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Relationship Smarts:  
Assessment of an  
Adolescent Relationship Education Program

Deanna Trella  
Department of Sociology  
Bowling Green State University

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**Deanna Trella  
Department of Sociology  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403-0001  
419-308-5828  
[dtrella@bgsu.edu](mailto:dtrella@bgsu.edu)**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this report is to evaluate how participation in the *Relationship Smarts* relationship education program leads to changes in teenagers' views of relationships. The program is targeted at adolescents and consists of eight weeks of just over nine hours of class. Pre- and post-program surveys were administered (N=297), and twenty respondents participated in semi-structured interviews at the conclusion of the program. Participants are asked to describe their relationship views and experiences and to consider how their experience in the *Relationship Smarts* program has influenced their beliefs and expectations concerning romantic relationships. Participants reported significant changes in attitudes and views pertaining to readiness to be in a relationship, dating someone whom their parents dislike, ending a relationship if partners tried to change them, and the benefit of cohabitation. Significant change was also experienced by those who began the program with below-average scores on waiting to have sex after high school and views that sex should occur within marriage. These changes were in-line with program curriculum goals.

## **RELATIONSHIP SMARTS: ASSESSMENT OF AN ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM**

Recently, the federal government has attempted to support marriage by providing financial and political resources for relationship initiatives, particularly those that target poor and disadvantaged populations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families 2003, 2005; Stanley, Pearson, & Kline 2005). A large body of research examines the link between relationship patterns and socioeconomic disadvantage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin 1991; Bennett, Bloom, & Miller 1995; Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale 1995; Brown 2000; Lerman 2002; Carlson, McLanahan, & England 2004; Schoen, Landale, Daniels, & Cheng 2009), highlighting the significant barriers to marriage among disadvantaged populations (Lichter, Graefe, & Brown 2003; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed 2004; Edin & Kefalas 2005). While much research has focused on relationship behaviors among disadvantaged adults, relatively little 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 this unique stage in the life course, one that is characterized by a keen interest in relationships (Giordano et al. 2001; Giordano 2003), but with little preparation for navigating this new type of intimate contact (Furman & Wehner 1993; Collins & Laursen 1999; Collins & Sroufe 1999). These early romantic relationships provide a framework for interaction with the opposite sex and can influence the trajectory of adult relationships and family transitions. Presently, the majority of relationship education programs focus on adults and their marriage behavior; however, many of these adults have already had children and are on life course trajectories that make it challenging to move into stable marriages. For this reason, the quality of adolescents' early romantic relationships is particularly important, and programs that seek to improve these relationships are pivotal. As stated earlier, there are few relationship education programs that specifically target adolescents. Consequently, little research has examined how programs may influence adolescents' union beliefs and expectations, and even less research has addressed the unique perspectives and experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth (Ooms 1998; Lerman 2002).

The motivations for the federal and community support for healthy relationship and marriage programs are based, in part, on family trends such as the delay of marriage, increase in divorce rate, and increase in cohabitation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families 2003). Addressing these concerns, the Healthy Marriage Initiative (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families 2005) outlines a number of goals. One such goal involves enacting relationship education programs in high schools with an aim toward increasing the percentage of youth who have the skills and knowledge to initiate and sustain healthy relationships that eventuate in healthy marriages. While these state- and community-wide adolescent relationship education initiatives exist in various formats and teach a variety of curricula (e.g., *Love U2*, *No Jerks*, *Within My Reach*), all share a core goal of increasing healthy marriages, lessening divorce rates, strengthening existing marriages, and teaching youth about healthy relationships. An intervention targeted at adolescents may lead to greater changes than an adult-based program because teenagers have had fewer experiences (e.g. parenthood) that may act as barriers to marriage (Kirby 2001).

This report focuses on two issues: 1) establishing the relationship beliefs among teen program participants; and 2) evaluating how the *Relationship Smarts* program influences the relationship beliefs of participants. Using a multi-method approach, this report moves beyond prior work and

provides findings from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Participants are asked to describe their relationship views and experiences and to consider how their experience in the *Relationship Smarts* program has influenced their beliefs and expectations concerning romantic relationships.

### ***Relationship Smarts Curriculum***

The *Relationship Smarts* program, targeted at adolescent participants, offers more than existing adolescent relationship education programs, which emphasize abstinence and avoidance of premarital sex (e.g., *Why Am I Tempted?*; *Plain Talk*; *Teen Outreach Program*). A combination of the *How Not to Marry a Jerk(ette)* and *Relationship Smarts Plus* curriculum, *Relationship Smarts* focuses on helping adolescents establish healthy relationships characterized by mutual respect and open communication. In addition, 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 (Pearson 2007). This positive relationship model gives adolescents the opportunity to compare their relationships to an ideal. Although this program is pro-abstinence, not for religious, ideological, or political reasons, it extends beyond issues concerning sex to explore the emotional and social well-being of adolescents in romantic relationships (Pearson 2007). The *Relationship Smarts* program also 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 (Pearson 2007). In a culture that encourages casual sex and cohabitation without commitment and accepts premarital childbearing without commitment between parents, the *Relationship Smarts* program gives adolescents another model to aspire toward.

The *Relationship Smarts* program is based on eight lessons that help adolescents build healthy relationship knowledge and skills. Lessons include creating self-awareness, establishing a future-oriented relationship mindset, and determining a more realistic concept of romantic love (Pearson 2007). Topics include the difference between infatuation and love, building blocks for healthy relationships, open-communication, cohabitation, mate selection, and consequences of premarital childbearing (Pearson 2007). Lessons are conveyed through role-playing, small group work, visual worksheets and guides, lectures, and multi-media accompaniment (e.g., video and music). Teens are apprised of the benefits of continued education, establishing financial security prior to marriage, and considering the consequences of early and unwanted pregnancy from the perspective of the child (Pearson 2007).

### **DATA and METHODS**

Sample participants were administered the *Relationship Smarts* program as part of their high-school curriculum in the public school system during the fall semester of 2008. Participants at all grade levels (9-12) took the program as part of their health or physical education class. Participation was required as part of the general curriculum, and it was expected that adolescents would complete the entire number of offered sessions. The classes were conducted by the same teacher and met on a weekly basis for the 70-minute eight-week course. The data are based on results from two schools. 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%) identifying as a racial minority. Further, based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates, about one-fifth (17%) of the study city population are below the poverty line and about 30% are unemployed.

The *Relationship Smarts* class participants complete a survey before and after the eight-week course to capture shifts in their relationship beliefs and expectations. Additional demographic information is collected including age, race, parents' educational attainment, family structure, participants' academic performance, dating history, relationship status, cohabitation history, and parenting status. There are pre-class survey data for 304 adolescents, and most (98%) also have a post-class survey data (N=297). Only those participants who have completed pre- and post-class survey data (N=297) are analyzed. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with twenty students, volunteering to be interviewed shortly after completing the program (described further below).

### **Relationship Beliefs Survey**

Prior and subsequent to participation in the *Relationship Smarts* program, adolescents were asked to complete a 23-item relationship questionnaire to establish their beliefs about dating, sex and parenthood, cohabitation, and marriage. Completed surveys allow program facilitators to gauge the extent to which participants have retained the course curriculum over time. Further, participants are asked to consider their future plans and goals as they pertain to education and relationships (see Appendix A for survey). This questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the research coordinators overseeing the pilot study and reflects the basis of the *Relationship Smarts* program as well as existing national survey data on adolescents. Survey questions were chosen that succinctly address key programmatic goals. In addition, an effort was made to provide a comparison point with existing research on adolescent relationships. For evaluation purposes, survey results are grouped into five domains: 1) *dating ideals and attitudes*, 2) *dating partner preferences*, 3) *attitudes about sex and parenthood*, 4) *beliefs about cohabitation*, and 5) *marriage attitudes*. The specific items that constitute each domain are provided in Appendix A. Responses to questions range on a five item scale from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*.

