



dialing down the drama

defusing early relationship conflicts to reduce teen dating violence

Prepared for Blue Shield of California Foundation
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“I need drama in my life to keep making music.”
-- Eminem

“I don't want no drama in my life, even though we have a little bit, but no more letting people control you. That's drama, because then you become something that you're not.”

--Mary J. Blige

“I first learned the concepts of non-violence in my marriage.”
-- Gandhi

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INTRODUCTION:

Intimate partner violence is a global issue that affects people of all ages, races and ethnicities. Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused during her lifetime.¹ America is no exception. In fact, the problem is just as rampant here as in less fortunate countries around the world. Estimates range from 960,000 incidents of violence against a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend per year², to three million women who are physically abused by their husband or boyfriend per year.³

According to a report prepared for the Family Violence Prevention Fund, *Promoting Prevention, Targeting Teens*, youth ages 16 to 24 are the most at-risk population for intimate partner violence. Furthermore, the report goes on to assert that while there is emerging and promising work being done in this area, there is a greater need to better understand the issues surrounding this behavior, especially among the most vulnerable sub-populations. Finally, it calls for an increase in social marketing campaigns directed to these audiences as a critical tool in addressing this issue.⁴

Blue Shield of California Foundation recognizes the severity of this issue and has made a long-standing commitment to ending domestic violence. As part of the Blue Shield Against Violence Strategic Plan, The Foundation seeks to create change in California by focusing on the prevention of violence at a critical time in a person's life - the teenage years. Building off of the recommendations within *Promoting Prevention, Targeting Teens*, Blue Shield of California Foundation is in the formative stages of creating a social marketing program to address the issue of intimate partner violence among young people. Our goal is not to reinvent what has already been done or to confirm previous learning. Rather, it is to discover new insights that can be leveraged to create unique communications that address the issue of intimate partner violence with equal amounts innovation and efficacy.

Yellowbrickroad Communications was enlisted by Blue Shield of California Foundation to review existing campaigns in this area, conduct new innovative primary research and synthesize our learning into a cohesive communications strategy that will drive the creative development of a media campaign.

We truly believe that communication can change the world. However, it is critical that in creating social change programs, we apply the best practices from the private sector to public benefit. We must utilize the most innovative research design to uncover new insights, and tap into the best minds and creative talent to deliver empowering strategic direction and messaging. And, we must create powerful partnerships to help bring our ideas to life. Most importantly, we must always ground our communications in the reality of the issue. This means we must ensure that our messages are created "for youth, by youth" and are well integrated with the efforts of those who are dealing with the issue every day on the ground and in the community.

OUR PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY:

As we approached this process and designed our research plan, there were several key imperatives that drove our thinking:

We Must Develop a Deeper Understanding of the Issue.

We believe there is an incredible opportunity to utilize more innovative formative research methods to uncover deeper insights into the dynamics of intimate partner violence. Specific questions that could be explored by going beyond focus groups and secondary research are:

- What is the process that leads to violent behavior at so early an age?
- How can communication help our youth mitigate conflict and control violence?
- What are the subconscious cues and triggers that lead to negative behavior?
- What is the context in which our messages will be best received?

Our Learning Must Help Focus the Scope of Our Campaign.

There is a great deal of positive activity among existing campaigns, but we are uncertain if these campaigns are making significant positive impact. Many are too broad in their target, message strategy and in their delivery based on their limited resources. We need to use our formative research to help answer the difficult questions and provide focus to our future efforts:

- What change can we create?
- On what target group can we have the greatest impact?
- How narrowly can we define our target?
- How can we target them with the greatest precision?
- How will we measure and isolate our impact?

We Need to Ensure Authenticity at Every Level.

Our research must create insights, not confirm concepts. We should have our message flow authentically from the underpinnings of the issue and into the cultural context of our target's lives. We must ensure that our messaging strategy has integrity that comes from the ground up and not the top down. The first step is to get out from behind the glass and into the communities to conduct our research.

We Must Identify the Unique Aperture When We Can Have the Most Impact.

Young people don't need just another well-intentioned advertising campaign that tries to "empower" them. The best campaigns acknowledge the environmental and systemic barriers that stand in the way of long-term behavior change. We must develop a program that is well integrated with the issue on the street and that has elements that are intervention-oriented with tangible tools. Critical to this will be reflecting and leveraging the changing media environment to insure that our message is delivered when and where it will be most receptive to our target audience.

Our Learning Should Lead to Innovative & Organic Partnerships.

As we have seen, partnerships are key to getting our message out, but the wrong relationship can immediately discredit your authenticity. The best partnerships are those that flow organically from our cause and reflect the interests and concerns of our target group.

We Must Place an Emphasis on Evaluating Our Efforts.

Every activity is an opportunity to add value to this discussion. Every program must justify its existence by capturing and sharing relevant learning at every stage of its development and execution. Reasonable and measurable objectives should be established and the program must be accountable for its performance. This should be a key consideration in developing program ideas.

Our process featured two distinct phases:

1. Conduct primary research to uncover new insights that will not only inform our efforts but contribute important learning to the field. This phase consisted of three parts:
 - a. Expert Consultation
 - b. Community Partner Outreach
 - c. Teen Ethnography
2. Create a strategic framework that synthesizes and distills all of our learning and will drive our creative development process.

Below provides a brief description of each phase of our process, the specifics of our engagement with the issue and target and what we hoped to learn from each phase:

PHASE I Primary Research: “Uncovering Insights from the Inside Out”

Our primary research approach was driven by our philosophy that we must create a communications program that is both “for youth, by youth” and well integrated within community efforts. Thus, we designed our primary research beginning within our target and extending outward to include learning from the frontlines and larger societal contexts.

Social Science Expert Consultation & Analysis: We conducted primary research, with the main objective of expanding our understanding of intimate partner violence, by first interviewing experts in related fields, including psychology, adolescent development, gender studies, ethnicity and communication. Each interview covered a range of topics including background learning in each area of expertise, its application to adolescence in general and the issue of intimate partner violence specifically. Finally, we solicited suggestions for intervention in the form of communication, and/or programs based on their learning. Those interviewed were:

Dr. Sam Cohen: Founder and President of Psychologies, a market research firm made up of trained psychology professionals.
Dr. Laurence Steinberg: Distinguished University Professor, Laura H. Carnell Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Temple University, and a recognized expert in the area of adolescent development.
Michael Gurian: Social philosopher, family therapist and author of twenty books, including <i>The Wonder of Boys</i> .
Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall: Founding Director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center, and Anna Julia

Cooper Professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College. Co-authored the book, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities*.

Emilio Ulloa:

Undergraduate Advisor, Department of Psychology, College of Sciences, San Diego State University.

By interviewing each of the experts above, we gained new perspective about intimate partner violence from the unique point of view of their individual areas of expertise. This has allowed us to generate a deeper understanding about adolescent development, in order to identify intervention potential with our target in general and any opportunities that might be segmented by gender, age, race or ethnicity. We also garnered suggestions about possible communication and/or program interventions aimed at ending intimate partner violence.

