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Affinity & Affection: Adolescent Relationships

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Abstract

The Epicenter is a resource center that serves LGBTQ, system affected, and at-risk youth in Monterey County. The problem being addressed is the misconceptions about healthy and unhealthy relationships among youth. Many young people fall into unhealthy relationships or behaviors due to not understanding the healthy characteristics of relationships. A contributing factor to unhealthy relationships is youth seeing examples of unhealthy relationships in their home. This leads them to practice or seek out similar unhealthy behaviors that they have witnessed. Unhealthy relationships harm a young person's perception of relationships and the behaviors they will exhibit later in life. The consequences of unhealthy relationships include increased rates of mental health issues as well as unsafe sex practices. The capstone project is a presentation on healthy relationships. The presentation will discuss what healthy and unhealthy behaviors look like in all types of relationships. It will also encourage youth to evaluate the current behaviors they exhibit in relationships, practice healthy behaviors, and help people they believe may be in unhealthy relationships. The results of the presentation showed that all youth benefited from learning more about relationship behaviors. After the presentation, the participants understood the types of abuse, unhealthy behaviors in relationships, and recognized red flags. The participants learned where to reach out for help and stated they were more likely to speak up if they witnessed unhealthy behaviors or abuse. It is recommended that the presentation continues to be presented to youth in Monterey County as it is beneficial to educate youth on healthy relationships, give them a safe space where they can have discussions on relationships, and allows them to practice healthy behaviors.

Keywords: Unhealthy/healthy relationships, abuse, behaviors, youth, characteristics

Agency & Communities Served

The Epicenter is a nonprofit agency in Monterey County. The mission statement of the

Epicenter is to "empower at risk and system involved youth ages 16-24 to flourish by connecting

them to community resources that provide opportunities for equity and hope in order to improve

youth outcomes in Monterey County" (Epicenter, n.d.). The Epicenter is a program that is led

and driven by youth that participate in it's programs. Some programs at the Epicenter are the

Friday Night Live (FNL) program, California Youth Connection (CYC), Our Gente, and the

Youth Council.

The Friday Night Live (FNL) program comprises several programs geared towards

different aged youth. These programs include, FNL which is for high school youth, club live for

middle school youth, and the Friday Night Live Youth Council. The main focus of these

programs is to teach students about drug and alcohol abuse, develop leadership skills, and

promote healthy messages to all youth. The mission of the California Youth Connection (CYC)

is to "develop leaders who empower each other and their communities to transform the foster

care system through legislative, policy, and practice change" (Epicenter, n.d.). CYC members

are current and former foster youth. The program provides a safe space for foster youth to come

and be a part of a community that understands them as well as provides them with the skills to

become empowered leaders and advocate for change for foster youth everywhere. The Our Gente

program provides a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth in Monterey County. The Our Gente program

includes community and agency training, support groups for youth, and community events

(Epicenter, n.d.). The Youth Council is made up of current foster youth who show leadership

potential and interest in supporting the Epicenter. Members of the Youth Council assist with

drop-in services, center outreach, and event planning (Epicenter, n.d.).

The Epicenter serves at risk and system-involved youth ages 16-24 (Epicenter, n.d.). The

Epicenter also serves LGBTQ+ and foster care youth. Some demographic data for adults served

by the Epicenter from July 2018 to September 2018 includes, 59% were assigned female at birth

and 40% were assigned male at birth (Epicenter, n.d.). Gender identity demographics are 35%

male, 31% female, 9% transgender, 9% genderqueer, and 10% were questioning or unsure about

their gender indentity. 57% of respondents were between the ages of 16-24 (Epicenter, n.d.). 81%

of respondents self reported their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino. The Epicenter is open to any

and all youth who are in need of services. It is a safe space where youth feel welcomed and

empowered to take become leaders, advocate for themselves and others, as well as create change

in their communities.

