



Looking Towards a Healthy Marriage: School-based Relationships Education Targeting Youth

Overview

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Healthy Couples, Healthy Children program is the first of its kind in Alabama. Although, promoting stable, 2-parent families is a stated goal of American welfare policy, there had been no coordinated effort to implement relationship/marriage education in our state before CTF's sponsorship of the HCHC program in 2002. CTF is recognized as a leader throughout the country by understanding the important linkages between healthy relationships and marriages and reduction of risks for children.

The over-arching purpose of the Healthy Couples, Healthy Children project is to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect and promote child well-being in the State of Alabama by fostering healthy couple and co-parenting relationships. Through funding provided by CTF for the last three years, community professionals around the state have been trained to facilitate community education programs focused on building healthy relationships and marriages for adults in their respective communities. The positive impact of this work has been empirically documented in each of the 3 years of the project. For the first two years of the Healthy Couples, Healthy Children's project we focused exclusively on adult relationships. Our objectives included reducing the risk factors that lead to separation/divorce and increasing or improving the factors that are associated with couple quality and stability. This, in turn, promotes family environments that allow for optimal development of children and reduces the risk for abuse and neglect.

In our efforts to expand the HCHC project in PY 2004-2005, we incorporated the delivery of relationship skills education at an earlier point of intervention: targeting youth. Although this is a target population of interest in the federal marriage initiative, there has been virtually no work to document program impact and establish a model of practice. Targeting youth with relationship/marriage education can serve as prevention of risks in both the short-term and the long-term. The overall objectives of the program centered on the reduction of the risk of maltreatment in dating relationships (Alabama has some of the highest rates of abuse among dating adolescents in the country), and the promotion of future healthy relationships of these adolescents as they transition into adulthood and parenthood. Specifically, the goals were to assist adolescents in developing the skills and knowledge necessary for healthy dating relationships, and for making good choices about partners in the future.

Adolescent Dating

Couple conflict and intimate partner violence are not only experienced in the confines of adult committed relationships. Violence also occurs between dating partners, including adolescent dating partners. In Alabama, youth experience higher prevalence rates of victimization than the national average. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2001) 12.9% of females and 7.6% of males were physically forced to have sexual intercourse compared to 10.3% of females and 5.1% of males, nationally; 13.2% of females and 14.1% of males were victims of dating physical violence, compared to 9.8% of females and 9.0% of males, nationally. It is apparent that victimization can occur not only between intimate partners but also when couples have just started dating. Violence can occur during adolescence, and both males and females can be either victims or perpetrators of violence toward their partner. Thus, since adolescents are still children, it appears that dating violence is another form of maltreatment against children requiring preventive efforts, yet is seldom addressed.

Although there is risk of dating violence, it is important to recognize that dating is a normal part of life, can be quite positive, and has developmental purposes (e.g., mate selection) (Paul & White, 1990). In addition, studies have shown that adolescent dating builds self-competence and self-worth, provides opportunities to practice conflict management and negotiate trust, and opportunities to learn how to protect oneself from abusive relationships, and how to form and maintain healthy relationships (Collins, 2003). It is through dating that adolescents are learning how to become a healthy socially competent dating partner, which translates into becoming a healthy socially competent marriage partner as an adult. Over 90% of adolescents will marry during their lifetime and about half will divorce. Teaching relationships skills and information about healthy marriages is probably the most relevant course adolescents can take.

