Research & Theoretical Basis for Learning

Relationships Under Construction (RUC) is constructed on several learning theories. Each theory provides the research or theoretical basis for sexual risk avoidance curriculum (SRA). The effectiveness of the research basis is dependent on the uniqueness of each student and their ability to respond. SRA programs are sensitive to the needs of students and the support structures available to each student. The SRA approach that RUC employs seeks to strengthen and support the family structure where ever possible. We support parents as the primary sex educators of their children. When families are fractured or dysfunctional and parental oversight may not be possible, RUC, as an SRA curriculum, seeks to help students realize the assets and community support that they do have and to point them in the direction of optimal health. RUC uses the following theoretical constructs in the formulation and implementation of our curriculum.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory\(^1\) posits that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modeling. The theory has often been called a bridge between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory, and motivation.\(^2\)

This theory suggests that individuals are more likely to exhibit a given behavior if they attach importance to the outcomes and admire the person modeling the behavior. From this and other research, we know that teacher selection is very important. A teacher passionate about optimal health, especially concerning relationships, is much more likely to influence students to consider the same for their life choices.

“Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.” (Bandura). Social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences.\(^3\)

Bandura’s necessary conditions for effective modeling:

1. **Attention** — various factors increase or decrease the amount of attention paid. Includes distinctiveness, affective valence, prevalence, complexity, functional value. One’s characteristics (e.g. sensory capacities, arousal level, and perceptual set, past reinforcement) affect attention.

2. **Retention** — remembering what you paid attention to. Includes symbolic coding, mental images, cognitive organization, symbolic rehearsal, motor rehearsal.


4. **Motivation** — having a good reason to imitate. Includes motives such as a past (i.e. traditional behaviorism), promised (imagined incentives) and vicarious (seeing and recalling the reinforced model)\(^4\)

---


RUC employs Bandura’s theory that students learn if they pay attention. RUC uses many demonstrations of the information we want students to remember. RUC is a fast paced curriculum designed to hold the student’s attention and encourage each student to think through his or her decisions.

Do the students retain the information? Often when our instructors return to the classroom the next year, the students will remember information from the year before. The demonstrations allow the students to remember. An example of student’s reproducing the information shared by RUC is seen in the 8th grade worksheet, Rebuilding a Country. Students are assigned the worksheet at the beginning of the week and then given hints to complete the worksheet each day. When they participate in a group version of the activity during the fifth session, you will hear the reproduction of information shared during the week as students complete the assignment together. Another example is the Positive Youth Development (PYD) worksheet designed to be used after each series of lessons in each grade level. This PYD worksheet allows the classroom teacher to help the students process the information that the RUC instructor presented the week before. Students reproduce the information in ways that will help them implement what they learned into a new situation and actually help someone else.

Motivation is perhaps one of RUC’s greatest assets. Students are motivated by the information given in a way they can understand and retain. RUC presents a logical system of information which builds each year on the knowledge base of the individual in a common sense, maieutic method of presentation. Greek philosopher, Socrates developed this questioning method of teaching that allows the learner to reach their own conclusion and, therefore, “own” the information. RUC employs the maieutic method of asking questions to help students come to their own conclusions. The Consequence Bag demonstration is perhaps the best example of this method in RUC, although there are many other examples. Four questions are asked - two at the beginning of the exercise, and two at the end which are very eye-opening for students and help the students come to their own conclusions.

Bandura believed in “reciprocal determinism”, that is, the world and a person’s behavior cause each other, while behaviorism essentially states that one’s environment causes one’s behavior, Bandura, who was studying adolescent aggression, found this too simplistic, and so in addition he suggested that behavior causes environment as well. Later, Bandura soon considered personality as an interaction between three components: the environment, behavior, and one’s psychological processes (one’s ability to entertain images in minds and language).

Our young people are not only influenced by their environment, but may choose behaviors which cause their environment. We are now facing in many communities a very complicated community structure where young people who live in fractured families find themselves in environments that are not conducive to optimal learning, optimal health or raising healthy children of their own. RUC has activities that help students think about how they can develop into responsible men and women even if they do not have the support of their parents. We also encourage future orientation by asking students to consider what kind of family they would like to create for their future children.

---

Social learning theory has sometimes been called a bridge between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory, and motivation. The theory is related to Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and Lave's Situated Learning, which also emphasize the importance of social learning.7

**Vygotsky's Social Development Theory**8 argues that social interaction precedes development; consciousness and cognition and is the end product of socialization and social behavior.9 “This theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and bonding to parents and other people who influence students such as teachers and community. Parent-child communication, student-teacher interaction, skill building, responsibility, problem-solving as well as high expectations and communication of healthy values provide a protective circle around the developing child. The theory’s Zone of Proximal Development proposes that an individual can achieve at higher levels when provided support and guidance in reaching reasonable, but higher expectations. These interactions and bonds reduce the probability of involvement in risk behaviors and increase individual learning. The SRA approach applies this theory to help students set high goals for themselves, while providing a supportive circle of mentors to help them reach their goals.”10

RUC includes parents or guardians by having them sign several of the worksheets. Parents even complete part of some worksheets. We encourage students to share information with their parents, especially because so much has changed concerning sexual risk, and parents need to know how to help their children navigate this part of their development. SRA programs, including RUC, encourage students to set goals and raise the standards for themselves and their future families.