Community Partner Outreach: To get even closer to the root of the issue, we leveraged relationships with Blue Shield of California Foundation grantees and potential grantees in order to spend time in sponsored after-school program settings, where we could observe our target audience within a social setting and draw on the expertise of adult and teen administrators. The following provides an overview of the four organizations:

CORA: CORA's sole purpose is serving victims/survivors of domestic violence/abuse. They serve victims regardless of age, race, gender or sexual orientation. Their services include a twenty-four hour adult run hotline, emergency shelter, support groups, crisis response, transitional housing, teen support services and workshops. They also run a "by teens for teens" online chat room three days a week, where teens from all over the world can log on and chat about their issues with other teens. www.corasupport.org

LA Youth: LA Youth is a newspaper written by and for teens. The paper is distributed in classrooms and community centers to approximately 400,000 teens in LA County. The staff consists of 5 adults and 80 teen staff members. The content is designed to be a reflection of what is going on with teens today. Articles cover a wide array of topics and are first-hand accounts of teens' experiences with college stress, racial identity, homophobia, censorship, broken families, teen pregnancy, teen prostitution, drug addiction, and dilapidated neighborhoods. www.layouth.com

Break the Cycle: Break the Cycle's sole purpose is to help youth build lives and communities free from domestic and dating violence. They are a community outreach organization that believes educating and providing kids with the proper tools early on will empower them to achieve healthy relationships and break the cycle. Their services and programs include: legal services, counseling, prevention curriculum, public awareness campaign, and public policy work. www.breakthecycle.org

Youth Radio: Youth Radio is a national organization that gives youth the opportunity to work for its radio station. The station's reporters and DJs are all young people who, through hands-on practice, develop both their journalistic and life skills. The station airs reports on teen issues as seen through the eyes of teens, and often airs round table discussions of teens talking through today's issues. www.youthradio.org

We met with key staff members in each of these organizations, and in some cases teen members of their staff. We were also fortunate to take part in round-table discussions, editorial meetings and workshops. The meetings resulted in important insights into their organizations and access to real teen perspectives on issues.

Teen Ethnographic Research: This last phase of our research was designed to gain greater insights into how teens interact in their relationships, and to better understand situational and language cues that can be appropriated to inform campaign development. Rather than conducting traditional focus groups, we utilized a more anthropological approach to better suit the sensitivity of our topic. This involved an informal observational research technique we call “exploring,” where we sent an ethnographer into settings where our target exists naturally. In other words, “To learn about lions you don’t go to a zoo.” So we traveled to key target locales including malls, schools, food courts, clubs and other typical hangouts to better understand the tensions and issues at play in relationships. The specific locations included:

After-school settings in Burlingame, CA: Burlingame High School, local donut shop, Starbucks
Mall/entertainment center in San Francisco, CA: The Metreon complex (arcade & movie theatre)
After-school settings in Berkeley, CA: Berkeley High School, local shops/streets around the school
Shopping district in Santa Monica, CA: Third Street Promenade & Santa Monica Place Mall (teen-oriented stores – e.g. Apple Store, Urban Outfitters, Quiksilver and food-court)

In addition, we also observed and participated in discussions with teens through the organizations mentioned in the community partner outreach. Specifically:

A CORA Workshop presented to “school-age moms” (Redwood City, CA)
Youth Radio young alumni staffers and current participants (Oakland/Berkeley, CA)
LA Youth editorial meeting of teen writers (Los Angeles, CA)

It is important to note that these discussions and observations were inclusive of a wide spectrum of socio-economic groups, ethnicities and genders; from the continuing education school-age moms in the Redwood City CORA workshop to more affluent teens observed in Burlingame and Santa Monica to a mixed cross-section of more urban teens in Berkeley.

Finally, we were also very fortunate to have access to considerable teen-generated content about relationships, conflict and technology provided by our partners. This included Youth Radio podcasts, LA Youth stories, Break the Cycle poems and CORA chatroom transcripts. This content was critical in being able to capture teen attitudes and behaviors in their own language.

The findings of this phase of our research gave us insight into teen relationship dynamics and interactions from the perspective of the teens themselves. This information served to focus the strategic direction of the campaign, provided tactical insights and imparted authenticity that could only come from a deeper understanding of the target.

PHASE II Strategy Development: “Creating A Platform for Change”

Research and learning are only as good as their ability to be put into action. Coming out from our first two stages, we have distilled our learning into clear, actionable insights. We have developed clear, concise strategy recommendations included later in this document that are summarized in a “Communications Change Brief” that will drive future campaign creative development. Among the questions we will provide recommendations for will be:

- What target segments can we make the most impact on?
- What message strategy will empower our target to take positive action?
- What specific tools will we communicate to our target?
- When will our message be most effective in engaging them?
- How will we leverage both new and old media organically to reach them?
- How will we ensure the campaign is “for youth, by youth”?
- How can we best integrate our message on the ground?

A SUMMARY OF OUR FINDINGS:

In this section we will review some of our general findings that not only have informed the strategic development for our Blue Shield of California Foundation efforts, but that we hope will also be of interest and use to others who are interested or work on the issue of intimate partner violence.

THE DEVELOPING TEEN: UNDERSTANDING THE GAPS AND DISSONANCE

So why do conflicts arise? And what explains this dissonance? As Dr. Sam Cohen, Founder and President of Psychologics says: “Why would anybody hit another person that they actually care about? We act out because we can’t experience those feelings because our psyches cannot tolerate it... so the cognitive dissonance is really the split mind, where the intellectual mind knows what I did here was horrible, but there’s a disassociate reaction, meaning that this part of the mind that acts out is actually split off...They may intellectually know what they’re doing is wrong, but in the moment, unconsciously, it’s their only option.”

Perhaps a more poignant articulation of this dissonance is brought to life by this poem by a fifteen-year-old teen:

Don't you know what it's like?
It's like you're falling down, down, deeper & deeper and WHAM!
You hit the ground.
It feels like thousands of bricks, jagged glass and pointed needles
when you feel it hit you.
His face is full of satisfaction, then disbelief,
and he's begging you not to go again.
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry" is all you hear until everything fades away...

Alisha, 15 - CORA/teenrelationships.org

Consistent in all of our expert interviews and confirmed by our interactions with representative teens, was the presence of several developmental gaps. These gaps are unique to the developmental phase associated with adolescence, when first relationships begin, and may explain how this cognitive dissonance between teen beliefs and actions can exist. While these gaps take several different forms from physiological to emotional to environmental, they all can contribute to the potential for violence if not addressed or exacerbated by environmental influences.

Teen Developmental Gaps

The body outstrips the psyche: This is the accepted idea that adolescents' physical development is maturing faster than their mental and emotional development.

Gaps between a highly activated social/emotional brain system and immature cognitive control: Much like “starting an engine without a skilled driver behind the wheel,” adolescence is characterized by certain parts of the brain developing more quickly than other parts.

