

An Evaluation of the *Relationship Smarts Plus* Program on Adolescents in Georgia

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The present study examines the impact of Relationship Smarts Plus among 1,657 adolescents age 12-18 across 25 Georgia counties. The program, aimed at increasing awareness about healthy versus unhealthy relationships and promoting smart dating strategies and the application of healthy communication and conflict resolution skills, was offered 54 times by 23 different FCS or 4-H agents during a 53-month period. After each lesson, participants completed a 5-item retrospective pre- and post-test assessing changes in awareness and understanding of the concepts and skills learned. Overall, 949 (57%) youth responded to an overall post-evaluation administered at the conclusion of the program series to document confidence levels in having a healthy relationship, likelihood of using the skills learned, perceived helpfulness of the program, and changes in how youth felt about themselves. On average, youth demonstrated significant increases in knowledge for all lessons and reported positive improvements across all post-evaluation indicators following participation in the program. Implications for future youth-focused outreach programming to promote healthy relationships are shared.

Keywords: adolescence, romantic relationships, dating, relationship education, program evaluation

Involvement in romantic relationships during adolescence is not only extremely common (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007), the quality of these relationships has implications for future intimate relationships as well as individual well-being (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Royer, Keller, & Heidrich, 2009). The growing understanding of the salience of adolescent romantic relationships (Collins, 2003) has resulted in increased attention to relationship and marriage education programs for youth. The purpose of the present study is to examine changes related to knowledge and attitudes among adolescents age 12-18 who participated in one such program, *Relationship Smarts Plus* (RS+; Pearson, 2007).

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Adolescent Romantic Relationships

By the time teens reach 11th or 12th grade, 77% have been involved in some type of romantic relationship (Raley et al., 2007). Despite past misconceptions that adolescent romantic relationships are trivial and inconsequential, research shows that these relationships are developmentally significant in many ways (Collins, 2003). These early romantic relationships provide the first opportunities for teens to understand communication, conflict management, and emotional regulation in the context of a relationship characterized by higher levels of intimacy than previously experienced in familial or peer relationships (Barber & Eccels, 2003; Collins, 2003). Teens themselves view developing a special personal connection and gaining experience with relationships as the main motivations for taking part in a romantic relationship (Royer et al., 2009). In fact, the characteristics of teen dating relationships (e.g., commitment, intimacy, reciprocity, acceptance) are often indistinguishable from adult romantic relationships (Williams & Hickie, 2010). These early dating experiences also have implications for the success of future intimate partnerships (Madsen & Collins, 2011).

While healthy intimate relationships provide adolescents with opportunities to develop important competencies and skills, a lack of understanding of intimate relationships and experiences with unhealthy relationships can have negative consequences. One such consequence is an alarmingly high prevalence of dating violence among teenagers. Adolescents, and especially females ages 16-24, report dating abuse more often than any other age group (Rennison & Welchans, 2000), and 12% of adolescents report they have been the victims of physical dating violence in the last year (Maas, Fleming, Herrenkohl, & Catalano, 2010). Dating abuse among adolescents begins gradually, often starting with teasing and name calling, but adolescents tend to think of these behaviors as “normal” in a relationship. For instance, although 60% of adolescent girls experience jealous or possessive behavior in a dating relationship, they tend to perceive these experiences as not serious, when in reality they can be red flags for the future occurrence of dating violence (Murphy & Smith, 2010). These patterns of dating violence that develop in the adolescent years continue into adulthood for both victims and perpetrators (Gomez, 2011). Furthermore, teen victims of physical dating violence are more likely than their non-abused peers to smoke, use drugs, engage in unhealthy diet behaviors, engage in risky sexual behaviors, and attempt or consider suicide (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Teaching adolescents about healthy relationships can help them recognize the signs of an abusive relationship and can provide them with tools to end unhealthy relationships before they experience negative consequences (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011).

