

## Appealing to Teens to Participate in Healthy Marriage/Relationship Education

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### Background

Divorce rates have more than doubled during the last half of the 20th century. They reached a peak in the 1980s and have lowered only slightly since. Over the same period, rates of cohabitation (i.e., unmarried couples sharing a household) have greatly increased. At the same time, the average age at which people are getting married has risen too. These trends are especially pronounced in low-income populations.<sup>1</sup> Despite these changes, the significant benefits of a healthy marriage to individuals and society remain unchanged and are documented by years of research.<sup>2</sup>

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More than 80% of teens have experienced their first romantic relationship by age 18.<sup>3</sup> The experiences in these relationships can have potentially life-altering consequences for adolescents' emotional health (like depression and self esteem) and social and academic competence.<sup>4</sup> In addition, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases/infections (STDs/STIs) and risk of pregnancy can occur. Teen relationships also provide the primary backdrop for intimate partner violence, decisions about if and when to engage in sexual behavior, and contraceptive use.<sup>5</sup> The consequences may be even more significant within low-income populations, where rates of STDs/STIs, intimate partner violence, and teen pregnancy are even higher than in middle class populations.

In light of these findings, it is believed that teens would benefit greatly from healthy marriage and relationship education (MRE). A survey conducted on behalf of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that in a nationally representative sample of young people aged 12-17, seven out of ten teens say that most of their friends are in romantic relationships.<sup>6</sup> According to a report released by Rutgers University on behalf of the National Marriage Project, high school students who participate in relationship education are more likely than those who don't to describe improved communications with parents, increased use of reasoning tactics in conflict situations and more favorable attitudes toward premarital preparation and marriage counseling.<sup>7</sup> In addition, those who participated were less likely to use verbally aggressive tactics in resolving conflict and less likely to see cohabitation as a likely course for them before marriage.<sup>8</sup>

This guide provides practical strategies to help you recruit teens into your MRE services. Consider the following four tips:

- Know and be able to explain why teen marriage/relationship education matters



- Choose a setting and/or partnership
- Market your message
- Consider all your recruitment options

## How to Appeal to Teens

### Explain Why Marriage/Relationship Education Matters for Teens

Relationship education guides adolescents in their problem-solving and communication skills. These skills are important for teenagers to understand so that they can form healthy relationships and make good decisions. Mastering these techniques will allow for better business and family interactions as teens grow into young adults and ultimately, start families of their own.

#### **Individual Development.**

Learning these skills encourages teens to discover things about themselves as individuals. This enables them to make more informed choices about what their values and goals are. Such introspection is helpful in a teen's transition to young adulthood.

**Teen Motivation:** Adolescents value romantic relationships highly and seek them out for themselves on average. Even young children are aware of and are generally preoccupied with romantic issues.<sup>9</sup> Across ethnic, racial, and gender categories, most adolescents view marriage as an important and desirable goal, and most expect to get married themselves. Males endorse marriage more strongly than females, and among males, Hispanics endorse marriage more strongly than whites, who endorse it more strongly than blacks.<sup>10</sup>

**Teen Sexual Behaviors/Risks:** Experiencing a romantic relationship within the past 18 months is one of the most powerful predictors of sexual activity among adolescents.<sup>11</sup> Unsafe teen sexual activity

can result in STD/STIs. In fact, nineteen (19) million new STD infections occur each year, almost half of them among those ages 15 to 24.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of teens believe that communication with their parents about love, sex and relationships should start when kids are about 13 or 14. In addition, teens indicate that it would be easier for them to delay sex and avoid pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.<sup>13</sup> Teens who participate in relationship education can apply the communication skills they learn to discussions with their parents; examples and homework from these classes are also the perfect tools to facilitate these discussions.

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**Teen Dating Violence:** Females ages 16 to 24 are more vulnerable to intimate partner violence than any other age group—at a rate almost triple the national average.<sup>14</sup> Approximately 1 in 5 female high school students report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner.<sup>15</sup> Because of these alarmingly high rates of vulnerability within female teens, it is essential for them to understand what a healthy relationship looks like so they may recognize warning signs and protect themselves. This includes being familiar with mental, physical and sexual abuse.

