



Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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SELF-REGULATION TRAINING APPROACHES AND RESOURCES TO IMPROVE STAFF CAPACITY FOR IMPLEMENTING HEALTHY MARRIAGE PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH (SARHM): EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As youth grow through adolescence and young adulthood, they assert their individuality by taking important and increasingly independent steps to separate themselves from their parents and caregivers (Petersen 1988; Steinberg and Morris 2001). These actions can move youth closer to or further away from achieving their long-term goals for education, employment, health, and relationship success. Youth need support to process emotions, cope with stress, and for *self-regulation*—managing thoughts and feelings to achieve goals and make healthy decisions in the moment and for the future. Caring adults such as parents, guardians, teachers, and coaches support the development of self-regulation skills from infancy through young adulthood through a process called *co-regulation*. Co-regulation happens when adults provide three kinds of support to youth: warm, responsive relationships; supportive environments structured to enhance safety; and self-regulation skills instruction, coaching, and modeling (Rosanbalm and Murray 2017). To provide co-regulation, adults must pay attention to their own capacity for self-regulation and take steps to nurture it (Rosanbalm and Murray 2017; Shonkoff 2012).

The Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM) project aimed to bring more focus to self-regulation development in programs for youth. SARHM was sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) through a partnership between the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE); it was conducted by Public Strategies and Mathematica. Specifically, SARHM's aim was to build on developmental psychology and prevention research on the adult role in youth self-regulation development to create resources for educators in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs for youth (defined as ages 14 to 24).

The goal of youth-serving HMRE programs is to help program participants develop skills to form and maintain healthy relationships and avoid unhealthy ones. Typically providing services in a multisession group workshop, youth-serving HMRE programs cover topics such as how to foster healthy romantic relationships and friendships, make healthy decisions, resolve conflict, and avoid negative situations (Scott et al. 2017).

WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES TO PROMOTE SELF-REGULATION IN YOUTH PROGRAMS?

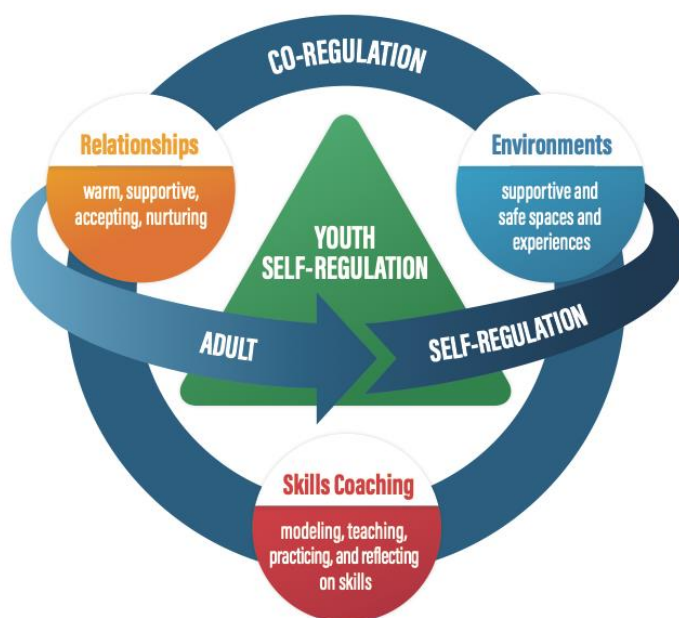
The vast majority of interventions for adolescents and young adults that could influence youth self-regulation outcomes—such as curricula related to leadership, empowerment, conflict resolution, and life skills—focus solely on skills instruction (Murray et al. 2016). They usually do not incorporate adult co-regulation and do not fully reflect the neuroscience about how self-regulation develops (Murray et al. 2015; Eckert et al. 2015; Portnow et al. 2015; Shaffer and Obradović 2017). For example, interventions rarely address the training or support needs of the

adults charged with carrying them out, or the important role of adult self-regulation skill-modeling in participant skill acquisition. Furthermore, staff working in human services programs often deal with a high level of secondary trauma and may face adversity and stress in their own lives as well, enhancing the need for their own self-regulation support. These adults may need their own support and training in order to provide effective co-regulation support to youth (Rosanbalm and Murray 2017).