Problem Description

A problem that many youth face is misunderstanding what healthy relationships should

look like. Many teens have unrealistic and false beliefs about what relationships are about as well

as how to behave in said relationships. This is true for all relationships from friendships, to

familial relationships, and romantic relationships. Many youth do not have the skills to speak up,

set boundaries, and advocate for themselves. 1 in 3 young people will be in abusive or unhealthy

relationships (Liz Clairborne Inc, 2009). The Centers for Disease Control estimates that around

1.5 million high school students experience physical abuse from a dating partner (2006). The

Department of Justice states that young women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest rate of

intimate partner violence, accounting for about triple rates of the national average (2006). These

rates show the pervasive problem of unhealthy relationships among young people. It shows how many people don't realize what unhealthy behaviors and healthy behaviors truly look like.

Contributing Factors

A key contributing factor to the high rates of youth in unhealthy relationships is the fact that there are a lot of misconceptions about what healthy and unhealthy relationships are. Unfortunately, many youth believe that some unhealthy and abusive characteristics of relationships are actually healthy and good. Many believe that partners act out in unhealthy and abusive ways because they truly love their significant other. Many teens aren't aware that boundaries are important in relationships and technology today has made it so people are more connected than ever. King-Ries cites a study by Liz Clairborne Inc (2007) which found that 40% of teens that participated in the study were in contact with their partners 10-30 times an hour. This shows how some teens may not realize that being in constant contact with their partners is not healthy. According to King-Ries (2011), teenagers develop patterns in early relationships that will carry on to their adult lives. Thus, a teen who experiences relationships with lack of communication or boundaries may see this as the norm and continue to practice these behaviors in later relationships.

Another contributing factor is that some of these youth may not have a clear example of what healthy relationships should look like. If their parents or other family members are in unhealthy or abusive relationships they may believe these relationships to be the norm. A study by Ernest N. Jouriles et al., (2012) examined whether intimate partner violence in the family contributed to the prediction of teen dating violence perpetration. The findings of this study were that teens' experiences of a lifetime of exposure to severe intimate partner violence contributed

additively in predicting teen dating violence perpetration (Jouriles et al., 2012). This shows how

exposure to domestic violence or intimate partner violence can lead teens to fall into unhealthy

or abusive relationships.

Consequences

Unhealthy relationships also have an effect on the mental health of the youth who

experience them and can begin a lifetime of trauma and other issues. A study done by Banyard

and Cross (2008), found that victims of dating violence had more mental health concerns than

those without dating violence experiences. This led to depression and thoughts of suicide.

Another study found that teen female perpetrators of teen dating violence reported having higher

symptoms of anxiety and depression (Temple et al., 2016). Research also shows that being a

victim of teen dating violence can lead youth to exhibit antisocial behaviors (CDC, 2020).

A study done by the Centers for Disease Control found that victims of dating violence

were more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior (CDC, 2006). The increase in unsafe sex

practices leads to higher a risk of sexually transitted infections (STI's) and unexpected

pregnancies. A study conducted by the CDC found that 7% of high school students had

experienced some form of sexual violence (CDC, 2017). Many people may not think that

unhealthy relationships are a big problem in society, but the reality is that these experiences lead

to serious consequences that can affect the lives of people who fall into unhealthy relationships.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Misconceptions about unhealthy/healthy	Teens in unhealthy relationships	Increased rates of mental health issues

relationships		
No example of healthy relationship at home		Increased rates of unsafe sex practices

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

The capstone project will be a virtual presentation that will educate young people on healthy and unhealthy relationships. The presentation was originally planned to be implemented in person, but due to COVID-19 restrictions it had to be altered to be implemented virtually. The presentation will include skills building through different activities, problem solving, and resources for youth to seek help for themselves or friends/family. Entry and exit surveys will be administered to measure the development of attitudes and beliefs regarding healthy relationships, confidence in skills, and overall understanding of the topics addressed during the workshops. Some topics the workshops will address in the workshops are healthy and unhealthy relationship characteristics, red flags in relationships, consent, getting help, and how to advocate for healthy relationships and respect. The presentation will include ideas that have been used by many healthy relationship programs such as the power and control wheel.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this capstone project is to teach adolescents the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Many teens have misconceptions about what healthy relationships are, this leads to teens falling into unhealthy relationships. This project will help to educate teens on what healthy relationships are really like, and what to look out for in potentially unhealthy relationships. Some teens may also not have healthy examples of relationships at

home, this project will show teens examples of healthy relationships. This will help them have something to refer to if and when they decide to be in a relationship.

