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Issue Brief

## About Dibble

The mission of The Dibble Institute® is to empower teens and young adults with knowledge and evidence-based skills to successfully navigate their intimate relationships.

Since 1996, Dibble has spearheaded efforts to build awareness and utilization of relationship skills programs for youth.

The Dibble Institute's® primary focus on forming healthy relationships versus avoiding unhealthy relationships is unique compared to other programs in the field of youth development.

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## Effectiveness of Healthy Relationship Interventions on Teen Pregnancy Rates

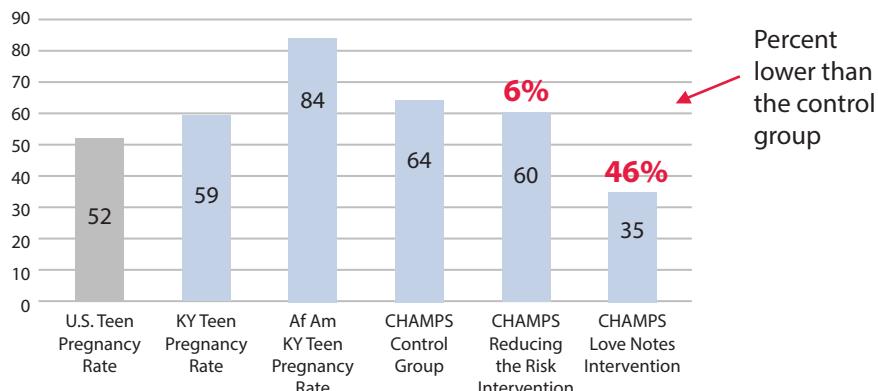
### THE ISSUE

The effects of teen and single young adult pregnancy in perpetuating generational cycles of low educational attainment, poor health, and poverty are well documented.<sup>i</sup> Teen parents are less likely to finish school, more likely to need public assistance, and less likely to enjoy good health. Their children are more likely to suffer from developmental delays as well as behavioral and cognitive problems.

As a nation, we have made great strides in preventing teen pregnancy. The dramatic drop in U.S. teen birth rates over the last 28 years is a testament to the effectiveness of pregnancy prevention education. From 1991 to 2019, teen birth rates fell just over 73% from 61.8 to 16.7 per 1,000 live births. Yet the U.S. persists in having one of the highest teen birth rates in the developed world, and striking disproportionality of teen birth rates remains for some races and ethnicities, particularly Latinos, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and African Americans.

The vast majority of historical evidence-based pregnancy prevention curricula are health-based, focused on the body, risks, and prevention. While this instruction is essential, effective pregnancy prevention programs must also address issues of the head and the heart. Most adolescent sexual activity takes place in the context of a romantic relationship.<sup>ii</sup> *Love Notes* offers new tools to reduce the teen pregnancy rate further by teaching youth proven ways to navigate their romantic relationships and by helping them understand the impact their love life choices have on them personally and on their current or future children.

*Love Notes* Teen Pregnancy Rates\*: 12-month Impact Comparison  
(\*Ages 15-19, per 1,000)



## LOVE NOTES: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PREVENTING PREGNANCY

*Love Notes*, developed by Marline E. Pearson, M.A., is a comprehensive healthy relationship education curriculum that teaches adolescents and young adults (14-24) how to build healthy romantic relationships, prevent dating violence, and improve impulse control. Its theory of change hypothesizes that preventing pregnancy must expand beyond teaching them about the scope of contraceptive options. Rather, interventions must build young people's skills for cultivating healthy relationships, selves, and sexual behaviors: planning and pacing relationships and sex, self-efficacy and resilience around relationships, proven communication skills, and understanding how family formation impacts children.

*Love Notes* was added to the [Office of Adolescent Health \(OAH\)'s list of Evidence-Based Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs](#) in June 2016 after undergoing rigorous evaluation during a 5-year \$4.8 million study through the Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville. The University of Louisville's research demonstrating the intervention's efficacy was published in [the American Journal of Public Health in Fall of 2016](#) and in [the Journal of Family Relations in the Fall of 2022](#). *Love Notes* is also on the recently updated [Youth.gov](#) Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review list and is one of only nine programs that has demonstrated to be effective in preventing pregnancy, and the ONLY curriculum on the list that focuses on robustly building healthy relationship skills.

