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Adolescent Romantic Relationships as Precursors of Healthy Adult Marriages

A Review of Theory, Research,
and Programs

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Prepared for the Department of Health and Human Services



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Executive Summary

Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Healthy Marriage in Adolescence

During the last half of the 20th century, divorce rates more than doubled, reaching a peak in the 1980s that has since declined only slightly. Over the same period, rates of cohabitation (i.e., unmarried couples sharing a household) have greatly increased and, perhaps as a consequence, the average age at which people are getting married has risen significantly. As much as these trends have affected all segments of society, they have been especially pronounced within low-income populations, suggesting that forming and sustaining a healthy marriage may be uniquely challenging in the context of economic disadvantage.

The Healthy Marriage Initiative. Concern about the potential social impact of these trends has motivated community leaders and policymakers to initiate programs and policies to encourage and support healthy marriages, especially among low-income populations. At the federal level, these efforts began in 1996 with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Among the goals of the law were to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” and to “end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting . . . marriage” (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 1996, Section 401). When this measure was renewed in 2006, the new legislation allocated \$750 million to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) for activities that promote and support healthy marriages and responsible fatherhood. Recent funding announcements for this initiative have targeted low-income populations. Thus, a substantial level of federal and state resources will soon be devoted to efforts to support and strengthen marriages in low-income communities.

The Case for Targeting Adolescents. Although most activities designed to promote and support healthy marriages are aimed at adults, an accumulating body of evidence suggests that, by the time members of low-income populations reach adulthood, some of the factors that place them at higher risk for unmarried parenthood and divorce may already be in place. In particular, a number of researchers and theorists have suggested that the building blocks of healthy adult marriages are formed during adolescence. Among the many elements of adolescents’ lives that may provide a foundation for healthy marriages as adults (e.g., the quality

of the education they receive, their available career opportunities, protection from violence and substance abuse), researchers and policymakers have devoted particular attention to adolescents' romantic relationships. Indeed, more than 80 percent of first romantic relationships occur during adolescence, and experiences in these relationships can have potentially life-altering consequences for adolescents' emotional health, social and academic competence, and self-esteem. The consequences may be even more significant within low-income populations, where rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), intimate partner violence, and teen pregnancy are disproportionately high. Recognizing the importance of adolescent romantic relationships to healthy adult development suggests that targeting those relationships directly may lay the foundation for subsequent healthier marriages in adulthood. Consistent with this strategy, the recent legislation allocating funds for the Healthy Marriage Initiative describes relationship-focused education in high schools as one of eight activities eligible for support.

Goals of the Report. To inform current efforts to strengthen the adolescent precursors of healthy marriage, the overarching goal of this report is to synthesize and evaluate the existing basic and applied literature on adolescent romantic relationships, with particular emphasis on experiences in these relationships as precursors of adult marriages. By evaluating the accumulated products of this work to date, the analyses described in this report should provide a foundation for policies to promote healthy marriages through programs aimed at adolescents.

Organization and Methods. The report is organized around three major tasks:

1. *Review descriptions of what adolescent romantic relationships are like.* To accomplish this task, the report assembles and reviews research that describes what adolescents believe and value about romantic relationships and marriage in general and how adolescents behave in their own romantic relationships.
2. *Review explanations of the role adolescent romantic relationships may play in adult development.* To accomplish this task, the report integrates existing theories of adolescent romantic relationships and adult development and evaluates the degree to which existing theories have received support from the empirical literature on adolescent relationships to date.
3. *Assess interventions designed to make adolescents' relationships, and their subsequent marriages, better.* To accomplish this task, this report reviews a diverse sample of available relationship education curricula targeted at adolescents and describes interviews with practitioners directly involved in this area.

Drawing on the results of these tasks, the report concludes by identifying priorities for future research in this area and offering strategies and suggestions for developing programs and curricula to promote healthy adult marriages during adolescence.

