

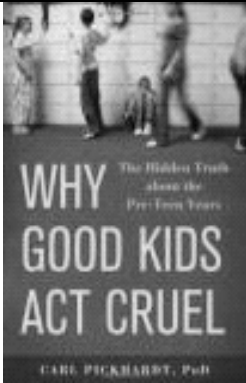
The Youth Advocate

September 2010 ~ Peer Pressure & Relationships

A Newsletter of the Youth Advocacy Task Force of The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

The Youth Advocacy Task Force (YATF), which is coordinated by the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, is a statewide coalition of Domestic and Sexual Violence Advocates who focus primarily on providing advocacy services and prevention education programs to children and youth in Vermont. As part of our mission, we are committed to acknowledging the specific injustices experienced by young people and to holding their integrity and human rights as paramount in our work to end domestic and sexual violence. We meet regularly to share resources, design children and youth related materials, and support one another in carrying on this important and challenging work. The idea to produce a newsletter grew out of a desire to share our work and other youth related resources with a wider audience. In each issue, *The Youth Advocate* will highlight topic areas related to domestic and sexual violence and how these issues affect children and youth in Vermont. Enjoy!

Special Focus - Book Review: Why Good Kids Act Cruel: The Hidden Truth about the Pre-Teen Years



Book written by:
Carl Pickhardt, Ph.D.

Reviewed by:
Gwen Lavoie,
Children's Services Coordinator
Voices Against Violence/Laurie's House

I volunteered to review a book on peer pressure for this newsletter largely because after 25 years of working with youth, I still don't have a good grasp on why they have such power and sway over one another. This was an opportunity for me to look through the most recent research and answer questions for myself.

I Googled "peer pressure" and the definitions ranged from the positive "encouragement by one's peers" (wiktionary.com) to the more coercive "process of using verbal or mental intimidation to force an individual to comply with a form of conduct determined by [others] and that undermines an individual's right to make their own decisions (ctal.martin.com). But why are youth so susceptible to influence from their peers?

Fortunately, I gained a helpful perspective by reading the book *Why Good Kids Act Cruel: The Hidden Truth about the Pre-Teen Years*. Dr. Carl Pickhardt does a beautiful job explaining that one of the functions of adolescence, which begins around the age of 9 and continues for the next 10-12 years, is to "contest and ultimately overthrow parental authority and claim true individuality and functional independence." Doing this can severely strain relationships between parents and children. This process can also create a great deal of insecurity for pre-teens and teens. In response, adolescents take comfort and find sanctuary in each other. This makes sense since so many of them are suffering from loneliness and insecurities caused by the difficulties they are experiencing within their families. They need each other



more than ever.

But the question remains: If they need each other so much, why are they so often cruel to each other? The answer in a word: *puberty*. The 1 ½ -3 years of uncontrollable and unpredictable sexual and physical growth that turns many children into self-obsessed and sometimes self-loathing creatures is often a nightmare for all parties involved – including their peers. No pimple is too small. No hair will go unnoticed.

Throw the complexity of puberty onto an already insecure adolescent and you've got a hot mess on your hands. Pickhardt relates this conversation:

"What's middle school like?" I asked a 6th grade client. "Is it different from elementary school?"

He shook his head. "It's like the wild west out there," he finally said.

As adolescents try to define their position among their peers, they may start to treat each other badly or put pressure on each other to conform to a certain set of behaviors. Dr. Pickhardt asserts that adolescents act this way to keep themselves from being hurt or to make themselves feel better about their own social standing or behavior. Pickhardt defines this as *social cruelty*, an "antisocial

behavior that serves a social purpose." He organizes the behaviors into five types: teasing, exclusion, bullying, rumoring, and ganging up; devoting a chapter to each topic.

In a most helpful section of this book, Pickhardt writes about the ways parents can stay connected to their young teens who are trying so hard to push them away. He also includes a lengthy section on the ways schools, particularly at the middle level, should be addressing social cruelty.

Pickhardt states:

This is no time to abandon your teenagers just because they want to be left alone to manage their own lives.

Relational Aggression and Peer Pressure

Andrea Jones,
Youth Services Coordinator
AWARE

Relational aggression is a type of aggression in which harm is caused through damage to relationships or social status rather than physical violence.

Relational aggression is emotional violence. It relies on the use of social skills to create networks of "negativity" around a particular target. People who use relational aggression seek to manipulate how others view a particular individual. They do this by isolating the victim, spreading or posting vicious rumors and lies about the person's private life, and exposing secrets and creating situations of public humiliation. Many of these behaviors are common in adolescent friendships, but when they occur repeatedly to one particular victim, it constitutes bullying.

