

## **DRAFT**

### **Task Force to Study the Statewide Response to Minors Exposed to Family Violence**

#### **Connecticut Office of Early Childhood**

##### **Early Prevention and Intervention Opportunities**

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (COEC) envisions that all young children in Connecticut are safe, healthy, learning and thriving. Each child is surrounded by a strong network of nurturing adults who deeply value the importance of the first years of a child's life and have the skills, knowledge, support and passion to meet the unique needs of every child.

It is the mission of the (COEC) to support all young children in their development by ensuring that early childhood policy, funding and services strengthen the critical role families, providers, educators and communities play in a child's life.

In 2014, Child and Family Advocates through Connecticut's 18 domestic violence agencies served 2,400 children. Of that number, 1,200 were sheltered with the majority of these children under the age of five. Child and Family Advocates also recorded 9,000 service contacts with children last year to include counseling, safety planning, referrals, advocacy within outside systems and support groups. Child and Family Advocates made 2,844 referrals to outside agencies such as behavioral health, birth to three, medical services and public school enrolment.

COEC provides funding, standards, regulations, training and oversight to ensure that early care and education programs for young children are safe, healthy and nurturing; effectively support children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development; and, are accessible to all children, particularly those facing barriers, risks or challenges to their healthy development and success. COEC provides home visiting services, funding and training to support families raising young children to ensure the children's health, well-being and positive growth and development and to prevent child abuse or neglect.

COEC funds four evidence based home visiting programs models to include; Child First, Early Head Start Home Based Option, Nurse Family Partnership and Nurturing Families Network Parents as Teachers.

COEC currently offers training through its Nurturing Families Network Program Home Visiting to include models such as; "Importance of Engaging Fathers – Real Dads Forever," "Fathers Exploring the Role as Leaders – 24-7," "Fathers as Nurturers – Nurturing Fathers," and "The Intersection Between Fatherhood and Domestic Violence."

In regard to opportunities to assess risk to children related to family violence and other matters, the COEC uses two tools; the Revised Early Identification Screen and Family Stress Checklist Assessment.

The COEC, through its Nurturing Families Network, does provide policy for families with Acute Problems whereas parents experiencing current or recent problems causing an acute crisis related to mental health, exposure to violence including domestic violence or substance.

**Recommendations:**

**1. Training**

Given its reach to providers serving young children and therefore young children potentially exposed to family violence, the COEC should consider establishing training and cross-training expectations and guidelines for providers on such topics as the impact of family violence on young children, risk assessment, a trauma-informed approach, and community-based resources and supports. COEC training should be foundationally structured to include evidence-based material and curriculum (s) which offer a multi-disciplinary perspective, a victim-centered approach and provide for accountability to the offender.

**2. Policy**

The COEC has opportunity to more fully support children living in homes with family violence through its funding, standards, regulation and oversight of programs for young children. The COEC might consider convening Connecticut stakeholders to build upon the agency's Nurturing Families Network Families with Acute Problems Policy to include other agency funded programs.

**Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence**

**Safe Dates Curriculum**

**Evidence-Based Model for Prevention of Domestic Violence Amongst Youth**

According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey;

- 26% of CT high school students report being verbally or emotionally abused (33.9% female; 19.1% male)
- 9% of CT high school students report being physically hurt on purpose by a dating partner (10.1% female; 7.9% male)

- 11% of CT high school students report being forced by someone they were dating or “going-out with” to do sexual things when they did not want to (15.5 % female; 7.3% male)

Existing Connecticut state statutes are limited in addressing teen dating violence and healthy relationships in school. Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) §10-16b(a) addresses health education in schools and the prescribed course of study related to health and safety. While the statute includes “physical, mental and emotional health,” it does not specifically include teen dating violence, domestic violence or healthy relationships among the four identified related topics<sup>1</sup>; therefore, there is no guarantee that every student receives consistent, if any, education on the topic while in the required health classes. Required in-service training and professional development is addressed in CGS §10-220a(a) with 10 potential topics to include in the in-service training program, one such topic being “health and mental health risk reduction” that has 7 possible sub-topics related to risk-taking behavior, including teen dating violence and domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Connecticut’s Safe School Climate (CGS §10-222d, 10-222g, 10-222h, 10-222i, 10-222j, 10-222k) offer limited guidance to schools seeking to address teen dating violence within its student body.

