

- ▶ RESEARCH FINDINGS ..... 1
- ▶ HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD PLACE.. 1
- ▶ Y.O.U. Program ..... 2
- ▶ TESTIMONIALS ..... 2



# Relationship Education *Across Louisville*

## Relationship Classes Make a Difference

When the University of Louisville received a federal grant from the Office of Family Assistance to provide healthy relationship training to at-risk adults and youth in the Louisville area, we designed a comprehensive evaluation plan to examine the effectiveness of this program. The evaluation plan includes research on the adult and youth relationship programs.

In the first 18 months of the grant, we have collected data on client satisfaction with the training, learning of key concepts, and communication and conflict resolution skills. We use surveys to collect this data on the first and last days of training, as well as at six, twelve, and twenty-four months after training.

To date, we have collected survey data on 202 adult participants in the *Within My Reach* program. Results indicate that participants experience high levels of satisfaction with the training, significant increases in knowledge and communication/conflict resolution skills, improvements in relationship quality, and a trend

in the reduction of relationship aggression. Those who participated in the training had a better understanding of relationship dynamics and skills and used more effective communication and conflict resolution strategies. They reported that their relationships were healthier and had less interpersonal violence. There were no significant differences by gender, race, or other key demographic variables, suggesting that the training is effective for a number of different groups.

We have collected survey data on 72 youth participants in the *Love U2* training. Participants in the *Love U2* training of trainers also reported a high level of satisfaction with the training and demonstrated a significant increase in knowledge of key relationship concepts from pre- to post-training.

In future years, we will also evaluate the impact of the training through in-depth interviews with training participants, diary studies that track relationship patterns over time, and research on

## Healthy Relationships and the Neighborhood Place

One of the research questions that the healthy-relationships grant explores is whether the training will make a significant difference in participants' lives, and whether that effect will last. It's too soon to know the answers, but at least some of the participants say they've been able to improve their relationships based on what they've learned. We recently interviewed three of them, identified here as Lisa, Joan and Mark (not their real names).

Lisa, who is married with children, said she found the training so valuable that "I'd do it again, three or four times, just to get it down perfect." What she learned, she said, is a different way to communicate. "It just opened my eyes to something I never thought about before," she said. Among other things, she tries paraphrasing what her husband or children say to make sure she understands them. She also sees the importance of "giving a person time to explain" and of giving herself time away when she's angry, she said. "Name calling is not especially wonderful. I didn't know that and at first, it just seemed to come so natural," she said. The training "just allowed me to communicate better."

Mark, a single dad, said the communication strategies he learned have become a daily part of life with his young son. "When we start to argue (we'll say), 'So what you're saying is' ... We use that to communicate with each other. Sometimes you start talking to your child and they get upset. They try to explain to you what's going on. Sometimes you might not understand. So you use the 'active listening,'" he said. "If it's not right they'll tell you it's not right."

Joan, a single mother, also said she uses what she's learned "in my day to day life." "It helped me out with my boyfriend a lot," she said. "I tried to tell him I wanted to get his input. I was trying to listen more to what he was trying to say: 'I hear what you're saying.'" It's has been perhaps more difficult to improve communication with her teen-ager, she said, but she works at it: "I still have my (training) book and I look in my book: 'What "I" messages can I use on my kid?'"

Lisa, who also has a teen-ager, said she developed more patience: "It just better helped me understand how they (teens) feel. They have bad days. They have a lot of extra stress (with school) ... I realized I'm the grown-up and she's the child."

Both Lisa and Joan said they wished their partners could have taken the class, and hope they still may sign up for a later workshop. It's harder to use what they've learned in their relationships when their partners don't have the same knowledge they do, they said. Lisa added that she would like to participate in follow-up relationship counseling to work on some specific issues. Lisa said she has also referred many people to the workshop so they will have "the advantage of knowing versus the disadvantage of not knowing." On a scale of one to five, she said, she'd rate the training "five plus five more." The stipend for attending was the motivation to start, she said, but after the first night's class, "I just knew I had to come back."



