

The Success Sequence: Giving Youth a Roadmap to Optimal Health

OVERVIEW

The Success Sequence is a pathway that can help youth thrive and achieve optimal health. Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) teaches youth how to voluntarily refrain from non-marital sexual activity and other risky behaviors. SRA teaches the skills necessary for self-regulation, success sequencing, healthy relationships, and goal setting.

THE SUCCESS SEQUENCE

Three steps for optimal health and reaching your full potential

If a young person: **1) graduates high school, 2) gets a full-time job, and 3) waits to be married before having children**, the likelihood of living in poverty is approximately 2% (Haskins, 2009). This research has become an intentional focus of SRA programs in the context of empowering youth to avoid sexual risk, build healthy relationships, and achieve academic success.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Your information should be culturally relevant for all your students. When communicating that education, job attainment, and marriage are critical to their futures, make the connection that these steps enable them to be healthy and fulfill their potential.

Integrate parents into the conversation so that they understand the Success Sequence and the role it can play in helping their children chart a positive course for their futures.

Youth from less-advantaged backgrounds who follow the sequence reduce their chances of being poor as they move into their late 20s and 30s. Only about nine percent of young adults from less-advantaged backgrounds are poor if they are on board with the success sequence (Wilcox, 2017, 2018).

Youth who put marriage before having children are 60 percent less likely to end up poor as young adults compared to their peers who have a child outside of marriage (Wilcox, 2017, 2018).

PRACTICAL WAYS TO APPLY THE SUCCESS SEQUENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

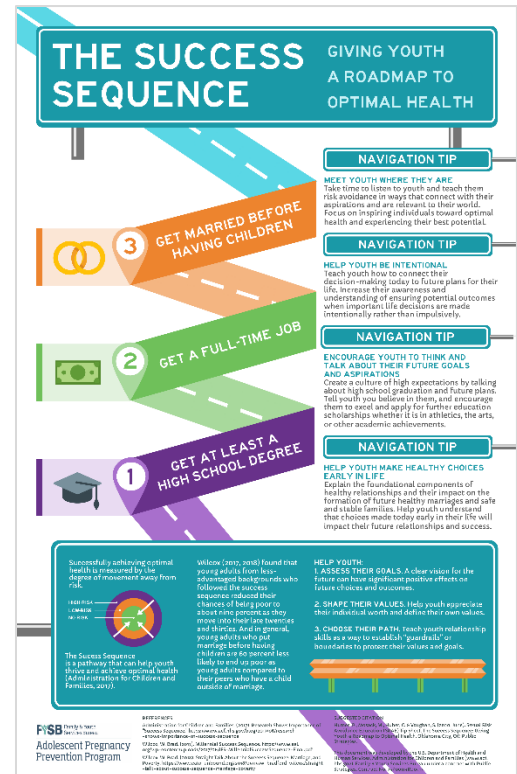
A three-step model is recommended to teach youth the Success Sequence.

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1 Ask youth what they want to achieve in life.
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2 Help them compare their current state to their desired future state.
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3 Equip them to make intentional life choices to positively impact their futures.



1. Help youth assess their goals.

It's helpful first to explain the benefits of healthy relationships and healthy marriages for the formation of healthy families to youth who haven't seen healthy marriage modeled. This helps them know what healthy relationships look like and what they want in a marriage. Then conducting a needs assessment is useful because results can be used to customize the program for your target population and identify relevant topics for your audience. Use the needs assessment to find out: 1) youth's views about healthy relationships, 2) what additional risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol, substance abuse, violence) need to be addressed, and 3) assess the youth attitudes about the institution of marriage.

2. Help youth shape their values.

Once you determine what youth want from the needs assessment, ask them to express their views. Take time to listen to youth and teach them risk avoidance in ways that connect with their aspirations and are relevant to their world. Focus on inspiring individuals toward optimal health and experiencing their best potential. Observe youth so that you can identify the personal qualities (e.g., empathetic, helper, good listener) and personal abilities (e.g., mathematical, athletic, musical, mechanical) that set them apart, then share the observations with them. Create a culture of high expectations by talking about high school graduation. Tell youth you believe in them, and encourage them to excel and apply for further education scholarships whether it is in athletics, the arts, or other academic achievements.

Some grantees may want to create a survey to let youth use their own voices (anonymously) to inform group leaders about their present and future focuses. This may enable leadership to engage more effectively, which could lead to an increase in positive outcomes.

Healthy relationships are the foundation and building block of future marriages and stable families. The negative outcomes of risky behaviors are avoided when youth make healthy choices early in life, including waiting until marriage to engage in sexual relations. Equip youth with the knowledge and skills that result in deep-rooted relational attachments. Help change their hopes for long-term committed relationships into reality. Young people need to value marriage because it has significant economic, health, and emotional benefits.

3. Help youth choose their path.

Teach youth how to connect their decision-making today to future plans for their lives. Help them understand that choices made today early in their lives will impact future relationships and success. Researchers frame intentionality through a model of "sliding vs. deciding" which states that many decisions about relationships are not intentional choices, but rather just happen by sliding into situations that are easy and comfortable. When youth are aware of this and understand the implications, they are more likely to think through important life decisions more intentionally (Owen, et al, 2013). Guiding youth to understand and appreciate their individual worth along with the need to develop goals and set boundaries based on what they value can have significant positive effects on their future choices and outcomes.

Help youth make healthier choices and achieve goals by:

- Teaching them that healthy relationships do not just happen.
- Empowering them to take relationships from convenience to commitment.
- Encouraging them to develop relationship skills, set boundaries, and practice refusal skills.

Other Considerations

The question may be asked, "Does sharing the Success Sequence with someone who already has a child or who didn't graduate from high school cause the person to feel like a failure or to feel shame?"

It's important to teach the Success Sequence in such a way that youth know that at any point they can get back on track to accomplish their goals. One way to think about it is the example of a road map. If you are on your way to a destination and you miss a turn, you don't stop the car and tell yourself that the destination is no longer there. You pull out your map or GPS, and you get back on track.

Create a culture of high expectations. If youth get off course, there are many opportunities to thrive in life and achieve life goals. Avoid lowering expectations for “at-risk” students by demeaning and degrading the capabilities of some to overcome their situations. Offer hope by affirming the inherent value each person has and how that can act as a guide to defining one’s values and goals.

All youth deserve the information and skills to achieve healthy lives and future success. Sexual Risk Avoidance Education programs should support youth in getting back on the pathway to risk avoidance for optimal health. We cannot leave them engaged in risky behaviors regardless of previous decisions, experiences, or intentions. Incremental steps toward risk avoidance can occur if youth are presented opportunities to practice refusal skills to discontinue their risky behavior. This can include strategies to mitigate adverse childhood experiences that may be contributing to continued risk behavior; teaching youth how to communicate their values and boundaries; and assisting them to build strong relationships with other youth as a support to move them from risk behaviors to a risk-free status.

References

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