Biological gender differences and “bio weapons”: Males and females have different biological and chemical reactions that significantly impact the way that they relate to each other and face conflicts. Moreover, these biological differences can show up as “bio weapons” in the face of a conflict, which can then cause a situation to quickly escalate into violence. We will explore this in greater detail later on in this report.

Adolescent separation from parents: In fact, separating from the family and forming one's own identity is the very *goal* of the adolescence phase. This separation is accomplished through bonding with the new “peer family”: While the adolescent is ‘rebellious’ against family, they are often unwittingly conforming to their new transitional group of peers.

These developmental gaps are exacerbated by other environmental influences that may affect some teens more than others:

Factors that Exacerbate Developmental Gaps in Adolescents

Roots of violence laid down in childhood: Not surprisingly, there is a correlation between being raised in a violent home (with poor parenting skills and destructive relationship modeling) and an increased likelihood to exhibit violent behavior as an adult. In essence, the child that is raised in an environment of abuse can grow up to become an adult without a sense of healthy boundaries or a differentiated sense of self. As a result, these individuals can experience what to others might be a minor incidence of disappointment as a re-occurrence of the original violation from childhood.

The presence of other negative environmental factors: Existing issues such as poverty, alcohol and substance abuse contribute to an environment where it is difficult for adolescents to develop the necessary self-esteem to participate in a healthy relationship. This added stress facilitates the presence and escalation of conflict.

Hostile Bias: This concept refers to “an inclination to see harmful or threatening things in the environment where other people might not see those same things as

threatening.” It is hypothesized that an unsafe upbringing might contribute to a ‘hostile bias.’ As Dr. Steinberg noted, “I think basically, if you grow up in a threatening environment you’re always going to be on the lookout for threats... quite understandably, you may over-perceive threats when they’re not there, because you’re always on the lookout for them... [You may have] a very short fuse and feel easily threatened.”

Different culture/media messages to boys versus girls: Media shape adolescent development significantly and this influencing role is far more pervasive than older generations. Generally speaking, this difference can be broken down into “boys should be powerful” and “girls should be desired.” Interestingly, when teens were asked about the cultural influences of negative imagery, messages and lyrics (such as referring to girls as “bitches” or “ho’s”) there was a mixed response. One teen from Youth Radio noted that all content “is just like a story or a movie, you don’t take it seriously,” while a friend quickly chimed in, “I don’t know, I think some people do take it pretty literally.”

Intense pressure to be sexual: Kids are under tremendous social and cultural pressure to be sexual; significantly greater pressure than previous generations. As one teen stated, “To me, being a part of a clique is like being in a gang. Everything you do has to be approved by your so-called friends...I know a couple of boys who lie about how many girls they’ve had sex with just so their friends won’t make fun of them or even disown them.”⁵

Lack of tools: Consistent among all of our experts is the belief that violent behavior is often rooted in a lack of tools that would help an individual regulate his or her angry impulses.

Limiting beliefs within a particular culture: Sometimes certain communities compensate for one belief system by limiting another (e.g. according to Dr. Sheftall, men are scarce in the African-American community so women need to stay in the relationship even when it’s dangerous.)

While our recommended strategy will be built off of several of these gaps and the factors that exacerbate them, it is important to note that it will be almost impossible for any one campaign to address all of them during its inception. However, we strongly believe that opportunities exist for both Blue Shield of California Foundation and others in the field to leverage these insights in future efforts.

TEENS & RELATIONSHIPS

It is of great significance that these gaps manifest themselves during the middle stage of adolescence (fourteen to eighteen years old), which also coincides with the time of life that most teens are engaging in their first or second relationships. According to the *Liz Claiborne 2006 Teen Relationship Abuse Report* nearly two-thirds (61%) of thirteen to eighteen year-olds have been in a relationship, dated someone, or “hooked up.” And even more (75%) of sixteen to eighteen year-olds have had a relationship, dated, or “hooked up” with someone.

It should be no surprise, then, that based on the aforementioned developmental gaps, half of these older teens (49%) have been seriously involved with a boyfriend or girlfriend. A disturbing number have also endured some type of controlling behavior in relationships and are further exposed to verbal, emotional, and even physical threats. According to a recent report from the Family Violence Prevention Fund, forty percent of girls age fourteen to seventeen report knowing someone their age that has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend ⁶ and eight percent of high-school-age girls said “yes” when asked if “a boyfriend or date has ever forced sex against your will.”⁷. *Liz Claiborne’s 2006 Teen Relationship Abuse study* showed that three out of five teens surveyed (61%) said that they’ve had a boyfriend or girlfriend who made them feel bad or embarrassed about themselves.

To use the term “teen relationships” suggests a universal meaning that does not exist. Teen relationships are fluid and diverse in terms of how serious they are, more so than in previous generations, and therefore the language used to describe them reflects this spectrum, from the pursuit of sex (“get at/with,” “holla at,” “hit that”) to the casual relationship (“talking to,” “seeing,” “be with,” “friends,” “friends with benefits”) to the more traditional longer-term relationship (“going out,” “boyfriend/girlfriend”). Terms that seemed particularly out of place were “dating” and “partners.” This construct is especially noticeable when references or terms are communicated digitally via instant messaging, emailing or texting. The fickleness of teen relationship labels is exemplified by the chat room exchange below hosted by CORA as part of their teen outreach program.

me (Oct 25, 2001 6:53:19 PM)

yeah but he just doesn't want to commit, he doesn't want to date or be with anyone else he just doesn't want the title RELATIONSHIP

Teen Counselor (Oct 25, 2001 6:53:40 PM)

so how is it between the two of you now?

me (Oct 25, 2001 6:54:17 PM)

well he calls to see where I am going and what I have been up to, who I have been out with and basically wants a track record

Teen Counselor (Oct 25, 2001 6:54:26 PM)

do u guys still hang out and act like bf and gf?

me (Oct 25, 2001 6:54:51 PM)

well its only been one day but I am sure that we will start the cycle again

The adult counselors/organization leaders and the teens themselves confirmed that sex and relationships are pervasive among today’s teens, but these relationships run the gamut in terms of expectations and emotional grounding. On the one hand, there were several descriptions of what could be described as “uber-relationships,” where some teens (often the girls) felt the need to be constantly attached to their

boyfriend/girlfriend, exhibiting and expecting almost all social interaction to involve the partner.

“They act like they’re married, she referred to her boyfriend as her husband.” -- Youth Radio staffer

“She wanted my whole life to revolve around her.” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

“One of my really close friends is in that situation...he just wants to spend every second with her.” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

“When I was in a relationship once, you could tell she didn’t know herself, but she was trying to figure me out all the time...she should know herself before she starts trying to spend every minute with me.” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

At the other extreme, casual sexual relationships are so commonplace that it’s barely remarkable for friends to have sexual encounters without any repercussions or expectations of an ongoing formalized relationship. In fact, almost every time we even mentioned the word “friends” to teens, they either cast a knowing smile or said, “you mean friends with benefits.”