The end goal of this type of

bullying is to increase the social status of the bully. One reason bullies choose this behavior rather than more direct acts of harassment is to avoid being caught or held accountable. If there is no blood, bruising or classroom disruption, then where is the evidence?

These bullies are often popular, charismatic students who are already receiving positive attention from adults. Because of their positive reputations, they are usually the least likely suspects. So, it can be very difficult to identify perpetrators of relational aggression, leaving victims to suffer longer without support. The *Ophelia Project* is one of the first organizations to study relational aggression. They report the following statistics:

- Children as young as preschool age use relational aggression as a means to an end, rather than as retaliation.
- Relational aggression is not linked with socio-economic status - children from all social classes use relational aggression.
- Despite such popular terms such as "mean girls" or "queen bees" – this is not a gender-specific type of bullying. Boys are also relationally aggressive. In fact, some studies show that the frequency with which boys use relational aggression increases with age, while for most girls, it decreases.

Victims of relational aggression may appear sullen, secretive and moody. Although these behaviors can sometimes be attributed to hormonal changes or adolescent rebellion, they could also be symptoms of experiencing

Peer Pressure Through Cell Phones

By: Savannah Williams, Sexual Violence Prevention Specialist & Youth Advocate, Advocacy Program at Umbrella - Newport

Dear Parents,

There may come a time when your child wakes up, comes to the breakfast table and you have no idea who this *half child/half adult being* is. He or she may be wrapped up in school, sports, movies, music, clothes, and more importantly - FRIENDS! Some friends you may approve of, some you may not. You may have a feeling that some "friends" are influencing your child in the wrong way. Once upon a time, youth were pressured by peers to wear certain clothes, drink alcohol, and experiment with drugs. Okay, so this still happens today peers have a strong hold on each other. The opinion of an authority figure does not count any more than it used to. The difference now is that the ante has been upped by technology. Sometimes children and youth use technology in ways that create situations of peer pressure, bullying and coercion. Our world has become technology driven. As your child starts to go out into the world without an authority figure, you may consider getting your child a cell phone for fast and easy check-ins and protection. A word of caution - the cell phone has an *evil-twin* side that you should be aware of. Two thirds of the children in America from the ages 10-19 have cell phones. Cell phones today can take pictures, send texts, have caller ID and GPS (which was originally made for 911 emergency uses only), and have access to the internet. According to a survey by the National Children's Home Charity and Tesco Mobile, 10 % of children that own cell phones between the ages of 11-19 report having had a picture taken with a cell phone that made them feel uncomfortable or threatened. (<http://www.mysecurecyberspace.com/>). Everyday, technology becomes more sophisticated right along with bullies and predators. Cell phones can be a gateway for peer pressure or cyber bullying. Your child may send a picture or text message intended to be viewed by only one person. However, photos and texts can be forwarded to others or posted on web sites in a blink of an eye. Then BAM! The whole school (even the world) can see or read what your child wrote. In the hands of unkind peers, these pictures and texts can be used to bully or manipulate your child. It could include a threat: "I will not send this if you . . ." situations. How can you protect your children? Be clear with them about cell phone safety. Talk about who they are allowed to talk to and remind them to never give their numbers to anyone they don't know 'in real life'. If they have access to texting and a camera, help them understand that once a photo or text is sent, there is no way to erase or retrieve it. It is lost in the void called the "World Wide Web" and could potentially be seen by many people even if they only sent it to one person. There are certainly risks to having a cell phone but, at some point, you may feel that the benefits outweigh the risks. You know that having a cell phone will soon become a reality for your *half child/half adult being*. With education and the proper tools, you can help your child use his or her cell phone safely and take advantage of the security with fewer dangers.

