CONNECTED PARENTS:

A Technology-Enabled Approach to Prevent Adolescent Dating Violence

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Service Providers

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THE PROJECT TO END
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of ConnectED Parents, an innovative, technology-enabled intervention designed to support parents and caregivers in preventing adolescent dating violence by promoting healthy youth relationships. ConnectED Parents was built over more than a decade and evaluated over the past four years. This report highlights key lessons from the program that can inform practice among service providers working in adolescent dating violence prevention and related fields.

The goals of this report are twofold. First, to share practical, evidence-informed insights on how service providers can effectively engage and empower parents in their critical role in fostering safe, respectful, and healthy relationships among young people. Second, to inform and influence policymakers by demonstrating the importance of sustained funding and support for innovation in the violence prevention sector, particularly technology-enabled approaches that can be scaled, adapted, and embedded within existing community systems.

Acknowledgements

Adolescent Dating Violence: A Serious and Prevalent Issue in Canada

Adolescent dating violence (ADV), also known as teen or youth dating violence, is a serious public health issue affecting young people in Canada and beyond. ADV is a form of intimate partner violence among youth that includes physical and sexual violence, psychological aggression, stalking, and increasingly, technology-facilitated abuse.[1] It affects roughly one in three Canadian adolescents.[2]

The consequences of ADV are significant across genders, with observed patterns and impacts shaped by research methods and sample composition. Young people who experience dating violence face higher risks for depression, anxiety, substance misuse, academic difficulties, antisocial behaviours,

suicidal thoughts, and future experiences of intimate partner violence in adulthood.[3,4,5] Victimization experiences vary by gender. [6] Cisgender girls—who show higher rates of psychological, cyber, and sexual violence victimization—experience pronounced mental health impacts, while cisgender boys appear more represented in bi-directional violence[a] in opposite-sex relationships, and non-binary youth face elevated risk of ADV victimization.

Upstream, gender- and trauma-informed approaches for promoting healthy youth relationships are critical primary prevention[b] strategies to stop ADV before it starts and prevent cycles of violence across the lifespan.[7]

Parents Play a Crucial Role in Building Healthy Youth Relationship Skills

Parents and caregivers[c] play a vital role in shaping their children's understanding of healthy and respectful relationships. In fact, they are the role models and everyday influencers through which young people learn what care, respect, and safety look like in practice.

When parents engage in open, positive, and trusting conversations about relationships and dating, they help their children develop the skills and confidence to build safe and healthy connections that reduce the risk of dating violence.[8,9] Modelling and discussing topics such as boundaries, consent, and assertive communication equip youth to navigate relationships respectfully and safely, laying the foundation for healthy relationships throughout life.[10,11,12]

However, many parents do not discuss these important topics enough. Nearly half avoid conversations about dating violence, and some who do may unintentionally reinforce rigid gender roles, victim-blaming attitudes, or even punitive responses to disclosures of dating violence.[13,14] As a result, youth often turn to their friends instead of parents for relationship advice.[15] While peer support can be helpful, youth may lack access to accurate information, leading to sharing misinformation.[16] Further, 72% of teens report using AI companions, often to ask questions about dating and relationships they feel "too scared" to ask their parents.[17] While these tools can give youth a low-risk space to practice relationship skills, they should complement rather than replace turning to trusted adults, as parents should remain a critical first source of guidance and support.[18] These findings highlight the importance of

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[a] Bi-directional violence means both individuals in a relationship are using and experiencing abusive behaviours.
[b] Primary prevention focuses on preventing violence before it occurs. It prioritizes building and amplifying the conditions for safety, equity, and peace, leaving no room for violence to take hold. Primary prevention emphasizes building strong, ConnectED Parents systems and communities that support well-being for everyone.
[c] Parents and primary caregivers refer to those responsible for the daily care and upbringing of a child, which may include people such as biological and adoptive mothers and fathers, grandparents, and/or guardians. In this document, we use the word "parents" to describe all these people.

empowering parents to engage in meaningful conversations that foster healthy relationship development while leveraging technology to improve their engagement in ADV prevention amid a rapidly evolving digital world.

Challenges and Opportunities for ADV Prevention Programs Targeting Parents

Historically, ADV prevention programs for parents have relied on in-person group sessions.[19] While effective for some, these programs often struggle to attract and retain participants. Busy schedules, inconvenient locations, and perceptions that such programs are intrusive, intimidating, or irrelevant can prevent parents from engaging.[20,21] These challenges highlighted the need for preventative supports that fit more easily into parents' daily lives and served as key drivers in the development of ConnectED Parents.

ConnectED Parents addresses these barriers through a light-touch, technology-enabled approach that allows parents to engage on their own time. The program delivers practical, research-backed parenting and healthy relationship tips and resources directly to parents' phones, seamlessly integrating into everyday routines, whether while waiting in the car during school pickup, sitting in the stands at soccer practice, or after children are asleep. By leveraging technology and microlearning—small, manageable learning moments—ConnectED Parents builds parental confidence and capacity to teach healthy relationship skills to their children.

