



Module 4*

Youth Focused Relationships and Marriage Education

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Slide 1: Introduction

Hello, my name is Jennifer Kerpelman. I am a Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University. I also am an Extension Specialist with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. My research and applied work focus on adolescent development and efforts to promote positive outcomes for youth. I welcome you to this presentation addressing romantic relationships during adolescence and the value of relationships and marriage education targeting youth.

Slide 2: Why Target Youth?

Information about courtship may be especially relevant and timely for young people in high school who are just beginning to have and understand romantic relationships. During this time young couples might be easily enticed into relationships based upon passion and romantic ideas about marriage. Their cognitive skills are not likely to be developed to the point where they can abstractly or realistically think about the future and may get engaged or married thinking passion is all one needs for a stable marriage (Niehuis, Skogrand, & Huston, 2005).

Slide 3: Content Overview

This module is divided into three main segments: First, aspects of romantic relationships during adolescence are reviewed; second, goals and objectives of relationships and marriage education targeting youth are presented; and third, Relationship Smarts Plus – is offered as an example of a youth-focused relationships education curriculum.

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 builds skills needed to function effectively within close relationships and marriages.

Slide 4: Romantic Relationships during Adolescence

This segment focuses on the importance of romantic relationships during adolescence. Examples of how romantic relationship experiences build competencies and are associated with risks will be reviewed. In addition, linkages between emotions and relationships will be covered.

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Slide 5: Benefits 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 that include:

- a. *Development of a sense of self-esteem and personal well-being.* Adolescent romantic relationships are the strongest predictors of adolescent well-being indicators, such as self-esteem, depression, and suicide attempts and completions (Brendt, et al., 1993; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2001; Joyner & Udry, 2000).
- b. *Formation of identity.* Romantic relationships provide opportunities for adolescents to rethink who they want to become in the future and help adolescents determine who they are within the romantic domain of identity (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Bouchey and Furman (2003) note that adolescents often behave differently across romantic relationships because they are experimenting with possible selves as they seek to establish a sense of identity.
- c. *Career Development.* 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 & Lamke, 1997; Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001).
- d. *Sexuality.* 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 & Shaffer, 2003).

Slide 6: Adolescents' Romantic Relationships

Also noted in the literature, is that learning about oneself, and how to relate effectively with a dating/marriage partner begins prior to 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 & 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 & Houts, 1998; Leonard & Roberts, 1998; Noller & Feeney, 1998).

Slide 7: Risks Associated with Adolescents' Romantic Relationships

Risks also exist in adolescent romantic relationships. There are alarming rates of relationship violence occurring among adolescent dating partners. Perpetration estimates of adolescent physical dating violence range from 11% - 41% with 4% - 14% of adolescents reportedly using forms of violence that are likely to result in serious physical injury (CDC, 2001).

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. They also



tend to hold idealistic, rather than realistic, beliefs about romantic relationships (Montgomery, 2005), and this can lead to difficulties in 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% 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.

Slide 8: Emotions and Romantic Relationships

Emotions are a central part of romantic relationships at any age, and can be positive, as well as negative (Larson, Clore & Wood, 1999). Often adolescents need help understanding and managing the emotional aspects of relationships. Effects of positive romantic emotions, such as elation, increased energy, and a positive outlook on life can be very motivating for adolescents. They 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's "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 can't believe his partner would give him an STD.

Slide 9: Emotions and Romantic Relationships

Negative emotions also accompany romantic relationships (Larson, Clore & Wood, 1999). Many adolescents experience jealousy, anger, longing and grief due to 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.

Slide 10: Emotional Intelligence

Educating adolescents about emotions associated with romantic relationships can enhance their emotional intelligence (Larson, Clore & Wood, 1999). 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. For example, if they become upset with their romantic partners' behaviors, they are better able to choose an adaptive response, such as directly communicating their feelings in a nonthreatening matter. Emotional intelligence also helps adolescents recognize common misattributions that often come with idealizing romantic relationships. When an adolescent is infatuated with a dating partner, for example, 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.



Slide 11: 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.

Slide 12: Overarching Goal of Youth-Focused Relationship/Marriage Education

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 necessary to form and maintain healthy, committed romantic relationships and marriages. Objectives for these programs should include increasing adolescents' knowledge of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and their skills for ensuring 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.

Slide 13: Main 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 adolescent recognize patterns of unhealthy and abusive relationships that may include: verbal or physical aggression, controlling behavior, and a lack of respect between partners.

Slide 14: Main 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 them selves when needed. In also includes enhancing problem solving and communication skills by helping adolescents learn ways to communicate effectively with partners about their needs and views. Adolescents also can be taught ways to resolve conflict in their relationships using effective communication strategies.

Slide 15: Main 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, and reducing favorable attitudes by increasing knowledge about healthy relationships and choices, as well as reducing misconceptions about risky sexual activity.