# Y.O.U. Program Perspective

LoveU2 is becoming an integral part of the program offerings at Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.), Louisville's youth one-stop shop. "Since Y.O.U. began offering the communication smarts for healthy relationship workshops, a.k.a. *Love U2*, the students and staff cannot say enough great things about the program," boasts Lorena Lasky, the director of the program. Ms. Lasky is also a trained facilitator of the curriculum and participates in the teaching of the workshops.

The cooperative communication smarts for healthy relationship program between the University of Louisville Kent School and the Y.O.U. workforce development program for at-risk youth ages 16 to 21, began in the Fall of 2006. The first workshop for the youths was held in March 2007, and since that time, seven two-day workshops have been conducted. Often, there are youth on waiting lists to get into a workshop. The target class size is 10 students per workshop. Usually, we sign up 35 to 40 students each session to get 12 -14 students to commit to the two-day seminar. To date, 62 young people have completed LoveU2 seminars. The Y.O.U. participants are eager to sign up to participate in LoveU2 because the word has spread among their peers that it is a "fun and useful class ... with free food!"

Workshop participant Kimber says, "Now I get along with my mom. The way we communicate and get through things *together* is great now. I can let her know when she is 'kitchen-sinking' or any other unhealthy way of talking. I am so glad I took the workshop."

Indeed, the staff at Y.O.U. has gotten feedback from many workshop attendees indicating that the techniques learned in LoveU2 have helped them improve their relationships with family members, romantic partners and even employers. Workshop facilitator Arlene Dumas-Fuller, who has been a Career Planner at Y.O.U. for over two years, reports that a few youth have told her that they have practiced walking away from arguments rather than letting things escalate. Thanks to LoveU2, the same students commented that they now know the importance of coming back at another time when both parties are calm and talking about the underlying issue. One recent attendee, Dominica W., said, "I learned how to have a good, strong relationship. I also learned how to work out the argument, how to say, 'there needs to be a timeout or we need a timeout,' and to come back to finish the argument or disagreement."

Speaking of her co-facilitator, Emilia Manuola, Arlene notes, "Emilia and I work as a team to make it a fun learning experience, with animated power points and singing jingles or rap phrases to emphasize key points or words. The most enlightening experience I have had as facilitator was having more guys than young ladies at the workshops. Usually, we have two or three girls to every guy that participates. The young ladies are more outgoing and are willing to share more stories of their experiences in relationships with friends and family. The guys usually don't volunteer a lot of information, but if you ask, they are willing to share and get right to the point of their likes and expectations. Therefore, it was an eye opener for the ladies when they really "listened" to what the guys had to say. For example, Josh, said, "Her looks get my attention, but

her conversation and how she treats me, my friends and my family is what makes me stay interested in pursuing a long-term relationship." Arlene and Emilia share how these techniques have worked in their own lives and relationships. Program Specialist Anthony Smith also participates in the seminars so the group will get a male perspective on relationship/communication strategies.

Emilia says she enjoys being in the workshop with the young people. "Arlene and I explain to the students that we did not have these skills when we were younger and have gone through some destructive, abusive situations ourselves. We get to know the students on a whole other level. We also make sure to tell them that now they are responsible for passing on this information to their children and loved ones. I get a sense of pride when I witness the students using these skills to improve themselves and the Y.O.U. program." Since Emilia and Arlene were GED instructors before coming to Y.O.U. and becoming Career Planners, they incorporate many standard techniques of Adult Education to teach the Love U2 skills. They also bring a sense of fun and comfort to the students who attend the workshops.

LoveU2 has been an educational, positive, fun partnership for Y.O.U. participants, Y.O.U. staff, and our partners at the University of Louisville, and the results have been more rewarding than anyone expected. Seminar participants have a chance to share feedback immediately after the workshop. Not one student has said that the seminars were a waste of time or that nothing was learned. In fact, some young people have said they wanted to do it again!