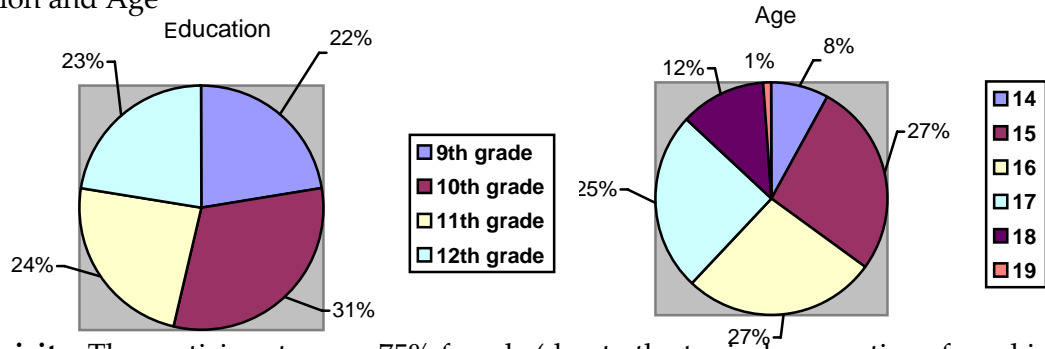
Program Implementation

In December 2004, we successfully completed the training of ten Family and Consumer Science teachers and 4 Family Life Extension Agents and several AU Graduate Students in Relationship Smarts (Pearson, 2004) curriculum. We made a few minor adjustments to the curriculum, eliminating some information that was judged to be for younger participants (e.g., discussions of “crushes”) and added some supplemental information on communication skills and factors related to healthy marriages. In return for their materials and training, the teachers were to offer the curriculum in their respective schools. Eight of the ten completed their class offering (the other two teachers were unable to complete their classes due to illness).

439 students were involved in the project; 288 adolescents completed the program; 151 served as control subjects. On demographic variables, controls only differed slightly by age; ($M = 16$ years vs. $M = 16.5$ years [controls] ($t = -3.69$, $p < .001$); no other statistical tests of difference were significant.

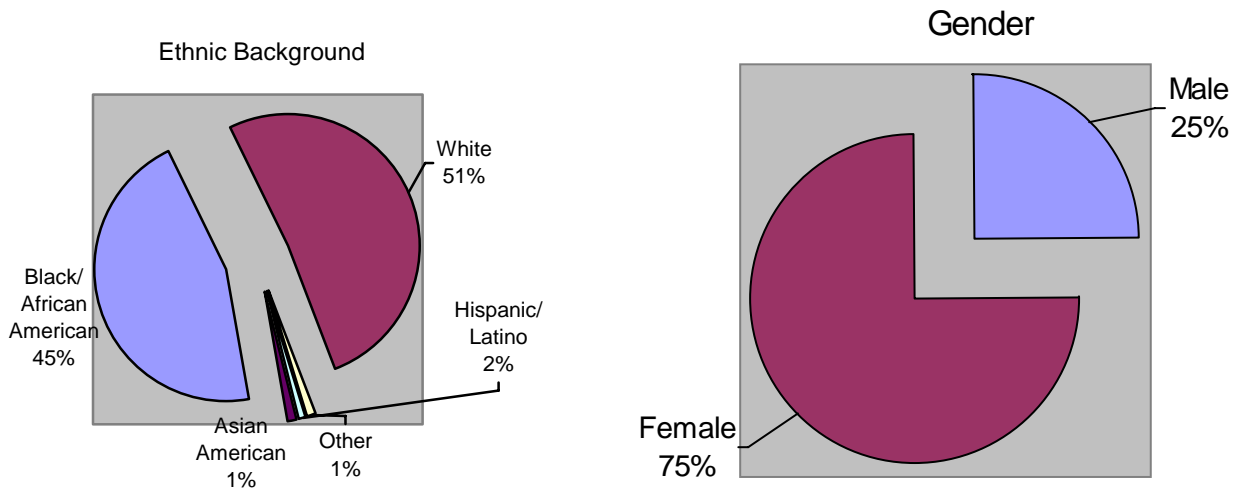
Age and Grade. Participants included students enrolled in the 9th – 12th grades in various Alabama High Schools. There was a fairly equitable distribution of students from various grades and ages that participated in the program (see figure 1). The mean age of participants was 16 years. Control subjects were slightly older, with a mean age of 16.5 years ($t = -3.69, p < .001$).

Figure 1. Education and Age



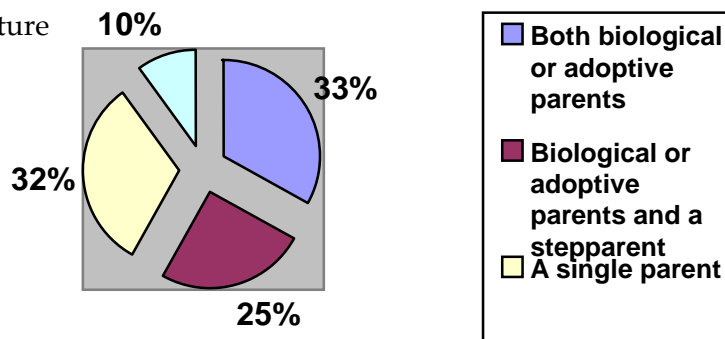
Gender and ethnicity. The participants were 75% female (due to the typical proportions found in FCS classes), with a fairly equitable mix of African American (45%) and Caucasian (51%) students (see figure 2). Statistical tests revealed that control subjects did not differ significantly from participants by gender or race.

