



**Transforming Discussions around Safety:  
Moving Beyond Harmful Safety Tips  
National Sexual Assault Conference 2016  
Alena Schaim + Lauren R. Taylor**

---

**What is Empowerment Self Defense?**

**ESD is a set of skills and strategies** that empowers students to avoid, interrupt, defend against, and heal from harassment, abuse, and assault. ESD:

- Directly condemns victim-blaming, honors survivors and their actions, and holds perpetrators solely responsible for gender-based violence.
- Addresses verbal, emotional, and physical forms of violence, ranging from irritating to life-threatening, and recognizes patterns of violence—including systemic violence such as racism, homophobia, and sexism.
- Addresses the social conditions that facilitate sexual assault and the psychological barriers to self-defense that women face as a result of gender socialization. Challenges the social norms that support gender-based violence.
- Allows people to share past experiences, express vulnerabilities, and receive support and guidance in a non-judgmental setting.
- Is accessible, including physical techniques that are simple to learn, easy to remember, and able to be done by people of different ages, sizes, and abilities. They require minutes or hours, rather than months or years, to master.
- Is realistic about the kinds of assaults women, children, and LGBTQ people suffer and the kinds of responses that are most likely to stop these assaults.
- Confronts stereotypes and misinformation that can endanger us. ESD addresses common misconceptions about who perpetrates violence and who is targeted. It provides strategies to stop violence from people we know, people we love, and strangers. It focuses on situations with known aggressors, since that is where most violations happen.
- Includes awareness and verbal self-defense strategies as well as physical techniques. These skills empower women to stop assaults in the early stages, before they escalate to physical danger. Students are also more likely to use verbal skills (such as with a co-worker, boss, family member, classmate, teacher, or harasser).
- Offers a toolbox of skills and strategies for avoiding and interrupting violence, and, rather than teaching a single “best” way to respond to violence, empower women to choose the options that are appropriate for their own situations.

- Presents a range of options for preventing and interrupting violence, recognizing that there are many ways to defend oneself and that ultimately the defender makes the choice that is right for them.

**ESD embraces the “self-defense paradox.”** The paradox holds that aggressors alone are responsible for gender-based violence and that there is nothing any victim could do -- or not do -- that would make them deserve to be assaulted. It is also true that those at risk of gender-based violence can take action to increase their own safety. Failing to acknowledge this truth limits the choices and agency of those primarily targeted for sexual violence: women, children, and LGBTQ people.

### **What are the benefits of ESD? Does it work?**

ESD is proven to reduce women’s risk of rape by up to 50% and lower rates of attempted assault.

The lower rate of attempted assault suggests that ESD training empowers a woman to interrupt perpetration early in an assault. Once an assault is underway, defensive tactics consistent with those taught in ESD reduce the risk of rape completion by more than 80% without increasing the risk of additional injury.

Three recent major studies, including a large, randomized control trial, have found that women who complete an ESD class are **at least** 50% to 60% less likely to experience an assault over the following year than similar women who did not learn self-defense.

Learning self-defense empowers women in ways that go far beyond preventing assault. ESD training itself decreases fear and anxiety and increases women’s confidence, their sense of self-efficacy, and their self-esteem. Learning self-defense helps women feel stronger and more confident in their bodies. Women trained in ESD also have a better ability to assess situations, and more options for handling conflict and violence. Women report more comfortable interactions with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, both in situations that seem dangerous and those that do not.

Because self-defense training provides such a wide range of benefits, it helps change gender norms and ultimately prevents sexual assault more broadly across the culture.

### **How is Empowerment Self-Defense different from other “self-defense”?**

**ESD is distinct** from other forms of self-defense, many of which:

- are fear-based and emphasize “stranger danger,”
- focus solely on physical skills, ignoring the everyday harassment, threats, and violations women face,
- are not based in the realities of how women and LGBTQ people are targeted,
- rely on physical strength and memorization of complex routines,
- are unsupported by efficacy research,
- suggest measures such as staying home, relying on others for protection, and limiting one’s clothing or alcohol consumption-- all of which *constrain* women’s lives,
- and often reinforce victim-blaming and/or violence-promoting gender norms.