ABOUT CONNECTED PARENTS

ConnectED Parents was designed using the Behavioural Drivers' Model,[22] a comprehensive framework that synthesizes 25 evidence-based behavioural and decision-making theories. ConnectED Parents targets three key drivers that influence parents' behaviours around having healthy relationship conversations with their children: social environment (the culture and norms within parents' everyday settings), social influence (the impact of peer and social networks), and individual psychology (knowledge, beliefs, and personal motivations).

Focusing on these key drivers, ConnectED Parents empowers parents of children aged 6 to 20 to prevent ADV and promote healthy youth relationships through a multi-component, technology-enabled approach.

1 **Microlearning for parents through text messaging to have healthy youth relationship conversations**

Parents receive bite-sized, interactive, research-based resources directly on their phones. These messages offer practical tips, resources, tools, and real-life examples of topics such as parental active listening and communication, gender socialization and norms, healthy versus unhealthy relationships, assertive communication, boundary-setting, and conflict-resolution. Parents can apply these resources in everyday interactions with their children, making it easier to model, teach, and reinforce healthy relationship skills at home.

Research shows that texting and microlearning approaches can address some of the cognitive biases that prevent parents from accessing and applying ADV prevention content, including present bias (preferring smaller rewards now over bigger rewards later), hassles that make parents avoid or delay doing something, information avoidance, and hot-cold commitment.[23] By delivering microlearning content through texts, ConnectED Parents keeps cognitive demands low, reducing information overload and inconvenience barriers. The curriculum uses a "skills-first" approach, encouraging parents to apply new skills immediately, which helps counter present bias that might otherwise delay conversations. In addition, behavioural nudges such as reminders and prompts for micro-actions can help sustain parent engagement and mitigate waning commitment, known as hot-cold biases.[24]

2

Capacity-building for service providers and community leaders to influence parents' healthy relationship behaviours

Service providers and community leaders who work with groups of parents are trained to create healthy social environments in spaces where parents naturally gather, such as faith-based settings, online groups, and extracurricular activity settings. Leaders and service providers such as managers, facilitators, and coordinators play a key role in shaping the norms, practices, and structures within these settings. By modelling healthy relationship behaviours and amplifying inclusion, equity, respect, power-sharing, and psychological and physical safety, leaders reinforce the skill-building content delivered through the program's text message component and encourage parents to bring these skills home and teach them to their children.

3

Capacity-building for parent leaders to support other parents' healthy relationship behaviours

Parent leaders are key influencers and hold unique positions within their social networks, serving as highly connected and trusted sources of advice for other parents. As influencers, they are important role models and can accelerate the spread of new ideas and behaviours. ConnectED Parents strengthens their capacity to provide peer support on positive parenting and reinforcing healthy youth relationship messaging. By modelling healthy behaviours in both online and in-person networks, parent leaders amplify the program's text message component, increasing the visibility and credibility of its content, while encouraging parents to adopt new positive parenting skills and build confidence to teach healthy relationship skills to their children.

ConnectED Parents builds parents' skills to teach healthy relationships skills, connects them to peer support, and shapes everyday social conditions to make accessing resources, learning about ADV prevention, and applying skills with their children easier.

RESEARCH

Between 2021 and 2025, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence (UCalgary, Faculty of Social Work) adapted, implemented, and evaluated ConnectED Parents. The PHAC-funded study aimed to understand the impact of ConnectED Parents in the following areas:

1   Service providers' capacity to create and strengthen healthy social environments in parent settings that reinforce healthy relationship behaviours.

2   Parent leaders' capacity to provide peer support that promotes healthy youth relationships.

3   Parents' competencies to initiate and sustain conversations with their children about healthy relationships and adolescent dating violence prevention.

Overview of Research Methods

This pilot evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys and the text messaging platform with qualitative insights from interviews and observations. One hundred sixty-seven (167) parents of children aged 6 to 20, five service providers, and three parent leaders were recruited through community partners and online outreach. All participants provided consent, and the project was approved by a research ethics board.

The evaluation measured what parents, service providers, and parent leaders learned, their level of confidence in supporting ADV prevention, and the actions they took to apply new skills. Participants were also asked to assess the helpfulness of ConnectED Parents and to provide suggestions for improvement.

Detailed information on sampling, measures, analyses, and researchers' positionality can be found in Appendix A.

Snapshot of Research Findings

1. **ConnectED Parents strengthened capacities in service providers and parent leaders**
   - **Among service providers,** confidence in promoting healthy social environments increased from 20% before training to 60% after. Training validated existing practices while introducing practical

tools and frameworks, including ConnectED Parents' Healthy Social Environments framework. Although immediate application was limited due to low parent participation in some agency programs, providers expressed strong intent to integrate these approaches moving forward.

