

Community intervention program reduces repeat intimate-partner violence

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Mothers who completed a mandatory community intimate-partner violence (IPV) program were less likely to be re-victimized and more likely to leave an abusive spouse or partner, say researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Changes in Intimate Partner Violence Among Women Mandated to Community Services" was published online recently in the journal *Research and Social Work Practice*. Rebecca Macy, L. Richardson Preyer Distinguished Chair for Strengthening Families and professor in UNC's School of Social Work, directed the five-year study.

It is believed to be the first research in the country to focus on court- or agency-required interventions designed for women who are victims of IPV and who also have children.

Two key factors led researchers to focus on this population. First, a growing body of evidence that children in homes with IPV are at greater risk for child maltreatment, leading child-protective agencies to look more closely at those homes. Second, changes in IPV laws were resulting in more arrests of women – often mothers – who, "used violence against [male partners](#) to protect themselves, defend their children, or to retaliate for prior abuse," the study said.

As a result, more women with children are being ordered by the courts or child-protection agencies to attend IPV [prevention programs](#). UNC researchers studied one such program, "Mothers Overcoming Violence

through Education and Empowerment," or MOVE.

MOVE is a collaboration between two North Carolina nonprofits, InterAct of Wake County, which provides IPV services, and SAFEchild Raleigh, which offers child abuse prevention services. It was started in 2007 to help women mandated to attend IPV intervention programs.

The 13-week program provides tips and techniques on safety, effective parenting, improved communication, [anger management](#) and self-advocacy. Meetings also focus on helping the mothers feel special and include festive sit-down dinners. Nearly 140 women have enrolled in the program over the past six years; 70 of those women participated in the study.

"So many of the women MOVE has worked with have complicated histories, and many have had years of victimization," Macy explained. "For those reasons, these are individuals who feel bad about themselves, and they blame themselves for the abuse in their relationships."

The intervention program attempts to alter that thinking by helping participants regain their self-confidence and develop the tools needed to be better parents, helping break the cycle of violence.

"One of the primary goals is to give them a chance to feel good about themselves again and to help them make healthy decisions for themselves and for their children," said Stacey Sullivan, clinical supervisor at SAFEchild and MOVE program coordinator, who holds a master's in [social work](#) from UNC.

MOVE has shown promising results, the UNC researchers found. Up to three months after participants completed the program, there was a 96.5 percent reduction in the likelihood that they would experience a repeat of physical abuse. There was also a nearly 84 percent decrease in the

likelihood that the women would experience any form of psychological abuse.

Macy and her colleagues also found that the study participants, mostly mothers with children ages 5 and younger, were also less likely to use physical or psychological violence against their male partners. According to research results, the chances that MOVE participants would commit psychological or physical abuse were reduced 89.2 percent and 93.6 percent, respectively, following program completion.

Even more promising, Macy said, is that researchers found that many women left abusive relationships after graduating from the MOVE program. At the beginning of the MOVE program, 42 percent of the participating [women](#) remained with their abusive partner; that percentage dropped to 32 percent after participants completed MOVE. At the three-month follow-up, only 19 percent still remained with their abusive partners, the study showed.

"I think the structure of this program is what really mattered," Macy said. "I also think this collaboration is an example of why community-based research is so important. I never would have thought of the self-esteem activities that InterAct and SAFEchild developed."

Though pleased with the early results, UNC researchers say a more stringent study is needed before MOVE can be replicated and promoted as an evidence-based practice.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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