Integrating a co-regulation framework into school- and community-based HMRE programs for youth can potentially improve the quality of these programs and enhance their ability to foster youth self-regulation. The content of HMRE curricula provides opportunities to learn and practice self-regulation in real-life situations. Further, the components of self-regulation are critical for healthy and stable relationships. To fill in knowledge and practice gaps about how adults can support youth self-regulation development in existing HMRE programs, SARHM created co-regulation training and strategies for HMRE educators that could be used regardless of the curriculum or program setting. Developing strategies for interacting with youth and structuring the environment, rather than a new curriculum, supports broader application of co-regulation to other youth programs and settings beyond HMRE programs (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017).

A theoretical model guided the translation of co-regulation into practical facilitation strategies for use in HMRE programs (Figure ES.1). In the center of the model, youth self-regulation is represented by a triangle, to connote cognitive, emotion, and behavior regulation. Encircling youth self-regulation are the three domains of co-regulation support—relationships, environments, and skills coaching—working together simultaneously. Adult self-regulation is pictured as an encompassing arrow, influencing the quality of co-regulation support and youth self-regulation development.

Figure ES.1. SARHM co-regulation theoretical model



HOW DID THE SARHM TEAM DEVELOP CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES FOR HMRE EDUCATORS?

The SARHM team partnered with two youth-serving HMRE programs to conduct formative rapid-cycle evaluations (RCEs) of co-regulation strategies: Children’s Harbor, in Pembroke Pines, Florida, and More Than Conquerors, Inc. (MTCI), outside Atlanta, Georgia (Table I.1). These two programs served different target populations and operated in different contexts, reflecting a diversity of youth-serving HMRE grantees. Both programs used popular HMRE curricula for their group workshops.

In a formative RCE, researchers and practitioners develop and pilot test a prototype of a new strategy on a small scale to generate feedback for improving its design and implementation (McCay et al. 2017). Through several iterative “learning cycles,” research and practice partners work together to implement the strategy, collect and analyze feedback on how well it worked, refine the strategy, and test it again. The SARHM team adapted the *Learn, Innovate, Improve* (LI₂) framework—a series of replicable, evidence-informed program improvement activities, supported by collaboration between practitioners and researchers—to co-create and refine a set of co-regulation strategies (Derr et al. 2017).

SARHM's main activities aligned with the phases of the Ll₂ framework:

- **Learn.** The SARHM team reviewed literature on co-regulation and commonly used HMRE curricula and interviewed HMRE program staff about the services they provided while assessing their interest in adopting and testing a co-regulation framework.
- **Innovate.** The SARHM team developed an initial menu of co-regulation strategies. Then, the SARHM team worked collaboratively with Children's Harbor and MTCI to select and adapt strategies from the menu to fit each program's unique context and develop detailed implementation plans and training guides.
- **Improve.** Through three iterative learning cycles, Children's Harbor and MTCI piloted the co-regulation strategies, provided feedback, and worked with the SARHM team to refine the strategies.

The results of formative RCEs lay the groundwork for further testing, refinement, and evaluation of the strategies. In the short term, the results can provide guidance for programs and practitioners about strategies that may improve the capacity of staff to support youth self-regulation. In the longer term, further development and more rigorous evaluation of these strategies can build evidence for the field.

Learn: The SARHM team identified opportunities to integrate co-regulation in youth-serving HMRE programs

Literature review. The SARHM team reviewed literature to identify characteristics theorized to be important in each domain of co-regulation (see Appendix A of the final report). Relationships should involve personal interactions with youth that are consistently compassionate, affirming, and supportive. Environments are characterized by settings that are safe and structured, offer opportunity for active participation, allow youth to contribute to norm setting, and create a positive program climate. Coaching should model and promote skill practice with the receipt of explicit feedback and opportunities for self-reflection. In addition, adults should model self-regulatory behaviors including emotion management, positive leadership, problem solving, and organizational skills. For caring adults to effectively coach and model, it is imperative that they be aware of and monitor their own self-regulation.

Review of HMRE curricula. We reviewed four commonly used HMRE curricula and one new (not yet used by HMRE programs) curriculum focused on self-regulation. These curricula touched on self-regulation skills but often did not provide instruction on basic aspects of self-regulation such as identifying and expressing feelings or opportunities to practice the skills with adult support. All of the curricula we reviewed covered at least one construct from each of the three self-regulation domains (emotion, cognitive, and behavior regulation). However, content tended to instruct youth to use a skill without specifying steps for how to use it, or without providing opportunities for practice and reflection. Emotion regulation was the least commonly addressed domain of self-regulation. The only co-regulation domain mentioned in the educator materials was warm and responsive relationships. Mentions were typically limited to general statements encouraging positive adult-youth relationships.

