

# “Back Off Buddy, This Is My Body, Not Yours”: Empowering Girls Through Self-Defense

Violence Against Women

1–23

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## Abstract

Although growing recognition is being given to the benefits of teaching self-defense skills to college women, very little research attention has considered the impacts of providing such courses to school-aged girls. This article presents the findings from a large-scale evaluation of self-defense programs provided to three different age groups of schoolgirls from diverse backgrounds in New Zealand, drawing on survey responses from the girls themselves, supplemented by qualitative data provided by key informant interviews with their school and self-defense teachers. The findings provide clear evidence of the many positive benefits that can result for girls of all ages who participate in feminist self-defense courses taught by carefully trained instructors with a strong empowerment focus.

## Keywords

self-defense, girls, empowerment, school programs, evaluation research

## Introduction

“Is there anything we can do to protect today’s girls from physical and sexual victimization?” is a question troubling many 21st-century feminists. Such a question has particular saliency when we acknowledge that, despite half a century of activism, rates of violence against women show little signs of abating. Recent estimates suggest that one in three of the world’s females will experience some form of sexual assault (NGO

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Committee on the Status of Women, Geneva, 2013), and research on intimate partner violence (IPV) is increasingly revealing how sexual violence is a frequent, yet less acknowledged, accompaniment to other forms of abuse (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004).

As awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse and violence has grown, increasing recognition has been given to the vulnerabilities faced by young girls in particular. The sexual assault of girls in childhood and adolescence is widely accepted as being of high prevalence (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014) and often linked to inflated risks of experiencing repeat victimization (Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Messman-Moore & Long, 2003). Teenage and adolescent years are identified as particularly risky for many, when sexual assault can occur at the hands of both adults and peer group members, resulting in such commonly cited prevalence rates as one in four for girls (Finkelhor et al., 2014). Increasing recognition is being given to adolescent peer-on-peer sexual victimization occurring both within and outside of school environments (Maxwell, Robinson, & Post, 2003; Young, Grey, & Boyd, 2009). Extensive social, physical, and mental health impacts can result and manifest in a variety of ways including sexual risk-taking, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (McFarlane et al., 2005; Ullman & Brecklin, 2002). The severity of the consequences means growing emphasis is being placed on the importance of awareness-raising education and prevention efforts while girls are in school (Young et al., 2009).

Recently, global recognition has been given to the extremely high levels of sexual assault and violence experienced by girls and women on the African continent (Sarnquist et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2013). Less acknowledged have been the positive impacts reported where self-defense programs have been offered to schoolgirls as one means of reducing high prevalence rates. In one such study, adolescent high-school girls from an urban slum in Nairobi, Kenya, were provided with a self-defense course while a similar control group of girls received life-skills classes. Ten months later, the results showed dramatic differences. Although at baseline 24.5% of girls reported experiencing sexual assault in the 12 months prior—perpetrated mostly by known men—at follow-up, this showed no change for the control group, whereas it had reduced to 9.2% for the self-defense girls (Sinclair et al., 2013). This finding was accompanied by over half of the girls in the self-defense group reporting they had successfully used their skills to avert a sexual assault incident in the year following the course. The success of this pilot initiative was replicated in a subsequent larger Kenyan study with high-school girls, following which the researchers concluded:

This study provides an evaluated model of a successful empowerment intervention that had a highly significant effect on decreasing sexual assault and increasing assault disclosure in Kenyan urban informal settlements. These findings suggest that this intervention may be effective in a broader population in Kenya and beyond. (Sarnquist et al., 2014, p. 1231)

Part of that “beyond” is North America, a very different cultural context, but one in which research on the effectiveness of empowerment-focused self-defense courses has yielded similarly positive outcomes. These include improvements in self-esteem,

self-efficacy, assertiveness, and physical self-defense skills, as well as reduced levels of fear (Brecklin, 2008; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Hollander, 2004, 2014; Orchowksi, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008). A recent, internationally lauded and impressive research study involved nearly 900 women from three Canadian universities (Senn et al., 2015). Half of the women were randomly selected to undertake a 12-hr resistance and self-defense program, whereas the control group received only brochures offering prevention advice. The research found that, 1 year later, the incidence of reported rape among women who took the program (5.2%) was just under half that of the women in the control group (9.8%), while the gap in incidents of attempted rape was even wider (3.4 vs. 9.3%, respectively). As in Kenya, these outcomes demonstrate that apart from improving confidence and self-esteem, a robust self-defense program can reduce actual rates of sexual victimization.

Even further “beyond” is New Zealand. While most of the North American research has focused on college-age women, this article seeks to explore further the potential benefits emanating from teaching schoolgirls self-defense. It presents data from an evaluation of programs provided to different years of girls in New Zealand, drawing on survey responses from the girls themselves, supplemented by qualitative data provided by key informant interviews with school and self-defense teachers (see Jordan & Mossman, 2016, for further data). The girls completed pre- and postcourse questionnaires to determine any shifts in self-efficacy, and a subsample also completed a Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Staff members were interviewed to ascertain their observations of how the girls experienced the course and their views regarding what factors contributed to the program’s success. Before describing the methods and approach used, a brief overview of the history and background of teaching self-defense is presented to provide a broader context within which to interpret the study’s findings.

