

## **MENTORS IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION (MVP) BY JACKSON KATZ**

### **HISTORY/OVERVIEW**

The Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Model is a gender violence, bullying, and school violence prevention approach that encourages young men and women from all socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds to take on leadership roles in their schools and communities. The training is focused on an innovative "bystander" model that empowers each student to take an active role in promoting a positive school climate. The heart of the training consists of role-plays intended to allow students to construct and practice viable options in response to incidents of harassment, abuse, or violence before, during, or after the fact. Students learn that there is not simply "one way" to confront violence, but that each individual can learn valuable skills to build their personal resolve and to act when faced with difficult or threatening life situations.

The MVP Model originated in 1993, with the creation of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Program at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society. With initial funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the multi-racial MVP Program was designed to train male college and high school student-athletes and other student leaders to use their status to speak out against rape, battering, sexual harassment, gay-bashing, and all forms of sexist abuse and violence. A female component was added in the second year with the complementary principle of training female student-athletes and others to be leaders on these issues.

Why the initial focus on working with student-athletes? Ever since battered women's programs and rape crisis centers established their first educational or "youth outreach" initiatives in the schools in the 1970's, one of the key challenges they have faced is the apathy, defensiveness—and sometimes outright hostility—of male athletic directors, coaches, and student-athletes. While men and young men in the school-based athletic subculture have hardly been unique in their reluctance to embrace gender violence prevention education, they typically occupy a privileged position in school culture, and particularly in male peer culture. As such, male student-athletes—especially in popular team sports such as football, basketball, hockey, baseball, wrestling, and soccer—tend to have enormous clout when it comes to establishing or maintaining traditional masculine norms. Their support or lack of support for prevention efforts can make or break them.

For the past decade, the *MVP Model* has been utilized by the parent *MVP Program* at Northeastern University, as well as by dozens of other schools and school systems in Massachusetts, Iowa, Colorado, Washington, and elsewhere. It has been implemented in hundreds of educational settings with diverse school-based populations of boys and girls, men and women, working together and in single-sex formats. It is important to note that although it began in the sports culture, and retains some sports terminology, by the mid-1990's MVP had moved from a near-exclusive focus on the athletic world to general populations of high school and college students, and other institutional settings.

## **FOCUS ON BYSTANDERS**

MVP utilizes a creative “bystander” approach to gender violence and bullying prevention. It focuses on young men not as perpetrators or potential perpetrators, but as empowered *bystanders* who can confront abusive peers—and support abused ones. It focuses on young women not as victims or potential targets of harassment, rape and abuse, but as empowered bystanders who can support abused peers—and confront abusive ones. In this model, a “bystander” is defined as a family member, friend, classmate, teammate, co-worker—anyone who is embedded in a family, school, social, or professional relationship with someone who might in some way be abusive, or experiencing abuse.

The heart of the model is interactive discussion, in single-sex and mixed-gender classes and workshops, using real-life scenarios that speak to the experiences of young men and women in high school, college, and other areas of social life. The chief curricular innovation of MVP is a training tool called the Playbook, which consists of a series of realistic scenarios depicting abusive male (and sometimes female) behavior. The Playbook—with separate versions for boys/men and girls/women—transports participants into scenarios as witnesses to actual or potential abuse, then challenges them to consider a number of concrete options for intervention before, during, or after an incident.

Many people mistakenly believe that they have only two options in instances of actual or potential violence: intervene physically and possibly expose themselves to personal harm, or do nothing. As a result, they often choose to do nothing.

But intervening physically or doing nothing are not the only possible choices. The MVP Model seeks to provide bystanders with numerous options, most of which carry no risk of personal injury. With more options to choose from, people are more likely to respond and not be passive and silent about—and hence complicit in—violence or abuse by others. Many young men and women, and people in U.S. society in general, have been socialized to be passive bystanders in the face of sexist abuse and violence. This conditioning is reflected in the oft-heard statement that a situation “between a man and a woman” is “none of my business.”

One historical antecedent of this belief is the English common law doctrine that a man’s home is his castle, and that family matters are properly confined to the domestic sphere. MVP sessions can only begin to explore this and some of the other deeply rooted cultural characteristics that contribute to bystander “apathy.” But one of the crucial aspects of MVP discussions—which are typically interactive and animated—is that focusing on specific cases of abuse can often lead to open, wide-ranging discussions about masculinity, femininity, gender relations, abuses of power and conformist behavior.

In single-sex sessions, racially diverse groups of young men and women discuss such questions as: why do some guys seek to control their girlfriends through force or intimidation? Why do some guys sexually assault girls? How do cultural definitions of manhood contribute to sexual and domestic violence and other sexist behaviors? How do

cultural definitions of womanhood contribute to women's victimization—or their resistance to same?