By educating 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 is 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 or seek help if they find themselves in abusive relationships.

Slide 16: Relationship Smarts Plus: An example of a youth-focused relationships education curriculum.

Part three of this module describes Relationships Smarts Plus (RS+), an example of an effective youth-focused relationships education curriculum. RS+ is being tested as part of the Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth (HCHCTY) project, a 5-year evaluation study funded by the Administration for Children and Families/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and also supported with funding from the State of Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama).

Slide 17: The Relationships Smarts Plus (RS+) curriculum (adapted from Love U2: Relationship Smarts; Pearson, 2004)

RS+ (adapted from Love U2: Relationship Smarts, Pearson, 2004) 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 current Love U2 curricula: Relationship Smarts, Communication Smarts, Sex Smarts, and Baby Smarts can be found at: www.dibblefund.org/love_u2.htm

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 material, "common" teen language, materials that show diversity, and language that assumes teens are living in diverse family structures.

Our pilot testing of RS+ last year as part of our ongoing HCHCTY project showed that it was effective in increasing adolescents' perceived knowledge of infatuation and love, healthy and unhealthy relationships, dating smarts, and relationship skills. In addition, an important difference was found between adolescents who received RS+ and those in a comparison group who did not receive the course. The students who participated in RS+ showed a significant decrease in their use of verbal aggression in their dating relationships from pre to post course, whereas those who did not receive the course showed a significant increase in their use of verbal aggression during that same time period. Based on results of our pilot testing, we have made, and will continue to make, adaptations to enhance the RS+ curriculum and to incorporate an appropriate developmental perspective. Ensuring an appropriate developmental perspective is an important and unique feature in our approach, since working with adolescents is different from working with adults on issues related to healthy relationships and marriages.

Slide 18: Features of RS+ are Consistent with Successful Youth Programs

Through its developmentally appropriate content, such as material that addresses identity development, current relationship dynamics, and future-orientation, and its hands-on approach that makes the material accessible and helps adolescents internalize the information being taught, RS+ is consistent with key aspects of successful youth programs. These aspects include: (a) adult facilitators instill hope in youth and assist youth in personal strength building processes, (b) adolescents are viewed as



community resources needing development rather than problems to be managed, (c) active adolescent participation and empowerment are integral, and (d) the programs are flexible and adapt to the needs of the participating adolescents.

Slide 19: The RS+ Curriculum: Part 1

The lessons in part 1 of the curriculum focus on developmental issues to prepare adolescents with a good foundation for understanding and engaging in relationships with romantic partners.

Lesson 1, "Who am I and Where am I Going?" helps adolescents get in touch with their sense of identity and consider their possible selves. Identity formation is a central task of adolescence that influences and is influenced by experiences in romantic relationships. In lesson 1, emphasis is placed on who the adolescent is within their family, friendship, and dating relationship contexts. The adolescents create a possible selves tree (adapted from Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, in press) in order to visualize their future self-goals and ways to attain them. The lesson concludes with adolescents addressing ways to stay true to themselves when faced with peer pressure.

Lesson 2, "Maturity Issues/What I Value," explores the concept of maturity. It identifies four aspects of maturity -- physical, emotional, mental and social -- and points out how the latter three don't happen on their own, but take conscious effort. The lesson then moves on to an activity that helps participants identify the values that are important to them.

Lesson 3, "Attractions and Infatuation," begins with a "dating pyramid" schematic that assists teens in thinking about the building blocks of good relationships. Adolescents are helped to 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, "What's Love? Three Sides of Mature Love; What's Intimacy?" is meant to get 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.

Slide 20: The RS+ Curriculum: Part 2

Part 2 of the curriculum addresses knowledge about dating relationship processes.

Lesson 5, "Principles of Smart Dating," 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 provide practice for applying these insights to real world teen relationships.

Lesson 6, "The Low-risk Relationship Strategy," 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 person 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. A concrete, low-risk relationship strategy---one that



maximizes the chances for healthy relationship development and minimizes the chances of getting deeply involved with a poor choice---is used.

Lesson 7, "Dating and Emotions," 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 fleshing out the negative and positive answers to the questions.

Lesson 8, "What Abuse Looks Like/Breaking up," 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 are offered guidelines for knowing when it's time to break up, better and worse ways to break up, and steps for moving on.

Slide 21: The RS+ Curriculum: Part 3

Part 3 of the curriculum covers the communication skills needed for maintaining healthy committed relationships and marriages.

Lesson 9, "Destructive Patterns in Relationships," begins with an activity to help teens identify the patterns that damage relationships and learn more about their corrosive effect over time. Teens also evaluate communication patterns they observed and learned growing up. Finally, they are introduced to the idea that skills can be learned to counter-act negative patterns; a video tape is included as a teaching tool.