Project Justification

The proposed project of a virtual presentation that will teach youth about healthy relationships and teach youth skills to prevent abuse is similar to various teen dating violence prevention programs that have proven to be successful. According to the CDC, "...promoting expectations for healthy, non-violent relationships and building skills in these areas can reduce risk for perpetration and victimization..." (CDC, 2017). The technical package of programs and policies, discusses successful programs that teach skills to have healthy relationships and also give youth the opportunity to practice those skills (CDC, 2017). That is the plan for this project - to teach youth about healthy relationships and skills needed to stay safe, as well as giving them the opportunity to practice those skills through activities during the presentation.

Project Implementation

The plan for this project was to review existing evidence based programs such as Safe Dates and Dating Matters to develop the healthy relationship workshops. After reviewing these programs, workshops will be created modeling successful theories or activities from such programs. The project will consist of a virtual presentation that will focus on different topics. Proposed topics for the presentation include defining relationships, healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, abuse and the power and control wheel, setting boundaries and consent, rights in a relationship, and advocating for healthy relationships. These topics were chosen as they were some of the main objectives in the healthy relationship programs reviewed. Activities were created that would achieve similar learning objectives to these programs. Prior to the shut down

due to COVID-19, Epicenter youth were asked what they believed was needed to teach in a

healthy relationships workshop. Their responses were taken into account and used to develop the

workshop.

The project was implemented virtually through the Zoom video platform during regular

program hours. The workshop was implemented in early November to 14 youth participants. The

workshop included a Powerpoint presentation that was shown on screen to all participants. The

presentation also included activities and discussions to further understanding of healthy

relationships among the participants. These discussions included what relationships mean to

participants, what they believe the most important characteristic of a relationship is, they were

also asked to practice setting boundaries, and check for red flags. A laptop was the main material

needed to implement the workshop due to the virtual modality of the project. There will also be

entry and exit surveys for the participants and these will be given out at the beginning and end of

the program. A recruiting process was planned a few weeks before the implementation of the

workshops and a flyer was created which can be seen in Appendix A. Ultimately, it was decided

that the best course of action was to present the workshop to Friday Night Live youth

participants as they already had set meeting times and would all be present for the workshop. A

detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Assessment Plan

The project will be assessed by evaluating data from youth surveys. Prior to the

presentation, youth will be given an entry survey that will measure their attitudes and beliefs in

regard to relationships. The entry survey will also include questions about experience or

knowledge of unhealthy or abusive behaviors and the likelihood to step up or advocate for

others. At the end of the presentation, youth will be given a similar exit survey to assess what has

been learned from participation in the project. The data from the surveys will determine if there

is a shift on attitudes and beliefs in regard to relationships after completing the program. The exit

survey will also assess the likelihood of youth reaching out for help and their knowledge of

resources after completing the program. The youth will also be asked to fill out a program

evaluation form to determine how they felt about the program. The evaluation form will be used

to assess whether youth responded positively to the program and whether they would participate

again or encourage others to participate.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes for this project are to further the understanding of healthy

relationships among youth. The youth will gain new knowledge and skills that will assist them in

having healthier relationships. The project will also teach youth about resources they can access

if they or someone they know is being abused. Lastly, the youth will be empowered to advocate

for healthy relationships and will feel comfortable speaking out against abuse. The expected

outcome is that at least 80% of youth feel that they can tell the difference between healthy and

unhealthy behaviors. Another expected outcome is that 100% of participants will know a

resource they can reach out to for help regarding unhealthy relationships.

<div align="center">

Project Results

</div>

The participants received a pre and post test to measure the results of the presentation.

There were 14 participants that received the presentation. All youth completed the pretest and 10

completed the posttest. The results of the project show that the participants greatly benefited

from receiving a presentation on healthy relationships. The participants that received the

presentation are all a part of a youth leadership group, therefore they were very engaged and

knowledgeable about the topics discussed. Although they had some knowledge on the topic of

healthy relationships, it was still beneficial to learn more about behaviors in relationships. In the

pretest most youth were not able to correctly identify the six types of abuse. After they received

the presentation though, most youth (90%-100%) were able to correctly identify the types of

abuse. Additionally, 35.7% of participants agreed to the statement "if my partner gets really

jealous it's because they love me" in the pretest, and no participants agreed to this statement in

the posttest. Also, 64.3% of participants agreed that it is okay to be in constant contact with their

partner, and in the posttest only 11.1% of participants agreed to the statement. After the

presentation all participants stated they felt confident in recognizing red flags in relationships.

