

# Characteristics of Successful Youth Programs

**Successful youth programs need to have a few key characteristics to reach teens effectively.**

It's no surprise that most teens explore romantic relationships. Romance is the premise of many teen movies, and is apparent in their everyday life through tweeting, chat rooms, text messaging and school gossip. Relationships that occur during the teen years are an opportunity for young adults to experience romance, learn about themselves and establish expectations for future relationships. So, how can a program effectively turn a hot topic into a teachable moment? This Tip Sheet describes key characteristics of successful youth programs.

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## 1. Meet teens where they are.

Make sure your program is age and culturally appropriate — and hip. The curriculum and corresponding materials need to be suitable for their maturity level. Relationship messages for tenth graders will be inappropriate for eighth graders. Be especially careful regarding sexual education content as the information provided and classroom discussions again, should be age-appropriate.

The culture of a group of teens is more than the origin of their racial or ethnic roots. Ethnic culture, religious views and relationship perspectives are quite often established at a local or community level. It will help to research the following questions about your community:

- What is the prevalence and/or social acceptance of premarital sex?
- Do most kids you're working with come from single parent families?
- What is the marriage and divorce rate in the community?

## 2. Be interactive.

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Lessons need to be engaging and entertaining. Include exercises that will provide an experience as well as activities to help them learn. Consider marketing your program on a social networking site such as Facebook or through Twitter to keep youth engaged and aware of upcoming workshops and events. These are also ideal ways to provide links to current resources and information.

### **3. Create an atmosphere that allows them to learn about themselves.**

Young people today tend to be introspective. They want to know why something matters — or should matter — to them. Give them the opportunity to self-assess their personal beliefs and relationships. For example, if their parents went through a divorce, encourage them to consider how that negative event might affect their personal views about marriage and commitment.

### **4. Don't let them say too much.**

Teens often disclose too much when they become engaged in class discussions. Be prepared to guide group discussions so they cannot reveal too much to their classmates.

### **5. The messenger matters.**

Teens want to hear from someone who is easy to relate to, so consider using peers (other teens and young people) to share how a similar workshop helped them in their relationships. You can also invite them to present a topic.

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### **6. Be a role model.**

You don't have to be married or even in a relationship to be a role model; however, you do need to be able to exhibit maturity, responsibility and adequate knowledge when delivering relationship education to youth. Your primary role is not to be their friend. While it is important that you listen, understand and relate to them, always remember that you are the adult.

Address not only what a marriage looks like, but how to make wise choices when choosing a mate. Try to demystify marriage as a "soul mate-based" concept and help a young person think about it as something that isn't perfect and takes work.

### **7. Use the word marriage.**

Marriage has become more of an individual choice (among other acceptable options) than a social requirement. Recent research indicates that most young people aspire to be married in their lifetime; and, they want their marriage to be a life-long commitment. With this in mind, address not only what a marriage looks like, but how to make wise choices when choosing a mate. Try to demystify marriage as a "soul mate-based" concept and help a young person think about it as something that isn't perfect and takes work.

## 8. Good relationship skills can be learned.

Many young people believe that good relationships just happen. However, it's important for them to understand that skills can be learned that will allow them to be themselves in a relationship, as well as communicate their needs and dreams safely. A younger audience (middle school) may not consider themselves ready for "dating" and will probably benefit the most from relationship skills (communication and conflict resolution) with friends, teachers, parents and family. On the other hand, older teens (high school and college) are more likely already involved in the dating game and will benefit from more specific information and skills that will help them establish healthy dating relationships.

Reinforce the many benefits of relationship education including:

- Making more money when entering the work force
- Having the knowledge to manage anger/conflicts
- Prevent child abuse
- Decrease criminal behavior

## 9. Talk about dating violence.

Make it clear that healthy relationships are free of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Explain what these three types of partner violence look like and alert them to the warning signs.

- Emotional abuse can consist of put-downs, destructive language, controlling behavior and threats of violence.
- Physical abuse involves hitting, slapping, hair pulling, using a weapon or basically any action causing physical pain to the victim.

- Sexual abuse can be defined as any kind of unwanted or forced sexual activity or rape, even when both parties are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Explain the difference between emotional abuse and common criticisms every teen experiences from their peers on a daily basis. It is crucial that they are provided with information on how to take action if they find themselves or someone they know in a dangerous or unhealthy relationship.

## 10. Have resources available.

Teens really want research-based information and they want to know that what you are providing them is accurate. Be prepared to direct them to reliable resources. Realizing that kids often get bogged down with a great deal of reading for classwork, try to provide resources that are direct, shorter in length and attention-grabbing. Here are some examples:

- a. "10 Things Teens Should Know About Marriage" flier - <http://www.dibbleinstitute.org/Documents/dibblepamp.pdf>
- b. "Facts About Dating Violence" handout - [http://www.dibbleinstitute.org/Documents/Dating\\_Violence\\_Flier.pdf](http://www.dibbleinstitute.org/Documents/Dating_Violence_Flier.pdf)
- c. First Things First Resource Center for Teens - <http://firstthings.org/page/resource-center/for-teens/>
- d. First Things First Talk to Friends Page – <http://www.talktofriends.org>

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