## Historical Background

Women’s self-defense courses are often viewed as emerging from the Women’s Movement of the 1970s, when they were promoted as one means by which women could resist violent victimization by men. However, evidence suggests they were popular in some quarters during the first wave of feminism also (Looser, 2010; Rouse & Slutsky, 2014). The suffrage movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was accompanied by many women taking up cycling, mountaineering, and other activities previously deemed masculine. Critics at the time were vocal in their condemnation of women engaging in sports and physical activities, arguing that these would defeminize women and subvert the “natural order.” Little surprise, then, that classes designed to reduce girls’ vulnerability and enhance their physical abilities to defend themselves were strongly opposed. In 1901, for example, an Episcopalian minister in St. Louis described boxing clubs for girls as “bordering on the indecent” and argued, “This imitation of mannish manners and masculine methods is simply vulgar” (the Rev Short, quoted in Rouse & Slutsky, 2014, p. 476). Ten years later, in 1911, Dr. Everett Beach, the athletic director of Los Angeles high schools, decided to ban boxing classes for girls, arguing this decision was in their best interests:

Suppose a pretty girl's nose was broken while boxing. It probably would mean permanent disfigurement, and might seriously injure her social prospects. (Quoted in Rouse & Slutsky, 2014, p. 477)

Teaching girls and women how to defend themselves disrupted traditional gender relations, reducing both their dependency *on* men and their submission *to* men. As promoting a fightback mentality was so revolutionary, it is not surprising that when feminists promoted self-defense classes in the 1970s, these were again met with vigorous resistance. Debate soon developed regarding the wisdom of encouraging physical resistance by women attacked by men, with traditional police advice urging women not to fight back for fear that this would escalate the violence against them, possibly bringing fatal consequences (Kleck & Sayles, 1990). Safety and prevention measures for women emphasized the many precautions they should take to avoid sexual assault, including restricting their movements and maintaining constant vigilance (Campbell, 2005; Stanko, 1996). Such an emphasis enhances perceptions of women's vulnerability, leaving little room for equipping them with measures they can actively employ in their defense of self. This debate has rumbled through the past few decades, with opinion remaining divided over the wisdom of encouraging resistance. This division is evident within feminist communities, with viewpoints still often polarized and the very concept of resistance actively opposed when viewed as signifying acceptance of responsibility to keep oneself safe (for discussion, see Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Hasday, 2001; Hollander, 2009, 2016). Such lack of agreement has contributed to a reluctance to recognize and affirm self-defense as a rape prevention measure. As recently as 2009, Jocelyn Hollander asserted from her review of the literature the surprising finding that, despite research demonstrating the effectiveness of resistance,

... there was a resounding silence about the question of whether formal training in self-defense bolsters women's ability to resist. Self-defense training was, in effect, invisible as a means of violence prevention. (Hollander, 2009, p. 575)

The obvious question arises, "How, then, were women and girls expected to learn how to resist?"

The ambivalence regarding the value of self-defense has translated into a relatively sparse body of academic research being undertaken regarding its effectiveness. Most of the research that does exist has focused on adult women's experiences, predominantly in North American colleges and universities, as, in recent times, these institutions have been increasingly expected to demonstrate the active steps they are taking to prevent the sexual victimization of their students (see, for example, Cermele, 2004; Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006).

The potential for teaching younger girls self-defense has been considered less often, despite the obvious fact that all women were themselves once girls and more easily reachable through the school system than after they enter adulthood. The merits and practicality of such a focus, however, have been recognized by New Zealand's Women's Self Defence Network—Wāhine Toa (WSDN-WT). Its vision is for a safe and respectful society in which violence and abuse against women and girls no longer

occur. For the last 20 years, the principal focus of this network has been to train self-defense teachers to deliver courses to girls in schools through the government-funded Girls' Self Defence Project (GSDP). This project teaches self-defense to girls throughout New Zealand, with priority accorded to schools in lower socioeconomic communities, rurally isolated schools, girls from ethnic minority groups, and other girls deemed most at risk from violence and abuse. The strongest priority is to reach girls of indigenous (Māori) identity, given the high levels of physical and sexual violence experienced by Māori girls and women (Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle, & Perese, 2010). While Māori constitute 14% of New Zealand's population overall, and 24% of the school roll, over the last 5 years, 34% of all girls receiving self-defense were Māori, and 51% of all courses were delivered to schools from the lowest four decile ratings (all schools are ranked on a 10-point decile rating scale from 1-10, where 1 is the lowest. This ranking is determined, in large part, by socioeconomic status with lower ranked schools rated as warranting additional resources to help offset increased student needs and vulnerabilities).

The overall level of GSDP funding is minimal (\$350,000 per year) but is stretched by WSDN-WT to provide courses for as many girls as possible. Initially, these courses targeted Years 7-8 girls (ages 11-12 years, middle school) but are now also provided in some schools to Years 3-4 (ages 7-8 years, elementary school) and Years 10-12 (ages 15-17 years, high school). Courses range in length from 5-8 hr, with the content of each program tailored to the specific risks and needs of each age group. For all age groups, the key learning outcome is that the girls learn to use their minds, bodies, and voices to keep themselves and their friends safe. Examples of specific tailoring include courses for the two younger sets of girls, teaching them how to recognize good and bad touching and the importance of talking to a safe adult if needed, whereas Years 10-12 courses include recognizing sexual violence, relationship safety, bystander intervention, and understanding what constitutes a healthy relationship. In total, more than 125,000 girls have participated in a course since 1996, for an average cost of less than NZ\$50 per girl.

WSDN-WT has been committed from its inception to obtaining postcourse feedback from course participants. In 2015, the government department responsible for funding GSDP, the Ministry of Social Development, agreed with the network that a fuller evaluation of these courses should be undertaken. This was deemed timely in a fiscal climate of "results-based accountability," where government funding is increasingly contestable and charitable services are under growing pressure to demonstrate results and outcomes. The authors of this article were commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the GSDP and also, on a smaller scale, an evaluation of WSDN-WT self-defense courses provided to vulnerable groups of adult women and funded through the Ministry of Justice ("Isolation to Empowerment" courses). In this article, we present the findings from the courses provided to the three age groups of schoolgirls.

