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Developing Healthy Relationships

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Abstract

The youth population in the public school system in San Benito County are involved in an increasing number of unhealthy relationships. The Youth Alliance is a non-profit organization located in Hollister, CA. Their mission is to provide innovative and culturally relevant services that strengthen and enrich youth, families and the community. This agency is working together with the elementary, middle and high schools within San Benito County to help support young men and women to create and maintain healthy relationships. The Healthy Relationships Workshop is a workshop-based group held for youth 12 and older at Rancho San Justo Middle School and the Youth Alliance agency that aims to support these efforts. Once the need was identified, the curriculum and existing groups were studied. From there the relationship workshop agenda and goal were created. Pre and post surveys were also created to measure the success of the workshop. It was expected that at least ten students would attend each workshop and at least half of the students would have an increased knowledge of being able to tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. The results of the workshop were, the number of attendees exceeded the expectation, as did the percent of students with an increased knowledge, with 88 percent of students finding the workshop very helpful. It is recommended that the Youth Alliance Agency provide a continuing relationship group on a weekly basis, both at the agency and within the schools. It is also important that they have a professional, such as a therapist, on site, that is available and accessible to these students, to help support them in their relationship needs.

Keywords: Youth, unhealthy relationships, abuse, mental health, intimate partner violence

Agency & Communities Served

Youth Alliance is a non-profit organization located in Hollister and Gilroy, CA. Their mission is to provide innovative and culturally relevant services that strengthen and enrich youth, families and the community. The agency is guided by the belief that every young person has the right to a quality education, self-determination, and a healthy wellbeing. The demographic primarily consists of underserved, Latino families. The Latino population makes up approximately 83 percent of the individuals served by the agency. Refer to Appendix B for specific demographics. Youth Alliance's vision is to empower youth as leaders who contribute to the social and economic betterment of their community. They have several different programs within the agency, each program consisting of a multitude of services. The program of focus within the agency is GUIAS, Guiding and Understanding Individuals in Achieving Success, in Hollister, CA. GUIAS is a program that targets the youth population of Middle and High Schools in San Benito County. This involves the students themselves and can include their family members. GUIAS uses a strength based group approach to promote young men and young women's positive character development to meet the specific needs of the community. The program is funded by San Benito County Behavioral Health, thus the two agencies often work closely together (Youth Alliance, 2023).

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

The youth population, specifically middle and high school aged students in the public school system in San Benito County are involved in an increasing number of unhealthy relationships. These relationships stem from a variety of factors including low self-esteem, young age and lack of family and social support. Once stuck in the cycle of unhealthy

relationships many consequences arise including substance abuse, violence and profound negative impact on mental health.

“Nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year” (White-Johnson, et al, 2017). This journal article highlights the prevalence of toxic dating relationships within the target population in our country. There is a significant amount of evidence proving that under-aged, unhealthy relationships are imposing a negative impact on the youth in our communities. Both boys and girls are affected by these harmful relationships, but for the purpose of this project, the focus will primarily be on the female population. “Approximately one in five high school girls has been physically or sexually abused by a dating partner” (White-Johnson, et al, 2017). This means that 20 percent of all high school girls are being abused. This is an alarming number that must be addressed.

“Youth who are exposed to one type of violence are at greater risk of experiencing other types of violence. Most victims of teen dating violence experience at least one other type of victimization, and on average victims experience over a dozen other victimizations” (NIJ, 2023). Unhealthy relationships are not isolated issues, as they have many risk factors and short and long term consequences involved. This makes the issue that much more pressing. In many circumstances, youth do not reach out for help while they are in the midst of an unhealthy relationship, so intervention and prevention is essential to helping reduce this problem.