- **Parent leaders** valued the training and found the curriculum helpful in deepening their understanding of how their positionality and parenting styles shape their ability to support and influence other parents.

2. Parents demonstrated meaningful learning and behaviour change

- **Parents** showed statistically significant gains in knowledge, skills, confidence, and comfort teaching healthy relationship skills. Parents also developed positive parenting skills.
- At the three-month follow-up, 92% of parents had discussed healthy relationships and dating violence with their children, up from 62% before the program. Satisfaction with these conversations increased from 39% to 90%.

3. Text-based microlearning proved highly effective and accessible

- ConnectED Parents' text message microlearning approach set a new standard for parent engagement. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of parents agreed that text messaging was a useful tool for learning about healthy youth relationships (up from 55% before the intervention), reporting that messages fit seamlessly into busy lives.
- ConnectED Parents achieved an 83% retention rate across its 6-month program, exceeding typical parent-focused interventions of 40 to 60%.[25]

4. Early engagement and supportive online spaces mattered

- Nearly half of the participants had children aged 6 to 10, demonstrating success in engaging parents before crisis or dating begins. Parents stayed engaged due to ConnectED Parents' "skills-first" approach, which focuses on the skills parents value and can apply immediately.
- Supportive online spaces, including the ConnectED Parents Facebook group, reduced feelings of isolation and supported peer learning. Eighty percent (80%) of parents agreed that healthy online environments helped them lead conversations at home.

5. Areas for growth

- The parent leader peer support component was not fully implemented due to limited uptake and weak pre-existing relationships.
- Some parents noted the need for content that better reflects diverse cultural and lived experiences to enhance inclusivity and relevance.

> *"I had previously been through dating violence with my daughter but had no idea how to handle everything. Between that experience and the resources ConnectED Parents shared, I'm now much better prepared for when my son starts dating." (Parent Participant)*

LESSONS FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS TO PREVENT ADV

This section outlines seven lessons to consider when working with parents to prevent ADV and promote healthy youth relationships. Each lesson includes background information and practical recommendations tailored to practitioners' roles.

Lesson 1: Parents Matter in Preventing Adolescent Dating Violence

Most ADV prevention interventions centre on youth programming, leaving the critical role of parents under-addressed.[26] However, research is clear: strong, supportive communication between parents and their children about dating and relationships is a protective factor[d] against ADV.[27,28] Youth want their parents to talk with them about relationships and sex, even when it may not seem evident.[29] When youth trust that their parents can engage in non-judgmental and supportive conversations about these topics, they are more likely to share their concerns and issues. Likewise, parents who feel confident and skilled in facilitating healthy relationship conversations are more likely to initiate and sustain them.[30] Findings from the pilot evaluation reinforce this research, showing that trusting parent-child relationships and supportive communication better equip parents to develop their children's healthy relationship skills.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

Role	What	Examples
Organizational Leaders & Decision-Makers	Prioritize parent-focused ADV prevention	Ensure ADV prevention strategies do not rely solely on youth-focused programming. Invest in building parents' skills and confidence to lead early, ongoing conversations about healthy relationships, positioning parent-focused initiatives as a core prevention strategy.
Programmers & Curriculum Developers	Integrate parent-child relationship-building and shared learning into curricula	Ensure prevention curricula move beyond youth-centred or violence-specific content by embedding parent skills such as active listening, shared decision-making, and

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[d] Protective factors are the individual, family, community, and societal conditions that reduce the risk of ADV.

asking curious questions. Design and offer age-appropriate, parallel content for parents and youth so families align their learning and strengthen their relationships over time.

Lesson 2: Meet Parents Where They Are by Using Microlearning, Texting, and Parent-Centred Design

The field of ADV prevention has traditionally depended on structured programs delivered in schools, clinics, or organizations by professionals, often following fixed schedules and formats.[31,32] While these models have strengths, real-world barriers, such as busy family schedules, prevent many parents from fully engaging. Historical approaches often overlook opportunities to support parents in informal settings where they naturally gather, such as online parent groups, workplaces, or extracurricular spaces. [33]

ConnectED Parents addresses this gap by delivering microlearning content via text messages, reaching parents "where they already are": on their phones during school pickup, at soccer practice, or after their children's bedtime. Parents who participated in ConnectED Parents reported that brief, research-based texts made it easier to build the skills and confidence needed for healthy relationship conversations without the extensive time or travel required for in-person programs. ConnectED Parents' flexibility, bite-sized content, and real-life examples help make prevention education feel doable and relevant.