Definitions. Several words and phrases that appear repeatedly throughout this report should be defined explicitly. For example, the World Health Organization defines *adolescence* as the period of life from 10 to 19 years of age (Goodburn and Ross, 1995). We adopt the same definition, although most research on adolescents has focused on the six years associated with secondary school, i.e., the ages of 13 to 18. A *low-income household* is one in which the household income is less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line, adjusted for the number of

individuals in the household. A *romantic relationship*, for the purposes of this report, is one in which the individual perceives an ongoing, reciprocated, emotional, erotically charged connection with a partner. It is worth highlighting that, by this definition, romantic relationships need not involve sexual behavior. On the contrary, the report draws a clear distinction between romantic relationships, which are defined by an emotional connection, and sexual behaviors, which may or may not occur in the context of a relationship. Because heterosexual relationships are the focus of the bulk of the literature in this area, this report focuses primarily on them.

Description: How Do Adolescents Think About and Behave in Romantic Relationships?

The State of the Data. Although there has been considerable research describing adolescent sexuality, there has been far less that directly addresses the relationships in which most of that activity takes place. What data do exist often come from smaller studies that may not generalize to low-income populations. For nationally representative data describing romantic relationships among adolescents, research to date has relied almost exclusively on just five studies: the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the National Survey of Family Growth, the National Survey of Adolescent Males, and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

How Adolescents Think and Feel About Dating and Romance. On average, adolescents of all ages value romantic relationships highly and seek them out for themselves. Even young children are aware of and generally preoccupied with romantic issues. Beliefs about the qualities that are important for successful romantic relationships evolve as youth move from middle school to high school and on to college, and this evolution in part reflects increasing clarity about the concept of “boy (girl) friend” across these years. In general, younger adolescents’ ideas about romantic relationships emphasize physical attraction (e.g., infatuations or “crushes” predominate), but in the later teen years adolescents grow to value intimacy and commitment in their relationships as well. Although a majority of adolescents have engaged in sexual intercourse by the end of twelfth grade, most of them nevertheless endorse the view that sexual intercourse is not appropriate for high school teens. However, adolescents are most accepting of sexual behavior within the context of a romantic relationship.

Adolescents’ Attitudes and Expectations Regarding Marriage. 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. Unwed teen mothers also feel favorably toward marriage, but they themselves have lower expectations of marrying, perceiving that a lack of suitable partners and other obstacles prevent them from achieving this goal. A slight majority of adolescents disapproves of divorce, but many nevertheless expect to experience divorce in their own lives. Over the past few decades, positive attitudes toward marriage have remained relatively stable, but acceptance of delaying marriage and cohabiting increased substantially. Together, these results highlight

the important differences between adolescents' attitudes toward marriage and relationships in the abstract, and their potentially quite different expectations for their own lives.

How Adolescents Conduct Their Own Romantic Relationships. Through the course of adolescence, adolescents generally progress from same-sex friendships, to mixed-gender friendships, to romantic and sexual relationships with the opposite sex. For example, a national study of adolescents (Carver et al., 2003) found that 68 percent of 18-year-olds had been in a romantic relationship, compared with 26 percent of 12-year-olds. Adolescents' behaviors in their romantic relationships generally correspond with their self-reported attitudes and values. For example, entry into a romantic relationship precedes the initiation of sexual behavior for most adolescents, although this sequence is less likely for females and blacks than for males and non-blacks. Data on the duration of romantic relationships during adolescence are rare, but what data exist suggest that the average romantic relationship during adolescence is not transient but rather lasts up to a year or more, with black adolescents reporting longer relationships than white, Hispanic, and Asian adolescents. Moreover, most adolescents report that their relationships are characterized by a great deal of emotional involvement, including expressions of love, appearing in public as a couple, and exchanging gifts. Among sexually active adolescents, most describe themselves as monogamous, reporting only one partner in the previous 12 months. Moreover, sexual activity is more likely to occur in romantic relationships than in any other context, although some evidence from smaller studies suggests that low-income adolescents may have greater than average numbers of sexual partners. About 10 percent of adolescent romantic relationships also involve physical violence, with rates higher among blacks and Hispanics than among whites. Overall, the existing literature suggests that the majority of adolescents endorse the goals of healthy marriage initiatives and seek to behave in ways that are consistent with those goals.