Contributing Factors

Age is a significant contributor to unhealthy relationships. When focusing on the middle and high school youth population, it is clear that the lack of knowledge, life and relationship experience at a young age can contribute to their susceptibility to being involved in a relationship that can hinder their growth and development. A BMC study in 2011 showed that younger age

played a role in the risk of getting involved in a toxic relationship. “Younger age of women was strongly associated with increased risk of past year IPV (intimate partner violence) in all sites” (Abramsky *et al.*, 2011). We see evidence across many studies that show adolescents experiencing a higher number of domestic violence than those of an older age. “The prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) is assumed to be even higher among adolescents and young women, a claim that is sustained by evidence from the USA, where the majority of studies on IPV among adolescents and young adults originate from” (Stöckl, H., March, L., Pallitto, C. *et al.*, 2014). The reason that young age can play such a large role in contributing to these harmful relationships is due to a variety of reasons. “Adolescence and early adulthood is a time of rapid physical, psychological and cognitive changes, stress and experimentation, which can be psychologically taxing and often overwhelming” (Stöckl, H., March, L., Pallitto, C. *et al.*, 2014). This population is significantly more vulnerable for these risky relationships, as they have not fully developed and matured.

Low self-esteem also poses a greater risk of entering into an unhealthy relationship. It is one of the main variables in causal conditions. Studies have found that this variable is not as clear to track statistically because it is not a concrete, measurable factor, but we can grasp the role it plays within these relationships as we look at studies that have been conducted (Cleveland *et al.*, 2003). “A main proprietor of unhealthy relationships is low teenage self-esteem. If a teenager does not understand their worth, they fall prey to abuse by justifying to themselves that they deserve it” (Rex, 2022). When young females experience low self-esteem they seek validation from others, at many times it can come at a hefty cost.

Teenagers who lack support, whether that be family or social, have a higher chance of susceptibility to fall victim to an abusive or unhealthy relationship. The CDC says, “Having few

friends and being isolated from other people,” is a primary risk factor to getting involved in an abusive relationship. The organization also states that a prior history of physical or emotional abuse in childhood, or lack of family support can also be a risk factor (CDC, 2021). Studies have shown that social support, or the lack of it, is important in enabling or hindering perpetrators’ ability to sustain abusive relationships through social isolation of victims. Levels of social support are lower among abused women compared to those of non-abused women (Machisa et al., 2018). While again, these numbers are not as easy and concrete to track because it is not measurable data and victims of intimate partner violence are often weary to come forward or talk about their experiences. We can however review studies that have been conducted through interviews of these victims that have come forward, to determine their levels of family and social support.

Consequences

The most prevalent, and widely discussed consequence of unhealthy relationships in teenage children, is domestic abuse and violence. This abuse can be carried out through a variety of ways including physical, sexual, mental and psychological. This abuse can occur through online methods as well. In today’s day in age, unhealthy relationships can often begin online, and as the relationship progresses, different tactics are used to control and abuse the partner including but not limited to: arguing, monitoring the whereabouts of a partner or controlling their activities, and emotional aggression toward a partner (Zweig et al., 2013). According to the CDC, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will experience physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime. About 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men experience some form of sexual violence during their lifetimes. Intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking rates are

very high, with intimate partner violence occurring in over 10 million people each year (Smock et al., 2023).

Another significant consequence that unhealthy relationships have on teenage children is a negative impact on their mental health. There are many studies and research being done to discover the ways in which toxic relationships can negatively impact an individual's mental health and affect their coping mechanisms. A study involving 457 males and females that were once in an unhealthy relationship, were evaluated as were the effects that their relationships had on their livelihoods. Their results concluded that these relationships had a major impact on their mental health, one that heavily outweighed the effect on their physical health (Forth et al, 2021). The immense consequences that abuse has on mental health is often overlooked and not addressed as often as it should be, but it has shown to be even more harmful than that of physical abuse. "Experiencing DV is associated with depression, anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as chronic pain and function inhibition from injuries" (Itzin, Catherine, et al, 2010). The negative mental health effects that unhealthy relationships have on an individual can be shown in many forms, and consequently, there is a trickle down effect, in which other parts of their lives are negatively impacted as well.

