



Evaluating a Relationship Education Program for Youth: *The Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth Project*

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Overview

Although many adolescents have positive adult role models for healthy romantic relationships, many others do not. Lack of positive role models (and exposure to negative role models) increases greatly the risk that adolescents will develop unhealthy patterns in their own romantic relationships (O’Leary & Slep, 2003; Wekerle & Wolfe 1999). Such patterns have long-term implications for the quality of committed relationships and marriages that are formed in adulthood. The *HCHC: Targeting Youth* project centers on the assumption that improving knowledge about healthy relationships and improving the quality and strength of couple relationships is beneficial for the individuals in relationships, and is beneficial for the children they bring into the relationship. Therefore, relationship education for adolescents will benefit the students themselves, now and in the future, and will benefit the children that will be born into future families.

Our current 5-year evaluation project, funded by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, involves testing the effectiveness of the *Relationship Smarts Plus* curriculum (RS+; Pearson, 2007) in “test” and “control” classrooms each year . The goals of this applied research study are to examine the effectiveness of a youth-focused relationships education curriculum, and to use the knowledge gained from this research to build an exemplary model of relationships education for teens.

Methods

Implementation and Sample.

In years 1 and 2 (2006-2007) the curriculum was presented in family and consumer science classes; the focus has shifted to health classes in years 3 and 4 (2008-2009); and during years 2 through 5, online follow up surveys are administered to individual students to assess whether knowledge gains are sustained 1-4 years after the course. In addition, control classes (similar in make-up to the test classes) also participate each year (and in the follow up surveys). The control students receive their typical lessons rather than the relationships education lessons. Over 4000 students across the state of Alabama participated in test or control groups during the first two years of this project. In the high school family and consumer science classes participating in the first two years of the project, the majority of the students were female (75%) and either African American (33%) or European American (61%). Students reported living in nearly equal numbers of nuclear families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies, and had family socioeconomic status levels that ranged from very low income to upper middle class, with the majority reporting parents’ highest completed education level as high school or lower; nearly half had experienced their parents’ divorce. Approximately half of the students reported currently being in dating relationships. The health classes in which the courses currently are being implemented are gender balanced in student composition.

Measures.

Prior to receiving RS+ the test students complete a pre-curriculum survey and at the conclusion of the course the students complete a post-curriculum survey. The surveys contain multi-item measures assessing relationship knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors in relationships. Individual difference variables (e.g., self-esteem, attachment style, dating experience) that might affect changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes or behaviors also are collected. The control students complete the same surveys during the same time periods as the test students do. A list of references and measures can be obtained by contacting us at www.alabamamarriage.org

Results

Findings for the test group versus the control group:

- Test students, but not control students, showed **significant decreases in faulty relationship beliefs** (test pre-mean = 3.7; post-mean = 3.1; control pre- and post-means = 3.6; $p < .01$) and **increases in conflict management ability** from pre to post curriculum (test pre-mean = 3.3; post-mean = 3.5; control pre- and post-means = 3.3; $p < .01$).
- **Verbal perpetration of aggression decreased** only for the test group (test pre-mean = 1.75; post-mean = 1.30; control pre- and post-means = 1.75; $p < .001$).
- **Viewing an ideal partner as possessing qualities of warmth/trustworthiness increased** for the test group but decreased for the control group (test pre-mean = 4.4; post-mean = 4.5; control pre-mean = 4.4 and post-means = 4.3; $p < .001$).
- The test group (pre-mean = 2.97; post-mean = 3.22) but not the control group (pre-mean = 2.84; post-mean = 2.92) ($p < .01$) indicated an **increase in willingness to participate in future marital education opportunities**.
- **Effect sizes ranged from moderate to large.**

Evidence of long-term impact of the program:

- A sample of year 1 participants completed a follow-up survey one year after the RS+ course ($n = 240$ test participants and 227 control participants). At this follow-up, subjects from the test group were randomly assigned to a booster or no booster condition. **Test subjects** (ignoring booster condition) **continued to have significantly less faulty relationship beliefs and higher conflict management ability than controls**. The **booster group revealed slightly more favorable outcomes than the no booster-test subjects**.

Students' qualitative responses to the curriculum:

- "I liked that it showed us the difference between good versus bad relationships, because that helped me to identify a bad relationship and how to avoid engaging in one."
- "I liked that you learn to find positive strengths about yourself. You become more aware of who you are and what you want to do later in your life."
- "I liked talking about breaking up and dating abuse, because I thought dating abuse was only physical and I did not realize that insulting your partner was abuse."
- "I really liked that the lessons gave you reasons why you should wait for sex rather than just telling you that you shouldn't."

Summary

Our experiences these last three years indicate that students who participated in relationship/marriage education courses were receptive to the experience and showed a significant increase in knowledge about relationship concepts, and made significant gains in areas of: understanding and addressing relationship abuse, recognizing unhealthy communication patterns and strengthening effective communication, implementing healthy dating strategies, understanding love and intimacy, increasing awareness of values, and preparing for the future (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2007; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Although there has been significant attention given to the need for relationship education for youth, little work has been done to document program effects, particularly sustained effects. This is among the first studies to show *sustained* relationship knowledge and skills for a large sample of ethnically and economically diverse youth who participate in a relationship education class compared to those who do not. This study also is the first to demonstrate the added benefit of "booster" sessions for further enhancing sustained effects.

References

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