Explanation: The Role of Adolescent Romantic Relationships in Adult Development

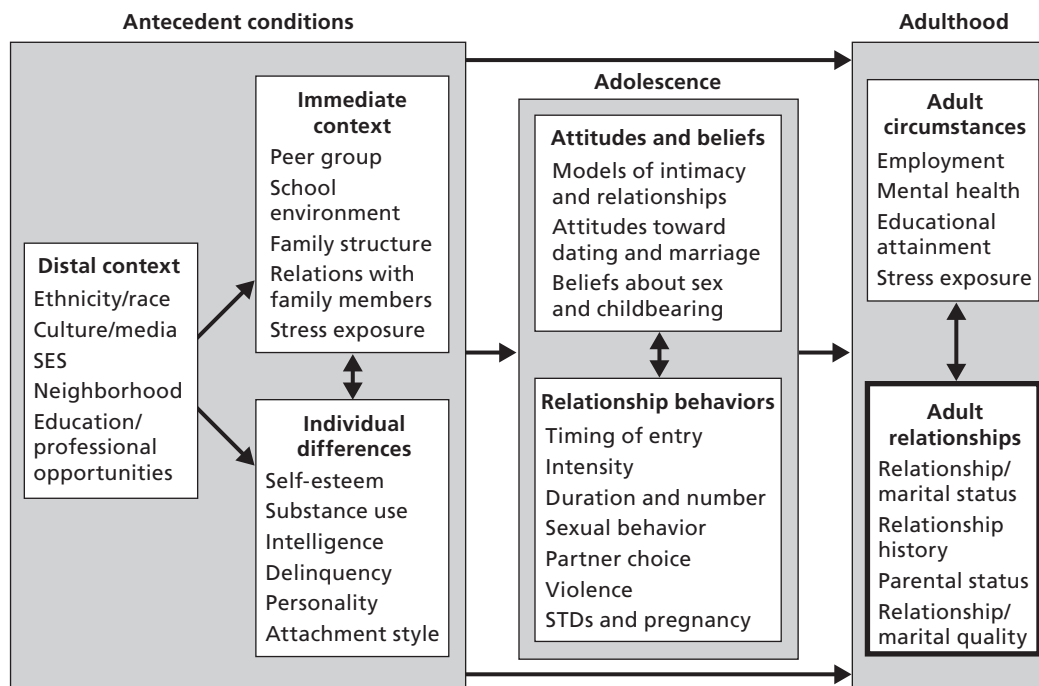
Existing Theories. Developmental psychology suggests that adolescence is a crucial period when the individual develops the tools to function as an independent adult. Yet, beyond this broad assertion, this field contains only a few theories that detail how these effects may come about. *Attachment theory*, the leading theoretical approach in this area, highlights the way the relationship with a primary caregiver shapes an infant's ideas about what to expect from relationships, which in turn affects how the individual approaches relationships in later life. This approach suggests that adolescence is a period during which enduring ideas and beliefs about relationships may be reinforced or altered by new experiences in romantic relationships. The *lifespan developmental perspective* points out that the concrete consequences of relationship experiences in adolescence (e.g., pregnancy, STDs) may facilitate or constrain development in ways that affect marital outcomes in adulthood. The recently proposed *Development of Early Adult Romantic Relationships* (DEARR) model draws attention to ways in which the social and physical environment of the individual affects relationship outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. The implication of all these ideas is that adolescents can be significantly altered by their

romantic experiences in ways that have long-term implications for their subsequent romantic relationships and marriages during adulthood.

An Integrative Framework. To describe how the existing theories might fit together to organize thinking about research and intervention in this area, we assembled components from all three theories within a single integrative framework (see Figure S.1). The framework divides the variables relevant to understanding adolescent romantic relationships into three broad groups: antecedent conditions, adolescence, and adulthood. Antecedent conditions are variables that are essentially in place before adolescence begins, including elements of the distal context (e.g., culture, socioeconomic status [SES], neighborhood), the immediate context (e.g., family structure, school, peer groups), and stable characteristics of the individual (e.g., personality, intelligence, self-esteem). Within adolescence, the framework highlights the connection between attitudes and beliefs about relationships and marriage, on one hand, and relationship behaviors (e.g., timing of entry, number of partners), on the other. Within adulthood, the framework distinguishes between relationship outcomes (e.g., marital status, relationship quality, parental status) and other outcomes—such as employment, educational attainment, and mental health—that shape the circumstances of adulthood.