---

#### Selected resources + research on women's resistance + self-defense

- Breitenbecher, K. H., and M. Scarce. 1999. "A Longitudinal Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Sexual Assault Education Program." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 14(5):459–478.
- Brecklin, Leanne R., and Sarah E. Ullman. 2005. "Self-Defense or Assertiveness Training and Women's Responses to Sexual Attacks." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20(6):738–762.
- Brecklin, Leanne R. 2008. "Evaluation Outcomes of Self-Defense Training for Women: A Review." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 13:60–76.
- Cermele, J. A. 2004. "Teaching Resistance to Teach Resistance: The Use of Self-Defense in Teaching Undergraduates about Gender Violence." *Feminist Teacher* 15(1):1–15.
- Gidycz, Christine A, and Christina M. Dardis. 2014. "Feminist Self-Defense and Resistance Training for College Students A Critical Review and Recommendations for the Future." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 1524838014521026.
- Gidycz, Christine A et al. n.d. "Concurrent administration of sexual assault prevention and risk reduction programming: Outcomes for women." *Violence Against Women*. In press.
- Hollander, Jocelyn A. 2014. "Does Self-Defense Training Prevent Sexual Violence Against Women?" *Violence Against Women* 20(3):252–269.
- Hollander, Jocelyn A. 2004. "I Can Take Care of Myself: The Impact of Self-Defense Training on Women's Lives." *Violence Against Women* 10(3):205–235.
- McCaughey, Martha. 1997. *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense*. New York: New York University Press.
- McCaughey, M., & Cermele, J. (2015). Changing the hidden curriculum of campus rape prevention and education: Women's self-defense as a key protective factor for a public health model of prevention. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse, online pre-print*, 1-16.
- Orchowski, Lindsay M, Christine A Gidycz, and M J Murphy. 2010. "Preventing campus-based sexual violence." Pp. 415–447 in *Prevention of Sexual Violence: A Practitioner's Sourcebook*, edited by K L Kaufman. Holyoke, MA: NEARI Press.
- Orchowski, Lindsay M., Christine A Gidycz, and Holly Raffle. 2008. "Evaluation of a Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Self-Defense Program: A Prospective Analysis of a Revised Protocol." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 32:204–218.
- Rozee, Patricia D, + Mary P Koss. 2001. "Rape: A Century of Resistance." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25(4):295–311.
- Sarnquist, Clea et al. 2014. "Rape Prevention Through Empowerment of Adolescent Girls." *Pediatrics* peds. 2013–3414.
- Senn, Charlene Y., Misha Eliasziw, Paula C. Barata, Wilfreda E. Thurston, Ian R. Newby-Clark, H. Lorraine Radtke, and Karen L. Hobden. 2015. "Efficacy of a Sexual Assault Resistance Program for University Women." *New England Journal of Medicine* 372 (24): 2326–35.
- Senn, Charlene Y., Stephanie S. Gee, and Jennifer Thake. 2011. "Emancipatory Sexuality Education and Sexual Assault Resistance: Does the Former Enhance the Latter?" *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35(1):72–91.
- Sinclair, Jake et al. 2013. "A Self-Defense Program Reduces the Incidence of Sexual Assault in Kenyan Adolescent Girls." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 53(3):374–380.
- Tark, Jongyeon, and Gary Kleck. 2014. "Resisting Rape: The Effects of Victim Self-Protection on Rape Completion and Injury." *Violence Against Women* 20(3):270–292.
- Taylor, Lauren R and Lynne Marie Wanamaker. 2014. "How to Exercise Our Right to Defend Ourselves without Being Victim-Blaming," *Everyday Feminism*.
- Thompson, Martha E. 2014. "Empowering Self-Defense Training." *Violence Against Women* 20(3):351–359.
- Ullman, Sarah E. 2007. "A 10-Year Update of 'Review and Critique of Empirical Studies of Rape Avoidance'." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 34(3):1–19.
- Ullman, Sarah E., and R. A. Knight. 1992. "Fighting Back: Women's Resistance to Rape." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 7:31–43.
- Ullman, Sarah E, and Raymond A Knight. 1993. "The Efficacy of Women's Resistance Strategies in Rape Situations." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 17(1):23–38.
- "What's the Fuss About? Controversies about Self-Defense Against Sexual Assault," online at <http://goo.gl/oQitqG>

By Lauren R. Taylor, *Defend Yourself*, Washington, D.C., with:  
Susan "George" Schorn, University of Texas-Austin / [gsschorn@gmail.com](mailto:gsschorn@gmail.com)  
Lynne Marie Wanamaker, Safe Passage, Northampton, Mass. / [lmw@safepass.org](mailto:lmw@safepass.org)  
Jocelyn A. Hollander, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, University of Oregon