Putting Youth Relationship Education on the Child Welfare Agenda:
Findings from a Research and Evaluation Review

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July 17, 2012
Washington, DC
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Why Relationships Matter
Why Relationships Matter for Children

- Relationships are important for the healthy development of children and youth

Infancy/Early Childhood  Middle Childhood  Adolescence  Young Adulthood
Why Romantic Relationships Matter

• Early relationships help youth develop the skills to manage healthy intimate partner relationships
• These relationships can influence youth decisions about:
  • School
  • Employment
  • Pregnancy prevention
  • Peer relationships
A Focus on Youth in Foster Care

• Youth in foster care have experienced abuse, neglect, and face both instability and turbulence

• As a result, they face multiple challenges, including:
  – Greater risk-taking behavior, such as using drugs or risky sex
  – Challenges in making decisions about sex due to the absence of caring adults or mentors
  – Challenges establishing and maintaining positive relationships
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Relationships Matter
- Healthy development
- Healthy romantic relationships

Broad implications for:
- School
- Employment
- Pregnancy prevention
- Peer relationships

Youth in Foster Care
- Abuse/Neglect
- Instability
- Multiple challenges
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Relationships Matter for Youth in Foster Care

Healthy development
Healthy partner relationships

Abuse/Neglect
Instability
Multiple challenges

Broad implications for:
-School
-Employment
-Pregnancy prevention
-Peer relationships

Healthy partner relationships
The Importance of Romantic Relationships is Overlooked

- Research is still young
- Prior research focused more on negative rather than positive relationship aspects
- Lack of attention given to this important issue by:
  - Policy makers
  - Practitioners
  - Funders
  - Researchers
Social Skills Matter

• Children with positive social skills are more likely to:
  – Have high self-esteem
  – Have positive relationships with peers
  – Achieve in school
• Positive social skills are associated with positive later life outcomes, such as successful marriages and careers.
• Deficits in social skills are related to aggressive behaviors, such as bullying, fighting and delinquency
• There is evidence that social skills are malleable for adolescents
Relationship Education for Youth in Foster Care

• Given the existing research on the importance of relationships, we are interested in:
  – better understanding how relationship education interventions can help to improve youth’s relationship skills and the quality of their relationships
  – what current interventions and types of services are most effective in improving relationships among youth in foster care
Relationship Education for Youth in Foster Care
What does the research have to say?

Approach

• Broad literature search for published and unpublished articles
  – Internet searches
  – Review of published evaluation literature
  – Review of programs
• Reached out to researchers, program evaluators and program practitioners for recommendations
• Several dozen intervention programs were identified
Level 5
Varied programs— not specifically focused on relationship education; some have formal evaluation; some have relevant components; some have relationship education components but no relationship outcomes appear to have been examined
Levels of Evidence

Level I

Level II
• Connections: Dating and Emotions
• The Kempe Fostering Healthy Futures Program
• (Within My Reach)
• Love U2

Level III
• Best Friends
• Choosing the Best (grades 9-10 and grades 11-12)
• Loving Well

Level IV
• Healthy Choices, Healthy Relationships
• Independent Living Program
• Love Notes

Level V
• Aban Aya Youth Project
• CAS-Carrera
• It’s Your Game: Keep it Real
• L.E.A.S.E.
• M.E.I.D.
• My First Place
• PRIDE: Module 12
• Respecting and Protecting Our Relationship
• Shared Family Care Model
• SiHLE
• STEP-UP with mentoring
• Teen Parenting Services Network IL
• TOP-Wyman
• Young Dads
What does the research have to say?

Level I: *none*

Level II: Love U2

Level III: Loving Well

Level IV: Love Notes

Level V: TOP-Wyman
Level II Program Summary - Love U2

- Classroom-based relationship education program for 8th-12th grade youth
- Series of units aimed to help youth acquire practical skills for emotionally healthy relationships
- Evaluated using a randomized control trial
- Statistically significant impacts were found in many areas, including cohabitation, conflict management, marriage preparation, and the understanding of what it means to be a supportive partner.
Level III Program Summary - Loving Well

- Relationship skills curriculum structured through the use of literature.
- Designed to develop values and attitudes surrounding romantic relationships that encourage responsible sexual behavior in adolescents
- Evaluated using a quasi-experimental design
- Associations were found for sexual activity and attitudes about sex
Level IV Program Summary - Love Notes

• 15-lesson activity-based program aimed to teach young people skills to form healthy and meaningful relationships
• Designed for youth aged 16-24 who are at risk for unplanned pregnancy, single parenting, and troubled relationships, as well as those already pregnant or parenting.
• Uses activities based upon realistic scenarios, drawing, role-playing, story-telling, poetry, music and film
• Program not evaluated
Level V Program Summary - TOP-Wyman (Teen Outreach Program)

- Designed for youth, grades 6-12
- Applied to foster care populations
- Focuses on personal values, relationships, communication and assertiveness, goal-setting, decision-making, human development and sexuality, and community service learning
- Evaluated by a randomized control trial
  - Associations found for school suspension, course failure and pregnancy
Conclusions

• There is evidence on the serious problems and poor outcomes faced by adolescents in the foster care system
• There are also compelling research findings on the importance of positive relationships
• There is a lack of rigorously evaluated relationship programs for youth in foster care (no programs in Level 1)
• A number of relationship education programs exist that serve vulnerable populations of youth
• Lessons learned from these programs and their evaluations can be used to help develop effective interventions for youth in foster care
Recommendations

• Appropriate relationship education programs need to be developed, manualized, assessed, refined and tested
• There is a need for more rigorous evaluations of programs for youth in foster care
• Relationship outcomes should be examined
• Policy makers need to recognize the importance of relationships for youth in foster care
• There is a need for more funding for relationship education programs or relationship program components for this group
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