Implications of the Integrative Framework. What the current framework highlights from existing theories is the idea that adolescent romantic relationships in particular represent a potential developmental turning point—a stage of life where patterns established in the family

Figure S.1
An Integrative Framework to Account for the Adolescent Precursors of Adult Romantic Relationships



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of origin may be reinforced or substantially altered, depending upon specific choices, behaviors, and experiences. In arranging the three broad groupings of variables as shown in Figure S.1, the framework suggests that conditions in infancy and early adolescence set the stage for romantic experiences in adolescence and describes several possible paths through which these experiences may in turn affect romantic relationships and marital outcomes in adulthood. One possibility is that experiences in romantic relationships affect an adolescent's ideas about romantic attachments and attitudes toward marriage, which in turn affect choices and behaviors in adulthood. An alternative is that the concrete consequences of adolescent relationships (e.g., teen parenthood) affect the available options for forming and maintaining healthy marriages and relationships in adulthood by interfering with or facilitating educational attainment and identity development.

The framework also points out that such conditions as socioeconomic status or family structure may give rise to romantic relationships in both adolescence and adulthood, even if adolescent experiences in relationships exert no independent causal influence on adult outcomes. From this perspective, understanding the development of healthy adult relationships in low-income populations involves understanding how a low-income environment limits the options that an individual encounters at different stages of development.

Explanation: Reviewing Research on Adolescent Romantic Relationships

How This Review Was Conducted. No study has brought together all parts of the integrative framework in a single investigation. Instead, this review assembled research that has examined each of the three broad groups of variables identified within the framework. All studies reviewed here in some way address romantic relationships explicitly and make some attempt to explain or account for variability in individual outcomes.

Comments on Methods. Interpretations of the results of research on adolescent romantic relationships must necessarily be qualified by the limitations of the research methods used to obtain those results. Overall, research on adolescent romantic relationships has been limited in a number of ways that prevent the accumulated research in this area from supporting strong conclusions. These include

- lack of agreement on definitions of key terms
- lack of data from representative samples
- lack of longitudinal data
- failure to acknowledge age differences within adolescence
- reliance on data from individuals rather than couples
- reliance on self-report data
- inadequate controls for unmeasured variables that may account for the associations between measured variables.

Antecedents of Adolescent Relationships

Family of Origin. Across a wide range of methods and study designs, research indicates that when the early family environment of the child is relatively stable and when parents are warm and attentive, the child is more likely to experience more satisfying romantic relationships in adolescence and beyond. In contrast, when the early family environment is characterized by distress or disruption, the child is at greater risk for experiencing relationship problems. To account for these associations, some evidence suggests such that experiences with parents shape the ideas and beliefs about relationships that young people use to guide choices in their own romantic relationships. Behaviorally oriented work finds evidence that interactions with parents create habits of communicating that persist in subsequent interactions with romantic partners. Both lines of work imply that, absent interventions, adolescents with maladaptive patterns of belief and behavior grow into young adults with the same maladaptive patterns. These findings therefore support the idea that cognitive and behavioral interventions during adolescence may offer alternative models of thinking and behaving in romantic relationships to adolescents who might otherwise be at risk. However, such explanations have yet to be pitted against alternative explanations for these associations, such as genetic and contextual influences that may affect both family relationships and romantic relationships directly.

Individual Characteristics. Several enduring characteristics of children have been associated with continuities in their relationships across the life span. For example, personality in childhood has been associated with relationship outcomes in both adolescence and adulthood, and this effect appears to operate in part through the direct effects of personality on the timing of entry into dating and sexuality during adolescence. Individual variability in the timing of puberty and sexual maturation is also associated with variability in the timing of the initiation of sexual behavior, but this association is far weaker with respect to the initiation of dating behaviors.

Peer Groups. Across genders, having a larger peer network in late childhood predicts having closer romantic relationships in middle adolescence, and in turn more enduring romantic relationships in later adolescence. However, other data indicate that peer acceptance in early adolescence predicts both earlier entry into romantic relationships and greater use of alcohol. Thus, whereas having friends is a necessary first step toward the development of sexual and romantic relationships, what matters most may be not the size of the peer network but rather the composition of that network. Consistent with this idea, children whose friendships at ages 11–12 tend to be with preteens in the same grade are significantly less likely to report weekly dating at ages 13–14 and 15–16, compared with children who interact regularly with older peers. Peers also seem likely to shape the standards that adolescents apply toward those relationships. For example, boys who believe that aggression is more common in the relationships of their peers engage in more aggression in their own relationships.