Interviews with HRME program staff. We interviewed staff at six ACF-funded HMRE programs. Across different contexts, ACF-funded HMRE programs touched on topics related to self-regulation, such as communication, decision making, problem solving, identifying life goals, and understanding healthy relationships. Programs reported including some content and staff training on topics related to self-regulation, but they did not make self- or co-regulation an explicit focus of training or observation. HMRE program staff expressed an interest in learning more about self-regulation and co-regulation, particularly to help them assist youth who admit to participating in risky behaviors and to manage their own stress and avoid burnout.

***Innovate:* The SARHM team collaborated with two HMRE programs to develop co-regulation strategies**

Based on findings from the literature, the SARHM team developed a preliminary set of 23 co-regulation strategies that covered all three domains of co-regulation support (warm and responsive relationships, structuring the environment, and skills coaching) and incorporated self-care and support for program educators' self-regulation (see Appendix B of the final report). Through on-site strategic planning meetings, Children's Harbor and MTCI managers, supervisors, and educators picked strategies from the set of 23 that they thought would fit well with their programs and address the needs of the youth they served. This resulted in 14 selected strategies, plus knowledge development, to be refined through the pilot.

Children's Harbor and MTCI selected a similar set of strategies but tailored them to their own contexts (Table ES.1). For example, both programs piloted positive praise strategies. Children's Harbor piloted a strategy in case management meetings that involved written notes that included the young person's name, praise for a specific behavior, recognition of the young person's effort, and the value of the young person's behavior to the program or community. MTCI piloted verbal praise in the group workshop that included the young person's name and praise for a specific behavior. The SARHM team provided two half-days of training to educators in both programs before the first learning cycle of the formative RCE.

Table ES.1. Strategies selected for the formative RCE

Strategy	Description
Workplace strategies for adult self regulation	
Knowledge Development	Staff (educators, supervisors, and program managers) receive training on self-regulation, co-regulation, and youth development.
Environmental Scan	Educators complete a worksheet on the workplace environment, prompting them to notice and change stressors and barriers to productivity and focus.

Strategy	Description
Rest and Return	Staff establish an area in the workplace where they can take a break from experiencing intense emotions and take a physical or mental rest; staff can also take breaks, if needed, while working with youth in the community.
Positive Praise Notes	Educators exchange four-part positive praise notes (name + specific behavior + praise effort not natural ability + share value to the program or community).
Take Note	Educators practice mindfulness or “noticing” exercises in a group in the workplace or individually.
Take Note, Tag It, Tune In (T3)	Educators pause to notice sensations in the body, identify and write associated feelings, and use pre-identified strategies to “tune” or manage intense emotions if needed.
Personal goal setting	Educators complete a worksheet on small, achievable goals; identify action steps; encourage use of a “support buddy”; and discuss progress toward individual goals as a team.
Co-regulation prompts in supervision	Supervisor selects a self-regulation champion, uses tools for growth mindset in the workplace, and uses targeted questions in meetings to enhance reflection and intention to co-regulate.
Skills coaching for youth	
Bookending	Educator ends the group sessions with a prompt to practice or plan for use of a self-regulation skill from the curriculum; subsequently, educator begins group sessions or individual meetings with a prompt to reflect on use of strategies since the last group or meeting.
Breath to Refocus	Educator coaches youth to use deep breaths to regain focus during transitions or times of intense emotion and models the exercise for the youth.
Take Note	Youth practice brief mindfulness or “noticing” exercises in the group sessions or individually.
Warm, responsive relationships between educators and youth	
Welcoming strategies	Youth complete preferences worksheet on how they want educators to interact with them; educators greet each youth personally at each workshop and check in, one on one, with 1–2 youth during or after each class.
Positive Praise	In group sessions, two-part verbal praise (name + specific effort/behavior); in case management, four-part written praise (name + specific behavior + praise effort not natural ability + share value to the program or community).
Collaboratively structure the environment for youth	
Group Agreement	Educators solicit values/behaviors from youth, define them, and obtain visible agreement. Educators reference these values and allow youth to shift them as needed. Educators model and reinforce values and behaviors.
Rest and Return	Youth have permission to take a break if they are experiencing intense emotions and need a physical or mental rest; youth commit to returning when they feel better.

Improve: Children's Harbor and MTCL conducted formative RCEs

The formative RCEs that Children's Harbor and MTCL conducted consisted of three iterative learning cycles. In each cycle, educators piloted the co-regulation strategies and provided feedback on them. At the end of each cycle, the SARHM team analyzed feedback and other data collected, met with program staff to present the results and refine the strategies, retrained educators on the strategies as needed, and developed an approach for the subsequent learning cycle.