Sincerely,

Savannah

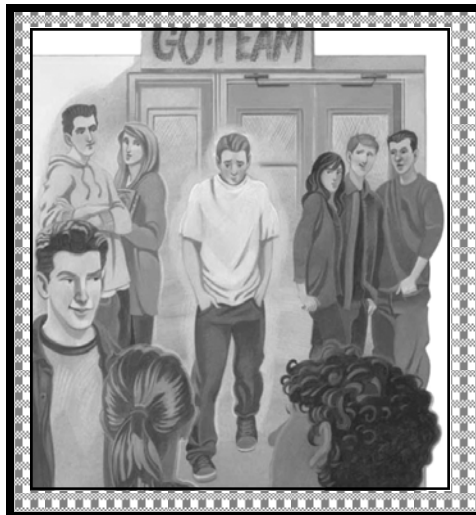
relational aggression. School absences, anxiety, depression and long-term mental health concerns can be consequences of experiencing relational aggression. Relational aggression has also been linked to acts of school violence. Researchers have described how many school shooters, boys and girls, turn to violence when they are victims of social isolation and poor treatment by peers. Early adolescent peer relationships seem to be particularly important in laying the foundations for future romantic relationships. Studies have found that women who were frequent victims as children are more likely to end up in abusive adult relationships.

Using relational aggression also comes with consequences. Many who participate in this type of bullying do so because they feel pressure from another more dominant bully. These kids often feel that if they don't side with the bully and participate, they too will be targeted as a victim. As a result of the peer pressure to bully, many who are relationally aggressive feel lonely and depressed and are likely to get into other trouble in the classroom. According to the Ophelia Project, children who are relationally aggressive are often highly disliked by many of their classmates, although they do seem to have friends. This suggests that although relational

aggressors appear to be social "leaders", they feel badly about themselves and their social situations. These children are at-risk for serious future problems such as delinquency and substance abuse.

How can parents and concerned adults help?

Encouraging students to form friendships and social groups based on interests rather than social status is key. Children who are caught up in a cycle of wanting to be popular may need to be reminded to "choose friends who are nice rather than mean to you." If your child is being bullied this way, seek counseling for them. If you recognize your child is the bully, counseling is equally important.



Journaling can also help if the child is interested in writing or drawing about things that happen - positive and negative. Also, seek support from the school. Most relational aggression happens at school, it's important that the whole school community take a stand against harassment and bullying. Get involved with after-school activities that will help students form friendships based on interests rather than popularity.

Lastly, talk about bullying with students. Ask what they see and if they feel the adults in their lives

are aware. Be supportive when your child is ready to talk and brainstorm things that can be done. If you can intervene, talk to other parents, school teachers and counselors about what is happening.

I Remember...

Thoughts from an adult about bullying and cruelty...

"When I was younger I wasn't so much bullied in the traditional sense of the word, but more so about [whom] I hung out with, what clothes I wore or where I lived. Even at a young age, I enjoyed hanging out with different kids from all different backgrounds. I found something unique and learned something from each individual more so [than] if I associated just in a [clique]. I found 'the popular girls' would whisper and point their fingers if someone was different than they were. I never let their whispers or snickers bother me but often thought how traumatic it would be for those kids who had to be subjected to the humiliation and be labeled as different.

I couldn't imagine someone being that cruel and unkind that way. They could use words to make another human being feel inferior. And why? Because that person looked different, didn't dress in the right clothes or live in the right neighborhood. It is interesting to think of why someone feels they have the right to impose their insecurities onto someone else whether it be an act of physical or mental bullying.

~ Woman

Age 32



“Peer pressure is like washing dirty laundry. You may not want to do something, but feel like you have to.”

~ female, 11



“My attitude is if you don’t think what I’m doing is cool then screw you. I’m not going to change so some kid thinks I’m cool.”

~ female, 14



Experiences and Thoughts Regarding Peer Pressure From Today’s Youth

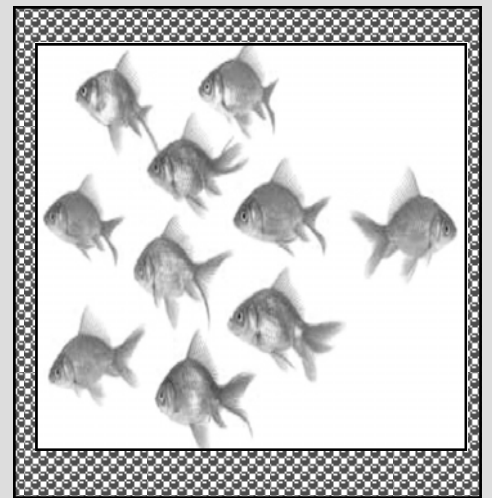
Compiled by: Amy Herrick,
Educator Coordinator
Circle

“I was influenced by other kids in high school in little ways. I always thought I was immune to peer pressure because I never caved on big stuff like substances or sex. But I definitely followed the crowd with clothing styles and after-school activities. I wasn’t really comfortable trusting my own decisions. I wanted to fit in, I guess.”

