



A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

CHAPTER 5: Youth focused relationships and marriage education

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Introduction

Information about romantic relationships may be especially relevant and timely for adolescents in high school. During this time, individuals may enter couple relationships based upon passion and idealized beliefs about love and commitment. Cognitively, many adolescents are still developing the capacity to think abstractly and realistically about the future; some may get engaged or married thinking that passion is all one needs for a stable marriage (Niehuis, Skogrand, and Huston 2005). Romantic relationships are an important part of adolescent development and influence both positive and negative youth outcomes. Adolescents can benefit from developmentally appropriate relationships education that promotes their understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships and that builds skills needed to function effectively within committed relationships and marriages.

Benefits and risks of adolescents' romantic relationships

The existing literature addressing the role of romantic relationships during adolescence is sparse. Of what is known, there appear to be important developmental benefits of adolescent dating relationships. Adolescent romantic relationships are the strongest predictors of adolescent well-being indicators such as self-esteem, depression, and suicide attempts and completions (Brent et al. 1993; Conger et al. 2001; Joyner and Udry 2000). In addition, romantic relationships provide opportunities for adolescents to rethink who they want to become in the future, and they help adolescents determine who they are within the romantic domain of identity (Furman and Shaffer 2003).

According to Bouchey and Furman (2003), adolescents often behave differently across romantic relationships because they are experimenting with possible selves as they seek to establish a sense of identity. Romantic partners also can influence career plans and aspirations in the extent to which they support or discourage an adolescent's dreams and goals (Kerpelman and Lamke 1997; Kerpelman and Pittman 2001). Although the implications of romantic relationships for expression and understanding of sexuality during adolescence are varied, romantic relationships are a primary context in which adolescents learn about their sexuality and try out different sexual behaviors. Common reasons that adolescents give for having their first intercourse experience is the desire to increase the love their partners feel for them (Furman and Shaffer 2003).

Also noted in the literature is that learning about oneself, and how to relate effectively with a dating/marriage partner, begins before the formation of romantic relationships. Research indicates that it is important for adolescents to understand how experiences with peers and friends help prepare them for romantic relationships (Kuttler and La Greca 2004) and how patterns of interaction with peers often are reflected in patterns with romantic partners (Furman 1999). Furthermore, empirical findings show that some behaviors, beliefs, and emotional characteristics that are predictive of marital outcomes are present in couple relationships before marriage (Huston and Houts 1998; Leonard and Roberts 1998; Noller and Feeney 1998).

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Risks also exist in adolescent romantic relationships. There are alarming rates of relationship violence occurring among adolescent dating partners. Well over 20 percent of adolescents experience psychological or physical abuse from a dating partner (Roberts and Klein 2003). According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2006), each year approximately one in 11 high school students is a victim of physical dating violence; the rates are similar for males and females.

Conflict within peer and dating relationships is a particularly important area to address, as many adolescents do not realize that conflict in romantic relationships is inevitable (Shulman 2003). In fact, adolescents often believe that conflict is negative and use maladaptive strategies to cope. Their tendency to hold idealistic, rather than realistic, beliefs about romantic relationships (Montgomery 2005) can lead to ineffective coping with relationship problems that emerge.

Another risk is teen pregnancy. Out-of-wedlock child bearing prior to marriage is associated with increased risk of divorce (Amato 2000), and approximately 70 percent of women who have their first child out of wedlock will have all of their children nonmaritally (Seltzer 2000). Thus, adolescents' concerns with, and abilities to manage, issues relevant to forming enduring intimate relationships are developmental in nature, and a lack of accurate information and effective skills can increase the risk of poor decision making and negative outcomes.

Emotions and adolescents' romantic relationships

Emotions are a central part of romantic relationships at any age, and can be positive, as well as negative (Larson, Clore, and Wood 1999). Often adolescents need help understanding and managing the emotional aspects of relationships. Positive romantic emotions, such as elation, increased energy, and a positive outlook on life can increase motivation. Adolescents may become more engaged in social activities and put greater effort into daily tasks because of the positive feelings they are experiencing. However, these positive emotions also can cloud judgment, leading some adolescents to make poor choices. For example, because she is "in love," a teen that ordinarily uses good judgment may get into a car being driven by her drunken boyfriend. Sexual risks also may be taken with a romantic partner, such as engaging in sex without protection because an adolescent cannot believe his partner would give him an STD.



