

# Messaging Report Summary

## SUPPORT FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA) conducted research on sexual violence prevention messaging in 2017 and 2018. The purpose of this research was to test and recommend key messaging for use by those advocating healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education for children and youth in schools and community settings. Teaching healthy relationship skills, especially when paired with sexual violence prevention education (which includes information on bystander intervention, consent, gender norms, etc.), is one evidence-based approach to prevent sexual violence. During this period, MNCASA conducted individual in-depth interviews, an online focus group, a statewide survey, and message testing for both general and targeted audiences.

This information can be used by organizations and individuals to promote healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education for children and youth in schools and community settings. This is a summary of the longer report.

### Sexual Violence Prevention Education

MNCASA investigated individuals overall awareness of sexual violence and sexual violence prevention education. These were the key findings:

- Respondents believe sexual violence is a problem, but it is happening “elsewhere.”
- Recognition of sexual violence as a problem increases support for change.
- Minnesotans believe that more must be done to combat sexual violence.
- Many parents/guardians recognize education as an important form of sexual violence prevention and believe schools need to do more to reduce rates of sexual violence.

### Support and Opposition to Sexual Violence Prevention Education

Eighteen parents of middle-school or high school age children attending public schools participated in an online focus group in April, 2017. They demonstrated three main points of opposition to teaching healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education:

1. A broad and ideological opposition that schools should not play a role in educating children about relationships or sexual violence in the first place.
2. A belief that changes and additions to curriculums takes time away from other subjects and priorities at school.
3. A distrust of some teachers’ ability to teach these subjects.

Political ideology, not religious belief, was found to be the greatest driver behind the level of support for teaching healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention skills.



## Top Tested Messages

The Messaging Report tested messages to assist parents/guardians, advocates, and others in promoting sexual violence prevention and healthy relationships through school curriculum.

This first message resonated the best across all audiences and describes a shared responsibility for protecting children. This message tested well across all criteria.

Until things change, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted or abused by age 18. Parent/guardians, schools, and communities share a responsibility to use proven strategies to protect all children from sexual violence so young people can build positive, healthy relationships throughout their lives.

The following messages tested very well across all criteria.

When children are the victims of sexual abuse, the offender is a person they know in 90% of the cases. Parent/guardians and schools need to know how to recognize signs of danger, such as when a child is being “groomed” for abuse, and teach about healthy relationships so all students in our communities can be protected from harm.

Sex education is too often limited to the biology of sex. Young people need more preparation for healthy relationships, dealing with peer pressure, negotiating personal boundaries, and seeking help from caring adults—lessons they need to hear multiple times at home, in schools, and from community members.



## CONCLUSION

When communicating regarding healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education focus on:

1. The health and safety of children and families
2. The limitations of current healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education curriculums used in schools and community setting
3. The inclusion of parents/guardians in the process
4. The teachings would reinforce, not replace, what parents/guardians do at home.

The inclusion of healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education in schools and communities is an important tool in sexual violence prevention. Using the findings and tools from this report will help reframe the issue, find consensus, and assist individuals and organizations in gaining policy support for implementing healthy relationships and sexual violence prevention education in school and community settings.