### **Qualitative Assessment of *Relationship Smarts* Participants**

In addition to survey data, face-to-face semi-structured 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. Qualitative research narratives allow for a reconstruction of past events and, of relevance here, provide a window on how program lessons influence adolescents' relationship beliefs and expectations. The open-ended nature of the interviews allows for a free-flowing thought process in which adolescents are encouraged to recall and reflect on class lessons as well as their own personal beliefs and expectations concerning dating, cohabiting, childbearing, and marriage. This methodology allows adolescents to expound upon their experiences in ways that are not always possible with survey data (e.g., Sessler & Cunningham 2008; Edin et al. 2004; Manning et al. 2004).

Adolescents' participation in the in-depth interview is voluntary and those under 18 years of age provide parental consent. Participants are apprised of their rights to refuse an interview and to terminate the interview process at any time. Confidential interviews were conducted and tape-recorded at the program site. On average, the interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and include 22 pages of single-spaced transcripts. The interview guide is provided in Appendix B. Questions focused on participants' thoughts about the *Relationship Smarts* program, including the most important lesson they learned and whether they have had the chance to use any learned skills in a romantic context. In addition, a series of questions asked about the unique qualities of adolescent romantic relationships short duration, heightened emotionality, increased sexual pressure, inexperience with the opposite sex, and difficulty communicating. A few general questions highlighted adolescents' opinions

concerning challenges to having a good relationship, how parents influence adolescents' dating choices, and standards for dating partners. All participants are asked about their beliefs concerning advantages and disadvantages to cohabitation and marriage. Lastly, all respondents are asked to consider their future goals as they pertain to relationships, education, employment, and childbearing. Interviews were transcribed shortly after completion, and shorter 1-2 page biographical sketches were developed from adolescents' interviews. These biographical sketches contain a summary of the respondents' experiences, including direct quotes from the longer narrative to briefly characterize each case.

## **PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROGRAM**

The *Relationship Smarts* program targets a low-income population in a moderately sized Midwestern city of 187,000, with a county-wide population of approximately 575,000. Table 1 presents the distribution of socioeconomic characteristics among the complete sample of adolescent participants (N=297). Demographic indicators examined include age, gender, race/ethnicity, dating experience, current relationship status, grades received in school, and parenthood status. Age ranges from 13 to 19 and is coded as a continuous variable. The average age of sample respondents is approximately 16 years old. In this sample, the majority (74%) is female and only one-quarter (26%) are male. Participants' race and ethnicity are divided into four categories: *African American*, *White*, *Hispanic/Latino(a)*, and *Other* (i.e., Asian, Native American, biracial or tri-racial). While there are insufficient cases to provide more refined measures of race/ethnicity, the majority of respondents are minorities with 51% *African American*, 19% *White*, 15% *Hispanic/Latino(a)* and 15% listed as *Other*.

The majority (81%) of students reported earning average or above average grades, and 9% reported receiving *Mostly A's*. The majority of participants have experience dating (80%) and almost half (44%) are currently dating. As expected, only 6% of participants are parents. The majority (69%) of participants do not live in married two-parent biological families. Lastly, about one-third (34%) of participants report that their parents are college graduates, 28% have some college or trade school experience, 21% are high school graduates, and the remaining 17% have less than a high school education.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

	Total Sample %, M (SD)		Total Sample %, M (SD)
<i>Age (range is 13-19)</i>	15.73 (1.19)	<i>Family Structure</i>	
<i>Sex</i>		Married Two-Parent Biological	31%
Female	74%	Stepparent	22%
Male	26%	Cohabiting	26%
		Single Parent	7%
		Other	14%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		<i>Parents' Education</i>	
African American	51%	Less than High School	17%
White	19%	High School Graduate	21%
Hispanic	15%	Some College/Trade School	28%
Other	15%	College Graduate	34%
<i>Grades Received in School</i>			
Mostly A's	11%		
Mostly A's and B's	31%		
Mostly B's	9%		
Mostly B's and C's	33%		
Mostly C's or less	19%		
<i>Ever Dated</i>			
Yes	80%		
No	20%		
<i>Currently Dating</i>			
No	56%		
Yes	44%		
<i>Parenthood Status</i>			
Non-Parent	94%		
Parent	6%		
<i>N</i>	297		

### Adolescent Relationship Beliefs

#### *Dating Beliefs: Ideals and Attitudes*

Table 2 presents relationship beliefs for the sample. Overall, the majority of participants (84%) agree that previous dating relationships influence subsequent partner choices ( $M=3.17$ ) and 54% somewhat disagree that they are too young to be tied down in a relationship ( $M=2.38$ ).



Table.2. Percentages and Means for Pre-Class Relationship Beliefs

	Total Sample (M, %)
<i>Dating Beliefs: Ideals and Attitudes</i>	
Previous dating relationships influence partner choice.	3.17
Too young to be tied down.	2.38
Would not date someone parents dislike.	2.36
Completing education more important than relationship.	3.49
Important to get to know partner's family.	3.09
<i>Dating Beliefs: Partner Preferences</i>	
Important that partner share values.	3.22
Should be able to trust partner.	3.67
Would end relationship if partner tried to change me.	3.43
Would stay in relationship if partner hit me.	1.34
Would stay in relationship if partner cheated on me.	1.38
<i>Sex and Parenthood Beliefs</i>	
Teens should wait to have sex until after high	2.99
Should only have sex if married.	2.73
How being parent would affect future goals.	2.05
Not affect me from reaching future goals.	24%
Help me reach future goals.	5%
Prevent me from reaching future goals.	30%
Delay me from reaching future goals.	41%
<i>Cohabitation Beliefs</i>	
Usually a good idea to live together before marriage.	2.89
People who live together before marriage are less committed.	2.42
How likely is it you will cohabit?	2.61
<i>Marriage Beliefs</i>	
How important is it to be married	3.15
Married people generally happier.	2.29
See so few good marriages that I question whether to marry.	2.53
Marriage is for life and divorce not an option.	2.57
Want to wait until I finish education before marriage.	3.48
<i>N</i>	297

Katie, a 14-years-old female, explains the importance of picking a good partner to date, “well it depends like what you look for in a guy...Because most girls like dudes with saggy pants and all that

