
INTRODUCTION

Be Strong is an asset-based, development program for young women that builds on concepts of womanhood, respect, and positive relationships as a strategy for health promotion and violence prevention. This program has been developed by Peace Over Violence, a social services/social change organization committed to ending violence in relationships, families, and communities. For more than 20 years, Peace Over Violence has recognized the need for a curriculum that helps young at-risk women negotiate the challenges of womanhood while simultaneously addressing the prevention of violence in their lives. Be Strong, like Peace Over Violence, helps young women define and discover the kind of women they want to be while developing protective factors against violence and other unhealthy behaviors, as well as refusal skills in the face of negative influences. It also provides a forum for young women to connect to each other, honor themselves, and create healthy relationships.

Young women at the greatest risk for unhealthy behaviors and violence benefit greatly when they develop practical skills that maintain a healthy mind, body and spirit, promote healthy relationships, and encourage their participation in the larger community. Be Strong is based on a social ecological model that builds the resiliency and self-esteem of young women from the inside out: from the individual level, to relationships, to the community, to society. Each module highlights one of these core empowerment areas and builds on the previous module to reinforce practical skills and empower young women by celebrating diversity and acknowledging a continual pursuit for equality in complex lives.

In the Be Strong curriculum, empowerment is used as the strategy for preventing domestic, dating, and sexual violence among young women. This is what is unique about Be Strong. It helps young women shape healthy views of themselves and promotes healthy female bonding while strengthening their capacity to take control of their lives and refuse unhealthy behaviors. During this process, they begin to view themselves as positive role models for their peers, siblings, and communities.

Empowerment Modules

Each empowerment module contains activities that enhance developmental assets and provides practical tools for self-discovery, critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making. Each section guides Be Strong participants to challenge existing social norms and to develop their own positive, unique voices.

- 1. Individual Module:** Be Strong begins by asking each participant to look inward. The goal of this module is to encourage the intellectual and creative development of the mind, protection and acceptance of the body, and growth of the spirit, which connects each of us to our humanity. The broader, practical thinking herein is for young women to know the core of themselves before they know someone else.
- 2. Relationships Module:** Be Strong understands that healthy relationships are central to humanity and life. An understanding of our humanity builds empathy and compassion, which in turn supports our desire for positive human connections while reducing our capacity to harm one another. This module focuses on three major relationship types for young women: family, friends, and intimate partners. Knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors explored within these contexts will assist young women as they develop public and professional relationships as well. Activities challenge participants to understand and practice healthy relationship patterns while developing the necessary skills to maintain distance from unhealthy people and situations.

3. Community Module: Be Strong helps young women understand the importance of community – as a physical place as well as a locus of collective being – and their role within their various communities. Participants identify their connection to healthy communities of sisters, as well as their connection to various political, socio-economic, and ethnic communities. Through a focus on community, Be Strong allows young women to identify their sense of belonging to, responsibility toward, and influence upon the world around them.

4. Society Module: Finally, Be Strong recognizes that a key element to young women’s empowerment is in understanding how sexism can limit women’s full participation in society; if sexism and its supporting structures of misogyny and patriarchy did not exist, organizations such as Peace Over Violence would not be needed. These organizations have historically and continually responded to issues of rape, harassment, and battery. Be Strong gives young women space to critically examine gender roles (from an historical and from an evolving perspective), social norms, and the role that media plays in shaping and defining women’s roles in society.

Ultimately, Be Strong guides participants into planning for their future from a place of introspection (individual module), support and connection (relationships module), greater sisterhood and understanding of diverse experiences (community module) so that they may positively contribute to and participate in the larger society (society module).

How Be Strong was Developed

Be Strong was developed in Los Angeles, California with urban youth in the public school settings and piloted at eight different sites from 2007 to 2009. Our youth participants were primarily Latina and African American, ages 15 to 18, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The program was piloted as part of counseling/student services at seven school campuses and as an after school program at one school site. However, despite its very urban roots, Be Strong can be used with almost any population of young women with simple modifications made by the facilitators which reflect alternate/isolated communities such as rural, mono-lingual or immigrant, church groups, or incarcerated young women. Be Strong has been evaluated by Harder and Company Community Research. Key Evaluation findings show positive assets increased and attitudes improved in participants through a post-survey and key informant interviews. See Appendix for complete evaluation findings.

Who is the Audience for this Curriculum?

Be Strong is designed for use with young women who are open to and would benefit from information and education that will provide a context for personal empowerment and a greater understanding of structural issues that can hinder positive development. This curriculum works best when group participants are able to share individual thoughts and opinions and can process the presented content together. This may mean that the facilitator is mindful of manageability including considerations of group size, levels of development, maturity, and shared experiences.

Successful Implementation

Much of the success of this curriculum will rest in the facilitator’s skill and ability to interact with participants in group settings. Facilitators should view the curriculum as a guide, so please embellish or shorten sections when appropriate. Feel free to modify activities so that they become specific to particular groups of participants. Incorporate into unit presentations any current events that are pertinent and illustrate a point of discussion. Personality is a plus. Be anecdotal. Allow the participants to be anecdotal. Give them the latitude to go off track if it is significant to the topic and to the rest of the group. Facilitators should know when to pull back and let the group interact while remaining in control. Finally, facilitators should keep in mind that the participants’ will not absorb everything offered in such a short time, but the first step toward empowerment is to raise awareness through exposure to these ideas.