Lesson 10, "Skills to Counter Negative Patterns," introduces skills to counter destructive communication patterns. "Time-out" is presented as an essential tool for exiting escalating interactions. Teens explore why and how an angry and aroused state of mind is not likely to yield a fruitful discussion. They also practice useful techniques for using time-outs effectively. In addition, effective complaining is reviewed and practiced. A strategy for raising issues or complaints that stand a better chance at being heard is presented.

Lesson 11, "Communication Strategies for Strengthening Relationships," examines common "filters" that color what we hear, say, see, and remember. Students learn simple strategies to counteract the negative effects of filters on communication. Next they are introduced to the Speaker-Listener Technique—a powerful structure and set of rules to use when talking is difficult. Finally communication techniques that foster positive feelings in relationships and build friendship are emphasized and then practiced using the "Strokes Cards" activity.

Slide 22: The RS+ Curriculum: Part 4

Finally, part 4 of the curriculum focuses on marriage and planning for the future.

Lesson 12, "Why Parents' Relationships Really Matter to Children," aims to build an awareness of how and why a *healthy* marriage matters. Specifically, teens learn how parents' relationships matter to children. Activities are designed so that teens can vividly see things from a *child's* eyes and heart.



Lesson 13, “Is Quality and Lasting Marriage Really Possible Today?” 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 the goal of a successful marriage.

Lesson 14, “Planning for Your Future,” is the final lesson which helps teens develop their own “personal policy” and engage in steps that will move them toward a desired future. The concept of “following your North Star” is introduced and teens are helped to develop concrete goals and then rules for themselves to help them reach and stay true to these goals. Basic concepts across the lessons are summarized and packaged to help teens continue using what they’ve learned as they move toward the future.

Slide 23: Implementation

In addition to focusing on the content of youth education curricula, it also is critical to focus simultaneously on implementation in order to ensure that programs targeting youth are employing best practices. Thus, it is important 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 include:

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, SES, 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. Setting effects 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?

Slide 24: Establishing an Exemplar Curriculum and Model of Best Practices

The HCHCTY evaluation study will help to establish an exemplar curriculum and model of best practices for educating youth about close relationships. Over 250 teachers and their classes will participate in this project. Both Family and Consumer Science classes and Health classes are being targeted. 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, retrospective pre/post measures assess module-specific learning of the program participants. This careful evaluation will include comparisons of adolescents who do and do not receive the course. In addition, some students who receive the course also will receive follow-up booster sessions to determine if follow-up sessions further extend the effects of course. Each year of the study, data will be collected that can help inform 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.



Slide 25: Establishing an Exemplar Curriculum and Model of Best Practices

The procedures used in the development and ongoing refinement of RS+ also will offer a model for best practices. Interviews conducted with teachers and students participating in RS+ will be used to gain additional insights regarding program implementation. Teachers and students will 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 will 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.

Slide 26: The NERMEN Conceptual Framework

The RS+ curriculum was examined in terms of its correspondence with the National Extension Relationships and Marriage Education Network's Conceptual Framework. 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. They tap key areas of creating and maintaining stable healthy marriages and couple relationships.

Dimensions of the framework:

Choose refers to intentionality in the creation and maintenance of healthy relationships.

Know addresses the development of interest, affection, and closeness.

Care notes the value of kindness, understanding, respect, and caring support.

Share acknowledges the importance of friendship, positive interactions, and meaningful time together.

Connect points to the role of social support and community ties.

Manage attends to strategies of engagement, interaction, and healthy resolution of differences.

Care for Self emphasizes the priority of maintaining one's physical, psychological, and sexual health and wellness.

You can find more detailed information about this framework in the NERMEN handouts.

Slide 27: Fit with the NERMEN Conceptual Framework

The RS+ curriculum was found to have a good fit with the NERMEN Conceptual Framework. Examples include:

Choose: 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



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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.

Know: RS+ stresses the importance of taking the time to really get to know a 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.

Care: Demonstrating affection, understanding, respect, and support for a relationship partner is emphasized throughout the RS+ curriculum. In addition, the steps needed to leave an unhealthy or abusive relationship are addressed.

Share: 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.

Slide 28: Fit with the NERMEN Conceptual Framework

Connect: 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.

Manage: 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.

Care for Self: 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.

Taken together, the RS+ curriculum prepares participants with critical knowledge and skills for establishing healthy, lasting close relationships and marriages.

Slide 29: Closing Points

Education for adolescents can promote healthy current and future relationships and reduce problems.

Using research-based curricula that are rigorously evaluated will optimize our efforts.

Creating model curricula and practices will ensure that more adolescents gain the knowledge and skills needed for healthier close relationships and marriages.



Module 4 References

Youth Focused Relationships and Marriage Education

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