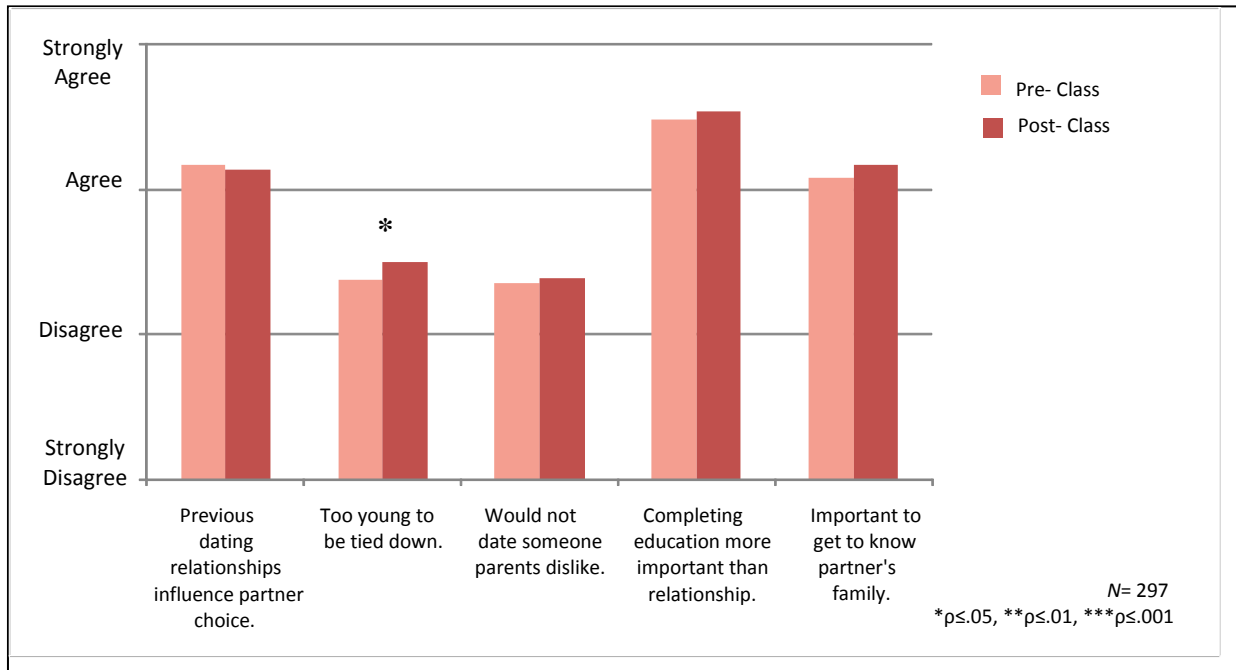
other stuff, and still expect him to do something with his life. Like 5 out of 10 it's not always gonna' be that. So it's like you gotta' really look for what you're looking for in a guy." Even at a relatively young age, Katie recognizes that choosing a romantic partner entails more than just superficial qualities. Table 2 also shows that 42% of participants would not date someone their parents dislike ( $M=2.36$ ). Jill, a 17-year-old female with highly educated parents who have some college and trade school experience, explains how she would reconcile wanting to be with a partner whom her parents disapproved,

[My parents would] prefer to meet them... They want to know who I'm dating. They want to know where I'm going, what I'm doing ... But I don't want to just not date someone just because they don't think it's the perfect person for me. I don't know if they're perfect standards and ... I would try and work out the differences ... If I really loved him and had strong feelings for him, then I don't want to disrespect my parents, but I would want to stay with him.

The majority (92%) of participants agree that completing education is more important than being in a relationship ( $M=3.49$ ). 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." For Abigail and others, romantic relationships and marriage decisions do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they must be evaluated in the context of education and career goals. Lastly, while teens may be conflicted about incorporating their parents' opinions about dating partners into their relationship decisions, they agree (76%) that it is important to get to know a partner's family before fully committing to a relationship ( $M=3.09$ ). Abigail, mentioned above, elaborates on the importance of getting to know a partner's family, "um like your background- I think it's important to know a person's family history. Since because like people say I've lived a sheltered life with my two parents and you know, I'm an only child. So I think it's important to know ... the family aspects and like your goals." Other respondents, like Abigail, expressed the importance of getting to know, not only their partner, but also the immediate influences (e.g., family) in his/her life.

Figure 1 shows that for the total sample of participants, there is a significant change in the dating belief "*I am too young to be tied down*" ( $t=-2.26, p=.02$ ). The survey results indicate there is no statistically significant change in their other dating ideals and attitudes. Given the relatively strong support for most of these indicators, further analyses were conducted to evaluate whether respondents who scored below the mean on each indicator changed their views after the class was completed. These analyses indicate that there were no significant changes in dating beliefs among the participants who scored below the mean on items measuring dating ideals and attitudes.

Figure 1. Pre-to-Post-Class Mean Dating Ideals and Attitudes Change

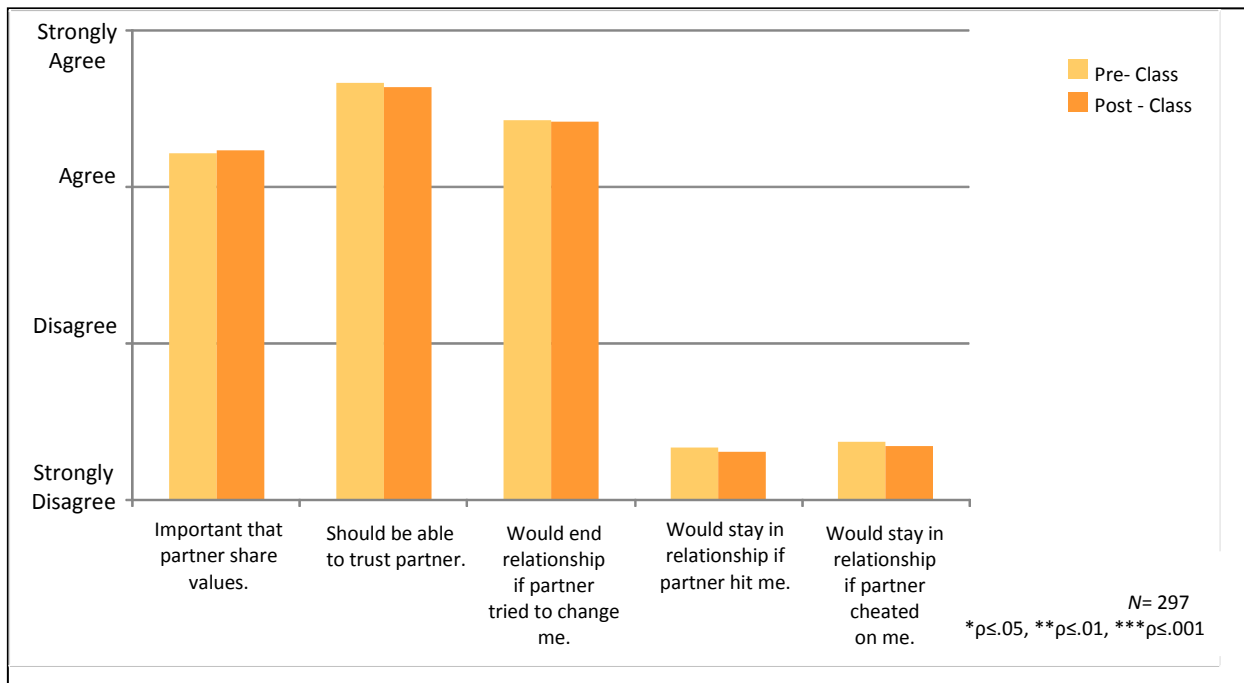


### Dating Beliefs: Partner Preferences

Answers to the second group of statements concerning “dating partner preferences” reinforce participants’ generally healthy outlook on romantic relationships (Table 2). This sample,  $M=3.22$ , agrees that it is important for a partner to share similar values (89%); 95% agrees that they should be able to trust their partner ( $M=3.67$ ); and 86% agrees that they would end a relationship if their partners tried to change them into someone else ( $M=3.43$ ). Fifteen-year-old Melissa echoes the sentiments of many participants when it comes to partner preferences, “I’m looking for how much they- how much they respect me ... How much they respect my family. If they care what I think. If they care what I- well what I say ... You gotta see if they’re sweet, if they’re smart, if they’re dedicated to their work, if they want a future.” Participants express fairly strong disagreement concerning whether they would stay in a relationship if a partner hit them ( $M=1.34$ ) or cheated on them ( $M=1.38$ ). Only 8% and 9% of participants, respectively, agree that they would stay in a relationship if they were being hit or cheated on. Ellen, a 15-year-old female who anticipates cohabiting with her current partner in the future, explains how the program taught her how to diffuse tense situations with her boyfriend: “we used to argue like everyday...I learned how to like stop. Like we can stop and talk and work out our problems instead of being mad at each other, arguing and making a big deal out of everything...we got our different opinions...But we just drop it at that.” Ellen learned that accepting differences in her partner is an important step in developing healthy relationships characterized by mutual respect.