~ female, 19

There are so many ways kids put pressure on you in school. Little things like not talking to someone who’s not cool, or giving them your homework so they can copy it. And then there’s the major pressure about drinking and hooking up. It’s hard. I try to ignore it, but sometimes I can’t.”

~ female, 16



“When kids ask you to do something ‘cool’, ***think*** for a little while before you say yes or no. Is it something you really want to do, or is it something that you’ll only do to fit in?”

~ female 12



“My parents keep telling me I should just think for myself. It’s not that easy when you walk down the halls and everyone is looking at you and judging you.”

~ male, 13



More From Youth...

“I thought when I got to college people would chill out a little, but it’s not really that way. I still feel like you get scoped out about what you’re doing. It’s easier to find friends in college who want to do the same things you want to do, so that takes away some pressure.”

~ male, 20

“The first time I smoked pot, it was totally because my friends were like, ‘come on, it’s fun.’ I didn’t really like it but I didn’t want them to think I was a loser. Now I don’t even like to hang with those kids, so it seems kind of dumb.”

~ male, age 16

“I feel like all anyone ever talks about is sex. I don’t really want to do it yet, but I feel like it’s getting harder to say no as I get older. I feel like a prude. Plus it makes me curious.”

~ female, 14

Pressure Pointers: Tips for Youth

www.kidshealth.org

Nearly everyone ends up in a sticky peer pressure situation at some point. No matter how wisely you choose your friends, or how well you think you know them, sooner or later you’ll have to make decisions that are difficult and could be unpopular. It may be something as simple as resisting the pressure to spend your hard-earned babysitting money on the latest MP3 player that “everybody” has. Or it may mean deciding to take a stand that makes you look un-cool to your group. But these situations can be opportunities to figure out what is right for you. There’s no magic to standing up to peer pressure, but it does take courage — yours:

- Listen to your gut. If you feel uncomfortable, even if your friends seem to be OK with what’s going on, it means that something about the situation is wrong for you. This kind of decision-making is part of becoming self-reliant and learning more about who you are.
- Plan for possible pressure situations. If you’d like to go to a party but you believe you may be offered alcohol or drugs there, think ahead about how you’ll handle this challenge. Decide ahead of time — and even rehearse — what you’ll say and do. Learn a few tricks. If you’re holding a bottle of water or a can of soda, for instance, you’re less likely to be offered a drink you don’t want.

- Arrange a "bail-out" code phrase you can use with your parents without losing face with your peers. You might call home from a party at which you're feeling pressured to drink alcohol and say, for instance, "Can you come and drive me home? I have a terrible earache."
- Learn to feel comfortable saying "no." With good friends you should never have to offer an explanation or apology. But if you feel you need an excuse for, say, turning down a drink or smoke, think up a few lines you can use casually. You can always say, "No, thanks, I've got a belt test in karate next week and I'm in training," or "No way — my uncle just died of cirrhosis and I'm not even looking at any booze."
- Hang with people who feel the same way you do. Choose friends who will speak up with you when you're in need of moral support, and be quick to speak up for a friend in the same way. If you're hearing that little voice telling you a situation's not right, chances are others hear it, too. Just having one other person stand with you against peer pressure makes it much easier for both people to resist.
- Blame your parents: 'Are you kidding? If my mom found out, she'd kill me, and her spies are everywhere.' If a situation seems dangerous, don't hesitate to get an adult's help.

It's not always easy to resist negative peer pressure, but when you do, it is easy to feel good about it afterwards. And you may even be a positive influence on

your peers who feel the same way — often it just takes one person to speak out or take a different action to change a situation. Your friends may follow if you have the courage to do something different or refuse to go along with the group. Consider yourself a leader, and know that you have the potential to make a difference.

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/friends/peer_pressure.html#

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I think peer pressure is not fair because you shouldn't have to do something you don't want to do. I believe you can say no. You have to be able to say no. Just like me.

~ Male, 11



"I know peer pressure is everywhere. I'd like to think I'd be able to say no if I was being pressured to do something I don't want to do ~ no matter what ~ but I guess if it was that easy, peer pressure wouldn't be happening."

~ Female, 13

How Parents Can Help Their Children

www.kidshealth.org

Healthy self-esteem is a child's armor against the challenges of the world. Kids who feel good about themselves seem to have an easier time handling conflicts and resisting negative pressures. They tend to smile more readily and enjoy life. These kids are realistic and generally optimistic. In contrast, kids with low self-esteem can find challenges to be sources of major anxiety and frustration. Those who think poorly of themselves have a hard time finding solutions to problems. If given to self-critical thoughts such as "I'm no good" or "I can't do anything right," they may become passive, withdrawn, or depressed. Faced with a new challenge, their immediate response is "I can't." How can a parent help to foster healthy self-esteem in a child?

