Adolescents and Romantic Relationship Education Programs

Overview
While much research has focused on relationship behaviors among disadvantaged adults, relatively less work has considered the implications of disadvantage on adolescents and how relationship programs can intercede at this critical juncture in the life course. Adolescent romantic relationships unfold during a unique stage in the life course, one that is characterized by keen interest in relationships, but with little preparation for navigating this new type of intimate contact. These early romantic relationships provide a framework for interaction with the opposite sex and can influence the trajectory of adult relationships and family transitions. The majority of relationship education programs focus on adults and their marriage behavior; however, many of these adults already have children and are on life course trajectories that make it challenging to move into stable marriages (i.e., decreased education, single parenthood). Thus, the quality of adolescents’ early romantic relationships is particularly important, and programs that seek to improve these relationships are pivotal. Relationship education programs that target adolescents can intercede at a critical juncture in the formation of romantic relationships that may have significant consequences for marriage and childbearing behavior.

Program Intervention
Relationship Smarts Plus focuses on helping adolescents establish healthy relationships characterized by mutual respect and open communication. This program helps adolescents establish a “north star” or positive vision of a healthy relationship that will help guide their behavior with potential romantic partners. This program sends the message to teens that developing positive relationships, waiting until marriage to have sex and children, and fully committing to another person is the ideal relationship model. The Relationship Smarts Plus program is based on eight lessons that help adolescents build healthy relationship knowledge and skills. Lessons include learning about self-awareness, establishing a future-oriented relationship mindset, and determining a more realistic concept of romantic love. Topics include the difference between infatuation and love, building blocks for healthy relationships, open-communication, cohabitation, mate selection, and consequences of premarital childbearing.

Sample participants (N= 297) in two large Midwestern urban public schools were administered the Relationship Smarts Plus program as part of their middle- and high-school curriculum, beginning during the fall semester of 2008. These schools are generally disadvantaged with 89% and 80% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches (vs. 37% for state), and the vast majority (91% and 78%) identified as a racial minority. Participants at all grade levels (9-12) took the Relationship Smarts Plus program as part of their health or physical education class. Participants completed a survey before and after the eight-week course to capture shifts in their relationship beliefs and expectations. In addition to survey data, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 20 participants shortly after completing the program. This qualitative component focuses on questions that could not be asked on the final pre-/post-class survey due to length and content restrictions.

Relationship Beliefs
At the outset, teenagers report being interested in marriage (88% agree that marriage is an important goal), and 60% think sex should only occur in the context of marriage (see Figure 1). Consistent with social science literature, teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more focused on completing education more important than relationship (82% agree), compared to addressing the importance of getting to know partner’s family (68% agree). 

Figure 1
Adolescent relationship beliefs before attending the Relationship Smarts Plus program.

Key findings:
• Adolescents are eager to attain academic, occupational, and financial goals prior to marriage.
• Effective relationship education programs could perhaps include curricula that address future goals, family circumstances, and past events (e.g., pregnancy).
The National Center for Family and Marriage Research, established in 2007 by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, aims to improve our understanding of how marriage and family structure affect the health and wellbeing of families, adults, children and communities and to inform policy development and programmatic responses.

Policy Issues
Relationship education classes targeted at teenagers may prove to have long term implications for the development and maintenance of healthy adult relationships. Disadvantaged teens launch their relationship trajectories without as many skills and pro-social beliefs as their advantaged peers. Although no relationship education program to date solely targets disadvantaged adolescents, their experiences and the difficulties they face suggest the importance of developing curricula to help them achieve their relationship goals. Relationship programs can help address the unique needs of disadvantaged youth by tailoring curriculum to address, not only what participants hope to achieve in the future, but also their current family circumstances and past events (e.g., pregnancy) that may be contributing to their present life course trajectory.