**Policy Brief: Ensuring Access to Healthy Relationship Education for Hawai‘i’s Youth**

The Hawaiʻi State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (HSCADV) addresses the social, political, and economic impacts of domestic violence on individuals, families, and communities.  We are a statewide partnership of domestic violence programs and shelters. Since its founding in 1980, HSCADV has fostered partnerships, increased awareness of domestic violence, and advocated for social justice and change throughout the islands. We envision a Hawai‘i where all individuals and families thrive and live free from violence.

HSCADV engages in conversations, collaborations, and training with a variety of organizations and agencies across the state to improve supports and safety of survivors, knowing that domestic violence is a significant, widespread public health and safety issue. Nationally, 41% of women, 26% of men, and 54% of transgender people reported experiencing intimate partner violence during their lifetime.[[1]](#footnote-0),[[2]](#footnote-1) Hawai‘i’s statistics are similar, with 35% of women and 24% of men experiencing intimate partner violence during their lifetime.[[3]](#footnote-2)

During HSCADV’s 2022-2023 statewide needs assessment, we spoke with survivors, domestic violence advocates, and community service providers. A commonality among the groups was a call for efforts to prevent violence before it ever has a chance to impact survivors and their families.

Research indicates that abusive relationship behaviors often begin and are most prevalent among adolescents and young adults, with one study reporting that 21% of teen girls and 10% of teen boys reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence from a dating partner in the past year.[[4]](#footnote-3) Similarly, a Hawai‘i-based service provider and parent told HSCADV staff about her experiences at her daughter’s school:

*“A lot of schools are not very welcoming to those topics, but that is the generation that we should be focusing on, try to get them young so that they can break that generational trauma, those cycles…It’s really sad to hear my daughter talk about the relationships that she sees and hears in high school and how many of those…there’s always a dominant person trying to control and it leads to a lot of coercion. It’s unbelievable, the stories that she was telling me.”*

Sexual health education is required by state education standards in Hawai‘i, and Board of Education [Policy 103-5](https://boe.hawaii.gov/policies/Board%20Policies/Sexual%20Health%20Education.pdf) requires that content “helps students develop relationships and communication skills to form healthy relationships that are based on mutual respect and affection and are free from violence, coercion and intimidation.” This is a good foundation from which to strengthen guidance for schools on effective violence prevention education. For example, the policy does not require instruction on consent.

**HSCADV recommends that the state pass legislation that requires the Hawai‘i State Department of Education (DOE) to provide consistent, quality programming on healthy relationships in schools.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified implementation of youth violence prevention education as a promising practice for states to take in ending domestic violence.[[5]](#footnote-4) By strengthening youth skills for healthy relationships of all kinds (friendship, familial, romantic, and intimate), educational efforts can target risk factors that are connected with multiple forms of violence, such as dating/domestic violence, bullying, sexual violence, and peer violence.5 The state can ensure that effective best-practices are being implemented by bolstering existing standards for healthy relationship education. Studies show that effective public health prevention programming is long-term and repeated, and “appropriately timed” to begin before problem behavior starts (Nation et al., 2003).[[6]](#footnote-5) Recently, Washington state voters and legislators approved mandating regular social-emotional learning programming for elementary students, knowing this will provide a foundation for ongoing skill-building for healthy relationships ([RCW 28A.300.475](https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=28A.300.475)).

Hawai‘i can take action to promote youth’s development of healthy relationship skills. We should utilize available research and implement promising practices for ending domestic violence. It is the state’s kuleana to work to create safer and healthier relationships, ‘ohana, and communities for all of Hawai‘i.

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4. Vagi, K.J., E. O. Olsen, K.C. Basile, and A.M. Vivolo-Kantor. 2015. "Teen Dating Violence (Physical and Sexual) Among US High School Students: Findings from the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey." *JAMA Pediatr.* 169(5): 474-482. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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