Figure 2 indicates there are no statistically significant shifts in teens’ dating partner preferences over the course of the program. There were also no significant changes among those who scored below the mean on each indicator of dating partner preferences.

Figure 2. Pre-to-Post-Class Mean Dating Partner Preferences Change



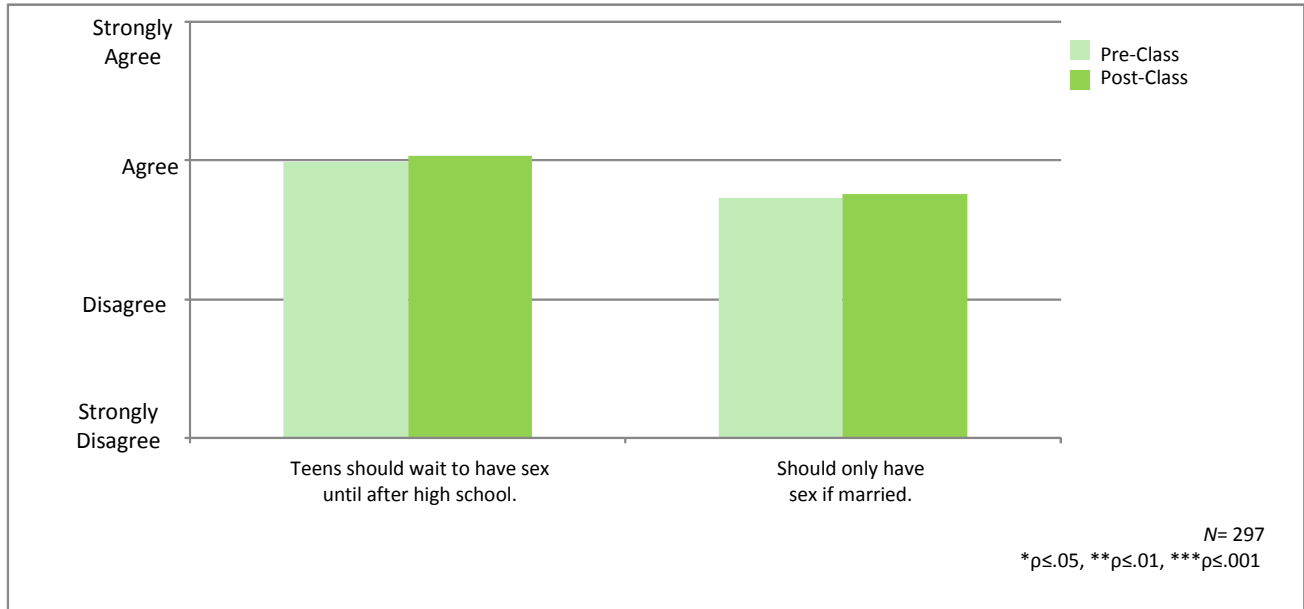
### Sex and Parenthood Beliefs

As indicated in Table 2, this sample of teens believes they should wait to have sex until after high school ( $M=2.99$ ). There is variation in response with 39% strongly agreeing and 11% strongly disagreeing to wait until after graduation to start having sex. Participants agree less strongly that people should only have sex if they are married ( $M=2.73$ ). Sixty percent agree that sex should only occur within the context of marriage, yet almost two-fifths (40%) disagree. Fourteen-year-old Wendy explains her decision to wait to have sex, “I’m waiting until I’m of age because I don’t know when I might get married. It could be a long time from now ... I think whenever I graduate high school ... Half this school’s already had sex...but like half the time that don’t even work. After they have sex they’re probably going to break up in the next week or so ... I mean there’s really no point.” Wendy’s views reveal that she has learned from the experiences of others that sex does not guarantee a happy relationship. In terms of parenthood, participants think that having children would delay their progress ( $M=2.05$ ) meeting future goals. The vast majority (71%) believe that having a child would delay or prevent them from reaching their future goals (not shown). Only 5% of respondents believe having a child would actually help them reach their goals. Ellen, living in a two-parent biological household, explains her relief at finding out she was not pregnant after having sex, “I don’t regret [having sex], because if I- why would I regret it? I shouldn’t have even did it, but I know it was too soon ... Because like I see people got babies while they’re young. I could have had a baby but good thing- thank God I didn’t.” Ellen realizes that having sex put her at risk for getting pregnant and admits to feeling relieved that she did not have a child, though she continues to have sex.

The results in Figure 3A show that teens did not statistically significantly change their beliefs about sex and parenthood over the course of the program. Additionally, there is not a significant change in

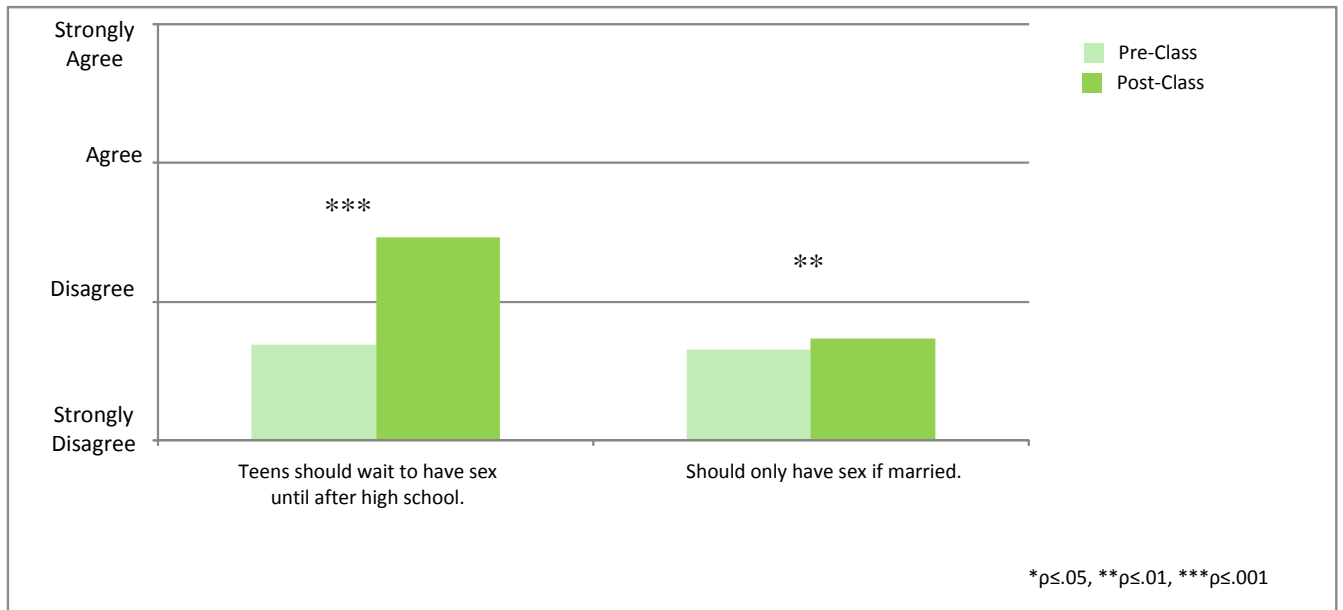
the effect of having children on achieving future goals (not shown). Prior to the class 30% felt having a child would prevent them from reaching their goals compared to 28% after the class.

