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**Start Strong Bronx teens working to eradicate abuse in relationships by teaching the kids**

BY [Tanyanika Samuels](http://www.nydailynews.com/authors/Tanyanika%20Samuels%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)
Daily News Staff Writer

Months after the headlines, songstress [Rihanna](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Rihanna%22%20%5Co%20%22Rihanna%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) is now opening up about her abusive dating relationship.

It's a story that resonates with a group of [Bronx](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/The%2BBronx%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Bronx%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) teens working to share a similar message.

These teens are part of Start Strong Bronx, a youth program teaching 11- to 14-year-olds about healthy relationships and how to avoid abuse.

"We want them to have a vision of what a healthy relationship feels like, whether it's with their parents or teachers or with someone they're dating," said [Christina Alex](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Christina%2BAlex%22%20%5Co%20%22Christina%20Alex%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), the program's director.

Sponsored by [Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Bronx-Lebanon%2BHospital%2BCenter%2BHealth%2BCare%2BSystem%22%20%5Co%20%22Bronx-Lebanon%20Hospital%20Center%20Health%20Care%20System%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), Start Strong Bronx kicked off this summer to tackle the issue by partnering with local government leaders, city school officials and community groups.

A reported 11.2% of [New York City](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/New%2BYork%2BCity%22%20%5Co%20%22New%20York%20City%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) teens have been hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year, according to a Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Centers%2Bfor%2BDisease%2BControl%2Band%2BPrevention%22%20%5Co%20%22Centers%20for%20Disease%20Control%20and%20Prevention%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

As part of Start Strong Bronx, teen volunteers reach out to middle school students in unique ways.

They've developed a comic book with a storyline about healthy teen relationships and performed a skit about cyber-bullying through text messages.

"Most middle school kids think that their parents' situation was not as drastic as ours," said teen volunteer [Marc Simmons](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Marc%2BSimmons%22%20%5Co%20%22Marc%20Simmons%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), 16, of [Bronx High School](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Bronx%2BHigh%2BSchool%22%20%5Co%20%22Bronx%20High%20School%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) for Visual Arts. "But we're not that far away in age group, so we will know what that abuse might look like and sound like."

The teen volunteers, with guidance from program advisers, are now working on a 15-minute film about relationships between middle school students, as well as with their parents.

"Even though our main focus is middle school, we get to tell parents and high school students about it also," said teen advisory member [Bianca Ortiz](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Bianca%2BOrtiz%22%20%5Co%20%22Bianca%20Ortiz%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), 16, of [Aquinas High School](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Aquinas%2BHigh%2BSchool%22%20%5Co%20%22Aquinas%20High%20School%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

"I think it's cool because not every adult knows what's going on. They think they know because 'I've been there before.' But they may not realize that what they do at home affects their child."

The Bronx program is one of 11 teen dating violence programs nationwide funded by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Robert%2BWood%2BJohnson%2BFoundation%22%20%5Co%20%22Robert%20Wood%20Johnson%20Foundation%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and [Blue Shield of California](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Blue%2BCross%2Band%2BBlue%2BShield%2BAssociation%22%20%5Co%20%22Blue%20Cross%20and%20Blue%20Shield%20Association%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

Bronx-Lebanon Hospital has partnered with the borough president's office, the city [Department of Education](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/U.S.%2BDepartment%2Bof%2BEducation%22%20%5Co%20%22U.S.%20Department%20of%20Education%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), the nonprofit Sanctuary for Families, Pregones Theater, Violence Intervention Program, the Bronx Clergy Task Force and the [Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Boys%2B%26%2BGirls%2BClubs%2Bof%2BAmerica%22%20%5Co%20%22Boys%20%26%20Girls%20Clubs%20of%20America%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) to develop the program over the coming years.

tsamuels@nydailynews.com

* For more information, visit [www.startstrongteens.org](http://www.startstrongteens.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

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([http://www.familyresourceny.com/articles/2009/11/13/bronx\_family/doc4af495cb9f882131395542.txt](http://www.familyresourceny.com/articles/2009/11/13/bronx_family/doc4af495cb9f882131395542.txt%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank))

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**Dating 101 for teens in the Bronx - Innovative program schools kids in relationships**

**By Tiziana Rinaldi**

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A new program in the Bronx will teach middle school children how to lay the foundations of healthy and supportive relationships before they start dating.

