



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

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Why Relationships Matter



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Why Relationships Matter for Children

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

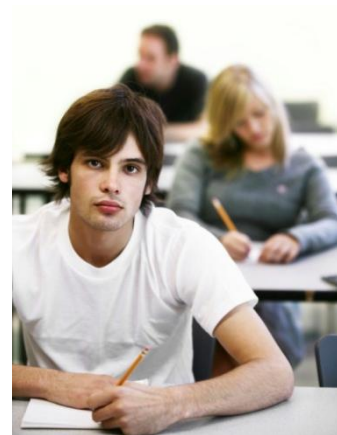
Infancy/ Early Childhood



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

Relationships Matter

**Healthy
development**

**Healthy
romantic
relationships**

Broad implications for:

- School**
- Employment**
- Pregnancy prevention**
- Peer relationships**

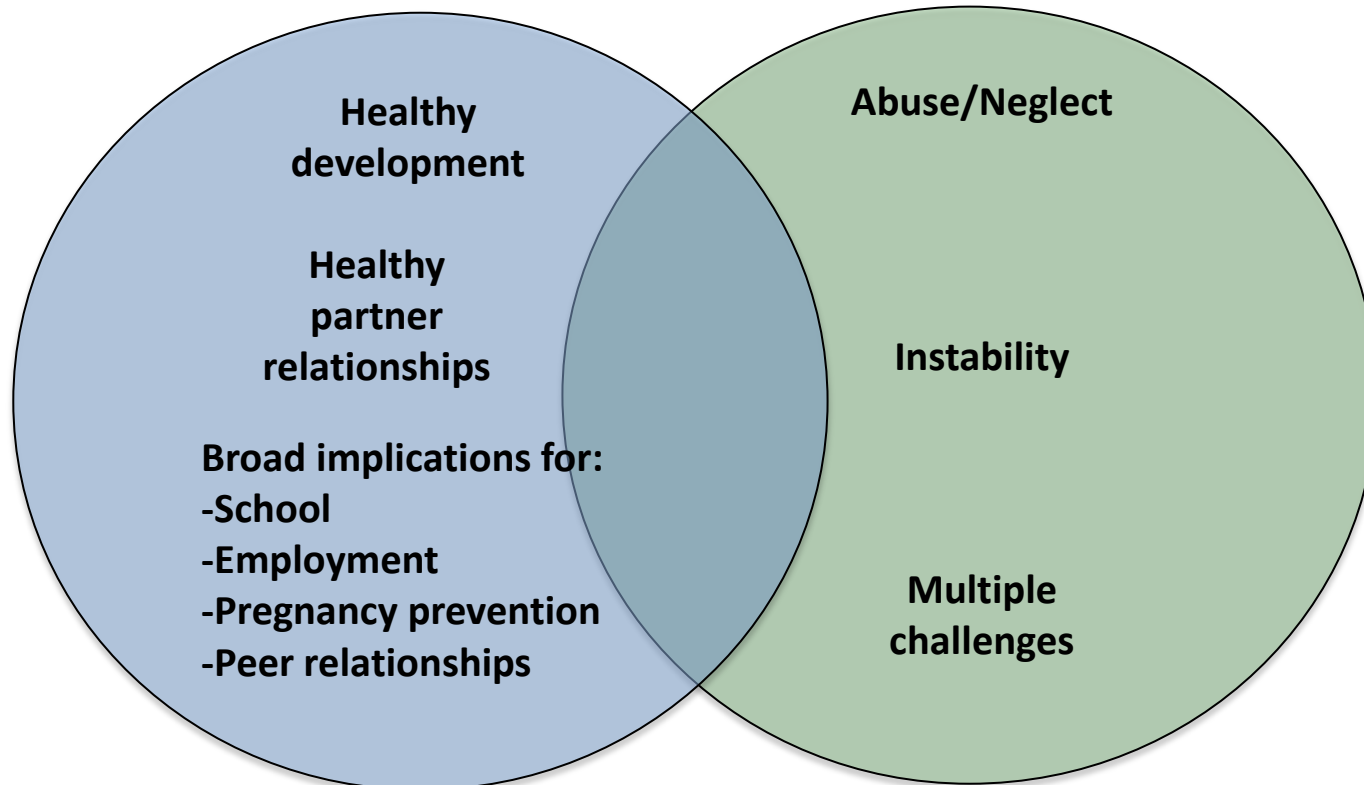
Youth in Foster Care

Abuse/Neglect

Instability

**Multiple
challenges**

Relationships Matter for Youth in Foster Care



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



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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 | •M.E.I.D. | •Respecting and Protecting Our Relationship | •STEP-UP with mentoring |
| •CAS-Carrera | •My First Place | •Shared Family Care Model | •Teen Parenting Services Network IL |
| •It's Your Game: Keep it Real | •PRIDE: Module 12 | •SiHLE | •TOP-Wyman |
| •L.E.A.S.E. | | | •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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