It’s More Than Romance: Becoming “Relationship Smart”

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Healthy Relationships Matter for Adults:

- Lower Mortality
- Healthier Habits
- Better Physical and Mental Health
- Greater Financial Well-being
Benefits and Risks of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence

- **Benefits**
  - Identity exploration
  - Positive feelings about self
  - Belonging/Closeness/Support
  - Peer group acceptance
- **Risks**
  - Emotional stress
  - Using sex to address unmet needs
  - Sexually transmitted infections
  - Pregnancy/teen parenthood
  - Relationship violence
Why Relationships Education is Important for Youth

- Developmentally relevant – a “teachable moment” in the life course

- Early prevention for later choices and behaviors

- Youth at risk of dating violence
  Nationally in the United States- 9.8% of teen girls and 9% of teen boys report being victims of physical violence in dating relationships

- Teen Pregnancy
  Nationally in the United States, the number of live births to 15-19 year olds was 415,408 in 2004 (NCHS)

- Relationship Models: Alter learned models that may be negative; reinforce positive learned models
Despite understanding of the rationale and potential positive impact of this work:

- **There are only 3 published studies of short-term program impact** (Gardner & colleagues, 2002; 2004 (SD and CA samples; White and Hispanic students); Adler-Baeder & colleagues, 2007 (AL sample; White and African American students)).
- **One very recent and limited study of sustained impact** (Gardner & colleagues, December 2007 (SD and CA; White, Hispanic and Asian American)).
- **No studies of implementation process.**
- **No previous work to utilize study results to inform/improve program and practices.**
The 5-year HCHCTY project
Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth

- Based on results of our pilot testing in 2004-2005, we were funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, Administration for Children and Families/U. S. Department of Health and Human Service. for a 5-year project (October 2005-October 2010) to evaluate the RS curriculum and to create a model of youth-focused relationships education.

- **HCHCTY is blazing a new trail!** There is no other previous or current study of this kind!

- We also continue to receive funding support for the program from the State of Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama).
HCHCTY Includes:

- The Relationship Smarts Plus curriculum (RS+; Pearson, 2007) which is Research- and theory-based.

- 2-day teacher training plus ongoing monitoring and support while the course is being taught.

- In-class lessons that incorporate hands-on activities to focus on skills and knowledge necessary for healthy “romantic” relationships.

- Self-reflection workbooks

- Parent/Guardian-Adolescent connection
The Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+; Pearson, 2007) addresses:

- Self-development and possible selves
- Importance of shared values
- The difference between love and infatuation
- The different dimensions of intimacy
- Smart and Not-so-Smart beliefs and choices related to dating
- The low-risk approach to relationships: how to really get to know someone
- Distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Recognizing and addressing abuse in relationships
- Communication skills
- Future orientation – why parents’ relationships with each other matter for their children
- How to increase the likelihood of having a healthy committed relationship/marriage in the future
Evaluation Process

- Pre/Post data collection: Test and Control groups.
- Booster/Follow up survey each year.
- Lesson Checklists (dosage)
- Student Focus Groups
- Teacher Interviews

Each year the RS+ curriculum is updated based on teacher/student feedback and tested with a new group.
Highlights of HCHCTY Findings
African American Youth:
PY1:  N=302; Females = 229; Males =73; age range 14-19
PY2:  N=349; Females =273; Males = 66; age range 14-19
HCHCTY YEAR 1

COMPARISONS OF TEST & CONTROL SAMPLES
Test = 302; Control = 154
Faulty Relationship Beliefs: One and Only

The test group, but not the control group decreased in faulty relationship beliefs from T1 to T2; $p < .001$. The groups did not differ at T1, but did differ at T2.
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The test group, but not the control group decreased in verbal aggression from T1 to T2; \( p < .001 \). The groups did not differ at T1, but did differ at T2.
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The test group, but not the control group increased their interest in taking future marriage prep/education classes from T1 to T2; \( p < .05 \). The groups did not differ at T1, but did differ at T2.
What did you like about RS+?
- "It will help dating teenagers avoid abusive relationships"
- "I thought I knew everything, but as it turns out, I've learned a lot about relationships and love."

How have you used what you learned?
- "I used some of the communication skills we learned—being aware of voice tone, prevented arguments"
- "I stopped changing for others"
What are your impressions of the curriculum and students’ responses to the lessons?

- "At the end of the semester, the students who were in my Relationship Smarts class actually surprised me at a school assembly with the "You made a difference" award. They wanted me to know what an impact the program had on them."

- "I thought the program was excellent. The discussion questions are in tune with the youth of today, and I think that made my kids more open. They actually said they wanted more discussion!"

- "Since finishing the curriculum, students have come back and told me they've used what they learned when faced with a difficult situation and it helped them make better choices."
Sample Activities
Possible Selves Tree
7 Principles of Smart Relationships

1. Look for Common Interests
2. Pay Attention to Values
3. Don't Try To Change the Other Person
4. Don't Try to Change Yourself to Get Someone's Love
5. Expect Good Communication and Don't Run From Conflict
6. Don't Play Games, Pressure, or Manipulate Someone
7. Expect Respect
1: Look for Common Interests

2: Pay Attention to Values

3: Don't Try To Change the Other Person

4: Don't Try to Change Yourself to Get Someone’s Love or Friendship

5: Expect Good Communication and Don't Run From Conflict

6: Don't Play Games, Pressure, or Manipulate Someone

7: Expect Respect
SCULPTURE EXAMPLES

Does It Feel CONDITIONAL?  
This sculpture represents a fragile egg trying to stay balanced and avoid holes so it won’t crash and break. Each color of the web represents a different condition for love to continue.

Does It Feel UNCONDITIONAL?  
This sculpture represents the support found in an unconditional relationship through the use of the connected hands. Despite all their warts, they are still loved, supported and accepted. We see a battered heart, a broken heart, a chubby heart, a happy heart...

Does It Feel OVER-CONTROLLING?  
The figures/sculptures are representative of one person controlling the other. In this instance, the female is controlling the male. Her size, in relationship to his, represents control. She carries a “control stick” which represents possible, and even likely, abuse in the future.

Does It Feel EQUAL & SUPPORTIVE?  
This sculpture represents a relationship that is separate but equal. They are holding hands for support. The stance shows they are able to branch out for personal growth and exploration, yet remain close and help each other.
Communication

Students do many activities to help them:

Evaluate communication patterns learned while growing up.
Learn the importance and practice the application of “Time Out”.
Practice the Speaker-Listener Technique.
Practice raising issues and complaints effectively
Learn ways to care for relationships with regular appreciations

But, if none of that works:
Family Wanted
What kinds of home situations and parents does a child want and need to grow up healthy and secure?
Relationships Education to Build Protective Factors

- Relationships education for youth, and enhancing the capacity within families to openly discuss relationships, increases the likelihood that adolescents will form healthy friendships and romantic relationships, and will form healthier families in the future.

- Relationships education provides children and adolescents with knowledge and skills for addressing interpersonal challenges.

- When available models are not healthy, relationships education, and supportive friends and adults, can offer good alternatives to those models.
- What experiences have you had that offer insights about educating teens about relationships?

- How can we make youth-focused relationships education as effective as possible?

- What else do we need to add to our efforts to facilitate healthy relationship development among youth?

- In what ways might we be most successful in helping parents and other caring adults support healthy relationships for adolescents and young adults?