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EDUCATE
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HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM

Small groups

This curriculum works best in a group of six to ten (6-10) young women who have a dedicated commitment to completing the group sessions.

Sessions

This curriculum is divided into four (4) modules, with three (3) subsections each. Each subsection has three to four activities. The curriculum was developed for each activity to be delivered in approximately 30-minute increments. However, the curriculum's modular design allows activities to be combined to accommodate time constraints of various settings.

Facilitation

Facilitators are suggested to read the module introduction and the subsection before introducing the activities to the group in order to adequately prepare for the activities and provide the materials listed in each activity description.

Check in/Wrap-up

Each session can begin with a Check in wherein each person briefly describes her present state of being (with or without names, depending on whether the participants know each other). Check in is a simple assessment of how each participant is feeling. Within Be Strong, a suggested topic is attached to each Check in. This step assists with group management and establishing a central theme for each session. Facilitators should be aware that the young women might bring real world stressors into each of their Be Strong sessions. Wrap-ups are centered on the lessons from that Be Strong session while also transitioning to the next session. The facilitator has the option to facilitate a wrap-up discussion or allow young women to write in their journals. Both options require the young women to take a moment and focus inward and reflect on the lessons learned. Both Check in and Wrap-up moments are critical to developing safe discussion space and group connectivity.

Safe Space

The facilitator has the challenge of creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere for sharing and bonding. Group discussions may unearth sensitive issues and participants may make disclosures or comments that are frank representations of how they feel. There are those who may not make any comments at all. While the facilitator's

goal is to get participants to talk openly and honestly about their experiences and opinions, you must stay focused, not register any shock, and keep the discussion moving along, reminding the participants of the Group Agreements when necessary (see below).

Group Agreements

One way to create a space that encourages respectful participation and expression is to come up with a list of group agreements that set the tone for productive communication and sharing. Establish some group agreements before presenting. The following are suggested group agreements:

- **Listen**
Have participants agree to listen to one another.
- **Take turns**
Identify a process for the order of speaking; this can be with raised hands or by passing an item like a fuzzy ball, stuffed animal, or "talking" stick, when possessed, the holder may then speak. Ordering of speakers ensures that everyone who wishes to speak will be called upon and heard.
- **Respect**
Have young women agree to not put down, or ridicule, each other's input or responses. They should agree to show respect for each other as well as for the facilitator, including:
 - + No name calling, or use of inflammatory or negative expressions.
 - + No eye rolling or showing disdain when others talk.
 - + Be considerate of others.
 - + Be patient.
- **Time-out**
Have young women agree that the facilitator reserves the right to intervene and call a time-out when necessary and remind participants of the group agreements.
- **Agree to disagree**
Because of the diverse cultural, political, and religious views expressed within the sessions, when discussion turns to debate, the women should be reminded that one view point is no more or less valid than another and that it is okay to disagree and move on.

Other group agreements can be solicited from the participants to set the tone for the activities. All of the group agreements can be put in the form of a contract that can be passed around the room for each student to sign. By involving young women in establishing the Group Agreements, the facilitator is engaging the students in the practice of conflict resolution even before they begin the violence prevention curriculum. The key to getting teens to talk openly and honestly is to make them feel that they can speak without being condemned or ridiculed. The group agreements can be instrumental in establishing such an environment.

Limits of Confidentiality

Although the goal of the group is to encourage personal sharing in safe and confidential environment, it is important that the facilitator be aware of limits of confidentiality as it regards to child abuse, suicidality, and duty to warn, or any other state-specific mandates. It is imperative that the facilitator disclose all of the limits of confidentiality as it applies to group participation and personal disclosures. For information regarding minor consent and confidentiality laws by state visit website www.youthlaw.org.

Note on Disclosures

Be prepared for participants to approach you with personal and specific questions regarding their lives. Some participants may need guidance on resolving some issues. Listen to them with a sympathetic ear, and point them in the right direction by making referrals to counselors, hotline numbers and other resources, such as:

Peace Over Violence Hotline

213-626-3393/ 310-392-8381/ 626-793-3385
www.peaceoverviolence.org / www.youthoverviolence.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline

1(800)656-HOPE
www.rainn.org

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline

1-866-331-9474 / 1-866-331-8453 TTY
www.loveisrespect.org

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Across the Curriculum

The Be Strong Curriculum provides a wealth of rich learning opportunities across many different content areas. It offers obvious opportunities for implementation in History-Social Science, Health, and English. However, other less obvious subject matters such as Mathematics, Visual and Performing Arts are also reinforced. The following list provides a high level overview of the commonalities in content and learning process across all subject areas that make the Be Strong Curriculum an effective tool for instructional purposes.

