



Futures Without Violence Vision for Healthy Relationships Education

Romantic relationships are central to the social lives of most teens. Three-fourths of teens age 16-18 report having had a relationship, dated, or “hooked up” with someone and half of these youth have had a serious boyfriend or girlfriend.¹ Moreover relationships are central to sexual activity, pregnancy, STIs and dating violence.

Teen pregnancy prevention programs should incorporate healthy relationships components into their programs including what constitutes healthy relationships, how to recognize unhealthy relationships, and how to build skills that help foster healthy relationships.

There is no one size fits all in terms of healthy relationships education. However, Futures Without Violence identified core components we believe provide the basis for effective healthy relationships education. These components can be provided in stand alone units or incorporated into material that is already being presented.

The core components focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes or values. In addition to the core components identified below, it is important for healthy relationship education to:

- Be age and developmentally appropriate;
- Be culturally competent and sensitive;
- Include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues;
- Be medically and factually accurate; and
- Utilize a variety of teaching techniques, methods and formats.

Relationship Basics: We believe strongly healthy relationships curriculum should lead by focusing on the positive: What is a healthy relationship? How can we foster them and help students aspire to them? Programs should help students explore their personal values and beliefs about relationships.

It is also important to provide a realistic picture about relationships. Not every relationship is perfect and sometimes a healthy relationship has some unhealthy moments. Being able to distinguish along a continuum of behaviors and situations is a critical lesson.

Crossing the Line Into Abuse: Most students don’t expect their boyfriend or girlfriend to be abusive. They often assume that abuse means violence -- and think, “I would never put up with that.” But abuse isn’t always – or even mostly -- about violence. Therefore it is important to teach students to recognize unhealthy relationships, the warning signs of abuse, and strategies for reducing the risk of abuse. Information should be gender neutral recognizing that males, females and transgender youth all experience and perpetrate abuse.

¹ Teenage Research Unlimited (2006). *Teen Relationship Abuse Survey*. Liz Claiborne Inc. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from www.loveisnotabuse.com/pdf/Liz%20Claiborne%20Mar%202006%20Relationship%20Abuse%20Hotsheet.pdf

The difference between healthy and unhealthy may not be immediately clear. Some teens think being controlled is a sign of love. How many texts from a dating partner are too many? When is texting controlling? Conversely, sometimes youth don't realize their behavior is abusive or controlling.

In addition to identifying the types and warning signs of abuse, programs should discuss the consequences of relationship abuse, both long and short-term, and its specific connection to and strategies to prevent pregnancy and STIs. For instance, discussions of contraceptive options should include information about reproductive coercion and pregnancy pressure and how such behavior may impact the choice of contraceptive method.

Moreover, sexual assault can happen inside or outside a formal relationship. Programs should include information the range of sexual violence from rape and sexual assault, child sexual abuse, voyeurism, child pornography and exploitation, sexual harassment and misconduct, and sexting, and should explore the issue of consent.

Gender Norms: A healthy relationships curriculum must also address gender norms. Such content should provide information about how gender functions in society -- in family relations, in schooling, in people's experience of violence, and in the media -- as well as how gender affects sexuality and romantic or dating relationships. Research indicates that traditional attitudes about gender roles and inequitable power in intimate heterosexual relationships are associated with earlier age of sexual debut, a higher number of partners, more frequent intercourse, low rates of condom and contraceptive use, and higher rates of HIV infection.² Students should explore their personal values and beliefs about gender and how those beliefs affect their relationships.

Skills Building: Skills building and practice is also vital to an effective healthy relationships curriculum. Those skills include:

- **Communication.** Learning how to express oneself effectively and being able to understand what other people are trying to say, are important skills to have in any relationship. Students should learn about positive communication, anger management and conflict resolution. Building effective communication skills requires a lot of practice – especially when communicating about complex subjects such as sex and sexuality and pressure.
- **Critical thinking skills.** Critical thinking skills help young people analyze the motivations for their actions and the actions of others. Critical thinking skills should also encourage youth to explore their values and aspirations and how those connect to their motivations.
- **Assertiveness skills.** Assertive skills help youth deal with pressure in a relationship or from peers and to learn how to enter and exit relationships. Such skills build confidence in youth to adhere to their personal beliefs and boundaries.
- **Becoming an Upstander.** Programs can help prevent relationship and sexual abuse by training youth who are aware of abusive or unhealthy behavior to intervene safely or seek help for the victim/targeted student.

² Jorgensen et al., 1980; MacCorquodale, 1984; Foshee & Bauman, 1992; Marsiglio, 1993; Pleck et al., 1993; Kowaleski-Jones & Mott, 1998; Karim et al., 2003; Dunkle et al., 2004.

Resources: Healthy relationships curriculum should provide resources for teens about where to access services and harm reduction strategies. Programs that disparage or stigmatize students who are or have been sexually active, or provide misinformation about contraception and STIs are not appropriate and in fact may do harm to the many young women and men who have or are experiencing violence and abuse, including reproductive coercion.

Training: All staff, but especially staff facilitating healthy relationships education, should be trained in the dynamics of adolescent relationship abuse, its consequences, and how to address it with adolescents. Discussing these issues in class or in a program often results in disclosures from youth. Before that happens, it is important staff are trained and confident about how to handle such situations. Moreover, staff training (not just teacher training) improves school climate, providing teachable moments in the class, hallways or locker rooms that reinforce the principles and norms around healthy relationships.

Getting an A+: No single intervention, curriculum or program can eliminate adolescent relationship abuse or sexual assault. Research indicates that multi-faceted approaches targeting all levels of the socio-ecological model, from the individual, to the family and community, are most effective in fostering positive social norms around healthy relationships.

Checklist For Healthy Relationships Curriculum:

- o Examines the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy romantic and/or sexual relationships including the dynamics of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, sexual and reproductive coercion, and how such behavior intersects with healthy relationships.
- o Defines sexual consent, explains its implications for sexual decision-making and how other factors, such as drugs and alcohol or power differentials including age and authority, impact consent.
- o Explores gender norms and stereotypes by providing opportunities to examine how gender functions in society and in their own lives and how gender affects sexuality and intimate relationships.
- o Builds skills including communication, anger management, and conflict resolution.
- o Teaches strategies to intervene safely or seek help for the victim/targeted person.
- o Provides resources so youth know where to find help if they or someone they know are experiencing relationship abuse or sexual assault.
- o Staff training on adolescent relationship abuse, how to handle disclosures and how to foster positive school climate.