The evaluation found that youth who practice skills that lead to healthy relationships build protective factors and resilience that help decrease risky sexual behaviors and ultimately reduce the likelihood that they will become pregnant. Furthermore, the evaluation findings validate the assertion that relationship skills are not innate; rather, they can and must be learned, practiced, and mastered. *Love Notes* stresses to youth participants that their love life is not neutral, and that they can develop an internal locus of control around their relationships. This foundational element of *Love Notes* is upheld in the neuroplasticity literature which cites the human brain as having the ability to adapt and change in response to the environment.<sup>iii iv</sup>

Planning physical intimacy and building self-efficacy around romantic relationships (called “Decide, Don’t Slide!” in the curriculum) forms a core strategy for the intervention and is grounded in the theory of planned behavior. This model is key to preventing pregnancy and STIs. *Love Notes* empowers teen participants to slow down and think through possible courses of action and consider the consequences rather than be ruled by the heat of the moment. Youth learn about their chemical and hormonal reactions to anger, stress, and sexual attraction. Understanding the science of emotions helps youth learn to put the brakes on impulsivity, including sexually risky behaviors. *Love Notes* underscores a new option to support healthy decisions: “intentionality via planning,” which calls for teens to consciously weigh their potential actions against their long-term goals. Isabel Sawhill, Senior Fellow of Center on Children and Families, Brookings, calls this “planning rather than drifting” into sex and parenthood.<sup>v</sup>

A young mom who was taking the *Love Notes* class stood at a bus stop in Sacramento when a man stopped his car alongside her and said, “Hey baby, what’s your phone number?” She later relayed to her instructor that before starting *Love Notes*, she would have gotten in his car and gone with him. Because *Love Notes* had taught her about good decision making in her romantic and sexual life, she told him to “Scram!” because, as she told her instructor, “he didn’t know my name or anything about me.”

Healthy communication is one of the primary ways people build loving, respectful relationships with each other. Conversely, toxic communication damages youth, alienating them and increasing risk factors for bad sexual decisions and abuse. Practicing respectful communication and diffusing conflict benefits all youth, but especially those from homes where unhealthy relationships are normalized and whose ability to form attachments is damaged. *Love Notes* teaches evidence-based strategies for communication and conflict resolution in all relationships, with an emphasis on romantic relationships.

*Love Notes* builds empathy for children by encouraging youth to reflect on how decisions they make around their romantic relationships would affect a child born to them. This component of the curriculum resonates with youth participants who experienced broken relationships, absent fathers, poverty, and childhood violence in their early years. They want to learn the relationship skills to do better by their children.

## UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE CHAMPS! RESEARCH PROJECT

**Participants:** The study included 1,448 vulnerable male and female youth ages 14 to 19 from Louisville, Kentucky's high-poverty western and southern neighborhoods. The participants were recruited from community-based organizations with the majority coming from low-income households. Participants also included foster, refugee, and immigrant youth. Eighty-eight percent of the treatment group was black, but it also included white, Hispanic, and Asian participants.

**Intervention Implementation:** The 13-module *Love Notes* curriculum was delivered in Louisville on two consecutive Saturdays as part of the CHAMPS! Camp project. Thirty-nine CHAMPS! camps were offered between September 2011 and March 2014 in partnership with 23 community- and faith-based organizations.

**Research Design:** The study was a three-arm, cluster randomized controlled trial that collected data at six points (pre-training baseline; immediate post-training; and 3, 6, 12, and 24 months post-training). Control and intervention classes ran simultaneously at each site and were given the same name to minimize the potential for students to determine their condition. Baseline data were collected at the start of the first session, immediately after randomization of cluster to condition. Follow-up data were collected in a similar manner for all three conditions.