Figure 2. Ethnic Background and Gender



Family structure. Only one-third of students resided in a nuclear family. One-third resided in a single parent household; 25% resided in a stepfamily and 10% resided in another arrangement.

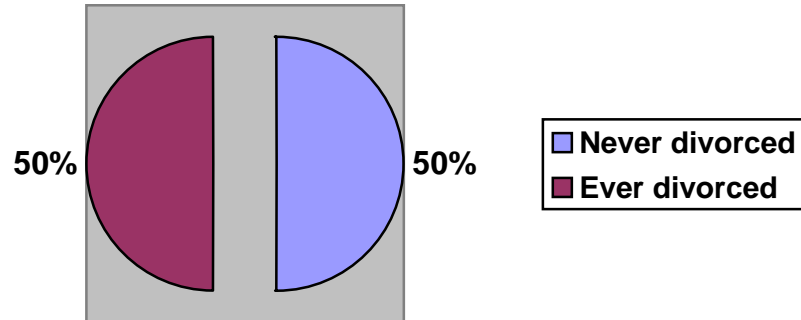
Figure 3. Family structure



Parents' income. Almost 20% of students reported household income of less than \$20,000 a year; another 20% reported \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year. For the 1/3 of participants in single-parent households, approximately 60% reported a household income of less than \$30,000.

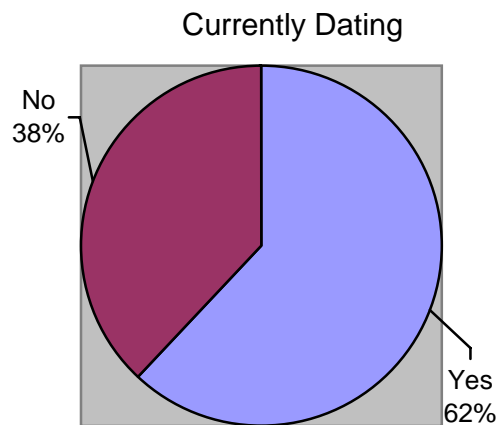
Experience with divorce. Half of the participants have experienced their parents' divorce.

Figure 4. Parental divorce.



Dating. Among the 288 participants surveyed, the majority (62%) were currently in a dating relationship.

Figure 5. Dating.



Program Effects:

To measure program effects, both groups (experimental and control) of adolescents completed both a pre-program and post-program questionnaire, which included measures of knowledge regarding healthy relationships and relationship functioning (conflict, communication). Adolescents who participated in the program also completed a retrospective pre-post measure that assessed changes in knowledge on specific curriculum learning objectives. Additionally, students who participated in the program also were asked what they enjoyed most about the class and what, if anything, they would change. FCS teachers also completed a brief survey that included their overall impressions of the program, and any unexpected difficulties they may have encountered.

In order to determine whether adolescent's knowledge, understanding, and awareness of themselves and current and/or potential relationships changed from the beginning to the end of the classes, participants completed a retrospective pre-post measure that assessed changes in knowledge on specific curriculum topics. We have found that the use of a "retrospective pre/post program" evaluation questionnaire provides efficient data collection and meaningful empirical documentation of the extent to which specific learning objectives have been met. With this procedure, participants are asked to indicate in terms of specific training learning objectives what they understood now that

they have been exposed to the content and, concurrently, they will indicate what they understood with respect to the same items and on the same scales, before they were exposed. These forms of evaluation may in fact be a more valid measure of immediate change in knowledge since participants may give themselves more or less credit for their current level of knowledge in a pre-program test. After they have experienced the program, they may have a clearer perspective on what their level of knowledge was prior to the program (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989).

For those who took the Relationship Smarts class, there was a statistically significant improvement from Time 1 (T1) to Time 2 (T2) for ALL of the 36 learning objectives (see Table 1). Figure 6 provides a visual of a sample of the item means across time (on a 4-point scale) for 7 of these questions, with the corresponding questions listed below Figure 6.