One school-based education model currently utilized in Connecticut is Safe Dates, a ten session evidence based curriculum designed to prevent dating violence. It helps teens recognize the difference between caring, supportive relationships and controlling, manipulative, or abusive dating relationships. Safe Dates can be used as a dating abuse prevention and intervention tool for both male and female middle and high school students. Safe Dates meets the national academic standards for health education grades 6-12 and is designed as a model program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Safe Dates was also selected for the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) has been offering the Safe Dates curriculum and training through a small contract through the Department of Children and Families since the Spring of 2015. As of November 2015, 214 school counselors, social workers, teachers and CCADV community educators have been trained from nearly 40 different school districts in Connecticut leaving them well-positioned to teach the curriculum in their classes.

## **Recommendations:**

### **1. Education**

Education related to teen dating violence, domestic violence or healthy relationships is not specifically included in the prescribed course of study outlined in CGS §10-16b(a) resulting in a lack of consistent education among Connecticut’s school-aged children. Language should be reviewed and resources should be made available to ensure that grade-appropriate K-12 teen dating violence education and prevention, using evidence-based curricula, is taught in all public schools. Given the evidence-based success of Safe Dates, we recommend that this curriculum be used for health education grades 6-12 and be fully supported by the Connecticut State Department of Education and Department of Children & Families.

## 2. Training

CGS §10-220a(a) is neither sufficient nor reflective of the importance to address dating violence and healthy relationships early to prevent potentially lifelong problems associated with experiencing or witnessing domestic violence. Given statistics that demonstrate that many educators and school employees feel unprepared to address teen dating violence in their schools, existing policies should be reviewed to determine a workable solution to bolstering training and resources for educators and school employees related to teen dating violence and domestic violence. Again, considering the documented success of Safe Dates, this is one potential model that meets both the needs of in-service training for educators/school professionals and in-class education for students.

## 3. Policy

Connecticut Safe School Climate (CGS §10-222d, 10-222g, 10-222h, 10-222i, 10-222j, 10-222k) should be updated as follows to more comprehensively and effectively address teen dating violence in schools:

- a) CGS §10-222d requires each local and regional school board of education to develop and implement a safe school climate plan to address the existence of bullying and teen dating violence in schools, including a prevention and intervention strategy for employees to deal with bullying and teen dating violence. There are 18 subdivisions that describe what the Safe School Climate shall include - teen dating violence is only specifically referenced in one (1) subdivision. The section also does not prohibit/establish a zero-tolerance policy for teen dating violence similar to its zero-tolerance policy for bullying. The exclusion of teen dating violence from the majority of the Safe School Climate plans developed by school boards is a barrier to a coordinated, comprehensive approach to addressing the issue. Language should be reviewed to more thoroughly incorporate the response to teen dating violence in the Safe School Climate plans.
- b) CGS §10-222g provides a list of potential actions, including a response to teen dating violence, to include in the “prevention and intervention strategy” referenced in §10-222d. None of the potential strategies are required. This section suggests that schools develop rules prohibiting bullying and teen dating violence, conflicting with and causing confusion regarding §10-222d, which requires a zero-tolerance policy for bullying but not for teen dating violence. This section also suggests the inclusion of grade-appropriate K-12 teen dating violence education and prevention curricula, which is not referenced in other statutes regarding course of study, including §10-16b. These conflicts should be addressed in §10-222d and §10-16b, respectively.