Characteristics of the Partner. Very little is known about the ways that characteristics of adolescents' romantic partners affect the implications of adolescent romantic experiences. One exception is research on the effects of age differences between partners. As might be expected, several studies indicate that adolescents who are in relationships with partners more than two years older than themselves are vastly more likely to be sexually active, compared with adolescents whose partners are close to themselves in age.

Beliefs and Attitudes. Given the centrality of adolescents' beliefs and attitudes in current theories and current interventions, it is worth noting that very few studies have examined whether beliefs and attitudes are in fact associated with adolescents' experiences and behaviors in romantic relationships. Most studies that have examined this question have been focused on sexual behavior rather than romantic relationships. For example, religious affiliation and frequency of attendance at religious services, variables that may be proxies for more conservative attitudes toward sexual behavior, account for the timing of first intercourse among adolescents, such that stronger affiliation and more frequent attendance are associated with delays, even after controlling for demographic variables. Yet aside from sexual behaviors, little is known about how other behaviors and choices relevant to romantic relationships are associated with adolescents' beliefs and attitudes.

Implications for Adolescents

Psychological Well-Being. Relative to adolescents not involved in romantic relationships, adolescents in romantic relationships experience greater increases in depressive symptoms over one year, lower self-esteem, and higher risk for eating disorders. It appears that romantic relationships during adolescence provide an opportunity for emotional pain that puts young people at risk for experiencing depression and other emotional problems. However, this risk may be linked to unhealthy or unsuccessful relationships. Thus, the converse may also be true: Healthy relationships during adolescence may offer opportunities for growth and fulfillment that improve well-being and increase resilience.

Sexual Behavior. Experiencing a romantic relationship within the past 18 months is one of the most powerful predictors of sexual activity among adolescents. Yet existing research has been inconsistent about whether romantic relationships make safe sex and the use of contraception more or less likely among adolescents who are sexually active. For example, in one study, roughly half (52 percent) of female adolescents who had just met their sexual partner prior to having sexual intercourse used no method of contraception, compared with 24 percent of girls who reported that they were "going steady" with their partner. Another study found no difference in rates of self-reported condom use between those with a single partner and those who were sexually active with multiple partners. Still another indicates that, among sexually active adolescents in exclusive romantic relationships, condom use declines as the length of the relationship increases. How can we reconcile these contradictory sets of results? Some evidence from ethnographic and longitudinal research suggests that the predictors of condom use early in a relationship may differ from the predictors later in the same relationship. Early in a relationship, when adolescents are initiating sexual activity for the first time, they may be more comfortable discussing and enacting safe sex behaviors with partners that they feel closer to and trust. Over time, however, deepening trust in a partner may, ironically, encourage adolescent partners in lasting relationships to be less vigilant about condom use than partners in newer relationships.

Physical Aggression. The dominant theory of relationship violence among adolescents focuses on the idea of intergenerational transmission, i.e., the idea that antisocial behaviors in parents, including violence toward the child, lead to children who view aggression between intimates as acceptable, and in turn makes aggressive behavior toward romantic partners more

likely. A number of longitudinal studies have found support for this general progression for males and females. Across a number of domains (e.g., socioeconomic resources, family relations, educational achievements, and problem behaviors), variables assessed during adolescence predict partner abuse at 21 more effectively than variables assessed prior to adolescence, suggesting that adolescence may be a crucial period in which the antecedents of partner violence take shape.

Substance Abuse and Academic Achievement. Although substance abuse and academic achievement are quite different outcomes, they have often been examined in the same studies. Much of the research on the implications of romantic relationships for these outcomes has focused on the effects of early or later entry into romantic relationships on substance abuse and academic achievement in girls. This work consistently shows that the earlier that girls become involved in romantic relationships, the higher their risks of later substance abuse and the lower their academic achievement. Yet, despite these results, it is not clear whether early entry into relationships causes problems for girls, or whether girls with preexisting problems are simply more likely to enter relationships early. Nor is it clear that the same effects hold true for boys. Late entry into romantic relationships, in contrast, is associated with higher intelligence, and those who do not date during adolescence have the highest grades and the lowest levels of delinquent behavior of all.

