



Research to Practice Brief

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Five Tips for Teaching Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education in Schools

This brief provides five practical tips for healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) practitioners interested in teaching HMRE in high schools. The tips are primarily for HMRE practitioners developing a school-based program for the first time, but they also have use for practitioners looking to improve or expand an existing school-based program.

The tips help address a current need for research and information on HMRE programs for youth (Scott et al. 2017). From 2011 to 2015, about half the participants served by HMRE grants from the Office of Family Assistance were under age 18 (Scott et al. 2017). However, most research on HMRE programming focuses on adult couples in existing, committed relationships (Hawkins 2017).

The tips draw on data from multiple sources. The main source is a relationship survey conducted with primarily 9th grade students in two Atlanta-area high schools. The survey is part of the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and its partner, Public Strategies, for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The STREAMS evaluation focuses on HMRE programs funded by the Office of Family Assistance within the Administration for Children and Families at DHHS. A more detailed description of the evaluation and survey respondents appears at the end of the brief. To make the tips broadly relevant for students nationwide, the brief also draws on findings from relevant national surveys of adolescents and adults.

For more information about the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation, visit the project's web page at <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/projects/streams>.

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Key Features of HMRE Classes for High School Students

- Although approaches can vary, relationship classes for high school students are often delivered in school as part of an existing course such as health or family and consumer sciences (Scott et al. 2017).
- A teacher, other school staff member, or trained facilitator from an outside social service provider usually leads the classes.
- The classes typically follow a scripted curriculum involving small-group activities, class discussions, and teacher-led instruction.
- The length of the classes can range from a few days to several weeks, depending on the curriculum and time available in the school schedule.
- The classes aim to provide students with the information and skills they need to develop and maintain healthy romantic relationships and marriages, and help them avoid negative or unhealthy relationship experiences in adolescence and adulthood.

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TIP 1. START WITH THE BASICS

Few students attend HMRE classes before reaching high school. Only a quarter of the STREAMS students (25 percent) said they attended a class on romantic relationships or dating in the past year (Figure 1). About one in three students (31 percent) said they attended a class on teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Fewer students said they attended a class on dating violence (11 percent) or marriage (8 percent). Students answered these questions at the start of the semester before they attended any classes for STREAMS. According to national survey data, students in about half of all schools nationwide receive limited or no education on these topics before reaching high school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015).

Percentage of STREAMS students who attended a class on each topic in the past year

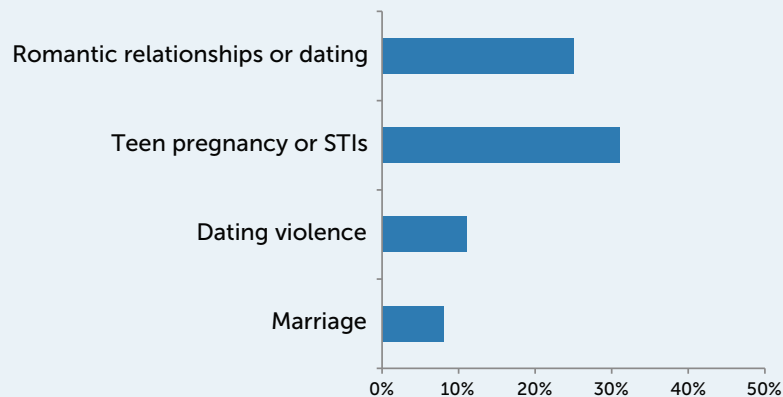


Figure 1

When planning a new HMRE class for high school students, choose an introductory curriculum that covers basic HMRE topics, such as the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, what goes into a successful relationship, and what to look for in a romantic partner. Do not assume that any of the curriculum lessons are too basic for students or that the lessons repeat what students have learned in other classes.

Most students say they want to learn this information. According to a recent national survey of young adults, more than half of those surveyed said they wished they had received more guidance on romantic relationships in school (Weissbourd et al. 2017). In a related survey of high school students, slightly more than 40 percent said they wanted to talk with adults in their schools about how to have a mature romantic relationship, and almost 30 percent said they wanted to talk about how to deal with break-ups (Weissbourd et al. 2017). Expect that students will be engaged in the classes and find that the information does not repeat what they have learned in their other classes.