Microlearning approaches deliver focused content in small, easily digestible units designed to be completed quickly, often within a few minutes.[34] Each microlearning unit targets a specific skill or knowledge gap, breaking complex topics into bite-sized lessons.[35] Research shows that microlearning improves knowledge retention and fits more naturally into busy lives compared to traditional approaches.[36,37] It often uses diverse formats such as videos, infographics, and other technology-based tools to promote active learning and practical application referred to as micro-actions.[38,39] Text messaging, as demonstrated by ConnectED Parents, provides an accessible and convenient delivery channel that integrates learning into parents' daily lives. By combining microlearning with text delivery, ConnectED Parents exemplifies parent-centred design that breaks down participation barriers and

Microlearning meets parents where they are – busy, on the go, and eager for practical tips.

builds parents' capacity to lead healthy relationship conversations with their children. Specific examples of how microlearning is paired with text messages are in Appendix B.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

ConnectED Parents research shows that microlearning delivered via text messaging is an evidence-informed standard in parent engagement and education. To support the design and implementation of ADV prevention programs for parents, Table 1 offers a high-level outline of traditional program models, common barriers parents face, and ways parent-centred design can address these challenges. It also illustrates how combining microlearning with text messaging creates a parent-centred solution that makes learning accessible and convenient and easily integrates into daily lives. While Table 1 is not exhaustive and includes generalizations, it provides key conceptual insights for program design and parent engagement in ADV prevention.

Table 1:

Addressing Parent Engagement Challenges Through Microlearning and Texting

Element	Traditional	Barriers & Limitations for Parents	Parent-Centered Design to Address Barriers	Microlearning Content + Texting
Design & Format	Long scheduled group sessions	Busy parents struggle with fixed, lengthy formats	Offer flexible, bite-sized learning content that fits into parents' schedules	Deliver short, focused, skills-based learning via text messages
Access & Setting	In-person, fixed times, travel often required	Travel, childcare, and timing limit access	Provide anytime, anywhere access that integrates into daily life	Offer content via texts sent directly to parents' phones that fits naturally into their daily lives
Engagement & Learning Process	Often, facilitator-led sessions with group discussions and exercises	Some parents are not comfortable in group settings	Offer personalized, private, and adaptive learning with ongoing practice opportunities	Use self-paced content with regular reminders and interactive options to practice skills
Pacing & Support	Typically, fixed pace; limited personalization	Parents have limited control over the pace and competing demands	Enable adaptive pacing that lets parents learn at their own speed with timely support	Deliver content in small chunks, spaced over time; offer support as needed

Lesson 3: Build the Sector's Capacity to Support Online, Passive ADV Prevention Learning

ConnectED Parents research highlights online communities as powerful spaces offering a sense of validation, opportunities for resource sharing, and avenues for ADV prevention learning. For example, ConnectED Parents includes a Facebook group that is moderated by a trained facilitator. Many parents in the ConnectED Parents Facebook group reported learning practical tips from peers and felt less alone and more confident after relating to other parents' experiences. While some parents actively posted and commented, most engaged passively, learning by reading, reflecting, and absorbing content without visible interaction.

Research shows that 90% of online community members participate passively, referred to as "lurking".[40,41] Importantly, passive participants still gain benefits, including increased knowledge, confidence, and a sense of belonging.[42,43] This low-barrier form of engagement can be especially beneficial for parents who value privacy, have limited time, or feel hesitant to participate publicly.

Most parents learn by observing online content and the prevention field can leverage this opportunity.

Facilitating and measuring passive learning in online spaces remains a complex and relatively new skillset, and many ADV prevention service providers are not trained to facilitate in this milieu.[44] Researchers and evaluators also lack practical frameworks to measure passive parent engagement in digital spaces, creating an opportunity to develop evaluation methods that better capture these learning behaviours.

With 83% of parents now seeking parenting support online,[45] and passive learning being the norm, failing to build the prevention field's capacity in this domain risks missing a critical opportunity for ADV prevention.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

Role	What	Examples
Organizational Leaders & Decision-Makers	Train service providers in active and passive online facilitation	Improve professional development in curating asynchronous online content, recognizing subtle engagement signals, and using digital tools to deepen passive learners' involvement gradually.

Programmers & Curriculum Developers	Validate passive learning as a legitimate form of engagement and design supportive tools	Build and offer low-pressure tools such as anonymous questions, microlearning modules, and reflective prompts that support learning without requiring public engagement.
Evaluators & Researchers	Develop evaluation frameworks and metrics that capture passive behaviours and their learning outcomes	In addition to using visible metrics such as comments and likes, track content views, dwell time, download rates, and private feedback to measure the impact of passive learning.