A third consequence that is common to arise out of an unhealthy teen relationship is substance abuse. Alcohol and substance abuse plays a major role in toxic relationships. Substance abuse can be both a contributing factor and also a consequence. Alcohol and substance abuse can lead men and women to act out on their partners because of their dependence and altered state of mind. Also, women and men can use alcohol and substances to mask the pain from relationship abuse (Mehr et al., 2023). "Experiences of DV (domestic violence) and sexual assault are associated with substance abuse and use of drugs and alcohol,

and an increase of suicide ideation” (Itzin, Catherine, et al, 2010). Relationship abuse - whether that be physical, sexual, or psychological is emotionally taxing on an individual. We as humans were not made to withstand this sort of treatment. So young women, left untreated, will find other ways to cope with the pain, guilt, shame and embarrassment. Drugs and alcohol is an easy place to numb these feelings.

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Young age	Unhealthy, youth relationships are prevalent within the school systems in San Benito County.	Domestic abuse and violence
Low self-esteem		Negative impact on mental health
Little to no social or family support		Substance abuse

Project Description

Working Title: Developing Healthy Relationships

Project Description

This project will be the development of a workshop centered around the concept of healthy relationships. This course will be presented in the form of a small group and will be held at Rancho San Justo Middle School and the Youth Alliance agency, in Hollister, California. This

is within our target population and the project will be geared towards teenage students (12-18 years). The Xinachtli and One Circle curriculum will be implemented to create the workshop's agenda and plan.

Project Justification

The purpose of this project is to help teenage students identify the differences between healthy and toxic relationships. The goal is to prevent these youth from entering or staying in abusive or unhealthy relationships, thus preventing the consequences those relationships may cause. This project will address the issue of unhealthy relationships and the factors that contribute to these relationships including young age, lack of social support and low self-esteem . It will also address the need for healthy relationships and promote self-worth.

This project will mainly be focused on the self-esteem factor, working on empowering these students and allowing them to realize the voice and power they have within them. It will do more than simply teach the facts surrounding unhealthy relationships and what to avoid. This project will teach these individuals to speak up for themselves, believe in themselves and each other and not want to settle for anything less than a healthy, well-balanced relationship. Youth alliance can expect more boys and girls within the middle and high school population to seek help from their programs.

This project meets best practice standards, as One Circle training has been proven to be effective in the lives of youth across the country. "They no longer sat by themselves at lunch, or played by themselves at recess, what a concrete example of how an increase in self esteem and self worth can benefit a young woman!" (Heather Higham, School Counselor, Wiley MS NHUH Schools, University Heights, OH). An example of a counselor who has been implementing One

Circle curriculum into her students' lives. Their curriculum and style of training has proven to be effective.

Benefits

The agency can expect to see young boys and girls thrive from these workshops, become more self-aware, self-confident, assertive and even leave toxic relationships. They can expect more students being referred to the Youth Alliance Agency for a safe place to discuss their own relationship questions or issues.

Implementation Process

This project will consist of a workshop centered around the idea of healthy relationships. The Project Implementation Plan is outlined in Appendix A. This project begins by the learning, training and studying of One Circle and Xinachtli curriculum. Both curriculums are instrumental in the development of this workshop, as they include icebreaker questions, group agendas and activity ideas that directly relate to the topic of interest, healthy relationships. It is also important to sit in on and participate in groups held at Hollister High School and Rancho San Justo Middle School to address the present need for the workshop, understand the target population, how groups are run, and how participants respond to various activities. Once this is addressed, the curriculum will be studied again, to choose the best and most effective activities and lesson plans for the project. An agenda will be created, detailing each step of the workshop. At that point, a flier will be made and will be distributed through the Youth Alliance agency, school and social media. Materials will be gathered and purchased, and the workshop will commence. The workshop will be held at the Youth Alliance agency and Rancho San Justo middle school in Hollister, by Ellie Quintana, intern of Youth Alliance and student at CSUMB alongside her

supervisor and manager of programs at Youth Alliance, Lorena Villagomez and Head of the Youth Alliance Impact Center, Riana Salazar. Participants will include Lorena, Riana and middle and high school students in Hollister, CA. The ages will range from 11 to 18 years old.