As well, teens are most likely to explore their sexuality in the context of a dating or romantic relationship. In fact, among adolescents having their first sexual experience, 85% reported that it was with a romantic partner (Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2003). Without a deep understanding of genuine love and intimacy, teens may rush into a sexual relationship before really getting to know a dating partner. For instance, among teens who have sex for the first time within a

romantic relationship, 24% have intercourse within the first month of the relationship and 37.5% have sex by three months (Manlove et al., 2003). Despite a decrease in the teen pregnancy rate to a thirty year low among 15-19 year old girls, the U.S. still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy, births, and abortions in the industrialized world (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). Helping adolescents understand how healthy relationships develop, including the role and timing of sex in a relationship and the consequences of having sex too early in a relationship, may serve to reduce at-risk sexual behaviors (Trella, 2009).

The *Relationship Smarts Plus* Program

Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+; Pearson, 2007) is a research-based curriculum that incorporates hands-on activities to teach skills and knowledge necessary for healthy dating relationships during adolescence. Recently registered as an evidence-based program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), this 13-lesson curriculum offers developmentally appropriate information that addresses identity development, personal goals and values, what healthy (vs. abusive) relationships look like, dating processes and decisions, important communication skills, and the promotion of future-orientated thinking about relationships (see Table 1 for lesson descriptions). Importantly, the structure of this program is very interactive (i.e., discussion focused) and activity based (e.g., games, role playing, drawing, sculpting, listening to music, writing stories) to stimulate thinking, sharing, and processing of the information learned.

Past studies have shown positive outcomes related to changes in beliefs, knowledge, and behaviors for adolescents who participate in the RS+ program. For instance, teens were less likely to have unrealistic beliefs about relationships and are more likely to believe a supportive partner is important (Kerpelman, Pittman, Adler-Baeder, Eryigit, & Paulk, 2009). In terms of gained knowledge, adolescents who participated in the RS+ program significantly increased their knowledge of main curriculum topics including mature love, healthy expectations and behaviors, unhealthy relationships, communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and smart dating strategies (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007). Perhaps most encouraging is the finding that participation in a relationship education program could lead to a decrease in conflict engagement, less reliance on verbal aggression and violence to solve conflict, and greater likelihood of using reasoning skills to manage differences (Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004; Adler-Baeder et al., 2007).

Table 1. Relationship Smarts Plus Lessons and Description

Lesson 1: *Who am I and Where am I Going?* Adolescents get in touch with their sense of identity and possible selves. Emphasis is placed on who the adolescent is within their family, friendship, and dating relationship contexts. Adolescents explore their future self-goals, ways to attain them and how to stay true to themselves when faced with peer pressure.

Lesson 2*: *Maturity Issues and What I Value.* Adolescents learn to identify four aspects of maturity—physical, emotional, mental and social—and learn how the latter three do not happen on their own, but take conscious effort. Adolescents then participate in a “values auction” that helps participants identify the values that are important to them.

Lesson 3*: *Attractions and Infatuation.* Adolescents explore the building blocks of a good relationship, including common interests, talking to each other, and developing a real friendship. The chemistry of attraction and the nature of infatuation are also explored.

Lesson 4: *Love and Intimacy.* Adolescents learn about the differences and connections between love and lust by analyzing magazine pictures, and examine three important aspects of mature love: passion, intimacy, and commitment. Adolescents also learn how intimacy develops over time.

Lesson 5: *Principles of Smart Relationships.* Adolescents examine seven principles for "smart" dating and process relationship decision making strategies.

Lesson 6*: *The Low-risk Relationship Strategy: Decide, Don't Slide!* Adolescents explore why people easily get swept up and involved with poor relationship choices when they slide into situations instead of making clear decisions. They learn how to take the go-slow approach to dating while avoiding the high-risks of sliding.

Lesson 7: *Is It a Healthy Relationship?* Adolescents learn to distinguish between a healthy and unhealthy relationship through a series of questions and a sculpting activity that aids in visualizing negative and positive relationship qualities.