Negative emotions also accompany romantic relationships (Larson et al. 1999). Many adolescents experience jealousy, anger, longing, and grief because of problems in their dating relationships and the relationship break-ups they experience. Often adolescent dating relationships are short in duration and can involve great fluctuations in positive and negative emotions. Some adolescents do not cope well with the negative emotions, becoming depressed, suicidal, or violent. In addition, some use drugs/alcohol to cope with their negative emotions.

According to Larson et al (1999), educating adolescents about emotions associated with romantic relationships can enhance their emotional intelligence. Learning what is healthy and what is not can help adolescents gain a better understanding of the feelings they experience and how to manage them. They can learn to step back during emotional situations and consider the full range of factors involved. Taking a broader perspective and learning effective relationship skills can help adolescents use adaptive responses, such as directly communicating feelings in a nonthreatening matter, when they become upset with their romantic partners' behaviors. Emotional intelligence also helps adolescents recognize common misattributions that often come with idealizing romantic relationships. When an adolescent is infatuated with a dating partner, he may believe the person is infallible and only see her positive qualities. It may be difficult for him to confront her if she mistreats him in some way. Increasing emotional intelligence facilitates more accurate appraisals of romantic relationship dynamics.

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Objectives of relationships/marriage education targeting youth

Based on an understanding of adolescent development and the functions and effects of romantic relationships in adolescents' lives, a number of important objectives can be met through relationships education designed for youth. The overarching goal of youth-focused relationships and marriage education should be to increase the numbers of adolescents and young adults who have the skills and knowledge needed for forming and maintaining healthy romantic relationships and, ultimately, well-functioning partnerships/marriages.

Objectives for these programs should include increasing adolescents' knowledge of healthy and unhealthy relationships and their skills for facilitating healthy relationship interactions. Because adolescents are developmentally different from adults, it also is important to address healthy identity formation and self-efficacy as these have been shown to impact adolescents' behaviors and decisions about dating relationships (Montgomery 2005). Finally, programs targeting youth should include objectives to reduce risky sexual behaviors and their outcomes. Below is a description of these three primary objectives.

- *Objective 1.* Increasing knowledge about healthy and unhealthy relationships includes learning about healthy dating patterns, such as using effective approaches to conflict management and communication, as well as addressing factors related to healthy and stable marriages, such as mutual respect, shared values, and commitment. It also is important to help adolescents recognize patterns of unhealthy and abusive relationships that may include verbal or physical aggression, controlling behavior, and a lack of respect between partners.
- *Objective 2.* Strengthening skills for facilitating healthy relationship dynamics involves increasing adolescents' levels of self-efficacy in relationships to help them feel empowered to make good choices and stand up for themselves when needed. It also includes enhancing problem-solving and communication skills by helping adolescents learn ways to communicate effectively with partners about their needs and views. Adolescents can be taught ways to manage conflict in their relationships using effective communication and self-control strategies.
- *Objective 3.* Enhancing understanding of the choices and behaviors that put physical and emotional health at risk includes addressing adolescents' knowledge of and attitudes toward risky sexual behaviors, reducing misconceptions about risky sexual activity, and increasing knowledge about healthy relationships and choices.

By teaching adolescents about healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns, adolescents may recognize problem behavior patterns, such as engaging in risky sexual behavior to please a romantic partner, and actively choose to reduce their levels of risky sexual activity. Physical and emotional health also are put at risk in abusive relationships. Increasing adolescents' understanding of what abuse looks like in close relationships may help reduce adolescents' selection of abusive dating partners, and may increase the likelihood that adolescents will seek help if they find themselves in abusive relationships.

