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## **Got Dating: Outcomes of a Teen 4-H Relationship Retreat**

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## Got Dating: Outcomes of a Teen 4-H Relationship Retreat

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**Abstract:** To support youth in developing healthy relationships, state and county staff collaborated to offer a statewide overnight teen retreat to teach health relationship skills. Evaluation of 64 youth participants from rural and urban counties found significant increases in posttest knowledge of relationship skills for both male and female youth. Youth also reported that the content was very helpful and worth repeating. Program success may be attributed to addressing the interesting and needed subject of dating relationships as well as involvement of state ambassador and collegiate 4-H members as teachers. Implications and replication suggestions are outlined.

### Program Purpose

One of the developmental tasks of adolescence is forming relationships with others (Adams & Williams, 2011). It is thus not surprising that Kaestle, Morisky and Wiley (2002) found over half of females and males reported having a recent dating relationship by age 15. Because relationship quality in youth is positively associated with couple-relationship quality in early adult relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000), having a positive and healthy example of relationships during adolescence may play a vital role in helping youth create and sustain healthy relationships. Surprisingly, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and the Dibble Institute (2007), many teens (17%) don't know anyone who serves as an example of a healthy relationship in their lives. Creating, maintaining, and terminating relationships can be stressful across the lifespan. As a result, programs to help youth to navigate through this dynamic process may be of great benefit (Adams & Williams, 2011).

The mission of 4-H is to help youth to reach their full potential and make a positive difference in the world (National 4-H Council, n.d.). Developing relationship and social skills is an important aspect of youth development and 4-H events can be valuable resources to help youth obtain these skills (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). To address

this youth development need, state and county staff collaborated to offer an overnight teen retreat to teach healthy relationship skills which included workshop sessions, interactive activities, peer teaching and leadership opportunities from state ambassadors and collegiate 4-H, and coaching support from extension faculty and staff (Brower, MacArthur, Albrecht, Bunnell & Lyons, 2011). An IRB-approved evaluation was provided to all participants at the conclusion of the retreat to measure the outcomes of the event.

### **Program Objectives**

The program had the following main objectives:

- To address a developmental need for teens
- To make the retreat available to interested teens
- To teach research-based relationship skills and knowledge to participants
- To provide hands-on learning activities to practice skills and increase learning retention
- To evaluate the education program by measuring the change in relationship skills and knowledge of participants

### **Retreat Organization**

The *Got Dating?* Retreat was based on the research-based national curriculum *How to Avoid Falling for a Jerk (or Jerk-ette)* by Dr. John Van Epp (Van Epp, 2007, 2010; Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp & Campbell, 2008). Successful implementation of this curriculum in several counties led to statewide interest in the curriculum. The retreat included peer-taught workshops on topics such as steps to building healthy relationships and communication skills, and supplemental activities such as dating scenario role plays and speed dating to encourage “learning by doing” (Diem, n.d). In addition, youth interacted through activities such as snowshoeing, cross country skiing, and a dance. More detailed elements of the retreat organization and implementation suggestions can be found in an article by Brower et al. (2011).

The retreat was held Friday evening through Saturday afternoon at a facility located in the central part of the state and was open to all youth at least 15 years old. Marketing efforts included flyers, e-mail, state and county newsletters and Web sites, and word of mouth efforts through county extension offices, teen council meetings, and 4-H events.

Many factors contributed to the success of this program. Some of these include:

#### **Youth and Adult Partnerships**

Youth and adult partnerships are often keys to success when planning events for teenagers. These partnerships in 4-H programming can help develop strengths in youth partners (see Epstein, 2004; Higginbotham, MacArthur, & Dart, 2010) and keep the focus of the program relevant to youth perspectives rather than adult perspectives. The combination of adult experience and expertise in subject matter combined with the creative and energetic perspective of youth can create a synergistic atmosphere for planning and implementing events. This event was planned collaboratively with county and state faculty, 4-H state ambassadors, and collegiate 4-H members. This partnership promoted youth buy-in and encouraged creativity in the planning process.

### **Shared Workload**

A shared workload was created by dividing and assigning tasks among state 4-H youth ambassadors and collegiate 4-H, with staff and faculty members serving in supportive roles. As a result, the program was planned and implemented smoothly with organizers able to maintain their other work responsibilities.

### **Peer-To-Peer Teaching and Role Modeling**

Peer teaching allowed state ambassador and collegiate 4-H members to learn teaching methods and leadership skills. In addition, participants were very engaged in the learning process when taught by peers.

### **Coaching Support**

Coaching by extension faculty was vital to the state ambassadors and collegiate 4-H members to be successful in their teaching. Coaches provided teaching outlines and activity ideas and then acted as an audience for teaching practice and feedback before the retreat.

### **Research-Based Curriculum**

Utilizing research-based curriculum ensured that concepts being discussed were appropriate and effective in helping youth develop the desired knowledge and skills. As mentioned previously, the curriculum utilized for this event, *How to Avoid Falling for a Jerk* by Dr. John Van Epp, is research-based and has been recognized nationally as an avenue to help youth and adults learn how to create and sustain healthy relationships. (Van Epp, et al., 2008). The focus of the curriculum concentrates on how to recognize warning signs of unhealthy partners, steps to building healthy and safe relationships, and the importance of being a healthy individual and good friend in order to attract others who are similar.

### **Social Interaction**

Every successful teen program needs social interaction to provide informal opportunities to apply the skills learned throughout the retreat. Opportunities for social interaction were initiated throughout the program with activities such as icebreaker games, speed dating, small group discussion, a dance, and cross country skiing.

