

# Empowerment-Based Programs for Preventing Interpersonal Violence: Evidence in Support of Girls Fight Back!

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*Despite commonly held assumptions to the contrary, and based upon the reports of both rape survivors and rape perpetrators, a victim's active resistance to a sexual assault is her best option for avoiding the completion of an attempted rape. The power of a woman's resistance has been the rationale for the formation of self-defense trainings, including the approach described in this article — empowerment self-defense (ESD). The authors emphasize the promise of these types of training programs, offers*

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*encouraging findings regarding their efficacy in helping women guard against completed sexual assaults.*

## INTRODUCTION

What constitutes “resistance” to an unwanted sexual advance (Schullhofer, 1998), and whether women can effectively resist against a perpetrator of sexual assault (Ullman, 1997; Ullman, 2007; Dardis et al., 2018) have been the subject of considerable discussion, debate, and focused research over the past 40 years. Despite lengthy debate on the topic, the findings from numerous studies suggest that most women use some form of resistance in response to rape (Clay-Warner, 2002; Fisher et al., 2007, O’Neal & Kaiser, 2015; Tark & Kleck, 2004), and engaging in resistance is associated with a greater likelihood of rape avoidance (Tark & Kleck, 2014). For example, in a study of 274 women experiencing rape or attempted rape, Ullman and Knight (1992) found that 22% of victims used physical force to resist their assault, whereas 49% of these women pushed away or fled from the perpetrator. Further, when victims use physical force to resist violence, rapes are 14 times more likely to be non-completed when compared to situations where the victim did not resist (Leclerc et al., 2022). These findings are also consistent with research among perpetrators of harm examining the role of resistance in the outcomes of unwanted sexual advances. For example, Orchowski and her colleagues’ (2022) evaluation of college men found that unwanted sexual contact that was initiated by a man was stopped 98% of the time because of a discussion of limits, non-verbal cues, verbal resistance, and physical resistance. Similarly, results from a study conducted among 140 criminal sex offenders found that perpetrators rated victim use of self-protective behaviors as the most effective strategy to prevent rape (Chiu et al., 2021).

Active practice of verbal and physical resistance skills are not widely implemented and continue to receive criticism often due to unfounded concerns that fighting back could result in the escalation of aggression or result in injury for the potential victim (see Dardis et al., 2018; Ullman, 2022). Whereas the core element unifying self-defense programs broadly centers on providing individuals with individualized tools and strategies to reduce their own personal risk for responding to unwanted advances, broader theoretical underpinnings and specific strategies provided within self-defense programs vary (Gidycz, 2018). Empowerment self-defense (ESD) is a specific type of self-defense training that focuses on empowering those who might be a potential target of harm, rather than restricting their actions (Thompson, 2014). ESD programs commonly teach participants how to be aware of potential risks in their environment, strategies for assertive verbal communication, and a variety of easy-to-learn physical resistance strategies. Hollander (2018) outlines seven fundamental elements of ESD training programs, which include drawing from an evidence base, being comprehensive in nature, communicating

to participants that perpetrators are responsible for their actions, transforming participants' understanding of their own bodies, placing violence in a social context, advocating for social change, and empowering rather than restricting participants lives. Notably, several sexual assault risk-reduction and resistance education programs that include empowerment self-defense demonstrate reductions in rates of victimization among participants after program completion (Orchowski et al., 2008; Senn et al., 2018).

Nicole Snell, the CEO of Girls Fight Back, is advancing efforts to spread the word about the importance of teaching personal safety, self-defense, and resistance to women, girls, and vulnerable populations of all gender identities. Girls Fight Back was founded in 2001 by Erin Weed, in honor of her friend Shannon McNamara who was murdered in her off-campus apartment near the campus of Eastern Illinois University. In addition to its signature 75-minute Girls Fight Back seminar, the organization offers several workshops and training programs, including "Students Fight Back" for youth and students of all genders, "Yes, I am Hiking Solo" to foster empowerment in outdoor activities, "Safety, Assertiveness, Violence Prevention, Empowerment" (SAVE) to enhance personal safety in the workplace, and "Boundaries for Personal Empowerment" to foster confidence in assertive interpersonal and organizational communication. Components of the Girls Fight Back program include providing basic physical self-defense skills, increasing situational awareness, boundary setting, interpersonal effectiveness, and assertiveness skill development, trusting one's intuition, how to support survivors, and bystander intervention training to prevent victimization among others.

Continued evaluation of empowerment self-defense programs prevention is essential for better establishing this approach as a component of sexual assault prevention efforts. Whereas data on whether the program is associated with decreases in sexual assault following participation is not yet available, post-program surveys from 285 participants collected between 2019 and 2022 highlight the acceptability and utility of the program. Specifically, data suggest that 94.3% of participants rate program facilitators and presenters as excellent, and 98.6% of participants indicate they are likely or extremely likely to recommend the program to friends. Further, most participants characterized the program as engaging (97.0%), useful (97.9%), and applicable (81.4%) to their everyday lives. Feedback also provided evidence that most participants (66.9%) reported that they were motivated to attend another self-defense program in the future. Qualitative feedback also indicated that the program was seen as transformative and empowerment. One participant noted, "I now feel in charge of my own safety." Similarly, another participant noted that as a result of the program, they learned "clear, easy tools for boundary setting and being assertive." Another participant noted: "I thought it was really awesome that the speaker made sure to clarify that teaching self-defense doesn't equal victim blaming, and that the criminal is the one responsible for the crime." More recent efforts to continue evaluating Girls Fight

Back are currently underway. In fact, among 191 participants who attended a prevention program from the Girls Fight Back training catalog between the dates of March 2023 and July 2023, 99.0% of attendees ( $n = 189$ ) indicated that the training was valuable. While these data collectively emphasize that nearly all attendees overwhelmingly agree that this specific empowerment self-defense program is acceptable, future efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of this program at reducing rates of sexual assault is warranted.

As rates of sexual assault remain high, efforts to evaluate prevention approaches are vital. Given growing research highlighting the effectiveness of empowerment self-defense training programs, we agree with McCaughey and Cermele (2017) as well as other authors who have argued that empowerment self-defense should be widely disseminated. Given that perpetrators remain 100% responsible for their behavior, these efforts should be implemented in tandem with efforts to address risk for engaging in sexual aggression, as well as efforts to engage all members of a community in acting to address risks for harm (Orchowski et al., 2020).

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