*For more information/handouts on teen dating violence, please see Appendix A.*

*For a sample Dating Violence Protocol for Educators, please see Appendix B.*

## Choose a Setting and Partnership

Select a setting and partnership(s). The two decisions are often interrelated. Once you establish contact, develop the relationships and stay connected. Consider drafting a strategic plan around your mutual settings, goals, and programs.

*For a list of Questions to Consider When Selecting Settings and Partnerships, please see Appendix C.*

Possible Settings		
Healthcare	Community	School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Healthcare facilities, extensions, and hospitals</li> <li>• Teen pregnancy prevention centers</li> <li>• Local counseling and mental health agencies and clinics</li> <li>• Programs for pregnant and parenting teens</li> <li>• Pediatric clinics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious institutions</li> <li>• YMCAs/YWCAs</li> <li>• Camps or retreats</li> <li>• Summer programs</li> <li>• Juvenile justice system, juvenile detention centers</li> <li>• Local counseling and mental health agencies and clinics</li> <li>• Foster care programs</li> <li>• Group homes</li> <li>• Daycare</li> <li>• Independent living facilities</li> <li>• Ropes courses</li> <li>• Charm schools</li> <li>• Boys and Girls Clubs</li> <li>• Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts</li> <li>• Boys town</li> <li>• Rotary Club</li> <li>• Kiwanis Club</li> <li>• Universities</li> <li>• Fraternities and sororities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-school (FACS/health/psy)</li> <li>• After-school programs</li> <li>• Pre-prom workshops,</li> <li>• Student government</li> <li>• Student clubs</li> </ul>

Experts in the field strongly suggest partnering with **schools, religious institutions** (especially those looking for programming for kids after 8th grade), and **community centers** (particularly those serving more at-risk youth).<sup>16</sup> It is important to note these facilities may have curriculum requirements.

For a list of Marriage/Relationship Education programs, please see Appendix D.

## Market Your Message

Marketing promotes your mission and services. Remember that people usually need to see information multiple times before they really absorb it. You should plan to market your program consistently in multiple places over time. Also, keep track of where participants hear about your program and what caught their attention so that you can identify which parts of your strategy are more successful and adjust accordingly. Lastly, remember that word of mouth is an invaluable marketing tool.

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**Social Networking Sites:** To advertise or increase interest in your services, consider using online services, like *MySpace*, *Facebook* or *Twitter*. For online marketing, the key to addressing teens is to talk with them, not to them. Often times, adults attempt to scare teens into things by using statistics. It is important to remember that this age groups believes themselves to be immortal so establishing rapport is much more effective.

Create a MySpace account for your program. You can easily create a page that can be accessed by anyone who searches *MySpace* by name or a related topic (such as relationships, love, health, teens, youth, or sex education). To promote your page, learn what other pages exist. Then, you can request to “add to friends” any person or organization with a MySpace account to raise awareness and interest in your page. Over time, your network of “friends” will grow as more people access your site through either the search function or mutual friends’ pages. This provides a great opportunity to spread the word and

make your services known. For more information, search the web for *how to set up a MySpace account*. *Facebook* operates similarly to *MySpace*.

*Twitter* is a service that allows you to send out “mini-blogs” to those people “following” you on this service. You can send out one to two line facts about relationships. You could use this to inform teens and generate interest in MRE classes.

Other prime methods for reaching teens are: instant messaging, email marketing, viral marketing, advertising, streaming audio, file sharing, and non-intrusive rich media.<sup>17</sup>

### **Traditional Marketing Venues:**

Other ways to market the message include advertising on your community partners’ websites and newsletters, in community and school newsletters and within religious organizations. There are many avenues available to advertise including but not limited to flyers and brochures, newspapers, TV, and radio.

People sometimes need to see information about a program or service multiple times before they decide to explore it further. Make sure that you use as many different marketing strategies as possible.

Use visuals that attract youth; it helps to feature pictures of young people. Make sure you have signed release forms from their parents!