## Method

The overarching objective of the evaluation was to understand and document the value and impact of self-defense to the girls who participate in WSDN-WT self-defense

courses and to the communities they live in. More specifically, the research asked to what extent self-defense courses could assist participants to

1. recognize sexual and family violence and abuse;
2. understand that it is not okay (and not their fault);
3. learn clear strategies for recognizing, resisting, and responding to specific violent/abusive events, disclosing abuse and seeking help, supporting other people who are victims of violence and abuse; and
4. feel empowered and have their self-esteem enhanced.

A further aim was to explore the extent to which, if achieved, these outcomes can reduce vulnerabilities to child abuse, sexual and family violence, revictimization, and stranger danger.

An evaluation framework was developed by the independent researchers in collaboration with the WSDN-WT research team. A mixed-method research design was agreed upon to assess the value of self-defense. Quantitative data were collected from a substantial sample of girls ( $N = 2,731$ ) who participated in a self-defense course run in the first half of 2015, using pre- and postcourse evaluation forms. These forms assessed the outcomes and experiences of the participants and included a mix of validated (e.g., Rosenberg Self-esteem) and program-specific questions (closed and open-ended).

These quantitative data were combined with qualitative data collected from a series of interviews conducted with principals and deputy principals, guidance counselors, and school teachers for the GSDP courses ( $n = 14$ ), supplemented by interviews with WSDN-WT self-defense teachers and chairperson ( $n = 7$ ). Interviews were conducted in four case study areas selected to include a mix of rural and urban locations and communities with diverse ethnic compositions (two South Island and two North Island communities). All interviews followed a semi-structured approach and ranged in length from 45 min-2½ hr. All interviews were digitally recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Aggregated and anonymized, past and current evaluation material collected by WSDN-WT was also made available to the researchers for review. This included more complete information on course numbers and demographics as well as the results obtained in previous postcourse feedback forms.

The WSDN-WT courses are run at the request of schools, and all girls attending WSDN-WT courses taught by senior self-defense teachers in the first half of 2015 were eligible to participate. The schools were initially contacted by letter with details of the research explained and providing contact details for us as the researchers. All schools approached agreed to participate.

The girls themselves were recruited using normal school/WSDN-WT course recruitment methods. Parents/caregivers gave informed consent for their daughters to participate using the school's standard procedures for gaining parental consent (typically a letter sent home to parents enabling them to elect for their child not to participate). Additional accompanying information was sent to parents about the research, ensuring they knew they could specify that their daughter not participate in the research

without it impacting on their child's ability to participate in the self-defense course itself; none requested this option.

Pre-post evaluations of WSDN-WT girls' self-defense courses were collected in the first half of 2015 for a total of 126 courses run by senior WSDN-WT self-defense teachers. This represents one third of all courses run in the 12 months from July 2014-June 2015 ( $n = 388$ ). Courses were spread across New Zealand covering both North (67%) and South Island (33%) locations with a mix of metropolitan (33%), small urban (37%), rural town (24%), and rural (6%) schools. Courses were delivered in schools from the full range of decile ratings 1-10 and included one Teen Parent Unit (included in Years 10-12 data).

A total of 2,731 girls and young women participated in the courses, with just over two thirds being in Years 7-8 (the primary target group for GSDP courses). This included

- Years 3-4—girls aged 7-8 years old ( $n = 244$ , 9%);
- Years 7-8—girls aged 11-12 years old ( $n = 1,851$ , 68%); and
- Years 10-12—girls aged 15-17 years old ( $n = 636$ , 23%).

A high proportion of girls identified as Māori (29%) or Pasifika (9%), reflecting the purposeful targeting of WSDN-WT and its bicultural focus. A breakdown of other ethnicities showed 55% identified as European New Zealanders (NZ European), 5% as Asian, and 2% as "Other." The response rate for girls completing both pre- and post-evaluations for courses attended was 88% overall.

All qualitative interview data were clustered, categorized, and analyzed for emerging themes assisted by NVivo software. Quantitative data (pre-post-course evaluations) were analyzed using appropriate repeated-measures statistical tests (e.g.,  $t$  tests) following data cleaning and evaluation of any violations of test assumptions. Written quotes included reflect the emphases, spelling, and grammar used by the girls.

## Findings

Key findings from both quantitative and qualitative data sets are presented here in line with the research objectives identified above.

### *Increased Recognition of Sexual and Family Violence and Abuse (Awareness Raising)*

Awareness raising was perceived as a valuable part of the course by the schoolgirls themselves as well as by teachers and key stakeholders. One way this was measured was by asking girls before and after their self-defense course if they agreed with statements aimed to assess changes in their levels of recognition and awareness of sexual and family violence and abuse. Positive and statistically significant shifts were evident for all three age groups related to their understanding of what inappropriate touching is, Years 3-4,  $t(231) = 13.3$ ,  $p < .01$ , and Years 7-8,  $t(1,674) = 20.3$ ,  $p < .01$ , and what

constitutes a healthy relationship, Years 10-12,  $t(487) = 15.1, p < .01$ . Some girls described this learning as the most valuable part of the course; for example:

The most important thing I learnt on this course was how to protect myself and know what's the wrong way people touch you. (Years 7-8 girl)

The best thing I learnt was how to defend myself and how to know the signs of an unhealthy relationship. (Years 10-12 girl)

When school staffs were asked what they considered the most important learning to come from the course, one responded:

If you asked the kids, they'd all say learning the moves! But I think it's a bigger understanding about what's OK and what's not OK. (School principal, Girls Years 7-8)

One example she gave involved a 13-year-old girl who thought she had no choice but to tolerate a 15-year-old male friend of her brother's coming into the bathroom whenever she was in the shower. She was impressed by the way the WSDN-WT teacher helped her understand why she felt silenced and previously compelled to accept such behavior. As was reinforced by others also, discussions such as these helped many girls come to a stronger sense of their own right to be safe and have control over what happened to their bodies.