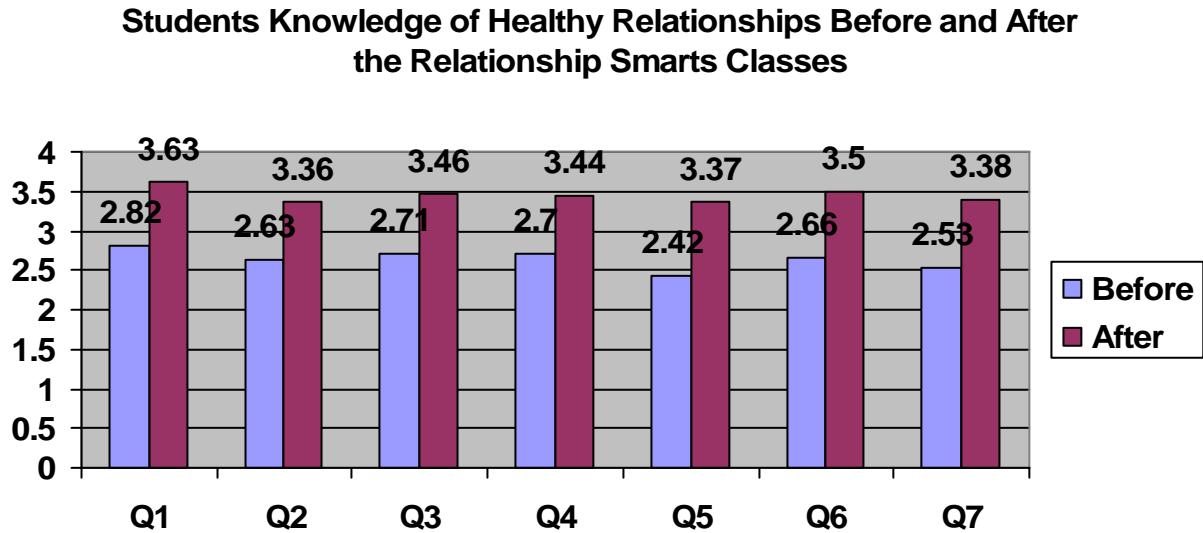
Table 1. Pre/Post comparisons on learning objectives.

		Mean	<i>t</i>
My knowledge of my personal values	T1	2.86	-12.42*
	T2	3.39	
My understanding of how someone's personality affects their behavior	T1	2.66	-13.84*
	T2	3.31	
My knowledge of the type of person that I am attracted to	T1	2.89	-9.81*
	T2	3.38	
My awareness of the differences between maturity and immaturity	T1	2.82	-4.53*
	T2	3.63	
My knowledge of social, emotional, and mental dimensions of maturity	T1	2.56	-14.50*
	T2	3.33	
My understanding of the difference between imitation and genuine love	T1	2.63	-7.11*
	T2	3.36	
My understanding of how relationships change over time	T1	2.67	-12.93*
	T2	3.38	
My knowledge of the dimensions of mature love-that is, passion, intimacy, and commitment	T1	2.59	-12.97*
	T2	3.33	
My awareness of problems when dimensions of mature love are unbalanced	T1	2.54	-13.70*
	T2	3.28	
My knowledge about dating "smart."	T1	2.71	-14.89*
	T2	3.46	
My ability to recognize "smart" and "dumb" dating practices.	T1	2.78	-14.55*
	T2	3.48	
My understanding of the importance of compatibility	T1	2.65	-14.63*
	T2	3.38	
My awareness of key things I should learn about someone that I am interested in.	T1	2.70	-14.24*
	T2	3.44	
My understanding of what it means to "know" someone.	T1	2.73	-5.97*
	T2	3.55	
My knowledge of "low-risk" dating strategies.	T1	2.42	-5.53*
	T2	3.37	
My ability to recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship.	T1	2.66	-16.75*
	T2	3.50	
My awareness of differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships	T1	2.74	-13.62*
	T2	3.45	

