

**“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.”**

## Overview

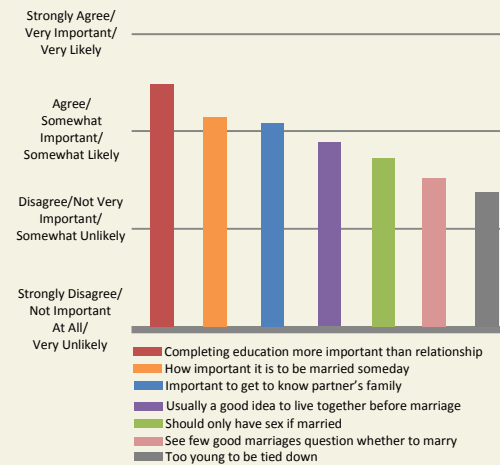
While much research has focused on relationship behaviors among disadvantaged adults<sup>1</sup>, relatively less work has considered the implications of disadvantage on adolescents and how relationship programs can intercede at this critical juncture in the life course. Adolescent romantic relationships unfold during a unique stage in the life course, one that is characterized by keen interest in relationships<sup>2</sup>, but with little preparation for navigating this new type of intimate contact<sup>3</sup>. 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<sup>4</sup>. 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

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



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

## 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).

## Sources

- <sup>1</sup>Bumpass, Larry L., J. A. Sweet, & Andrew Cherlin. (1991). "The role of cohabitation in declining rates of marriage." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53: 913-27.
- <sup>2</sup>Giordano, Peggy C. (2003). "Relationships in Adolescence." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 257-281.
- <sup>3</sup>Furman, Wyndol & Elizabeth A. Wehner. (1993). "Adolescent romantic relationships: A developmental perspective." Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, New Orleans, LA.
- <sup>4</sup>Pearson, Marlene. (2007). *Love U2: Relationship smarts plus*. Berkeley, CA: The Dibble Institute for Marriage Education.

For a full listing of sources, please visit the NCFMR website: [http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working\\_papers/file78718.pdf](http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file78718.pdf)

*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.*

backgrounds (parents with low education levels) face obstacles in terms of reporting lower expectations to marry, less agreement that completing education takes precedence over relationships, and a lesser desire to wait until education is completed before marriage. Similarly, adolescents raised outside of two-biological parent families confront some relationship issues in terms of greater expectations to cohabit, lower expectations to marry, and fewer relationship role models. These relationship beliefs may contribute to a differentially poorer outlook for disadvantaged youth in terms of relationship quality and development.

Overall, the two messages that had the greatest impact on adolescents were those relating to being too young to be in a relationship and their views of cohabitation. Teenagers increased their reports of feeling too young to be in a romantic relationship from 43% before the program, increasing that rate to 52% after the program. Prior to taking the *Relationship Smarts Plus* program, 30% of adolescents indicated that they "strongly agree" that cohabiting prior to marriage is a good idea. This percentage decreased significantly to 20% over the course of the program.

However, not everyone responded to the program lessons in the same manner. Teenagers from less advantaged backgrounds, defined by parents' education, reported gains in the importance of getting to know a partner's family before fully committing. Disadvantaged youth significantly increased their agreement that they are too young to be committed to one partner and experienced a significant increase in agreement that education should be completed prior to marriage. Fifteen-year-old Ellen claims that before she will marry her current partner, "like we've gotta be on top. We both gotta have our stuff, like jobs ... and stuff ... Our relationship's gotta be better ... We gotta have more trust in each other ... We really gotta be committed if we really want to get married." Teens from disadvantaged families also reported significant declines in the support for cohabitation after completion of the program. In contrast, teens from more advantaged backgrounds did not experience significant change on any of the relationship belief items.

Analyses also consider how family structure influences the impact of the program. Teens raised in two biological parent families (31% of the sample) report

gains in wanting to complete education prior to marriage and on the importance of getting to know a partner's family. Qualitative findings also suggest that adolescents are eager to attend college and achieve financial stability prior to romantic commitment. For example, seventeen-year-old Abigail, daughter of married biological parents with some college or trade school experience, thinks that being in a relationship in the next three to five years will "depend on like where ... what type of goals and stuff that I see maturing and moving forward with life." Conversely youth who were not living with two biological parents reported a significant increase in the belief that they are too young to be committed to one partner and experienced a significant decline in agreement that cohabiting prior to marriage is a good idea.

The program did not result in statistically significant changes in all indicators, but some key factors related to positive relationship development. *Relationship Smarts Plus* encourages a broad range of adolescents, some who may be at the most risk, to slow down their relationships and to take time to build a strong foundation of mutual respect, trust, and reliance before commitment.

## 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.

## About the Author

Deanna Trella is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Northern Michigan University. Her research examines adolescent relationship development, relationship education programs, and dating violence.

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