Prior to the presentation 57.1% of participants stated they did not know where to reach out for

help and after the presentation 80% of participants stated that they knew where to reach out for

help. All participants also stated they were more likely to speak up if they witnessed unhealthy

behaviors in the posttest. Also, all the participants stated that they had a better understanding of

unhealthy and abusive behaviors as a result of the presentation. Charts for these results will be

listed under Results in Appendix A.

<div align="center">**Conclusion & Recommendations**</div>

Healthy relationships is a topic that should be discussed with youth often. Even if youth

may have some understanding of relationships. The conversations on healthy and unhealthy

behaviors benefit the youth and help them to understand what they deserve and don't deserve in

a relationship. It's also important to stress the importance of all relationships being healthy.

Oftentimes people assume that healthy relationships automatically means that it is about

romantic relationships. Giving youth examples of healthy behaviors that should be practiced and

expected in their friendships and family will help them to understand the difference between

healthy and unhealthy behaviors in these types of relationships. This workshop was an hour long

presentation. It is recommended to have a series of workshops and different topics for each in

order to further the understanding of youth participants. This will also allow for the youth to

become comfortable with the facilitator and will improve participation and program outcomes. It

is also recommended that there be a focus on topics that youth have difficulty understanding.

These topics include codependency, verbal, emotional, and digital abuse. One thing that was

clear about the participants is that they were all very open minded and participated frequently.

It's important to note that not all participants will be that way in future sessions and to plan

adequately. This could mean having activities that involve more participation, encouraging

discussions, and allowing time for youth to get comfortable with the group before starting any

difficult discussions. Additionally, it is recommended that the workshops be implemented to both

middle and high school students.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Meet with mentors to discuss project	February 21 & 28	Sam Gomez, Richelle Santoya
Short focus group with Epicenter youth about relationships	Early March	Sam Gomez
Research healthy relationships programs	June/July	Sam Gomez
Review Safe Dates & Dating Matters curriculum	July/August	Sam Gomez
Create workshop plan	August	Sam Gomez
Create entry/exit surveys and program evaluation form	August	Sam Gomez
Create powerpoints presentations for workshops	September/October 2020	Sam Gomez
Ongoing meetings with mentor to approve workshop and make edits	September/October 2020	Sam Gomez
Created flyer for recruitment	October 2020	Sam Gomez
Gather materials needed for activities	October 2020	Sam Gomez
Recruit participants	November 2020	Sam Gomez, Richelle Santoya
Virtual presentation	November 2020	Sam Gomez
Sent Posttest to participants one week after presentation	November 2020	Sam Gomez
Assess surveys and program evaluations	November 2020	Sam Gomez

Flyer:

Results:

Pretest

If my partner gets really jealous it's because they love me
14 responses

Legend:
- 🔵 Strongly Agree
- 🔴 Agree
- 🟠 Disagree
- 🟢 Strongly Disagree
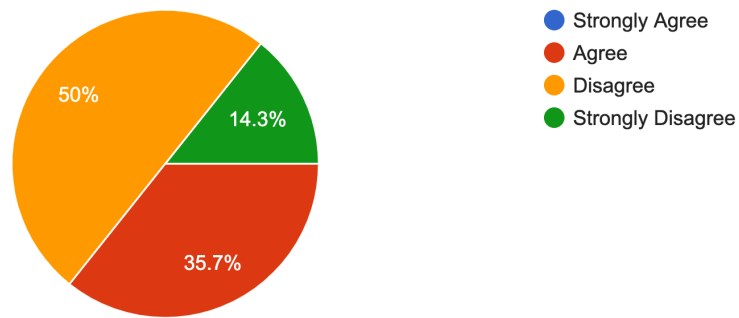
Posttest