Implications for Adult Outcomes

Evaluating the effects of adolescent romantic relationships on adult outcomes, and adult marital outcomes in particular, requires, at minimum, long-term longitudinal research that follows adolescents into adulthood, assessing the nature of their romantic relationships at each stage of development. As many scholars in this area have noted, no research of this type has been published to date. The research that has attempted to link adolescent relationships to adult marital outcomes has so far been extremely limited in scope. For example, research focused specifically on the consequences of teen pregnancy has identified the economic and educational deficits that teen mothers experience relative to their peers who do not become pregnant, perhaps explaining the positive associations between premarital pregnancy and subsequent risk of divorce. But research in this vein does not account for the relational context in which those pregnancies occurred. To the extent that adolescents' experiences in romantic relationships have the immediate consequences reviewed in the previous section, it is reasonable to expect that evidence of long-term consequences may be found, because those immediate consequences have often been linked to adult marital outcomes. Yet without direct evidence that rules out alternative explanations of the obtained associations, conclusions about the role of adolescent relationships in adult marriages must remain tentative.

Conclusions

Although the existing research on adolescent romantic relationships is methodologically limited and incomplete, the results of this research offer some justification for efforts to target these relationships for intervention. Characteristics of children's family of origin and early environment are associated with their peer relationships. Peers do appear to influence timing of entry into romantic relationships. The immediate consequences of these relationships are

the very ones that would be expected to influence adult marital outcomes. Moreover, studies that have followed individuals from early childhood through young adulthood do point to adolescence as a critical period during which significant antecedents of young adult outcomes take shape. Thus, the existing data are consistent with a model that views adolescent romantic relationships as a key period during which the foundations of healthy adult marriages may be strengthened. To the extent that further research confirms this emerging picture of adolescent relationships as a link in a causal chain leading from the early environment to adult marriages, then it would be warranted to intervene during adolescence, especially as a means of preventing the continuation of negative patterns in vulnerable youth.

Intervention: Review of Current Relationship Education Programs for Adolescents

How the Review Was Conducted. To evaluate the current state of relationship education aimed at adolescents, we spoke with decisionmakers, curricula developers and distributors, and practitioners who are delivering relationship curricula to low-income adolescents. Each informant was asked to nominate one or two highly regarded curricula in this area, and then the distributors of the most frequently nominated curricula agreed to send review copies for inclusion in the chapter on intervention. Thus, the specific curricula and programs reviewed cover the leading materials but do not represent a comprehensive list.

The Goals of Relationship Education for Adolescents. As with marriage education programs for couples, the broad goal of relationship education for adolescents is to impart some combination of knowledge, values, and skills believed necessary to establish healthy romantic relationships. Yet, in pursuit of that broad goal, programs differ in their specific objectives. For example, some programs explicitly seek to prepare adolescents for marriage in adulthood, whereas other programs are focused on promoting healthy relationships during adolescence. Some programs address romantic relationships specifically, whereas others address interpersonal relationships (e.g., with friends and family) more generally. Frequently, the stated objectives of available programs lack a clear connection to tangible outcomes, raising questions about how the effectiveness of these programs might be evaluated. An important step in refining existing programs would be to begin an explicit discussion of what their concrete objectives should be and how progress in meeting those objectives might be measured. It is not clear that such a discussion has taken place with regard to relationship education aimed at adolescents.

How Relationship Education Is Delivered to Adolescents. Relationship education is currently offered in a wide range of settings, including schools, the juvenile justice system, foster care, independent living facilities, programs for pregnant and parenting teens, camps, retreats, group homes, and after-school programs. Across these settings, the program developers and distributors that we spoke with identified five formats in which relationship education is typically delivered. The first of these, *relationship and marriage education* (RME), explicitly and more or less exclusively addresses interpersonal and romantic relationships and their implications. Typically, RME curricula contain some mix of intervention orientation and educational orientation. The other four formats include RME as a component of a broader curriculum.

