The Potential of Peers in Sexual Risk Avoidance Programs: Highlights from a Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation (SRAENE) Technical Working Group

Background

For nearly a decade, federal policymaking related to adolescent pregnancy prevention has focused on optimal health outcomes and sexual risk avoidance (Tollestrup, 2022). Grant programs have increasingly emphasized the social, psychological, and biological factors that can eliminate risk and encourage healthy behaviors. In support of this emerging approach, Congress authorized a discretionary grant program in 2016—the General Departmental Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program. Then, in 2018, Congress authorized and funded the Title V State and Competitive SRAE programs. If a state or territory does not apply for the Title V State SRAE program, the funding allocated to that state or territory is made available to direct service providers or organizations in the state or territory through an open competitive application process for the Title V Competitive SRAE program. The SRAE legislation replaced the previous Title V Abstinence Education Program to expand the federal emphasis on improved health outcomes, positive youth development, and risk avoidance education. SRAE-funded programs focus on personal responsibility and healthy decision making, with the goal of encouraging youth to voluntarily refrain from nonmarital sexual activity and other risky behaviors.

The Title V SRAE program is administered by the [Family and Youth Services Bureau](#) (FYSB) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The programs are guided by six program requirements that all grant recipients must address through their programming (Box 1; Neelan et al. 2022a, 2022b). One requirement emphasizes positive youth development, which supports program activities that provide "holistic, individual, and societal benefits

Box 1. Sexual Risk Avoidance Education program requirements

In accordance with the Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education legislation, programs must address the following six required topics:

1. The holistic, individual, and societal benefits associated with personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy decision making, and a focus on the future.

2. The advantage of refraining from nonmarital sexual activity to improve the future prospects, and physical and emotional health of youth.

3. The increased likelihood of avoiding poverty when youth attain self-sufficiency and emotional maturity before engaging in sexual activity.

4. The foundational components of healthy relationships and their effect on the formation of healthy marriages and safe and stable families.

5. How other youth risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol usage, increase the risk for teen sex.

6. How to resist and avoid, and receive help regarding, sexual coercion and dating violence, recognizing that—even with consent—teen sex remains a youth risk.

associated with personal responsibility, self-regulation, goal setting, healthy decision-making, and a focus on the future" (Blesson et al. 2022; FYSB 2023).

A central component of positive youth development is helping youth develop self-regulation skills (Gestsdottir et al. 2017). For example, self-regulation supports a youth's decision to say no to or set clear

boundaries around sexual behaviors and ability to engage in positive communication to develop healthy relationships (for example, Farley and Kim-Spoon 2014; Raffaelli and Crockett 2003). However, youth do not develop many of these skills on their own—rather, they acquire them through their experiences and relationships with others. The process of youth developing self-regulation through their relationships is called co-regulation (Erdmann and Hertel 2019; Murray and Rosanbalm 2017).

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is the act of managing one's own thoughts and feelings to behave in ways that help each person reach their current and future goals (Bandura 1990, 2005). Self-regulation is commonly viewed as being composed of three types of regulation: cognitive, emotion, and behavioral regulation (Bandura 2005; McClelland et al. 2010).

What is co-regulation?

Co-regulation is the supportive process between youth and another person that helps youth develop self-regulation. Typically, this takes the form of caring adults such as parents, guardians, teachers, and so on—called co-regulators—supporting and coaching a youth to understand and use self-regulation skills (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017). Peer interactions have also been shown to influence the development of self-regulation in adolescence (King et al. 2018). Co-regulation has several key components: developing a positive relationship, establishing a safe environment, and skills coaching (Baumgartner et al. 2019). For more information on co-regulation, see the ACF website.

A recent ACF study—Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SAHRM)—explored how staff at healthy relationship programs for youth could

use various co-regulation strategies to help youth develop self-regulation (Baumgartner et al. 2019). These programs are similar to sexual risk avoidance education (SRAE) programs and often use similar curricula (for example, Love Notes).