My awareness of different types of abuse.	T1 T2	3.02 3.61	-4.08*
My knowledge of warning signs of abuse.	T1 T2	2.72 3.50	-10.19*
My ability to identify negative patterns of dealing with conflict	T1 T2	2.78 3.54	-6.91*
My knowledge of how to respectfully break up with someone	T1 T2	2.61 3.52	-13.09*
My knowledge of steps to take to recover from a broken relationship.	T1 T2	2.57 3.34	-13.41*
My understanding that meaningful relationships involve an emotional investment from both partners.	T1 T2	2.46 3.27	-13.38*
My understanding of "risky" marriage choices.	T1 T2	2.74 3.38	-16.14*
My understanding of some of the ways to have a great marriage.	T1 T2	2.53 3.38	-5.86*
My understanding of the importance of identifying and sharing expectations about relationships and marriage with my future partner.	T1 T2	2.66 3.66	-13.88*
My recognition of the importance of commitment in relationships.	T1 T2	2.67 3.39	-10.66*
My understanding of how my expectations affect my behavior.	T1 T2	2.86 3.41	-12.71*
My understanding of the attack/defend method of communication.	T1 T2	2.67 3.37	-13.55*
My ability to use communication methods that have a positive effect on the other person.	T1 T2	2.55 3.28	-13.69*
My ability to use "soft" approaches in communication and conflict.	T1 T2	2.62 3.30	-13.31*
My understanding of effective communication in conflict.	T1 T2	2.51 3.25	-14.55*
My understanding of how family communication may affect future communication styles.	T1 T2	2.52 3.31	-14.98*
My understanding of the importance of forgiveness in relationships	T1 T2	2.60 3.41	-12.96*
My awareness of the impact of financial issues on a relationship.	T1 T2	2.77 3.47	-14.29*
My knowledge of my own financial habits and values.	T1 T2	2.64 3.41	-14.34*

*p <.01

Figure 6. A sample of the significant changes in knowledge Before and After Relationship Smarts

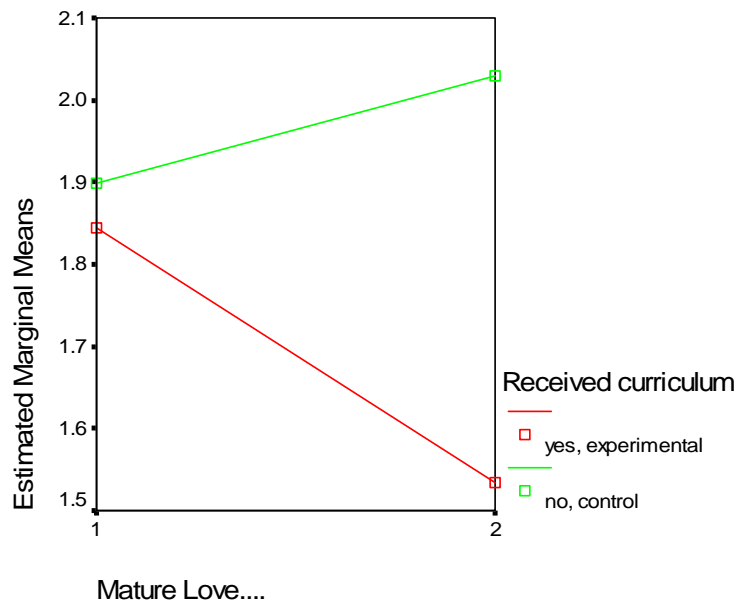


- Q1. My awareness of the differences between maturity and immaturity.
- Q2. My understanding of the difference between imitation and genuine love.
- Q3. My knowledge about dating "smart."
- Q4. My awareness of key things I should learn about someone that I am interested in.
- Q5. My knowledge of "low-risk" dating strategies.
- Q6. My ability to recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship.
- Q7. My understanding of some of the ways to have a great marriage.

Participants' knowledge regarding healthy relationships was also assessed by true pre- and post-program responses to seventeen knowledge statements. Paired samples t-tests identified four significant improvements in knowledge for the experimental group. Specifically, at Time 2 participants' level of agreement with the statement *"Being in love is enough to sustain a positive relationship,"* significantly decreased and their levels of agreement the statements, *"Communication styles must be similar in a relationship,"* *"Most conflicts in a relationship center around misunderstanding and miscommunication,"* and *"Mature love occurs when all three relationship components are present: intimacy, passion, and commitment"* significantly increased. Control participants did not exhibit significant changes over time on any of the seventeen knowledge statements. This indicates that those who participated in the class gained insights that may lead to healthier relationships; knowledge that was not gained by those that did not take the class

Further statistical tests for changes across time by treatment group for each of the seventeen knowledge statements identified a significant interaction. Specifically, in regards to the statement *"Mature love occurs when all three relationship components are present: intimacy, passion and commitment"* the experimental group's level of agreement significantly increased over time, while the control group's level of agreement decreased over time ($F [1, 316] = 11.42, p = .001$. Figure 7 shows this statistical difference between the two groups (*lower scores indicate greater agreement*).

Figure 7. Understanding of mature love over time.



