

Skills for Safety: An evaluation of the  
value, impact and outcomes of girls'  
and women's self defence in the  
community

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# Preface

*A letter written from a WSDN-WT course participant to her self defence teacher*

Hello my ANGEL

First of all, I would like to THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH, you have CHANGED MY LIFE.

Since I was a little girl, at the age of 7 years old I was raped by my father and the abuse continued well into my teenage years, but by now my three brothers were also abusing me. I had three miscarriages to my family due to my family abuse. I was unable to have children when I got older and married.

All my life I have been abused by men, in every form of abuse you can name. I am now in my 50's and men still abuse me.

I have been seeing a man recently, as a friend. He has been abusing me because he wants more than just being friends and I don't.

This man came to see me the Sunday after the course and started nutting off at me because I mowed the lawns the WRONG WAY. I didn't know there was a right and wrong way to mow lawns, LOL.

I am sitting in my chair and listening to this man nutting off at me in my own home about the lawns, and then I felt an ANGEL on my shoulder and it was you.

I got up out of my chair, walked up to my bedroom, scared to bits, shaking. I felt so sick. Then I looked in my mirror and saw you.

You smiled at me and said to me DO IT, DO IT NOW. So I walked back into my lounge and jumped into the kick arse position. I stood the way you showed us. I had my hand in a fist position, and as I gently bounced up and down with my knees, I yelled at him:

I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS. GET OUT OF MY HOME AND DON'T COME BACK.

Well, believe it or not he just sat there, and I thought, oh shit, but I stood my ground and moved a bit closer with such an angry face and repeated what I had said before:

GET OUT OF MY HOME AND DON'T COME BACK.

He left this time. I was so scared I cried in fear that he would come back, and yes, he did come back the next day. And yes, he is still abusing me, up until last night when I felt that ANGEL again on my shoulder and I kicked him out, and told him I will call the police if he comes back.

I have not heard from him since, it's early days I know, but I'm hoping it has worked this time, and that you are my ANGEL on my shoulder, and I will be strong and keep him away.

THANK YOU so much, you will always be my ANGEL ON MY SHOULDER.

# Executive summary

This report presents findings from the 'Skills for Safety' project, an outcome evaluation of girls' and women's self defence courses run by the Women's Self Defence Network – Wāhine Toa (WSDN-WT).

WSDN-WT is a nationwide network of specialist trained accredited women teachers of self defence that has been in operation for 28 years. WSDN-WT has always been committed to evaluating the quality of their programmes and their ability to achieve their goals, with post course evaluation an integral part of the delivery of their courses. However, in the current climate of results based accountability, to ensure sustainable funding they recognised the importance of rigorous evaluation carried out by independent researchers. The 'Skills for Safety' research project has been completed by two independent researchers, Associate Professor Jan Jordan (Institute of Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington) and Dr Elaine Mossman (Adjunct Research Fellow, Victoria University of Wellington) and was made possible with funding provided by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD).

## Evaluation objectives

Violence against girls/women is a major New Zealand problem with serious, sometimes fatal, consequences. The overwhelming health, social and economic impacts of violence against women have prompted a recent emphasis on identifying effective prevention strategies. Internationally there is now a sizeable body of evidence pointing to the value of self defence as such a strategy, including randomised control trials demonstrating reduced sexual victimisation following participation. This research aims to develop a better understanding of the unique role and impact of a New Zealand girls' and women's self defence programme in responding to this problem.

The overarching objective of this evaluation is to understand and document the value and impact of self defence to the girls and women who participate in WSDN-WT self defence courses and to the communities they live in. More specifically, the research asks to what extent self defence courses can assist participants to:

- recognise sexual and family violence and abuse;
- understand that it is not okay (and not their fault);
- learn clear strategies for recognising, resisting and responding to specific violent/abusive events, disclosing abuse and seeking help, supporting other people who are victims of violence and abuse; and
- feel empowered and have their self-esteem enhanced.

A further aim of the project was to investigate the extent to which short term/intermediary outcomes, if achieved, can reduce vulnerabilities to child abuse, sexual and family violence and re-victimisation, and stranger danger.

