Healthy relationship education for dating violence prevention among high-risk youth

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ABSTRACT

A federal grant was awarded to provide the *Love U2* healthy relationship curriculum to low-income, high-risk youth. This research sought to examine the relative effectiveness of a brief intervention with this curriculum compared to the much more intensive relationship education programs that have been previously provided to high-risk youth. Data were collected from 233 participants through measures of training and relationship outcomes pre- and post-training. Participants experienced high levels of training satisfaction, significant increases in relationship knowledge and self-efficacy related to conflict resolution. They also experienced a significant improvement in attitudes toward couple violence in the desired direction. Implications of these findings for promoting healthy relationships and reducing dating violence among high-risk youth are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The prevention and reduction of youth dating violence has become an issue of national urgency. In recent years, hundreds of healthy relationship programs have been funded by federal agencies to provide relationship education to various target populations. These programs seek to promote healthy relationship knowledge and skills and to reduce interpersonal violence. In an assessment of possible configurations of these relationship education programs, Ooms and Wilson (2004) state that "older adolescents and young adults in high schools and community colleges are another key audience for relationship education programs... (pg. 445)." The present study addresses issues of implementation and outcomes for one such healthy relationship program for high-risk youth.

2. Prevalence and impact of dating violence

One in five teenage girls has been physically or sexually assaulted by a dating partner (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001) and has experienced emotional abuse (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Others report that 54% of teens are aware of dating violence among their peers (Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992). African American youth are overrepresented as victims and perpetrators of teen dating violence, with 14% reporting that they had been abused, compared to 7% of their white youth counterparts (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), 2006). It also was found that

psychological aggression (i.e., control and jealousy) was significantly associated with physical aggression both concurrently and 3 months later (O'Leary & Slep, 2003). Research suggests that experiencing dating violence in adolescence increases the likelihood of experiencing future relationship violence (Close, 2005; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe, 2006).

Risk factors for dating violence include younger age (adolescents), gender (females), and experience of other potentially traumatic events or recent life stressors (Wolitzky-Taylor, 2008). Inter-parental violence directly predicts teen dating violence, while the impact of nonviolent parental conflict on dating violence is mediated by adolescent appraisal of this conflict and their emotional distress (Tschann, Pasch, Flores, & VanOss Marin, 2009). Other studies have found that history of the physical abuse and sexual abuse of adolescents' parents increase the risk of dating violence for that adolescent (Leiderman & Almo, 2001; Manseau, Fenet, Halbert, Collin-Vezina, & Blais, 2008). Several studies have found that attitudes toward violence are important predictors of dating violence. For example, Josephson and Proulx (2008) found that there is a direct causal effect of violence-tolerant attitudes and psychologically aggressive strategies on physical violence against dating partners. Knowledge of healthy relationships contributed to a reduction in violence among boys' friendships, and had an indirect effect on physical violence by reducing violence-tolerant attitudes.

The consequences of interpersonal violence are numerous, and include physical and emotional problems, as well as social and academic difficulties. Studies have found that 8% of males and 9% of females have been to an emergency room for an injury received from a dating partner (Foshee, 1996). Victims of dating violence are more

likely to engage in physical fights, sexual activity, binge drinking, drug use, and suicide attempts (Ackard, 2007). The rate of substance abuse is twice as high for females who experience dating violence than those who do not experience such violence (Plichta, 1996). Dating violence is also related to high-risk sexual behaviors, which often leads to unintended pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, and HIV infection (Silverman et al., 2001). Those who experience dating violence may suffer from problems with self-esteem and body image (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002), and often repeat these patterns of violence in their future relationships (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Because youth who are victims of interpersonal violence often go untreated, they may carry over the sequelae of this abuse into their roles as parents. Victims of interpersonal violence and abuse may find it difficult to provide optimal parenting to their children (Leiderman & Almo, 2001). They are more likely to live in poverty and experience depression, which inhibits their ability to provide consistent and responsive parenting.