School teachers often told us about situations they had heard about which demonstrated the girls came away from the self-defense course with an increased awareness of how to identify abuse as well as strategies for responding. One example recounted arose from a situation where a change in circumstances meant a group of girls ended up sleeping at a different family house from that they had initially told their parents. One girl was "touched up" by a family member, and had no hesitation in speaking up, which the teacher attributed to the impact of the WSDN-WT course. The family member in question was eventually sent to prison.

### *Increased Understanding That It Is Not Okay (and Not Their Fault)*

The second key objective involved ascertaining that the girls could not only recognize inappropriate touching and behavior but also know they were not responsible for it. The evaluation showed that following the course 89% ( $n = 209$ ) of Years 3-4 girls and 96% ( $n = 1,683$ ) of Years 7-8 girls agreed, "If bad touching happens to a girl it is never her fault." Similarly, in pre- and post- questionnaires, the Years 10-12 girls had statistically significant increases related to "sexual assault is never the victim's fault,"  $t(487) = 10.7, p < .01$ . These positive shifts in attitude were highlighted by one girl when she referred to this as one of the most important things she had learned from the course:

I learnt to be more confident in myself and that I can defend myself. Also that sexual assault or domestic violence if caused to hurt me is not my fault. (Years 10-12 girl)

Another stated the most important learning for her was



how to be confident enough to stand up and protect myself and how no one has the right to make me feel unsafe in anyway and that I am allowed to fight back. (Years 10-12 girl)

As discussed later, a comparison of preprogram characteristics of Years 10-12 girls who had previously undertaken a WSDN-WT self-defense course with those who had not suggested these positive attitudes were maintained across time to a statistically significantly enhanced level,  $t(338) = 3.36, p < .01$ .

Given that a major criticism leveled at the provision of self-defense courses proclaims them to be victim-blaming, we made the latter a specific focus during our interviews with school personnel. However, this emerged as a difficult issue to explore, largely because they struggled to understand the relevance of the question. One high school teacher's immediate response to the suggestion that self-defense could be viewed as victim-blaming was to angrily retort,

Who said that?! [Then she added] Oh, I'm being taped! (School head of department, Girls Years 10-12)

She went on to clarify her perspective:

. . . you try not to put yourself in the situations where you're going to be unsafe. Unfortunately sometimes you just end up in those situations. I think it's good to have some strategies to get yourself out of it. I don't think at any stage a student at this school would get the impression that they are responsible for their own safety. I think they are given some strategies to get themselves out of the situation and then go for help as quickly as absolutely possible. (School head of department, Girls Years 10-12)

Another responded to the question as follows:

Oh, wow, yeah, that's a very deep question, isn't it? I know what you're saying it's like, whoa. No, I don't think it is putting the responsibility on them whatsoever. The responsibility that's going on them is letting them know that they can actually look after themselves if they need to, and it's okay to be able to go and say, "Hey, this has happened," to someone that they trust. (School teacher, Girls Years 7-8)

School teachers of all age groups strongly rejected the notion that it made girls responsible and blamed them:

That's not how I would interpret the message at all—it's about strengthening the girls, not about them taking the blame. That's a different end of the continuum, isn't it? (School principal, Girls Years 3-4)

No, I think we're just giving them more skills to deal with things. (School head of department, Girls Years 10-12)

A WSDN-WT teacher similarly struggled to comprehend how what she was presenting could be construed as potentially victim-blaming:

It's never ever come up, so I don't know. I find it hard enough to get my head around it and I've been teaching for 23 years. So victim blaming—I need to answer it with a question, so what's the alternative? Obviously, anything that does social change needs to be multi-pronged. We need to work with men, we need to work with the law, we need to work with empowering women and changing families, and we need to work with the types of violence from strangers, and from people we know. That's always the best way. I'm just focusing on one little corner of that. One little prong of that, empowering girls. (WSDN-WT teacher)

Although many teachers and self-defense instructors agreed there was an urgent need for programs to be provided to men and boys, addressing issues such as bullying, consent, and masculinity, they accepted it currently remained essential to help better equip girls and women with the skills to protect themselves:

In a perfect world things would be different, but the stats are stacked against that, aren't they? (School principal, Girls Years 7-8)

### *Learning Ways to Stay Safe and Keep Friends Safe*

Fundamental to the aims for these courses was that they would enable the girls to learn clear strategies that would help to keep them safe as well as to support other people victimized by violence and abuse. Girls were asked before and after their self-defense course if they agreed with a number of statements aimed to assess changes in self-defense knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Results are presented in Table 1 and show positive and statistically significant shifts for all three age groups.

Girls in all age groups showed significant improvements in understanding the importance of help seeking for themselves and others, with a high proportion (95%) of girls reporting their intention to do this if required:

If someone touched me in a way that made me feel yucky or uncomfortable . . . I wouldn't keep it a secret because it would make me feel yucky. I would tell somebody for them to get it sorted with. (Years 3-4 girl)

As well as self-care, teachers praised the emphasis in these courses on encouraging girls and women to look out for each other. This message was clearly well learned by the girl in the following example who ran excitedly up to her self-defense teacher when she saw her on a later school visit:

This kid came racing up to her at school, and this was a kid whom [she] had taught some time previously. And she was just full of it, "Guess what I did, guess what I did? I'm a self-defense girl!" She'd been at the petrol station with her dad, and had seen someone in a car cruise up to a kid on the footpath and try and get the girl to go in the car. The self-defense girl told her dad and they rang the Police and they watched this girl—they