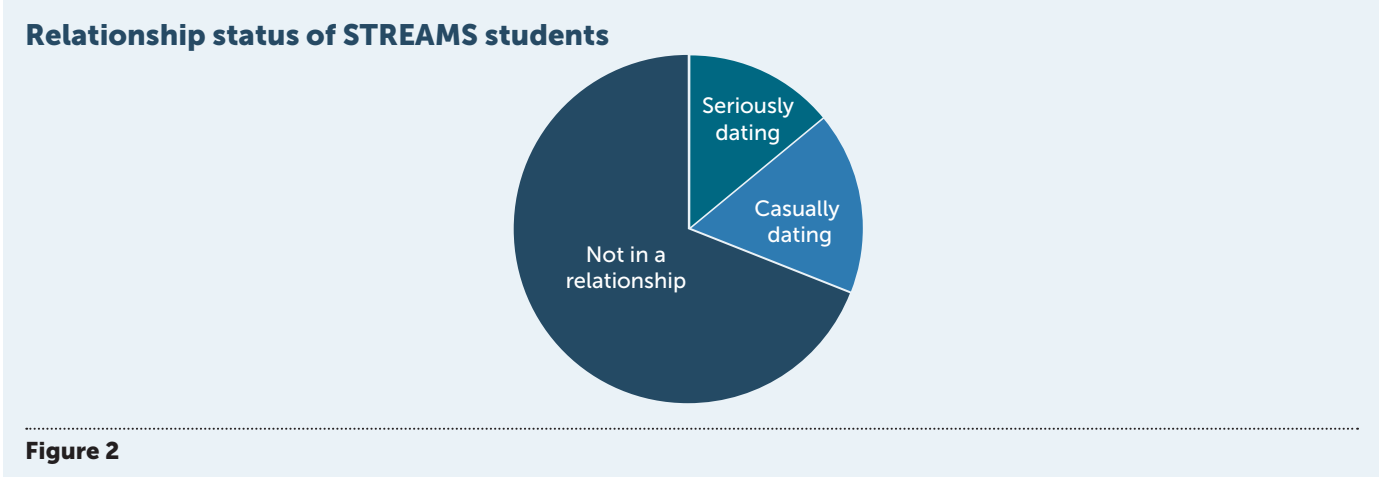
TIP 2. MAKE IT RELEVANT

Some students have a hard time envisioning themselves in adult relationships. When asked about their expectations for the future, fewer than half of STREAMS students (47 percent) said they were more likely than not to get married. Only about one in four students (26 percent) said they were more likely than not to live with a romantic partner before marriage. These expectations are at odds with current rates of marriage and cohabitation in the United States, which show that the majority of young adults are likely to both live with an unmarried partner before age 30 (Copen et al. 2013) and eventually get married (Kreider and Ellis 2011).

Give students the message that even though they might have a hard time seeing themselves in these roles right now, they are likely to get married as adults. Many will also live with a romantic partner. Students might get more out of the class if they see a personal connection to their lives. In addition, they might become more active participants in class activities and discussions and more likely retain the information after the class ends.

TIP 3. OFFER SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

HMRE classes for high school students serve youth in different types of romantic relationships and with different levels of commitment in their relationships. For example, about one in three STREAMS students said they were currently in a dating relationship (Figure 2). Fourteen percent of these students described themselves as seriously dating and 17 percent described themselves as casually dating. The other 69 percent of students described themselves as not in a relationship. Data from national surveys indicate that by the time students reach their senior year, three-quarters will report dating experience (Wood et al. 2008).



Choose a curriculum with a mix of activities and discussion topics to engage these different groups of students. For example, students currently in relationships might benefit from discussions or classroom activities on how to handle conflict or problems in their relationships. Students not in relationships might benefit from information on what to look for in a romantic partner or how to know when they are ready for a relationship. Picking a mix of activities and discussion topics will help ensure everyone feels included. Moreover, students' relationship status can change quickly, so even if the information is not relevant immediately, students might be able to use it in the near future.

TIP 4. EMPHASIZE THAT GOOD RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRE SPECIFIC SKILLS

Although students might be aware that good relationships take work, they might not know or possess the specific skills that are important for successful relationships. For example, although most STREAMS students expressed a high level of confidence in their ability to have stable, long-term relationships (Figure 3), they expressed more doubt when asked to rate their specific communication and conflict management skills. Less than half of the STREAMS students said they were good or extremely good at admitting they might be wrong during an argument (Figure 3). Similarly, just more than half of the STREAMS students said they were good or extremely good at working through problems without arguing (not shown). The other students said they were only okay or bad at these skills.