Peers also have the potential support the development of self-regulation in other youth. Peer-based strategies hold significant promise in addressing the complex challenges of promoting healthy sexual behaviors among young people. Research has consistently demonstrated that peer-led interventions can be more relatable, engaging, and credible for young people, as peers share similar experiences and can effectively communicate in a language and style that resonates with their peers (Ng et al., 2021; Sim & Madden, 2008). By leveraging the relatability and credibility of peers, peer-based strategies create a safe and non-judgmental space for open discussions, provide accurate information, challenge risky beliefs, and empower young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health (Barbee et. al, 2022; Blesson et. al 2022, Ng et al., 2021).

The literature points to two peer-based approaches that have a good evidence base for enhancing self-regulation that might be applicable to SRAE programs: peer mentoring and peer tutoring (also referred to as peer education). Broadly, peer mentoring and peer tutoring use cooperative interpersonal relationships in which the mentor or tutor builds self-regulation skills for the youth. Using co-regulation, a process through which an adult or individual helps a young person develop self-regulation skills, in mentoring interactions is a promising approach to enhancing the self-regulation skills of a mentee, as mentors typically provide feedback, advice, and guidance to their mentee (Burton et al. 2022; Karcher 2007; Karcher and Berger 2017). Tutoring can result in enhanced self-regulation skills for tutees, although these skills typically relate to self-regulated learning or social integration (Alegre et al. 2020; Moliner and Alegre 2020). Table 1 shows a comparison between the two strategies and highlights best practices from the literature and applications to self-regulation.

Table 1. Peer mentoring and peer tutoring: A comparison

	Peer mentoring	Peer tutoring
Definition and goal	Focuses on building a trusting relationship between a mentor and mentee, often involving coaching related to a shared experience for which the mentor can offer support and guidance	Involves one student supporting another student in a learning process and is typically focused on individualized instruction and clarification of specific subject matter
Best practices and relationship characteristics	• Brings together a mentor and mentee from different environments, such as different schools, or brings together a mentor and mentee around a shared experience • Occurs outside of the classroom • Has at least a two-year age difference between mentor and mentee • Has sustained and intensive interaction, including 20 or more meetings per year • Includes supportive adults who provide training, supervision, and coaching	• Brings together a tutor and tutee/student from similar backgrounds, often from the same school or program • Occurs inside the classroom • Allows the mentor and mentee to be same age • Has consistent interaction over a designated period of time • Includes supportive adults who provide training, supervision, and coaching
Application to self-regulation	A mentor typically provides feedback, advice, and guidance to their mentee. Because the focus is on the relationship, co-regulation strategies could be infused when helpful or appropriate.	A tutor helps a student learn specific subject matter. Because self-regulated learning is a potential outcome of these interactions, the tutor could use co-regulation strategies to support self-regulation skill building.

Sources: Alegre et al. 2020; Burton et al. 2022; Karcher 2007; Karcher and Berger 2017; Moliner and Alegre 2020; Utley and Mortweet 1997. SAHRM = Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth; SRAE = Sexual Risk Avoidance Education.

The SRAE National Evaluation (SRAENE) is a FYSB-funded evaluation of SRAE programs that, in part, seeks to understand how programs can promote youth self-regulation, including exploring how co-regulation can support that self-regulation development in SRAE programs. The project has three distinct arms. One is the **National Descriptive Study**, which describes the implementation of programs funded by SRAE grants. The second is **Data and Evaluation support**, intended to help grant recipients build their capacity to use data and research to improve their programs and support grant recipients conducting their own evaluations. The third arm is the **Program Components Impact Study (CIS)**, which involves a systematic and rigorous approach to test and improve the components of programs. It is this third arm that is focused on identifying ways SRAE grant recipients can implement activities to support the grant requirement of providing content related to positive youth development and self-regulation. As a result, the CIS seeks to expand the work of SAHRM in two

ways: (1) by implementing and further studying the facilitation techniques developed through SAHRM and (2) identifying potential ways that SRAE programs could use peers as co-regulators.

