

## Student Activists Ending Dating Abuse

**WRITTEN BY JESSICA WAHLSTROM**

**If you or someone you know is a victim or survivor and needs help, please reach out to us, we are here 24-hours a day.**

Early on a Monday morning, every year in both February and July, approximately 30 teens walk through the doors of a mall in a town just north of New York City. Most walk alone, occasionally in a pair. They come from different schools and parts of the county where they live. They have unique histories and experiences, styles and preferences. As they move toward the escalators, the teens pass by storefronts — some vacant, others still closed with chain gates in front of glass doors. There are giant posters of young people plastered in retail windows. The images displayed are brushed and edited. Model body parts are trimmed and rounded and broadened and tweaked, fabricated to show teens what they are supposed to look like; what they are supposed to accept and buy; how they are supposed to be in the world. They make their way toward a windowless conference room on the top floor that many have passed by before but never noticed.



days, they learn that one in three teens experiences dating abuse — including verbal, emotional, sexual and other physical forms. They discuss green, yellow and red flags for behaviors in relationships. As they practice identifying unhealthy behaviors, some participants say to themselves — or aloud, “this is happening to me,” or “I am doing that and don’t want to anymore.” They admit that giving and getting consent can be confusing in dating scenarios. They talk through how to make it clearer, how to make sure that it is respected. They feel seen and heard and understood.

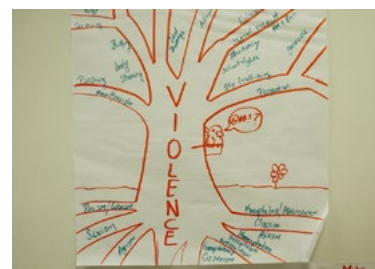
For a few days each year, SAEDA gives participants the opportunity to operate outside of the familiar systems that affect how they move through and experience the world. With a little distance from what influences them, teens better see what they have internalized their entire lives about relationships and power balance and roles and expectations. **They are surprised — often — by how normalized toxic behaviors are in their lives, across the diverse households and social networks they function within.**

They look closely at what is perpetuated by pop culture and the media. They become more aware of the forces working to shape them — in the images they are fed, in the apps they use, in the institutions they depend on. They explore how these forces can lead to conditions for unhealthy behaviors and relationships. They share the challenges they feel and experience as they try to fit into the places and roles they think they **given the tools they need to change behaviors, to learn how to be activists that work alone or in groups to end dating and other violence that they matter.**



As the teens enter the conference room they are greeted by two adult facilitators. Some smile nervously as they scan what is in

front of them, looking for a seat to land in. Some initiate conversation with the person sitting next to them. Some pretend to be captivated by what is on their phone screen so that they can avoid figuring out what to say. All are aware that they've entered a space that is unique. They are invited to settle into it as the facilitators welcome them to their first day of SAEDA (Student Activists Ending Dating Abuse), a program facilitated by Center for Safety & Change. **SAEDA is an innovative youth-led education and dating abuse prevention program dedicated to exploring what healthy relationships look like by promoting leadership, celebrating diversity and challenging oppressive social norms. Through their participation in the program, the teens will look closely at how those norms create environments where abusive behavior is condoned and accepted.** The group will spend five full days together in the room, inspiring each other to understand and end dating abuse and its root causes. The teens are told that they are allowed to sit wherever, and however, they want while they participate in SAEDA sessions. Usually — eventually and naturally — they end up in a circle. In the circle and in small breakout groups that change composition throughout the five



Most SAEDA sessions are led by other teens who have been through the program. They know what they are supposed to do in that room. The teens are trusted to lead. The program's adult facilitators are committed to offering a space where everyone can be their authentic self. They are clear about how much they learn from the young people in the program, who come with their

own knowledge and experiences and perspectives. The facilitators help to pull what already exists into the light, to places where it can be heard and seen. The strength of SAEDA, facilitators say, is the student voice.

It is possible at times to forget that SAEDA participants are teens as they break down and reconsider and configure the world — until the closing activity. During the activity, participants are asked to hold a ball of string while they share what they are taking with them from their five days together. While they share, each participant grabs a small section of the string before tossing the ball to another person in the circle. There is a teen-like awkwardness and playfulness imbued in the acts of throwing and sharing. The ball rarely gets



to where it's intended, to its target; it lands just short, to the side, or between where it started and where it is headed. It

is messy. Life is messy. A web forms between them as they move through the activity, showing their connections. At the end, when everyone has had a turn with the ball, with their fingers still pinching their own little section, the teens are strung together. It is their favorite activity. As they say goodbye, some hug



and linger while others rush out, unsure about how to navigate the departure. Someone always makes the joke that they came for community hours and left with community. They always laugh. It's always true. The teens make bracelets with their pieces of string and wear them in different ways on different wrists.

**On average, more than half of the teens who participate in the program each year join SAEDA's Advisory Council after the five days end. The council communicates and meets regularly to continue and expand the work they started during the training.**

There is an active text chat group and they get together to hang out; many feel that they are closer in specific ways to those in that group than they are with their school friends. Teens reach out to the facilitators often, checking in about life. It is not uncommon for them to ask a facilitator to present to a group of their peers elsewhere in the community or to a college class once they've graduated from high school. They remain connected and committed to their advocacy as they move forward. The web gets bigger every year.

**It is estimated that in its 20-year run, SAEDA has directly trained more than 1,000 young people.** While this number is impressive, it is a gross

underrepresentation of the true number impacted by the program. SAEDA participants are trained to reach out to those around them. Their reach, into communities and schools and families and peer groups, is far. There is so much change attributable to SAEDA that won't be measured in a post-test or survey or a participant focus group. Some things are hard to measure, impossible to quantify. **Evaluation tools won't capture what happens inside a young person's mind when they speak up and others listen, how one grows into and begins to trust their own voice.** It is difficult to know how to measure what happens when a teen's understanding of power and influence — of how they are balanced and imbalanced — shifts. There is no reliable tool to calculate the strength of the foundations that are built for future relationships.

Movements sometimes push forward quietly, steadily — their spread is not always apparent to everyone. Most of the young people hold onto and wear the thin pieces of string they were given from the closing SAEDA exercise for a long time. These pieces are part of something bigger and full. They remind the teens that they are connected. They suggest they may be giving up on some of the adults around them, as well as the systems and norms that have hurt them, aged them and held them back — but they are not giving up on each other or on themselves.



The conference room is so alive during the SAEDA sessions that it's hard to imagine what happens at the end of the five days. It's difficult to picture what



it looks like once the giant sticky paper posters the teens have made come down from the walls and the bins are cleared of wrappers and coffee cups and everyone heads out the door. As the sessions close and SAEDA participants walk through the mall on the way out to sunlight, they are clumped into groups with their new friends, talking about what they will do over the weekend, laughing. They emit energy. **They are prepared to shape the spaces they occupy, designing what they need and deserve. They need community. They deserve to be heard. They are leaders. They are moving together.** If movements can build — if transformations can seed — inside a fluorescent-lit, windowless conference room, they can happen anywhere.

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