Figure 3A. Pre-to-Post-Class Mean Sex and Parenthood Beliefs Change



There was not a significant change in beliefs about the effect of children on achieving goals among those who began with below average scores (not shown). Prior to the class 57% believed that children would delay their progress compared to 61% after the class. However, among those who began the program with below-average scores on the sex and parenthood items, there was a significant increase in agreement about the following: (1) teens should wait to have sex until after high school, and (2) sex should only occur within the context of marriage (Figure 3B). Among those who initially scored below the mean on waiting to have sex until after high school, only 3% felt it was important to wait prior to taking the class compared to 57% after the class. Similarly, among respondents who initially scored below the mean on the belief that sex should occur in marriage, there was a significant increase on the same issue ( $M=1.65$ ,  $M=1.73$ ). Yet, after the program, the majority (97%) still disagrees that one should wait until marriage to have sex. The significant changes suggest that the greatest strides were made among those who had the furthest to go in terms of meeting the program goals.

Figure 3B. Pre-to-Post-Class Mean Sex and Parenthood Beliefs Change for Participants with Below-Average Initial Indicators

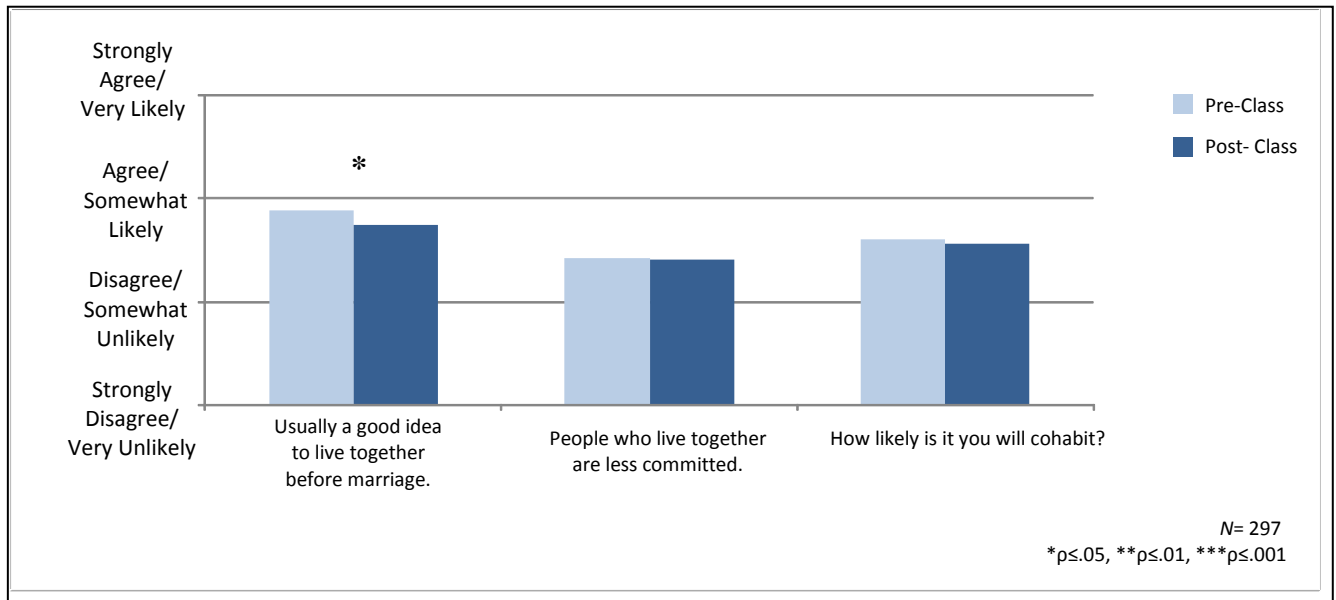


### Cohabitation Beliefs

Participants offer support for the idea of cohabiting prior to marriage ( $M=2.89$ ), but there is variation in responses with 28% strongly agreeing and 14% strongly disagreeing (Table 2). Teens do not have strong views on whether living together prior to marriage signals less commitment than marriage ( $M=2.42$ ). Forty-six percent agree that cohabitators are less committed but close to half (48%) disagree. Kelly, 14-years-old and from a married household, explains why cohabitation may not be a good choice, “I think you shouldn’t live together before you get married...Cuz then like if you’re living together- like the percentage of you guys getting a divorce is really high.” This suggests that cohabitation is not viewed as a promise of a successful marriage. Teens also do not want to risk living with someone who is untidy. Abigail, 17-years-old and also from a married household, explains her reluctance to cohabit with her current boyfriend, “I think, and there’s small stuff right now because I think I’m younger, but like just I’ll walk into his room and I’m like I could never live with you. Like it would never happen. I would never be able to live with you! ... just how he operates sometimes. It’s just like I know our systems would crash.” Like many respondents, Abigail anticipates that disparities in their mannerisms and behaviors may foretell problems. Other respondents have more positive assessments of cohabitation. Fifteen-year-old Katia, who lives in a non-two parent biological family, believes that “when you live with somebody before marriage, you know how they react to things ... You don’t wanna’ just get married and then all of a sudden live together because then you’re just going to be learning what this person likes and what this person dislikes ... It could really tell you if you’re going to get married or not.” Some respondents also fail to appreciate any difference between cohabiting and marriage. Fourteen-year-old Katie, also from a non-two parent biological family, argues, “the only difference is there’s a ring on your finger, so you’re really committed ... [but] you could still be committed and not be married.” This sample is also unsure as to whether they will ever/will again cohabit ( $M=2.61$ ) with 12% expressing strong agreement and 19% strong disagreement (Table 2).

Figure 4 indicates that adolescents experienced a significant decline over the course of the program in their level of agreement with the statement “*It is usually a good idea to live together before marriage*” ( $t=2.38, p=.02$ ). Adolescents agreed less with this statement after completing the class ( $M=2.89, M=2.75$ ). Prior to taking the class, 30% of adolescents indicated that they *Strongly Agree* that cohabiting prior to marriage is a good idea compared to only 20% after taking the class. The remaining items measuring commitment in cohabitation and expectations to cohabit did not significantly change over the course of the program. There were no significant changes in cohabiting beliefs among those who began the class with below-average scores on the indicators.