Lesson 8*: *Breaking up and Dating Abuse.* Using a thought provoking game and viewing an educational video, adolescents learn about the various forms of abuse and explore ways to avoid or get out of abusive relationships. In addition, adolescents are provided guidelines 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.* Adolescents consider the positive and negative communication patterns learned within their families, and then explore the basic elements of listening openly and speaking clearly, taking time outs, and giving appreciations in relationships.

Lesson 10: *Communication Challenges and More Skills.* Adolescents look more extensively at challenges to good communication and are introduced to patterns of troubled communication that damage relationships. Ways to address negative communication patterns in a relationship are practiced.

Lesson 11*: *Through the Eyes of a Child.* Adolescents build an awareness of how and why a healthy marriage matters by exploring the needs and wants of children and the importance of fathers.

Lesson 12: *Looking Toward the Future – Healthy Relationships and Healthy Marriages.* Adolescents 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 a successful marriage.

Lesson 13: *Follow Your North Star.* Adolescents work together to produce a mural summarizing the key insights and information they have learned from the program, and then work individually on their own “success plans.”

*These lessons are considered “core” lessons of the curriculum.

Current Study

The purpose of the present study is to evaluate adolescents' changes in knowledge and attitudes resulting from participation in the RS+ program. Specifically, the current study adds to the present literature by exploring whether expected changes occurred across each curriculum lesson topic (see Table 1) and whether possible variations may exist by topic. Because resources (e.g., materials) and time (e.g., class duration and frequency) are often limited, assessing whether certain topics/lessons yield more or less improvements in adolescents' awareness and beliefs could inform what lessons educators may want to prioritize during implementation of the program. Adolescents' overall perceptions of change and benefits resulting from participation in the program are also explored.

Method

Procedures

Data for the present study were collected anonymously from adolescents across Georgia who participated in a RS+ program facilitated by a Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) or 4-H Extension agent. From July 17, 2008 to December 13, 2012, 2,436 youth across 30 counties in Georgia were offered the RS+ program. The current study is based on data collected from 1,657 youth age 12-18, in 6th-12th grade, who were offered at least three lessons from the RS+ curriculum and provided with evaluation forms to complete. Narrowing the sample in this way allowed us to examine the effects of a multi-lesson program that included minimum content coverage and that was offered to the appropriate audience for whom the curriculum was designed. During the 53-month period, the 1,657 youth were reached through one of 54 programs offered by 23 different facilitators across 25 counties. Although most agents offered youth 3-5 lessons from the program (n = 885), others included 6-9 (n = 683) or 10 or more lessons (n = 89) across multiple classes. Agents also varied in how often they met with the youth, including one-time workshops (covering multiple lessons), a single week series, once a week for several weeks, and once or twice a month for 6+ months.

Participants

Demographic information for the 1,657 youth and program characteristics are presented in Table 2. On average, the youth were about 14 years old (MD = 13.9), and most were female (57%), in 8th grade (63%), and White/Caucasian (45%). Further, 84% of the teens reported having had previous dating experience. A majority of the RS+ programs were offered in a school setting (75%) with lessons delivered either weekly (47%) or monthly (36%). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine possible variations between 4-H and FCS agents across youth and program characteristics; these results are summarized in Table 2. Overall, compared

to 4-H agents, FCS agents were more likely to reach adolescents who were older, female, in high school, Black/African American, and who had dated previously. Further, 4-H agents were more likely to offer the program during school hours and as a 1-2 day workshop or one-week series, while FCS agents were more likely to offer the program as part of a weekly series.

