

The Healthy Couple Healthy Children: Targeting Youth (HCHCTY) Project

Jennifer L. Kerpelman, Ph.D., Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., & Joe F. Pittman, Ph.D., Auburn University, Auburn, AL

Youth-focused relationships/marriage education is an uncharted course of study. This is one of the first, federally-supported projects focused on youth and is the only 5-year longitudinal evaluation of youth-focused relationships/marriage education. The HCHCTY project is expected to complement current ACF-sponsored initiatives related to building and sustaining healthy marriages, and result in: (1) empirical rationale for offering youth-focused marriage education and (2) an empirically validated model of practice for youth-focused marriage education with specific information regarding the impact and best practice methods among youth from middle and low-income families and among ethnic minority youth.

Currently, funding support for this project is received from: The Administration for Children and Families/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; The State of Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board/the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama.

Preliminary findings from the first year of the HCHCTY project (October 2005-October 2006) indicate that the *Love U2: Relationship Smarts (RS+)* curriculum was effective in reducing faulty relationship beliefs, and increasing future orientation and conflict management. Also seen was less use of verbal aggression in dating relationships among those who switched to a new relationship while taking the course, and greater emphasis at post-test on intimacy and loyalty in ideal close relationships. Findings on the effect of participation in RS+ on behaviors such as physical and verbal aggression, and sexual activity will be reported at a later date.

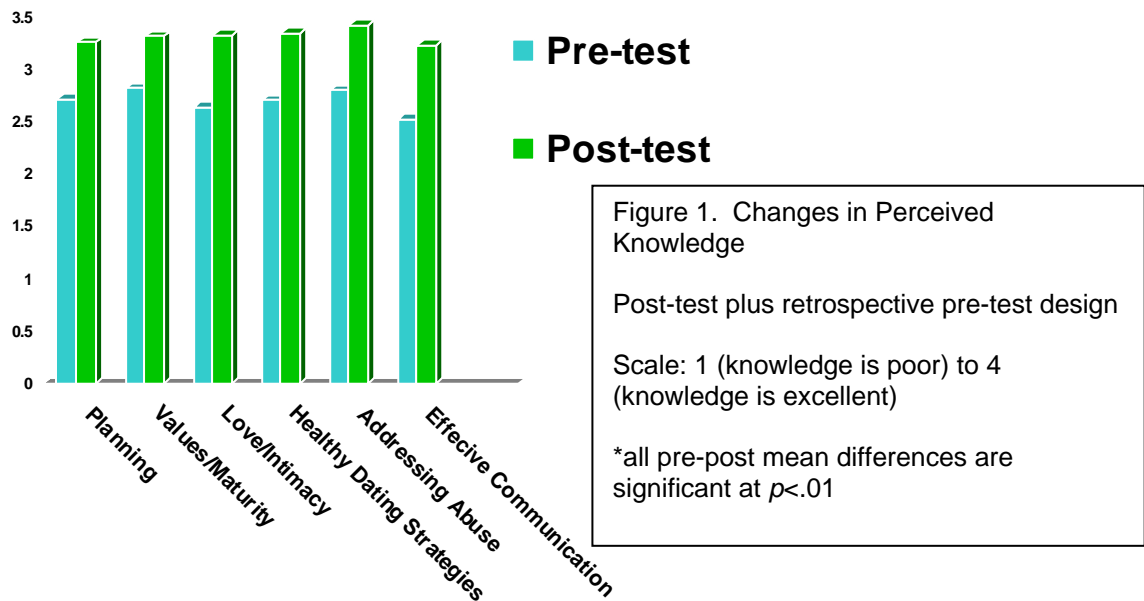
Summary of the Year 1 HCHCTY Findings

Sample Description

- Evaluation data collected from 1215 Alabama high school youth who received the *Relationship Smarts+* curriculum indicated that the lessons were effective in increasing knowledge about healthy/unhealthy relationships and improving interpersonal skills.
- Of the 1215 students, 33.7% were African American; 59.4% were Caucasian; 1.67% were Hispanic; 0.8% were Native American; 0.9% were Asian American; 2.3% had multi ethnicity, and 0.6% was uncertain.
- The mean age of participants was 16 years ($SD= 1.3$) with a range between 13 and 20; 34.1% were in the 9th grade; 27% were in the 10th grade, 19.9% were in the 11th grade, and 18.5% were in the 12th grade (0.2% were considered Other).
- Of the participating students, 42.25% lived with biological or adoptive parents; 20.7% lived with one biological or adoptive parent and one step-parent; 27.7% lived with single parents, and 8% lived in a family structure characterized as "Other" (e.g., grandparents, aunt/uncle).
- Approximately 35% of participants had parents who had experienced a divorce.
- Over half (56.4%) of the participants reported that they were currently in dating relationships. The mean length of their relationships was 8.6 months ($SD= 10.5$); the median was 4.3 months. Participants reported a mean of 3.9 partners ($SD= 3.2$).