Assessment Plan & Expected Outcomes

Once the workshop begins, facilitator Ellie Quintana will hand out surveys to each participant. The surveys will have a pre-survey on one side, and a post survey on the other. The surveys will ask participants a few questions, some with a rating scale and others, open-ended. An example of a question included will be: On a scale of one to five, how well do you think you can identify unhealthy behaviors in a relationship? This is an example of a question that is on both the pre and post survey. The expected outcome is that at least ten participants will attend each workshop, and 50% will have an increased knowledge of identifying the difference between unhealthy and healthy relationship behaviors. The goal is that at least two participants will return to Youth Alliance for workshops and groups in the future or seek out additional resources within the agency.

Project Results

The Healthy Relationship workshop commenced on Tuesday, November 7th, 2023. The first workshop was held at Rancho San Justo Middle School with a female-only group. The girls were aged 12-14 years old. The second workshop was held during the Tuesday Youth Impact Center at the Youth Alliance Agency, with both teenage boys and girls participating, aged 11 to 17 years old. There were a total of 25 participants. The workshops proved to be successful in educating the targeted youth population about identifying the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors. The expected outcome of at least ten participants per workshop

was met, as one workshop had 11 students, and the other had 14. Also, the outcome of an increased knowledge of being able to identify the behaviors of an unhealthy versus an unhealthy relationship, in at least 50 percent of the students, was also met. Pre and post surveys, as shown in Appendix C were analyzed and compared to determine the success of the workshops. Data, as shown in Appendix D, shows that before the workshop, 56 percent of participants rated themselves as a 4 or 5 (on a scale of 1-5) in how well they could tell the difference between an unhealthy and healthy relationship. After the workshop, 88 percent of participants rated themselves a 4-5 on how well they could tell the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship. In addition to this, Appendix E shows that 88 percent of participants rated a 4-5 (on a scale of 1-5) on how helpful the workshop was for them, with no participants giving a 1 or 2 rating, and 3 participants giving a 3 rating.

During the workshops, participants were open and honestly discussed their opinions about the examples of both unhealthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors. There was disagreement between the students about how they identified the examples, and we had successful discussions and communication about why individuals had the point of view that they shared. Without judgment, I guided the students in the right direction, explaining why certain relationship behaviors were either healthy or unhealthy. Their perspectives seemed to change amidst these discussions. The other students' perspectives also helped to open up the minds of the others.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In concluding this project, it is evident that self-esteem and self worth are low in the targeted youth population. The boys and girls that this agency is serving are accustomed to certain relationship norms that are becoming increasingly common, so they are not seen as

unhealthy. These students seem to have low confidence in being able to say no to their partners, and be assertive when it comes to their own well-being and respect, specifically their personal space. They believe their partners have certain rights over their personal lives, bodies and choices, that is fearsome from an outside perspective. Many of these students do not have healthy examples to base relationships off of, and it is imperative they are taught and given a proper education on what a healthy relationship looks like, and what to avoid. It is my recommendation that the Youth Alliance Agency further address this need. I believe that weekly groups need to be held surrounding this topic. These groups should be held within the Youth Impact Center and in the middle and high schools. There should be open discussions on this topic and resources available to those who need help navigating a relationship of their own. There are limited resources available surrounding relationship counseling in Hollister, therefore a therapist onsite at Youth Alliance, that can be available and accessible to these students, would be very beneficial.

Although the workshop was successful, it could have been improved by having a series of workshops, over the course of 8 weeks. There was more discussion to be had, and not enough could be accomplished in this 90 minute session. Many students made comments and gave opinions that were worrisome, and it would have been beneficial to dive deeper into these discussions and spend more time figuring out their frame of mind and perspective, to properly address and support them.