Table 2. Participants Demographics & Facilitation Characteristics

	Total (N = 1,657)	4-H (n = 646)	FCS (n = 1,011)	F-Value
Age				
Mean (SD)	13.88 (1.32)	13.56 (1.26)	14.08 (1.31)	62.91**
Gender				
Female	930 (56.6%)	326 (51.2%)	604 (60.0%)	12.38**
Grade				
6 th -7 th	262 (15.9%)	162 (25.2%)	100 (10.0%)	70.05**
8 th	1,033 (62.9%)	410 (63.8%)	623 (62.4%)	0.33
9 th -10 th	249 (15.2%)	48 (7.5%)	201 (20.1%)	50.13**
11 th -12 th	98 (6.0%)	23 (3.6%)	75 (7.5%)	10.83**
Race				
White/Caucasian	732 (45.2%)	307 (48.3%)	425 (43.2%)	3.96*
Black/African American	561 (34.7%)	161 (25.3%)	400 (40.7%)	41.30**
Hispanic/Latino	222 (13.7%)	108 (17.0%)	114 (11.6%)	9.50**
Other	104 (6.4%)	60 (9.4%)	44 (4.5%)	15.93**
Prior Dating Experience				
Yes	1,239 (83.5%)	475 (79.7%)	764 (86.1%)	10.80**
Location				
In-School	1,248 (75.3%)	590 (91.3%)	658 (65.1%)	159.99**
Format				
1-2 Day Workshop	21 (1.3%)	19 (2.9%)	2 (0.2%)	24.02**
Monthly Series	589 (35.5%)	216 (33.4%)	373 (36.9%)	2.06
One Week Series	271 (16.4%)	188 (29.1%)	83 (8.2%)	135.93**
Weekly Series	776 (46.8%)	223 (34.5%)	553 (54.7%)	66.98**

Measures

The evaluation of the RS+ program included an examination of short-term indicators of change in participants' knowledge and beliefs related to topics covered in each lesson, as well as confidence in their ability to use the skills learned. First, participants completed a 5-item retrospective pre- and post-test following the conclusion of each lesson. Specifically, youth were asked to report whether their knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the various topics or skills that were covered in the lesson was 1 = *Poor*, 2 = *Fair*, 3 = *Good*, or 4 = *Excellent* before the program and then asked what their understanding was like after the program (using the same scale). Items related to changes in knowledge are pulled directly from main topics covered in the

curriculum, thus providing high construct validity (copies of the evaluation instruments are available from first author). These same instruments have been used in other evaluations of the RS+ program (e.g. Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Mean before and after scores were computed with higher scores reflecting greater understanding. Cronbach's alphas for each pre- and post-lesson scale were .79 or above.

In the context of program evaluation studies, the use of a retrospective pre-/post-design has benefits over more traditional pre-/post-designs. In traditional pre-/post-designs, changes in knowledge can be obscured when participants overestimate their knowledge and skills before attending programming. However, after programming, individuals are more aware of their lack of knowledge prior to their participation in a program, and thus they do not evaluate themselves from the same frame of reference or using the same metric at pre- and post-test (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000; Sibthorp, Paisley, Gookin, & Ward, 2007). The use of a retrospective pre-/post-test design has been shown to reduce the risk of response shift bias that results in underestimation of program effects (Pratt et al., 2000).

Second, a brief one-page overall post-evaluation was administered to participants at the end of the program series. This evaluation was only administered when the educators offered a minimum of four lessons from the curriculum: one lesson focused on values/goals (Lesson 1-2), two lessons focused on what healthy relationships look like (Lessons 3-8), and one lesson focused on teaching communication skills (Lessons 9-10). Youth reported on changes in confidence levels related to having healthy relationships with friends and family, being a good listener, handling conflict in a healthy way, having healthy dating relationships, and expressing their feelings to a dating partner. Specifically, youth were asked "As a result of participating in this program, how confident do you feel *now* compared to before in..." and response options for the 5 items were 1 = *Less confident*, 2 = *About the same*, 3 = *A little more confident*, and 4 = *A lot more confident*. The post-evaluation also included single items related to how youth felt about themselves after the program compared to before (1 = *I feel a lot worse* to 5 = *I feel a lot better*), helpfulness of the program (1 = *Not at all helpful* to 5 = *Very helpful*), and likelihood they would use the skills learned in the program (1 = *Not at all likely* to 5 = *Very likely*).