“They don’t talk about boyfriends or girlfriends as much...it’s ‘talking to,’ ‘seeing’ or just ‘friends’...” -- Youth Radio staffer

“Friends do stuff all the time, randomly... even if you don’t plan it.” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

This phenomenon was well chronicled in the recent book *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*. In it, the author Laura Session Stepp follows three high school girls and six college women through a year in their lives. These girls and women don't date, don't develop long-term relationships or even short, serious ones - instead, they "hook up". Hooking up, Stepp writes, "isn't exactly anything. It can consist entirely of one kiss, or it can involve fondling, oral sex, anal sex, intercourse or any combination of those things. It can happen only once with a partner, several times during a week or over many months . . .It can mean the start of something, the end of something or the whole something...What makes hooking up unique is that its practitioners agree that there will be no commitment, no exclusivity, no feelings. The girls adopt the crude talk of crude boys: They speak of ‘hitting it’, of ‘boy toys’ and ‘filler boys’, ‘my plaything’ and ‘my bitch.’”⁸

Perhaps worth noting, regardless of how “serious” the relationship, there appears to be an increased comfort level with heightened expressions of casual physical intimacy in public, which has likely evolved over the past few generations. From walking down the street, literally embraced under the same sweatshirt, to hanging out at the mall draped over one another while in the midst of a larger group, it appears more common for teen couples to be physically affectionate (referred to by some teens as “cupcaking”), even if they aren’t engaged in an explicitly sexual activity (e.g., kissing, etc.).

REFRAMING THE ISSUE

Overall, there is an opportunity to redefine the issue of intimate partner violence and the language that frames it. By doing so, we will not only more accurately label our initiative, but we will also inspire more innovative approaches for our effort and for future programs.

More specifically, experts agree that the current label of Intimate Partner Violence does not accurately portray the current situation, as adolescents and young adults do not often achieve true intimacy. But when they do, this would typically be at odds with the presence of violent behavior, as real love and violence would seem incompatible.

While it's true that many teens at this age are already involved in physically intimate relationships, they are not necessarily equipped to handle these relationships emotionally, due to lack of development and maturity. "Intimacy is something that is achieved with a greater sense of self. How can you be really intimate with someone when you don't know yourself?" says Dr. Sam Cohen.

As noted earlier, with teens engaged in more casual dating and sexual behavior, "partners" are constantly being redefined and the appropriateness of that term is also less relevant.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, while reducing violence is the end result we are trying to achieve, there are other more common and equally destructive acts, such as verbal and emotional abuse, that we are also attempting to curtail. When use adult terminology, such as "intimate partner violence" to label teens, who are just forming a sense of self, we wrongly subject them to such charged language as "perpetrator" and "victim". This sometimes makes it difficult to remember that we are talking about people who are emotionally closer to children than adults.

A more accurate term to frame our issue would be **Early Relationship Conflicts**. This phrase puts the emphasis on our desire to provide solutions to help youth in formative relationships, identify and resolve conflicts that can often escalate to violence.

FROM CONFLICT TO VIOLENCE

The question then becomes: "By helping defuse early relationship conflicts can we be confident that we can help reduce violence?" While the answer may seem intuitive, we feel it is important to make the case.

Dr. Cohen says, "There is certainly a relationship between conflict and intimate partner violence...One reason is because with conflict, individuals often repress what they're actually feeling... which underneath it all usually is hurt, loss or humiliation... which the partner may be simply triggering."

Michael Gurian, social philosopher and author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, believes that males and females have different biological and chemical reactions that significantly impact the way they relate to each other and face conflicts. Moreover, he

feels that these biological differences can show up as “bio weapons” in the face of a conflict, which can then cause a situation to quickly escalate into a violent situation. In a typical stressful situation, he suggests the biology between female and male might progress something like this:

- a. Female becomes highly verbal.

(because she has twice the verbal centers compared to males)

- b. Male becomes overwhelmed by her verbalization, becomes more agitated and more physically impulsive.

(because unlike the female, he has fewer verbal centers and more spinal fluid, which conduct energy down into the body rather than the brain)

- c. Stress causes the amygdala (anger center in the brain) to swell in both female and male, but with different chemical responses...

- d. It causes the female to want to bond with the male.

(because she is now secreting oxytocin, which is a bonding chemical)

- e. It causes the male to want to pull away.

(because he is secreting less oxytocin and more testosterone, which makes him aggressive)

Mr. Gurian shares this step-by-step account of the biological and chemical reactions to demonstrate that hard-wired responses among males and females are sometimes not only opposing to each other, but can “trigger” the other partner in ways that escalate the conflict. “[These are] profound male-female brain difference...he’s wired to pull away, to protect... so he doesn’t do anything bad and so he can just regroup and figure out what’s going on for him, because his brain is not processing the emotions as quickly. Her bonding chemicals are saying “bond, bond, bond!” So these two people are wired differently.”

The notion that males and females react differently in the face of conflict resonated significantly with the many teens with whom we spoke. Although they did not necessarily know anything about the biology behind the behavior, they were quick to agree and/or volunteer that girls were likely to be more verbal in an argument, while boys were more likely to ignore, withdraw or experience physical agitation.

“I don’t know about her, but when I start arguing my heart races, my cheeks flare up and heat up a lot, and my ears turn red.” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

“Girls talk a lot, that’s sooo true...even when they get into fights with each other... this girl was like “I want to beat her ass,” but then she walks up to her and starts

*talking... she said she wanted to sock her, but then she just started talking.” --
Teen boy, LA Youth*

Emilio Ulloa, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, adds “Although it is difficult to tease apart the causal order of things, one thing is evident; that conflict is not only a component of intimate partner violence, but that it can precede intimate partner violence, as well as be an outcome of past intimate partner violence. Thus, the cycle of conflict and violence is worrisome and efforts to arm individuals with conflict negotiation skills seem, at a minimum, warranted.”

Therapist Michael Gurian explains: "Conflict in itself need not lead to violence--in fact, conflict can be a healthy form of family adaptation, progress, and communication. Conflict can make intimate relationships stronger. If, however, the individuals engaged in the conflict have not learned or are not practicing healthy communication skills, conflict can quickly turn to violence. Once adrenaline rises, anything can happen. Emotions are meant to be experienced, expressed, and expelled. Violence can become one way of doing all three. This is why therapists insist, "Healthy communication is the key to healthy relationship. It is also a key to stopping violence. If we learn to communicate in healthy ways, we are learning to experience, express and expel our feelings and emotions in ways that are healthy and progressive for our relationship. The bottom line: When a couple has not worked out mutually respectful codes of conduct and communication prior to a conflict situation, and/or when they do not stick to these codes during the conflict, the conflict situation can turn violent."

Dr. Steinberg suggests that if you teach individuals general non-violent conflict resolution skills, it stands to reason that they will employ these skills across multiple settings and relationships. Therefore, teaching adolescents how to settle immediate or short-term disputes non-violently will diminish their likelihood of domestic violence in the future.