These tips can make a big difference:

Watch what you say.

Kids are very sensitive to parents' words. Remember to praise your child not only for a job well done, but also for effort. But be truthful. For example, if your child doesn't make the soccer team, avoid saying something like, "Well, next time you'll work harder and make it." Instead, try "Well, you didn't make the team, but I'm really proud of the effort you put into it." Reward effort and completion instead of outcome.

Be a positive role model.

If you're excessively harsh on yourself, pessimistic, or unrealistic about your abilities and limitations, your child may eventually mirror

you. Nurture your own self-esteem, and your child will have a great role model.

Identify and redirect your child's inaccurate beliefs.

It's important for parents to identify kids' irrational beliefs about themselves, whether they're about perfection, attractiveness, ability, or anything else. Helping kids set more accurate standards and be more realistic in evaluating themselves will help them have a healthy self-concept. Inaccurate perceptions of self can take root and become reality to kids. For example, a child who does very well in school but struggles with math may say, "I can't do math. I'm a bad student." Not only is this a false generalization, it's also a belief that will set the child up for failure. Encourage kids to see a situation in its true light. A helpful response might be: "You are a good student. You do great in school. Math is just a subject that you need to spend more time on. We'll work on it together."

Be spontaneous and affectionate.

Your love will go a long way to boost your child's self-esteem. Give hugs and tell kids you're proud of them. Pop a note in your child's lunchbox that reads, "I think you're terrific!" Give praise frequently and honestly, without overdoing it. Kids can tell whether something comes from the heart.

Give positive, accurate feedback.

Comments like "You always work yourself up into such a frenzy!" will make kids feel like they have no control over their outbursts. A better statement is, "You were really mad at your brother. But I appreciate that you didn't yell at him or hit him." This acknowledges a child's feelings, rewards

the choice made, and encourages the child to make the right choice again next time.

"It's hard to say no to peer pressure. If your friends do something, you'll feel stupid if you don't do it also."

~ female, 13



Create a safe, loving home environment.

Kids who don't feel safe or are abused at home will suffer immensely from low self-esteem. A child who is exposed to parents who fight and argue repeatedly may become depressed and withdrawn. Also watch for signs of abuse by others, problems in school, trouble with peers, and other factors that may affect kids' self-esteem. Deal with these issues sensitively but swiftly. And always remember to respect your kids.



Statistics about Peer Pressure...

- *What Girls Say About Life In Vermont: Executive Summary—2006* revealed that 55% of girls 11-13; 45% of girls 13-15; 37% of girls 15-17; and 30% of girls over 17 **say they deal daily or weekly with pressure from peers to make choices they'd rather not make**
- The Kaiser Foundation reports that about 50% of teenagers feel pressured with regard to sex in relationships.
- The Adolescent Substance Abuse Knowledge Base reports that right around 30% if teens are offered drugs in middle school and high school.
- According to the National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 74.3% of high school students have tried alcohol.
- 3.1 million teenagers smoke, according to the American Lung Association.

<http://women.vermont.gov/sites/women/files/pdf/WhatGirlsSay06.pdf>

<http://www.familyfirstaid.org>

Thank You.....

Sandy Hart, Youth Program Coordinator at Umbrella for wrestling with formatting, compiling resources, and overall visioning.

To our article writers and gatherers of survivor and youth quotes and stories...

Gwen Lavoie—Voices Against Violence

Andrea Jones—AWARE

Savannah Williams—Umbrella

Amy Herrick—Circle

Roxana MacMartin—Circle

Books:



Friends, Cliques, and Peer Pressure: Be True to Yourself
Christine Wickert Koubek

The In Crowd: Dealing With Peer Pressure
Amy Rechner, 2009

The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School--How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence
Barbara Coloroso, 2009.

Life Strategies for Dealing with Bullies
Jay McGraw, 2008.

The Secret Lives of Boy: Inside the Raw Emotional World of Male Teens
Malina Saval, 2009.

The Curse of the Good Girl: Raising Authentic Girls with Courage and Confidence
Rachel Simmons, 2009.

The Courage to Be Yourself: True Stories by Teens about Cliques, Conflicts, and Overcoming Peer Pressure
Edited by Al Desetta, 2005.