3. Current programs to prevent dating violence

Most dating violence prevention programs are offered through the school systems and are typically universal, targeting all male and female students in the school setting (Whitaker, 2007). Perhaps the most widely evaluated program, the Safe Dates project (Foshee, Bauman, et al., 1998; Foshee, Fothergill, & Stuart, 1998; Foshee et al., 1996), compared students who received 10-session curriculum in schools to those who received community services only. In a sample of 1886 eighth and ninth grade students who participated in the study, one month after the program, the treatment group had 25% less psychological abuse, 60% less sexual perpetration, 60% less physical violence than the comparison group. There were also differences in attitudes in desired directions between the treatment and comparison groups. One year following data, there continued to be differences in attitudes but no differences in behaviors (Foshee, Bauman, & Greene, 2000). At four years post-treatment, Foshee et al. (2004) found adolescents in the treatment group reported significantly less physical violence, serious physical violence, and sexual dating violence perpetration and victimization than the comparison group.

While the Safe Dates program demonstrated an impact on actual physical and sexual aggression, other programs have produced positive short-term outcomes in the areas of knowledge and attitude change. MacGowan (1997) evaluated a five-session dating violence prevention program for predominantly African American middle school youth and found an increase in knowledge of healthy relationships and attitudes toward non-violence, but found no changes in attitudes about physical violence or methods of dealing with violence in relationships. Similarly, Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, and Cano (1997) identified that a five-session school based program was an effective tool to change attitudinal correlates of dating violence among 102 high school students when compared to a no-treatment control group. In this study, there was a significant reduction in teen tolerance of violence as a means to resolve conflict.

There have been fewer studies that have focused on diverse or high-risk populations of students. One study that included an excellent representation of diverse students was conducted by Adler-Baeder et al. (2007). Adler-Baeder et al. (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of the Love U2 Relationship Smarts curriculum, a 12 module (12–18 hour) program that focuses on healthy/unhealthy relationship patterns and communication/conflict resolution skills, for high school students in the state of Alabama. She used a treatment (training intervention) and comparison group design. She found a significant increase in knowledge about relationships and awareness of healthy/unhealthy relationship

patterns in the treatment group but no such increase in the control group. She also documented a significant reduction in verbal aggression measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale for the treatment group, while the use of verbal aggression increased over time for the comparison group.

Hammond and Yung (1991) also evaluated a healthy relationship program for 15 at-risk middle school-age African American youth, the Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT). This program sought to reduce violence across all types of relationships, not just dating violence, through 37 sessions on communication, problem-solving, and negotiation. These researchers assessed behavioral change through videotaped demonstrations of healthy relationship skills. In a comparison of these 15 youth to 13 students who did not receive the program, they found that participants improved in all skills areas, particularly areas of significant deficit, and they experienced significantly less involvement in violence-related behavior and suspensions/expulsions from school than those who did not participate in the program.

Wolfe et al. (2003) also evaluated a community-based intervention to promote healthy dating relationships among high-risk youth with a history of child maltreatment through a treatment-comparison group design. The program included 18 modules on positive alternatives to relationship aggression, healthy communication and conflict resolution skills, and gender-based role expectations. The program was effective in reducing incidents of physical and emotional abuse and symptoms of emotional distress over time.

4. Gap in the literature

Hence, the literature has begun to establish that relationship education programs can promote relationship knowledge (Adler-Baeder), skills (Hammond & Yung, 1991), and a reduction in violent behaviors (Wolfe et al., 2003) for high-risk or diverse youth. However, these programs were all very time intensive and most were delivered in a traditional school setting. The Love U2 Relationship Smarts curriculum consisted of 12 sixty to ninety minute modules administered in high schools (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007); the Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT) program (Hammond and Yung (1991) involved 37 sessions delivered in a middle school; and the Youth Relationships Project (Wolfe et al., 2003) offered 18 sessions to high-risk youth in a community setting. This study seeks to address the issue of dosage—whether a program that is administered in a brief format can produce similar gains in knowledge and skills for high-risk youth. In 1995, LaVoie et al. compared the effectiveness of short and long prevention programs for traditional school students to address attitudes and knowledge related to dating violence. They found that both versions of the program were equally effective to produce positive attitudes, but the short version produced greater knowledge gains. This research will address the effectiveness of a prevention program delivered in fewer hours (12) and in a compressed time frame (two days) for a high-risk population of youth. The previously mentioned programs for high-risk youth offered 12 to 37 modules through as many sessions; the current study evaluated a program that provided eight modules over two consecutive days. The question of dosage is particularly relevant given current budget constraints on educational and social service systems, as well as logistical constraints relevant to high-risk youth such as difficulty with retention of participants in multiple sessions due to their inherent risk factors. This issue of dosage is particularly relevant for high-risk youth who have dropped out of the traditional school system, such as those served by the current project. Barriers to retention of these youth include transportation, employment issues, neighborhood and family violence, teen parenting, and stigma associated with social services and/or academic institutions.