Each program's structure influenced the design of its formative RCE. Children's Harbor conducted three sequential four-week cycles over the summer of 2018. MTCL completed one cycle in the fall semester of the 2018–2019 school year and two in the spring. For the spring semester, the SARHM team divided the staff into two groups to pilot variations on the strategies simultaneously. The variations were designed for classes of different lengths and number of meetings per week. Eight educators at each program participated in the formative RCEs.

The SARHM team adapted existing measures and created new measures to establish a set of tools to assess educator knowledge gains after initial training, strategy use, and educator and youth feedback on the strategies. The measures included self-assessments for educators to rate their knowledge of self- and co-regulation and their use of co-regulation strategies during workshop sessions; a workshop session observation form; a youth questionnaire; and interview and focus group protocols. Appendix C of the final report provides additional detail about development of measures for the formative RCE.

Educators reported an increase in their own self-regulation skills and comfort with co-regulation strategies

Educators reported feeling more comfortable with co-regulation strategies over time and more confident using them in their personal lives and in the group workshops, despite initial discomfort. Primarily, adjustments made at the end of each learning cycle focused on strengthening implementation, such as providing more specific guidance for how and when a strategy should be used. Findings are as follows:

- **Educators reported that strategies encouraging warm and responsive relationships made them more conscious of what they were already doing.** Several educators told the SARHM team that they already did things like welcome youth when they entered a workshop space and provide positive praise, (although their procedures differed somewhat from the SARHM strategies). These strategies felt natural to them, and they told the SARHM team that learning about and trying the strategies helped them be more conscious about their actions and think about why the actions were important. They also reported a deeper understanding of how to apply co-regulation. For example, educators practiced Welcoming to focus on personally greeting every youth in the workshops. Before educators started focusing on intentionally greeting everyone, educators realized they may have missed greeting some youth because they were also focused on workshop preparation or speaking with someone else.

- **Coaching self-regulation skills helped educators shift their mindset and focus on modeling.** At first, educators saw some strategies, like Breath to Refocus, as a classroom management tool to get the group to calm down. After the initial learning cycles, the SARHM team provided retraining, visual cues, and more explicit direction about why and when to use the strategies. These additional supports helped educators understand that they were helping youth practice strategies they could use themselves to refocus when a situation became stressful or overwhelming. The educators reported that they began to see themselves as coaches instead of just teachers of a curriculum. According to the educators, this affected how they viewed and related to the youth in their program.
- **Specificity, reinforcement, and buy-in were essential for strategies to collaboratively structure a supportive environment.** Because program sessions took place in high school classrooms or a community agency, educators could make few changes to the program environment. Other programs that shared the space sometimes disrupted the environment by interrupting the group workshops. For the Group Agreement strategy, educators led youth through an exercise to identify and define a set of specific values youth felt would create a safe learning environment, then invited youth to adjust the values until they could all agree to uphold them. However, school staff often remained in the room to manage student behavior during HMRE workshops, and these staff typically did not honor the values that the group set. For example, staff often attempted to enforce school discipline policies while the educators were facilitating workshops. Educators also struggled to establish buy-in for the values, perhaps because the values tended to be nonspecific (“respect one another”) or mirrored the content and language of preexisting school rules (“no cell phones”), which may have indicated they were not truly youth-developed. Over time, educators in the two programs experimented with different ways to get youth buy-in for the values and practiced getting youth to be specific about values that were important for them to feel safe and secure in the group workshop.

WHAT DID THE SARHM TEAM LEARN ABOUT INTEGRATING CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES INTO HMRE PROGRAMMING?

The formative RCEs demonstrated that integrating co-regulation strategies into HMRE programming was feasible, and that the program staff found the strategies useful. Educators reported that the co-regulation strategies improved youth engagement. Educator feedback, however, suggests that some strategies were more comfortable to implement than others. In particular, educators reported having difficulty with strategies aimed at structuring a safe and supportive environment and addressing emotion regulation.

Incorporating the co-regulation strategies into the programs’ practices took time and investment. Program educators and supervisors had to remain open-minded and willing to try something

new, even if the strategy didn't connect with youth or feel natural right away. Educators reported valuing the reflection, troubleshooting, and problem-solving involved in the debrief sessions between learning cycles. Additionally, they needed ongoing support, coaching, and reinforcement to implement the strategies as intended.