We also assessed the level of verbal aggression, physical aggression, and reasoning used in current relationships and compared these levels between groups. For verbal aggression in dating relationships, Figure 8 demonstrates a pattern that shows, on average, that students who participated in the Relationship Smarts class were significantly less verbally aggressive (lower scores indicate lower verbal aggression) towards a dating partner or best friend, following the class, than students who did not take the class ($F [1, 307] = 3.775, p = .05$).

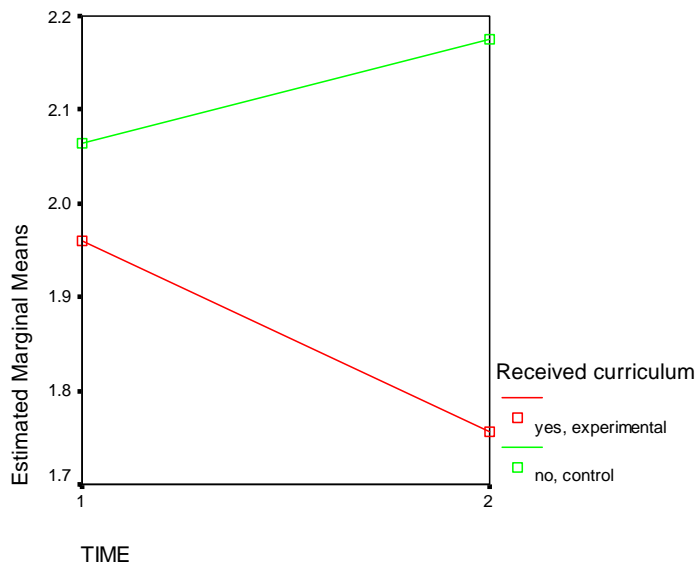


Figure 8. Verbal Aggression

Qualitative comments. The following are some of the transcribed comments from student participants when asked what they most enjoyed about the class:

- *Learning what love really means*
- *Finding out why we argue and why I act the way I act*
- *Getting to know good relationships and bad relationships better than I already did*
- *I felt this class will help me deal with some of the relationship problems I will undoubtedly encounter*
- *I enjoyed learning about how to avoid being in an abusive relationship*
- *It answered many questions I had about my relationships and helped to prepare my relationships for the future*
- *It helped me with some of the problems in my relationships. It also helped me with that to expect*
- *It was very informative, I learned things that seemed simple, but they were things I wouldn't know if I didn't take this class. I learned a lot more than I would have just by experience*
- *Learning how to deal with relationships and knowing what to do if you get caught in an unhealthy relationship*

Lessons Learned from Teacher feedback:

- High value of scripted curriculum and the orientation training.
- Preferred mode was daily delivery over a 3 week period, rather than once or twice a week
- Students react most positively to *physical* activities (not just interactive discussions) and the videos.
- Overall, liked the amount of information – not too long; not too short
- High value for using university students as helpers during the sessions; "...the kids could relate to them."
- Liked being part of a larger project; consistency of delivery of curriculum across sites allows us to aggregate data and show impact.
- Evaluation questionnaire worked well; not too complicated; didn't take too long
- Support \$ for supplies and mailings essential.

Sample comments from teachers:

- *The students loved the hands-on activities. Overall, I thought it was great and had a BIG impact on at least a few students!*
- *I will continue using the Relationship information in my Life Connections class...I do feel the information is very beneficial.*
- *I really enjoyed using your plans. "Aaron Fischer" was wonderful to illustrate anger management which is a big problem at my school.*
- *The most help for me has been the AU students coming out to present some of the modules to my students. The students responded so well to them, and learned a lot in the process.*
- *I think it is essential for you to offer the training. I have enjoyed teaching the lessons but another teacher has borrowed my stuff and she does not understand the point of some of the activities.*
- *Thanks for giving me the opportunity to work with this program.*
- *The program is excellent just as it is. The students seemed very receptive to the work... Again, the work is excellent and primarily applies to an area I have always felt lacking. Please include me in any revisions/changes. I have told many about the program and there is interest out there for it. Again thanks so much for the program.*