5. Louisville Healthy Relationships Program

5.1. Target population

The Louisville Healthy Relationships Program has implemented the *Love U2* Communication Smarts curriculum with high-risk youth involved with a specialized program of the public school system, the Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U) Program. "Youth at risk" can be defined as young people whose background places them "at risk" of future offending or victimization due to environmental, social and family conditions that hinder their personal development and successful integration into the economy and society. Nearly 100% of the Y.O.U. participants meet this definition of at-risk youth. Seventy-nine percent of those accessing intensive services are dropouts, 87% compute below a 9th grade level and 73% are reading below a 9th grade level as measured by the Test of Adult Basic Education.

The majority of participants come from ten zip codes that represent the most economically and socially disadvantaged areas of Metro Louisville. Three of those ten zip codes have the highest number of Y.O.U. participants—the areas have been defined by Annie E. Casey Making Connections as areas facing higher than average risks for children and youth. In these areas, 112 incidents of child abuse per 1000 children were reported compared with 71 for the county in 2000–01. Approximately 25% of all children in these three zip code areas live in poverty. There were 102 reported crimes per 1000 persons compared to 61 for the county. Teen violent deaths per 100,000 persons were 105 (20% of the deaths in the county). Only 37% of families with children were headed by married couples. Fifty-four percent of families with children were headed by single mothers and 9% were headed by single fathers. Over 72% of new mothers were unmarried, and 30.5% of new mothers were under the age of 20. The teen birth rate per 1000 females ages 15–17 was 83.5. The median age of birth mothers was 22.5 years. The highest area of need in these three zip codes is the empowerment zone. In the empowerment zone, 32% of birth mothers were under the age of 20, and 82% of the mothers were single. In addition 1268 physical abuse reports were made in the empowerment zone areas. The neighborhoods represented in the other seven zip codes of highest number of enrollees in the Y.O.U. program are also areas of high poverty, high crime, high teen pregnancy rates, and low marriage rates. These demographics reflect numerous risk factors for negative relationship outcomes for program participants.

5.2. Service delivery

The *Love U2: Communication Smarts* (Pearson, 2004) curriculum consists of seven modules that address healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns, communication and conflict resolution skills, and general problem solving. This training teaches youth skills to form and maintain healthy relationships, as well as to avoid or end unhealthy relationships. An eighth module was developed by this research team to address issues of dating violence more directly. This curriculum is particularly relevant for the high-risk youth identified for the described project given the numerous risk factors described above.

The eight modules of the *Love U2 Communication Smarts* curriculum are offered over two consecutive days on-site at the Y.O.U. program for high-risk youth. Staff members from the Y.O.U. program have been trained by project personnel to facilitate the curriculum. Youth sign up for the *Love U2* class with their career planners two weeks prior to the training. The classes averaged 10 participants. Four hours of curriculum were presented per day with the additional 2 h each day used for pre and post evaluation, breaks and lunch. Each student received a participant manual the first day of class and a certificate of completion the last day. Students also received a training incentive in the form of a $50 Visa gift card. Due to the success of the class the administrators of the Y.O.U. program integrated the *Love U2* class into the regular course offerings at the Y.O.U. program.

