

Putting Youth Relationship Education on the Child Welfare Agenda: Findings from a Research and Evaluation Review

Executive Summary



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It's My Community Initiative (IMCI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Oklahoma City with a mission of developing and expanding efforts to strengthen communities by building strong, healthy families. For more information on IMCI's work to engage interest and support for providing relationship education to child-welfare-involved youth visit <http://www.itsmycommunity.org/youth-decide.php>.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families (www.aecf.org).

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Child Trends reviewed existing evidence on a somewhat neglected topic: relationship education for youth in foster care. The goals of this research review were to identify the needs of disadvantaged young people around intimate partner relationships, to identify evaluated relationship education programs, to highlight and synthesize common themes and gaps in research and evaluation in this area, and to make recommendations about opportunities to improve relationship skills among vulnerable youth in foster care.

A review of the research indicates that having the skills to manage healthy intimate partner relationships can help vulnerable youth make a successful transition to adulthood and can support positive decisions related to school, employment, pregnancy prevention, and establishing strong, constructive relationships. These skills are important for all youth, including and perhaps especially among youth involved in or aging out of the child welfare system. Relationship education programs typically focus on building skills needed for positive romantic relationships, addressing topics such as interpersonal skills, safety, knowing oneself, and setting the stage for healthy relationships. These types of programs can equip youth to have healthy intimate relationships as adolescents, as well as healthier peer and adult relationships.

This review identified several dozen intervention studies that represent a diverse set of programs. Some target youth in foster care directly, or target other vulnerable populations that have similar risks as youth in care (e.g., runaway and homeless youth, youth involved in the juvenile justice system and other vulnerable or minority populations). However, these programs are diverse in terms of the extent to which they address relationship skills and relationship education, and in their level of evaluation evidence. Child Trends developed six categories to describe the types of programs selected for the review based on the goals of the project, and the

diverse characteristics of the programs that were identified. Based on project criteria, the top category would be relationship education programs that have been rigorously evaluated among youth in foster care. However, no programs were found that fell into this top category.

An analysis of the characteristics of the programs identified in the research and evaluation review was combined with our understanding of existing research on the importance of positive romantic relationships for adolescents and young adults, as well as input provided by participants in a forum on this topic where preliminary findings from the review of research and evaluation were presented and discussed. Based on this input, the following recommendations were developed for future research and practice related to relationship education for youth in foster care:

- Policy makers and public administrators should recognize positive romantic relationships as an important and legitimate outcome for youth in foster care, with potentially positive impacts for other outcomes;
- Relationship education programs that address the needs of youth in foster care and other highly vulnerable populations need to be developed;
- Funding needs to be made available to develop strong programs for youth in foster care in order to bring programs to a stage where they can be evaluated. Specifically, core components need to be identified and the programs should be manualized, assessed, refined, and rigorously evaluated;
- To assess impacts, relationship education programs need to be rigorously evaluated, ideally in a random assignment evaluation or secondarily in a quasi-experimental evaluation, among youth in foster care, with adequate sample sizes to assess impacts overall and across subgroups (for example, males and females);
- Relationship outcomes should to be included, if possible, among the outcomes assessed in other youth development program evaluations; and
- Relationship education programs for youth in foster care are hypothesized to be more successful if they are integrated into existing services for youth in foster care, rather than provided as stand-alone programs. In other words, relationship education would be incorporated in a tiered approach to address the multiple needs of youth in foster care, as well as other vulnerable youth.

The logic model below was developed to depict the key program elements that have been identified or hypothesized as critical for successfully improving relationship skills, along with the short-term and long-term outcomes anticipated for vulnerable youth (see Exhibit 1). Ideally, this logic model could serve as a useful tool for designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating existing and future relationship education programs for youth in foster care.

Exhibit 1. Proposed Logic Model for Relationship Education Programs for Youth in Foster Care