1. Confronting important social issues and conflicts and helping students develop strategies for analyzing consequences of various alternatives.
2. Developing better communication skills through integrated, frequent, and meaningful listening, speaking, reading, writing, and observing in both independent and group settings.
3. Communicating the importance of a strong sense of values for ethical decision-making in personal, social and civic settings.
4. Building an appreciation for cultural diversity and recognition of the beliefs of a pluralistic society.
5. Promoting the development of a sense of self-identity, positive self-esteem, and respect for others.
6. Developing critical thinking, basic study and personal skills; giving special emphasis to responsible social interaction so that students develop a sensitivity to the needs, problems and aspirations of others and a willingness to listen to the differing views of others.
7. Offering a variety of resources (popular media, on-line, literature, etc.) as a means to acquire information and a way to stimulate comparison and evaluation of information sources.

Below is a breakdown of the key elements of the Be Strong Curriculum that align with several of the main subject frameworks according to the California curriculum guidelines. Again, as you read the following alignments you will recognize how the connections are not limited to these content areas, but provide a good starting point for how the curriculum can be integrated into individual subject matter courses or used in core classrooms.

History—Social Sciences Alignments

The Be Strong Curriculum focuses primarily on the following goals and strands of the California History-Social Science Framework for grades K-12.

- *Knowledge and Cultural Understanding*—opportunities to explore historical events of violence, peacemaking, cultural diversity, and societal issues.
- *Democratic Understanding and Civic Values*—opportunities to discuss the democratic process, explore rights and responsibilities, and understand civic values.
- *Skills Attainment and Social Participation*—speaking, group participation, group and individual critical discussions and analysis, and opportunities for community organizing for policy advocacy and civic participation.

English-Language Arts Alignments

The following lists provide an overview of key elements of the Be Strong Curriculum that align with the English-Language Arts Framework and related documents for high school grades 9-12.

- *Varied Forms of Writings*—lists, stories, charts, notes, summaries, letters.
- *Key Vocabulary Taught in Context*—See Glossary for full list of vocabulary taught across the curriculum.
- *Reading Comprehension*—stories, poetry, letters.
- *Integrated use of language*—listening, speaking, reading, writings, cooperative work continually promoted in every lesson.
- *Critical Thinking Skills*—opportunities to define and clarify problems, problem solve and develop solutions to real life problems.
- Attention to providing opportunities to explore cultural diversity, pluralistic ideas, and societal issues that are relevant to a teen population. Teens are encouraged to draw from personal experience and process outside information in a unified meaning-centered curriculum.
- *Research & Technology*—promotes use of varied research methods (library, electronic media, personal interviews) to elicit evidence from primary and secondary sources for discussions.
- *Media*—various types of media (films, advertisements, speeches) used to help students better recognize the strategies used to inform, persuade and entertain.

Mathematics Alignments

Problem-solving attitudes are of great importance in understanding and performing mathematical operations in the Mathematics Framework for grades K-12. The Be Strong Curriculum provides opportunities across all units to develop critical and logical thinking skills to analyze evidence and build arguments to support or refute a hypothesis. Specific examples of how the curriculum reinforces these skills include:

- Encourages students to recognize and develop alternative outcomes and solutions.
- Requires students to process and use statistics, probability and percentages.
- Allows for comparisons of usage and occurrence across different time frames, cultural and gender groups.
- Provides alternative instructional opportunities for teachers to reinforce basic concepts in real world settings.

Physical Education Alignments

Healthy self-image and personal development is a key goal of the physical education curriculum for grades K-12. Across all units, the Be Strong Curriculum encourages students to do continued self-introspection and analysis to better understand their choices and behaviors in their daily life. The unit activities provide practical lessons to help students better understand what constitutes healthy and unhealthy self-image, reasons for healthy and unhealthy behaviors, and strategies for how to change negative behaviors and support positive behaviors. Each unit builds on foundations laid in earlier units, to help students develop a sense of self-identity, positive self-esteem and respect for others.

Visual Performing Arts Alignments

The following list provides an overview of the key elements of the Be Strong Curriculum that align with the Visual Performing Arts frameworks for grades K-12.

- Provides opportunities for role-play, improvisation and scene writing.
- Promotes constant opportunities for public speaking in front of groups.
- Encourages students to discuss and share personal experiences as sources for material.
- Exposes students to specific vocabulary of the theater and performing arts.

- Allows students to critique and derive meaning from works of film/video and electronic media on the basis of aesthetic qualities.
- Uses collages, self-portraits, and other pictorial representations of certain themes and concepts.
- Uses popular media (movies, TV, advertisements) as a means to teach.

40 DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS FOR ADOLESCENTS AGE 12-18®

The Developmental Assets, developed by Search Institute, are grounded in extensive research in youth development, resiliency, and prevention. They represent the relationships, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to avoid risks and to thrive. Studies of more than 2.2 million young people in the United States consistently show that the more of these assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to thrive. Assets have power for all young people, regardless of their gender, economic status, family, or race/ethnicity. Furthermore, levels of assets are better predictors of high-risk involvement and thriving than poverty or being from a single-parent family.

Be Strong connects the Developmental Assets with each of the activity objectives. Below is the list of 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents (age 12 – 18), reproduced with permission from Search Institute. The Developmental Assets are included in the Standards Table where each Module and Subunit is associated with the corresponding assets.

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