

# The *Be Strong* Program: Key Evaluation Findings



September 2009

*Be Strong*...From the Inside Out

## Background and Overview

Peace Over Violence (POV) received funding from the Verizon Foundation and Weingart Foundation in 2007 to develop and pilot the *Be Strong* program, 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. *Be Strong* curriculum consists of four empowerment modules which contain activities that enhance developmental assets and provide practical tools for self-discovery, critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making. The program objective is to help young women define and discover the kind of women they want to be while developing protective factors against violence and other unhealthy behaviors. It also provides a forum for young women to connect with one another, honor themselves, and create healthy relationships.

The *Be Strong* program was implemented in eight high schools in the Los Angeles area during the 2008-2009 school year by POV facilitators trained in *Be Strong*, *In Touch With Teens* (a youth violence prevention program), and POV Crisis Hotline curricula. At each school, POV facilitators worked with school staff to identify at-risk young women to participate in the *Be Strong* program. In most schools, the curriculum was implemented in weekly sessions throughout the school year to a consistent group of girls; however scheduling was adapted for two schools with a rotating track system. In contrast to schools with a traditional calendar, in schools with a track system, students rotated on and off campus every few months. To accommodate students in schools with a tracking system, the *Be Strong* curriculum has stand-alone units. This allows students to benefit from each session and gain valuable information even if they did not attend the previous or following sessions.

## Evaluation Approach and Methods

Harder+Company Community Research (Harder+Company) began the evaluation of the *Be Strong* program in August 2008. The goals of the evaluation are to assess the implementation and the impact of the program. The evaluation used a mixed method approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative procedures. The data collection strategies were utilized:

- ✦ **Student post-test survey.** The student survey was designed in collaboration with POV staff members so that the survey items would be relevant to female students in urban high schools. The survey measured the impact of the *Be Strong* program on student participants. Thirty-seven students completed the post-test survey.



- ✦ **Student participant focus group.** Eight students participated in a focus group. The focus group assessed students' experience with the *Be Strong* program.
- ✦ **School staff interviews.** Three school staff members were interviewed about their experience with the program and their perceived impact of the *Be Strong* program.

All data collection instruments were developed in collaboration with POV. Data collections were conducted by POV staff members and data analyses were conducted by Harder+Company.

## Key Findings

### Demographics

A total of 37 *Be Strong* student participants from three high schools completed a survey at the end of the program in May 2009. All of the students surveyed were female; their ages ranged from 14 to 18 (see Exhibit 1), with an average age of just over 16 years.

**Exhibit 1. Age of Participants (N=37)**

Age	%
14	2.7%
15	29.7%
16	29.7%
17	27.0%
18	10.8%

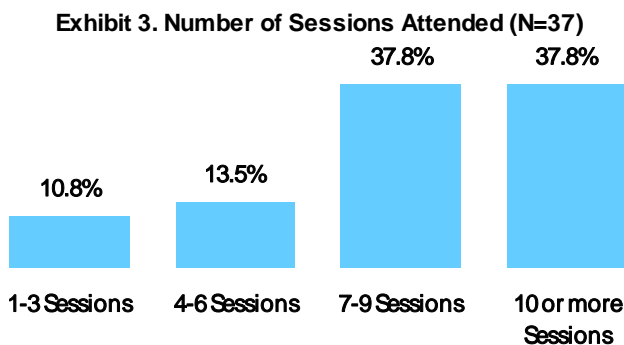
Over three quarters of the survey respondents were in either 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade (see Exhibit 2). Over half of them were Latino and over one-third were Black.

**Exhibit 2. Grade and Ethnicity of Participants (N=37)**

Student Information	%
<b>Grade</b>	
9	10.8%
10	45.9%
11	32.4%
12	10.8%
<b>Ethnicity<sup>a</sup></b>	
African American	37.8%
Latino	59.5%
Other	2.7%

<sup>a</sup>Percentages add up to more than 100% because students had the opportunity to check more than one ethnicity

The *Be Strong* program ran at the school sites throughout the school year and the number of *Be Strong* sessions that the students attend varies. Just over a third of the participants in this study attended 10 or more sessions (see Exhibit 3). An equal number attended between seven and nine sessions.



