

# ENGAGING BYSTANDERS TO PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## Bulletin

*Sexual violence is any type of unwanted sexual contact. Sexual violence affects men, women, and children, at any age in their lives regardless of their gender expression or sexuality. This can include words or actions of a sexual nature without a person's consent or against someone who is unable to give consent due to age, disability, illness, or the influence of drugs and alcohol. A person who perpetrates sexual violence might use force, threats, manipulation or coercion to commit sexual violence (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2010). Our cultural attitudes, beliefs, and social norms can influence or promote the decision to engage in these acts.*

Sexual violence affects everyone: individuals, families, communities, and the larger society. While some forms of sexual violence – such as sexist and sexually violent jokes, comments about someone's appearance, sexual orientation or gender identity, catcalling, sexually explicit comments, and vulgar gestures – might not be illegal, this does not make them less threatening or harmful to the person victimized. All of these behaviors contribute to a culture that accepts sexual violence. Bystanders can speak up when they witness these actions in order to promote safety, respectful relationships, and safer communities. Sexual violence can be prevented.

Many opportunities exist in daily life where you can prevent behaviors that

### **Social norms**

Norms help shape behavior. They shape our attitudes, beliefs and standards of what behavior is considered OK and not OK (Davis, Parks, & Cohen, 2010).

promote sexual violence. Research has shown that, on average, third parties (individuals who are neither the victims<sup>1</sup> nor the perpetrators of violence) prevented injuries in 1.2 million violent victimizations annually between 1993 and 1999 (Planty, 2002). We use the term “bystander” to describe these third parties.

You, as a community member, play a critical role in preventing sexual violence by establishing healthy

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this document, the terms “victim” and “survivor” are used interchangeably to be inclusive of the various ways people who have experienced sexual violence might identify.



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and positive relationships that are based on respect, safety, and equality. Everyone can play an active role in stopping sexual violence before it occurs by becoming engaged bystanders. Many studies have shown that bystander intervention programs are effective in changing participant's attitudes and willingness to intervene (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Cissner, 2009; Coker et al., 2011; Potter, 2012). This document provides practical tips for community members on how to be an engaged bystander in sexual violence prevention.

### **What is an engaged bystander?**

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An engaged bystander is someone who intervenes before, during, or after a situation when they see or hear behaviors that promote sexual violence. It is common for people to witness situations where someone makes an inappropriate sexual comment or innuendo, tells a joke about rape, or touches someone in a sexual manner. Bystanders might also witness other forms of sexual violence. Bystanders who witness the behavior or hear the comment can intervene in a positive way that will help create a safer environment.

### **When and how to intervene**

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You can be an engaged bystander in many ways to help promote healthy, respectful relationships that are free of sexual violence. The social norms that contribute to accepting sexual violence in our society are norms that glorify power over others, objectify women, tolerate violence and aggression, promote male dominance, and foster notions of privacy to the point of secrecy about sexual violence (Davis et

### **Rape myths**

Rape myths are stereotypes, attitudes, and beliefs about rape, survivors, and perpetrators that are false, but are held to be true. Research has shown that bystander prevention programs can produce positive results by increasing participants' knowledge of sexual violence, decreasing participant's acceptance of rape myths, and increasing the likelihood that they will intervene as an engaged bystander (Banyard et al., 2007). When you become an engaged bystander, you help create healthy communities and help others build safe and respectful environments by discouraging victim blaming, changing social norms that accept sexual violence, and shifting the responsibility to prevent sexual violence to all community members (Tabachnick, 2009).

al., 2010). Other negative social norms include children shown in a sexual way and adults' misuse and abuse of power over children. Changing social norms can decrease sexual violence in a community (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). When you decide to interrupt social norms that perpetuate sexual violence in our culture, you are acting as an engaged bystander.

Every situation is different and there is no universal response when intervening to prevent sexual violence. Safety is vital in deciding when and how to respond to sexual violence. Every person must decide for



themselves the safest and most effective way to become an engaged bystander. Here are ideas on how you can maintain safety while being an engaged bystander:

- When you witness sexual violence, get support from people around you; you do not have to act alone.
- Contact your local community-based sexual assault center to see if they offer resources or training on bystander intervention. You can find your local program by contacting your state, territory,

or tribal sexual violence prevention coalition. Visit [www.nsvrc.org/organizations/state-and-territory-coalitions](http://www.nsvrc.org/organizations/state-and-territory-coalitions) for coalition contact information.

- Practice with friends and family about what you would say and how you would say it.
- When intervening, be respectful, direct, and honest.
- If you see or hear something and you do not feel safe, contact such authorities as the police, Child Protective Services, or Adult Protective Services.

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## Examples of bystander intervention

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How would you intervene in the following scenarios?

### IN YOUR COMMUNITY

**Q: You are going home from work using public transportation. You see someone sitting on a bench reading a magazine being watched by someone nearby. You see that the stares are making the person feel uncomfortable. What can you do?**

**A:** You can go sit next to the person or place yourself in between the two people to block the stares.

### IN ONLINE SPACES

**Q: After reading an online article about someone who was sexually assaulted, you notice a comment that someone posted implying that the person deserved to get raped because of how they were dressed and how much they had to drink. What do you do?**

**A:** You can respond to the comment by expressing that sexual assault is never survivors' fault. It does not matter what clothes they were wearing or how much they had to drink. The responsibility lies with people who choose to commit sexual violence, not the actions of survivors.