## Methodological approach

An evaluation framework was developed by the independent researchers in collaboration with the WSDN-WT research team. A mixed method research design was agreed upon to assess the value of self defence for the two key target groups of WSDN-WT: (1) school age girls; and (2) women in the community.

Quantitative data were collected from a substantial sample of girls (n=2731) and women (n=115) who participated in a self defence course run in the first half of 2015, using pre and post course evaluation forms. These forms assessed the outcomes and experiences of the participants and included a mix of validated (e.g. Rosenberg Self-esteem) and programme specific questions (closed and open-ended).

These quantitative data were combined with qualitative data collected from a series of interviews. Four separate groups were interviewed:

- key informants/stakeholders for the Girls' Self Defence Project courses (n=14);
- key informants/stakeholders for the Isolation to Empowerment women's courses (n=15);
- women's course participants (n=15); and
- WSDN-WT self defence teachers and chairperson (n=7).

Interviews were conducted in four case study areas selected to include a mix of rural/urban locations, and communities with different ethnic makeup (two South Island and two North Island).

## **Programme characteristics**

WSDN-WT has been delivering self defence courses to girls and women for nearly 28 years with highly positive feedback received by the schools and partner agencies where courses have been run. Priority has been given to reaching vulnerable girls and women including those most at risk from violence and abuse, and those with limited alternative access to learning self defence.

All courses have a core focus on teaching participants ways to keep themselves safe, their friends safe and ways to use their mind, bodies and voices to keep safe. This learning is delivered using a mixture of ice breakers and games, the teaching and practising of physical self defence skills, group discussions and role plays.

Some key characteristics of girls' courses for Years 3-4, 7-8 and 10-12 include:

- over 125,000 girls have participated in a course since 1996, for an average cost of less than \$50 per girl. Up to 10,000 girls participate around New Zealand each year with funding provided by the Ministry of Social Development;
- over the last five years 34% of all girls receiving self defence were Māori, and 51% of all courses were delivered to schools from the lowest 4 decile ratings;
- courses range from 5 to 8 hours. The content of each programme is tailored to the specific risks and needs of each age group. For example, Years 3-4 and 7-8 courses include recognising good and bad touching and the importance of talking to a safe adult if needed, whilst Years 10-12 courses include recognising sexual violence and understanding what constitutes a healthy relationship.

Some key characteristics of women's Isolation to Empowerment courses include:

- in the three years since WSDN-WT first received funding from the Ministry of Justice they have delivered 68 programmes to 747 women at an average cost of around \$120 per woman. This equates to around 250 women per year;
- courses are targeted at women whose vulnerability to sexual violence is at increased risk due to cultural (recently extended to including a culture of violence), geographical and/or disability-related isolation;

- courses are 6 to 8 hours long with the content tailored to suit the specific needs and abilities of participants but including:
  - awareness discussions related to sexual violence;
  - self-esteem and confidence building;
  - strategies to keep / get safe from sexual violence; and
  - physical self defence skills and strategies.

Characteristics of the WSDN-WT self defence teachers include:

- WSDN-WT have trained and accredited 64 self defence teachers since their first training in 1988. There are currently 26 accredited self defence teachers who are members of WSDN-WT (8 of whom are Māori, 1 is Pasifika and 17 are Pakeha);
- accreditation is based on successful evaluation following a rigorous process of selection, training and co-teaching. Training involves attending two week-long residential training camps followed by co-teaching with experienced teachers, prior to evaluation. The process from training to accreditation takes approximately 18 months;
- years of service for current WSDN-WT teachers range from 2 to 28 years, with an average length of service of 11 years.

## Programme outcomes

Evaluation of the girls' and women's self defence courses using both quantitative and qualitative methods revealed an impressive range of outcomes related to improvements in girls' and women's self defence knowledge, attitude and skills. Outcomes summarised below are those most relevant to evaluation objectives.

