

A Community-Based Framework for Preventing Intimate Image Abuse on College Campuses

Introduction: Intimate Image Abuse as a Community-Level Problem

When a young woman in our research described receiving unsolicited explicit images as “a canon event in a young woman’s life,” she articulated a stark reality: for many, digital abuse has shifted from a possibility to a painful rite of passage. This experience is a form of Intimate Image Abuse (IIA) defined as the non-consensual creation, sharing, or threat of sharing sexually explicit media (McGlynn et al., 2017). While often conflated with “revenge porn,” IIA is a broader category of gender-based violence that functions as a tool of coercion and control with severe consequences (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Our research, supported by The Lindsey M. Bonistall Research Fellowship, reveals that an alarming four out of five young adults have experienced at least one form of IIA, with a significant correlation between victimization and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Bonnesen & Swartout, 2025).

From a community psychology perspective, IIA is not merely a series of individual incidents; it is a systemic problem that erodes community safety, damages social trust, and disproportionately harms marginalized populations on college campuses (Henry & Powell, 2015). Addressing it requires a move beyond reactive measures toward proactive, community-wide prevention.

The Evidence Base: The Four Dimensions of Intimate Image Abuse

Our research identified four distinct, empirically derived dimensions of IIA (Bonnesen & Swartout, 2025). Understanding these categories is essential for developing targeted, effective prevention programs that address the specific behaviors involved.

1) Non-Consensual Creation & Sharing: This is the most widely recognized dimension of IIA. It encompasses the unauthorized recording, posting, or distribution of nude or sexual media. Critically, this applies even when the initial image was taken consensually; consent to create an image does not imply consent to distribute it. This form of abuse violates personal autonomy and turns private moments into tools of public humiliation.

2) Voyeurism and Covert Recording: This dimension involves the secret recording of individuals in private spaces, such as bathrooms or bedrooms, where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. It includes invasive acts like "upskirting" and "down-blousing" and represents a profound violation of personal boundaries, often intended to degrade the victim.

3) Digitally Altered Imagery: The proliferation of accessible technology has given rise to this insidious form of IIA. It involves using software (e.g., AI, deepfake technology, Photoshop) to create fabricated sexual images of a person or to manipulate non-sexual images to appear explicit (Chesney & Citron, 2019). This dimension preys on a victim's public identity, creating convincing falsehoods designed to cause reputational and psychological harm.

4) Coercion and Unwanted Exposure: This dimension captures the non-physical tactics of control. It includes pressuring or manipulating an individual into creating or sharing sexual media against their will (Bianchi et al., 2021). It also includes the act of sending unsolicited explicit images to a non-consenting recipient, a common form of online sexual harassment.

A Programmatic Framework for Prevention at School and at Home

Effective prevention requires a multilevel approach that integrates consistent, evidence-based education into the core environments shaping young adults' lives. Successful initiatives, focus on delivering multi-pronged, crucial knowledge and skills *before* harm occurs.

In Educational Settings: Integrating Proactive Digital Citizenship

Educational institutions are critical sites for prevention. Currently, resources from organizations like the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative often reach students reactively. To shift this paradigm, preventative education on digital safety and consent must be a standard component of health and wellness curricula, particularly during key transition periods.

Core Principle 1: Countering Self-Blame. A primary finding of our research is the tendency for victims to internalize blame. Curricula must unequivocally state that the responsibility for abuse lies solely with the perpetrator. Educational content should explicitly teach that if an individual is pressured, manipulated, or has an image shared without their consent, it is a violation committed *by the actor*, not a fault of the victim, who may already be facing societal blame (Powell & Henry, 2017).

Core Principle 2: Operationalizing Digital Consent. Education must clarify that digital consent is a dynamic, ongoing process. A central tenet is that trust does not equal perpetual permission. Students must learn that consent to take an image is distinct from consent to save, share, or show it to others, and that permission must be sought for each action.

Core Principle 3: Fostering Bystander Intervention. Prevention efforts should empower students as ethical bystanders. This involves teaching concrete, actionable steps: if a private image is shared in a peer setting, the community norm should be to refuse to engage, condemn the act of non-consensual sharing, and support the person who has been violated.

In the Home: Fostering Supportive and Brave Conversations

Parents and guardians are essential partners in prevention. Given our research finding that a significant portion of IIA begins when individuals are minors, it is vital for families to establish open lines of communication grounded in non-judgmental support (Henry & Powell, 2018).

Core Principle 1: Creating a Foundation of Unconditional Support. The key message from parent to child must be one of unwavering support. Conversations should assure young people that they can report any uncomfortable or violating online experience without fear of punishment or blame, reinforcing that their safety and well-being are the paramount concerns.

Core Principle 2: Proactively Addressing Victim-Blaming. Parents should explicitly state that if their child were ever targeted by IIA, they would have done nothing wrong. This preemptive validation is a powerful tool to counteract the shame and self-blame that often prevent victims from seeking help.

Core Principle 3: Modeling Respect for Digital Privacy. Families can model pro-social behavior by discussing the importance of respecting others' privacy online. This includes guiding children on how to respond if they encounter a non-consensual image of a peer—by refusing to participate and affirming that such behavior is wrong.

Conclusion: A Call to Action for Practitioners

Intimate Image Abuse is a complex, community-level problem demanding a systemic, evidence-based response. The framework presented here offers a pathway for community psychologists, educators, and campus practitioners to move beyond reactive crisis management toward proactive prevention. By integrating these educational principles into schools and homes, we can build a culture of digital respect, equip young people with the tools for ethical online engagement, and fulfill our collective responsibility to create safer communities.

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