An example of an effective youth-focused relationships education curriculum

*The Relationships Smarts Plus*¹ curriculum (RS+; adapted from Love U2: *Relationship Smarts*, Pearson 2004) provides an example of an effective youth-focused relationships education curriculum. RS+ is a research-based curriculum that incorporates hands-on activities to focus on skills and knowledge necessary for healthy dating relationships, for making good choices about partners, and for later healthy marital relationships. The RS+ curriculum has features that are especially appropriate for lower-resource, ethnically diverse youth, many of whom are attending the Alabama schools where RS+ is being offered. These features include less didactic and more experiential learning material, "common" teen language, materials that show diversity, and language that assumes teens are living in diverse family structures.

RS+ is consistent with key aspects of successful youth programs. The curriculum offers developmentally appropriate content, such as material that addresses identity development, current relationship dynamics, and future-orientation, and a hands-on approach that makes the material accessible and

¹ RS+ will be distributed by the Dibble Institute in the fall of 2007. RS+ is being tested as part of the Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth project, a 5-year evaluation study funded by the Administration for Children and Families/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; it is also supported with funding from the State of Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (The Children's Trust Fund of Alabama).





helps adolescents internalize the information being taught. For example, adult facilitators (e.g., high school teachers) assist youth in personal strength building processes, adolescents are viewed positively and as capable of making good choices, adolescents actively participate in the program and are empowered by it, and the RS+ curriculum is flexible and can be adapted to the needs of the participating adolescents.

The RS+ lessons, each of which is 60-90 minutes long, address the establishment of a foundation for understanding the nature of romantic relationships, followed by several lessons that address dating processes and decisions. Also addressed in the curriculum are important communication skills within romantic relationships and the promotion of future-oriented thinking about relationships. Below is a summary of the RS+ lesson content.

Section 1: Establishing a Foundation for Understanding Romantic Relationships

- **Lesson 1:** “*Who am I and Where am I Going?*” helps adolescents get in touch with their sense of identity and possible selves. Identity formation is a central task of adolescence that influences and is influenced by experiences in romantic and other close relationships. Emphasis is placed on who the adolescent is within his or her family, friendship, and dating relationship contexts. Adolescents create a possible-selves tree to visualize their future self-goals and ways to attain them. The lesson concludes with addressing ways to stay true to themselves when faced with peer pressure.
- **Lesson 2:** “*Maturity Issues and What I Value*” explores the concept of maturity. It identifies four aspects of maturity — physical, emotional, mental, and social — and points out that the latter three don’t happen on their own, but take conscious effort. The lesson then moves on to an activity, “a values auction,” that helps participants identify the values that are important to them.
- **Lesson 3:** “*Attractions and Infatuation*” begins with a “relationship pyramid” schematic that assists teens in thinking about the building blocks of good relationships. Adolescents visualize the foundation of good relationships that include common interests, having fun together, talking to each other, and developing a real friendship. In addition, the chemistry of attraction and the nature of infatuation are explored.
- **Lesson 4:** “*Love and Intimacy*” gets teens thinking about the meaning of the words love and intimacy. First, teacher-selected pictures from teen magazines are used to help adolescents learn about the differences and connections between love and lust. Next, the three important aspects of mature love – that is, passion, intimacy, and commitment – are examined. The last part of the session builds an understanding of intimacy and how it develops.

Section 2: Fostering Knowledge about Dating Relationship Processes

- **Lesson 5:** “*Principles of Smart Relationships*” provides practical guidance for developing positive relationships. The first part introduces seven principles for “smart” dating. Teens learn that they can fall in love with their brain turned on by paying attention to these seven principles. Activities such as identifying Smart and Not-so-Smart relationship decisions provide practice for applying these insights to real world teen relationships.

- **Lesson 6:** *“The Approach to Relationships: Decide, Don’t Slide!”* explores why people can easily get swept up and involved with poor relationship choices. Too often young people slide into situations instead of making clear decisions with good knowledge about the individuals they are attracted to. This lesson aims to build skills and awareness for how to take a “go-slow, go-smart” approach toward building relationships and avoiding the sometimes high-costs of sliding. Teens explore, through four different activities, steps to take to really get to know the people they are dating.
- **Lesson 7:** *“Is It a Healthy Relationship?”* offers concrete and practical guidance about how to tell if a relationship is healthy or unhealthy. By trying to answer three essential questions, the lesson explores what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like in the real world. A fun sculpting activity aids in visualizing the negative and positive answers to the questions.
- **Lesson 8:** *“Breaking up and Dating Abuse”* increases teens’ awareness of what abuse looks like in relationships and stresses that abusive relationships are unhealthy and unsafe. Thought-provoking activities and an educational video are used to help teens understand the forms abuse takes and ways to avoid or get out of abusive relationships. In addition, adolescents learn that even relationships that are not abusive may need to end, and guidelines are offered for knowing when it’s time to break up, better and worse ways to break up, and steps for moving on.