## Program Impact

Participants reported that *Be Strong* helped them to feel better about being a girl and helped them develop skills to build cultural competency with people from different cultures, ethnicities, and walks of life (see Exhibit 4).

**Exhibit 4. How *Be Strong* Influences Participants' Feelings about Relationships (N=37)**

	Agreed with the statement <sup>a</sup>
Increased how much I trust other girls.	32.4%
Helped me to see that I have more in common with girls than boys.	78.4%
Taught me to treat all girls with respect, even if they are not my friends.	78.4%
Made me feel proud to be a girl.	97.3%
Helped me get along better with people who are different than me (for example, different race or culture).	86.5%

<sup>a</sup> Based on a scale: 1 = "Hell No," 2 = "No," 3 = "Yeah," and 4 = "Hell Yeah"

Students' responses to the open-ended items on the survey also indicated that they felt that the program helped them to improve their relationship with other girls and other people in their lives. One student said, "[I learned] how to be strong and respect others. I learned that other girls have problems just like me." Another student said, "I have learned to be strong and to get along with my peers." Also, students indicated that they learned the following:

- "never judge a person by their skin color"
- "always be respectful no matter what"
- "treat people the way you wanna be treated"
- "...that we all have different opinions"

The *Be Strong* program also appears to have helped the participants feel better about themselves and improved their self-confidence and self-esteem (see Exhibit 5). A large majority of them indicated that the program helped them feel more confident, taught them that they can reach their goals, and helped them feel that they can handle different circumstances.

**"[I learned] how to be strong and respect others. I learned that other girls have problems just like me."**

– Student

**Exhibit 5. How Be Strong Influences Participants Feelings about Themselves (N=37)**

	Agreed with the statement <sup>a</sup>
Helped me to feel more confident with myself.	94.6%
Taught me that I can reach my goals.	89.2%
Taught me to think through possible solutions when I am confronted with a problem.	97.3%
Helped me to feel that I can handle whatever comes my way.	97.3%
Helped me to work things out when I'm mad at someone.	83.8%
Taught me to respect other people's opinions even if I disagree with them.	86.5%

<sup>a</sup> Based on a scale: 1 = "Hell No," 2 = "No," 3 = "Yeah," and 4 = "Hell Yeah"

Their responses to the survey's open-ended question also indicate that the program helped them to increase their self-esteem, increase resistance to and resiliency in negative situations, regulate their negative emotions, and increase their positive view of their personal future. One student reported, "Before I joined this group I was bad and very violent. And now I'm doing much better." Another student said, "...it [*Be Strong*] made me change the way I think of myself."

**"Before I joined this group I was bad and very violent. And now I'm doing much better."**

– Student

School staff also noted changes in the program participants. One school staff member reported, "We see a lot of bright young ladies who have flowered with their self-esteem, who have become more vocal, able to have that conversation. As a school we get so busy with the day to day, we don't always look at what our kids really need. This helps them to find their voice. We don't see the kids who had behavioral problems as often in the Deans Office." Another school staff member noted changes in the students' behavior and stated, "We saw less Dean's office referrals. The girls are better able to articulate themselves. Less reactive. Showing vulnerability more."

**"We see a lot of bright young ladies who have flowered with their self-esteem, who have become more vocal, able to have that conversation... [*Be Strong*] helps them to find their voice. We don't see the kids who had behavioral problems as often in the Deans Office."**

– School staff member

Participants were also asked to describe certain types of behaviors that may occur between dating couples as "healthy" or "unhealthy." Using a retrospective post- then pre-test method, they were asked to indicate how healthy or unhealthy they feel that each behavior listed in Exhibit 6 was before they started the *Be Strong* program and how they feel now that they are finished with the *Be Strong* program. The results show that there are significant increases in the identification of several clearly unhealthy behaviors.<sup>1</sup> The greatest increase was found in "telling a boy/girlfriend what to wear or not to wear" (32.4% increase), "talking a boy/girlfriend into doing

<sup>1</sup> To test for significant change from before program participation (pre-test) to after program participation (post-test), paired t-tests were conducted with each item.

sexual things” (21.6% increase), and “being jealous of who a boy/girlfriend is hanging out with” (20.8% increase). There were also significant increases in identifying several other behaviors as unhealthy: “following a boy/girlfriend wherever they go” (10.8% increase), “hitting a boy/girlfriend in a playful way” (16.2% increase), “checking a boy/girlfriend’s cell phone, email, or My Space account” (5.4% increase), and “doing sexual things with a boy/girlfriend when they are drunk or high (5.4% increase).”