### WITH YOUR FRIENDS

**Q: You're at a bar with your friends, and one of them starts flirting with someone. You can tell that the other person is not interested, but your friend will not leave them alone. What do you do?**

**A:** You can approach your friend and start a conversation to distract them from the disinterested person.



### IN SCHOOL

**Q: You are in the lunch room with your friends, and a group of students nearby start making sexual gestures and comments to one of your friends. Your friend tries to ignore the comments, but you see that he or she is upset. What do you do?**

**A:** You can tell the group making the comments to stop sexually harassing your friend. You could ask your friend if he or she wants to leave and tell a teacher or principal about the harassment.



they listed. The resources below provide helpful language and information on healthy sexuality and healthy relationships:

- **Planned Parenthood Federation of America:**  
[www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/talking-kids-about-sex-sexuality-37962.htm](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/talking-kids-about-sex-sexuality-37962.htm)

- **Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States:**  
[www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=632&nodeID=1](http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=632&nodeID=1)

### WITH CHILDREN

**Q: You are a chaperone on a school field trip and you see one of the other chaperones hugging and touching a group of children. You can see that this is making some of the children uncomfortable. What do you do?**

**A:** You can ask the person directly to stop their behavior, or stay close to the children who are being targeted. Afterward, talk with a teacher or other school official and address what you saw. Bring up your concerns about appropriate boundaries and potential child sexual abuse.

### WITH ADULTS IN LATER LIFE

**Q: You care for your parent in your home. While you are at work, you have a nurse care for your parent. One day you arrive home early and you overhear the nurse making sexual jokes and innuendos to your parent. What do you do?**

**A:** Approach the nurse and tell him or her not to talk to your parent like that. Call the nurse's employer to inform them that this behavior is sexual harassment, and you expect it to be dealt with accordingly. Other options include calling Adult Protective Services or a government official in your state.

### AT A SPORTING EVENT

**Q: You are at your child's football game and you overhear one of the parents yelling at the team to stop playing like girls. What do you do?**

**A:** Talk with the parent who is yelling at the children. Say that you don't think it is appropriate to make comments like that. You can inform them that your daughter just made the varsity team at her school.

### WITH YOUR TEENAGE CHILD

**Q: Your teenager has started his or her first romantic relationship. You would like to make sure that he or she is in a healthy relationship. What do you do?**

**A:** Sit down with your teenager and talk about what a healthy relationship means to them. Ask if their partner exhibits the traits that

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## WITH YOUR COWORKERS

**Q: You overhear a female supervisor say that she wishes her boyfriend had a butt like that of a male employee she supervises. What do you do?**

**A:** You can talk with your supervisor directly or follow the steps to report the incident based on your workplace's sexual harassment policy.

## WITH YOUR FAMILY

**Q: You are watching a crime show on television with your mother, and a story comes on about someone being raped by a friend. Your mother makes a comment that the victim is lying because the victim and the perpetrator were friends. What do you do?**

**A:** Inform your mother that many victims are raped by friends, family, or someone the victim knows.

### Checklist for being an engaged bystander

- ✓ Am I aware there is a problem or that someone needs help?
- ✓ What are my options?
- ✓ Can I keep myself safe?
- ✓ Can I call on others for help?
- ✓ What are the costs and benefits for me taking action?
- ✓ What action should I take?
- ✓ Do Something!

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More scenarios are available on NSVRC's website at [www.nsvrc.org/saam/bystander-resources](http://www.nsvrc.org/saam/bystander-resources). Submit your stories about how you are an engaged bystander to [www.nsvrc.org/projects/bystander/share-your-stories](http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/bystander/share-your-stories).

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## Resources

For more information on this topic and tips on how to be an engaged bystander, check out the following resources:

### WEBSITES

#### Bringing in the Bystander®

[www.unh.edu/preventioninnovations/index.cfm?ID=BCC7DE31-CE05-901F-0EC95D-F7AB5B31F1](http://www.unh.edu/preventioninnovations/index.cfm?ID=BCC7DE31-CE05-901F-0EC95D-F7AB5B31F1)

#### Child Welfare Information Gateway State Child Abuse Reporting Numbers

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl\\_dsp.cfm?rs\\_id=5&rate\\_chno=11-11172](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?rs_id=5&rate_chno=11-11172)

#### Green Dot

[www.livethegreendot.com](http://www.livethegreendot.com)

#### Hollaback!

[www.ihollaback.org](http://www.ihollaback.org)

#### Know Your Power®

[www.know-your-power.org](http://www.know-your-power.org)



**MyStrength Campaign**

[www.mystrength.org](http://www.mystrength.org)

**National Adult Protective Services Association**

[www.napsa-now.org/get-help/help-in-your-area](http://www.napsa-now.org/get-help/help-in-your-area)

**National Sexual Violence Resource Center  
Bystander Intervention Resources**

[www.nsvrc.org/projects/bystander-intervention-resources](http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/bystander-intervention-resources)

**That's Not Cool**

[www.thatnotcool.com](http://www.thatnotcool.com)

**The Red Flag Campaign**

[www.theredflagcampaign.org](http://www.theredflagcampaign.org)

**MOBILE APPS**

**Hollaback!** (2012). Hollaback!

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**The Line Campaign.** (2012). Circle of 6

[Mobile application software.] Retrieved from [www.circleof6app.com](http://www.circleof6app.com)

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For more information, contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center at 877-739-3895 or visit <http://tinyurl.com/ofrw5v2>

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