### ***Increased recognition of sexual and family violence and abuse***

All WSDN-WT self defence courses cover age or group specific education around inappropriate and abusive behaviour. Evidence from the evaluation suggested this education is effective, for example:

- girls from all three age groups had statistically significant improvements post course in relation to **understanding what inappropriate touching is** (Years 3-4 and 7-8) and **what constitutes a healthy relationship** (Years 10-12);
- this education and awareness raising was seen as a valuable part of the course by key stakeholders, and for several Years 3-4 and 7-8 girls was described as the best / most valuable thing learnt on the course, as described by this Years 7-8 girl:

*The most important thing I learnt on this course was how to protect myself and know what's the wrong way people touch you.*

- women on the Isolation to Empowerment courses also had statistically significant improvements in self-reported **knowledge of sexual violence** post course and also their ability to **recognise the early signs of violence**. This increased understanding was described in very real terms by several interviewees, including the following women's refuge client:

*If I had learnt (earlier) what I had learnt in the last two years, I wouldn't have been a survivor of childhood abuse. ... If I had the knowledge I've got now when I went to school, I would have been able to stop my family from doing what they did to me as a*

*child and what men have done to me since I've been an adult. But there were no such things back then. You just shut your mouth and put up with everything.* (Participant, women's course).

### **Increased understanding that it is not okay (and not their fault)**

Self defence teachers explained to us that a key aim of their courses was to ensure participants understand that violence against girls and women is not okay but also very importantly that if it did, or had occurred, it was never their fault.

- after the self defence course, 89% of Years 3-4 girls and 96% of Years 7-8 girls agreed, **'if bad touching happens to a girl it is never her fault'**. Years 10-12 girls had statistically significant increases related to **"sexual assault is never the victim's fault"**. Again for some this was the most important thing learnt on the course, as described by this Years 10-12 girl:

*I learnt to be more confident in myself and that I can defend myself. Also that sexual assault or domestic violence if caused to hurt me is not my fault.*

- comparison of pre-course attitudes of those Years 10-12 girls who had previously done a Girls' Self Defence Project course to those who had not, suggested such positive attitudes were maintained to a statistically significantly enhanced level several years later; and
- women participants and key stakeholders were typically insistent about experiencing the course only in empowering ways and not experiencing any hint of victim blaming. A pragmatic approach to ensuring women's safety meant that, while recognising violence against women is not their fault, they considered it important to equip women with skills for safety. As one refuge manager expressed it:

*In an ideal world women wouldn't have to worry about keeping themselves safe or be learning things like self defence. However, we don't live in an ideal world, and part of my job is to support women to keep themselves as safe as possible and I think a self defence course is a way of doing that.* (Women's refuge manager, women's courses)

### **Learnt clear strategies for recognising, resisting and responding to specific violent/abusive events, disclosing abuse and seeking help, supporting other people who are victims of violence and abuse**

The core components of all WSDN-WT courses are to teach girls and women ways to keep themselves and their friends safe and how to use their mind, body and voice to keep safe.

- post course evaluation of girls' and women's courses found statistically significant improvements in relation to:
  - **understanding the importance of help seeking for themselves and others**, and importantly also high proportions (95%) of girls and women reporting their intention to do this if required. This was supported by strong evidence from the qualitative analysis of girls and women learning to use their voice and speak up. This was a valued and often liberating experience. The following quote from a Years 3-4 girl is an example of the important learning that can occur following a self defence course:

*If someone touched me in a way that made me feel yucky or uncomfortable... I wouldn't keep it for a secret because it would make me feel yucky. I would tell somebody for them to get it sorted with.*

- **recognising potentially risky situations** for Years 7-8 and 10-12 girls, and women;
- **knowing ways to stay safe**, and importantly significant improvements in their **confidence to use these self defence** skills if required. Responses by all girls to an open ended question at the end of the course provided further evidence of high levels of understanding of how to put the self defence strategies they had learnt into practice. An example of the learnings taken away from the course is illustrated by this Years 7-8 girl who, when asked what she would do in a scenario requiring self defence, answered:

*If they were holding on my neck and trying to drag me into a car first I would turn around strongly then elbow them in the nose kick in groin [groin], then push them to the ground and punch them one more time, run a way tell parents and police.*

- comparison of pre-course ratings of those Years 10-12 girls who had previously done a Girls' Self Defence Project course to those who had not suggested the **increased knowledge of how to keep themselves safe** and how to be an **ethical bystander** was maintained to a statistically significantly higher level several years later; and
- qualitative analysis pointed to the importance of participants not only learning simple yet effective self defence skills and strategies, but also the opportunity to practise them. This appeared to be a valued aspect of the course that was seen by many interviewees as one that set it apart from other sexual violence prevention programmes that were limited in scope to imparting knowledge.