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Appendix A

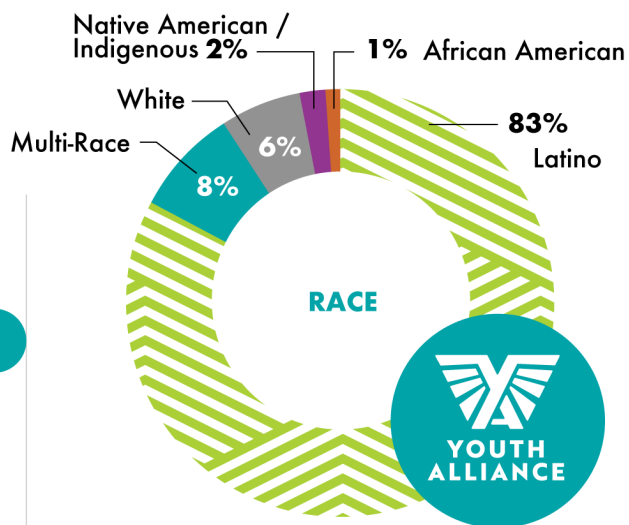
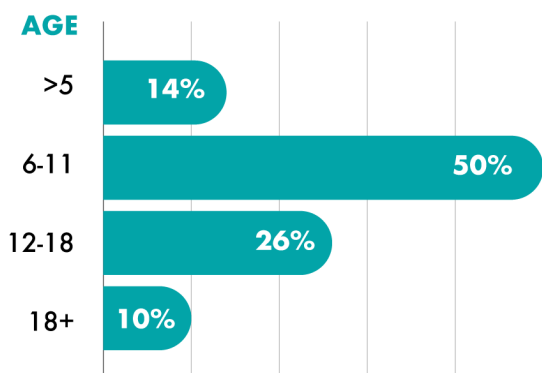
Project Implementation Plan

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Learn curriculum and complete training	One Circle Curriculum	Fall 2021	Lorena Villagomez,
Learn curriculum and complete training	Xinachtli Curriculum	Fall 2021	Lorena Villagomez
Participate in groups at Hollister High School	Agenda, group materials	Fall 2021	Lorena Villagomez
Study curriculum, find group ideas	One Circle Curriculum	August 2023	Lorena Villagomez, Intern Bri
Study curriculum, find group ideas	Xinachtli Curriculum	September 2023	Lorena Villagomez, Intern Bri
Participate in groups at Rancho San Justo Middle School	Agenda, group materials	September- November 2023	Lorena Villagomez, Riana Salazar
Create flier for healthy relationship group	Canva, YA past flyers	October 2023	Lorena Villagomez
Create thematic calendar	YA past calendars	October 2023	Lorena Villagomez
Create group agenda	YA past agendas, curriculum	October 2023	Lorena Villagomez
Create survey for pre and post workshop	YA past surveys, Canva	October 2023	Lorena Villagomez
Hand out flyers, post to social media	Canva flier that was created	October 2023	Lorena Villagomez, Riana Salazar
Gather all materials needed for group	Paper, markers, snacks, raffle prize, drinks	October 2023	Lorena Villagomez
Execute group workshop	All of the above	November 2023	Lorena Villagomez, Riana Salazar
Input and Analyze results	Surveys, Google Forms	November 9-15 2023	Lorena Villagomez

Appendix B

Demographics

The Community We Serve



Appendix C

Pre Survey



PRE SURVEY

Please answer honestly. All surveys are anonymous

How well do you think you can identify unhealthy behaviors in a relationship?

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would struggle identifying				I could identify behaviors easily

Who would you talk to if you or a friend needed help dealing with or leaving an unhealthy relationship?

Check all that apply

- A parent/guardian
- Teacher
- School Counselor
- Friends
- Family member
- No one

How well can you tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships?

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not very well				Very well

How might you support a friend who might be in an unhealthy relationship?



Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.



Post Survey



POST SURVEY

Please answer honestly. All surveys are anonymous

How well do you think you can identify unhealthy behaviors in a relationship?

1 2 3 4 5

I would struggle identifying I could identify behaviors easily

Who would you talk to if you or a friend needed help dealing with or leaving an unhealthy relationship?