Understanding Peer Influence in Children and Adolescents
Edited by Mitchell J. Prinstein and Kenneth A. Dodge, 2010.

Cliques: Deal With it What You Have Inside
By Kat Mototsune, illustrated by Ben Shannon, not until December, 2010.

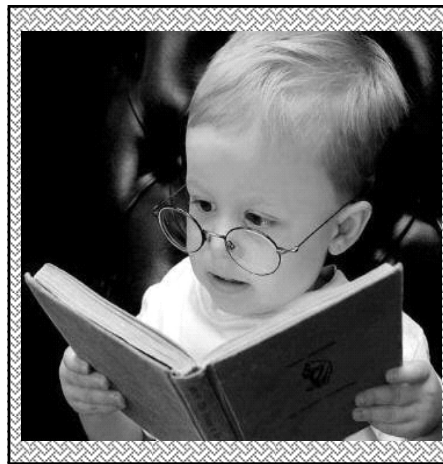
Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls
Rachel Simmons, 2003

Odd Girl Speaks Out: Girls Write about Bullies, Cliques, Popularity, and Jealousy
By Rachel Simmons, 2004.

Handling Peer Pressure
Kate Stevenson Clark, Madonna M. Murphy, Sharon L. Banas

Peer Pressure: Deal with it without losing your cool (Deal With It series)
Elaine Slavens, Ben Shannon

Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying
By Cheryl Dellasega, Charisse Nixon, Elina D. Nudelman, 2003.



Resources:

For parents and other adults

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

www.kidshealth.org

www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fm103>

www.tnpc.com/parentalk/

www.tnpc.com

www.cfw.tufts.edu/

<http://www.StopRAtoday.com>

www.teachersandfamilies.com

www.canadian-health-network.ca

www.clubophelia.com

Web

Sites:

<http://www>

Websites for Youth

www.teenvoices.com

www.powerofhope.org

Websites for Girls

www.gURL.com

www.smartgirl.com

www.newmoon.org

www.smith.edu/

ourhealthourfutures

Websites for Adults

www.bccf.bc.ca

www.fullesteemahead.org

www.opheliaproject.org

<http://www.bullies2buddies.com/>

www.helpstopbullying.com

<http://www.edap.org/>

Websites for Youth & Adults

www.girlsinc.org

www.bullying.org

www.edap.org

www.empowerprogram.org

www.genaustin.org

www.nfb.ca/itsagirlsworld

<http://www.thecoolspot.gov/>

www.relationalaggression.com



Youth Advocacy Task Force Member Programs

Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

<i>Program</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Hotline Number</i>
AWARE	Hardwick area	472-6463
Circle	Barre/Montpelier/Washington Co	1-877-543-9498
Clarina Howard Nichols Center	Morrisville/Lamoille Co.	888-5256
New Beginnings	Springfield/ Southern Windsor Co	885-2050 or 674-6700
PAVE	Bennington Co.	442-2111
Rutland County Women's Network	Rutland/Rutland Co.	775-3232
Sexual Assault Crisis Team	Barre/Montpelier/Washington Co	479-5577
Safeline	Orange and NE Windsor Co	1-800-639-7233
Advocacy Program at Umbrella	Caledonia and S. Essex Co.	748-8645
	Orleans and N. Essex Co.	334-0148
Voices Against Violence/Laurie's House	St. Albans/ Franklin & Grand Isle Co.	524-6575
WomenSafe	Addison Co. and the Town of Rochester	1-800-388-4205
Women Helping Battered Women	Burlington/Chittenden Co.	658-1996
WISE (Women's Information Service)	White River Junction, VT/ Lebanon, NH	866-348-WISE (9473)
Women's Crisis Center	Brattleboro/ Windham Co	1-800-773-0689
Women's Rape Crisis Center	Burlington/Chittenden Co. area	863-1236

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~Network Program Children and Youth Services~

Children and Youth related services provided by Vermont Network Programs

vary across the state. Services include:

Prevention Education in flexible formats on topics including: healthy relationships, dating and domestic violence, sexual violence, bullying, the effects of exposure to battering on children, media literacy and consent.

Support Groups for children, teens, and non-offending parents with variety of focuses relating to domestic and sexual violence

Emotional Support for children, teens, and non-offending parents

Emergency Shelter for families fleeing from domestic or sexual violence

Advocacy for children, teens, and non-offending parents with courts, schools, DCF, and other child related systems

Training and in-services about domestic and sexual violence related issues for teachers and other professionals working with children and youth