Section 3: Facilitating Communication Skills for Healthy Relationships and Marriages

- **Lesson 9:** *“A Foundation for Good Communication”* provides students with a strong foundation for effective communication in couple relationships. After considering the positive and negative communication patterns students have learned within their families, the basic elements of listening openly and speaking clearly are reviewed. Ways to engage in problem solving also are covered. The lesson concludes with opportunities to practice important skills for good communication.
- **Lesson 10:** *“Communication Challenges and More Skills”* looks more extensively at challenges to good communication and ways to address negative communication patterns in a relationship. Students are introduced to patterns that damage relationships and how to recognize the warning signs of troubled communication. Next, students have opportunities to practice different strategies to change negative communication patterns into positive ones.

Section 4: Encouraging Future Orientation: Marriage, Family, and Planning for the Future

- **Lesson 11:** *“Through the Eyes of a Child: Parents’ Relationships Matter”* aims to build an awareness of how and why a healthy marriage matters. Specifically, teens learn how parents’ relationships matter for their children’s well-being. They also focus on the importance of fathers. Activities are designed such that teens can vividly see things from a child’s eyes and heart.
- **Lesson 12:** *“Increasing the Odds of Having a Healthy Marriage Someday”* helps teens learn about wise mate selection and reasons why some marriages succeed and others fail. Through activities, they learn why the choices they make in the present can take them down paths that will either lead them towards or away from a successful marriage.

Program implementation.

In addition to focusing on the content of a youth education curriculum, it also is critical to focus simultaneously on implementation in order to ensure that programs targeting youth are employing best practices. Thus, it is necessary to evaluate carefully the outcomes of youth education programs using quantitative measures of change and program impact, as well as qualitative methods to gain understanding of program implementation issues. Both educators and students should be included in this process. Key areas to assess are

1. Fit of the material and activities to the audience. Are the examples and activities used to promote learning relevant to and engaging for the adolescents participating in terms of age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.
2. Clarity and ease of the delivery of the material. Are the lessons easy to understand and implement; are the messages being conveyed clear?
3. Dosage needed to effect change. Does the program cover the range of material needed in adequate quantities to facilitate the desired changes?
4. Aspects of the setting that may affect the implementation and understanding of the material. How does class make-up, regional location, teacher characteristics, or factors in the larger community influence the effectiveness of the program being implemented?

- **Lesson 13:** “*Follow Your North Star*” provides a final lesson where teens first review core concepts and then work together to produce a mural summarizing the key insights and information they have learned in RS+. Then, they begin to work individually on their own “success plans” in session. They continue and finish these plans outside of class.

Establishing an exemplar curriculum and model of best practices

The Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth (HCHCTY) evaluation project will help to establish an exemplar curriculum and model of best practices for educating youth about close relationships. Between 2005 and 2010, more than 200 teachers and their classes will participate in this project. Both Family and Consumer Science classes and Health classes are being included. The impact of the program content and effectiveness of the implementation are evaluated through pre-/post- evaluations that assess the adolescents’ knowledge, attitudes, perceived skills, and behaviors. In addition, a post-test with retrospective pre-test measure assesses participant learning that is module-specific. This careful evaluation includes comparisons of adolescents who do and do not receive the course. In addition, some students who receive the course also receive follow-up booster sessions to determine if booster sessions further extend the effects of the course. Each year of the study, data are collected that can help determine how effective the curriculum is and where changes are needed to improve the curriculum. Every time the curriculum is revised, it will be tested with a new group of teachers and students.