Aimed at reshaping a teen culture of connections marred by violence and abuse, Start Strong Bronx received a $1 million grant to implement the school-based curricula and community outreach as part of an unprecedented national campaign, led by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

In New York City, 11.2 percent of teenagers say they were hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or a girlfriend during the previous year, according to data released by the Center for Disease Control’s 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

“We can teach them how to look for a partner who will support and encourage their goals and development,” said Start Strong Bronx director Christina Alex.

Headquartered at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center, the four-year program plans to adopt a comprehensive strategy to educate not only the 11-to-14-year-olds in its five participating middle schools (MS 331, 117, 279, 15 and 206b), but also Bronx families, educators, faith leaders and even sports coaches to the reality of bad teen relationships.

“As the father of two teenage boys, I think it is essential to educate our youth about healthy relationships and the value of respecting themselves and others,” said Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., in the press release, which  announced the initiative.

Start Strong Bronx is  also working with his office to affect policy and legislation, which  will increase the number of teen violence prevention programs.

Middle school children will be engaged in workshops, support groups and a 21-lesson curriculum, called the “Fourth R,” for Reading, ’Riting, ’Rithmetic and Relationships, which addresses safe dating issues, along with bullying, cyber bullying, media violence and risky behaviors (such as substance abuse and unprotected sex).

To accomplish the task, Start Strong Bronx has partnered with a network of organizations, which  include the Mayor’s and Bronx borough president’s offices, the Department of Education, Sanctuary for Families, Pregones Theater, Violence Intervention Program, the Bronx Clergy Task Force and the Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club. Medical practitioners also participate in the training and social outreach, since a recent survey conducted at various Start Strong centers showed that many parents feel more comfortable learning about teens dating problems from their pediatrician.

“In a healthy relationship two people respect each other as equals and feel safe to be themselves,” said Alex. “Warning signs that [a] child maybe in an abusive relationship [occur] when [he or she] changes to please the partner.”

Dropping their favorite activities to do what their companions like, changing their taste in clothes or music or acting withdrawn when normally outgoing are all behavioral modifications that should be paid close attention to. Kids get brainwashed when they spend all their time with a controlling partner who puts down their family and friends to isolate them, said Alex, “[it] rips apart their self-confidence.”

Abusive practices are, in fact, not just of a physical nature, but verbal and emotional as well and are sometimes picked up at home.

The use of such expletives as “stupid” and other insults, or mind games to make children question their judgment “are so common,“ added Alex, “that people don’t consider them [abusive].” Children, though, take it very seriously. In a child’s world “a joking putdown can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

A Teen Advisory Board – Bronx high school students who play a key role as peer leaders in Start Strong Bronx’ outreach to the middle schools – is working with Reel Work Teen Filmmaking to produce a video on the topic. Its purpose is two-fold: to show how kids apply habits learned from parents and caregivers on their peer and dating partners, and to help the adult population recognize how grown up behaviors influence young minds.

Additional creative materials in progress by the teen board include a Japanese Manga comic book to be distributed in the fall, a photography project and a public service announcement campaign.

“We all learn our manners, our behaviors and the way we should deal with a situation mostly at home,” said Bianca Ortiz, a 16-year-old student at Aquinas High School and a member of the Teen Advisory Board. “Our home life affects everything about us.”

The awareness that the program hopes to raise applies to all relationships – with peers, parents, siblings, teachers or dating partners.

“My first thought about the program was that I [would] finally have a way to talk to kids about the rights and wrongs of a relationship, no matter what kind,” said Teen Advisory Board member Marc Simmons, also a sophomore at Aquinas High School.

One teenager felt abused by an ex-girlfriend who used to put him down and hurt his feelings. Start Strong Bronx helped him debunk one of the most common myths about relationships, which is that people in supportive partnerships don’t fight. Fighting or disagreeing is a normal and healthy part of the process, while putting down the other person is never acceptable.

Acknowledging that texting is a favorite way for teens to stay in touch, Start Strong Bronx and MS 331 students will present “Texting for Life,” an original, interactive short play scheduled to debut at Pregones Theater in October, on the occasion of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

“So many teens use texting to control each other,” commented Alex, who quoted research from the National Domestic Violence Hotline to make her point. “One in three teens reported that they are texted 10, 20 or 30 times an hour, to find out what they’re doing or who they are with.”

For more on Start Strong Bronx, log on [www.startstrongbronx.org](http://www.startstrongbronx.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).