

# TIP SHEET

## Family Formation

September 2021

### INTRODUCTION

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) educators are keenly aware of the diverse populations they serve and the reality of their students' life experiences. The United States has the highest rate in the world of children living in single-parent households (Kramer,

Rate of Children Living  
in Single-Parent Households

COUNTRY	PERCENTAGE
United States	23%
United Kingdom	21%
Russia	18%
Denmark	17%
Kenya	16%
France	16%

2019). In some communities, 64 percent of the youth are unlikely to have ever experienced a healthy marriage or relationship in their own home (Annie E. Casey, 2010-2019). For some, the word "family" may connect with trauma from adverse family experiences (Murray et al., 2014).

Yet the goal of the SRAE legislation and funding requires and expects SRAE educators to see their participants beyond current experiences and assimilate this new information into their existing schema. The expectation is to have a significant enough impact that the program affects future intentions and behaviors. SRAE is to empower adolescents to strive incrementally toward these sometimes-lost

ideals and to prioritize the importance of the biological two-parent family. The program is to ultimately help youth value personal responsibility and healthy marriage formation (FYBS, 2020) because healthy families are essential to healthy communities (ACF, 2021; Waldfogel et al., 2010; Waite et al., 2000; Wilcox, 2021; Wilson, 2002).



### HELPING YOUTH BUILD INTENTIONALITY TOWARD INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

One of the most important concepts for youth to learn while in their family formation stage is the importance of building intentionality into their experience and choices. It is the concept of being in control of their future (as best they can), rather than their future "just happening." SRAE promotes this approach for optimal health through communication of the following:



#### Deciding, Not Sliding.

Stanley and colleagues (2010) articulated the importance of deciding rather than sliding during important relationship transitions. Deciding implies intentionality about the significance of important relationship phases, while sliding through a relationship transition is characterized by a lack of intentionality. Examples are when a couple neglects thinking through the

significant decisions to become sexually active or live together, or when a couple says “it just happened” because it was convenient and “it felt right” at the time. This indicates that the relationship is one that is sliding and ambiguous and that this couple has not considered all of the ramifications of their choices.

In contrast to sliding, deciding requires more intentionality and mindfulness about the significance of transitioning into a sexually intimate relationship or a marriage commitment and is characterized by choosing one thing while knowingly giving up other choices. In a marriage relationship, deciding means that the two partners are mindful and aware that they are choosing to commit and devote their lives to each other and to any future lives created as a result of their union and are walking away from other choices (e.g., the amount of free time they will have, relationships with others, a certain financial stability, or having an intimate relationship with another partner).



#### **Secure Attachment Style.**

Research has confirmed that couples with secure attachment style have higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Levine & Heller, 2010). A secure style is defined as stable, reliable, consistent, and trustworthy. This is the opposite of anxious or avoidant attachment styles that are characterized by withdrawing, making threats, manipulation, and jumping to conclusions about what others might be feeling or thinking. Young people can learn to assess their own attachment style in order to be able to identify and foster a secure attachment style in themselves and identify this style in those they choose to spend time with in a dating relationship (Karney et al., 2007; Levine & Heller, 2010). Being selective means dating is about choosing, not being chosen.



#### **Refraining from Sexual Activity Until Marriage.**

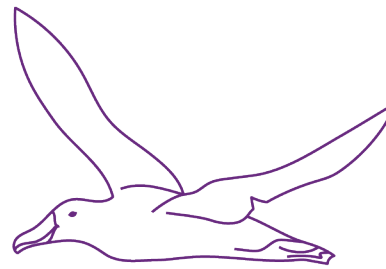
Following this core SRAE advice results in both physical and nonphysical benefits. Rotz and colleagues (2020) found that sexual delay has positive effects on romantic partnering. SRAE teaches the importance of strengthening the emotional side of the relationship before initiating the physical side of a relationship (benefits of refraining from sexual activity until marriage). This provides youth with x-ray vision to recognize the red flags that ought to be avoided (such as unsafe, violent, or manipulative relationships) and the opportunity to develop mature, committed relationships, and thus reduce divorce, separation, or annulment, as well as dissatisfaction with the relationship as a whole (Rotz et al., 2020).



#### **STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL FAMILY FORMATION**

Healthy relationships are developed and become strong when specific characteristics are introduced at the right time. If some steps are skipped in building a relationship, the result may not be as strong and stable as it could be. Researchers provide a number of key characteristics of healthy relationships leading to healthy marriage and successful family formation. These include getting to know each other through friendship and dating, communicating with each other openly and honestly, building a bond of trust, working through conflict and disappointment, having similar views of the world and goals, and making a commitment to each other (Stanley, 2005; 2010). Communicating these steps to family formation (and healthy relationships)—and the correct sequencing—can be boring to youth; however, using examples from nature

can introduce new content to youth without getting too personal. One example is the albatross, nature’s ultimate love bird. This example from nature can teach youth to hone their observation and mindfulness skills about how and why healthy relationships and families are formed.



The following key components of healthy relationships and family formation can be gleaned from the albatross.

	WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE ALBATROSS	TRANSLATING FOR YOUTH
<b>Being Selective</b>	The albatross is selective about choosing a lifetime mate. The male works hard to build a nest to attract the female. Courtship rituals often take years, working to get everything right.	Courtship can be a long process. Youth shouldn't waste their time and energy on just anyone. Critical courtship and dating skills for humans include an understanding of secure attachment styles and the importance of refraining from sexual activity until marriage.
<b>Dynamic Soaring</b>	Albatross fly farther than all other birds because they use dynamic soaring. This particular strategy fosters efficiency without losing energy—they don't even have to flap their enormous wings. They utilize forward momentum, allowing them to gain altitude to fly extraordinary distances.	For youth from every economic and social background, the Success Sequence provides altitude and forward momentum by empowering them to follow specific steps to reduce risk, giving them a 97 percent chance of avoiding poverty. Dynamic soaring for youth allows them to reach the benchmarks of graduating and getting a full-time job.
<b>Time + Talking = Trust</b>	Long, selective albatross courtship rituals—strategies that are practiced over years—build strong, lifetime bonds. Albatross look for a mate to share the work of raising their young and to take turns with parenting chores. Albatross parents are dedicated, loyal, and devoted to nurturing the next generation through provision of food and security to protect the precious egg that they must nurture to young adulthood.	The <b>Success Sequence</b> helps youth slow down and make wise choices. It helps prepare them to be selective when choosing a partner, thus reaching the final benchmark of marriage before having children. When adolescents take personal responsibility for their lives, they share in the belief that the majority of their time during adolescence should focus on meeting individual and academic goals and on identifying and developing sparks of passion based on individual strengths.

This tip sheet is developed through the lens of the research on societal benefits for children who are raised by both biological parents within a healthy and committed marriage, and benefits for the community when the institution of marriage is communicated. While the research about the benefits of healthy marriage relationships in nontraditional families is still emerging, much of the research that does exist highlights the benefits to children raised by their biological parents (Popenoe, 1993; Waite et al., 2000; Wilson, 2002) and by two-parent families in a stable household (Hamilton et al., 2007; Wilcox, 2021). Research presented here supports the goal of the SRAE program and its requirements.

## Additional Resources and References

[Click here](#) to download PDF for additional resources and references on Family Formation.

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Adolescent Pregnancy  
Prevention Program