



WCSAP
Washington Coalition of
Sexual Assault Programs

THE PREVENTION REVIEW

Engaging Bystanders in Sexual Violence Prevention



Tabachnick, J. (2009). *Engaging Bystanders in Violence Prevention*. Encola, PA: National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

The publication [Engaging Bystanders in Violence Prevention](#) makes the sometimes complex nature of violence prevention and the bystander approach easy to understand. While providing insight into why people are not always active bystanders, the text also offers various easy to replicate activities to stimulate bystander involvement in communities.

The bystander approach has been discussed and utilized in many social contexts and has become a common concept. However, *Engaging Bystanders in Violence Prevention* very clearly makes the connection of how the bystander approach is a useful tool in the primary prevention of sexual violence. The text explains that using the bystander approach can address some of the core values in the sexual assault movement: reducing victim blaming by creating an expectation that others need to intervene, challenging social norms that allow for sexual violence to occur, and shifting responsibility off of individuals and onto communities (men and women alike).

The bystander approach is sometimes considered a form of intervention. This text helps reframe the approach as a tool of primary prevention by explaining the continuum of behaviors that are related to sexual violence and all the points along the continuum where bystanders can intervene before sexual violence occurs.

We often think of bystander intervention as simply an individual action, but also know that preventing sexual violence requires larger societal change. *Engaging Bystanders* connects individual actions to larger societal change by explaining how the bystander

approach works on multiple levels of the [Social Ecological Model](#), which is best practice in primary prevention work.

- **Individual Level:** individuals need skill training so they can identify warning signs and intervene appropriately. (See the “Five Steps Towards Taking Action” on pages 12 and 40).
- **Relationship Level:** individuals must both be a model in their own bystander actions and share stories of positive bystander engagement with their friends, family, and peers.
- **Community Level:** organizational policies or programs that promote active bystander engagement help create new norms of action rather than acceptance of sexual violence.
- **Societal Level:** messages about active bystander engagement must be reflected in media and policy changes; just as the stories of victims helped create infrastructure for direct services, stories of bystanders can help create social change.

Throughout the book there are activities that will help build the capacity of individuals and communities to become active bystanders in the prevention of sexual violence. The first activity, *A Call To Action*, addresses the reasons why people may or may not act in situations. The second activity, *Notice and Choose Each Day*, addresses all the places along the continuum of behaviors that bystanders can intervene. The third activity addresses the many people and organizations that are connected to one person and relieves the victim in the situation of the entire burden of protection. Each activity comes with a trainer’s guide that explains materials necessary, time needed, objectives to cover, and size of the appropriate audience. Finally, there are step-by-step instructions so the activity can be easily replicated. At the end of text there is a series of four scenarios that can be used with community groups so people can practice different ways to be an active bystander. The scenarios also come with trainer instructions on how to replicate.

Suggested Uses:

- Great primer for stakeholders or educators on the foundation of the bystander approach and how this is helpful in preventing sexual violence.
- Use the activities in the text with any community group to build bystander capacity. The three activities build upon themselves and could be helpful if used together in the order in the text.
- Use the four scenarios as a fun activity with a group to practice building bystander skills.