Lesson 4: Using AI Can Help Ensure ADV Prevention Content Resonates Deeply with Parents

While most parents felt ConnectED Parents' content reflected their experiences, some groups—including dads, parents of neurodiverse children, families with non-traditional structures, and those with conservative values around sexuality—felt less represented. Universal interventions face an inherent tension: no program can perfectly reflect every family's values or reality. Research and practice indicate that even flexible, parent-centred interventions have limits in achieving cultural relevance, personal resonance, and the trust needed for sustained engagement.[46]

This is not a reason to abandon universal strategies, but rather a call to make them more inclusive. While no intervention can perfectly address every family's specific circumstances, the ADV prevention field can explore and adopt innovative methods to respond more effectively to diverse families' needs.

Evolving technologies offer new opportunities to achieve this. For example, Shift is developing an AI-driven chatbot to complement ConnectED Parents text modules. It is designed to respond to the questions, concerns, and situations most relevant to diverse groups of parents, including dads, parents with neurodiverse children, racialized parents, families with strong spiritual ties, families with non-traditional structures, and those dealing with challenging parent-child relationships. By offering relevant content through a

Thoughtful use of AI and technology can personalize prevention, enhancing (not replacing) human connection.

friendly, accessible format, the chatbot provides nuanced, individualized support, allowing parents to ask targeted questions and receive personalized guidance.

Combining a universal approach with adaptive, parent-centred AI supports can move the prevention field closer to "targeted universalism,"[47] a framework that balances broad strategies with focused approaches to meet the diverse needs and experiences of parents.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

Role	What	Examples
Organizational Leaders & Decision-Makers	Build capacity to leverage technology for personalization	Some service professionals may hesitate to adopt new technologies, concerned they could feel impersonal, raise ethical concerns, or detract from the relational aspects central to prevention work. To address concerns, offer ongoing training to service providers on the ethical use of technology for social change, involve parents in content design, and learn from organizations that have successfully used technology to enhance—not replace—human connection and support. To learn more, see: - ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society's toolkit: https://apo.org.au/node/326724 - All Tech is Human: https://alltechishuman.org/
Programmers & Curriculum Developers	Design and test personalized technological tools for ADV prevention	Build interventions with AI, virtual reality, texting, social media, etc., at the core (not just moving in-person content to an online meeting). Test with parents and iterate continuously to ensure effectiveness across diverse needs and preferences.
Evaluators & Researchers	Evaluate the impact of technological personalization on diverse parents	Generate evidence on how well technological personalization advances universal reach and outcomes for equity-deserving families.

Lesson 5: Using a Skills-First Approach is Effective at Engaging Parents

A persistent challenge in ADV prevention is that parents often seek support only after seeing warning signs or harm has occurred, making proactive prevention difficult.[48] ConnectED Parents works to break this pattern. About half of the participating parents had children aged 6 to 10; before dating is usually on parents' radar. This research showed that parents of younger children engaged due to ConnectED Parents' "skills-first" approach, which provides tangible, actionable skills and tools parents can use immediately. While addressing harmful ideologies, values, and beliefs is important, and often dominates prevention efforts, a skills-first approach may engage parents more effectively by aligning with how they learn, change behaviour, and stay involved, especially around sensitive issues such as relationships and violence.

This happens for various reasons. First, skills feel practical and non-threatening. Teaching concrete skills, such as communication, emotion regulation, and boundary-setting, allows parents to engage without feeling judged, corrected, or morally evaluated. In contrast, attempts to change beliefs or ideology can trigger defensiveness, resistance, or disengagement, particularly when parents feel their identities or values are being challenged.

Second, skills help create immediate, observable behaviour change. Parents can practice a skill right away, experience success, and see positive outcomes in their children or their parent-child bond. These early wins build confidence and motivation, which increase the likelihood of sustained engagement and deeper learning over time.

Third, skills can shift norms indirectly. When parents repeatedly practice new behaviours in everyday settings, those behaviours normalize. Over time, norms and attitudes often follow behaviour change, making skill-based approaches effective in community-level prevention.

Fourth, many skills can be adapted to parents' contexts and beliefs. While not universally transferable, skills such as active listening, assertive communication, conflict-resolution, and boundary-setting can align with diverse values, which can engage more parents compared to ideology-heavy approaches.

Finally, skills can help reduce harm without full worldview alignment. By focusing on what parents can do, rather than what they should believe, skills-first approaches can help them act in ways that promote healthy youth relationships even across differing values and beliefs.

14

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

Role	What	Examples
Organizational Leaders & Decision-Makers	Champion skills-first approaches	Review the organization's existing prevention efforts to identify ideology-heavy approaches and, where appropriate, rebalance resources toward skill-building as the entry point that can engage parents effectively.
Programmers & Curriculum Developers	Prioritize early, practical skill-building	Design and facilitate skills-first approaches with parents to address everyday challenges such as unhealthy friendships, managing screen time, or addressing risky behaviours. Building foundational parenting and relationship skills may foster deeper attitude shifts in the future.
Evaluators & Researchers	Build the evidence for advancing protective factors	Given the limited research on protective factors against ADV, broaden evaluation to include outcomes such as enhanced parenting skills, daily micro-actions that foster healthy communication, and stronger parent-child connections. This complements traditional risk-reduction efforts while building evidence on the factors that sustain parents' roles in fostering healthy youth relationships.