But the focus always goes back to the bystanders. For example, why do some young men make it clear that they won't accept that sort of behavior from their peers, while others remain silent? How is the silence of peers understood by abusers? What are some of the informal policing mechanisms in male peer culture that keep young men from speaking out about these issues? In female culture? What message is conveyed to victims when the abuser's friends don't confront him? On a related note, why do some heterosexually identified men harass and beat up gay men? Does the accompanying silence on the part of some of their heterosexual peers—male and female—legitimize the abuse? Why or why not?

Unlike prevention efforts that target young men as perpetrators or potential perpetrators, MVP has the potential to expand dramatically the number of young men willing to confront the issue of men's violence against women. This is a result of the MVP philosophy of working *with* men as empowered bystanders—not *against* them as potential perpetrators. This positive approach has the effect of reducing men's defensiveness around the discussion of these issues, which provides the basis for the emergence of more proactive and preventive responses.

At the same time, the focus on girls and women as empowered bystanders—not victims, potential victims or survivors—can give them fresh new ideas about how to be supportive to their peers, as well as help inspire them to be leaders in their peer culture, as well as with younger girls.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

The MVP Model can be utilized in numerous educational settings. The MVP playbooks and trainer's guides are customizable for diverse populations of students. Currently, materials are available for high school boys and girls. In some cases, these materials can be used with middle-school students as well. (MVP classes and workshops with middle school students are typically conducted by MVP mentors who are high school students.)

### **Training of Trainers: High Schools**

MVP trainers at Northeastern University or in Jackson Katz's Long Beach, CA-based organization MVP Strategies conduct intensive, on-site, two-day trainings of trainers with high school personnel, including teachers, coaches, counselors, administrators, public safety staff, parents, and others. The highly interactive trainings introduce the participants to the MVP philosophy and teaching/mentoring methods. Participants are given the opportunity to lead mock MVP playbook sessions with their fellow trainees.

Once the high school personnel receive the MVP Strategies training, they should be prepared to implement MVP with their students in the following ways:

- They can recruit a cadre of sophomores and juniors—boys and girls—with existing or developing leadership ability. This group of prospective MVP "mentors" should be from a number of different peer groups and social cliques,

representing a cross-section of the school population. Once the students have applied for participation in the program and received parental approval, the trained school personnel can hold a one- or two-day retreat in the spring or summer to introduce MVP, teach the students how to use the materials, and lead small-group discussions based on the MVP playbook. This retreat can be followed by weekly or bi-weekly educational sessions for several months. The goal of these trainings is to prepare the mentors to facilitate interactive discussions in the fall with incoming 9th grade students, using the MVP playbook. (This is currently the most popular model being used in several high schools in Jefferson County, Colorado.)

PLEASE NOTE: MVP mentors are not expected to be subject-matter experts on gender violence or bullying prevention. Their training prepares them to facilitate discussions on these issues with other students. The most important role they play is to provide younger students—and their peers—with the space to talk about important day-to-day issues, like how to be supportive friends, how to respond to incidents of actual or potential abuse or harassment, what to do about threats or rumors about school violence, and how to create a student-powered, positive and harassment-free school climate.

- School personnel who have completed the MVP training of trainers can lead one-time or multiple MVP sessions with athletic teams, student government leaders, members of various student organizations, or other formal or informal groups. Student mentors can present/facilitate with these groups as well.

### **Evaluation**

Implementation of the MVP Model has been formally evaluated in various institutional settings, including several high schools, college campuses and the United States Marine Corps. The high school/middle school version is currently being systematically evaluated in several schools, although there is a wealth of anecdotal and qualitative evidence for its effectiveness. The standard MVP evaluation is a pre- and post-test that measures attitudes and behaviors that relate to the role of bystanders in creating and sustaining peer culture climates that discourage abusive behavior and reward pro-social, proactive responses to situations of harm or potential harm.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

One of the most important lessons learned in ten years of MVP is the need for early buy-in and follow-through on the part of key administrators and faculty. MVP trainers can come from outside of the school and provide interesting and rich learning experiences for students, in the course of a few days or over a period of weeks. But for the MVP Model to truly transform a school climate, educators need to be committed to training a new cadre of student mentors each year, and provide them with the on-going support they need.

One way to achieve this buy-in is to invite key athletic personnel, administrators, and teachers to participate in an MVP training of trainers as early in the process as possible. This training can be framed positively as a leadership training. By defining the issues of

gender violence and bullying prevention as *leadership* issues for educators as well as students, it is possible to garner the support of a broader spectrum of male—and female—allies and supporters than has been common to date.

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