**Exhibit 6. Percent of Students Who Indicated a Behavior to be Unhealthy<sup>a</sup> (N=37)**

Behaviors	Before program participation	After program participation	Difference
Spreading rumors about a boy/girlfriend to friends or other people at school	81.1%	86.5%	5.4
Calling a boy/girlfriend bad names	75.7%	70.3%	-5.4
Following a boy/girlfriend wherever they go	78.4%	89.2%	10.8*
Checking a boy/girlfriend’s cell phone, email, or My Space account	64.9%	70.3%	5.4*
Listening to a boy/girlfriend when they have a problem	18.9%	29.7%	10.8
Telling a boy/girlfriend that you will date someone else if they do not do what you want	73.0%	81.1%	8.1*
Breaking up with a boy/girlfriend	21.6%	29.7%	8.1
Disagreeing with a boy/girlfriend	27.0%	24.3%	-2.7
Telling a boy/girlfriend that you might harm yourself if they break up with you	70.3%	81.1%	10.8
Doing sexual things with a boy/girlfriend when they are drunk or high	73.0%	78.4%	5.4*
Hitting a boy/girlfriend in a playful way	32.4%	48.6%	16.2**
Telling a boy/girlfriend what to wear or not to wear	56.8%	89.2%	32.4**
Being jealous of who a boy/girlfriend is hanging out with	51.4%	72.2%	20.8*
Talking a boy/girlfriend into doing sexual things	67.6%	89.2%	21.6*
Always calling a boy/girlfriend on the phone to check up on them	40.5%	51.4%	10.9

<sup>a</sup> Based on a scale: 1 = “Really Unhealthy,” 2 = “Kinda Unhealthy,” 3 = “Kinda Healthy,” and 4 = “Really Healthy”

\*Significant at p < .05

\*\* Significant at p < .01

When participants were asked how they have benefitted from the *Be Strong* program, they expressed that it helped them to identify healthy and unhealthy behaviors in relationships, different types of abuse, and early warning signs of an abusive relationship. One student stated, “I’m more informed about abusive relationships and where to get help.” Another student reported, “I’ve learned that if I was in an abusive relationship, I should tell someone before the problem gets worse.”

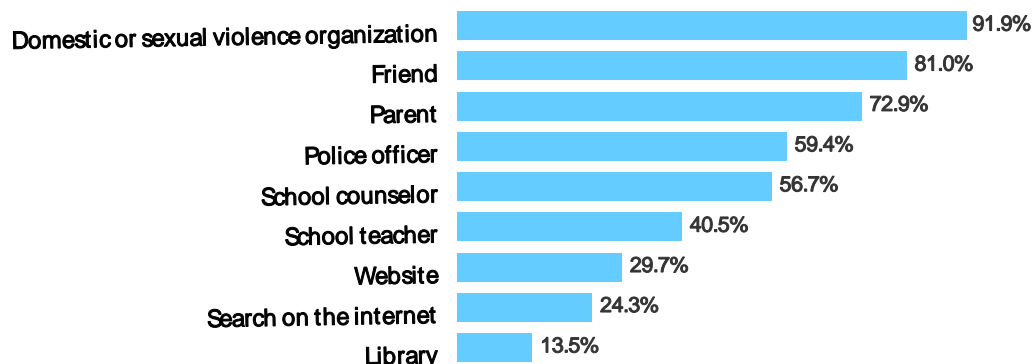
When students were asked what resources they would use if they or someone they know is in an abusive relationship, almost all of them indicate that they would contact a domestic or sexual violence organization, and large majorities reported that they would contact their friends, or their parents (see Exhibit 7). More than half of the participants reported that they would contact a police officer or a school counselor. Students’ responses to the

**“I’ve learned that if I was in an abusive relationship, I should tell someone before the problem gets worse.”**

– Student

open-ended question showed that most students would contact Peace Over Violence specifically and the police.

**Exhibit 7. Resources Participants Will Use (N=37)**



### Program Satisfaction

Overall, the participants were highly satisfied with all aspects of the *Be Strong* program (see Exhibit 8). All reported enjoying coming to the *Be Strong* sessions, and large majorities felt that they learned a lot of new things from the group, and they felt welcomed at the *Be Strong* sessions.

