

\$7.6 Million Project Will Teach Relationship Skills to At-risk Youth | CEHS

10/29/2015



For nearly 10 years, Utah State University has offered relationship education classes to people throughout the state. Now, information will be brought to a new audience: at-risk youth.

Over a period of five years, more than \$7.6 million in funding will bring healthy relationship education to youth in juvenile detention facilities, alternative high schools, and the Youth in Custody program.

The research-based curriculum, "Love Notes," is geared toward youth who may not have grown up with strong, real-life examples of healthy relationships, said Dr. Brian Higginbotham. He is a professor in Family, Consumer, and Human Development and USU's Associate Vice President for Extension, which offers the university's relationship education programs [<http://healthyrelationshipsutah.org>]. Higginbotham will lead the new project, which will be part instruction, part distribution of materials and part research.

"Youth approaching adulthood face complicated life decisions with long-lasting consequences," he said. "For some the path is even more complex because of traumatic life experiences, dysfunctional homes, and/or delinquent behavior. We want to give these youth hope, knowledge, and skills to be successful." Participants will receive eight hours of instruction on healthy relationship skills such as communication, conflict-management, decision making, and recognizing abusive and unhealthy behaviors.

The new grant will build on programs that have already proven their effectiveness. USU's Healthy Relationships Utah offers four courses: smart dating, couples, parenting and stepfamilies. Taken together, they have affected

thousands. "We have found statistically significant increases in relationship knowledge in all our measures in all four programs," said Dr. Kay Bradford, a collaborator on the Steps to Healthy Fatherhood project. Over the past three years, the combined courses offered through Healthy Relationships Utah have reached 12,000 adults and 7,800 youth statewide. To date, the organization has partnered with 25 different community agencies.

The funding will pay for USU Extension educators to teach classes around the state. It will also supply the Utah Healthy Marriage Handbook to couples applying for marriage licenses and to high school teachers of adult roles classes.

The project's research component will track the program's effectiveness.

A special focus of the project will be young men. "Men, on average, are less likely to seek out relationship education than women," Higginbotham said. The project will implement and research ways to help young men and young fathers feel comfortable with relationship education.

Project collaborators include Higginbotham, Dr. Bradford and Dr. Linda Skogrand, all of the Family, Consumer, and Human Development department. Undergraduate and graduate students will also be involved.

Contact: Dr. Brian Higginbotham: Brian.H@usu.edu