Lave’s Situated Learning Theory is the general theory of knowledge acquisition. Everyday activities contribute to the gradual acquisition of knowledge. Lave argues that learning is the function of the activity. Social interaction is the most important aspect of situated learning as learners become involved in a “community of practice.” Situated learning is unintentional rather than deliberate. Knowledge is acquired through observations of the environment and social interaction, leading to modeling, or mirroring, as also evident in social learning.

Children are like sponges, learning information in the environment in which they are placed. A safe learning environment is critical to raising children who succeed and become responsible adults. Protecting young people from pornography, adult media, suggestive music, suggestive movies and television is paramount to raising emotionally and psychologically healthy children. Optimal health is critical in every area of development – moral, physical, emotional, intellectual and social. RUC strives to protect the modesty of children and helps them sort through media influence. We include parents and other influential adults. Lave’s theory suggests that children learn what they live. Their learning environments are critical to their success. We, as a community, can help them navigate living with fractured or dysfunctional families and change the future for their children. 

---

10 2012 Sexual Risk Avoidance Certification Program, National Abstinence Education Association, The Research Base for SRA.
Benson’s Developmental Assets Theory\textsuperscript{11} identifies 40 developmental assets that are essential for healthy child development. Assets are divided into two groups – external and internal. External assets include assets of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations. Internal assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. The more assets a young person has, the less likely they are to engage in risky behaviors. SRA programs, including RUC, provide a holistic approach to teaching the need for internal assets and connection to parents and the community to increase external assets. RUC presentations include support for healthy decisions, empowerment, boundaries and high expectations for students in our programs.

According to Rainer K. Silbereisen & Richard M. Lerner in their book, Approaches to Positive Youth Development, 2007, the 40 developmental assets are an applied research initiative aimed at transforming communities to promote positive human development. Their review of the developmental assets represent a theoretical construct identifying a wide range of environmental and interpersonal strengths known to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents (Benson, 1990, 1997, 1998, 2006; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999). The 40 elements in this framework represent a synthesis of multiple research literatures and are purposefully positioned as health-enhancing resources over which communities have considerable control. Second, asset-building community is an evolving conceptual model describing the nature and dynamics of places and settings that provide a constant and equitable flow of asset-building energy to all children and adolescents (Benson, 1997, 2006; Benson & Leffert, 2001). This work provides the framework for Positive Youth Development. The PYD perspective has arisen through the development and, in some cases, the evaluation of interventions designed and delivered within community-based, youth serving programs that have worked to counter what have been seen as steady increases across the past five to six decades of substantial incidences of risk behaviors among adolescents.\textsuperscript{12}

RUC provides a well-planned program for helping young people assess the risks involved with certain behaviors, navigate a decision-making model and framework to evaluate information provided, and appraise the community for the future of their own children.

Berkowitz & Perkins’ Social Norming Theory\textsuperscript{13} is based on the view that individuals tend to adopt attitudes, behaviors, and expectations that they perceive are similar to their social group. According to the theory, individuals tend to exaggerate the negative behaviors of their peers and are then more likely to conform to the perceived negative behavior. The theory further asserts that educating a group about healthy behavior and informing them that many (or most) of their peers are choosing healthy decisions, will result in an increase in healthy positive behavior. The theory has application to SRA education because many teens believe they are the only ones who are not engaging in sexual activity, when in fact; most teens are not sexually active. Sharing this information and providing reasonable reasons to wait for sex are two practical applications of this theory.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Lerner, Richard M., Silbereisen, Rainer K., Approaches to Positive Youth Development, 2007.
\textsuperscript{14} 2012 Sexual Risk Avoidance Certification Program, National Abstinence Education Association, The Research Base for SRA.
The Social Norming Theory has been used with great success in curbing tobacco use and is currently gaining some success with alcohol binge drinking use especially among teens and college students. Sexual abuse is another area where the Social Norming Theory is being employed.15

RUC employs the Social Norming Theory by demonstrating to students that the majority of students are not sexually active. Current statistics from the CDC shows that 72% of high school students are not sexually active. This shows great success of SRA programs over the past several years compared to the 1990s when 48% of teens were sexually active. Current statistics reveal that only 28% of teens report being sexually active.

Ajzen & Fishbein’s Theory of Planned Behavior/Reasoned Action16 suggests that the best predictor of behavior is intention. This theory also demonstrates that the most reliable measure of future action or behavior is attitude or beliefs, perception of people caring about them and their behavior, and their perceived sense of self-efficacy. The more favorable the attitude, support of people they care about, and the feeling that they can succeed, the more likely they will practice healthy behavior.

RUC’s evaluation is designed using this theory. The results of our evaluation are statistically significant in every category and question over a period of seven years. (See summaries of our evaluations on our web site, RelationshipsUnderConstruction.com.)