Check all that apply

- A parent/guardian
- Teacher
- School Counselor
- Friends
- Family member
- No one

How well can you tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships?

1 2 3 4 5

Not very well Very well

How might you support a friend who might be in an unhealthy relationship?

Was this workshop helpful for you?

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all Very helpful

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

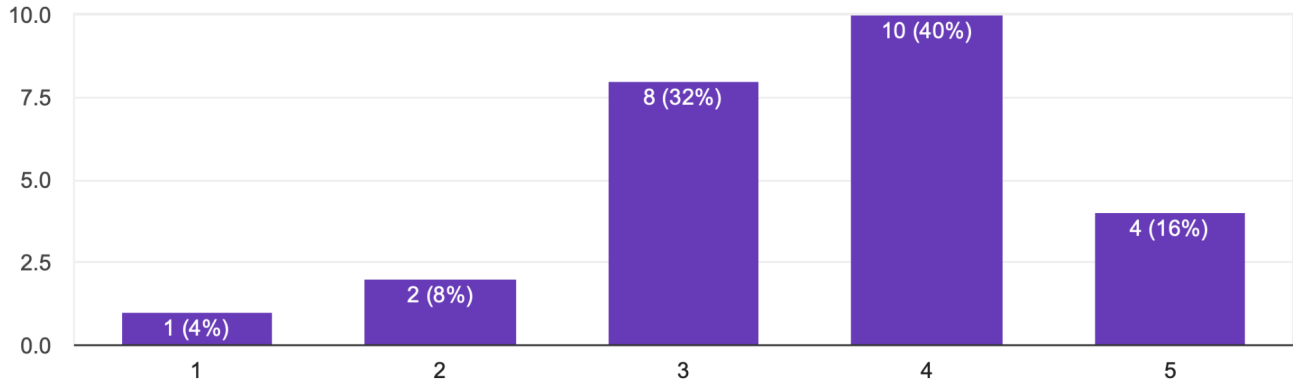


Appendix D

Pre Survey

How well can you tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships? (Pre)

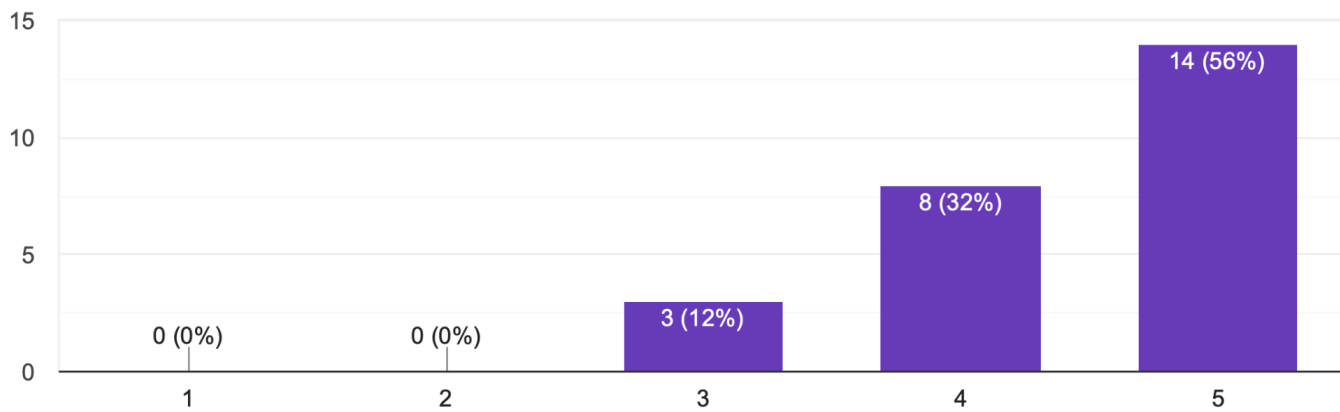
25 responses



Post Survey

How well can you tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships? (Post)

25 responses



Appendix E

Was this workshop helpful for you? (Post)

25 responses

