



Tip Sheet

Why Marriage and Relationship Education Matters to Youth

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Adolescence is a time when preparation for adult roles increases. Much of this preparation is through the life experiences that help enhance readiness for greater responsibilities, higher demands for critical decision making, and overall increased independence. One area in which many adolescents need support and guidance is that of navigating romantic relationships. Direct experiences with romantic relationships often begin during the adolescent years and are informed by models adolescents observe around them.^{1,2} These models may be



positive, such as the loving relationship between parents or grandparents. Alternately, the models can be negative where the observed couple relationships involve high levels of conflict or lack supportiveness and empathy. Youth may not have a clear understanding of what healthy romantic relationships are like, and even if they do see positive adult models, they may not know what healthy romantic relationships are like for people their age.³ Providing youth-focused relationship education increases the likelihood that adolescents will be prepared to make wise relationship decisions and to handle relationship challenges effectively. This tip sheet addresses reasons why relationship

education is essential for youth and offers ways to ensure that programs are of high quality and effective.

Relationship Education is Developmentally Relevant for Adolescents

Adolescent development is intimately tied to subsequent development and functioning in adulthood, and patterns established in romantic relationships during adolescence are likely to persist.⁴ Adolescents experience a strong press to move toward romantic relationship experiences,^{5,6} this press comes from adolescents' sexually maturing bodies, social pressures from peers and adults to find romantic partners, and messages from diverse media sources that present romance and sex as enticing, desirable activities. Peers, in particular, through conversations during and outside of school as well as through online communication, make the focus of romantic relationships both daily and central in the lives of adolescents. It is what the majority of adolescents are talking about, getting excited about, and worrying about. They will seek out romantic relationships and information about how to "do" them, and may not discern whether the information is valid or from a quality source.

Bringing quality, research-supported, age-appropriate relationship education to adolescents facilitated by qualified, well-prepared educators is one of the best ways to ensure that youth will have accurate and useful information when they need it most.

Support age appropriate developmental needs and processes:

During adolescence, interest in forming close relationships with peers, including romantic partners, increases.⁷ With this interest is the need to have accurate information about how to form and maintain healthy peer relationships; how to make decisions about sexual behavior; how to manage relationship problems; and how to incorporate what is being learned in friendships and romantic relationships into ongoing personal development. Relationship education helps ensure that adolescents have accurate information and a place to ask questions as new needs arise.

Foster youth resilience:

When youth are educated about healthy relationships, such education increases their accurate understanding of how relationships function and builds skills and behaviors associated with maintaining healthy romantic relationships.⁸ Relationship education has also been shown to most benefit adolescents who face multiple obstacles to having access to information about healthy relationships.⁹ It is important to offer relationship education opportunities for all adolescents, with a special effort to ensure the information gets to youth with greater risk factors including: living in low resource families, experiencing unstable family structures, participating in the foster care system, or having been adjudicated. From a risk and resilience perspective, as youth face additional obstacles in their lives, they need supports such as relationship education to help them counter these obstacles.

Counter inaccurate messages youth receive about relationships:

When adolescents are unable to access relationship information from reputable sources, they are likely to believe faulty information about romantic relationships. Youth can receive

inaccurate messages from family members and peers, websites, and other media sources. Quality relationship education delivered in school or community settings offers a way for youth to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information and increases protective factors promoting youth resilience.

Relationship Education Facilitates Problem Prevention

Although romantic relationship experiences during adolescence are normative and part of healthy development,¹⁰ they can also introduce unhealthy risk-taking behaviors and experiences that are associated with a host of negative consequences for adolescents and their families. In particular, engaging in romantic relationships increases the potential for adolescents to become sexually active.^{11,12} Sexual activity increases adolescents' risks of unintended teen pregnancy; contraction of sexually transmitted infections; and experiencing negative emotional consequences such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Romantic relationships also increase the likelihood of experiencing jealousy, possessiveness, and relationship violence.^{13,14} Relationship violence can take the form of physical, psychological, or sexual aggression. Many adolescents may confuse jealousy with love or believe that controlling behaviors indicate caring.