### **Reduced Cost**

Cost for statewide retreats can often be prohibitive for participants. Efforts to keep registration costs low resulted in reaching the retreat capacity.

### **Replication**

The success of this model has resulted in planning additional retreats using this format.

## **Method**

Participants completed an IRB approved evaluation at the end of the retreat containing questions about relationship skills and program satisfaction. Because most of the participants were under 18, parents signed a consent form during the retreat registration allowing youth to complete the evaluation.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of a total of 86 youth, with a total of 50 females (58%) and 36 males (42%). The youth came from several urban and rural counties across the state (55% of the state's counties were represented; i.e., 16 of 29). Of these youth, 64 (74%) filled out surveys.

This sample was identified as 71% female, 29% male; and the mean age was 16.6 ( $SD = 1.24$ ). Almost all were Caucasian (97%); two of the 64 youth identified as Asian/Pacific Islander. Approximately two-thirds of the youth indicated they had never before had relationship education.

### Measures

Using a posttest-then-retrospective-pretest evaluation pen and paper tool (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007), participants rated their knowledge of relationship skills on their knowledge 'BEFORE and AFTER the program' (ranging from 1 = poor to 4 = excellent). Categories included knowledge of how to 'listen effectively to someone,' 'settle disagreements well,' 'solve problems,' 'deepen a loving relationship,' 'have a strong friendship,' and 'awareness of the importance of spending time together.' The six items were reliable ( $\alpha = .80$  and  $.86$  for males,  $.76$  and  $.75$  for females, pre- and posttest), suggesting they measure different dimensions of a single construct: relationship knowledge. Because the items measure a single construct, they were combined rather than being analyzed separately. A repeated measures ANOVA was used to test both for differences in pre- and post-test scores, and to test for potential effects of gender.

## Results

### Outcomes

The results, reported in Table 1, show significant increases in posttest knowledge of relationship skills for both male and female youth. Means for males were 2.68 (pre) versus 3.53 (post); means for females were 2.90 (pre) versus 3.59 (post). The data thus suggest that participation in the program resulted in an increase in aspects of relationship knowledge that the research literature underscores as important to healthy relationships. Outcomes measured on a scale of 1-4, with 4 being 'excellent,' showed the average rate of gain in relationship knowledge was  $.85$  for males, and  $.69$  for females, reported retrospectively (i.e., posttest-then-retrospective-pretest). These results are statistically significant and indicate gains in participants; knowledge of listening effectively, handling disagreements, solving problems, relationship depth and friendship, and the importance of spending time with a significant other. These findings applied regardless of gender, showing no significant differences when comparing the gains made by males with those made by females ( $F(1, 62) = 1.71, p = .21$ ).

**Table 1**

*Change in Relationship Skills Knowledge Before and After the Retreat*

Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Males	2.68 ( $SD=.55$ )	3.53 ( $SD=.57$ )	-7.53***	16
Females	2.90 ( $SD=.49$ )	3.59 ( $SD=.34$ )	-10.42***	46
$F(1, 62) = 142.28***$				

Note.  $N=64$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Youth Perceptions

To evaluate the perceived value of the program, participants rated their experience with the program with five questions (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), using survey items including 'Helped me strengthen my relationship,' 'I'd take this class in the future,' 'Presenter was knowledgeable,' 'Presenter was caring,' 'I'll recommend this experience.' These questions

reliably measured program value ( $\alpha = .87$  for males and  $.90$  for females) and were thus combined. Both males and females rated the program highly, with means of  $4.37$  ( $SD = .63$ ) for males, and  $4.47$  ( $SD = .50$ ) for females. There were no significant gender difference ( $F(1,63) = .02, p = .89$ ). On average, the data show that the youth found the content very helpful and worth repeating and that the presenters were knowledgeable and caring.

In addition to quantitative data, youth were also asked the open ended question, "What are the most important things that you learned?" Responses included comments such as "good listening skills," how to "understand" and "relate" better with the opposite sex, how to better communicate and read "body language," and "how to make and keep good relationships and how to be smart when dating."

### **Funding Considerations**

One goal of the retreat was to keep the cost reasonable to encourage attendance. This was accomplished in three ways. The first strategy was to handle registration ourselves rather than University services that charge an added fee. Second, extension faculty and staff covered their registration through county funds. Lastly, some counties were able to provide partial scholarships (with previously collected county funds or grant money) for a few participants. The cost of the conference (\$50 per participant) included the facility cost, workshop materials, and a beanie memorabilia cap. The majority of this cost (\$42 per person) covered the facility, including one night in a mountain lodge, three meals, and the snowshoeing/cross-country skiing activity. An additional \$600 in grant money was used to provide scholarships to cover the registration for the collegiate 4-H members and state 4-H ambassadors for their planning and teaching efforts.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this article was to direct attention to the gap in teen relationship education programming and to highlight the unique role extension has in being able to help fill this gap. An additional purpose was to outline results from the program evaluation and any implications stemming from these results.

The positive results were consistent across gender; that is, the retreat resulted in significant increases in knowledge for both males and females. A descriptive finding of interest was that this retreat was the first relationship education for almost two thirds of the participants. Together, these results imply a need for relationship education for teens. For extension personnel, this implication can highlight the need for relationship education in future teen programming. An implication for parents may be to take note of this need and enroll their teens in programs which teach practical relationship knowledge and skills.

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