**Table 1.** Pre–Post Ratings Related to Learning Ways to Stay Safe and Keep Friends Safe.

	Years	Precourse M (SD)	Postcourse M (SD)	df	t	p
Importance of help seeking	3-4	2.40 (.75)	2.93 (.32)	229	10.5	.000
	7-8	3.50 (.74)	3.88 (.37)	1678	21.6	.000
	10-12	2.99 (.83)	3.62 (.60)	492	16.2	.000
Knowing ways to stay safe	3-4	2.03 (.63)	2.96 (.20)	229	20.5	.000
	7-8	2.78 (.86)	3.89 (.33)	1683	51.7	.000
	10-12	2.86 (.78)	3.76 (.46)	485	24.5	.000
Knowing ways to keep friends safe (ethical bystander)	3-4	2.00 (.75)	2.88 (.38)	229	16.8	.000
	7-8	2.56 (.93)	3.72 (.51)	1676	49.8	.000
	10-12	2.59 (.87)	3.65 (.52)	490	26.9	.000
Recognizing potentially risky situations	7-8	3.04 (.87)	3.66 (.56)	1673	29.6	.000
	10-12	3.23 (.66)	3.66 (.52)	487	13.5	.000
Confidence in ability to use self-defense skills	7-8	2.98 (.89)	3.76 (.49)	1657	37.4	.000
	10-12	2.98 (.83)	3.61 (.55)	486	21.9	.000

followed the car and got his number plate and everything. The car took off once he realised he'd been watched, but the Police identified him and said, "Yes, he was a known offender," and this kid was so proud of herself. According to her she'd saved this girl, and she could well be right. (WSDN-WT chairperson)

The girls' evaluations also showed significant differences pre- and postcourse in their abilities to recognize potentially risky situations and know ways to stay safe, as well as increased confidence to use self-defense skills, if necessary:

First when I was doing the first answer sheet [the pre-course evaluation form] I thought it would be impossible to fight off an adult male and now I know even I can do it. (Years 7-8 girl)

Qualitative comments offered by the girls strongly supported positive quantitative results. When asked post course, what they would do if someone touched them in a way that made them feel yucky or uncomfortable, the range of self-defense strategies offered by the girls increased with age. The majority of girls from Years 3-4 gave just one response (e.g., seek help and tell a safe adult), whereas others referred to mixed methods (verbal—yelling out, physical—kick and punch, and help seeking—telling a safe adult). For example,

Say back off and kick them in the Nut's and Run back home and Tell my mum what happened. And I will Tell her to Ring the Police. (Years 3-4 girl)

For both Years 3-4 and 7-8 girls, the most common strategy identified was using verbal self-defense, with many referring to increased confidence in their ability to use their voice. One way this was evident was in the use of assertive language against the perpetrator:

Say “STOP Touching ME NOW”; “I DON’T LIKE IT.” (Years 3-4 girl)

I would say . . . “Back off buddy, this is my body not yours.” (Years 7-8 girl)

The second way this was evident was in girls proclaiming they would use their voice loudly to attract attention and seek assistance:

If someone touched me in a Bad way I will say “Don’t touch me,” or get your hands off. So loud that people from the community can hear. (Years 7-8 girl)

Using their voice to speak up was also an important aspect some girls identified as part of their learning:

I would let them know I am not happy with what they are doing and I would tell a adult I trust about what they did to me. I would make sure the adult is listening when I tell them what happened. (Years 7-8 girl)

Say no; fight them off; get to a safe place; tell someone. (Years 7-8)

Another important message in the self-defense classes is for girls, where possible, to try to get to safety:

Run away And tell an safe adult. Speak up for yourself. (Years 3-4 girl)

When other options fail, or are not feasible, physical defense moves and fight-back skills can be employed. The girls’ responses suggested that the older they became, the more likely they were to envision themselves using physical self-defense moves. For Years 3-4 girls, 38% of them said they would use physical moves, referring most commonly to kicking:

Say Bake [back] off and kik them in Testikles. (Years 3-4 girl)

Yell and try to pull or push there hand’s away. Or kik, pull hair, yell, stomp foot, Bite, scratch, punch nose, stance (stand strong), walk strong, Defend, Show a friend. (Years 3-4 girl)

For Years 7-8 girls, 58% referred to using physical moves, making it the second most commonly reported response, whereas for Years 10-12 girls, 85% spoke of using a physical self-defense move to respond to an unwanted sexual attack:

If they were holding on my neck and trying to drag me into a car first I would turn around strongly then elbow them in the nose kick in groyn, then push them to the ground and punch them one more time, run away tell parents and police. (Years 7-8 girl)

I would punch/kick them in the throat nose guts nuts to protect myself or others. I would get them off me in any way possible. (Years 10-12 girl)

More evident with these older age groups were the girls describing progression through escalated level of actions:

I would give them a warning and if they wouldn't listen I would give them a clear message what my boundary is. If he still doesn't stop I would give him a sting. Shin kick. (Years 7-8 girl)

I would: Try to talk my way out of it—tell them to stop; and if they persisted; use self-defense skills; then call for help; and tell someone. (Years 10-12 girl)

Also evident was an awareness reflected in some girls' comments that they may be able to use their new skills and knowledge to avoid attacks:

I would hopefully be able to prevent this from happening in the first place. If it did happen I would defend myself verbally and physically and seek help from others around me as well as myself. (Years 7-8 girl)

Hopefully after this self-defense course I never get into one of those situations. But if I do I will keep calm and think of a plan to get out safely. (Years 7-8 girl)

There was also more evidence that the older girls often felt prepared to think through what the most appropriate self-defense strategy would be (i.e., good decision making), and to seek ways to try to stay in control of the situation:

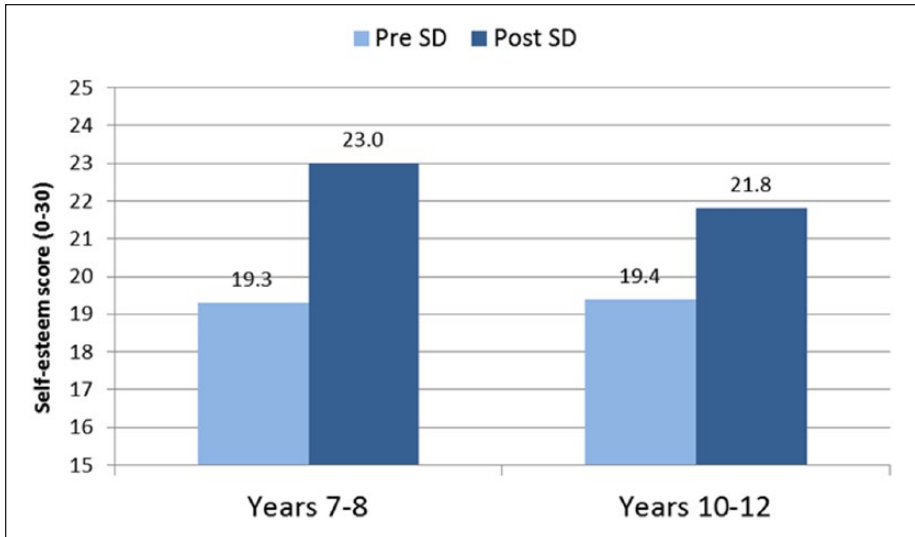
I would use my initiative and assess the situation. If they were using force I would use my self-defense moves. If it was a touch I would ask them not to do it and try to reason with them. (Years 10-12 girl)

Think: where can I hit this person? Where can I run to? How can I get them to back down? (Years 10-12 girl)

### *Feeling Empowered and Self-Esteem Enhanced*

Knowing a range of skills and responses means little unless accompanied by a sense of personal power, strength, and respect for oneself. A central aim of feminist self-defense courses is to empower women and girls and enhance their self-esteem and confidence (Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997). Our evaluation showed statistically significant improvements post-course for girls of all ages.

The two older groups of girls completed an additional evaluation tool, the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, which is an internationally recognized and validated scale of self-esteem. Scores range from 0-30, with scores 15-25 considered normal. Not all the self-defense teachers elected to complete the Rosenberg instrument, resulting in a slightly reduced sample available for analysis (Years 7-8,  $n = 1,133$ ; Years 10-12,  $n = 496$ ). Results presented in Figure 1 show relatively high levels of pre-course self-esteem that following the self-defense course were further enhanced.



**Figure 1.** Pre–post changes in Rosenberg self-esteem.

These improvements in self-esteem were statistically significant for both age groups, Years 7-8,  $t(1,132) = 28.9, p < .01$ ; Years 10-12,  $t(495) = 14.6, p < .01$ . Moreover, when the sample was broken down by different ethnic groups (NZ European, Māori, Pasifika, and Asian), all were found to achieve statistically significant improvements in self-esteem.

Comments made by many of the girls clearly reflect the sense of confidence and empowerment gained. When asked about their most important learning, comments included,

To be confident with my self and to know that Im no bodys victim and that I now know how strong I really am. (Years 7-8 girl)

How to feel powerful & more comfortable in my skin. (Years 7-8 girl)

During their interviews, the WSDN-WT teachers described how they sought to establish a positive environment right from the start. One teacher, for example, explained how she divided the girls into two groups by looking directly at each girl and telling her she was either “brave” or “strong”:

They’re hearing these words and I’m looking them in the eye, and the girls that drop their eyes when I stand in front of them and they’ve got their head down and their eyes down, I’ll wait, because they will always look up. And as soon as they look into my eyes, I’ll go, “Strong,” and then go on to the next one. And then I’ll say to them, “You know, one of the things I notice about you as a group of girls? Each one of you looked me in the eye.”

So okay, I might have had to have paused in front of them—and I don't tell them that—but “you're already strong, you're already brave, you're already clever.” So I'm sort of building on that “You're already this. And all I'm going to show you are a few little techniques that you can use if somebody tries to hurt you.” (WSDN-WT teacher)

Adopting such a positive and confidence-enhancing approach was integral to the program's overall effectiveness.

Evidence of girls' use of their voice to seek help and as verbal resistance to an attack has been mentioned earlier, and girls referred frequently to the power they felt they gained from learning to use their voice:

The best thing I learnt was the moves and that my voice is a powerful weapon. I really enjoyed this. (Years 7-8 girl)

I now am someone that is strong and can fight back not only with my body but with words!!! (Years 7-8 girl)

This was reinforced by observations made by schoolteachers with one commenting that by the end of the course

I think 99 percent of them would feel absolutely okay about using their voice and going for help and things. (School teacher, Girls Years 7-8)

School teachers also often commented during our interviews with them how they observed, post-course, many girls standing taller and walking with greater confidence. Mention was made specifically of how the gains in confidence were particularly noticeable in previously more timid girls, including those from cultural backgrounds characterized by pronounced gender inequality. The self-defense teachers were praised for their ability to establish rapport with girls from a wide range of cultures, with one principal commenting:

I've looked at the mix of ethnicities in the hall and we've got a little girl with her *habib* on, and scarf, and we've got such a range and they were all engaged, so for a female I think it's extremely empowering. (School principal, Girls Years 7-8)

Some suggested the high levels of cultural responsiveness could be enhanced by a number of the WSDN-WT teachers being Māori or Pasifika themselves. However, it was also evident that the Pakeha (Caucasian) teachers were regarded very positively in terms of their abilities to speak across different cultural backgrounds effectively and respectfully.