Key Findings

- Changes in perceived knowledge occurred across all of the targeted program areas (see Figure 1; all changes significant at $p<.001$). Knowledge increases were found for planning for the future, understanding the nature and importance of values, maturity, love and intimacy, identification of healthy dating strategies and of what abuse looks like in relationships and ways to address it, and how to implement effective communication within romantic and other close relationships. Means increased on average from 2.5 to 3.5 on a 4 point scale (1=knowledge is poor; 4=knowledge is excellent).



- Faulty relationship beliefs (e.g., there is only one person out there for you, love is enough to solve all relationship problems) were found to decrease from pre to post test (dropping from 3.6 to 3.1 on a 5-point scale; significant at $p = .001$).
- For those who started a new dating relationship while receiving the program, verbal aggression in their new relationships was significantly ($p < .01$) lower than in the previous relationships they had been in (decreased from 1.2 to .50 on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicated greater aggression).
- Finally, those who received the RS+ lessons evidenced a modest but significant ($p < .05$) increase in their conflict management skills (3.3 to 3.5 on a 5-point scale; higher scores indicate greater conflict management ability).

Sample comments from students about what they liked about Relationship Smarts+

- "I liked learning how to communicate in your relationship and the things you needed to keep your relationship together."
- "It will help dating teenagers avoid abusive relationships."
- "I liked that it taught me some things about dating and being in a relationship that I didn't know before."
- "I liked how in depth the program was - it was really informative about dating and what should and shouldn't happen."
- "I thought I knew everything, but as it turns out, I've learned a lot about relationships and love."
- "Relationship Smarts gave me useful information about relationships and helped me learn new ideas about how to maintain my relationships now, as well as in the future."

Sample examples of how the adolescents said they are using skills learned from RS+

- “I tried avoiding negative starts – discussion did not turn into an argument.”
- “I used my notebook to improve my relationship by getting my boyfriend to read it.”
- “I used some of the communication skills we learned—being aware of voice tone, prevented arguments.”
- “I stopped changing for others.”
- “I used my knowledge of conditional vs. unconditional love for examining my current relationships.”
- “I shared the information on family of origin patterns and how they affect me with my family.”

Summary of Teacher Interviews

Overall, the interviews indicated that teachers and students enjoyed the lessons. Many examples of lesson strengths were provided, such as: “The possible selves tree activity of lesson 1 was great,” “the Values Auction of lesson 2 was really engaging for the students,” “the topic of intimacy went over well with the students,” “the students especially enjoyed the magazine picture sort activity, the Charting a Teen Relationship activity, and the Triangle of Love activity.”

The sculpting activity in Lesson 7 was well-received, but teachers said it could be made stronger with some examples. We have provided color photo examples for the revised curriculum. The dating abuse lesson also was seen as important, and we have added two powerfully engaging activities plus the new video *ChooseRespect* from the CDC’s dating violence initiative. The communication lessons were viewed as needed but contained too much information. We have reduced the communication lessons from 3 to 2 and have increased the focus on skills practice. A number of other strengths and suggested changes were offered by the teachers and students and have been incorporated into the revised curriculum.

Teachers perceived their students were receptive to the curriculum, and especially enjoyed the activities in which they could be active. Male students were noted by teachers to be most engaged when participating in the games, art activities and music activities. We have made a number of revisions to the current curriculum in order to increase the involvement and receptivity of male participants.

Overall, teachers did not make any big adjustments to the curriculum. Some used past experience and materials that they thought would be helpful in supporting the curriculum’s content, such as magazine articles or other statistics. Teachers thought that the curriculum was well laid out, but some had suggestions. We have incorporated those suggestions into a new more user-friendly format.

Taken together, the first year of the HCHCTY project has indicated that the *Love U2: Relationship Smarts* (RS+) curriculum is effective in educating youth about healthy romantic relationships and marriages. We have learned important lessons about teacher preparation and support that we will incorporate into the subsequent years of our project. We also have received valuable feedback about how the curriculum can be revised to increase its effectiveness. We look forward to the second year of our evaluation process as we test our revised curriculum and procedures with a new set of teachers and students.

Other contributors to this report: Sarah Swart, M.S., Suna Eryigit, M.S., & Kate Stringer, B.S., Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University, AL. For more information about the HCHCTY evaluation, contact Jennifer Kerpelman, jkerpelman@auburn.edu