5.3. Evaluation of Love U2

There were two primary research questions guiding this evaluation:

1) What is the impact of a brief (two-day) healthy relationship program on relationship knowledge and attitudes toward violence among high-risk youth?
2) What is the impact of a brief healthy relationship program on communication and conflict resolution skills among high-risk youth?

6. Methodology

6.1. Design

This research utilized a pre–post-test research design. Data on demographics, trainee knowledge of key concepts and skills are measured pre-training. Trainee reactions to training, knowledge, attitudes, and transfer of skills are measured post-training.

6.2. Sample

There were 260 individuals who completed the *Love U2* classes. As indicated above, classes were offered in two-day sessions. The retention rate of participants for all classes across all sites and formats was 93%. All 260 youth who participated in an initial *Love U2* session were invited to participate in the study. For the current study, the sample size was 233 subjects for the pre-training surveys and 202 subjects for the immediate post-training surveys. The 233 subjects represented a 90% response rate to the surveys at the pre-training data collection point. The response rate for immediate post-training was 78%. There were no significant differences in demographic variables between these response groups, indicating that the results for the follow-up periods are representative of the entire study population.

There were 140 females (60.1%) and 93 males (39.9%). There were 167 African American participants (73.6%), 44 white participants (19.4%), and 16 participants of other racial groups (7%). There were 125 participants (61.9%) who were unemployed, with the remaining 38.1% employed full- or part-time. For 88% of participants, the gross annual family income was $30,000 or less. These demographics are consistent with the general client population at the Youth Opportunities Unlimited Program.

6.3. Variables and measurement

Trainee *demographics* measured included gender, age, race, religion, marital status, education, occupation, employment status, income, and number of children. Training *satisfaction* was measured using a 15-item survey that evaluates the extent to which trainees found the training enjoyable and useful. Participants rate the quality of the training on a 1 to 5 Likert scale for each of these items. This training satisfaction scale has been used extensively in child welfare training evaluation and has strong reliability and validity with an alpha of .75 (see Antle, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2008).

Learning was measured using a knowledge test of the training curriculum written by the authors. This knowledge-based test was developed specifically for this research and consists of 20 multiple-choice questions on material from each of the key content areas of the training. Trainees completed this test pre-training and immediately post-training.

Transfer of skill was measured for two key skills from the training: communication and conflict resolution skills. Participants completed

the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Noller & White, 1990) and the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory-Partner (Kurdek, 1994). Participants completed these surveys pre- and immediately post-training. In a study of 96 married couples, Noller and White (1990) reported the following Chronbach's alpha levels for the factors of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire: Coercion: 0.86, Mutuality: 0.88, Post-Conflict Distress: 0.73, and Destructive Process: 0.79. They also found support for the discriminant validity of this scale. For the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI), Kurdek (1994) presented preliminary psychometric data from a sample of lesbian, gay, and married heterosexual non-parent, as well as married heterosexual parent couples. For the CRSI-Self, the Cronbach's alpha ranged from .65 to .89. For the CRSI-Partner, the Cronbach's alpha ranged from .80 to .91. Scores were internally consistent and stable over a one year period. For the CRSI-Self Cronbach's alpha ranged from .46 to .83, and for the CRSI-Partner Cronbach's alpha ranged from .54 to .83. Kurdek (1994) reports good face validity, evidence for convergent validity, and evidence for concurrent and predictive criterion-related validity.

Attitudes toward relationship violence were measured using the Acceptance of Couple Violence scale (Foshee, Fothergill, et al., 1998). The scale contains eleven items that measure acceptance of male or female violence, female on male violence, and acceptance of general dating violence. The reported internal consistency reliability is greater than .70 for all components of the scale (Foshee et al., unpublished).

6.4. Procedure

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university. A full consent form was used prior to the administration of the pre-test, through which subjects were informed of their right to refuse to complete these surveys, not answer a specific question or questions on the surveys, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. The pre-test was administered on the first day of training prior to the initiation of the lecture. There is a referral mechanism in place for any participant who becomes distressed during these research procedures. Facilitators of the training and the researchers collecting data have been provided with a written protocol that includes a list of referral sources. If any subject becomes distressed during these research procedures (or the training program itself), facilitators and/or researchers make appropriate referrals for services. The post-test was administered on the last day of training prior to dismissal. Recruitment strategies and materials were for participation in the training versus participation in the research. There was no targeted recruitment solely for the research.