For example, the national standards for *family and consumer sciences* (FACS) classes require that they include material on interpersonal relationships (i.e., understanding the impact of individual differences on interpersonal relationships, relationship skills, effective problem-solving). Because these classes are often a required part of the secondary school curriculum, they may be the program that routinely covers RME-related topics to which the largest number of low-income and other adolescents is exposed. *Character education* (CE) programs are defined as “teaching and learning for personal development” and may include “moral reasoning/cognitive development,” “social and emotional learning,” and “moral education/virtue” (Otten, 2000). Informants noted that they themselves were not clear about the standards to which adolescents were to be held and expressed some discomfort with the concept. *Abstinence education* (AE) programs have recently been called upon to address healthy relationships during adolescence and healthy marriages in adulthood. Indeed, incorporating RME curricula into abstinence education curricula may be an effective strategy for moving RME curricula into schools. Finally, *community-based initiatives* include efforts by national or community-based organizations to improve relationship outcomes as a primary or secondary objective of programs targeting at-risk youth.

Are These Programs Effective? There have been two obstacles to evaluating whether relationship education for adolescents is effective. First, as noted above, it has not been clear exactly what these programs are trying to achieve, and so the criteria for measuring effectiveness are not obvious. Second, conducting rigorous evaluation research requires the ability to randomly assign adolescents to treatment and comparison groups. Such research is costly, and not always possible (e.g., the law may prevent differential access to available programs). For both of these reasons, no rigorous evaluations of relationship education for adolescents have yet been completed. There have been quasi-experimental studies of three curricula—*The Art of Loving Well*, *Connections*, and *Love U2*—but the results of these evaluations are at most suggestive that relationship education curricula may improve relationship outcomes during adolescence. The Administration on Children and Families (ACF) is now supporting an experimental evaluation of the *Love U2: Relationship Smarts* curriculum that will test whether this program is effective when offered in schools with a high percentage minority and low-income student population. At present, however, the results of this evaluation are not available.

Does the Content of Existing Programs Map onto the Existing Research? When results from rigorous evaluations are lacking, an alternative way of evaluating the likely effectiveness of curricula is to assess how well the content of each curriculum aligns with what the research literature suggests is likely to be important. Comparing the content of the leading curricula to the integrative framework developed in this report suggests that these curricula have rarely covered the full range of content likely to be relevant to adolescents’ relationships and eventual marriages. For example, all the leading curricula reviewed here seek to shape attitudes and beliefs regarding romantic relationships and marriage, and all of them address specific behaviors and choices in relationships, like commitment, whether or not to have sex, and how to choose a partner. In contrast, the existing programs are far less consistent in their coverage of how individual differences affect relationships. Most discuss self-esteem, but few examine the connections between romantic relationships and substance abuse or delinquency. The existing programs are least consistent in their coverage of issues external to the couple. For example,

although most programs discuss how romantic relationships can be affected by each partner's peer groups, most do not acknowledge the role that families may play in shaping each partner's approach to a relationship, despite the fact that this is one of the strongest associations in the existing literature in this area.

Practical Concerns in Delivering Relationship Education to Low-Income Adolescents.

Among the organizations we spoke with that have experience encouraging healthy adolescent relationships, there is uniform agreement that need for this programming is vital and that additional funds would help them better address the needs of the adolescents they work with. Moreover, there is also consensus that youth who participate in these efforts are highly receptive to them. Nevertheless, our informants also identified six practical concerns that have yet to be addressed:

1. *A need for more culturally appropriate curricula.* This ranged from a concern that the curricula are too explicit for the youth that are served (and their parents) to a concern that the curricula do not accurately reflect youth culture (such as hip-hop).
2. *Problems with curricula that overlook adolescent parents.* Program developers and administrators said that existing curricula largely ignore young mothers and fathers and pregnant women, and they would value efforts to tailor programs specifically for these groups.
3. *A need for assistance or guidelines for adapting curricula.* In cases where it is necessary to shorten existing curricula, program administrators would appreciate some guidance about which curriculum components are essential and which can be considered optional. In the absence of such guidelines, most administrators we spoke with simply used their best judgment when adapting curricula.
4. *Questions about the age-appropriateness of some curriculum components.* Many in the marriage education field believe that existing marital education programs should be adapted for and distributed to youth, but some informants with a background in adolescence (rather than in marriage education) expressed concerns about whether research supports the use of such curricula for all adolescents.
5. *A need for training in the logistics of serving at-risk youth.* For example, there is need for guidance on how to arrange childcare for adolescent parents, when to separate males and females in classes, and whether to offer incentives for participation. These are logistical questions that most people with experience interacting with low-income youth have faced before.
6. *Assistance in marketing relationship education to adult decisionmakers.* Given that some of those with whom we spoke have encountered resistance to relationship education among parents and community leaders, there may be a need to reach out to decisionmakers who are not involved in the relationship and marriage education movement to educate them about the need for and potential benefits of these efforts.