Figure 4. Pre-to-Post-Class Mean Cohabitation Beliefs Change



### Marriage Beliefs

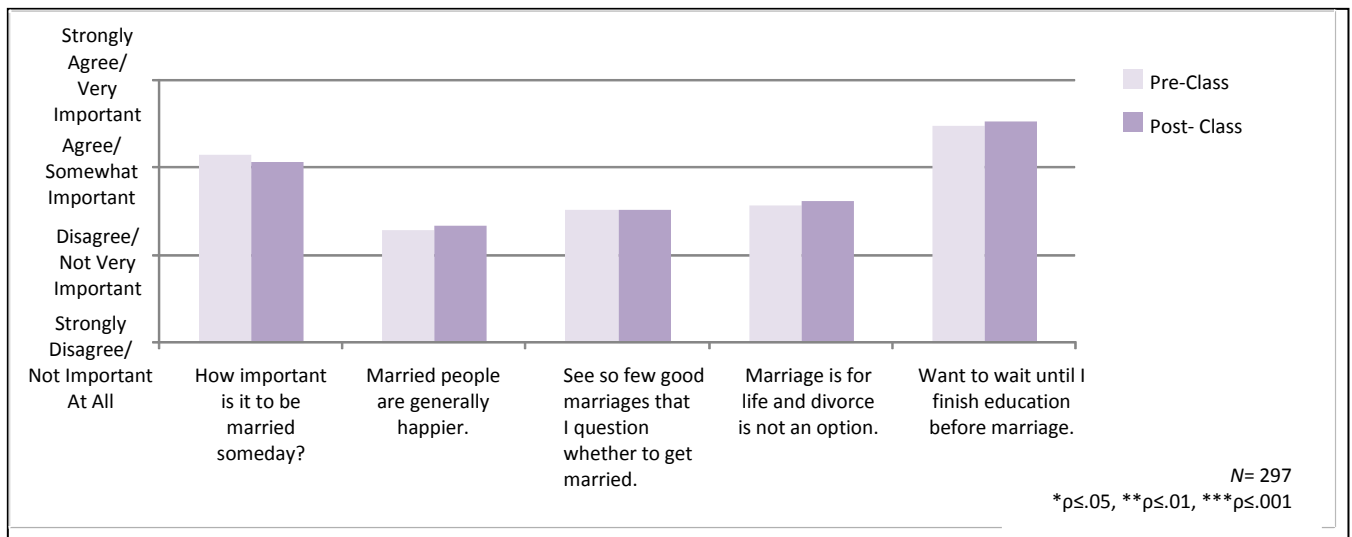
Table 2 indicates that participants generally agree that it is important to be married someday ( $M=3.15$ ). Close to half (44%) of all respondents indicate that marriage is a “very important” goal: however, they are somewhat undecided as to whether married people are happier than unmarried people ( $M= 2.29$ ). Accordingly, fifteen percent of participants strongly disagree that married people are happier than non-married individuals; yet only 8% strongly agree that married people are happier. This may be due, in part, to the fact that more than half (69%) of this sample resides in non-two parent biological families where relationship discord is a greater likelihood; yet participants are somewhat unclear as to whether seeing few examples of good marriages makes them question whether to get married ( $M=2.53$ ). Similar percentages of participants strongly disagree (16%) and strongly agree (11%) that having few good relationship role models influences their own marriage plans. This uncertainty in response may be due to the discrepancy between those who *do* see so few good marriages, therefore, questioning whether to get married, and those who *do* see so few good marriages, yet do *not* question whether to get married. Poor question wording may also be eliciting unreliable and inconsistent responses.

Participants are also unclear as to whether marriage should be for life without the option of divorce ( $M=2.57$ ). Over half (53%) agree that marriage is for life; however, 46% disagree. Melissa, 15 years old, explains that she wants “to get married but well how I see it is that if I feel that we’re not going-

we're not going okay well then I'd have to say that we'd have to take a break, like separate for a little bit. And then if it really isn't working then just have to get a divorce because if it's not working now ... [but] I wouldn't want to put my kids through that." Even by the age of fifteen, respondents like Melissa are grappling with the future ramifications of divorce on themselves and their yet-to-be-born children. Most participants strongly agree that they want to wait until after completing their education to marry ( $M=3.48$ ). Only 2% of participants strongly disagree that they will wait to finish their education before marrying. 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." Commitment is not the only consideration for adolescents. Educational goals are also factored into decisions about marriage timing.

Figure 5 illustrates the pre- and post-scores on the marriage belief items. The findings indicate no significant change in marriage beliefs over the course of the program. Those who began the program with below-average scores on marriage belief indicators also did not experience any significant change in beliefs about marriage.

Figure 5. Pre-to-Post-Class Mean Marriage Beliefs Change



## SUMMARY

This assessment examines the relationship beliefs of the adolescents who have recently completed the *Relationship Smarts* relationship education course as part of their high school curriculum. Because the majority of youth experience their first romantic relationship in adolescence, this time period is pivotal for ensuring that adolescents forge meaningful, healthy relationships as they transition to adulthood. Accordingly, whether government policies concerning relationship education programs are effective and appropriately targeted will depend, at least in part, on an understanding of how adolescents think about and plan for romantic relationships during the transition into early adulthood. Notwithstanding expectations to marry, adolescents maintain certain attitudes and beliefs concerning marriage, and relationships in general, which may forestall efforts to achieve their union goals.



Prior to taking the program teenagers generally want to be with people who share their values, who are trustworthy, do not try to change them, as well as avoid relationships with violence or cheating. They are aware that prior relationships may influence the course of their current relationships and know it is important to know their partner's family. Teenagers are knowledgeable about relationship risks and agree that it is best to wait to have sex and express low support for cohabitation. They value their education and do not think that relationships should come before relationships and report is a good idea to complete their education prior to marriage. Teenagers agree that it is important to be married. Thus, prior to the class, adolescents' beliefs were in line with much of the program curricula.

Among this sample of youth there is consistent agreement that being a teen parent would prevent youth from reaching future goals. The vast majority of the sample are non-parents; however, qualitative findings suggest that these youth have directly witnessed the influence of children on their peers. In many cases, adolescents indicate that, at least temporarily, having children actually results in greater respect and adoration. Youth may be unaware of parenting struggles when they witness their peers elicit positive reactions to having children and see their peers continue to attend school and, in some cases, graduate.

After completing the program participants reported changes in some attitudes and views. There was an increased awareness that they may be too young to be tied down. Prior to the class, 43% felt they were too young to be tied down and after the class this percentage increased to 52%. Teenagers were less likely to report that they would date someone who their parents disliked after the class. After completing the program participants reported greater odds of ending a relationship with a partner who tried to change them. There were significant increases in support of statements related to the delay in sex and having sex in marriage among those who began the program with below-average scores on these indicators. Below-average scoring youth experienced a significant increase in agreement that teens should wait to have sex until after high school, and that sex should only occur within the context of marriage. Forgoing cohabitation, in general, is a key component of the *Relationship Smarts* curriculum and adolescents experienced a significant decline over the course of the program in their level of agreement with the belief that it is a good idea to cohabit. The percentage who *Strongly Agree* in the benefit of cohabitation decreased from 30% to 20% over the course of the program.

Relationship education programs should acknowledge that teens, even disadvantaged teens, often 'know' the appropriate conduct and expectations for future relationships, but they may face challenges in enacting these beliefs and attitudes. Future work is warranted to assess how adolescents' beliefs influence their subsequent relationship behavior. It is important to understand how adolescents utilize the material presented in relationship classes and later apply it in their personal relationships. For relationship education classes to meet the needs of youth, it is also important to understand the nature of their relationships, how they view marriage, and the obstacles they face in achieving marriage. Relationship programs can help address the unique needs of adolescents by tailoring curriculum to address, not only what participants hope to achieve in the future but also their current family circumstances, and past events that may be contributing to their present life course trajectory. Program evaluations that are able to assess the benefit of such curricula may be more beneficial for understanding the different relationship trajectories facing all youth.