There is also a fidelity process in place, by which trained observers document the degree to which trainers cover core concepts and utilize various training methods from the *Love U2* curriculum. The fidelity assessment consistently showed very high levels of curriculum compliance and use of appropriate training methods. A full description of the fidelity measure and outcomes of fidelity are reported elsewhere (Antle et al., unpublished).

7. Results

7.1. Satisfaction and learning

The average satisfaction item rating for the *Love U2* training was 4.01 on a 5-point scale. The average total satisfaction rating for the 15 items on the satisfaction scale was 60.14 (SD = 13.14) out of a total possible score of 75. There was a significant increase in participant knowledge from pre- to post-training, $t (202) = -11.76$, p<.0001. The average pre-test score was 30.76% correct (SD = 13.18), and the average post-test score was 42.61% (SD = 14.10). There was a significant difference in learning based upon race, $F (5,194) = 2.83$, p<.05. Specifically, African American students learned more (M = 13.38% gain) than Caucasian students (M = 5.69% gain).

7.2. Relationship skills

In the area of communication (as measured by the Communication Patterns Questionnaire), there was a significant decrease in the demand–withdraw pattern of communication, $t (155) = 3.59$, p<.0001. The average pre-training score was 25.67 (SD = 10.34), and the average post-training score was 22.68 (SD = 10.51).There was also a significant decrease in the mutual avoidance pattern of communication, $t (158) = 2.85$, p<.01. The average pre-training score was 8.36 (SD = 3.95), and the average post-training score was 7.43 (SD = 3.98).

In the area of conflict resolution (as measured by the Conflict Resolution Inventory), there was also a significant decrease in the withdraw dynamic for conflict resolution, $t (167) = 2.04$, p<.05. The average pre-training score was 10.00 (SD = 3.89), and the average post-training score was 9.46 (SD = 3.71). This decrease in the withdraw dynamic represents an improvement in conflict resolution skills. There was also a decrease in conflict engagement, $t (167) = 4.35$, p<.0001. The mean pre-training score was 9.64 (SD = 4.12), and the mean post-training score was 8.48 (SD = 3.51).

7.3. Attitudes

There was a significant improvement in attitudes toward couple violence (as measured by the Attitudes toward Couple Violence scale), $t (114) = 2.04$, p<.05. The mean pre-training score was 17.16 (SD = 6.90), and the mean post-training score was 16.09 (SD = 6.99). A decrease in score represents an improvement in attitudes in the desired direction, participants are less likely to indicate support for dating violence in romantic relationships.

8. Discussion

8.1. Key findings

This study documented that a brief relationship education program can produce significant gains in relationship knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward couple violence. Participants in the two-day *Love U2* curriculum experienced a significant increase in relationship knowledge, with African American students (who comprised approximately 74% of the sample) demonstrating the greatest gains. This finding is consistent with previous research on youth relationship programs that found improvements in relationship knowledge (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; MacGowan, 1997).

There was also a statistically significant improvement in communication and conflict resolution skills reported by program participants. Youth experienced a significant decrease in the demand–withdraw and mutual avoidance patterns of communication. This finding reflects that youth think they are better able to manage communication episodes so that they and/or their partners remain engaged. Similarly, participants reported a significant decrease in withdrawal during times of conflict and an overall decrease in conflict engagement. The latter refers to a decrease in general frequency or pursuit of conflict in dating relationships. There were no differences by race, gender or other demographics in these changes. Other research has documented a positive impact of relationship education for communication/conflict resolution skills of high-risk youth (Hammond & Yung, 1991), but these findings were specific to middle-school-age youth involved in a program of very long duration (37 sessions).