(See Logic Model of illustration on page xxii.)

Boyden & Mann’s Resilience Theory addresses the strengths within an individual that make it possible to rise above adversity.

Resilience in children refers to individuals who are doing better than expected, given a history that includes risk or adverse experience. Simply put, resilience requires two conditions to be met: (1) the child must have experienced some sort of risk or adversity that has been linked with poor outcomes, and (2) the child is generally doing okay despite being exposed to that risk or adversity; they are not showing that poor outcome.17

The American Psychological Association suggests “10 Ways to Build Resilience”, which are: (1) maintaining good relationships with close family members, friends and others; (2) to avoid seeing crises or stressful events as unbearable problems; (3) to accept circumstances that cannot be changed; (4) to develop realistic goals and move towards them; (5) to take decisive actions in adverse situations; (6) to look for opportunities of self-discovery after a struggle with loss; (7) developing self-confidence; (8) to keep a long-term perspective and consider the stressful event in a broader context; (9) to maintain a hopeful outlook, expecting good things and visualizing what is wished; (10) to take care of one’s mind and body, exercising regularly, paying attention to one’s own needs and feelings and engaging in relaxing activities that one enjoys. Learning from the past and maintaining flexibility and balance in life are also cited.

RUC, as an SRA curriculum, encourages and motivates students to rise to a higher standard. RUC encourages self-efficacy which allows a student to realize that they can achieve higher expectations. Our Positive Youth Development worksheet also encourages students to help others and look at the resources and community members that provide the support they need to succeed.

**Prochaska & DiClemente’s Transtheoretical Model**\(^{18}\) was developed to promote health behavior. Positive decision-making is used to acquire a healthy behavior or discontinue an unhealthy behavior. Change is a process and requires a person to move through several stages including:

1. Precontemplation: no intention for change,
2. Contemplation: intention to change in the future,
3. Preparation: intention to change immediately,
4. Action: behavior change is taking place,
5. Maintenance: taking steps to avoid regression into previous condition.\(^{19}\)

RUC and SRA present information in a way that allows students in the different stages to contemplate where they are and choose optimal health. Many students write comments on their survey like, “you saved my life.” Some say they were already making healthy choices and others say they are not going to stop having sex. On our current surveys, 79% choose the optimal sexual health decision to wait to participate in sexual activity until marriage.

**McGuire’s Social Inoculation Theory**\(^{20}\) suggests that inoculations are needed for social behavior in the same way that inoculations are needed for physical health. The theory recommends that a child should be introduced to the concept of peer pressure long before he or she is confronted with it. The child can then develop “immunity” to negative peer pressure through role-playing and conversations about specific behavioral risks he may encounter in the future. Just like antibodies surround cells after inoculations, the theory suggests that it is important that family, friends, and mentors who model positive and desired behaviors surround the child.\(^{21}\)

RUC provides several teaching methods to reach students who learn in different ways. We know that 10% of students would choose optimal health even if we did not present in their classroom. Another 10% of the students will choose to be sexually active whether we present in their classroom or not. That leaves 80% of the students who are trying to decide which way to go. In our evaluation and in the students’ comments, we find that we strengthen the first 10%, make the second 10% at least think about their choices and encourage the 80% to choose optimal sexual health. Currently, our evaluation shows that 79% of the students served are choosing to not participate in sexual activity.


---

- XX -

Hochbaum, Rosenstock and Kegels’ Health Belief Model\textsuperscript{22} was developed by the U.S. Public Health to explain and predict health behaviors. It is based on an individual’s view of:

- Perceived susceptibility to a specific risk,
- Perceived severity of the risk, so that the person wants to avoid the risk,
- Perceived benefits to following the recommended health action,
- Perceived barriers or costs of the recommended health action,
- Cues to action or prompts that help move the individual to action,
- Self-efficacy or confidence that the individual is able to take the recommended action.

This theory is intended to help individuals move from unhealthy to healthy behaviors. It can also help an individual maintain a healthy behavior.\textsuperscript{23}

RUC addresses the Health Belief Model to help students make decisions for optimal health. By working through a decision making model to equip students to understand the problem with risk behaviors, discussing healthy or unhealthy options, allowing the students to think through their own situations, offering solutions, posing questions to help students think and allowing each student to come to their own conclusions, RUC provides a positive health model that the majority of students can accept.

Relationships Under Construction has a theoretical basis that encourages the success of this dynamic curriculum. The combination of good curriculum and passionate teachers provides a win-win for students and influencing adults.


\textsuperscript{23} 2012 Sexual Risk Avoidance Certification Program, National Abstinence Education Association, The Research Base for SRA.
Logic Model for understanding teen sexual abstinence based on Azjen’s Theory of Planned Behavior

Prevention Programs

Teen’s perceived behavioral control over sexual involvement

Teen’s subjective norms about abstinence

Teen’s attitudes toward abstinence

Teen's behavioral intentions regarding abstinence (pre-test)

Teen’s actual behavior of staying abstinent (post-test)

Teen stays abstinent at follow-up