Gains in confidence were especially evident in girls living with some form of disability. Teachers and parents often voiced their anxiety over such girls being able to manage a self-defense course, and then realized how for some it was more than manageable; it was transformative. Some of the self-defense teachers referred to their own initial anxieties on such occasions, with one describing her apprehension when

we had a small group of four in (provincial city) and they all had vision impairment. One girl was almost completely blind, and three were just partially impaired—they could see us pretty much. They all had some physical disability too, such as caused by a stroke—where one side of them was a bit weaker than the other—and they all had some level, varying levels, of cognitive dysfunction. (WSDN-WT teacher)

The challenges may have seemed immense, but the gains made by these girls sounded equally immense:

I was pleasantly surprised to see they got the same things out of it as other girls, but perhaps amplified even. I think they came from a place of more vulnerability, so the feeling of power they got was kind of more intense! (WSDN-WT teacher)

Providing self-defense courses to girls with disabilities is especially important given the increased risks of sexual assault these girls face from perpetrators intent on exploiting their vulnerability (Higgins, 2010; Pillay, 2012).

### *Reduced Vulnerability to Violence and Abuse*

The positive gains outlined above by course participants and school commentators are important outcomes in themselves, but the ultimate aim of teaching these skills is to see reductions in violence and victimization. As part of the evaluation, we sought information regarding specific known instances where, post course, the skills and confidence gained were used effectively. The wide range of responses received included examples of the following:

- girls defending themselves against bullying;
- girls identifying and disclosing sexual abuse to a safe adult;
- girls identifying and avoiding potentially violent situations;
- girls actively seeking help for friends, family members and strangers in trouble;
- girls fending off and escaping from violent sexual attacks.

One clear account of learned skills being used to prevent a serious attack was revealed to us when we met a group of students from a teen parent unit. When asked if doing the self-defense course had made any difference in their lives, one girl responded calmly, “Yep.” Further probing revealed that just weeks after doing the course, she became aware of a man in a van following her when she went out running. This continued for a week before he attacked her, when she said initially she wondered if she was about to be killed. She said,

I was panicking and everything. Like, I didn’t know what to do until I remembered I did the self-defense course. And I just remembered, the way he was holding me, what she said to do if the guy’s holding you that way. (Participant, Teen Parent Unit)



She was able to escape, and also made sufficient noise to attract a local resident's attention who recorded the attacker's number plate and passed it on to police, who subsequently confirmed he was a known rapist.

Other examples included a Year 7-8 schoolgirl who told her classroom teacher that some men approached her when she was down at a local park. She was unsure what to do until she recalled what the WSDN-WT teacher had taught her about how to position her body and use her voice, and she was able to run away. There were also at least two incidents recounted where girls were prompted by the course to disclose sexual abuse, which resulted in investigations and the perpetrators ended up in court and/or prison.

The examples we were told about during our interviews did not necessarily become known by the self-defense teachers. In one powerful example the story was told of a recent funding crisis that nearly led to the network's closure and the end of the courses in schools. One of the Māori WSDN-WT teachers was asked by the chairperson if she would be willing to get some girls and/or their parents who had done the course to appear on television. A mother whose daughter had done the course some years previously asked if she could bring her along. The WSDN-WT teacher agreed, having no idea why, and the girl turned up and confirmed she was willing to speak on television:

And then she said that her stepfather had sexually assaulted her. Well, tried to, and she said, "I did the hold," which I think was going to the balls, basically grabbing them. And she said, "And he didn't ever do anything else to me." But she hadn't told anyone about it, she just sorted it out herself.

Her younger sister had not learned self-defense and was unable to stay safe from her stepfather. Eventually, there was a court case and he went to prison, and when the mother was filmed for television, she emphasized,

The self-defense is so great, you've got to keep the funding because my daughter who did it, it saved her, and the one who hadn't, she didn't know what to do.

### *Impact of Prior Self-Defense*

A frequent criticism of self-defense courses is that any gains and knowledge acquired will be short-lived. In this study, 290 (46%) girls in Years 10-12 had previously completed a self-defense course, most often an earlier WSDN-WT course in Years 7-8. Assessing pre-program levels of self-reported knowledge, attitudes, and skills of this group compared with those who had not previously done self-defense provided an opportunity to investigate longer-term impacts of self-defense learning.

The results showed that the positive changes were maintained in the girls' knowledge of how to keep themselves safe,  $t(342) = 3.77, p < .01$ ; their understanding of the importance of help seeking,  $t(345) = 2.8, p < .01$ ; and their understanding of how to be an ethical bystander when the safety of others was under threat,  $t(342) = 4.78, p < .01$ . Differences in recognizing potentially risky situations and in their confidence to use self-defense skills were higher for girls who had previously completed a self-defense

course, but this difference was not statistically significant,  $t(343) = 1.1, p > .05$ . However, study findings also showed that when placed in situations where they need to use their self-defense skills, many girls discover they do remember and are able to use them.

## Discussion

Girls of all ages provided examples not only of physical moves they had learned but also of discovering the power of their own voice and how it could be used to frighten off an attacker and/or yell for help. Such learning is vitally important, given that girls are typically socialized in ways that encourage the suppression of voice and that reward politeness and submission, with the impacts of their socialization typically evident in their adult responses. As so clearly pointed out by Martha McCaughey (1997),

... if a woman throws “like a girl,” runs like a girl, swings like a girl, climbs like a girl and hits like a girl, it is not because she has some natural disadvantage relative to men, but because she does not use her whole body and full strength; because she has less self-conscious direction and placement to her body motion; and because she approaches physical tasks with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy. (p. 41)

As noted earlier, an oft-cited criticism of self-defense courses suggests that they may foster increased fear in participants and contribute to attitudes of self-blame (Cermele, 2004; McDaniel, 1993). The findings from this evaluation indicate that contrary to these concerns, the girls experienced the WSDN-WT course in ways that increased their confidence and encouraged them never to view victimization as the victim’s fault. Instead of becoming more fearful, girls reported feeling empowered as a result of learning a range of behaviors they could draw on if attacked or when facing a threatening situation. Their schoolteachers reported other programs might try to engage intellectually with the girls and give them knowledge, but the self-defense courses combined that element with an embodied experience of their own strength. As one teacher observed,