Results

Outputs: Lessons Offered and Attended

Table 3 provides a summary of the number of youth who were offered the lesson, who attended, and who completed the evaluation for each lesson. The lessons offered and attended most often were lessons 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 9; with the exception of lesson 1, these are considered core lessons of the program. Although lesson 11 is also considered a core lesson, it was offered considerably less often than the other core lessons. On average, youth were offered 5 lessons and attended 4

lessons within a given program series. Further, 401 (24.4%) youth attended less than 3 lessons, 901 (54.4%) attended 3-5 lessons, and 355 (21.2%) attended 6 or more lessons. Overall, youth attended, on average, about 74.5% of the lessons offered. Last, as summarized in Table 3, at least 92% or more of the youth who attended each lesson also voluntarily completed the evaluation for that lesson.

Table 3. Participants' Reported Change Across Relationship Smarts Plus Lessons

Curriculum Lesson	<i>n</i>			Mean Score (<i>SD</i>)			% improved
	Offered Lesson	Attended Lesson	Completed Evaluation	Before	After	<i>t</i> -value ^b	
Lesson 1	931	766	714	2.67 (0.70)	3.26 (0.61)	22.78	68.3%
Lesson 2 ^a	1,496	1,165	1,101	2.79 (0.69)	3.34 (0.58)	27.63	68.9%
Lesson 3 ^a	807	622	618	2.70 (0.71)	3.30 (0.61)	20.55	71.2%
Lesson 4	265	174	168	2.26 (0.74)	3.35 (0.55)	18.11	84.9%
Lesson 5	521	402	371	2.52 (0.68)	3.42 (0.54)	25.97	86.2%
Lesson 6 ^a	1,202	813	782	2.63 (0.74)	3.25 (0.63)	22.60	67.2%
Lesson 7	190	97	94	2.83 (0.63)	3.52 (0.48)	10.04	73.7%
Lesson 8 ^a	1,462	1,096	1,049	2.68 (0.76)	3.36 (0.62)	27.47	67.7%
Lesson 9 ^a	1,252	875	845	2.66 (0.73)	3.24 (0.64)	22.87	64.8%
Lesson 10	210	104	99	2.55 (0.79)	3.40 (0.60)	10.67	71.0%
Lesson 11 ^a	569	390	383	2.87 (0.82)	3.37 (0.68)	12.48	52.7%
Lesson 12	134	69	69	2.75 (0.78)	3.54 (0.55)	9.05	73.6%

^a These lessons are considered “core” lessons of the curriculum (see Table 1 for a description of each lesson)

^b All *t*-test results were significant at $p < .01$

Outcome: Changes in Knowledge

Following each lesson, participants, on average, reported that their knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the topics addressed in the lesson improved. As shown in Table 3 above, on average, youth reported their understanding of the principles and skills taught was “fair” (overall

$M = 2.7$) prior to each lesson and improved to “good” (overall $M = 3.4$) afterwards. Paired-sample t -test analyses showed that the mean difference scores (before vs. after) were statistically significant for all twelve lessons evaluated. As shown in the last column of Table 3, at least two-thirds of the participants reported improvements across each lesson (i.e., individual post mean score was greater than their pre mean score), with the exception of lesson 11 (53%).

Interestingly, youth exhibited the greatest mean score improvements (pre-post group score difference $> .70$, and at least 70% of the youth reported improvements) in lessons 4, 5, 7, 10 and 12, which are non-core lessons and that were offered to fewer youth.

Outcome: Changes in Attitudes

Of the 1,657 youth in the current study, 988 (60%) received at least four lessons (covering goals/values, characteristics of healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, and communication strategies), and 949 (57%) completed the overall program evaluation survey. First, youth were asked to rate how confident they felt after the program (compared to before) on 5 items related to establishing healthy relationships and using the skills learned. Table 4 summarizes the level of confidence that these youth reported after the completion of the program. Overall, the majority of youth felt that they were more confident than before the program in establishing healthy relationships with dating partners (81%) and family/friends (76%), followed by listening (75%), expressing their feelings and wants in a relationship (75%), and handling conflict (74%). These improvements were reinforced in some of the comments shared by the youth, including:

- *I feel that I will listen to what a dating partner says more carefully.*
- *In my relationship I will be more clear about my sexual guidelines and what I look for.*
- *The program helped me overcome trust issues.*
- *Be able to talk to guys differently and also won't take smack from them.*

Table 4. Youths' Confidence After Completing Relationship Smarts Plus Program

	<i>n</i>	Level of Confidence			
		Less	About the Same	A Little More	A Lot More
1. Having a healthy relationship with family and friends	936	2.6%	21.4%	32.2%	43.9%
2. Being a good and sensitive listener	933	2.0%	23.5%	34.0%	40.5%
3. Handling conflict in a healthy way	930	3.7%	22.0%	36.2%	38.1%
4. Having a healthy dating relationship	927	2.6%	16.6%	29.0%	51.8%
5. Expressing your feelings and sharing what you want from a dating partner	925	3.9%	21.0%	26.5%	48.6%

Next, participants were asked “*How likely are you to use the skills you learned in this program?*” (1 = *Not at all likely*; 5 = *Very likely*). The majority (93%) of the youth reported that they were likely to use the skills learned: 20% were somewhat likely, 35% were likely, and 39% were very likely. As commented by one youth, “*I can use all of the learned skills to help me in the future.*” Participants were also asked “*How helpful was the program to you?*” (1 = *Not at all helpful*; 5 = *Very helpful*). Again, nearly all (93%) of the youth felt that this program was helpful: 39% very helpful, 36% helpful, and 18% somewhat helpful. Example comments shared by youth on how the program helped included:

- *I express myself more openly to others now.*
- *A lot of the questions I had been wanting to ask someone were answered.*
- *It helped me to be better in life and know how to handle thing when you are growing up.*
- *Help me understand how I should begin to treat others.*
- *I could express myself and say how I felt and then get feedback on what I said and what’s the right thing to do.*
- *It helped me realize the importance of my future and how is it affected by the choices I make now.*

Last, to determine how participants felt about themselves after the program, they were asked “*Compared to before the program, how do you feel about yourself as a person now?*” Response options included: 1 = *I feel a lot better*, 2 = *I feel a little better*, 3 = *I feel about the same*, 4 = *I feel a little worse*, and 5 = *I feel a lot worse*. Although 26% felt about the same, most (73%) of the youth felt better about themselves after the program (only 1% felt worse). Commenting on what they learned or liked about the program, youth expressed examples of how the program helped them feel better about themselves, including:

- *I have changed my attitude; it has become a lot more positive and I let a lot of little things pass me.*
- *This program has helped me a lot with my anger and temper.*
- *I feel this has helped me be a better person.*
- *This program made me feel more open about my opinions and now I have a higher self-esteem than before.*

Discussion

Overall, after participating in the *Relationship Smarts Plus* (RS+) program, youth reported gaining awareness and understanding of what it means to have a healthy relationship. Specifically, adolescents who participated in the program showed an increase in knowledge about main curriculum topics including healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns, effective communication and conflict resolution skills, dating expectations and behaviors, dating abuse, and smart dating strategies. Further, participants reported that, after the program, they were

more confident in their ability to have healthy relationships, to handle conflict in a healthy way, and to communicate effectively. Importantly, youth became more confident that they can use these skills and behaviors in their everyday lives. Last, participants felt that the program was helpful to them, and they felt better about themselves after participating. These findings are consistent with previous evaluations of the RS+ program that showed the program to be effective (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Kerpelman et al., 2009).