WHY TEENS FIGHT: COMMON CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Teens fight for a barrage of different reasons. In these teen years, when emotions are running high, social pressure is intense, and it is a time of change in development from childhood to adulthood. Beyond those general reasons, however, we found that there were some common conflict triggers among teens entering in relationships.

By far, the most commonly cited catalyst for conflict in teen relationships was jealousy. *Liz Claiborne's 2006 Teen Relationship Abuse Report* states that nearly two-thirds of teens interviewed (64%) were with someone who “acted really jealous and asked where they were all of the time.” In some cases, the jealousy stems from over-sensitivity and insecurities that accompany adolescence.

*“A lot of girls are insecure these days because of image and a lot of different issues” --
Teen girl, LA Youth*

“[What makes you jealous?]... her talking to other guys a lot” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

"It could be as stupid as the way you're walking or the way you're talking" -- Teen boy, LA Youth

In other cases the jealousy is intentionally provoked and/or justified. Consistent with the overall propensity for drama, it was a common theme that there's more intensity around flirting and competition in daily teen interactions.

"Another girl wanted to be with my boyfriend, but she made it seem like she was just a friend so she could spend time with him. He didn't believe me that she was trying to get with him...I was so mad...but I've done that too." -- Teen girl, CORA workshop

"Some people kiss other people and the other person doesn't really mind..." "...Yeah, that's common." "But that would make me really jealous." -- Teen girls/boys exchange, LA Youth

The intensity of these feelings is real and comes equally from both genders, as the excerpt shared from the CORA chat room below shows.

lrslore (Jul 18, 2001 5:20:00 PM)

well my boyfriend and i went to this 18u club and when we got there he completely ditched me and started dancing with some sluts. i got really pissed off and left and this afternoon he came crawling back to me saying he was sorry. i love him so much but really dont think he should have done that to me last night

SweetNSassiJules (Jul 19, 2001 5:24:09 PM)

OMG! Ok we were at a store and my friend * a guy * saw me and came over and I introduced him and he accused me of liking him * becuz i gave him a hug * and sleeping with him

The Break the Cycle administrators pointed out that much of what they have found effective in addressing jealousy as a precursor to abuse is helping teens differentiate between feeling jealous and acting jealous. They teach that it's OK to feel the sentiment, but how teens interpret and act on those feelings can be the key to avoiding conflict.

The issue of money/economics was also probed as a potential trigger point. It was mentioned in the CORA workshop that not receiving a birthday present became an issue in one woman's relationship. Similarly, one of the Youth Radio staffers relayed an anecdote about one 18-year-old boy in a relationship (with a new baby) who commented that he wasn't going to do anything for his girlfriend for Valentine's Day. This may result in males "fronting" or acting like they don't care instead of admitting the embarrassing reality that their lack of thoughtfulness was the result of limited resources. It was also hypothesized that pressure to spend money on a girlfriend or boyfriend can contribute to conflicts when put into the context of other students. As a girl in our LA Youth session said, "Yeah, in terms of class...giving things to a person and them not being able to give the same things back [can be a problem]."

Another potential trigger point involved teens feeling as if their points of view weren't heard or their values weren't respected. As a result, an alarming 47% of teens have done something they say conflicts with their personal values or beliefs to please their boyfriend or girlfriend.⁹ In addition to these specific issues, many of the teens spoke of "little things" that would set an argument or conflict in motion, such as not respecting the other person's point of view or being inconsiderate. Most expected there to be some conflict in their relationships, but relationships were seen to become unhealthy "when you argue all the time," or "when the same argument drags on for weeks." As was highlighted in the CORA workshop, teens are able to appreciate that "communicating, supporting each other, respect and self-control" are key ingredients for a healthy relationship.

jassy (ID=81) (Apr 19, 2001 6:04:30 PM)

umm.. first my b/f gets mad over little things also he keeps forcing me to answer the love question and im not sure if i love him or not

In a sample survey conducted for this report by LA Youth (distributed to multi-ethnic Los Angeles teens both online and in paper), the preliminary results were remarkably consistent with the trigger points listed above. When asked "Have you ever argued with the person you're seeing or dating over the following" over 59% of respondents included "stupid little things" while 44% cited "other girls/guys" and 38% listed "jealousy".

As one teen pointed out, many of these issues "aren't unique to teenagers". However, it may be even more difficult for teens to navigate these issues and potential conflicts given the insecurities of adolescence and the associated developmental gaps.

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE: BLACK & WHITE THINKING/GRAY LANGUAGE

Exacerbating all of this is the teens' general inability to articulate his or her feelings or thoughts. Given the cognitive development and the gaps that we noted earlier, this should come as no surprise.

Although the experts talked about this concept with specific respect to violent behavior patterns, teens in general tend to talk about (and see) things in more dramatic extremes (i.e., black and white). A key indicator of this pattern that was observed and discussed was the extreme language often used in simple conversation (e.g., "*She hates it when I...*" "*I hate it when he...*"). These extremes tend to intensify situations and create conflict. Overall, it seemed a common theme among adult counselors and the teens themselves that teens often thrive on "drama" as part of their daily lives.

At the same time, however, there is also frequently a lack of clear definitions and a "gray area" that typify teen interactions and language. As referenced above, relationship lines are often blurred and in flux. Similarly language, while often used in extremes, can also have different meanings depending on the context. Terms that might be perceived by adults as deliberate slurs are more casually used, sometimes to be hurtful, other times playful, and other times just as punctuation (e.g., "bitch" which in one observed

exchange was used with several different connotations in the space of thirty seconds). Similarly:

“Has anyone ever tried to ‘holla’ at you? You know, yelled at you in a supposedly friendly, but actually degrading way. Sometimes guys holla at me, wanting me to come and give my number even though they are complete strangers. You know, when they say, ‘Aye girl, can I get your number?’ Holla’ at me...or not.” – Teen Girl, Youth Radio Reporter

Our conversations did yield interesting language and context for today’s teen relationships, some of which tie-in to the dynamics discussed above. The most important was that relationship issues were frequently referred to as “drama”. This was an almost universal term that referred to a wide spectrum of conflict. Like other “gray language,” drama was simultaneously good and bad. Some drama is expected, if not desired in most relationships. Like jealousy, mentioned earlier, drama is another primitive signal of caring. As such, an appropriate amount of drama is perceived as a reflection of a healthy relationship. At the same time, too much drama is clearly a dangerous sign as things can quickly get out of hand.

Technology today can sometimes inflame the situation as it lends itself to making a point with harsher language. A visitor to the CORA chat room, included below, best summed up this use of harsh language.

