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Starting Younger to Prevent Dating Abuse

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Programs that teach young people how to avoid abusive relationships are generally for high school or college age. But new programs are being created for younger students because they too experience abusive dating relationships.

Earlier this year the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released a study done in the United States. Fifteen percent of seventh graders in the study said they had been the victim of physical violence in a relationship with the opposite sex. Seventh graders are about twelve years old.

Kelly Miller, a lawyer in the state of Idaho, directs a program called Start Strong Idaho. It started three and a half years ago. The goal is to help eleven- to fourteen-year-olds learn the skills to have healthy and safe relationships. For example, she teaches them to "wait a second and breathe" before they make a decision.

Ms. Miller says a big problem for young people is that television programs, video games and movies often show violent relationships. Mobile phones and the Internet can also create problems.

KELLY MILLER: "Now young people have access to one another 24/7, which I think really can complicate lives of young people that don't have the skills or boundaries or that ability to say, 'No I can't text you at two in the morning' or 'No, I really need to get to sleep by eleven because I've got a test tomorrow morning.'"

Kelly Miller says young people need adults to teach them what it means to have a healthy relationship. Several American cities have received money from the CDC, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for programs to prevent abusive relationships.

A private organization called Men Can Stop Rape has groups for boys between the ages of twelve and fourteen. These Men of Strength, or MOST, groups teach boys that being a strong man is not always about physical strength.

They learn that if they respect themselves and others, they will be men of

strength. They are also taught that they can be allies of girls and women. A CDC study showed that boys in these groups are more likely help a young woman who is being mistreated by another boy.

In Idaho, the state does a Youth Risk Behavior Survey each year. Ms. Miller says the number of high school students who say they have been physically hurt by a dating partner has dropped by six percentage points in the past six years.

KELLY MILLER: "So we're hopeful if we continue this work in really promoting healthy teen relationships and teaching those skills, that we can continue to impact the Youth Risk Behavior Survey question."

Next week, we look at some of the skills needed to build healthy relationships.

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report, available online at voaspecialenglish.com. Read, listen and learn English with our programs and activities. You can also find links to the Start Strong Idaho and Men Can Stop Rape websites. I'm Karen Leggett.