



Executive Summary

Promoting Relational Health in Alabama

Project Funding Cycle: 2015-2020

Report Date: September 2020



The Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative (AHMREI) is a partnership between faculty, staff, and students in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at Auburn University and 9 Family Resource Centers around the state.*

The AHMREI's mission is to promote access to educational information on healthy relationship functioning by offering free programs in Alabama and collecting evaluation research information from participants.

Over the past 5 years (2015-2020), **6,633 adults** and **8,962 youth** in Alabama participated in multi-session healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs in communities and schools. The population served through these programs were primarily low-resource individuals and couples.

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Overall, adult participants who attended either as a couple or as individuals were diverse:

- 55% were female and 45% were male.
- The majority (61%) ranged in age from 25 – 44.
- 62% were White/European American; 31% were Black/African American; and the remaining 7% reported other racial backgrounds (e.g., Asian, Native American, etc.).
- 36% were married; 36% were currently single, never married; 12% were currently single, divorced; 9% were engaged, 6% were currently separated, and 1% were currently single, widowed.
- The majority (62%) were parents.
- Reported annual household income: 62% less than \$12,000; 24% \$12,000 - \$36,000; 9% \$36,000 - \$60,000; 5% more than \$60,000.

Additionally, youth participants who attended in schools were diverse:

- 57% were female and 43% were male.
- The majority (83%) were in 9th or 10th grade.
- 52% were White/European American; 36% were Black/African American; and the remaining 12% reported other racial backgrounds (e.g., Asian, Native-American, etc.).
- Only 1.5% (approximately 85 students) were a parent.
- 36% had a boyfriend or girlfriend at the time classes started.

Testing the Efficacy of HMRE for Couples in Alabama:

Following 10 years of demonstration project work to establish partnerships, scale up accessibility, develop and fine-tune programmatic offerings, and assess initial indicators of program effectiveness, the AHMREI conducted a **rigorous, randomized control trial** during 2015-2020. This involved testing the impact of two HMRE curricula: *ELEVATE** and *Couples Connecting Mindfully (CCM)*** developed through the AHMREI, by randomly assigning interested couples to one of three groups: participants in *ELEVATE*, participants in *CCM*; or participants in a control, no-program group. Control participants received information on resources in the community but did not participate in an HMRE program series. Data were then collected from all participants at baseline, immediate post-program (2 months post-baseline), 6-month follow-up, one-year follow-up, and two-year follow-up. This report highlights the changes participants reported over a one-year period.

A sample of adult couples ($n = 929$ couples OR 1,858 individuals) were recruited and enrolled in the efficacy trial to test the impact of *ELEVATE* and *CCM* participation. The majority were White (60%) or Black (34%), married (69%), and the average participant reported a combined household income of between \$25,000 and

*Futris, T. G., Adler-Baeder, F., Ketrings, S., Smith, T., et al. (2014). *ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level*. Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M and Auburn Universities: Publication No. FCS-2047) and the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension (Publication No. HDFS-E-161). Available at <http://www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php>

**McGill, J.M., Ketrings, S., Adler-Baeder, F. (2015). *Couples Connecting Mindfully*. Unpublished facilitators manual.

\$39,999. Growth modeling procedures that compare trajectories of change over a one-year period **found significant differences between program participant groups and the control group, indicating treatment effects in several important areas of functioning:**

ELEVATE participants reported significant improvements over 1 year, compared to the control group who did not change or declined over 1 year in:

- *Couple Relationship Skills*
- *Mental Health*
- *Sleep Quality*
- *Couple Well-Being*
- *Family Harmony*

CCM participants, reported significant improvements over 1 year, compared to the control group who did not change or declined over 1 year in:

- *Couple Relationship Skills*
- *Couple Well-Being*
- *Family Harmony*

This study of a large diverse sample of couples in HMRE provides evidence that both the ELEVATE and CCM curricula positively impact individual and relational health and well-being over a one-year period and may be viewed as a protective factor for more vulnerable families.

In addition to the rigorous efficacy study, the AHMREI participated in the uniform pre- to post-program evaluation developed by the federal sponsor for all HMRE grantees. From 2018 to 2020, adult couples who did not participate in the Couples Efficacy Trial took surveys before and after their programs. From 2015-2020, the adults who attended HMRE programs individually and high school youth also took pre- and post-program surveys. The surveys assessed average changes reported by participants from pre-program to immediate post-program in a number of outcome areas.



Adult Couples Results:

Ten sites provided *ELEVATE* and *Couples Connecting Mindfully (CCM)* to **an additional 816 adult couples** (married or unmarried) who attended the program together and 1,544 individuals provided pre and post assessments that revealed statistically significant improvements in:

Healthy Relationship Behaviors:

- Frequency of Quality Interactions
- Positive Feelings
- Negative Interactions
- Conflict Management Skills
- Satisfaction with Conflict Management
- Relationship Satisfaction

Well-Being:

- Depressive Symptoms
- Anxiety Symptoms

Parenting:

- Parenting Stress
- Negative Verbal Use
- Physical Discipline

Economic Stability:

- Using a Budget
- Having a Checking or Savings Account
- Difficulty Paying Bills

Importantly, **75 adult couple participants** reported leaving an emotionally unhealthy or abusive relationship and **77 adult couple participants** reported leaving a physically unhealthy or abusive relationship after attending the program.



Adult Individuals Results:

Ten sites provided the *Together We Can** and *Smart Steps for Stepfamilies*** curricula to **3,752 adult individuals** who were not in a couple relationship at the time of program participation or who were not attending with a romantic partner, and 2,252 individuals provided pre and post assessments that revealed statistically significant improvements in:

Healthy Relationship Behaviors:

- Negative Interactions
- Conflict Management Skills
- Satisfaction with Conflict Management
- Relationship Satisfaction

Well-Being:

- Depressive Symptoms
- Anxiety Symptoms

Parenting:

- Positive Verbal Use
- Negative Verbal Use

Economic Stability:

- Using a Budget
- Having a Checking or Savings Account
- Difficulty Paying Bills



Importantly, **471 adult individuals** reported leaving an emotionally unhealthy or abusive relationship and **364 adult individuals** reported leaving a physically unhealthy or abusive relationship after attending the program.

Youth Results:

Ten sites provided the *Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+)*** curriculum to **8,962 youth in high schools**, and 4,613 youth provided pre and post assessments that revealed statistically significant improvements in:

Attitudes about Relationships and Sex:

- Knowledge of Relationship Resilience
- Knowledge of Effort in Relationships
- Healthy Relationship Attitudes
- Healthy Attitudes about Sex
- Dating Violence Acceptance

Importantly, **1,071 youth participants** reported leaving an emotionally unhealthy or abusive relationship and **737 youth participants** reported leaving a physically unhealthy or abusive relationship after participation in the program.

*Shirer, K. A., Adler-Baeder, F., & Contreras, D. (2007). *Together We Can: Creating a healthy future for family. A 24-lesson for unmarried parents on co-parenting, marriage, father involvement and child support issues*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University.

**Adler-Baeder, F. (2007). *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey*. Auburn, AL: National Stepfamily Resource Center.

***Pearson, M. (2013). *LoveU2: Relationship Smarts PLUS*. Berkely, CA: The Dibble Fund for Marriage Education.