DemonRocker (ID=63) (Oct 24, 2001 5:52:19 PM)

hi teen Counselor

DemonRocker (ID=63) (Oct 24, 2001 5:52:47 PM)

it so nice to be in a chat room where no one says fuck of bitch or dick

Teen Counselor (ID=59) (Oct 24, 2001 5:52:54 PM)

I know

Teen Counselor (ID=59) (Oct 24, 2001 5:52:57 PM)

:-)

In addition to “drama,” there was also a mention of “emo”, meaning out-of-control emotion. Caution should be used when using this term, however, as it is also used to describe a clique of teens who we may have previously referred to as “goths”.

Other interesting language that reflects different extremes includes, “cupcaking” (being affectionate in public), “rippers, runners and boppers” (sexually promiscuous girls), and “grown-ass” man/woman (indicating you’re your own person in a relationship).

THE UBIQUITY OF CONNECTION (THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY)

Never before have teens been raised in an environment so dominated by media usage. According to a 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation report entitled *Generation M*, which examined media usage among 8 to 18-year-olds, a typical 8 to 18-year-old lives in a home containing three TV sets, three CD/tape players, three radios, three VCR/DVD players, two video game consoles, and a computer. In addition, substantial numbers of kids have most of these media in their own bedrooms. More than two-thirds (68%) have their own TV and more than half have their own VCR/DVD player (54%); 95% have a personal music source (i.e., a radio, tape, or CD player in the bedroom, and/or a portable device such as an MP3 player); almost half say they have their own video game console and almost one third report their own personal computer (31%). In addition to easy physical access to most media, large numbers of these kids also report a social environment that is conducive to media use. Fewer than half (46%) of 8 to 18-year-olds report that their family has any rules governing TV use, and among older youths (7th- to 12th-graders) the proportion with rules governing TV, computers, video games, or music is even lower.

From a behavioral standpoint, today's young people live media-saturated lives. They spend nearly six hours per day using media, during which time they are exposed to more than eight hours per day of media messages, a result of the fact that a quarter of the time that kids use media, they use two or more media simultaneously (e.g., reading while watching TV;). Exposure to TV and music substantially outpaces exposure to other media. When time spent with TV, videos and DVDs, and movies is combined, screen exposure is over four hours daily. Music listening, that is, exposure to radio, tapes, CDs, and MP3s, garners about two hours daily of kids' time. Young people also report in excess of an hour daily using a computer other than for school or work, 49 minutes daily playing video games. As new technologies have become available young people have been quick to make use of them, changing how they use media as well as which media they use. For example, 64% have downloaded music from the Internet; 48% have streamed a radio station through the Internet; 66% use instant messaging; 39% have a cell phone; a third (34%) say they have a DVR such as TiVo in their homes; 32% have created a personal Web site or Web page; 18% have an MP3 player; and 13% have a hand held device that connects to the Internet.¹⁰

The predominance of new technology was even more pronounced among respondents from our LA Youth survey where over 84% of teens had access to a cell phone and over 61% sent text messages or instant messages to friends.

Against this media-saturated backdrop, the potential for misunderstanding and conflict is heightened by the propensity for more and more virtual communication among teens. The repercussions of increased communication through technology, rather than in person, had both negative and positive interpretations. On the negative side, there were several points made regarding how the tone of communication can be lost or misunderstood in email, site postings and the shorthand of IMing/texting.

“(Roughly) 60% of communication is body language, 30% is verbal tone and only 10% is the actual words. If you’re only dealing with the 10%, the potential for misunderstandings increases dramatically, even more so with the shorthand of texting.”
– Break the Cycle Administrator

As highlighted in the *Liz Claiborne Tech Abuse Study* and other recent research, technology has reshaped how teens communicate overall and, specifically, in their relationships. From cell-phones (voice and texting) to IMing to MySpace to iPods, teens are constantly immersed in technology. One key take-away is that the omni-presence of portable tech tools and toys has resulted in many teens choosing semi-isolation even in the social company of others. As one Youth Radio staffer observed, “Kids are in their own world, even when they’re together. What we might have thought of as rude is completely acceptable now. I was recently in a car with three teens, and instead of talking to each other, one had her iPod on, one was texting on her two-way and another was talking on her cell-phone.”

This was clearly the trend observed among teens “out and about.” Those who were walking alone typically had iPod “earbuds” (especially in the affluent Burlingame neighborhoods); several couples were seen where at least one person had earbuds, and one couple listened together as they walked, with one set of earbuds shared between the two of them.

It is important to note that, while sometimes isolating, tech tools are also communal. Cell-phones and two-ways were frequently seen passed back and forth in couples and groups to share gossip, information and pictures.

Dr. Cohen adds: “Bonding with the adolescent peer family has become even more intense among current adolescents as a result of technology that allows 24-hour access to each other.”

As far as how technology impacts relationship communications, the feedback we received suggested varying degrees of relative importance. Certainly, there was a baseline level of increased access that was not available to previous generations:

“There’s all this new communication...I talk to my girlfriend all the time during school, text her all the time.” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

However, the degree to which access crossed the line into abuse seemed a little less pervasive in these group discussions versus the numbers seen in the Liz Claiborne study. Whereas that study indicated that almost a quarter of all teens were texting or calling hourly from 12AM to 5AM or sending over 150 texts a day, this was seldom perceived as a real issue among the teens with whom we spoke. There was agreement that cell-phone texting and calling was sometimes used as a way of “checking up” and

“checking in” on partners, but few volunteered personal experiences of having been harassed or knowing of others who had been harassed by too much of this activity. The more common behavior that bordered on abuse seemed to be the notion of “spying” on others by checking their email or viewing their MySpace page.

According to our survey conducted by LA Youth, over 55% of teens stated that they or someone they know had used technology to make someone jealous, while 46% used technology to say mean comments about someone and 36% to embarrass someone.

There also seemed to be common experience with using technology platforms (MySpace, cell-phone cameras) to gossip and spread rumors. Sometimes this was done with intended malice; other times conflict arose from confusion or misinterpretation. MySpace was the most observed and discussed platform for trading information that could become inflammatory. There were several anecdotes shared of postings that led to arguments, jealousy, and, again, overall “drama.” As reported in a recent issue of *LA Youth* (a monthly LA newspaper for teens), a student contributor spoke of her own experience with MySpace:

“Just about everyone has a MySpace, from students to teachers and other adults. I have been a member since August 2004. [And it’s] helped me keep in touch with people from my middle and even elementary schools. [Then, an unknown acquaintance created an “impostor” MySpace page with a profile wherein] ...some of the information was exactly the same, but some was completely absurd and immature, using swear words and stuff I wouldn’t want to repeat. The person who made this other MySpace made me look very bad.” -- MySpace: A Place for Friends and Enemies, LA Youth Jan/Feb 2006 Issue

A Youth Radio segment offered similar accounts of MySpace maneuvering:

“It’s all the dysfunction of high school, on a website.”

“In the age of MySpace, it’s easier to check out the guy you like and also know when a guy isn’t being truthful. To read his messages, all you need is his password.”

“A few months ago, MySpace started some major drama...he gave her his password... she decided to check up on him, and it led to a surprise...he was messaging another girl.”

