Love U2®: Relationship Smarts PLUS Curriculum

Teacher’s Implementation Guide

for the

Healthy Couple Healthy Children: Targeting Youth (HCHCTY) Project
Auburn University, Auburn, AL
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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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Youth-focused relationships/marriage education is an uncharted course of study. This is one of the first, federally-supported marriage 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 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.
OVERVIEW OF RELATIONSHIP SMARTS PLUS

RATIONALE, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES:

Rationale

The Relationships Smarts PLUS curriculum is a research-based program 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 original Relationship Smarts (Pearson, 2004; www.dibblefund.org/love_u2.htm) had features judged to be especially appropriate for diverse youth. These features included less didactic material, “common” teen language, materials that show diversity, and language that assumes teens are living in diverse family structures. Our initial use of the curriculum included adaptations to enhance these features and strengthening the developmental perspective guiding each of the lessons.

Overarching Goals:

➢ To increase knowledge about healthy/unhealthy relationships.

➢ To strengthen skills for facilitating healthy relationship dynamics.

➢ To enhance understanding of the choices and behaviors that put physical and emotional health at risk.

Main Objectives:

• The numbers of adolescents and young adults who have the skills and knowledge necessary to form and maintain healthy, committed romantic relationships and marriages will be increased. More specifically, there will be increases in participating adolescents’:

• knowledge about healthy and unhealthy relationships.

• knowledge about healthy dating patterns in terms of using effective approaches to conflict management and communication, and the importance of mutual respect, shared values, and commitment.

• abilities to recognize patterns of unhealthy and abusive relationships in terms of verbal or physical aggression, controlling behavior, and lack of respect between partners.
• levels of self-efficacy in relationships to help them feel empowered to make good choices and stand up for themselves when needed.

• problem solving and communication skills in terms of communicating effectively with partners about their needs and views and resolving conflict in their relationships using effective communication strategies.

• understanding of the choices and behaviors that put physical and emotional health at risk.

OVERVIEW

RELATIONSHIP SMARTS PLUS CURRICULUM (2007) CONTENT

Part 1: Foundation for Understanding Romantic Relationships

Lesson 1: “Who am I and Where am I Going?” helps adolescents get in touch with their sense of identity and possible selves. Identity formation is a central task of adolescence that influences and is influenced by experiences in romantic relationships. Emphasis is placed on who the adolescent is within their family, friendship, and dating relationship contexts. The adolescents create a possible selves tree 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 and 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, “a values auction,” that helps participants identify the values that are important to them.

Lesson 3: “Attractions and Infatuation” begins with a "relationship 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: “Love and Intimacy” gets 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.
Part 2: Knowledge about Dating Relationship Processes

Lesson 5: “Principles of Smart Relationships” 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, such as identifying Smart and Not-so-Smart relationship decisions, provide practice for applying these insights to real world teen relationships.

Lesson 6: “The Low-Risk Relationship Strategy: Decide, Don’t Slide!” 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. Teens explore, through four different activities, steps to take to really get to know someone they are dating.

Lesson 7: “Is It a Healthy Relationship?” 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 visualizing the negative and positive answers to the questions.

Lesson 8: “Breaking up and Dating Abuse” 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 guidelines are offered for knowing when it’s time to break up, better and worse ways to break up, and steps for moving on.


Lesson 9: “A Foundation for Good Communication” is the first communication lesson and provides students with a strong foundation for effective communication in couple relationships. After considering the positive and negative communication patterns students have learned within their families, the basic elements of listening openly and speaking clearly are reviewed. Ways to engage in problem solving also are covered. The lesson concludes with opportunities to practice important skills for good communication.

Lesson 10: “Communication Challenges” is the second communication lesson and looks more extensively at challenges to good communication and ways to address
negative communication patterns in a relationship. Students are introduced to patterns that damage relationships and how to recognize the warning signs of troubled communication. Next students have opportunities to practice different strategies to change negative communication patterns into positive ones.


Lesson 11: “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 12: “Increasing the Odds of Having a Healthy Marriage Someday” 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 13: “Follow Your North Star” provides a final lesson where teens will first review core concepts and then work together to produce a mural summarizing the key insights and information they have learned in this unit. Then, they will begin to work individually on their own “success plans” in session. They will continue and finish these plans outside of class.
LEsson Format

1. **Lesson Overview:** Briefly describes what is in the lesson and its purpose.

2. **Goals of Lesson:** Briefly details the specific lesson goals.

3. **Lesson-at-a-Glance:** Offers a quick overview of the lesson sections.

4. **Materials Checklist:** Provides a quick reference for all materials needed for the entire lesson (i.e., handouts, examples, activity cards, and additional resources provided in the curriculum notebook; extra supplies that need to be purchased).

5. **Background Information and Presentation Material:** This material is contained in single-lined text boxes and provides information for teachers to use to create points to make to students and also is information to have handy to address student questions.

6. **Talking points:** These are the bulleted points that indicate what should be addressed when presenting an activity or section of the lesson to the students.

7. **Scripts:** These are brief bolded parts of the lesson text that can be read directly to the students to emphasize key points and provide instruction for activities within the lesson.

8. **Instructions to the Teacher:** These are provided as non-bolded text within the lesson that describes the steps to be taken when covering a section of the lesson or an activity within the lesson.