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## APPENDIX A- RELATIONSHIP SMARTS PRE-/POST-CLASS ASSESSMENT

### Relationship Smarts Survey

#### *Dating Beliefs: Ideals and Attitudes*

*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?:*

1. My previous dating relationships influence what I look for in a [boyfriend/girlfriend].
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
  
2. I am too young to be tied down to one [girl/guy].
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
  
3. I would *not* date someone who my parent[s] dislike.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
  
4. Completing my education is more important than being in a romantic relationship.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
  
5. It is important to get to know my [boyfriend's/girlfriend's] FAMILY before fully committing to them.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree

#### *Dating Beliefs: Partner Preferences*

6. It is important that my [boyfriend/girlfriend] share my values.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree

7. I should be able to trust my [boyfriend/girlfriend] before fully committing to [him/her].
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
8. I would end a relationship if my [boyfriend/girlfriend] tried to change me into someone I am not.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
9. I would stay in a relationship if my [boyfriend/girlfriend] hit me, as long as [he/she] loves me.
  1. Strongly Agree
  2. Somewhat Agree
  3. Somewhat Disagree
  4. Strongly Disagree
10. I would stay in a relationship if my [boyfriend/girlfriend] cheated on me, as long as [he/she] loves me.
  1. Strongly Agree
  2. Somewhat Agree
  3. Somewhat Disagree
  4. Strongly Disagree

*Sex and Parenthood Beliefs*

11. Teens should wait to have sex until they are out of high school.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
12. A person should only have sex if they are married.
  1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
13. Do you think that being a teen parent would...
  1. not affect me from reaching my future goals.
  2. help me reach my future goals.
  3. prevent me from reaching my goals for the future.
  4. delay me reaching my goals for the future.

14. It would be okay for me to have children if I were living with my [boyfriend/girlfriend].
1. Strongly Agree
  2. Somewhat Agree
  3. Somewhat Disagree
  4. Strongly Disagree

*Cohabitation Beliefs*

15. It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along.
1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
16. People who live together without being married are less committed to one another than people who are married.
1. Strongly Agree
  2. Somewhat Agree
  3. Somewhat Disagree
  4. Strongly Disagree
17. How likely is it that you will [ever/ever again] live with a [boyfriend/girlfriend] before marriage?  
Is it:
1. Very Unlikely
  2. Somewhat Unlikely
  3. Somewhat Likely
  4. Very Likely

*Marriage Beliefs*

18. How important is it to you to be married someday?
1. Not Important At All
  2. Not Very Important
  3. Somewhat Important
  4. Very Important
19. Married people are generally happier than unmarried people.
1. Strongly Disagree
  2. Somewhat Disagree
  3. Somewhat Agree
  4. Strongly Agree
20. I see so few good or happy marriages that I question whether I should get married.
1. Strongly Agree
  2. Somewhat Agree
  3. Somewhat Disagree
  4. Strongly Disagree

21. Marriage is for life and divorce is not an option for me.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Somewhat Disagree
3. Somewhat Agree
4. Strongly Agree

22. I want to wait until I finish my education before getting married.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Somewhat Disagree
3. Somewhat Agree
4. Strongly Agree



## APPENDIX B- RELATIONSHIP SMARTS INTERVIEW GUIDE

### INTRODUCTION

My name is Deanna and I work at Bowling Green State University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. There are few things I want to remind you about this study. First, this is a study of the *Relationship Smarts* relationship education course, and I am interested in your unique experiences. Additionally, I am interested in learning more about how your experience in the class has influenced your relationship beliefs and expectations. Second, you can stop talking at any time. If I raise some issue you don't want to talk about, just say so and we will move on to something else. No big deal.

I will tape record our conversation because I don't want to take notes during the interview. If you want me to turn off the tape recorder for any reason or any time, just say so. No one will hear the tape except for the research team and then we erase the tape. We take out your name and other identifying information.

Is it okay to turn on the tape recorder now? {GET VERBAL CONSENT}

The tape recorder is now on. Any questions? Okay, let's start.

---

### BACKGROUND

*I have just a few questions about your background ...*

How old are you? [INTENT: Age]

What grade are you in now? [INTENT: Educational attainment]

Are you currently working for pay? [INTENT: Employment]  
Do you work full-time or part-time?

Does your family currently receive any kind of public assistance [e.g. SSI, food stamps, subsidized housing]?

Do you live with both your biological parents? [INTENT: Family structure]  
[If not] Why is one of your parents absent?

Who lives with you right now in your house?

Do they all live here regularly or most of the time? [Household relationship & stability]

[If kids present...] Are any of these your biological children? [INTENT: bio/step children?]  
[If yes bio kids...] Do all of your biological children live with you?  
[If not all biological children live with respondent...] Where do your other biological children live? [INTENT: physical custody of children]

## PROGRAM

*Let's start by discussing the Relationship Smarts Program. I am interested in your thoughts about the class.*

What did you think of the facilitator (name)?

[Probe: Did he/she make you feel comfortable at the class?]

[INTENT: response to facilitator]

What were your expectations about the classes? In other words, what did you hope to learn?

Do you think your expectations for the class were met?

How did the class meet your expectations?

[Intent: expectations met]

What are the most important things you think you learned there?

[INTENT: Noteworthy elements of class]

Do you think the *Relationship Smarts* program has given you the tools you'll need to have a successful relationship?

Have you tried to use any of the skills you learned in the class with anyone?

[INTENT: Apply skills]

Have you tried to use any of these skills with others (i.e., co-workers, parents, customers)?

How did that work out?

[Probe - What happened when you tried? It can be with kids, partner, other parent, family or even work]

[INTENT: success of application of skills]

Would you recommend the class to friends or family? Why or why not?

[INTENT: network]

Have you recommended the class to friends or family? Why or why not?

[INTENT: network]

Did any of the lessons in the class help you in your relationships – Did you avoid getting involved with someone or did you get involved with someone based on lessons from class? Has the *Relationship Smarts* program influenced what you look for in a dating partner?

[INTENT: decision-making]

What about the worst thing about the class for you? If you could change one thing about the class, what would it be?

[INTENT: problems in class]

## GENERAL RELATIONSHIP BELIEFS

*Now I have some questions about your general experiences and views about relationships:*

What do you think are the key issues/challenges to having a good relationship?

[INTENT: Key relationship issues]

How do you think the class you took addressed those issues/challenges?

[Probe: Did the classes cover relationship challenges]

[INTENT: Class question outside class section]

Is there anything going on in your life that makes it hard to have a good relationship?

[INTENT: other intervening factors – illegal activities, jobs, etc.]

What are you looking for in an ideal partner?

Do you think it is hard to find a good partner to date in today's world?

Why?

Who influences you most when it comes to your dating choices? (e.g., parents, friends, coworkers, pastor?)

[INTENT: Where are adolescents seeking dating advice?]

Does your parents' relationship influence your dating choices at all?

[INTENT: Intergenerational transmission of relationship issues]

Do you think you would ever date someone who has been to jail?

[INTENT: Ideal partner]

Do you think you would ever date someone who has been/is involved with drugs or alcohol?

[INTENT: Ideal partner]

Would you date someone who has children from another relationship?

[INTENT: Ideal partner]

Would you date someone who your friends dislike?

[INTENT: Influence of friends on relationships]

Would you date someone who your parents dislike?

[INTENT: Influence of parents on relationships]

## SEX

*Now I have a few questions about sex and relationships.*

Have you ever had sex?

[INTENT: Sexual experience]

[If no...] Are you waiting to have sex until you get married?