Lastly, this study found a significant improvement in attitudes toward couple violence. Youth reported a much lower acceptance of violence in dating relationships. Other studies have examined the impact of relationship education on attitudes toward violence. Adler-Baeder et al. (2007) found a similar result when *Love U2* was provided

to diverse high-school-age students in a traditional school setting. Foshee et al. (2000) and Avery-Leaf also reported that relationship education programs were effective in promoting appropriate attitudes toward relationship violence. Like gains in communication and conflict resolution skills, there were no differences by race, gender or other demographics in these changes. These attitudes toward violence have been found to serve as an important mediator of actual violence in romantic relationships. For example, Josephson and Proulx (2008) found that there is a direct causal effect of violence-tolerant attitudes and psychologically aggressive strategies on physical violence against dating partners. Knowledge of healthy relationships contributed to a reduction in violence among boys' friendships, and had an indirect effect on physical violence by reducing violence-tolerant attitudes. Much of the research and practice in this area is based upon the theory of planned action, which postulates and has found evidence for the impact of attitudes and beliefs on intentions and behaviors (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Thus, interventions that offer participants new information that undermines maladaptive beliefs and attitudes about relationships should lead to a change in those attitudes and beliefs.

Hence, this study began to address a key gap in the literature—the issue of effective dosage of relationship education to produce positive outcomes for high-risk youth. While several previous studies documented an impact of relationship education on diverse youth (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007), high-risk middle school youth (Hammond & Yung, 1991), and youth victims of family violence (Wolfe et al., 2003), each of these programs was much longer in duration. Given significant community resource constraints and the potential difficulties associated with retaining high-risk youth in these types of relationship education programs over time, this question of relative effectiveness of a brief relationship program is critical.

8.2. Strengths and limitations

There were several strengths of the present study. One strength of this study is the examination of multiple training outcomes for the *Love U2* relationship education program, including satisfaction, knowledge, skill, and attitudes toward violence. This training evaluation model provides comprehensive data on the various domains of impact for the *Love U2* curriculum. Furthermore, process outcomes such as the fidelity of the intervention were evaluated to ensure that the intervention is consistent across groups and sites. The results from this study are based on the use of standardized scales with strong psychometric properties. There was also a large sample size of 233 high-risk youth. This study highlights the difference between efficacy research, which is synonymous with highly controlled randomized clinical trials research, and effectiveness research, which is more associated with transportable mental health services research. This research provides preliminary evidence that relationship skills/dating violence prevention curriculums can work in naturalistic, applied settings. Unlike highly controlled, laboratory-based efficacy studies that focus on participants with a specific issue, this effectiveness study took place in an unfiltered setting designed to provide services for teens with multiple problems and risk factors.

However, there were also several limitations of this study. First, there was no control group utilized, resulting in several threats to validity (e.g. history, maturation). Nevertheless, given the limited published research on the *Love U2* curriculum (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007 is only identifiable study) and need for data on the training process and outcomes closer to the training intervention event that are critical in the training evaluation chain of evidence (Barbee & Antle, 2009) such as satisfaction, learning, and skill acquisition, this study still makes an important contribution to the field. A second limitation is the need for follow-up data. While participants reported immediate gains in knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes, the

maintenance of these gains over time is a key issue for consideration. There is also a need to link these immediate outcomes to more long-term outcomes such as reductions in relationship violence and improvements in relationship quality and decision-making. Lastly, the measure of skills is through self-report. Participants may have inflated their level of appropriate communication and conflict resolution skills. However, their belief that they will be less avoidant and violent in dating relationships is a measure of behavioral intention. Other research shows a strong relationship between behavioral intention and actual behavior (Josephson & Proulx, 2008).

8.3. Future research

Future research should address these limitations by conducting a longitudinal, randomized control trial of high-risk youth using the *Love U2* healthy relationship curriculum. In such a study, there should be direct measurement of communication and conflict resolution skills through observational research methods, such as those used by Hammond and Yung (1991). Most importantly, this research should examine the relationship between these immediate relationship gains reported in this study (knowledge, skills, attitudes), and long-term relationship quality and safety. Other research in the dating violence literature has documented a positive impact of relationship education on physical and emotional violence (e.g. Foshee et al., 2004; Wolfe et al., 2003). However, these studies were evaluating the impact of such education for traditional students and/or programs of much higher intensity/duration. These issues should be examined in light of the dosage question addressed by the present study to determine whether a brief educational intervention can produce similar improvements in relationship safety for high-risk youth. Hence, future research should collect relationship violence data and follow these high-risk youth over time.

