

Delivering Relationship Education Services to Youth

Relationship education can be a vital intervention to help teens achieve their relationship goals.

Studies show that increasing numbers of teens from 1975 to 1995 felt that marriage and family life were “extremely important” to them. In 2005, most teens continued to feel favorably about marriage. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 90 percent of Americans will marry someday. Relationships as depicted in popular books and movies are new and exciting to youth. Even so, many teens have

The common elements in most programs include commitment, trust, intimacy, self awareness, attitudes/beliefs and communication skills. These components may be taught in a stand-alone relationship education course (such as *Relationship Smarts* or *Connections*) or as part of a sex education program, abstinence education curriculum, character education course or Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) curriculum.

The common elements in most programs include commitment, trust, intimacy, self awareness, attitudes/beliefs and communication skills. Selecting the curriculum that is right for youth in your community requires a review of the various programs available.

Selecting the curriculum that is right for youth in your community requires a review of the various programs available. Things to consider when selecting a curriculum include:

- Age of youth

experienced divorce in the family and are pessimistic about the possibility of having a stable, two-parent household or a lifelong marriage. Relationship education (RE) services are, therefore, a timely, vital intervention to help teens achieve their relationship goals. However, since the field is relatively new, programs for youth can be difficult to create. The following are tips to navigate common challenges in delivering RE services to teens.

Select an Appropriate Curriculum

Youth RE curricula come in many forms. Some are geared toward middle-school-age youth while others target pregnant/parenting youth or young adults/late teens with some relationship experience.

- Maturity of youth (Are they currently in romantic relationships?)
- Community values (Are divorce and cohabitation common or are most students in two-parent,



married family homes? Are there common ethnic cultures/values? Are out-of-wedlock births common?)

- Teaching setting (Are you teaching in a community-based or academic setting?)
- Teaching style (Some programs are led by peers, others are best taught by teachers, and others can be taught by lay people.)

You will need to tailor the curriculum by using stories and examples that reflect your students' life experiences. This can be done by using examples from pop culture such as movie/video clips, news/magazine articles and themes from popular books. Adapting the curriculum allows you to teach the core skills in the lesson and ensures its relevance to your students.

Get Parents on Board

Between the ages of 12 and 18, youth make many important decisions related to deciding to date, becoming sexually active, and so forth, which impacts issues such as teen pregnancy and self-esteem. Research highlights the importance of parents as a resource for teens and influential in teen decision making, yet also indicates that parents may not see the purpose of RE for youth. Parents may find it challenging to talk to their teens about these issues and need to be comfortable with how your program defines them. Create resource materials that explain what youth RE is and why it matters. Consider using resources that explain why marriage matters to society, what relationship education teaches, and how RE is a great supplement to pregnancy prevention, dating violence, positive youth development, and

building teen assets. Understand what your audience cares about, and address it in your materials.

Make sure facilitators are able to build good rapport with youth and are comfortable discussing relationship issues. A facilitator should have formal training in the curriculum you choose; be knowledgeable about other community resources so he or she can make referrals; understand and be able to identify the signs of dating violence; and have experience working with youth.

The Messenger Matters

Teens can be a tough audience. Make sure facilitators are able to build good rapport with youth and are comfortable discussing relationship issues. A facilitator should have formal training in the curriculum you choose; be knowledgeable about other community resources so he or she can make referrals; understand and be able to identify the signs of dating violence; and have experience working with youth. It is also helpful for facilitators to be tech savvy. Today's youth enjoy texting and social media sites for communication. A facilitator can use these tools as a means to keep their participants engaged in the program.

Gauge how your teacher/facilitator is received by youth by gathering feedback through focus groups and evaluation forms. You can also use the focus groups and interviews to gain insights about what else might be needed in your RE program. Communicate this information to your facilitators if you are directing a program.

Some programs use peer facilitators. An enthusiastic participant from a previous class or a champion for the program in the current location will be a great peer facilitator.

Select a Setting

Youth RE can be delivered in a variety of settings. You may not be able to deliver your RE program in a school during the school day because of the high demands of the district's education requirements.

Working with school teachers to deliver the curriculum may be ideal; however, getting a program approved by a school board, department of education or school administrators may be challenging. The education system provides many opportunities for integrating RE (see Figure 1), but you may want to explore partnerships with after-school/community programs that already serve youth to offer RE classes.

Figure 1. Possible settings for RE services

Possible Settings		
Healthcare	Community	School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Healthcare facilities, extensions and hospitals ✓ Teen pregnancy centers ✓ Local counseling and mental health agencies, including out-of-home placement facilities ✓ Programs for pregnant and parenting teens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Religious institutions ✓ Community and/or faith-based organizations ✓ Camps or retreats ✓ Summer programs ✓ Juvenile justice system and juvenile detention centers ✓ Child welfare programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ In-school classes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FACS (Family and Consumer Sciences) • Health ✓ After-school programs ✓ Pre-prom workshops ✓ Student government ✓ Student clubs ✓ Alternative schools

Though youth RE is a relatively new field, there are many ways to deliver these services to teens. The keys are to choose a good curriculum, define your message, select an appropriate setting, hire good facilitators, and know your audience. These tips will aid in overcoming common challenges and achieving success.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Emily Luschin, M.Ed, for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Ms. Luschin is a program specialist and research analyst within the healthy relationship field.

This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.