*It's actually practising being really loud verbally, and being assertive, and going through the different actions that they can do in those situations, and actually acting them out – rather than saying this is what you should do, actually allowing them to say "right do this, and now let's practise it". I think that's what's been powerful about it. (School principal, Girls Years 3-4).*

### **Women and girls feel empowered and have their self-esteem enhanced**

The strongest finding to emerge from this research was the increases in confidence, self-esteem and empowerment post course. Key findings included:

- statistically significant **increases in self-esteem**, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, for Years 7-8 and 10-12, and when the sample was broken down by ethnicity for all four ethnic groups: Māori, New Zealand European, Pasifika and Asian;
- for girls of all ages and women self-reported increases in **confidence and feeling strong**. This was supported by findings from the qualitative analysis that also revealed increases in overall self-confidence and, importantly, increased confidence post course that participants could and would defend themselves and, if necessary, seek help for themselves or others. This is reflected in the following comment from a woman course participant:

*It gave me a lot more confidence.... You know how you're brought up to always be polite? I think for the first time it gave me permission to fight back. (Participant, women's course)*

- qualitative analysis also identified increased empowerment of participants, in particular that girls and women realised they have the right to be safe from violence and to have

control over what happens to their bodies. The following quote from a Years 7-8 girl is an example of the enhanced confidence and empowerment achieved:

*Well I enjoyed everything, but I loved learning that every girl is strong & can stand up for herself & not to be vulnerable (vulnerable), I learnt to be powerful.*

### **Reduced vulnerabilities to child abuse, sexual and family violence and re-victimisation, and stranger danger**

The ultimate aim of WSDN-WT self defence courses is to provide the girls and women with the knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to reduce their likelihood of becoming victims of abuse or sexual violence. It is difficult to quantitatively assess the degree to which this happens, however, whilst conducting interviews, a surprising number of first and second hand stories emerged that suggested girls and women had retained their self defence skills, and when needed were able to put them into practice. Examples included:

- girls defending themselves against bullying;
- girls identifying and disclosing sexual abuse to a safe adult;
- girls and women identifying and avoiding potentially violent situations;
- girls and women fending off and escaping from violent sexual attacks

*When he was attacking me, I was panicking and everything. Like, I didn't know what to do until I remembered I did the self defence course. (Participant, teen parent unit)*

- girls and women actively seeking help for friends, family members and strangers in trouble; and
- women standing up for themselves and leaving violent relationships.

*He wanted to isolate me and keep me away from everybody, and after that course, I went back and said to him, "No, this ain't healthy, you're trying to control me, and this is not part of what a healthy relationship is." (Participant, women's course)*

### **Outcomes for Māori women and girls**

The higher rate of sexual and violent victimisation of Māori women and girls places increased significance on the availability and effectiveness of self defence for this group. Māori have always been a priority focus for WSDN-WT, as reflected in their constitution's aims and in the caucus-based structure and decision-making model of WSDN-WT. When results for Māori girls and women were extracted for analysis, all measures of self defence knowledge, attitude and skills assessed were found to increase significantly post course.

The action-based way the programme was delivered was viewed as an easier 'fit' for Māori girls than other courses that were exclusively talk-based. Encouraging Māori girls and women to use their voices to stay safe was seen to be a particularly valuable outcome of courses:

*Tell them I do not like what they are doing and then tell them to back off if they don't I would fight back. 2. I would yell their name and yell what they are doing! So others can hear. (Māori girl, Years 7-8)*

*Voice, body language techniques, what body part is open to attack/defend myself, body blocking, don't stop at 1 defensive move, continue until the offender is down. (Māori participant, women's course)*

Course effectiveness for women was seen to be enhanced by all-Māori groups, especially if taught by a Māori WSDN-WT teacher.

