

Considerations for Collecting Outcomes Data from Adolescents

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Child Trends, with funding from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has put forth recommendations for outcome measures that may be used in evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education programs serving high school-aged adolescents.

Creating a strong data collection plan involves both selecting appropriate measures to assess program outcomes and carefully considering how the data will be collected. Toward these aims, Child Trends has developed a set of [recommended outcome measures](#) that may be used in evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs serving high school-aged adolescents.¹

This tip sheet is a companion piece that provides advice on collecting outcomes data for adolescents. There is no one correct approach; the best approach will depend on a particular program's goals, research questions, and resource constraints. This document presents researchers, evaluators, and program staff with key considerations for developing a data collection plan that is appropriate for their situation.

What are the intervention's goals and target population(s)?

When developing a data collection plan, it is essential to first consider what outcomes and population your intervention is intended to impact. For instance, is the program only intended to impact the program participant, or also the participant's partner? Is the program focused solely on romantic relationships, or does the curriculum also address relationships with friends and family, or career and college readiness? While most HMRE programs for teens have similar core goals and target populations, different curricula and research questions will necessitate different data collection approaches. Having a clear logic model for the intervention, and well-defined research questions, will allow you to determine the most important outcomes to examine in your evaluation, and will inform other decisions you will need to make when designing your data collection plan.

Who should answer the questions?

We suggest that questions be posed to the teen who is engaged in the program, not any of the teen's romantic partners. While a typical issue that arises when studying relationships is whether to ask questions of one partner or both partners, this issue is less of a concern when studying adolescents. This is because most adolescents are not in long-term, stable relationships, so programs do not tend to focus on specific couple relationships. Instead, HMRE programs for teens are generally meant to change an individual participant's behaviors and attitudes, rather than the behaviors or attitudes of both members of a couple.

Who should the questions be about?

While we recommend collecting data from the program participants (and not their partners), it is important to consider whether the questions should focus only on the respondent's behaviors or also on the respondent's perceptions of a partner's behavior. If an HMRE

¹ Scott, M.E., Moore, K.A., Fish, H., Benedetti, A., & Erikson, S. (2015). Healthy marriage and relationship education: Recommended outcome measures for adolescents. OPRE Report #2015-65a. Prepared by Child Trends. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.childtrends.org/our-research/marriage-and-cohabitation/3m/>

program mainly focuses on changing the youth's own attitudes, expectations, and skills, it may not be necessary to include questions about a specific partner. However, if a program is focused on changing the types of relationship a teen has or the partners he or she chooses, it may make sense to ask about the respondents' partners. For example, a researcher could ask (1) how often a respondent does things to show that he or she cares about his or her boyfriend/girlfriend, and (2) how often a respondent's boyfriend/girlfriend does things to show that he or she cares about the respondent. If the goal of the program is to encourage teens to avoid uncaring, unsupportive relationships, it is important to measure how often the respondents and their partners are supportive of one another.

Because most adolescent relationships are temporary in nature, many teens in HMRE programs may experience several relationships over the course of a program and follow-up period. Also, most HMRE programs for teens are focused on changing an individual's behavior and attitudes rather than specific couple dynamics. Therefore, we recommend that questions about a respondent's partner focus on the current relationship at the time of the survey. If you take this approach, you should consider asking teens who their partner is at each data collection point so you will know whether the respondent is answering about the same partner or different partners at each point. This can be important if you need to know whether the same relationship changed over time, or whether the teen began a new relationship. Also, because some teens may have multiple romantic relationships at the same time, we suggest using a screener item to identify teens in multiple relationships. You can then instruct those teens to answer questions about their primary relationship or a series of questions about each relationship they have. The best approach will depend on your circumstances.

Some adolescents, of course, will not be in a romantic relationship. After using screener items to identify who is in a relationship, you could instruct teens who are not in a current relationship to skip the questions that focus specifically on romantic relationships, and instead answer items about relationship dynamics (for example, emotional and personal support) that are rephrased to inquire about a specific non-romantic relationship, such as a close friend or parent. In fact, given the nature of the development of close relationships and given that relationship skills learned in the context of friendships may transfer to a romantic relationship (and vice versa), it may be valuable to ask all respondents about non-romantic relationships. The value of this approach will depend on the program's goals and research questions.

How should data be collected?

Beyond assessing who should answer questions and on whom questions should focus, it is important to consider the setting where the survey is conducted, the mode of administration, and its length. Finally, it is always important to follow standard procedures for ensuring human subjects protection and addressing issues that may arise when collecting sensitive data (such as mandatory reporting requirements).

Regarding setting—some teens may not feel comfortable disclosing information in locations where there is a real or perceived lack of privacy (for example, over text message that their parents may see, or in juvenile justice facilities or schools). Conducting online surveys or administering surveys in community locations such as libraries or recreational facilities may be more viable alternatives. It is also necessary to consider the potential limitations of what kinds of data can be collected in certain settings. For example, some schools may prohibit data collection about sexual interaction or dating violence.

Regarding the mode of administration—if your survey contains sensitive questions (for instance, about sexual activity), it will be important to administer the survey in a way that protects privacy and promotes truthful responses. You will be more likely to get accurate responses to sensitive questions if respondents complete the survey on their own, instead of answering questions posed by an interviewer.²

²Morsbach, S. K. and R. J. Prinz (2006). Understanding and improving the validity of self-report of parenting. *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review*, 9(1), 1-21.

Regarding survey length—while it can be tempting to include every item that is potentially relevant or interesting, survey fatigue can diminish the quality of the data you collect, especially among adolescents. If you require a long survey, to the extent resources allow, you may consider breaking the survey into multiple discrete sections that can be administered at intervals.

Conclusion

The tips presented here, along with the corresponding measures tables, are meant to support researchers, evaluators, and program staff in their efforts to assess HMRE outcomes for adolescents. As described above, we encourage all researchers, evaluators, and program staff to consider an intervention's goals and target population(s), the most appropriate respondents and question subjects, and the best way to collect the data. Our hope is that these resources will provide guidance for creating a strong data collection plan that is responsive to the program's goals, research questions, and resource constraints. Ultimately, this will strengthen your ability to evaluate and draw conclusions from HMRE programs for adolescents.