

A Specialized Sex Education Program for Adjudicated Male Youth

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Sex education is a critical feature of treatment programs for adolescents adjudicated for illegal sexual behavior (AISB) (ATSA, 2017). Many AISB have cognitive distortions and misinformation concerning sexual topics, making it difficult to establish appropriate boundaries and form healthy relationships (Dwyer & Boyd, 2009; Seto & Lalumiere, 2010). Data recently presented from this population showed those AISB who reported the highest amount of child sexual abuse indicated they had learned about sex through witnessing or experiencing a sexual act, potentially a sexually abusive act (Evans & Thompson, 2020). Yet, most standard comprehensive sex education curricula for teens are inadequate at meeting the unique clinical needs of this specific population, making clear the need for a more tailored approach to sex education for AISB. This research project summarizes these needs and introduces a newly implemented approach for use in secure residential facilities called the HEalthy Adolescent Relationship Training (HEART) curriculum.

The HEART curriculum was designed to meet the needs of this clinical population by fitting within a larger mental health treatment model including additional group formats for social skills building and emotion regulations alongside intensive individual therapy sessions. According to best practices in the field, this type of multifaceted treatment program should include trauma-focused therapy, applied behavioral analysis, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and family therapy to meet the diverse clinical needs of AISB (ATSA, 2017). This allows youth to gain basic knowledge and skills about healthy sexuality at a similar rate to other cognitive and emotional issues being addressed in treatment at large.

While a group format for sex education serves as an ideal means to build social skills and a source of peer critique and input that is critical for this population (Dwyer & Boyd, 2009), many residential facilities were unable to conduct group formats during the COVID-19 pandemic due to enhanced safety protocols. Table 1

summarizes topics covered and learning goals for the HEART curriculum with optional activities that can be completed in either group or individual sessions as needed. An important feature distinguishing this program from other sex education curricula is its focus on appropriate media use and establishing healthy boundaries with pornography and masturbation. A recent fact sheet on pornography summarizes best practices in regard to this debated topic (ATSA, 2020). Exposure to pornography and masturbation are common experiences for adolescents (Lim et al., 2017). While pornography can influence sexual behaviors, practices, attitudes, and perceptions of what “sex looks like,” its role in developing and maintaining abusive sexual behavior remains unclear (Pratt & Fernandes, 2015). Responses to pornography and masturbation with this population must be realistic, balanced, rational, and individualized (Prescott & Schuler, 2011). Thus, a psychoeducational approach that focuses on teaching healthy sexual boundaries and positive practices, as shown here, is encouraged over an abstinence-based approach (ATSA, 2020). Overall, this research highlights the need for a tailored approach to working with AISB and one creative solution to providing sex education in this type of setting.

Statement of Research Advisor

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Table 1. Summary of topics covered in HEART curriculum.

Topic	Learning Goals	Optional/Sample Activities
W1. Sexual Values & Decision Making	Define values and how it influences sexual decision-making; recognize and accept others with different values.	1.1 Intro/Pretest 1.2 Ice Breaker: <i>Get On The Bus</i> 1.3 Game: <i>The World Around Me</i> 1.4 Wrap up and Homework
W2. Talking Sex & Basic Anatomy	Use medically accurate terminology associated with reproductive systems and identify functions associated with these body parts	2.1 Intro/Review Homework 2.2 Ice Breaker: <i>Sexual Anatomy Scattergories</i> 2.3 Craft: Making Anatomical Models 2.4 Wrap up and Homework: <i>STI PSA</i>
W3. Sex, Gender, Orientation, & Expression	Learn sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity terms, and gender expression, learn that sexual identity is on a continuum and how gender stereotypes and expectations can be harmful	3.1 Intro/Review Homework 3.2 Ice Breaker: <i>Gender-Bread Person Poster</i> 3.3 Game: <i>Coming-Out Stars</i> 3.4 Wrap up and Homework
W4. STIs & Healthy Sexual Practices	Correctly identify facts about common STIs and healthy sexual practices, such as condom usage	4.1 Intro/Review Homework 4.2 Ice Breaker: <i>The Handshaking Game</i> 4.3 Demonstration: <i>Condom Confidence</i> 4.4 Wrap up and Homework
W5. Masturbation & Appropriate Media Use	Establish a healthy relationship with masturbation, develop healthy relationships to pornography use, and learn facts about harmful pornography use and appropriate boundaries	5.1 Intro/Review Homework 5.2 Ice Breaker: <i>Relationships in Media:</i> 5.3 Activity: <i>Media Case Study</i> 5.4 Wrap up and Homework
W6. Affirmative Consent & Boundaries	Establish a firm understanding of affirmative consent and the responsibility to understand clearly what a partner wants	6.1 Intro/Review Homework 6.2 Ice Breaker: <i>Consent & Boundaries Games</i> 6.3 Activity: <i>Scenario Board</i> 6.4 Wrap up and Homework
W7. Romantic Relationships & Effective Communication	Establish a firm understanding of what is and what is not a healthy attachment or romantic/sexual relationship with a partner	7.1 Intro/Review Homework 7.2 Ice Breaker: <i>Celebrity Relationship Worksheet</i> 7.3 Communication Activities/Games 7.4 Wrap up and Homework
W8. Birth Control Basics & Family Planning Options	Understand basic birth control methods, family planning options, and be able to discuss the steps needed to prepare to have a family	8.1 Intro/Review Homework 8.2 Ice Breaker: Timeline Activity 8.3 Birth Control Discussion & <i>Two Truths and a Lie</i> 8.4 Abortion Discussion 8.5 Wrap up and Homework
W9. Review & Wrap-Up Party	Group post-test to determine Acquisition of Skills and Knowledge over the topics that have been presented, and an opportunity to answer any remaining questions	9.1 Intro/Review Homework 9.2 Post Test 9.3 Game: <i>SexEd Jeopardy Challenge</i> 9.4 Wrap-up