The procedures used in the development and ongoing refinement of RS+ are expected to result in a model of best practices. Interviews conducted with teachers and students participating in RS+ are used to gain additional insights regarding program implementation. Each year, teachers and students provide feedback about program content, areas they think need to be strengthened or added, and ways in which the fit of program materials to the audience can be improved. Teachers also provide feedback on the quality of the training they received and on aspects of implementation of the curriculum that need to be adjusted. Based on these qualitative assessments, as well as quantitative questionnaire data, changes will be made to the materials and delivery methods in ways designed to increase the effectiveness of the curriculum. Guidelines for best practices will be derived from what is learned.

Curriculum fit with the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) model

As part of the process of evaluating the RS+ curriculum as an exemplar curriculum for teaching adolescents about healthy relationships and marriages, RS+ was examined in terms of its correspondence with the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) model. This working framework was established to guide and evaluate efforts to strengthen relationships and marriages. Its dimensions are strength-based, and focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements of relationships. The dimensions tap key areas of creating and maintaining stable healthy marriages and couple relationships. Examples of how RS+ fits with the NERMEN model are provided in Table 1.



Table 1. RS+ fit with the NERMEN model

NERMEN Concept	Fit with Relationship Smarts Plus Curriculum
<p>Choose (intentionality in the creation and maintenance of healthy relationships)</p>	<p>RS+ at its core is designed to promote the importance of intentionality. Across the lessons, adolescents are made aware of the important choices they are making in their lives and the value of carefully considering the partners they select and the ways they interact with their dating partners. They also come to understand why sustained commitment to working on a relationship is central to its success and are made aware of the elements that comprise a healthy relationship.</p>
<p>Know (development of interest, affection, and closeness)</p>	<p>RS+ stresses the importance of taking the time to really get to know the person one is dating in order to find out about compatible interests and values and to establish a relationship that is based on mutual respect.</p>
<p>Care (the value of kindness, understanding, respect, and caring support)</p>	<p>Demonstrating affection, understanding, respect, and support for a relationship partner are emphasized throughout the RS+ curriculum. Also addressed are the steps needed to leave an unhealthy or abusive relationship.</p>
<p>Share (the importance of friendship, positive interactions, and meaningful time together)</p>	<p>The dating lessons of RS+ focus considerably on the importance of developing a caring friendship with a dating partner and the value of spending meaningful time together in order to build intimacy.</p>
<p>Connect (the role of social support and community)</p>	<p>The RS+ curriculum recognizes the influences and values of the broader social network. Activities help adolescents become aware of these influences and to understand how their dating relationships fit within their broader social worlds.</p>
<p>Manage (strategies of engagement, interaction, and healthy resolution of differences)</p>	<p>The RS+ curriculum, especially the communication skills lessons, provide adolescents with activities that help them practice effective communication, and to learn strategies for dealing with relationship challenges and problems.</p>
<p>Care for Self (the priority of maintaining one's physical, psychological, and sexual health and wellness)</p>	<p>RS+ begins with a focus on self – one's sense of identity and goals for the future. Throughout the curriculum, issues of self-awareness and self-respect are emphasized.</p>

The RS+ curriculum appears to fit well with the NERMEN model. Across the lessons, RS+ provides adolescents with an understanding of the balance between caring for self and caring for the relationship, and with an appreciation for factors outside the relationship (family, peers, community) that have important implications for relationship functioning.

Summary of key findings during the first year of HCHCTY

Before the 5-year HCHCTY project, a pilot study examining the efficacy of RS+ was conducted in nine Alabama high schools in low-resource, ethnically diverse areas. Results indicated that adolescents participating in the program showed gains in knowledge from Time 1 to Time 2 and had better outcomes



Student Response

Student focus groups revealed that the participants liked the RS+ curriculum. Student comments included

- *It will help dating teenagers avoid abusive relationships.*
- *I liked that it taught me some things about dating and being in a relationship that I didn't know before.*
- *I liked how in depth the program was – it was really informative about dating and what should and shouldn't happen.*

Students also described how they were using skills learned in RS+, for instance

- *I tried avoiding negative starts – discussion did not turn into an argument.*
- *I used my [RS+] notebook to improve my relationship by getting my boyfriend to read it.*
- *I used some of the communication skills we learned – being aware of voice tone, prevented arguments.*

Although they liked the content, students recommended that the instructional videos be updated with “teens of today.” They noted that some of the lessons presented too much information in certain areas. They also requested that the number of hands-on and experiential activities be increased.

than those in the control group (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007). Importantly, this study provided the first empirical evidence of positive program impact of marriage education among a sample with a strong representation of low-income, African-American youth. Because our pilot work yielded promising results, we applied for and received funding in 2005 for the 5-year HCHCTY evaluation study.