8.4. Implications for policy and practice

8.4.1. Reduce barriers to service delivery
School systems and other potential community treatment providers must deal with constraints around budgets, resources and retention rates when deciding on which programs to implement. This research demonstrates that training that is brief and cost-effective, yet focused can have a positive impact on teen knowledge, skill development and attitudes around dating violence and healthy relationships. Because the program is brought directly into a non-traditional academic service delivery setting and facilitated by familiar staff, barriers to retention for high-risk youth such as transportation, school instability, and conflict with staff, are greatly minimized. By tapping into an existing infrastructure, relationship educators can form community partnerships and provide services that are convenient and accessible to potential participants. Based on these results, it may be possible to connect with a difficult teen audience by being brief in presentation and talking about relevant subject matter. If teens find the information interesting, they will not only comply, but learn from the overall experience. The content must be easily accessible and written in way that academically low-functioning teens can comprehend. The brief format (dosage) of the program may overcome barriers such as transportation needed for multiple sessions, conflicts with work schedules for non-traditional students, life stressors such as neighborhood and family violence that might cause absences, and the demands of teen parenting that are common to many of these students.

8.4.2. Combine knowledge and skills
Like other traditional dating violence programs, this curriculum explains different types of abuse, cycles of violence and common victim responses. While insight into these areas is important, knowledge and self-awareness alone may not be enough to help

these high-risk youth. It is also crucial to learn a series of skills or tools to deal in order to deescalate conflict and remain safe. Although designed originally for use in romantic relationships, these communication skills can be used in all significant interpersonal relationships (i.e. with parents, siblings, friends). These results stress the importance of combining both knowledge and skill acquisition in the education of couple violence.

8.4.3. Focus on strength and health in a safe group setting

The *Love U2* curriculum focuses on healthy relationships which may be more inviting and less stigmatizing than a group marketed primarily around dating violence. Health, rather than deficits or pathology, is embedded in the curriculum. Teens are impressionable and often rely on other peers for ideas and input around values and dating behaviors. A positive group experience marked by sharing and acceptance, combined with knowledge and skill acquisition, may enhance the program's overall ability to change attitudes and values around dating violence.

8.4.4. Alternatives to violence

Love U2, by either helping a participant resolve conflict or safely exit a violent dating relationship, is beneficial for teens who have been victims of emotional or physical abuse. The curriculum may also help perpetrators of dating violence develop a sense of personal responsibility for one's actions and stopping the violence, this curriculum teaches important communication and listening skills that are viable alternatives to their, old ineffective coping strategies. Given the frequency of mutual violence in youth dating violence (Coker et al., 2000), the gender-neutral presentation of dating violence material is an important element of teaching alternatives to violence to a youth audience.

8.4.5. Promote follow-up and advocacy for family and friends

A positive experience with the *Love U2* program may counteract a negative stigma that high-risk youth may have with mental health programs or service providers and lead to voluntary follow-up activities. For teens with a family history of violence (such as many of those in the high-risk sample reported in this study), they may need their own individualized treatment to address their responses to witnessing or experiencing abuse. If a participant needs additional help with an abusive relationship at the conclusion of the program, the setting may have either the resources already available or be able to refer the participant for additional services in the form of therapy or a support group. Even if teens are not personally affected by dating violence in their own romantic relationships, they many benefit their friends and loved ones by acquiring the knowledge and skills in the program. If they recognize the warning signs of abuse in their family of origin or in another friend's relationship, participants may be able to advocate for these loved ones to get the help they need.

In all, this research offers preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of a lower dosage relationship education program for high-risk youth. This brief intervention addresses many of the logistical barriers to reaching high-risk youth often encountered by more traditional formats. As youth service providers seek new and innovative ways to prevent violence and promote positive youth outcomes, this approach to relationship education may serve as a viable alternative.

Acknowledgement

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