A cluster-randomized trial of a middle school gender violence prevention program: Design, rationale, and sample characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: High rates of adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) and sexual violence (SV) reported among adolescents point to the need for prevention among middle school-age youth. This is a cluster randomized controlled trial to test an athletic coach-delivered ARA/SV prevention program in 41 middle schools (38 clusters). Trained coaches talk to their male athletes about 1) what constitutes harmful vs. respectful relationship behaviors, 2) dispelling myths that glorify male sexual aggression and promoting more gender-equitable attitudes, and 3) positive bystander intervention when aggressive male behaviors toward females are witnessed.

Methods: A total of 973 male athletes (ages 11–14, grades 6–8) are participating. Athletes complete surveys at the beginning and end of sports season (Time 2), and one year later (Time 3). The primary outcome is an increase in positive bystander behaviors (i.e., intervening in peers’ disrespectful or harmful behaviors); secondary outcomes are changes in recognition of what constitutes abusive behavior, intentions to intervene, and gender equitable attitudes (Time 2 and 3) as well as reduction in abuse perpetration (Time 3).

Results: Participating schools have a greater proportion of non-White students and students on free/reduced lunch compared to schools that declined participation. Participants’ self-reported ethnicities are 54.5% White, 29.0% Black, 1.4% Hispanic and the remainder, multi-racial, other, or not reported.

Conclusions: This study will evaluate the effectiveness of a coach-delivered ARA/SV prevention program for middle school male athletes. Findings will add to the evidence base regarding developmentally appropriate violence prevention programs as well as the role of coaches in adolescent health promotion.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Adolescent relationship abuse (ARA; physical and sexual violence and psychological aggression in adolescent dating relationships) and sexual violence (SV; sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape) are not uncommon among adolescents. Created by Futures Without Violence (a national non-profit violence prevention organization), Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM) is an ARA/SV prevention program which trains athletic coaches to talk to their male athletes about respect, non-violence, consent, and their responsibility in speaking out against violence toward women and girls. In a rigorous evaluation with high school male athletes in California, athletes who received CBIM had increased intentions to intervene when witnessing peers’ harmful behaviors, more positive bystander behaviors, less negative bystander behaviors (i.e., laughing and going along with such disrespectful behaviors), and less ARA perpetration [1,2]. The current study aims to evaluate CBIM with middle school male athletes.

In a study of over 5000 6th graders, 42% of dating students reported being victimized by a boyfriend/girlfriend, with youth reporting high acceptance of ARA [3]. One in 5 tweens (ages 11–14) report their friends have been victims of ARA [4]. In a survey of 7th graders found 28% of students reported being a victim of physical dating violence in the past year, and 22% reported perpetrating physical violence in a relationship in the past year [5]. Similarly for SV, in the American Association of University Women survey of students grades 7–12, nearly 50% of students had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the past year [6]. The alarmingly high rates of ARA/SV reported among younger adolescents point to the need for ARA/SV
prevention among middle school-age youth. Sexual harassment increases during middle school [7–10], and persists into high school [11–14]. Studies point to the overlap of SV, ARA, and bullying behaviors including sexual harassment [15–19]. Homophobic teasing among adolescents is prevalent (among adolescent males in particular) and is a particular form of gender-based victimization and sexual harassment that is an important precursor to SV perpetration [15,16,20]. Prevention programs working with early adolescents need to connect homophobic teasing and sexual harassment to efforts to reduce ARA/SV perpetration.

Despite the prevalence of ARA/SV among younger adolescents, only three school-based prevention programs are considered effective to stop perpetration of ARA/SV, [11,21,22] all of which involve classroom instruction. Only one focuses on middle school, [11] none utilize adults such as coaches outside the classroom setting, and none integrate promoting gender equitable attitudes with a bystander behavior approach. This study is significant because it addresses several substantive gaps in ARA/SV prevention utilizing a rigorous approach grounded in theory.

Consistent with Social Norms Theory and Theory of Reasoned Action, Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM) trains coaches to: 1) raise awareness about ARA/SV while promoting respect, 2) promote gender equitable attitudes, and 3) encourage positive bystander intervention when witnessing disrespectful behaviors among peers. By making clear expectations for positive masculine behaviors and strong disapproval of disrespectful behaviors, this intervention is intended to correct athlete misperceptions that others endorse violence against women and to promote subjective norms of non-violence (Fig. 1).

2. Methods

2.1. Objectives

This cluster-randomized school-based controlled trial will examine the effectiveness of a program for the primary prevention of ARA/SV. “Coaching Boys Into Men” (CBIM) is a theory-based program intended to alter norms that foster ARA/SV perpetration, promote bystander intervention, and reduce ARA/SV perpetration by engaging athletic coaches as positive role models to deliver violence prevention scripts and tools to male athletes. The structured intervention involves a 60-min training and bi-weekly check-in for coaches by a violence prevention advocate. Coaches present 12 weekly mini-lessons to their middle school male athletes throughout the sport season. Trained middle school coaches will talk to their male athletes about 1) what constitutes disrespectful and harmful vs. respectful relationship behaviors, 2) dispelling myths that glorify male sexual aggression and promoting more gender-equitable attitudes, and 3) positive bystander intervention when aggressive male behaviors toward females are witnessed.

The CBIM intervention is currently being examined in 38 clusters across 41 middle schools in the Western Pennsylvania region. Students that are a part of a formal athletic program at a participating middle school in either the Winter, Spring or Fall complete study evaluations at baseline (T1), at the end of the sport season (T2; approximately 6 weeks after baseline), and 12 months (T3) to determine if the CBIM intervention results in greater improvements in positive bystander behavior. Secondary outcomes include 1) a greater increase in intentions to intervene as bystanders regarding ARA/SV, 2) greater improvement in athlete knowledge of what constitutes abusive behaviors, and 3) more gender-equitable attitudes among athletes in CBIM middle school clusters as compared with control. The ultimate goal is to decrease perpetration of ARA/SV among these adolescent males.

2.2. Trial design

The experimental design for this evaluation involves a parallel arm, cluster randomized-controlled trial conducted with coaches and student athletes recruited from 43 middle schools in Western Pennsylvania based on their size and availability of an athletics program. A cluster, which is the unit of randomization, was defined as one or more middle schools that share common sports teams. Clusters were randomly assigned to either CBIM intervention or control (standard coaching) condition in a 1:1 allocation ratio and stratified by school size. A cluster-randomized design was used at the school level because it would be infeasible to randomize individual students, as the CBIM program is integrated into sports practices. Further, many athletes participate in multiple sports during the school year; school-level randomization prevents contamination of the control condition.

2.3. Participants, interventions, and outcomes

2.3.1. Study setting and eligibility criteria

The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study on March 14, 2014 (Protocol Number PRO14020618). Intervention and control sites for this study are set in diverse communities throughout Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania. Schools had to have formal athletics for 6th through 8th grade to be eligible. General student demographics were collected for schools that chose to participate and compared to schools that declined participation (Table 1).

2.3.2. Intervention

Launched in 2001 by Futures Without Violence (a national non-profit violence prevention organization) and funded by the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention and Verizon, Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM) trains athletic coaches through a Coaches Leadership Program which consists of a 60-min training for coaches, focusing on the rationale for CBIM while empowering coaches to utilize the CBIM Coaches Kit (available at www.coachescorner.org). In this Kit, a Playbook provides concrete strategies for discussing the prevalence of violence against women and specific vignettes (“teachable moments”) coaches...
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