If my partner gets really jealous it's because they love me
10 responses

Legend:
- 🔵 Strongly Agree
- 🔴 Agree
- 🟠 Disagree
- 🟢 Strongly Disagree
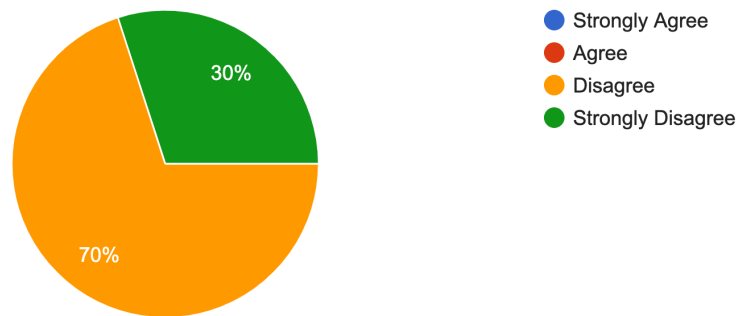
Pretest

It's okay to be in contact with my partner (texting/calling) throughout the whole day
14 responses

- 🔵 Strongly Agree
- 🔴 Agree
- 🟠 Disagree
- 🟢 Strongly Disagree
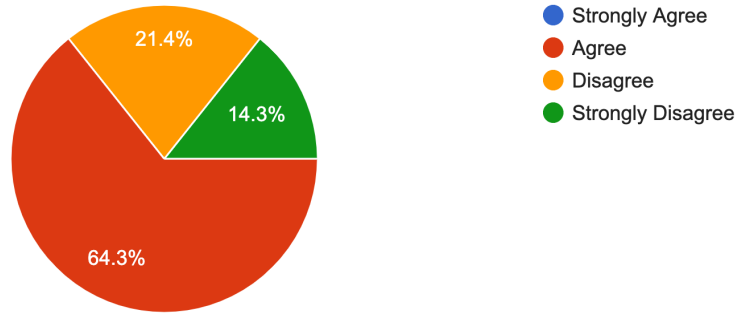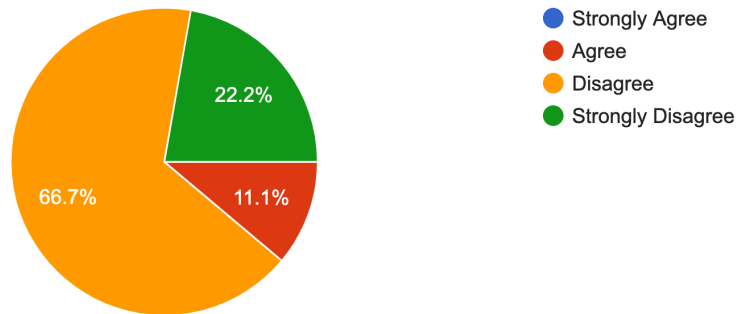
Posttest

It's okay to be in contact with my partner (texting/calling) throughout the whole day
9 responses

- 🔵 Strongly Agree
- 🔴 Agree
- 🟠 Disagree
- 🟢 Strongly Disagree

Pretest

I know where to reach out for help for unhealthy or abusive relationships
14 responses

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

57.1%
14.3%
28.6%
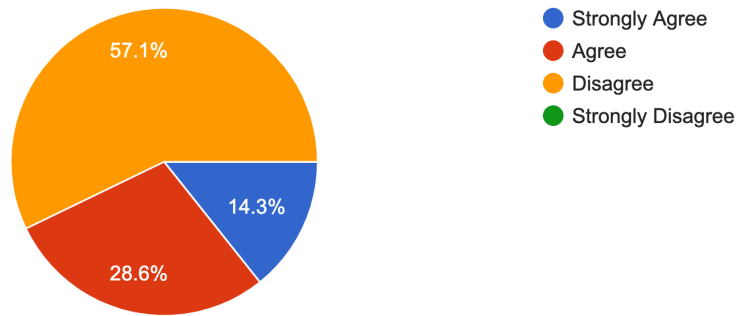
Posttest

I know where to reach out for help for unhealthy or abusive relationships
10 responses

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10%
50%
10%
30%