[INTENT: Sex and marriage]

[If yes... ] How old were you when you first had sex?  
[INTENT: Age at first sex]

When you date someone do you think there is generally some pressure to have sex?  
[INTENT: Sex in dating relationships]

Have you ever been pressured to be in a sexual relationship?  
[INTENT: Sexual initiation]

Do you think that teens today are having sex too soon? Why/why not?  
[INTENT: Perception of teen sex as an issue]

Do you think that it's okay for teens to have sex as long as they are committed to one another?  
[INTENT: Does commitment make having sex okay?]

## DATING

*Now I have some questions about your current dating, cohabiting, or married relationship.*

Are you currently dating?  
[INTENT: Relationship status]

[If yes... ] How long have you been seeing each other?  
[INTENT: Duration]

[If not dating]: Have you ever seriously dated someone before?  
How many people have you seriously dated?

[Not in relationship- If *never* dated]: Why have you decided to not date?  
[Probe: There are no eligible partners, too busy...]  
[INTENT: Is that a decision they made or is there some other reason?]

[Not in relationship- If *never* dated]: Do you ever want to date someone? Why or why not?

[Not in relationship- If not dating currently – *ever* dated]: Tell me about your most recent serious dating relationship?  
Why did you start that relationship?  
How did that relationship end?

[In a relationship]: What would you say is the best thing about your relationship?

[In a relationship]: What makes you want to stay with x?

[In a relationship]: What would x say is the best thing about your relationship?  
[INTENT: Warm up for next question]

[In a relationship]: What do you think is the biggest problem in your relationship?

[In a relationship]: What would x say is the biggest problem in your relationship?

[In a relationship]: What gets in the way of having a good relationship?  
[INTENT: Do they see problems]

[In a relationship]: Had you ever considered living together with x? Why or why not?  
[INTENT: Thoughts about cohabitation]

[In a relationship]: Do you expect to live together with x at some point?

[In a relationship]: What would have to happen for you to live together with x at some point?

[In a relationship]: Did you ever consider getting married to x? Why or Why not?

[In a relationship]: Do you expect to marry x in the future?

[In a relationship]: What would have to happen for you to marry x in the future?

[In a relationship]: What do you think is the ideal age to get married?

[In a relationship]: How committed are you to this relationship? How committed is X?  
[INTENT: Commitment levels; mismatch in commitment levels]

[In a relationship]: Do you trust x? [why / why not]

[In a relationship]: Does X trust you? Why/why not?  
[INTENT: Reasons for trust/distrust; mismatch in levels of trust]

[In a relationship]: Have you talked about being sexually faithful to one another? [What is your agreement?] [Note – there may be no conversation and it is implied]  
[INTENT: Fidelity issues]

[In a relationship]: Has fidelity or being faithful been an issue at all in your relationship?  
[INTENT: Problems with fidelity]

[In a relationship]: What would be the “deal breaker” in the relationship – under what conditions would you break up?  
[INTENT: Why would they end relationship?]

[In a relationship]: Have you ever thought about leaving or breaking up? Why?  
[INTENT: Instability and conflict]

[In a relationship]: Did you ever break up and then get back together? Why did you get back together?  
[INTENT: History of instability]

[In a relationship]: What does your family think about your relationship?

[In a relationship]: How does that influence your relationship? Examples of support?  
[INTENT: Family reactions]

[In a relationship]: What do your friends think about your relationship?

[In a relationship]: How does that influence your relationship? Examples?  
[INTENT: Friends' reactions]

[Everyone]: Sometimes men and women want different things out of their relationship ... do you see that among your family and friends?

[In a relationship]: How about in your own relationships?

[INTENT: Gender issues – men traditional and women not]

[In a relationship]: How long do you think this relationship will last?

[In a relationship]: Do you think you will still be together in one year?

[INTENT: Future stability of the relationship]

[Everyone]: Have your past relationships influenced what you look for in a dating partner?  
How?

[Everyone]: Has the *Relationship Smarts* program influenced what you look for in a dating partner? How?

[Everyone]: Do you think the program will help you in your future relationship? How so?

[Everyone]: How important is to you to be in a relationship right now? (Scale from 1 to 10) Tell me why?

[INTENT: Do people even want to be in relationships]

[Everyone]: How important is to you be in a relationships sometime in the future? (Scale from 1 to 10) Tell me why?

[INTENT: Relationship later?]

## MARRIAGE ATTITUDES, EXPERIENCES, AND EXPECTATIONS

*Now I have some questions about your marriage attitudes and experience.*

Do you know anyone who has had a marriage or relationship that has worked out?

[If yes...] Why do you think it worked out [probe: what was their secret for success?]

[INTENT: perceptions of what it takes to have a good relationship]

In general, do you see any advantages to being married rather than living together?

[INTENT: advantage of marriage]

Are you concerned about divorce in the future?

[INTENT: fear of divorce as motivator to avoid marriage or to test out partner via cohabitation]

In general, what do you think has to be in place to get married?

[PROBE: money, job, mature]

[INTENT: Barriers to marriage]

Have you discussed marriage with your partner?

[If yes...] When do you think you might marry?

[INTENT: Specific plans to marry]

Does your family pressure you about marriage or encourage you to get married?  
[INTENT: Pressure or influences to marry]

What is the ideal age to get married?

## COHABITATION ATTITUDES, EXPERIENCES, AND EXPECTATIONS

*Now I have some questions about your cohabitation attitudes and experiences.*

Have you ever lived with someone (cohabitation)? How many different people?  
[INTENT: Cohabitation history]

[If no...] Would you ever consider cohabiting with someone before marriage?  
[INTENT: Intention to cohabit]

Do you think cohabitation is generally a good idea for couples? Why/Why not?

Does it usually work out okay or not?  
[INTENT: general view of cohabitation]

Do you think there are any advantages to cohabiting with someone?

In your experience, what are some of the advantages of cohabiting rather than dating?  
[INTENT; reasons to cohabit]

Do you expect to cohabit before marriage?  
[If no...] why not?

## CHILDREN AND PARENTING

*Now I have some questions about children.*

Do you have any children?  
[If yes...] How old are your children?  
[If yes...] Do these children all have the same [father/mother]?  
[If yes...] Do you have a child support order for any of these children?  
[If yes...] Is this child support order being paid?

[Everyone...] Would you consider having children with your current partner?  
Why or why not?  
[INTENT: Partner's parenting]  
[INTENT: Fertility intention]

*Let me ask you some questions now about children as they pertain to relationships.*

Do you think that having a partner who has children from another relationship can make it hard on your relationship?

How might the children's other parents (e.g., mother/father/stepmother/stepfather) affect your relationship with your partner if you were dating someone who had children from another relationship?

[INTENT: How complex families influence relationships]

Would you marry someone who has children from another relationship?

Would you marry someone who is not the [father/mother] of your children? Why/Why not?

[INTENT: Multiple partner fertility and marriage intention]

Do you think that people who have children together should get married? Why/Why not?

[INTENT: Combination of marriage and parenthood]

Do you think children are better off if their parents are married rather than living together? Why/Why not?

[INTENT: Is marriage better for kids?]

Do you think a single [mother/father] could bring up a child as well as a married couple?

What are some difficulties a single [mother/father] might face?

[INTENT: Can an individual parent as well as a couple?]

#### FUTURE PLANS AND GOALS

[Everyone...] How do you see your future shaping up ... where will you be in 3-5 years?

Do you have any other thoughts or anything you would like to add to help us understand relationships?

THANK YOU!