Relationship education can dramatically increase adolescents' capacities to avoid unhealthy risk taking and to get help sooner if they find themselves in a physically or emotionally compromising relationship.

Help adolescents think about how decisions in the present matter for the future:

Developmentally, it is normal for adolescents to make decisions based on immediate needs and wants, giving little thought to future implications or consequences. This especially is true when adolescents find themselves strongly attracted to another person, and have limited experience negotiating relationships. Relationship education can provide adolescents with steps to take, prior to being in the “heat of the moment,” so wise decisions can be made. Relationship education also helps adolescents make the link between current choices and potential future consequences.

Offer alternatives for addressing relationship challenges:

Adolescents may not be aware of options for addressing relationship challenges or they may have tried certain options and found they have not worked. Through relationship education, diverse and relevant examples of relationship challenges as well as the ways to handle them can be presented and discussed in an educational setting.

Offer adolescents ways to avoid or get help for dating violence:

Often adolescents may not realize they are in a dating violence situation, especially if the situation involves primarily psychological and emotional abuse. They may confuse love with possessiveness and jealousy and not understand the negative consequences that controlling behavior can have on their own and their partner’s well-being. Relationship education can help adolescents recognize “red flags” indicating an unhealthy and possibly abusive relationship. They can also be provided with the skills they need to address an unhealthy/abusive relationship situation they or a friend may be experiencing.

Provide a broad range of reasons why sexuality should not be disconnected from relationships:

Often sexuality information is presented in a vacuum to adolescents, which disconnects sexuality from the relationships in which most sexual experiences occur. This leaves adolescents with many questions about healthy sexuality, and may increase their risk for engaging in sex with casual partners.¹⁵ Through relationship education, adolescents can be helped to understand that healthy sexual activity with a partner best occurs within a committed, loving relationship. Reasons why it is important to establish a strong relationship foundation prior to engaging in sexual activity can be presented and discussed. Through these discussions, adolescents will learn that engaging in sex is not a way to *get* a partner’s love. Relationship education also offers adolescents opportunities to learn and practice specific skills to 1) maintain good communication with a relationship partner, 2) work through disagreements with a partner in a productive way, and 2) engage in specific activities that help to build respect, intimacy, and trust within a romantic relationship.¹⁶⁻¹⁹ Through gaining knowledge and skills, adolescents increase the protective factors that reduce the likelihood that they will engage in sexual behaviors that put their physical health and emotional well-being at risk.



Relationship Education Reinforces Positive and Challenges Negative Relationship Models

The foundation for romantic relationships begins with models experienced and observed in childhood. Thus, adolescents' relationships with parents and guardians; adolescents' observations of the romantic relationships of their parents and other significant adults or peers; and adolescents' understanding of romantic relationships as portrayed in media inform the beliefs adolescents have about what romantic relationships should be like. Adolescents vary in the models they have for romantic relationships and in the extent to which they internalize positive or negative models.²⁰

Relationship education can offer adolescents the tools they need to distinguish healthy and unhealthy models and to engage in interpersonal behaviors that help them build and maintain the healthy relationship patterns they carry forward into adulthood.

Offer new perspectives on what makes relationships healthy versus unhealthy:

Many adolescents will benefit from concrete, "real-life" examples that help them compare and contrast healthy and unhealthy relationships. They need opportunities to ask questions about what makes certain beliefs or behaviors healthy and unhealthy. Ways to accomplish this include using examples of relationships from adolescents' own experiences and from popular sources (e.g., movies, novels, or high profile individuals that illustrate healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns). Using activities that provide key information about what makes

relationships healthy or unhealthy combined with the opportunity to apply the information to their own lives should help adolescents gain clarity about how to judge relationship health.

Help youth focus on the benefits of healthy relationships:

When youth do not have positive relationship models, they not only are unlikely to have a clear understanding of what healthy relationships look like, they are also unlikely to appreciate how healthy relationships can be beneficial. Through relationship education, adolescents can learn the different ways that healthy relationships foster physical and mental health, support educational and career aspirations, and enhance quality of life. Helping adolescents to see how a relationship with a caring, respectful partner facilitates their own healthy development and helps them pursue important goals can make them more willing to end unhealthy relationships and seek more fulfilling ones.