“She found a creative way to use MySpace to check up on her boyfriend by creating a whole new profile, complete with fake pictures, to see if he would cheat on her.”

-- Love in the Digital Age, Youth Radio segment, January 2007

A group of teens observed in the Apple Store were all using the display computers to check MySpace profiles and add “fun” content, which reinforced the notion that the MySpace/online networking phenomenon is not limited to just those who have computers in their homes. Participation is less dependent on hardware, as points of public access to the Internet have become more ubiquitous.

The LA Youth group discussion further confirmed that, in addition to the brevity of online communication being potentially misleading, the shorthand can be intentionally harsh. In some cases, abbreviations (like STFU for “shut the ‘f’ up”) are used, which can be either joking or inflammatory. It was also thought that sometimes people are more aggressive in their “online” tone than they would be in person, sometimes because they’re not really thinking about the tone or in some cases because they’re trying to take on a “cooler” or more impressive persona.

On the positive side, one teen voiced the notion that text-only communication eliminates misreads and the awkwardness of youth that can come from non-verbal cues:

“A lot of people feel more comfortable talking in AIM [AOL Instant Messenger] because there’s no voice communication, there’s no body communication, so that way you don’t have to worry about the stance you’re in...you can just say what you’re thinking, and you have the chance to stop while you’re writing and say ‘that’s not a good idea’ or ‘this is really good, but I can perfect it’” -- Teen boy, LA Youth

As with any new technology there is potential for abuse or misuse. However, most teens see technology as a positive influence in their lives. According to our LA Youth survey, teens see it as an important tool to help them communicate (59%) and to keep in touch (58%). More importantly to our efforts, they increasingly see it as a way to help resolve conflicts or defuse the drama in their lives. Over 41% said they used technology to avoid a fight or argument and almost 50% used it to make up after a fight. And in spite of the findings suggested in the Liz Claiborne report, only 17% suggested that it is “too much sometimes.” These numbers suggest that there exists an incredible opportunity to see technology as teens see it, that is to recognize its positive potential, and to leverage its influence as a way to minimize the effects of conflict and help them from spiraling out of control.

In the Kaiser Family Foundation study, *Generation M*, they conclude by acknowledging this potential by saying “without question, this generation truly is the media generation, devoting more than a quarter of each day to media. As media devices become increasingly portable, and as they spread even further through young people’s environments – from their schools, to their cars, to their pockets (e.g., cell phones with TV, audio, print, video gaming, and online capabilities) – media messages will become an even more ubiquitous presence in an already media-saturated world. Anything that takes up this much space in young people’s lives deserves our full attention. The sheer amount of time young people spend with media makes it plain that the potential for media to influence significant aspects of their lives should not be ignored.”

dialing down the drama

defusing early relationship conflicts to reduce teen dating violence

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BLUE SHIELD OF CALIFORNIA FOUNDATION

The core issue of **Early Relationship Conflicts** was validated as an issue that teens do, in fact, wrestle with every day. Even the mundane takes on greater significance in the teen world of developing personas, heightened drama, and increased information exchange through technology. This is not to belittle the fact that real abuse (physical, emotional and psychological) takes place in teen relationships, as we heard in some of our discussions, but focusing on Early Relationship Conflict provides an opportunity to help teens establish healthier relationship habits before situations escalate to the point of abuse or before abuse becomes a pattern.

The overall objective is to provide solutions and tools to help youth in formative relationships identify and resolve conflicts that can escalate to violence or abusive behavior. Our research has identified various levers that can be pulled to achieve this objective.

THE TARGET: ACTORS & AUDIENCE

As previously discussed, inherent in the notion of holistically portraying common conflicts and negotiation tools, is the idea that both parties can be empowered by the information and benefit from the tools. This would suggest that the target should encompass both genders and the messaging should address a variety of relationship profiles within the fourteen to eighteen year-old age range that has already been discussed.

We believe that targeting the relationship, rather than one gender in the relationship is necessary for a successful communication campaign. There's a notion we heard in both our primary research and our discussions with teens, which supports this thought. And that is the notion of assuming responsibility for early conflict, and the importance of talking to both parties in the relationship about this. "Intimate partner violence is about intimate partnerships so it's not just about men," says Michael Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Girls* and *The Mind of Boys*.

Not only is it important to target the relationship but also to target teens when they're first beginning early relationships, between the ages of fourteen and eighteen years old. And in many of these cases, these teens are not only just beginning their relationships they're already experiencing some form of violence within them.

Our experts also came to the consensus that fourteen to eighteen year olds was the optimal age range to target. This middle stage of adolescence is viewed as the phase

particularly marked by the aforementioned gaps and that time when real relationships are beginning to form. They are also a group that is still largely impressionable to both cultural influences and peer action.

Emilio Ulloa from San Diego State University perhaps said it best, “Adolescents are learning what’s right and what’s wrong. They’re figuring out how to interact with one another, and it seems like a time that’s ripe for understanding how that developmental process occurs, and also for intervention...this is when you want to step in.” As Michael Gurian told us, “It seems that targeting any older than eighteen could lead us to missing the opportunity to get them to change. Any younger, and it seems they will not take the message seriously, When we teach to the twelve to fourteen year olds, they just kind of make fun of it. They don’t get it...too young to really get it. But since 50% of our 16 year olds have had sex, we definitely want to be teaching it by the time they’re in high school.” Added Dr. Laurence Steinberg, “My suspicion is it’s much easier to get out of a violent relationship when you’re less committed to it. And, so if you can get kids to know going into the relationship what appropriate ground rules are...what’s permissible and what’s not... you’re probably going to help a lot of kids.”

As it pertains to race and ethnicity, there was consensus among our experts that our campaign should be inclusive of all teens and not target any one group in particular. The rationale for this was three fold. First while there are statistics that suggest higher correlations of domestic violence among certain sub-groups, typically socioeconomic factors are stronger indicators than race or ethnicity. Furthermore, the gaps that lead to early relationship groups are not unique or more predominate in any one group versus another. Second, today’s teens see race and ethnicity differently from previous generations in that they are considerably more color-blind than their parents or grandparents. This is best exemplified by the significant increases in inter-racial dating and multi-cultural peer and friend groups. Finally, from a communications perspective, when targeting teens with social marketing campaigns, it is most effective to show messages that feature a diverse group of teens so as not to single out any one group by stigmatizing them with a potentially negative social behavior.

CONFLICT PORTRAYAL: PROBLEM - DRAMA

Based on the underlying dynamics outlined above, the path to conflict could be portrayed in many ways in order to authentically capture issues heard from the teens and teen advisors:

1. Boys and girls argue in different ways with different tools that push different buttons. As suggested earlier, it has been shown that once teens are educated about these differences, they have a greater sense of understanding and empowerment for the issue.
2. In today’s world, relationship definitions and expectations can vary widely. As a result, we need to put the problem in the proper context, using examples that illustrate the ever-changing nature of relationships.
3. Jealousy is a natural emotion and the most common conflict trigger, especially in the teen environment of constantly evolving individuals and relationships. It is important that we not dismiss jealousy, as not only is it natural, but there is justified cause. Instead, we must help delineate between healthy concerns and disproportionate responses to jealous threats.