Data collected from 1,215 Alabama high school youth who received the RS+ curriculum during the first year of the HCHCTY study in the spring of 2006 indicated that the lessons were effective in increasing knowledge about healthy/unhealthy relationships and improving interpersonal skills. Of the 1,215 students, the majority were African-American (33.7 percent) and Caucasian (59.4 percent). The mean age of participants was 16 years (SD = 1.3). More than half of the participants (56.4 percent) reported that they were currently in dating relationships. A control sample (N=243) was drawn from students in FCS classes at comparable high schools.² In spite of the imbalance in the sizes of the RS+ and control samples, which limited the power to detect mean group differences, significant differences were found.

For the group receiving RS+, changes in perceived knowledge occurred across all of the targeted program areas. Knowledge increases were found for planning for the future; understanding the nature and importance of values, maturity, love and intimacy; identification of healthy dating strategies; understanding of what abuse looks like in relationships and ways to address it; and how to implement effective communication within romantic and other close relationships. Across the areas assessed, means increased significantly ($p < .001$); the average increase was from 2.5 to 3.5 on a 4 point scale (1 = knowledge is poor; 4 = knowledge is excellent).

Faulty relationship beliefs of RS+ participants (e.g., there is only one person out there for you, love is enough to solve all relationship problems) were found to decrease from pre- to post-test (dropping from 3.6 to 3.1 on a 5-point scale; significant at $p = .001$). Those in the control group did not show decreases in faulty relationship beliefs over this same time period. For those in the RS+ group who started a new dating relationship while receiving the program, verbal aggression in their new relationships was significantly lower ($p < .01$) than in the previous relationships they had been in (decreased from 1.2 to .50 on a 5-point scale, higher scores indicate greater aggression). Finally, those who received the RS+ lessons evidenced a modest but significant increase ($p < .05$) in their conflict management skills (3.3 to 3.5 on a 5-point scale; higher scores indicate greater conflict management ability). Those in the control group did not show increases in conflict management ability.

² Data collected from additional students with demographic backgrounds similar to the RS+ group are being added to increase the size of the control sample.

Interviews with teachers also indicated that both teachers and students enjoyed the lessons. Many specific examples of lesson strengths were provided. In addition, the dating abuse lesson was seen as critically important. In general, teachers perceived that their students were receptive to the curriculum, and especially enjoyed the activities in which they could be active. Teachers noted that male students differed from female students in their response to the curriculum. Male students preferred participating in active games and activities, but often became uncomfortable when there were lengthy discussions about relationship issues. Efforts to make the curriculum and its delivery more supportive of male student participation and learning will be important to strengthening the efficacy of RS+. Collectively, the teacher and student feedback offered important directions for making improvements to the RS+ curriculum.

Overall, the findings from the first year of the HCHCTY project indicated that RS+ was effective in educating youth about healthy romantic relationships and marriages. We have learned important lessons about teacher preparation and support that we will incorporate into the subsequent years of our project. The RS+ curriculum prepares participants with critical knowledge and skills for establishing healthy, lasting close relationships and marriages.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a key time to offer relationships/marriage education, as it is during adolescence that youth begin to actively explore romantic relationships. Providing effective relationships education can support positive youth development and help reduce impulsive and health-compromising behaviors. Relationships education also can facilitate movement toward well-functioning committed relationships and marriages in adulthood. Using rigorously evaluated research-based curricula will optimize efforts to provide adolescents with effective learning experiences. Creating model curricula and determining best practices will ensure that more adolescents gain the knowledge and skills needed for healthier close relationships and marriages.