Future Directions for Research and Intervention

Immediate Priorities for Research. If programs and curricula targeting adolescent romantic relationships are to be effective, they must be grounded in an accurate understanding of how these relationships function and the role that they play in the development of healthy adult marriages. Promising directions for the next generation of research on adolescent romantic relationships include the following:

- Exploit nationally representative data sets to expand descriptions of low-income adolescents.
- Address diversity across cultures, ethnicities, and sexual orientations.
- Continue longitudinal studies that examine the consequences of adolescent experiences for adult outcomes.
- Conduct analyses that test genetic and economic explanations for links between adolescence and adulthood.
- Describe processes within adolescent relationships, such as conflict resolution and social support.

Research that pursues these directions would strengthen the empirical base of current programs and substantially advance efforts to promote healthy adult marriages.

Strategies for Programs and Curricula

General Organization. The accumulated and evolving research on adolescent romantic relationships offers ways to strengthen existing programs targeting those relationships as precursors of adult outcomes. The integrative framework described here, by mapping the range of possible content that relationship education curricula may contain, suggests organizing that content into three broad topics: *antecedent conditions*, issues relating to *adolescence*, and issues relating to *adulthood*. The research reviewed in this report suggests specific strategies for addressing each of these domains and the way they affect each other. Some of these strategies are already being used in existing programs.

Antecedent Conditions. Relationship education curricula may seek to directly affect the sources of adolescents' thoughts and behaviors in romantic relationships, or, to the extent that some antecedent conditions are impossible for individuals to change (e.g., family history), these curricula might help adolescents to recognize the impact that their backgrounds and personal histories have on their current relationships. For example, programs should

- help adolescents identify and express their own feelings and beliefs about romantic relationships
- explore the sources of their feelings and beliefs about relationships
- include training in interacting effectively with parents, siblings, and friends.

Adolescence. In addition to its focus on adolescents' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, the current framework also suggests that relationship education should acknowledge how the context external to a romantic relationship (e.g., the stresses that each partner faces, the resources

and opportunities available to the couple, the physical environment) may affect how partners behave within the relationship. To accomplish these ends, programs should

- help adolescents understand how their models of relationships affect their behavior in their current and future relationships
- encourage adolescents to explore how their own behaviors affect the way other people respond to them
- help adolescents appreciate ways that their own or a partner's behavior might be changed or constrained in different kinds of environments
- offer relationship education in conjunction with or alongside programs aimed at improving adolescents' lives in other ways (e.g., substance abuse prevention, job training)
- in curricula that address safe sex and contraception, emphasize that using condoms does not indicate a lack of trust in a partner
- directly address beliefs about intimate partner violence.

Adulthood. Programs aimed at adolescents obviously cannot target adult outcomes directly. However, they can address the consequences of adolescent romantic relationships that are likely to have the greatest impact on adult outcomes, either by encouraging adolescents to consider the possible consequences of their choices and behaviors more carefully, or by teaching skills that help adolescents to manage possible negative consequences of their relationships more effectively. To accomplish these ends, programs should

- help adolescents to understand the ways that their behaviors and decisions in adolescence can affect their options in later life
- emphasize that successful marriages are an achievable goal for adults
- offer assistance in preventing or managing negative consequences of adolescent relationships.

Conclusion

None of the alternative intervention strategies described here are mutually exclusive or incompatible with current programs and curricula aimed at promoting positive outcomes experiences and outcomes for adolescents in romantic relationships. On the contrary, it seems likely that the programs most effective at promoting healthy adult marriages will be multifaceted, acknowledging that adolescents' experiences in romantic relationships, and the long-term consequences of those experiences, are woven into the broader fabric of their lives. Relationship education is likely to be one element in a repertoire of approaches. Reviewing the theory and evidence on the links between adolescence and later healthy marriage yields a number of ways that approaches to serving adolescents could be strengthened.