**Tailor Your Message:** One way to get some ideas about effective messages for your population is to ask teens themselves. Get in touch with some teens who have already been through your program, find out what they liked most about the program, what interested them about it in the first place and where they heard about your program. In fact, if the teen is really enthusiastic about his or her experience, you can even incorporate his or her quote into testimonials in your marketing materials. Focus groups are a good way to get feedback from teens!

## Recruit Teens to Your Program

Recruitment is specific to getting participants in the program.

### Schools:

Teachers in the school setting are the most sustainable approach and most practitioners find greater success going directly to teachers.<sup>18</sup> Propose to present at their local in-services, summits, and state conferences. However, feel free to ask administrators to let you do a training for teachers too. Present at the next PTA (to convince parents) or school board meeting.<sup>19</sup> Try approaching teachers individually. On your school's website, look up the teachers of Health and/or Family and Consumer Science classes. Meet with the principal. Talk to school counselors, who will know which students have the greatest need. Always prepare remarks and handouts.

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Check your state's curricular frameworks and find out which discipline covers these materials (i.e., family and consumer science/health/psychology).<sup>20</sup> For instance, family and Consumer Science classes, or FACS classes already teach courses on child development, family, relationships, and sexuality (see webcast information on FACS partnerships in Additional Resources). Health classes are mandatory and universal. Promote healthy relationship education as an important context for making good sexual choices. If teens know how to handle crushes, attractions, and understand the differences between healthy and abusive relationships, they will make better sexual decisions. Also, healthy relationships are an integral part of the wellness agenda; they encompass physical, mental and emotional health.<sup>21</sup>

Many students are looking for volunteer hours to fulfill service requirements—ask teachers if attending an MRE program can fulfill this requirement. Explain that it will be a service not only to them, but to their future relationships, friendships, co-workers, and families. Cite research on the impact of social-emotional intelligence and relationship smarts on life satisfaction and success. (See additional resources)

Ask teachers to award extra credit to students 1) who participate in any form of MRE outside of class, whether a luncheon, after-school program, or night class, and 2) who discuss these the skills with their siblings, friends, neighbors, or families.

Depending on the reach of your group, contact the state, district or high school person in charge of the appropriate discipline. Let them know how you can help them reach their goals because you are familiar

with best practices, the research base informing relationship education, and evaluated materials.<sup>22</sup>

Send flyers to parents publicizing who you are, what you do, and why these programs should be included in their child's education. Provide

remarks or handouts or schedule a brief assembly at parent-teacher conferences.

Encourage MRE graduates to be mentors to the next class and to recruit their friends and siblings into classes. Word of mouth is a great way to recruit. If students enjoy the material, consider starting a club and giving it a creative name. Recruit an adult club advisor (they are normally teachers in the school), such as a FACS/health/psych teacher. Host a lunch series of teen MRE, either by the club or by your organization. Sponsoring an outing is always popular with teenagers as is getting a t-shirt (designing t-shirts at your meeting is a great time, too).

*To see a sample handout, "10 Things Teens Should Know About Marriage", please see Appendix E.*

## After-school programs:

Research suggests that MRE is well-received in after-school programs if you can demonstrate the following:

**Your curriculum has low resource demands (for example, it does not require staff to have much education or training with the service).**<sup>23</sup> You might try a curriculum/program that can be taught without training.

**Students like the curriculum.** Do your homework on the curriculum you use. Talk to the curriculum developer. Get in touch with others who use it. Find out what students like and why. Read journal articles, publications, or fact sheets about your curriculum's successes and be prepared to talk about them.

**Show that the program can improve program attendance, behavioral problems, or staff-student relationships.**<sup>24</sup> Again, what are the benefits or outcomes of your program? What does it aim to do? How does that relate to improving relationships or reducing behavioral problems? For instance, in MRE you teach communication skills, anger management, conflict resolution, and so forth. All of these skills are transferable to staff-student relationships.