Skills-first approaches engage parents early, support quick wins, and build habits for lasting change.

Lesson 6: Parent Leaders, Weavers, and Diffusers can Drive ADV Prevention

A strong support system is essential for engaging parents in promoting healthy youth relationships. Parents, supported by trusted friends or respected leaders, are more likely to try new behaviours such as talking with their children about healthy relationships.[49,50] When parents observe peers in their social circle modelling healthy relationship behaviours, they are more likely to mirror them within their own families.[51,52] ConnectED Parents' research findings support this, showing that peer support approaches can engage parents in ADV prevention, but their effectiveness depends on social context and group readiness.

Parent leaders can be catalysts for behaviour change in close-knit, trust-based groups because influential parents can drive rapid changes by modelling and promoting healthy relationship norms.[53,54] These key influencers, with formal or informal authority, help set group standards for positive behaviours. However, parent engagement is shifting. Increasingly, parents now participate in multiple, overlapping networks[55] rather than within a single, tightly connected group. Groups include online communities, extracurricular programs, faith groups, workplaces, and informal social circles.[56] In these more loosely connected contexts, sources of influence are varied and diffused,[57] making traditional key influencer approaches less effective. In loosely connected or newly formed groups, individual parent leaders, or even a group of them, may struggle to gain sufficient traction to effect change in other parents. In such cases, alternative peer support approaches may be more appropriate. Two key roles illustrate this potential.

- **Parent weavers** bridge diverse networks. Today's parents belong to multiple, overlapping, and often loosely connected social networks, ranging from online communities and schools to workplaces and faith organizations. Parent weavers can help link these spaces, enabling healthy relationship messages to flow across boundaries.
- **Parent diffusers** spread messages organically. Many parents naturally share and model prosocial behaviours within their immediate circles—family, friends, neighbours, or online forums—without holding formal leadership roles. These diffusers help prevention messages take root and spread organically across diverse settings.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

Understanding shifts in how parents network and socialize, along with the widespread use of digital social spaces, creates opportunities for the prevention sector to design more effective peer support approaches that can maximize reach and impact across diverse parent contexts. Table 2 provides a high-level outline of parent network types, ways to identify them, real-world examples, and strategies practitioners can use to advance ADV prevention efforts within each group.

Table 2:

Understanding Parent Networks and Peer Support Approaches

What You See In Your Parent Group (Network Characteristics)	How to Identify Your Network	Peer Support Approach	Example	Strategies for Supporting Peer Supporters
Tight-knit, close, and trusted connections	Parents know and rely on one another deeply; strong interpersonal bonds; clear leaders emerge	Parent Leaders	The parent group at a church where most parents know each other well, and a parent leader organizes bible studies and events, gives advice to other parents, and helps to drive group norms. The broader church parent community interacts regularly within this trusted circle.	• Provide parent leaders with ADV prevention leadership training to build coaching skills (e.g., motivational interviewing) so they can effectively support and motivate other parents. • Offer communication skills training to amplify prevention messaging. • Include them in program design for ownership and sustainability.
Multiple, smaller groups with solid internal trust but weak ties between groups	Parents belong to several groups, with each group having strong or growing trust; however, there is minimal interaction or trust across groups	Parent Weavers	Groups such as the local soccer team parents and parent council members interact strongly within their groups but not much between them. Parent weavers can link these groups and connect parents across settings.	• Equip parent weavers with tailored messaging tools focused on ADV prevention topics they can adapt for different groups. • Facilitate cross-group networking circles. • Facilitate role-play sessions for parent weavers to practice initiating ADV prevention conversations across varied contexts.
Numerous, casual yet welcoming groups where connections are lighter and trust is still emerging	Parents belong to several informal groups or online communities where relationships are friendly but not deeply personal. Also includes parents that have multiple one-on-one relationships.	Parent Diffusers	Parents participate in Facebook parenting groups and local coffee meetups with loose, informal ties. Parent diffusers spread messages casually across these groups, reaching less-connected parents. They may also spread messages in their one-on-one relationships.	• Provide parent diffusers with micro-learning ADV prevention modules highlighting concrete prevention strategies that they can share and model in everyday spaces. • Offer shareable digital content (e.g., videos, infographics, social media posts) designed for easy parent-to-parent transmission.

Lesson 7: ADV Prevention Needs to Influence Parents' Broader Communication Environment

ConnectED Parents targets key behavioural drivers to boost parents' ability to support healthy youth relationships. These include reinforcing parents' ADV prevention beliefs, knowledge, and skills via text messages; building social support through trained peer leaders; and cultivating healthy social environments led by service providers.