The SARHM team's approach to conducting the formative RCE mirrored the co-regulation framework that educators used with youth. The SARHM team sought to establish warm, responsive relationships with the program staff, engaging them as co-creative partners in developing and refining the co-regulation strategies. The SARHM team structured a safe environment in which program staff felt comfortable trying out the strategies and felt empowered to provide feedback on them, good or bad, through the iterative nature and fast pace of the formative evaluation. Program staff reported benefitting from ongoing coaching throughout the formative RCE that prompted them to reflect on the use of the strategies, deepen their understanding of co-regulation and their influence on youth self-regulation development, and develop ownership of the strategies.

The main result of the SARHM team's approach—more important than the success or viability of any one strategy—was that educators reported an overall shift in their mindset, toward understanding their role as adults in supporting youth self-regulation development through warmth and responsiveness, modeling and coaching skills, and structuring the environment to promote safety and focused learning.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR BUILDING THE CO-REGULATION CAPACITY OF HMRE STAFF?

The SARHM study represents a critical first step to translate rigorous research and theory about self-regulation and adult co-regulation into actionable strategies for educators facilitating youth development programs. Adolescence provides a particularly salient time for self-regulation interventions in HMRE programs because rapid brain changes support the enactment of skills necessary for healthy peer and romantic relationships. The findings from the formative RCEs provide a strong foundation for additional development of co-regulation strategies and, eventually, evaluation of their efficacy and effectiveness. Possible next steps include formative research to develop and refine additional approaches to enhancing co-regulation, as well as assessing their efficacy and effectiveness.

Formative research and development

Formative evaluation can support the continued refinement and enhancement of the strategies developed for SARHM.

- **SARHM identified more potential strategies than could be piloted in the formative RCEs.** Additionally, some of the strategies programs selected—particularly ones aimed at creating a safe and supportive environment—were challenging to pilot.

- **Focus areas for the development of new strategies include supporting adult self-regulation and fostering emotion regulation.** Emotion regulation is an important component of healthy relationships, and skills such as conflict management and decision making—both impacted by emotion—are cornerstones of HMRE curricula.
- **More research needs to be done to understand the interactions of educators and youth in the program environment and to support additional ways to promote co-regulation.** In addition, more research is needed to understand the role of adult self-regulation in co-regulation and how youth perceive and talk about self-regulation.
- **A more robust training and coaching plan is needed to support implementation of the co-regulation strategies.** The SARHM team delivered two half-days of training at the beginning of the formative RCEs and re-trainings between learning cycles. Program staff indicated that more intensive and more frequent training would be beneficial. As with developing the co-regulation strategies, practitioners and researchers could collaborate to develop more systematic training options.

Efficacy testing and effectiveness evaluation

Once strategies and implementation supports are refined, their efficacy can be tested in a larger group of programs.

- **Strategies could be rolled out in a random sample of programs.** Outcomes in randomly-selected programs could be compared to outcomes in other youth-serving programs or of a matched comparison group of programs that share similar characteristics and serves a similar population as the programs implementing the strategies.
- **Small-scale efficacy assessments should focus initially on implementation outcomes, youth engagement, and other youth outcomes.** Qualitative impressions from the formative RCEs indicated that the co-regulation strategies showed promise for improving implementation factors such as educators' ability to deliver the intended curriculum, educator-youth relationships, youth attendance and participation in program activities, program completion, and engagement during the group sessions.
- **A rigorous effectiveness evaluation of a package of strategies could be conducted if the efficacy assessments show promise.** A cluster-randomized controlled trial with random assignment at the program level would compare programs with and without the use of co-regulation strategies alongside the curriculum and other program services. Another approach to assessing the impact of co-regulation strategies is to recruit a program delivering a large number of group sessions, and randomly assign classes within schools.
- **Support future research with continued development of co-regulation measures.** The results of pilot tests of the co-regulation measures the SARHM team developed

indicated that while the programs perceived the measures as useful overall, some aspects of the measures are not reliable and need further refinement.

Future planned SARHM publications will share tools, resources, products, and findings from other aspects of the study. This report summarizes the activities involved in developing and pilot testing co-regulation strategies through two formative RCEs with two youth-serving HMRE programs funded by ACF and shares lessons learned and implications for HMRE programming. Upcoming SARHM tools and resources can support the future development of co-regulation strategies. They include a brief for HMRE practitioners on building staff co-regulation skills, a brief on using observational measures in HMRE programs, a journal article on the feasibility of using a co-regulation model to improve the delivery of HMRE programs, and a toolkit and training materials for educators and program leaders interested in using co-regulation strategies in their programs.

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