## **Programme processes**

Some of the programme processes that were seen to contribute to the positive outcomes achieved following WSDN-WT courses included:

- the length of the course – a short intensive block run over one or two days rather than classes spread over a number of weeks;
- limiting class sizes – enabling the self defence teachers to ensure all participants were learning the moves correctly, while also enabling them to monitor how the information presented was being received;
- course content – that includes physical skills and techniques that are accessible to all, gender awareness and challenges to stereotypical views of sexual assault, help-seeking and ethical bystander interventions;
- taught by self defence teachers with the skills to engage participants in the topic whilst delivering an enjoyable experience;
- delivered by someone external to the school with expert knowledge of self defence;
- well-trained, respectful and professional self defence teachers able to create a safe environment and equipped to deal with triggering and abuse disclosures if they occur;
- offering courses to vulnerable groups in close partnership with relevant support agencies to ensure overall participant safety;
- identifying and delivering self defence to those most at risk of sexual victimisation or re-victimisation and tailoring the courses to meet the specific needs of any such group, with special attention to being culturally appropriate; and
- recruitment of a diverse mix of self defence teachers providing a range of skills and expertise to draw on.

## **Challenging issues and future developments**

Whilst conducting the research a number of challenging issues emerged which could potentially be viewed as impacting on the delivery of self defence by WSDN-WT. These included:

- how to overcome inaccurate stereotypical views that self defence is like martial arts, that it might enhance fear levels, and that it could lead to victim blaming;
- how to ensure sufficient and consistent funding enabling professional development and forward planning; and
- addressing the 'gap' created for boys when delivering self defence to girls.

Exploring these issues with key stakeholders and course participants revealed unanimous support for the current WSDN-WT courses and a desire to see these better funded in future to guarantee course delivery. While the literature review raised the possibility of potentially negative outcomes such as victim blaming and fear enhancing effects, there was absolutely no support for such views evident in our research findings. What emerged instead were accounts indicating that the self defence teachers worked consciously to reduce fear and perceptions of

self-vulnerability, and were careful to emphasise that being victimised was never the fault of the victim.

The following suggestions were made during our interviews about how the teachers, women, support workers and other key stakeholders would like to see the WSDN-WT courses develop in the future:

- extend the length of some courses;
- increase the number of courses in schools and in the community for women;
- offer mother and daughter courses;
- expand delivery to other vulnerable groups;
- have more explicit links to the school curriculum; and
- be better funded and resourced.

## Conclusions

The overall report presents a compelling range of data, both quantitative and qualitative, that demonstrate clearly the extremely positive regard with which the WSDN-WT courses are held. Both the content and delivery were very highly rated, and school teachers and community stakeholders alike consistently praised the self defence teachers for their knowledge, skills, interactive abilities, cultural awareness, and sensitivity to sexual abuse and violence issues.

Moreover, the combined findings from the pre/post-questionnaires and the interviews consistently indicate the effectiveness of this programme in a range of critical areas related to violence prevention, public health, and community safety. These are difficult areas within which to make measurable differences, with the field of rape prevention, for example, yielding many good programme ideas but few that have been subjected to the rigorous analysis of this one. No single programme can stand alone, and rape prevention ideally would combine a linked set of initiatives that would be offered alongside appropriate courses targeting boys and men, as well as ethical bystander programmes.

Our experience as researchers was that this was an unusual evaluation experience in that the feedback we received was so consistently positive. It was difficult to find anyone with negative experiences of the WSDN-WT courses or teachers – all emerged as star players. So what are the reasons for this success?

We identified the following aspects as being of critical importance:

### **Organisational characteristics and capacity:**

- the incremental knowledge and wisdom arising from their historical involvement and willingness to learn from experience;
- bicultural structure to the organisation, with an important and active Māori caucus;
- a clearly articulated core philosophy shared by the teachers and uniting them in their understanding of gender violence and stereotypes and the importance of the preventive work they are engaged in;
- a democratic and collectivist approach to decision-making;
- respectful of diversity and development of a team of self defence teachers that provide a range of skills and experience to draw on;