Although no long-term behavioral outcomes were measured in the present study, these changes in short-term knowledge and attitudes reported by the youth have been shown to lead to positive changes in behavior. For instance, adults who have negative attitudes about divorce are more likely to believe their relationship will succeed and face fewer interpersonal problems within their relationship, like feeling closer to their romantic partner and experiencing less conflict than those with positive attitudes about divorce (Riggio & Fite, 2006). Clearly, attitudes about the seriousness of marriage and divorce can influence later relationship outcomes; thus, they are an appropriate target for relationship education programs. The RS+ program is one avenue by which adolescents are encouraged to deeply think about their beliefs related to family and intimate partnerships, including marriage. In fact, one of the lessons that influenced the greatest improvement was lesson 12, which focuses on risky marriage choices, why some marriages succeed and others fail, and ways to have a great marriage. Although not measured, some of the comments shared by the youth reflected positive changes in their attitudes towards marriage (e.g., *“It helped me become more positive about myself and relationships,” “People should not live together before marriage,” “I learned that divorce can affect children”*) and their confidence in having a healthy and stable marriage some day (e.g., *“It will definitely affect my future relationships, and it will give me the knowledge to successfully raise children,” “It will help me pick the right person to spend my life with*). Future Extension and outreach programming could benefit from including content aimed at helping adolescents develop realistic expectations about the commitments involved in intimate relationships, especially those they will have in adulthood.

Furthermore, researchers have shown that adolescents who believe conflict is a chance for growth and greater understanding within a romantic relationship are more likely to have relationship-oriented conflict goals and are more likely to rely on negotiation during conflict. On the other hand, adolescents who believe conflict is destructive to relationships are more likely to have either self- or partner-oriented conflict goals and are more likely to rely on aggression or compliance during arguments (Simon, Kobielski, & Martin, 2008). Similarly, adolescents who see aggression in romantic relationships as acceptable are more likely to perpetrate dating violence (Connolly, Friedlander, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2010). Thus, a healthy understanding of conflict in romantic relationships as well as an understanding of appropriate conflict behaviors can facilitate more healthy interactions in adolescent relationships (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). The RS+ program helps teens handle conflict more effectively as

they learn to use smart communication and conflict strategies, like negotiating and active listening, while also learning to avoid negative communication and conflict strategies, like aggressiveness or avoidance. In fact, some of the comments shared by the youth in the current study reflected better understanding these strategies (e.g., “*Helped me learn how to communicate better in my relationships,*” “*I will know how to stop fighting and talk,*” “*It has taught me how to be a good listener and stop blaming and name calling*”) and their application of these skills (e.g., “*It helped me to be a good listener and help me have a better and stronger relationships with the people in my life,*” “*has helped me get through a break up 2 weeks ago and found a way to say that I still want to be friends*”).

Recognizing the constraints faced by Extension agents in offering multi-lesson curricula (e.g., limited accessibility to youth, competing program needs), the current findings reinforce that youth who receive at least the minimum “core” content from RS+ still report significant improvements in knowledge and attitudes related to developing “smart” relationships. However, our findings suggest that youth may be missing out on the additional benefits gained by receiving “non-core” lessons as demonstrated by the greater mean score improvements found among youth across those lessons. Compared to prior research on RS+ (e.g., Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Kerpelman et al., 2009), this is the first study to examine differences in knowledge changes by lesson. Future research would benefit from further examining whether variations in overall program-related and behavioral outcomes exist based on unique changes in knowledge and attitudes resulting from the number and types of lessons offered and attended.

These promising findings must be cautiously interpreted within the limitations of the current study. For example, not all youth participated in the same number of lessons even within the same program series. Similarly, the educators were not always consistent in their presentation of the content or in the amount of content they were able to cover during each session. Future evaluation efforts would benefit from documenting these variations to assess the impact of program dosage and fidelity on the changes observed following such programs. Albeit the inclusion of a diverse sample of youth and variations in program implementation, future research should explore possible variations in programmatic outcomes that may be attributed to characteristics of the youth (e.g., gender, age, race), as well as the program (e.g., location, duration, format). Still, according to our present findings, across the board, youth reported benefitting from participation in the *Relationship Smarts Plus* program. Helping youth better understand romantic relationships and feel efficacious in their ability to navigate the landscape of dating promotes positive youth development and can facilitate later healthy adult relationships and family formation decisions.

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