- c) CGS §10-222j allows the State Department of Education to, within available resources, provide annual training to school employees on the prevention, identification and response to school bullying and teen dating violence, and the prevention of and response to youth suicide. Additional funding needs to be allocated to the State Department of Education or Department of Children and Families to strengthen the availability of training for educators and school employees using evidence-based curricula such as Safe Dates.

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<sup>1</sup> CGS §10-16b(a) Prescribed courses of study. (a) In the public schools the program of instruction offered shall include at least the following subject matter, as taught by legally qualified teachers, the arts; career education; consumer education; health and safety, including, but not limited to, human growth and development, nutrition, first aid, disease prevention, community and consumer health, physical, mental and emotional health, including youth suicide prevention, substance abuse prevention, safety, which may include the dangers of gang membership, and accident prevention; language arts, including reading, writing, grammar, speaking and spelling; mathematics; physical education; science; social studies, including, but not limited to, citizenship, economics, geography, government and history; and in addition, on at least the secondary level, one or more world languages and vocational education. For purposes of this subsection, world languages shall include American Sign Language, provided such subject matter is taught by a qualified instructor under the supervision of a teacher who holds a certificate issued by the State Board of Education. For purposes of this subsection, the “arts” means any form of visual or performing arts, which may include, but not be limited to, dance, music, art and theatre.

<sup>2</sup> CGS §10-220a(a) In-service training. Professional development and evaluation committees. Institutes for educators. Cooperating teacher program, regulations. (a) Each local or regional board of education shall provide an in-service training program for its teachers, administrators and pupil personnel who hold the initial educator, provisional educator or professional educator certificate. Such program shall provide such teachers, administrators and pupil personnel with information on (1) the nature and the relationship of drugs, as defined in subdivision (17) of section 21a-240, and alcohol to health and personality development, and procedures for discouraging their abuse, (2) health and mental health risk reduction education which includes, but need not be limited to, the prevention of risk-taking behavior by children and the relationship of such behavior to substance abuse, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV-infection and AIDS, as defined in section 19a-581, violence, teen dating violence, domestic violence, child abuse and youth suicide, (3) the growth and development of exceptional children, including handicapped and gifted and talented children and children who may require special education, including, but not limited to, children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or learning disabilities, and methods for identifying, planning for and working effectively with special needs children in a regular classroom, including, but not limited to, implementation of student individualized education programs, (4) school violence prevention, conflict resolution, the prevention of and response to youth suicide and the identification and prevention of and response to bullying, as defined in subsection (a) of section 10-222d, except that those boards of education that implement any evidence-based model approach that is approved by the Department of Education and is consistent with subsection (d) of section 10-145a, sections 10-222d, 10-222g and 10-222h, subsection (g) of section 10-233c and sections 1 and 3 of public act 08-160\*, shall not be required to provide in-service training on the identification and prevention of and response to bullying, (5) cardiopulmonary resuscitation and other emergency life saving procedures, (6) computer and other information technology as applied to student learning and classroom instruction, communications and data management, (7) the teaching of the language arts, reading and reading readiness for teachers in grades kindergarten to three, inclusive, (8) second language acquisition in districts required to provide a program of bilingual education pursuant to section 10-17f, (9) the requirements and obligations of a mandated reporter, and (10) the teacher evaluation and support program adopted pursuant to subsection (b) of section 10-151b. Each local and regional board of education may allow any paraprofessional or noncertified employee to participate, on a voluntary basis, in any in-service training program provided pursuant to this section. The State Board of

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Education, within available appropriations and utilizing available materials, shall assist and encourage local and regional boards of education to include: (A) Holocaust and genocide education and awareness; (B) the historical events surrounding the Great Famine in Ireland; (C) African-American history; (D) Puerto Rican history; (E) Native American history; (F) personal financial management; (G) domestic violence and teen dating violence; (H) mental health first aid training; and (I) topics approved by the state board upon the request of local or regional boards of education as part of in-service training programs pursuant to this subsection.