This research highlights a crucial fourth driver: influencing parents' broader communication environment.[58] ConnectED Parents effectively uses direct channels such as text messaging and a private Facebook group, amplified by parent leaders and service providers who model and reinforce healthy relationship behaviours. However, parents access information from a wider range of sources, including social media, streaming platforms, email, and online forums. This broad communication environment shapes what parents notice, trust, and act upon. Saturation+ principles[59] can guide next steps for ConnectED Parents and the prevention field to flood communication channels and everyday spaces with consistent healthy relationship messages so they become part of the culture of daily life. This helps shift norms at community and population levels.

The Saturation+ model includes three key pillars:

1. **Saturation (high exposure to key messages)**. For example, ConnectED Parents effectively reaches and engages parents through texts and a private online group. Saturation can be improved by increasing the frequency of these messages and extending reach on social media platforms, in online forums, and in parents' workplace conversations.
2. **Science (evidence-based design)**. For example, ConnectED Parents effectively uses research to design its approach and identify optimal channels for reaching parents with promising results. Next steps should include mapping additional channels (e.g., podcasts, social media), along with tracking exposure frequency and mentions of relationship norms to understand community- and population-level impacts.
3. **Stories (compelling narratives to support behaviour change)**. For example, parent leaders in ConnectED Parents shared personal parenting experiences, and service providers modelled and supported healthy relationship behaviours with parents. These relatable stories and supportive environments should be amplified across platforms and in parents' everyday spaces.

The Saturation+ approach can help drive behaviour change among parents through several mechanisms:

- **Learning**–Parents access social media, streaming, podcasts, TV, etc. at different times and with varying readiness to absorb the content. By repeating healthy youth relationship messages, the prevention field can create more opportunities for learning when parents are most receptive.
- **Priming**–Frequent exposure to healthy relationship messaging makes the content more relevant and gives it greater influence when parents weigh whether to adopt new behaviours.
- **Creating social norms**–Repeated exposure to healthy relationship messages creates social expectations about behaviours that can motivate parents and the broader community to adopt them.
- **Diffusion effect**–As exposure reaches more parents and the wider public, discussions spread naturally through social networks, even reaching those without direct exposure.
- **Indirect impact on policy**–Widespread visibility signals public priorities to policymakers, potentially sparking legislation or policies that further support behaviour change.[60]

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE PREVENTION FIELD?

Role	What	Examples
Organizational Leaders & Decision-Makers	Attend to parents' full communication ecosystem	Allocate resources to engage parents through direct channels (e.g., texting, private online and in-person groups), broader channels (e.g., social media), and parents' social networks (e.g., parent leaders, faith leaders, youth).
Programmers & Curriculum Developers	Create easy content to reach parents through diverse channels	Develop reels, texts, and online quizzes for easy sharing from closed groups to open platforms; format learning content for podcasts and storytelling in cultural spaces; and enable family and friend-forwarding features for organic spread of information and resources.
Evaluators & Researchers	Measure multi-channel saturation	Track text open rates and online group activities, monitor cross-platform impressions and parent mentions of healthy relationship norms, and assess critical mass via conversation frequency in parent networks.

See Appendix C for a list of questions to support service providers' engagement with parents through diverse communication channels.

CONCLUSION

This report demonstrates the promise and impact of ConnectED Parents as a technology-enabled approach to supporting parents and caregivers in preventing adolescent dating violence by promoting healthy youth relationships. Built over more than a decade and rigorously evaluated over the past four years, the program offers practical, evidence-informed lessons for service providers working across adolescent dating violence prevention and related fields.

The findings reinforce the critical role parents play in shaping young people's understanding of healthy, respectful relationships through text-based microlearning, peer networks, and healthy social environments, using a skills-first approach. These strategies meet parents where they are by shaping their knowledge, skills, and behaviours via technology, amplifying these competencies through trusted peers, and building spaces that reinforce healthy relationship behaviours.

Beyond informing practice, this report highlights the importance of sustained investment in prevention innovation. Policymakers have a key role to play in supporting technology-enabled interventions that can be scaled, adapted, and embedded within existing communities. Researchers and evaluators can advance the field by studying protective factors and developing new measures to better reflect how parents learn and change behaviours. Together, this commitment to early, skills-first, and technology-enabled approaches strengthens families, shapes community and gender norms, prevents harm before violence occurs, and builds safer futures for youth.

Appendix A

Research Methods

This pilot used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design guided by critical ethnographic principles to evaluate ConnectED Parents, a technology-enabled approach to promote healthy relationships. One hundred sixty-seven (167) parents and caregivers of children 6 to 20 years old, five service providers, and three parent leaders were recruited via community partners and snowball sampling to participate in ConnectED Parents programming and evaluation. The Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board granted ethical approval, and participants provided informed consent.