Summary

Overall, the results and feedback provided by the adolescents and teachers were very encouraging. Qualitative responses from the teachers and the students themselves suggest that the program content is well-received and judged to be relevant and valuable. Results indicate that students who received the Relationship Smarts program showed statistically significant increases in knowledge and understanding of various aspects of healthy relationships, including a greater awareness of characteristics of unhealthy relationships and healthy patterns of communication in relationships. Particularly noteworthy are the significant increases over time for all 36 items assessing learning objectives of the curriculum. Also significant was the impact the course may have had on the current use of verbal aggression in relationships. Overall, those who participated in the class indicated significantly lower levels of verbal aggression after taking the class than the control group that did not take the class (i.e., use of verbal aggression *increased* over time for controls). This empirical evidence of positive program impact suggests that the Relationship Smarts class can serve to promote knowledge and skills about healthy relationships and future marriages for adolescents. It is recognized that dating patterns are predictive of later relationship patterns. Learning information and skills that support an adolescent as a healthy and socially competent dating partner can translate into becoming a healthy socially competent marriage partner as an adult. With demonstrated effectiveness, expansion of the HCHC: Targeting Youth program is warranted and can provide more youth this important knowledge and the necessary skills to form and sustain healthy relationships now and healthy marriages in the future.

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Appendix A

The Alabama *Healthy Couples, Healthy Children* Project: Relationship Smarts Curriculum

SESSION 1: MATURITY ISSUES, WHAT I VALUE: Explore the social, emotional, and mental dimensions of maturity, Gain awareness of what maturity and immaturity mean in these three dimensions, Reflect on values and determine which are personally important, Identify personality characteristics in others that are important.

SESSION 2: ATTRACTIONS AND INFATUATION: To introduce the idea that good relationships come from relationship "smarts" -a product not only of experience, but also of conscious learning and skills, To gain knowledge about the nature of infatuation, To validate the importance of early experiences of love.

SESSION 3: FIRST RELATIONSHIPS - JOYS AND DOUBTS: To bring to life many of the issues addressed in this unit and engage teens through the use of video drama, To provide a safe forum to discuss some of the difficult situations, dilemmas, and choices teens experience by use of characters in the video.

SESSION 4: WHAT'S LOVE? THREE SIDES OF MATURE LOVE: To explore three dimensions of mature love-that is, passion, intimacy, and commitment, To gain experience in identifying these dimensions as well as recognizing the problems for relationships when these dimensions are undeveloped or unbalanced, To introduce students to some key research findings on marriage and intimacy

SESSION 5: PRINCIPLES OF SMART DATING: To help teens recognize smart and dumb dating and relationship choices and practices, To offer concrete guidelines for "dating smart," To explore the importance of compatibility for relationships and offer a list of key areas to consider

SESSION 6:THE LOW-RISK DATING STRATEGY - HOW TO "REALLY" GET TO KNOW SOMEONE: To explore what it means to "know" someone, To become familiar with the five key areas that are important to learn about someone you are interested in, To use these same five things to gain valuable self awareness, To learn a low-risk dating strategy.

SESSION 7: DATING AND EMOTIONS: IS IT HEALTHY?: To gain a concrete sense of the key questions to ask about the emotional health of a relationship, To gain familiarity about what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like in the real world.

SESSION 8: WHAT ABUSE LOOKS LIKE: To identify and discuss behaviors that demonstrate abuse, To recognize that there are different types of abuse: emotional and physical, To become aware warning signs of abusive relationships: controlling behavior, lying, problem lifestyles, physical abuse, sexual pressure, To understand that in dating relationships one has the right to safety, respect, and shared values.

SESSION 9: RELATIONSHIP DECISIONS AND BREAKING UP: To explore a teen relationship through a story, To identify positive and negative characteristics of this relationship by applying several of the frameworks presented in previous lessons, To consider several aspects of decision-making around breaking up and gaining insights about knowing when it's time, better or worse ways to break up, and moving forward.

SESSION 10: COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE: To understand the *elements associated with healthy, stable marriages*: similarity, safety, mutual respect and balance, and nurturing behaviors, Develop awareness of *expectations* for relationships and marriage, Understand the importance of *commitment* for relationship and marital stability

SESSION 11: COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND CONFLICT: Students will analyze their own family patterns of conflict. Students will be able to identify positive and negative patterns for dealing with conflict

SESSION 12: FORGIVENESS AND FINANCES: Increase understanding of the role of forgiveness in relationships, Understand differences in attitudes about budgeting, Increase awareness of spending choices and the importance of sharing values.

SESSION 13: WRAP-UP AND EVALUATION: To assess students' knowledge about relationships and marriage before and after participating in the classes. To evaluate knowledge that has been acquired throughout the sessions regarding personal growth for developing meaningful interpersonal relationships.