**Outcomes:** At the 6-month follow-up, youth who completed *Love Notes* were significantly less likely to have ever had sex, to have had sex without a condom in the last 3 months, or to have had sex without a method of birth control in the last 3 months than those completing the control intervention. In addition, for those youth who remained sexually active, *Love Notes* participants reported having fewer sex partners and less frequent sex in the last 3 months than those in the control intervention. Overall, the *Love Notes* intervention led to significantly fewer pregnancies: ***Love Notes* participants were 46% less likely than the control group to experience a pregnancy at the 1-year follow-up.**<sup>vi vii</sup>

Organizations using *Love Notes* as a pregnancy prevention curriculum include:

- Boys and Girls Club of Milwaukee, WI
- Mission West Virginia, WV
- Oklahoma Department of Public Health, OK
- OMNI Youth Services, IL
- Opportunity Industrialization Center of South Florida, FL
- Quest for Change, GA
- Prevent Child Abuse Iowa, IA
- Mary Black Foundation, SC
- Trinity Church, FL
- Tulsa Health Department, OK
- United Way of Anderson County, SC
- University of Texas Science Health Center, TX

## CONCLUSION

The *Love Notes* evaluation findings advance teen and young adult pregnancy prevention options beyond the mechanics of contraception to an exciting realm that teaches young people how to navigate their love lives. By integrating age-appropriate education about the social and emotional aspects of sex with medically accurate reproductive education, the curriculum provides a new paradigm for pregnancy prevention that views emerging adults as whole people, capable of learning, practicing, and applying skills that help them develop healthy relationships. *Love Notes* teaches youth that they can take charge of their romantic lives by equipping them to make constructive choices.

*Love Notes'* potential to support positive youth development does not end with its demonstrated efficacy in promoting healthy sexual behaviors and preventing pregnancy. The findings from this evaluation have implications for other prevention fields, including relationship violence of all kinds, and other risky youth behaviors. Further, the curriculum's focus on resilience, self-efficacy, and social-emotional skill-building are highly relevant in an era that calls for trauma-informed interventions.

With its broad applicability for cultivating healthy behaviors, *Love Notes* is a meaningful resource for programs dedicated to helping young people learn to make choices now that create a positive future later.

## ABOUT THE DIBBLE INSTITUTE®

The Dibble Institute®, a national independent non-profit organization, equips teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge they need to develop healthy romantic relationships now and in the future by developing and distributing evidence-based educational resources. Dibble programs have reached over 1 million young people in all 50 states since 2015. Dibble curricula are used in public and private schools, health clinics, and community-based organizations, including programs that focus on foster youth, pregnancy prevention, juvenile justice, and violence prevention.

**Review a free digital copy of *Love Notes* for 30 days.**

Visit [digital.dibbleinstitute.org/LN](http://digital.dibbleinstitute.org/LN)

Use unlock code: **LoveNotes30**

**Learn more about *Love Notes***

Visit [dibbleinstitute.org/our-programs/love-notes-4-0/](http://dibbleinstitute.org/our-programs/love-notes-4-0/)

<sup>i</sup>Why it Matters: Teen Childbearing, Education and Economic Wellbeing. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup>Collins, W. A., Welsh, D. P., & Furman, W. C. (2009). Adolescent romantic relationships. Annual Review of Psychology, 60, 631-652.

<sup>iii</sup>Davidson RJ, McEwen BS. (2012). Social influences on neuroplasticity: Stress and interventions to promote well-being. *Nature Neuroscience*. 15(5):689-695.

<sup>iv</sup>Bruce J, Gunnar M, Pears K, Fisher P. (2013). Early adverse care, stress neurobiology, and prevention science: lessons learned. *Prevention Science*. 14(3):247-256.

<sup>v</sup>Sawhill, Isabel. (2014). *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

<sup>vi</sup>Barbee, A. P., Cunningham, M. R., Antle, B. F., & Langley, C. N. (2022). Impact of a relationship-based intervention, Love Notes, on teen pregnancy prevention. *Family Relations*, 72(5), 2569-2588.

<sup>vii</sup>Cunningham, M. R., van Zyl, M. A., & Borders, K. W. (2016). Evaluation of Love Notes and Reducing the Risk in Louisville, Kentucky. Final Evaluation Report to the University of Louisville Research Foundation, Louisville, KY