Quantitative data were collected through structured online surveys administered at pre-intervention, post-intervention, three-month follow-up, and after each of the seven text-learning modules. Qualitative data included semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of parents to explore experiences, barriers, and impacts of ConnectED Parents. Observational notes and journaling by the project implementation lead provided additional information about implementing the project.

These tools measured parent knowledge of adolescent dating violence (ADV) and healthy relationships, self-efficacy (i.e., skills, comfort, and confidence) in healthy relationship communication, behaviours related to applying skills and having conversations, and satisfaction with parent-child discussions. Parents' overall perception and relevance of the intervention were also measured. The texting platform tracked message delivery, engagement with prompts, and opt-outs to monitor participation and retention rates.

Measures included Likert-scale items for knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy, while frequency and satisfaction ratings measured conversations. Post-module surveys used a retrospective design to capture immediate learning gains. Qualitative responses added depth to parents' reflections and behaviours.

Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test to assess changes over time, complemented by subgroup analyses examining demographics and equity considerations. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using iterative coding, and findings were integrated with quantitative results to provide a comprehensive understanding. Reflexivity was maintained through positionality statements and team discussions.

Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data identified consistencies and complexities in ConnectED Parents' impact on competencies related to ADV prevention for service providers, parent leaders, and parents.

Appendix B

Examples of ConnectED Parents Text Messages as Microlearning

Example 1: Conversation Starters

sh!ft

Let's learn about healthy relationships through a scenario! On the way to soccer practice, you ask your child, "You mentioned your friends are dating—what does a healthy relationship mean to you?"
They reply, "I don't know."

You could say: "To me, healthy relationships mean respect, trust, honesty, communication, and equality. Do you think your friends' relationship is like that?"

Would you like to have this type of conversation with your child? Text yes, no, or maybe.

Maybe!

sh!ft

Great start! Being open to relationship talks is key. The more you learn, the easier it gets.
Conversation starters:
Are your friends dating? What are their relationships like?
Have you seen a healthy relationship? What made it seem that way?
We'll send a link to learn more about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships. See you next time!

Example 2: The ASK-OFFER-ASK Approach

sh!ft

You notice signs that your child is ready to talk about dating! They're talking more about their crush, and have told you they are close to making it "official."
This is when the *ASK-OFFER-ASK* approach to giving advice can come into the picture.

>> Text NEXT to learn more about the *ASK-OFFER-ASK* approach to giving advice

NEXT

sh!ft

You could ASK: "There's a lot to think about when deciding if someone is a good fit for you to date —where should we start?"
OFFER: "Some people list qualities they want in a partner and reflect on them. Want to try that?"
After making a list, you realize the crush might not be a great match.
ASK: "What do you think this means for you?"

On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being very unlikely and 10 being very likely), how likely are you to use the ASK-OFFER-ASK approach?

6

sh!ft

Thanks for sharing! Using this approach can strengthen communication and models respect. See you next time :)

Appendix C

Questions and Considerations for Engaging Parents through Diverse Communication Channels

The questions below were designed to help practitioners stretch their thinking about how to influence meaningfully the diverse communication spaces parents navigate.

If you are getting started on your communication journey:

- Where do parents in your community *actually* spend time—online (social media, messaging apps, niche digital platforms) and offline (community centres, local events, places of worship)? How can you embed prevention messages in these everyday spaces?
- How can prevention messages become part of daily parent routines? Think about school runs, sports practices, playgrounds, grocery trips, or neighbourhood gatherings and ways to offer repeated exposure without overwhelming parents.
- Which trusted local voices or informal connectors (coaches, teachers, faith leaders, community business owners) can amplify healthy relationship messages?

If you already have experience influencing parents' communication environments:

- How can you creatively enter unconventional digital spaces (e.g., gaming communities, TikTok, local online marketplaces) where parents spend time but prevention messages are absent?
- How can you weave prevention messaging into cultural outlets such as podcasts, storytelling, or youth arts scenes, to reach parents?
- Are you developing content in diverse formats (e.g., videos, audio, quizzes) to cater to varying parent preferences and encourage sharing within families and friend networks?
- How might AI and digital tools tailor prevention messages to parents' behaviours and preferences in order to increase relevance and engagement?
- Where can viral or disruptive tactics (e.g., social challenges, pop-up events, influencer collaborations) break through digital clutter and capture attention in everyday settings?

If your primary focus is on population-level campaigns:

- What partnerships beyond traditional health or social services (e.g., local small businesses, libraries, schools, workplaces) can you leverage to broaden reach and normalize healthy relationship conversations?
- What feedback loops and co-creation opportunities allow parents to shape, own, and share prevention messages in culturally meaningful and peer-driven ways?
- How do you know when prevention messaging is widely recognized or regularly referenced in parent conversations, online or offline?
- What indicators show that healthy relationship messages have reached a "critical mass" in your community, and how will you adapt your outreach if they have not?

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