Perceived relationship skills among STREAMS students

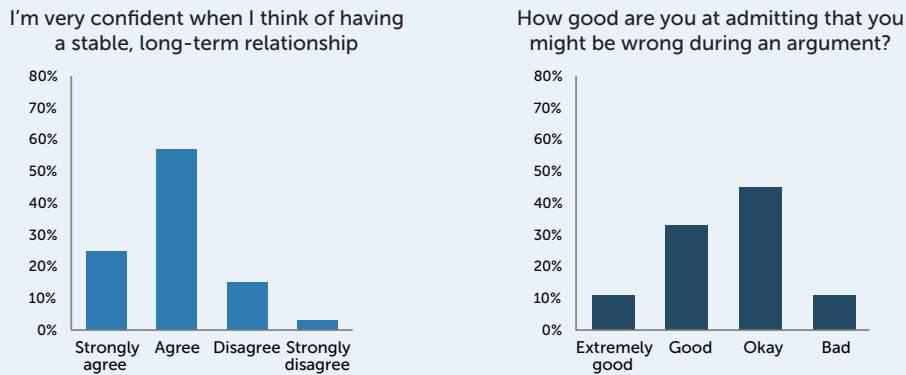


Figure 3

When teaching lessons on relationship skills, motivate the lessons by explaining that relationships are not something people are either good or bad at; successful relationships require specific skills that people can practice and improve. Explain to students that learning certain skills, such as how to work through problems without arguing and how to admit to being wrong during an argument, will make it easier for their relationships to live up to their expectations. With this motivation in mind, students might be more invested in learning and practicing the skills presented in class.

TIP 5. EXPECT TO TALK ABOUT GENDER NORMS

Gender norms and stereotypes can have a strong influence on adolescents' relationship attitudes. As one example, consider trends in how high school students describe their expectations for marriage. In the past, girls were more likely than boys to say they wanted to get married soon after high school, whereas boys were more likely to say they wanted to delay marriage until after attending college or starting a career (Wood et al. 2008). More recently, both adolescent boys and girls now say they want to delay marriage, if they get married at all. In fact, among the STREAMS students, boys were more likely than girls to say they had a high chance of getting married (50 versus 43 percent). Boys were also more likely to say they had a high chance of becoming parents (58 versus 52 percent). The declining gender gap in marriage expectations aligns with changing societal norms about gender equality and the educational and career opportunities available for women and men.

Expect gender to be a reoccurring theme of class discussions. When students talk about relationships, these discussions naturally give rise to related conversations about gender norms and stereotypes. Some students might use gender norms and stereotypes to support their opinions. Other students might question prevailing norms and stereotypes, or feel reluctant to express views that run counter to societal messages about gender. Be prepared to manage these discussions by encouraging an open and supportive classroom environment in which students feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and values. At the same time, challenge students to think critically about their opinions and be prepared to dispel harmful myths or stereotypes.

ABOUT THE DATA

The data presented in this brief were collected as part of STREAMS, a large multisite random assignment evaluation of five healthy marriage and relationship education programs funded by the Office of Family Assistance within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Wood et al. 2018). This brief presents data from one of these five programs—a program delivered in two Atlanta-area high schools by More Than Conquerors, Inc. (MTCI), a nonprofit social service provider in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The program features lessons from the Relationship Smarts PLUS 3.0 (RS+) relationship education curriculum. The STREAMS evaluation team from Mathematica Policy Research and its partner, Public Strategies, is collaborating with MTCI to evaluate the impacts and implementation of RS+ in the two participating high schools. The evaluation began in the fall semester of the 2016–2017 school year and is expected to continue through the 2018–2019 school year. The data presented in this brief were collected at the start of the semester (baseline) before programming started and include students in both the treatment and control groups.

Table 1. Characteristics of STREAMS students

Characteristic	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	47
Male	53
<i>Grade</i>	
9	87
10	8
11 and 12	5
<i>Race and ethnicity</i>	
Hispanic	59
Black, non-Hispanic	23
White, non-Hispanic	4
Other	14
<i>Speaks primarily Spanish at home</i>	44
<i>Born outside of United States</i>	21
<i>Biological parents are currently married</i>	43
<i>Living arrangements</i>	
Lives with both biological parents	48
Lives with biological mom only	41
Lives with biological dad only	5
Lives with neither biological parent	6

Source: STREAMS baseline survey conducted in 2016–2017 by Mathematica Policy Research. N = 1,085.

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