9. **Optional Activities:** If time is available, additional activities are provided to enhance the students’ learning. These activities are contained in double-lined text boxes.

10. **Section Materials Checklist:** Each section contains its own materials checklist and the approximate time it takes to do the activities within that section.

11. **Resource List:** At the end of each lesson is a complete list of resources for that lesson in the order that they appear. Almost all resources, with the exception of posters and materials that need to be purchased, are found at the end of the lesson to which they belong.
SECTION 2: WORKING WITH RELATIONSHIP SMARTS PLUS

Preparation

Your advance preparation will make a difference in how easy it is to provide the lessons and how effective the activities are with the students.

Before implementing this curriculum with students, it will be important to review each of the lessons and think about how the points and activities are relevant to the students with whom you work. Consider the following:

- Age (maturity level) of the students you teach
- Gender make-up of your class*
- Family/cultural backgrounds of the students
- Whether you have one or more teen parents in the class
- Special learning needs of students in the class
- Sensitive issues/past experiences of one or more students that might affect how they respond to the curriculum

Keep these and other factors you know about your students in mind as you prepare to provide the lessons. Also consider your teaching style and comfort level with the topics covered. For those areas in which you feel less comfortable or prepared, gather additional information on the topics in advance and/or talk with a teacher who has taught this (or a similar) curriculum in the past to get an idea of how she or he handled these areas.

Take time in advance of delivering the curriculum to obtain the materials you will need for providing and processing each of the activities. Consider incorporating video or music clips in order to increase the relevance to, and engagement of, your students.

If possible, take time to practice implementing any of the activities that may be more difficult to deliver to your class. Anticipate students’ responses and plan ways to address their questions, concerns, or behavior.

Please contact the HCHCTY office (334-844-3253) if you have any questions about any of the activities or lessons. We will be happy to assist you with your preparation.

*Special Note about Male Students

During the first year of the project, we learned from students and teachers that male students, in general, were less involved and less comfortable with the Relationship Smarts PLUS material. This especially may be the case when males comprise 25% or
less of the students in the class. After talking with some of the male students and holding a focus group with young men in their early 20s, we learned the following that may be helpful when thinking about ways to reach out to and engage the male students in the class:

1. Many (if not the majority) of the male students in high school are afraid of doing the wrong thing, afraid of exposing their inner selves when getting close to a girl emotionally. Often they are unsure how to express how they feel when they talk with girls.

2. Some male students lack the skills for interacting with the opposite sex. Some have self-doubts – “Am I really okay” and this makes them self-conscious when interacting with girls.

3. Some male students will avoid situations that make them feel vulnerable.

4. A big challenge is that they are still figuring out who they are – “Identity” issues.

5. The more sociable, skilled, confident male students are more likely to be comfortable with and participate in a relationships education course.

6. Direct efforts to engage the male students will be needed. Also make sure the learning is hands on and includes some humor.

7. Be up front about addressing the discomfort they may have with some of the important topics that will be covered.

8. Male students do want to know how to start conversations (need ice breakers). They also need a better idea of what girls want from them – “what might a guy need to put into a relationship with a girl?”

9. Respect for women is an issue for why some male students may be more/less receptive to relationships education (do they view women as people or objects? How caught up are they in the “bravado” of being a “real” man)? It may be hard to reach male students that have little respect for women, but they are an important group to target. To reach young men that may not respect women, put a human face on the respect issue with a powerful video or real story of someone’s experiences; discuss experiences about how it feels to be disrespected. Connect those experiences to how they treat the girls they date.

10. One thing male students need to know is how to find common ground with girls (include activities that help facilitate this). Help them view girls as multidimensional rather than superficially.
11. It is important to really help males understand what it means to have a relationship with a girl, and to help girls be aware of what guys want and don’t want in relationships.

12. Teachers can increase receptivity by meeting the students where they are and providing opportunities for “conversation.” Ways to start conversations might include saying things like: How many of you wonder __________? How many of you do___________? And then get students to elaborate their experiences and thoughts.

**General Guidelines for Implementing the Lessons**

- Prior to offering the lesson, take time to carefully read through and prepare talking points. Remember to keep “lectures” brief; students learn better through “doing.”

- Check the approximate times noted for each section/activity and determine how long you will need to deliver the lesson to your class. If needed, make decisions about material to cut or reduce in order to keep the lesson within your desired timeframe.

- Review the available powerpoint slides and handouts. Adjust if needed.

- Consider modifications you may need to make to the talking points or to the activities to increase the interest or understanding of older or younger students.

- Consider the backgrounds of your students (e.g., family structure, race/ethnicity, gender…) when thinking about points you will make or the best way to deliver an activity. Determine whether the examples provided need to be modified to better fit the cultural backgrounds of your students.

- Decide if students need more opportunities for small or large group discussion of some of the topics covered (discussion opportunities may be particularly useful for older students with dating experience).

- Keep your students engaged through emphasizing the experiential learning and encouraging them to share and discuss their ideas. Remember to convey respect for their views as a way to encourage students to become fully involved. You set the tone for how your students will show respect toward one another. Students will learn more in an environment of respect and support that challenges them to consider new ideas and ways of behaving.