Increase critical knowledge and skills including interpersonal communication, goal setting, and decision-making skills that enhance health:

Healthy relationships are part of overall health and can be supported through helping adolescents develop a strong interpersonal skill set.²¹ Through relationship education, adolescents are provided new schemas for how healthy relationships function. They have opportunities through educational activities to learn and practice specific communication, decision-making, and goal-setting skills. To reinforce these skills, adolescents can be provided additional opportunities to apply the skills and reflect on their effectiveness.

When introducing relationship education in programs targeting youth:

- Ensure that handouts and other resources on the importance of healthy relationships are age appropriate for youth.
- Partner with community healthy marriage and relationship education programs to bring classes to your youth.
- Integrate relationship education skills into existing programming.

Selecting the Best Resources, Partners, and Programs

Is the curriculum research- or evidence-based?

Research-based curricula are those developed using information from current research addressing adolescent development and healthy relationship processes; evidence-based curricula are research-based and shown to be effective through rigorous evaluation. An effective relationship education curriculum should be relevant or adaptable for diverse populations (e.g., males/females, different ethnic backgrounds, different age groups) and in particular be effective for “vulnerable” populations (e.g., youth who have experienced past trauma). An effective relationship education curriculum should also address issues or concerns that are current for today’s youth, so they can apply what they’ve learned to their everyday experiences.

How will the lessons be implemented?

Lessons are most effective when they are interactive and engaging for youth, and youth feel that their input is valued. A strong approach is to offer active-learning opportunities for youth through games, role plays, and other forms of creative expression, followed by time for the youth to process what they have learned, ask questions, and apply the material to their real lives.

What is the context in which the program is to be implemented?

When integrating in a school environment, make sure to obtain advance support from teachers, the principal, the superintendent, the school board, or others who need to approve or participate in implementation of relationship education within the school setting. Send information about the relationship lessons to parents/guardians in advance so they have opportunities to ask questions. When integrating healthy relationship education into a community setting, ask whether the organization has worked with youth in the past on the topic of relationship education. Find out how the community educators work with parents/guardians to inform them about the lesson content being taught to youth and whether they extend any educational opportunities for parents/guardians. Determine whether the facility where the community group offers the programming is conducive to youth engagement.

What is the background and preparation of the educators?

The educators should have background checks to ensure youth safety. They should also have past training and experience that has prepared them to work effectively with youth. Effective educators view youth as having potential to be developed rather than as problems to be



managed. Facilitators should be able to demonstrate the ability to build rapport with youth quickly and find it easy to talk with youth about sensitive and challenging topics. Prior to teaching a relationship education curriculum, facilitators should receive training on the lessons and have the opportunity to practice teaching the lessons before offering them to a youth audience.

What do the youth bring to the education setting (their background and experiences)?

Research shows different outcomes for youth with varying socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, and family structure backgrounds. Also important to consider is gender given that males and females receive different socializing messages about their roles and empowerment in romantic relationships. The extent of dating experience adolescents have and whether they are sexually active can also affect what they need and what they learn in relationship education classes. Finally, an important consideration is how adolescents' life circumstances, particularly traumatic experiences (e.g., physical or sexual abuse, neglect, family breakdown and loss, other forms of maltreatment) may affect how they react to relationship education material. When topics being covered link to negative experiences, adolescents may exhibit behaviors during educational sessions that suggest emotional discomfort or distress (e.g., increased fidgeting, engaging in disruptive behavior, crying).

Educators working with youth, particularly youth with multiple risk factors, should be apprised of the potential to invoke memories of past maltreatment and have a strategy for handling situations where a youth becomes distressed to ensure that additional supports are available to help the adolescent manage emotions and cope effectively.

Suggested Resources

The Dibble Institute:

The Dibble Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides educational resources to help youth create healthy romantic relationships. <http://www.dibbleinstitute.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Dating Matters Initiative*:

Dating Matters provides a range of resources to help educate youth and adults about dating violence and to prevent teen dating violence. www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datingmatters/

Notes

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