- commitment to on-going evaluations of their courses and responsiveness to feedback from participants and stakeholders;
- willingness to incorporate new research and update materials used;
- close collaboration with partner agencies and networking with NGOs working with violence against women;
- the maintenance of strong networks within both NGO and government sectors; and
- the adherence of all involved in WSDN-WT to the self defence ethos: *“Never give up!”*

#### **Recruitment and development of high quality self defence teachers through:**

- the rigorous selection process for teachers;
- the intensive training of teachers, with any not reaching their very high standards not being accredited;
- on-going training and supervision, including 6-monthly training hui;
- encouragement of self reflexivity and regular reviews and discussions regarding best practice; and
- attracting individuals with a passion and personal commitment that motivates those involved to give far more than they are recompensed for and subsidise the work.

#### **Delivery of a quality self defence programme:**

- that reaches those most in need, with priority given to identifying and reaching girls and women most at risk from violence, abuse and re-victimisation, and those with limited alternative access to learning self defence;
- courses are tailored to meet the specific risks and needs of those attending
- where learning is delivered by an expert self defence teacher in a fun, engaging but effective manner that ensures self defence skills are accessible to all;
- delivered in a short intensive block using a mixture of activities and exercises both physical and verbal;
- self defence knowledge is presented within a feminist empowerment model; and
- courses are delivered in a safe environment by self defence teachers equipped to deal with triggering and disclosures if they occur.

The findings from this evaluation provide strong evidence of the importance of a range of integrated elements being fundamental to this organisation’s successful delivery of self defence. Others can and do teach self defence, others can and do teach rape prevention. However, course participants and stakeholders in this study with knowledge of other such programmes routinely expressed criticisms of these, including misgivings about teacher professionalism and skills, concerns about the limited nature of course content, and anxieties regarding the management of triggering and disclosures. The strong collective that is WSDN-WT serves as a safe container for the teachers and the commitment to on-going training and evaluations further promotes the safety these women provide for all course participants.

Such attributes have developed and been strengthened during the more than 28 years of course delivery they have provided to thousands of girls and women in New Zealand. This winning formula could not be easily replicated, given how many core components are linked to

its success. It is self defence **and**, as many of those interviewed said, it is so much more than self defence. Our analysis suggests it is the empowerment strand running through the programme that increases so significantly its effectiveness. Accordingly we suggest the following recommendations to be considered in relation to the future development of such courses, and to ensure all girls and women are able to learn 'skills for safety':

- provide increased and guaranteed funding to expand further the reach and positive impacts of WSDN-WT courses for girls in schools so that both WSDN-WT and the schools can plan ahead certain of assured funding;
- provide sufficient funding to enable refresher courses to be offered;
- extend the vulnerable groups targeted for the Isolation to Empowerment women's courses to include older women generally, to assist with managing their fear of attack;
- extend the vulnerable groups also to include women university students, given increased understanding of the high prevalence of sexual assaults they experience;
- build on the collaborative partnership established with women's refuge to provide future courses specifically for women known to be living with violence;
- provide funding targeted specifically to support course provision for Māori women and girls, including translation of key resources into Māori and additional resourcing for Māori teachers in rural and low-income areas;
- pilot a specifically targeted course for mothers and daughters; and
- explore options for funding a parallel school programme for boys that would be of a matching calibre, provided by a separate group/organisation working in tandem with WSDN-WT. This course would ideally involve appropriately qualified men working with boys to address issues of bullying, gender stereotyping, negotiating consent and other prevention-related issues.

Providing skills to maximise the safety and security of all girls and women living in New Zealand should be a national priority if we are committed to creating a society characterised less by violence and more by gender equality. That is why courses teaching 'skills for safety' are currently so needed.

In reviewing the past and looking towards the future, WSDN-WT Chairperson, Alison Broad, raised the following question which we decided to reproduce here to end this report:

*Self defence has already become part of the fabric of New Zealand society, with an impact on the thousands of girls and women who have learned self defence, and also with a wider impact on attitudes, assumptions and expectations. Currently learning self defence is an opportunity available to many, but still not most, New Zealand girls, and only a relatively small proportion of New Zealand women. What additional impact and transformative contribution could self defence have in preventing violence against girls and women if it became a majority experience? (WSDN-WT chairperson)*