## Leaders Confirm the Value of Program

When Neighborhood Place agreed to partner with the University of Louisville to offer Healthy Relationships workshops last year, Administrator Polly Mayer of South Jefferson Neighborhood Place was worried about recruitment. How would she ever convince enough clients to participate? "I thought it was going to be a huge stumbling block," even though participants would be offered \$150 incentive payments, she said. But as it turned out, recruitment was the least of her worries: "Now we struggle with keeping enough classes going to get everybody in."

Other Neighborhood Place administrators are having the same experience, they said recently as they reflected on the first year of the grant: The workshops are in such demand they often have waiting lists. "Clients have even been willing to travel outside their service area to participate," said Regina Warren, director of the Metro Louisville Division of Human Services, which oversees the Neighborhood Place sites.

Certainly the incentive payment is part of the reason, but it's unlikely that clients would stick with the entire 15-hour program if they weren't benefiting in other ways, the administrators agreed. As it turns out, clients seem to like what they're learning and are spreading the word. "I think the content is very important," said Nancy Lasky, administrator of South Central Neighborhood Place. "People want healthy relationships and an awful lot of folks can't define it much less talk about some of the skills you need to get there."

In some cases, workshop participants have even stayed in touch with the trainers, Polly Mayer said. "They pick up the phone and say, 'I'm going through this. What do you think about that?' It is just ongoing, (starting with) the very first group that we had back in June."

Along the way, Neighborhood Place and U of L have dealt with some procedural hiccups, including the logistics of child care. By late winter, however, the hiccups were subsiding and buy-in was increasing. The workshop facilitators at Greater Can Run Area Neighborhood Place are so committed to the program that "it's running itself," said Administrator Woody Miller. There have also been ancillary benefits for the Neighborhood Place sites, administrators said. Staff members normally have to spend so much time telling clients what they have to do to get government assistance, Mayer said, that they've welcomed the chance to offer clients "something extra" with funding attached. "There's not a policy, there aren't rules, there aren't regulations. They can tangibly say, 'Here, you can enroll in this.'"

Donna Morton, administrator of Bridges of Hope Neighborhood Place on Algonquin Parkway, said workshops may be helping change clients' perceptions of Neighborhood Place as well. At one point, her site was working with parents who were at risk for having their child removed from their home. "By being referred to this training and really feeling very positive about it, I think it changed their view of the Neighborhood Place," Morton said. "It made them feel more welcome when they came to see those workers (about the child removal issue). It helped the workers develop the relationship" because they could demonstrate to the parents, "I'm here to help you." It's also important, however, to make sure that clients find out during the workshops about the other resources that Neighborhood Place has to offer, said Georgia Turner, administrator at Ujima Neighborhood Place. That means making sure facilitators set aside time to talk about Neighborhood Place.

Another issue for the program, administrators said, is reaching both men and women. Because more women than men are clients at Neighborhood Place sites, they are more likely to sign up for the workshops; efforts are underway to recruit more men. However it's important not to displace women in the process, Nancy Lasky said. The workshops also include participants who have been referred from other social services agencies. Morton said the crossover has helped other agencies learn more about her site and its many services. One local nonprofit across town, for instance, is now using the Bridges of Hope Neighborhood Place for programming for the nonprofit's clients who live nearby. Woody Miller, of Greater Can Run Area Neighborhood Place, said that, besides the workshops, his site has benefited from the \$2,000 that each site receives for participating in the grant. Greater Can Run Area, for instance, has used the money to buy children's books to give to parents who come in for food stamps. The books not only support families, he said, but they give workers another opportunity to build positive relationships with parents. The site also has a program to reward new parents for positive behaviors such as breast-feeding; the parents receive coupons for the site's "baby store," which the grant money helps stock.

Regina Warren, the Human Services Director, said the partnership between U of L and Neighborhood Place is making a difference for clients. "It is a testament to our collaboration that we have a waiting list," she said. "Reminding folks that our relationships with one another are valuable and deserve to be nurtured has improved the lives of staff and the families we serve ... We look forward to finding a way to sustain this important service beyond the grant period."

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