There is potential for SRAE programs to use peers to support the development of youth's self-regulation. Based on a scan of grant applications conducted as part of SRAENE, many SRAE grant recipients had plans to use peers in some capacity—both as formal and informal mentors and tutors and in other capacities (such as advisory boards). Although promising, peer-based strategies might pose challenges for SRAE programs to implement. For example, SRAE programs typically deliver scripted curricula in schools during a class such as health for a limited time (for example, two weeks), which means these programs have few opportunities in school to implement anything other than the curricula (Neelan et al. 2022a, 2022b). As a result, SRAE programs might need to incorporate a peer-based component (such as mentoring) as a supplemental

activity that is conducted outside the time devoted to delivering SRAE curricula content. In addition, SRAE programs opting to use peers will need the resources and time to identify, train, and support peers. SRAE program providers will require guidance on how to structure these activities to align with the program content, and how to support development of youth co-regulation skills to promote self-regulation among their peers.

The SRAENE CIS aims to conduct formative and exploratory work to provide recommendations on how SRAE programs can implement a peer-based component aimed at promoting the development of self-regulation in various program contexts. With this study, we aspire to generate feasible strategies that programs can use, refine, and evaluate. We began this formative work by convening a Technical Work Group (TWG) meeting to: (1) understand how SRAE programs currently use peers; (2) gather tips, strategies, and considerations to share with other SRAE programs on the full range of program design to implementation to monitoring; and (3) explore how peers might be leverage in an SRAE context to help youth develop self-regulation skills. This brief provides a summary of this meeting. We first describe the goals and format of the meeting and close with highlights from the activities and group discussion.

Technical Work Group meeting

Mathematica convened the TWG on November 9, 2022, in Mathematica's Washington, DC, office. The SRAENE team invited 16 SRAE grant recipients. The grant recipients represented an array of contexts and locations (from American Samoa and Guam, to suburban and rural areas of the U.S. mainland), and the grant recipients varied in their use of peers (from mentoring or tutoring, to recruiters and advisory boards). The TWG included several experts in the co-regulation field—namely members of the SAHRM project—and two experts that were not associated with FYSB-funded SRAE programs but had experience operating peer mentoring and tutoring programs. Table 2 provides a full list of attendees and their affiliations.

The meeting had several goals (Box 2). Our *primary* goal was to have an exploratory conversation with grant recipients to better understand the promise

Box 2. Goals of Technical Work Group meeting

- Hear from grant recipients about how they structure and implement their peer-based strategies
- Provide a basic, common understanding of self-regulation, co-regulation, and best practices related to peer tutoring and mentoring
- Have an exploratory conversation with grant recipients to better understand the promise of peer-based strategies from their perspectives and how it aligns with self-regulation development and the process co-regulation

Table 2. SRAENE peer co-regulation TWG members

Name	Organization
Tracy Barber	Aiming for Healthy Families
Alesha Knight	Aiming for Healthy Families.
Dianna Bonneau	Child and Family Resources of Arizona
Jenny Cox	Child and Family Resources of Arizona
Joanna Lamb-Looby	Community College Foundation
Ashley Williams	Family Wellness Outreach Center of Georgia
Loso Iaulualo	Intersections, Inc.
RB Alverna	NJ Physicians Advisory Group
Kathryn McCutchan	Pacific Youth and Community Development
Jeffrey Guidry	PeeDee Healthy Start Outreach
DeeAnn Arroyo	Pima Prevention Partnership Outreach
Arial Moore	Safe Havynn Education Center
Emily Taverez	Sunset Park Health Council Outreach
Renee Perez	Texas State University
John Williams	The Center for Relationship Education Outreach
Michelle Cajero	The University of Texas Houston
Regina Shiroma	WestCare Pacific Islands Outreach
Kelvin Walston	Wholistic Stress Control Institute, Inc. Outreach
Aleta Meyer*	Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Aly Frei*	Public Strategies
Celia Thomas*	Michigan Alternatives for Girls
Francesca Adler-Baeder*	College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

* Denotes the attendee is not a FYSB-funded SRAE grant recipient

of peer-based strategies from their perspectives. Additionally, the SRAENE team, in collaboration with the experts, aimed to provide attendees with a basic, common understanding of self-regulation and co-regulation, and shared best practices from the literature related to peer mentoring and tutoring. In addition, we asked SRAE grant recipients to discuss how they use peers in their programs and if their experiences align with best practices or the concepts of self- and co-regulation.