4. Disagreements are normal in any relationship, but constant arguments and disrespect are signs of an unhealthy relationship. It is critical that we put drama in the proper perspective and help shed light on the myriad of trigger points and their root causes.

TOOLS FOR CONFLICT DEFUSION: SOLUTION - DIALING DOWN THE DRAMA

In an effort to tee-up real issues, the difficult work will come in providing paradigm-shifting insights in a voice that isn't too pedantic or heavy-handed.

1. Empathic attunement: First and foremost, any communication must contain an element of compassion rather than judgment. Teens prone to conflict, in particular, are already 'guilt-ridden' at some level, and as such, any communication that feels like criticism may be rejected outright. This is best achieved by either messaging that is created by and for the audience or that uses the archetype of the mentor. Building from a place of empathic attunement to the new landscape of flexible relationships (vs. judgment of looser morals), we should encourage understanding of expectations and respect for boundaries within the relationship. One potential tactic could include reversing perspectives so teens could feel what it might be like to be in the shoes of the person with whom they are in a relationship during a conflict.
2. Teach coping mechanisms and tools to defuse conflict: This is the idea that simple tools might fill the void that is left when individuals are poorly parented and have not been taught basic communication and conflict skills. Educate the audience about how the other gender approaches arguments differently and how conflict can be defused by anticipating the other gender's natural bias and modifying behavior to avoid escalation (e.g. a *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* approach). The goal would be to teach a tool that could then be used as an intervention when future conflicts arise, but before acting out occurs. Additionally, we should help teens understand the propensity for black and white thinking and the implications for using "gray language" that is often used with shifting or unclear context. Within our change brief, we lay out five different approaches to tool development that could be explored moving forward.
3. Come from a context of true empowerment: This concept is based on the idea that a person who truly feels empowered would never be violent. That being said, some teens seem to be seeking a sense of power to bridge some developmental deficiencies (albeit a false sense of power) when they subconsciously act violently in order to transfer the pain they are feeling to their mate. Possible ways to do this would be to help the audience appreciate the difference between feeling jealous and acting jealous, and to provide context for an appropriate range of responses to jealous feelings. Also, we could portray the difference between "normal" disagreements and destructive dynamics while offering tools to argue constructively.

CONFLICT DEFUSION DELIVERY: LEVERAGE ORGANIC MEDIA CULTURE

Technology is clearly a powerful tool used by teens to communicate today, and as such, there is an opportunity to leverage it in telling stories of conflict/resolution, as well as to leverage teen culture to deliver the message. Importantly, technology should not be demonized as the source of conflict, but both as a backdrop in which the story plays out and an incredible source for empowerment. This is how teens really view technology while adults may be more likely to see it as the source of the problem.

1. The portrayal of technology should feel organic and authentic (vs. forced or gratuitous). As adults, we too often treat new technology with an unnatural sense of awe and concern. Whereas for teens, new technologies and communication tools are an expected part of their growth. Any attempt to teach kids how to use technology or to have this play too contrived a part in our messaging strategy stands the risk of feeling like a campaign created by adults for kids about a topic they clearly know more about than we do.
2. There is opportunity to use the outlets of the organizations we consulted as part of the communication outreach, especially as a means to access alternative/online media. At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the fact that so many potential partners have indeed set up organic media outlets for teens. Rather than trying to create new web sites or podcasts, we should look to instead seed our message and leverage appropriate existing channels to help get our message out more naturally.
3. Although TV is no longer the dominant medium that teens consume, it is still very much a part of the mix, especially as an “off-hour” pastime. As such, we should consider its use as it relates to how and when it commands their attention. It often still fulfills the role of needed distraction or a conduit to connection, once contacts with their friends or partners become difficult to maintain.
4. In terms of relevant apertures for reaching teens, our observations yielded a few particularly interesting insights. After-school is a highly social time, especially for teens in relationships, as many teens were seen hanging out in groups or with their “partners” for extended periods of time and are eager to reconnect after a day of school or planned activity. The CORA counselors also reported that their chat room activity peaks on Mondays and Wednesdays; the Monday increase reflects socializing (and conflicts) from the weekend, and the Wednesday increase seems to reflect building pressures from the school week and anticipation of the upcoming weekend.
5. Regarding the issue of popular teen culture, it is clear that music artists, professional athletes and other celebrities have the potential to impact teen values and beliefs. For example, a recent online poll conducted by *People* magazine showed that more teen girls desired to be a personal assistant to a celebrity than almost any other occupation. Yet in relationship messaging, it remains to be seen how conscious teens are to celebrity influence and how literally teens take their messages. Most of our experts however, particularly Dr. Sheftall, believe that celebrities are considerably influential in relation to teens and relationships, especially as it pertains to language. Regardless of the extent of their influence, there exists an opportunity to leverage whatever sway celebrities have to promote our strategic messages in an authentic medium.

THE MEASUREMENT: EVALUATING OUR EFFORTS

As mentioned earlier in our analysis of previous efforts, it is critical that we integrate proper evaluation components into our campaign development. Based on our preliminary thinking, we see two critical areas for measurement.

1. The first opportunity relies on leveraging the inherent capabilities of the chosen media. As stated above, it is critical that we use media organically to ensure that our message feels “for teens, by teens”. A benefit to this approach will be that we are able to capture how and when our message is not only being seen but also shared, via web, texting, IM-ing etc. The ability to measure how our message organically is shared will be a critical aspect to our evaluation and should be our primary quantitative measurement
2. From a qualitative perspective, we should utilize a similar approach to that which we used in this formative stage. We should go to where teens are and talk to them in their own environment and assess the effect of our campaign and its ability to help them defuse conflict.

Every activity is an opportunity to learn, and as we have done in this report, we will continue to explore innovative ways to gauge the effectiveness of our efforts as we move forward with campaign design and implementation.

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At YELLOWBRICKROAD, this project was certainly a labor of love driven by our passion to make a difference in the lives of young Californians. A special thanks goes out to the team here, including Wendy Forman, Nicole Souza, Danayi Munyati, Juliana Christie, Lariayne Payne and Ed Stein. For all those colleagues, partners and contributors who have not only given of themselves for this report but who continue to dedicate themselves to improving the lives of our youth, we hope we have accurately captured your passion and wisdom within these pages.

Most importantly, we'd like to thank the countless teens in California who allowed us a brief glimpse into their lives and relationships. Without their openness and courage to share personal and intimate aspects of themselves, honestly through their words and writing, this work would not be possible. As we all know, being a teenager can be an incredibly challenging stage of life. For some, this already difficult time can be made even more difficult by forces beyond their control. For too many, violence has become a regular way of life. We hope this research and report can contribute to the end goal we all share, reducing conflict in their lives and bringing an end to the devastation that violence can wreak on a young person's life.

Bob McKinnon May 2007

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