Personal Violence Prevention Program in High Schools

by Cynthia B. Wilson, Ph.D., CFLE, and Tyler Wertenberger

Family Life Education (FLE) can be conducted in a variety of settings, but perhaps one of the most challenging can be the public secondary school. Relationships must be established, trust must be built, and ongoing communication must be maintained. Thankfully, we have the privilege of serving in several secondary schools in our area through our roles at the Florida Center for Prevention Research (FCPR) at Florida State University. We have several contracts with local community partners and state agencies that allow us to bring FLE into the school context. One such contract involves a Personal Violence Prevention Program using the Green Dot strategy (https://alteristic.org/services/green-dot/). This particular contract is in partnership with the Panhandle Area Educational Consortium (PAEC), which serves as a support unit to help small school districts in the Florida panhandle. The contract is funded by the Florida Department of Health using federal flow-through dollars from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This article provides an overview of this program and describes how it fits within the framework of FLE in school settings.

What Is the Green Dot Strategy?

Green Dot is a bystander intervention training program focused on reducing power-based personal violence on campuses and in communities. They offer programs for high schools, colleges, and communities (with our particular contract focusing on high schools). This means we get to work directly with students to prepare them for situations in which they might need to stand up and speak out. A central message in the Green Dot strategy is that, as bystanders and a larger community, we have a significant amount of influence over our peers and school environment. We facilitate this by educating students on their role as bystanders and empowering them to take action when they feel something has crossed the line.

As described by Alteristic (the authors of the Green Dot program), Green Dot’s core strategy is as follows:

- Through bystander intervention training, the Green Dot program engages witnesses to interrupt situations that are imminent or potentially high-risk for violence. It increases self-efficacy and provides skill building and specific strategies to increase the likelihood that trained individuals will actually intervene. By expanding the role of bystanders beyond reactive, the Green Dot program trains participants to engage in proactive behaviors that model and endorse norms that are incompatible with violence. The goal is not simply to react to potential violence as it is occurring, but rather to simultaneously shift community norms that support the violence that is occurring.

A Red Dot is a short moment in time when one person makes an action, choice, or behavior to harm someone else. In contrast, a Green Dot is any good deed one person does that makes it less likely for a Red Dot to occur.

Green Dot trainings are given to students at two specific events: the Overview and the Bystander Training. The Overview is a 30-minute presentation on Green Dot’s goals and the different ways students can think about getting involved in violence prevention at their school. We do this by asking students to imagine a map with a lot of Red Dots on it, each representing acts of violence. A Red Dot is a short moment in time when one person makes an action, choice, or behavior to harm someone else. In contrast, a Green Dot is any good deed one person does that makes it less likely for a Red Dot to occur. Like Red Dots, Green Dots are short moments in time; they are actions, choices, or behaviors that bystanders make to reduce violence. Whether it’s breaking up a school fight, mediating an argument, or asking the right questions, we tell our students that there is a Green Dot for every one of them. The Overview concludes with the students feeling inspired to be a positive change for good and an invitation to attend a Bystander Training in the future.

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we have well-established relationships with the schools in which we work, many of our Overview trainings are given within class time, with the teacher’s permission.

The Bystander Training is a 1-day, 6-hour event that inspires students to fill an active role in violence prevention, think about forms of violence prevention that are realistic for them, and prepare them for situations they might encounter on campus and out in the world. The education is facilitated through a series of games, activities, group conversations, and individual writings that place the students in hypothetical situations that they can tackle with the social tools Green Dot provides. The curriculum divides Green Dots into two main categories, Reactive and Proactive:

- **Reactive** Green Dots are anything you must do in the moment in response to a situation where violence is taking place and you are actively trying to stop it. We break down reactive Green Dots into three main categories, or the 3Ds:
  - **Direct** (get directly involved in preventing a Red Dot)
  - **Delegate** (tell someone else, usually an adult or teacher)
  - **Distract** (usually diffusing an uncomfortable situation)

- **Proactive** Green Dots are anything you do ahead of time that makes violence less likely to occur. These are small things such as sitting with someone who sits alone at lunch, sharing a positive message, or encouraging others to be neighborly.

Beyond education and training, the Green Dot strategy is set up for campus impact. This usually involves booster sessions and

**Violence Prevention continued next page**
Violence Prevention continued

action events. Booster sessions are little fun
days planned throughout the year to remind
students of the training they received and
inspire them to share antiviolence messages.
These can include things such as a pizza
party, a painting session, sidewalk chalk day,
or participating in school events that are
already occurring (e.g., field day). The second
are action events, which are meant to inspire
action in the community. These can involve
sparking conversations between students
and parents about how they would handle
a particular violent situation or encouraging
students to share positive messages with
their peers. School sporting events have
served as our most common context for
action events because students and families
are already there, and we can join the fun
and inspire them to action.

In addition to the trainings, booster sessions,
and action events, we are continuing
to expand our influence by looking for
ways to build protective environments for
students. We are currently working with
administrators to set up peer counseling
programs and looking for ways to get
students more involved in their community.

A large part of working on the Green Dot
program is getting involved on campus and
in the surrounding community. This means
attending coalition meetings, partnering
with programs to hold events, and finding
new ways to serve those at the school to
build on existing relationships.

How does the Green Dot Program Fit with
FLE? According to the NCWR website, FLE is
"the practice of equipping and empowering
family members to develop knowledge and
skills that enhance well-being and strengthen
interpersonal relationships through an
educational, preventive, and strengths-
based approach." The Green Dot Program fits
under this mission in several ways. First, the
Green Dot program falls under several key
content areas in FLE, specifically Interpersonal
Relationships and Human Sexuality. Second,
the Green Dot Program highlights a key
feature of FLE—collaboration—which is
to key to the success of FLE and is essential
for working in school contexts. The grant
we received exemplifies the power of
collaboration because we may not have
had access to these schools were it not for
the relationship that had been established
between FCPR
and PAEC for many
years as partners on
other FLE-related
contracts. Another
key collaboration
involves FCPR's
relationship with
the state agencies
who manage the
contracts. We are
fortunate to work with
wonderful contract managers at the Florida
Department of Health who
oversee the
Personal Violence
Prevention Program
and provide
ongoing support
and technical
assistance. As FLEs,
its imperative that
we nurture those
relationships that
are key to program
success.

Lastly, the Personal Violence Prevention
Program exemplifies the preventive nature
of FLE. The Green Dot program focuses on
primary prevention, which involves preventing
problems before they happen. This is the
domain of practice in which many FLEs work
and are best equipped to serve. As pointed
out by Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, and
Myers-Bowman in their 2011 Family Relations
article titled "Reconceptualizing the Domains
and Boundaries of Family Life Education,"
FLEs are uniquely equipped with the content
knowledge needed to perform primary
prevention. By working at the headwaters
of problems, we can ideally prevent youth
from engaging in destructive behaviors
that can have lifelong implications. The
Personal Violence Prevention Program being
implemented by FCPR and PAEC aims to do
just that. Our hope is that by training high
school students to build more Green Dots
into their environment, eventually we will see
a culture shift occur, where protective factors
outweigh risk factors, and where Red Dots are
engulfed in a sea of Green Dots.

For more information, visit: https://alteristic.
org/services/green-dot/ and https://
greendotfepac.org/blog/ *

Reference
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