaign posters and REP Magazines, creating a nationwide and international presence. In less than two years, MCSR has sold and distributed more than 12,000 posters and 1,000 REP Magazines across 47 states and 6 countries. Feedback from across the country about the campaign materials has been overwhelmingly positive, as is suggested by the following comments from Sharlynn Daun-Barnett, from the Sexual Assault Treatment Center in Milwaukee, WI: "This summer a colleague gave me a copy of Men Can Stop Rape's REP Magazine. I was immediately impressed with the positive and empowering campaign messages. . . . The campaign broadens the definition of male strength to include emotional sensitivity and self-control. This fall, I incorporated the Strength Campaign posters into my classroom workshops. The posters are a springboard to do role-plays of healthy sexual communication. Thank you for helping young men to respect women and work to end sexual violence." Because the response to the campaign

has been so favorable, MCSR is expanding and redesigning its materials for a national launch next year.

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