Findings: SRAE programs highlight the promise of peer-based strategies

The SRAENE team led small-group brainstorming sessions with attendees to identify promising practices around using peers in SRAE programs and peers as co-regulators in SRAE programs. The team instructed attendees to work together to develop recommendations that could be compiled into a guide or toolkit to help SRAE grant recipients with this goal. The team randomly placed TWG attendees into three small groups for the brainstorming. Box 3 provides more information on the small-group exercise. After working in small groups, we reconvened as a large group to share small-group findings. We identified commonalities and key ideas across the small groups and discussed ways the SRAENE formative work could further the field.

The following section presents common and key findings related to each implementation component (see Box 3) across the three small groups. *It is important to note that the highlights presented below reflect the opinions and experiences of the TWG attendees. These are findings from the discussion, and they have not been studied for feasibility and success.*

Engaging peers as co-regulators

Across the activities and discussions, two common themes emerged related to using peers as co-regulators:

1. **Recognize the unique place peers have as co-regulators.** Reflecting on literature that demonstrates that many people involved in youth's lives can serve as co-regulators (for example, Butler and Randall 2013; Erdmann and Hertel

> **Box 3. Small-group exercise**
>
> Goal: Create content that could be compiled into a guide for any SRAE grant recipient or program developing and implementing a peer-based strategy. Attendees worked in three groups of seven to nine attendees supported by experts and SRAENE staff. Attendees brainstormed recommendations related to several core implementation components:
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> - *Needs and enabling factors.* This component sought to identify resources needed for programs to begin developing their peer-based programs. This included factors such as funding, school-based resources, or organization characteristics.
> - *Recruitment and selection.* This component sought to identify ways programs could recruit and select peers. This included strategies to entice youth to become peer staff and how programs can identify those who should participate in the program (for example, characteristics of quality peers).
> - *Training.* This component sought to identify ways programs should train their peers or staff to implement their peer-based program. This included aspects such as training topics, frequency of training, and so on.
> - *Implementation activities.* This component sought to identify the types of activities peer could use to support the development of self-regulation skills.
> - *Continuous support.* This component sought to identify ways programs supervise and coach peers and other staff in their peer-based program.

2019; Murray and Rosanbalm 2017), one of the small groups offered the idea of a system of co-regulators. This idea resonated with the other attendees. Attendees felt that SRAE programs wishing to use peers as co-regulators need to first identify all the potential co-regulators in youth's lives (for example, parents, teachers, peers, community members, and so on) and identify the unique and shared ways that each supports self-regulation development. By identifying the community of co-regulators, SRAE programs can recognize and take advantage of the role peers

play during adolescence. For example, peers could help support the use of self-regulation skills taught by SRAE program staff in the day-to-day situations faced in schools, or teach other self-regulation skills in these contexts. In addition, attendees noted that co-regulation components might look different for peers and adults because peers might establish safety and a positive relationship with youth differently than adults might.

2. **More guidance is needed on how to incoporate co-regulation into peer-based strategies.** Attendees identified ways that peers could use the same co-regulation strategies that adult facilitators use—such as those developed in SAHRM (Frei and Herman 2021)—including memorizing names, providing praise, establishing group agreements, defining norms for safety, setting clear boundaries, modeling self-regulation skills, and respecting confidentiality. In addition, attendees discussed the need to provide peers with training in self- and co-regulation to understand how to use these strategies. Relatedly, many attendees voiced that adult staff should also receive this training and extensive training in trauma-informed approaches. They noted that the adult staff who support peer staff act as co-regulators and should model strong co-regulation skills, which these trainings would help them do.

Overall, there was consensus among the attendees that more guidance is needed in this area to fully develop how peers can become co-regulators. For example, attendees wondered what self-regulation skills peers were most apt to "coach" on and when they should do so. Some did express that understanding a peer's role in the system of co-regulators might help answer these questions.