## Programs serving disadvantaged youth:

The message that MRE will “build assets” has been extremely successful. Possessing knowledge, insights and skills to build healthy relationships is an asset of the highest order. Troubled, bad relationships often accompanied by poor sexual choices have the capacity to undo and set back the progress young people make.<sup>25</sup>

## Youth programs:

Explain that possessing “love smarts” is important. Just as youth need school smarts and job smarts today, they need “love smarts” to make sound and healthy relationship choices to get where they want to be in ten or fifteen years.<sup>26</sup>

## Teen parenting programs:

The research is clear. When parents are in troubled, unstable, and destructive relationships, there is a significant impact on child well-being and parenting. Teen parents need tools to learn how to leave safely if it is dangerous, how to assess their relation-

Do your homework on the curriculum you use. Talk to the curriculum developer. Get in touch with others who use it. Find out what students like and why.

ships, and how to identify what needs to change or improve to go forward with their current partners.<sup>27</sup>

## Foster youth:

MRE can provide information and skills to build, prepare for and live for what they want most- a family.<sup>28</sup> It is also extremely important for this population to understand what a healthy relationship looks like as most foster youth have been removed from biological families that are dysfunctional.

## Religious institutions:

Make the case to the youth services coordinator; be sure to relay that this venue will inform both parents and youth. Ask him or her to publicize your services and endorse teen MRE. Host an information session in the religious institution for free. Send flyers and informational handouts home and post them in the building.

## Adult marriage education programs:

Partner with adult marriage education services in your community. Schedule a 5-10 minute informational message about teen MRE before a class to raise interest and awareness. Hold it at the end of their series/class/training, so they can advocate the merits of MRE from personal experience. Solicit suggestions on how to recruit teens and share these services. Ask them to discuss youth MRE with their neighbors, friends, and co-workers.

## Health clinics and health-related organizations:

Know your state's health guidelines for middle-schoolers and high-schoolers and use these guidelines as an opportunity to offer MRE. For instance, all students entering 7th grade in the state of Nebraska are required to have a general health physical. Practitioners can take advantage of this time to talk to both youth and their parents about MRE.

You can also recruit teens directly into programs. Consider recruiting the student body president or student government as MRE spokespeople, campaigners, and/or advocates. Hold a "lunch and learn" and offer curricular excerpts. Invite the teens to create a campaign using their student newspaper, and radio/TV/announcement programs.

## Conclusion

More than 80% of teens have experienced their first romantic relationship before the age of 18. Thus, it is essential that teens are given a solid foundation of knowledge regarding healthy relationships. There are several ways in which to appeal to teens to participate in marriage education programs, including establishing strategic community partnerships, utilizing marketing venues and materials that attract teens, and recruiting teens through schools, youth programs and teen-led campaigns.

## Additional Resources

**Adolescent Romantic Relationships as Precursors of Healthy Marriages: A Review of Theory, Research, and Programs.** [http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/2007/RAND\\_TR488.sum.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2007/RAND_TR488.sum.pdf)

**Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy and Marriage.** [http://www.thenational-campaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/MALC\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.thenational-campaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/MALC_FINAL.pdf)

**Kiss and Tell: What Teens Say About Love, Trust and Other Relationship Stuff.** [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/kiss\\_tell.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/kiss_tell.pdf)

**Can Kids Get Smart About Marriage? A Veteran Teacher Reviews Some Leading Marriage and Relationship Education Programs.** <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/Print/Print%20Can%20Kids.htm>

**Starting Early: Talking to Teens About Healthy Relationships. Why Family and Consumer Sciences is the Perfect Fit.** <http://www.nga.org/Files/ppt/0409webcastfossum.ppt>

**Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.** [http://ag.arizona.edu/extension/weld/book\\_reports/Emotional\\_IQ-Hutchins.pdf](http://ag.arizona.edu/extension/weld/book_reports/Emotional_IQ-Hutchins.pdf)

**Listen to the complete webcast of Joan Fossum's speech on Partnerships Between MRE and Family and Consumer Sciences classes at** <http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.9123e83a1f6786440ddcbeeb501010a0/?vgnnextoid=beb5303cb0b32010VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD>.

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- <sup>11</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup>Students Against Destructive Decisions. Resources: Statistics. February 2007. Retrieved July 13, 2008 at <http://www.sadd.org/stats.htm#stds>.
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