It’s actually practicing being really loud verbally, and being assertive, and going through the different actions that they can do in those situations, and actually acting them out—rather than saying, “This is what you should do,” actually allowing them to say, “Right, do this, and now let’s practice it.” I think that’s what’s been powerful about it. (School principal, Years 3-4 girls)

Interviews conducted with school personnel were unanimously positive, even glowing, about how they observed the impacts of the course on the girls, irrespective of age and ethnicity. Every key informant identified one of the most important outcomes being the increased confidence they saw in the girls. Gains were observed in even the most timid, prompting some teachers to see the course as contributing also to school anti-bullying programs.

Evaluation research typically yields a mixed bag of findings, with even the most positively experienced programs being seen, at least by some commentators, as lacking or being less than excellent in particular respects. We struggled as researchers to elicit from either the girls as participants or the key informants anything experienced negatively or found lacking. These courses and the teachers presenting them consistently received the highest levels of praise, with suggested changes only with regard to how to extend the reach of this program further.

Among the factors central to this program's success, we identified the rigorous selection and training process for the self-defense teachers, including ongoing training, up-skilling, and close supervision. Also evident was the value of a clearly articulated core philosophy shared by the teachers and uniting them in their understanding of gender violence and the importance of the preventive work in which they are engaged. It was essential that such courses were delivered in a safe environment by teachers equipped to deal with triggering and disclosures should they occur, underscoring the importance of close collaboration between the self-defense teachers, school personnel, and specialist support agencies.

The WSDN-WT teachers were praised for their professionalism and competency and the careful ways in which they encouraged discussion of sensitive topics such as unwanted sexual touching. Some schoolteachers recounted examples of self-defense teachers alerting them to disclosures of child sexual abuse prompted by course content, a possibility recognized in advance by WSDN-WT teachers agreeing to align with school protocols should such situations arise.

The self-defense teachers were uniformly described as highly qualified and experienced, and adept in establishing good rapport with the girls. Several staff members commented how unusual it was to see pupils so positively engaged that even the ringing of the school bell at the close of day elicited no shift in student attentiveness.

A further aspect often praised was how the physical techniques were taught in ways accessible to girls of all abilities. Every girl attending a course, including those with physical disabilities, was encouraged to experience a sense of her body's strength, a powerful message in stark contrast to the plethora of ways in which girls and women are portrayed as weak, vulnerable victims-in-waiting. Also often recognized were the fun and active approaches to learning adopted by the self-defense teachers.

Try as we might to uncover any criticisms about the teachers or course content, we were unable to identify anything problematic. The closest we could get to a negative comment was when a couple of schoolteachers said boys at their school and other teachers had complained that they were missing out on the course. The many positive attributes that emerged emanated in large part from the feminist philosophical core at the heart of this program. This enabled a clear, gendered account of violence and victimization to be consistently maintained, accompanied by a central belief in the rights of all persons to live without fear and violence.

## **Conclusion**

As we continue to strive for societies characterized by mutual safety and respect, free from violence and coercion, self-defense courses based on a feminist empowerment

model emerge as an initiative warranting increased positive attention and investment. The social and economic costs of violence are vast, with impacts from one attack rippling through families and communities in ways beyond easy quantification. Against this backdrop, the funding of self-defense courses similar in content and approach to those evaluated here emerges as a relatively low-cost social imperative.

Potentially diluting the strength of this imperative, however, are the objections still voiced to teaching women self-defense. Contrary to traditional rape prevention advice, an abundance of research now exists indicating that women who resist an attacker do not place themselves at greater risk of injury or death; they do, however, place themselves at higher likelihood of being able to avoid rape (Ullman, 1997, 2007). As Gordon and Riger (1989) observed, women successfully resist at least three quarters of all attempted rapes; yet, this reality is not reflected in news reports or in everyday conversation (Hollander, 2002). The general consensus is that fighting back provides an opportunity to avoid being raped, without increasing the severity of the attack (Hollander, 2014; Thompson, 2014; Ullman, 1998).

The power and potential of this conclusion is itself resisted, challenging as it does conventional beliefs in gender roles and stereotypes. Men's power is complemented by women's vulnerability, their status secured in the fusion of physical and social dominance. The messages girls in many societies continue to receive growing up present them with conflicting images of female agency juxtaposed with female victimization. Although girls can now supposedly "do everything," many forms of media imply they face perpetual risk from everyone. Discourses of vulnerability persist, reinforcing images of women helpless to defend themselves against male attackers (Burton, 1998; Campbell, 2005). Proclamations of growing gender equality are undermined by the prevalence of violence against women, spousal homicide statistics, and the unrelenting objectification and sexualization of female bodies (Hatton & Trautner, 2013; Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). Girls growing up are typically exposed to a vast array of images portraying women both as victimized *and* deserving blame for their victimization. Although rape myths remain far from mythical, strong and clear initiatives are needed that directly challenge dominant conceptions of female vulnerability and subordination.

The self-defense courses evaluated here emerge as a vital strand contributing in ways both direct and indirect to the prevention of physical and sexual violence. Many girls and women need education and support to be able even to recognize the wide range of controlling and victimizing behaviors they experience, let alone know how to resist them. Our findings endorse the potentially life-saving merits of feminist self-defense programs constructed around a strong empowerment focus. The unrelenting prevalence of IPV necessitates utilizing diverse approaches to enhance women's safety and prevent ongoing victimization. Just as we teach children road safety to help them negotiate traffic, we need to teach girls and women relationship safety to help them negotiate life.

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