Suggestions for programs

The discussion during the meeting was rich with tips, strategies, and considerations about engaging peers as mentors and tutors from current grant recipients. The discussion also produced some preliminary guidance for SRAE programs to consider when looking to develop peer-based co-regulation strategies:

1. **Build a coalition of partners and champions.** Attendees noted the importance of establishing a coalition with other organizations and services for youth and families in the community, as a coalition aligns with the system of co-regulators, including representatives from all layers of youth's lives to support the development of self-regulation. Attendees discussed the importance of a coordinated community effort, including surveying the existing landscape of services and developing a peer-based program that addresses a need or gap. Developing a peer-based program with a coalition had several advantages, according to attendees. First, they noted that a coalition could share resources and reduce the financial burdens on a program. In addition, attendees expressed that a coalition had the potential to improve school and parent buy-in. Specifically, attendees suggested that including representatives from educational institutions could foster program champions at local schools. This might also help gain the necessary buy-in and support from the district, principals, and teachers.

2. **Create a peer-based program with benefits that resonate with youth.** Attendees agreed that in order for youth to be interested in becoming part of a program as peer staff, the benefits need to be apparent and appeal to them. Attendees stressed the importance of compensating peer staff for their time through hourly wages or financial incentives. Some attendees also suggested offering college-level course credit as another means of compensation. Moreover, attendees felt offering wages or pay-based incentives can improve equity for peer staff, particularly for those who need to participate in the workforce.

3. **Understand what makes an effective peer co-regulator and design a recruitment process to identify them.** TWG attendees posed that additional research could seek to understand what makes an effective peer co-regulator. Attendees noted that understanding these characteristics could help them better select peers. Attendees agreed that programs seeking to identify peers should not solely rely on typical

application components such as essays or a listing of accomplishments or grades. Attendees suggested that peers should share their interests, experiences, and hopes through other means of expression in addition to written methods. Attendees noted that this multimodal approach offers ways to include youth who otherwise might not be included. Several attendees noted that, in their experience, quality peers are often the ones with lived experience who might or might not have a solid academic history. As a result, the application should not focus solely on this.

4. **Infuse equity and inclusion throughout the program, beginning with recruitment.** Attendees voiced that adults should model equity and inclusion, and this should begin during the recruitment and selection process. They suggested that a program can use committees and transparent and accountable processes to enhance recruitment. For example, being transparent about the selection criteria and and how those will be used for selection could result in a larger pool of applicants that may be suited for the program. In addition, attendees suggested that programs provide direct and supportive written feedback to peers who are not chosen, giving practical guidance on how to improve their application in the future. Attendees noted that program staff and leaders should intentionally incorporate equity and inclusion principles into all aspects of a peer-based program, not just the peer selection process.

5. **Co-create supportive environments that foster relationships between adult staff and peer staff.** Attendees agreed that peers need continual support from adults. There was consensus that organizations should work to create a supportive environment that encourages consistent self-reflection and clear, bidirectional communication between peers and adult staff. As such, attendees suggested that peers and adults staff meet regularly, both formally and informally. For example, some attendees suggested meeting to set and revisit group norms, or establishing regular times to debrief and self-reflect together. Attendees also voiced that programs should aim to create a safe environment for peers. They suggested that programs cultivate a culture that promotes self-advocacy or people advocating on behalf of the group, learning about and consistently implementing cultural humility practices, affirming personal identities, and building empathetic interpersonal skills.

Many attendees stressed the importance of adults and youth in the program co-creating and co-implementing the program together. They voiced that programs should value youth engagement and strive for a true partnership that will embed and elevate youth voices across all essential components of a peer-based model (for example, involving young people in decision making). The attendees reiterated that adults in the program can frame their role as learning alongside youth, as opposed to telling them what to do.

Next steps

This was the first step in formative work on the promise of peer-based strategies in SRAE programs for the SRAENE project. Later in 2023, we will expand this study. The TWG participants shared their reflections and discussed ways research and the SRAENE project could add value to the field. Based on the discussion, we will consult the literature to produce a tip sheet that SRAE and similar programs can use to help guide them in developing and implementing peer-based strategies. Additionally, there could be a benefit in understanding how peers help each other develop self-regulation skills. We will explore this by consulting the literature on peers and self-regulation development.

More information and future publications from SRAENE are available on the project website.

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