**Exhibit 8. Participants' Satisfaction with the *Be Strong* program. (N=37)**

	Agreed with the statement*
I feel safe sharing my thoughts during <i>Be Strong</i> sessions.	94.6%
My facilitator is someone I can trust.	94.6%
I have gained something valuable by participating in this group.	97.3%
I have learned a lot of new things from this group.	94.6%
I enjoy coming to the <i>Be Strong</i> sessions.	100.0%
I feel welcomed at <i>Be Strong</i> sessions.	94.6%
I would recommend <i>Be Strong</i> to my friends.	97.3%
I was able to bond with other girls in this group.	83.8%

\*Based on a scale: 1 = "Hell No," 2 = "No," 3 = "Yeah," and 4 = "Hell Yeah"

School staff also indicated that they are highly satisfied with *Be Strong*. One school administrator stated, "[I am] very satisfied. It exceeded my expectations. It not only helped the students we were specifically targeting, but also the students who showed up through word of mouth, students who might otherwise have gone under the radar...We already have recommended it to other schools..." Another school staff member commented, "I definitely see the benefit. I can see it with our students. It's really helped them to find their voice, but also to bring their friends into it as well" and "*Be Strong* has exceeded my expectations. I didn't think it would have an impact."

**"*Be Strong* has exceeded my expectations. I didn't think it would have an impact."**

– School staff member

## Program Challenges

Although most of the participants were satisfied with the *Be Strong* program, some of them provided suggestions to improve the program. Some students indicated that they would like more sessions, and other students indicated that they would like to see the same person leading all of the *Be Strong* sessions. One student reported, “It would be really nice if there was only one person coming to teach our lesson and not other people.” Another student said, “[Keep] one person all the time instead of changing every week.”

At the program implementation level, one of the challenges of the *Be Strong* program has been coordinating with the school schedule. Finding space at the school site for the sessions has especially been a challenge. It was also difficult to find teachers who would allow the program to use their room. Also, because some schools have a rotating tracking system, forming groups and having a consistent group of participants attending the *Be Strong* sessions has been difficult. One staff member stated, “There’s no good time because of space. It’s driven by time of day, room availability, that’s always an issue. We need two rooms at one time, one for boys & one for girls. Doing the summonses, the behind the scenes work to get the kids there, sometimes takes time...” Other challenges include obtaining buy-in from the teachers. Many teachers are not very knowledgeable about the program and do not see the value of it. One school staff member reported, “In terms of mental health and programs like *Be Strong*, we are still educating teachers on the significance of it. Sometimes it’s misunderstood. I’ve had some feedback from teachers who say, ‘well they’re just in there laughing’. They don’t quite get it.”

**“On a scale from 1 to 10 - I give the program a 9. Girls need empowerment and need to understand their cultural and socialized roles. If they don’t know that things can be different, they can’t fight to end violence in their lives.”**

– School staff member

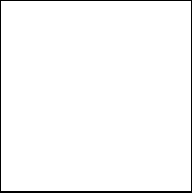
## Conclusion and Recommendations

The initial evaluation of *Be Strong* finds that the program has had a positive impact on its student participants in the areas of self-esteem and self-confidence, interpersonal relationships, knowledge of dating violence, attitudes, and behaviors. Most participants and school staff are very satisfied with the *Be Strong* program despite several challenges in its implementations. Based on the key findings of this evaluation the following two recommendations are suggested:

**“We saw less Dean’s office referrals. The girls are better able to articulate themselves. Less reactive. Showing vulnerability more.”**

– School staff member

- ✦ **Improve the consistency of attendance and facilitation.** Attendance data suggest that fewer than 40% of the participants attend 10 or more of the program sessions. School staff also indicated that because of challenges within the school, having a consistent group of girls participating is difficult due the transitory nature of the at-risk student population. Oftentimes, students are transferred out of the school or are placed on leave. Additionally, several program participants suggested the need for consistency in the assignment of one program facilitator across all sessions.

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- ✦ **Provide professional development for teachers to increase buy-in.** Some of the school staff indicated that teacher buy-in has been a challenge at their schools and suggests that POV provide professional development about teen dating violence for teachers as well.