



Couple and Relationship Education (CARE) for Foster Parents Project¹

Why Healthy Couple and Co-Parenting Relationships Matter to Child Welfare in Georgia

Children are safer and healthier when the adults in their lives have healthy relationships.

Child welfare experts have emphasized the importance of reinforcing elements of healthy family functioning (which include healthy parenting dyad relationships) in order to minimize risks to children and maximize the opportunity for children to remain safely with their families. The research is clear: negativity in the couple and co-parenting relationship leads to negative and ineffective parenting, which adds stress to children and puts them at greater risk for abuse and/or neglect. In contrast, a healthy couple relationship is associated with positive parenting behaviors and stable and safe homes.

However, too many children are growing up in unstable homes. The percentage of children who grow up in fragile – typically fatherless and poor– families has grown enormously over the past four decades. Nearly 40% of children live in single-parent homes, mainly due to divorce (nearly 65% of couples who divorce have children) and out-of-wedlock births (45% of all births are to unmarried mothers). Consequently, more children are exposed to the risk of poverty and to unhealthy models of relationships that increase their chances for abuse and neglect.

Consequently, as of June 2018, approximately 14,400 children in Georgia were placed in foster care. According to national reports, nearly half (45%) of children in foster care live in non-relative foster homes and almost two-thirds (63%) of these children live with married foster parents. While all youth benefit from being exposed to *healthy* couple and co-parenting relationships and stable families, foster children require greater attention to being placed in high-quality home environments because of their unique experiences with maltreatment, poor parenting, and high conflict homes.

The Relevance of Healthy Relationships to Foster Parents²

Being married is not enough, a healthy marriage matters for children.

Foster parents must possess a greater understanding of foster children’s unique needs, have good mental and emotional health, and demonstrate extra skills in order to create a high-quality home environment for foster children. Quality parenting is important, but it is not enough: research reinforces that children exposed to high-quality parenting *and* high-quality couple relationships do better on several outcomes. Due to the unique and many stressors experienced by foster parent couples (e.g., traumatic experiences of foster youth, challenges with both foster and birth children, financial strain, increase on time demands, legal processes, lack of permanency, ambiguous loss), they are at elevated risk of experiencing marital and co-parenting challenges. Common conflicts experienced by foster parents include a lack of equal commitment to fostering, role ambiguity, lack of communication, and disagreement on parenting decisions. Thus, the couple relationship of foster parents is taxed following the placement of a child in their home, and this may jeopardize placement quality and stability. However, training to support their couple relationship is lacking.

High-quality foster parents:

- provide a safe and secure environment;
- provide a nurturing environment; promote education attainment and success;
- meet physical and mental health needs;
- promote social and emotional development;
- value diversity and support the child’s cultural needs;
- support permanency plans;
- manage ambiguity and loss for the foster child and family;
- grow as a foster parent by developing skills and role clarification;
- manage the demands of being a foster parent on a personal and family level;
- support relationships between children and their families; and
- work as a team member.

Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback (2006)

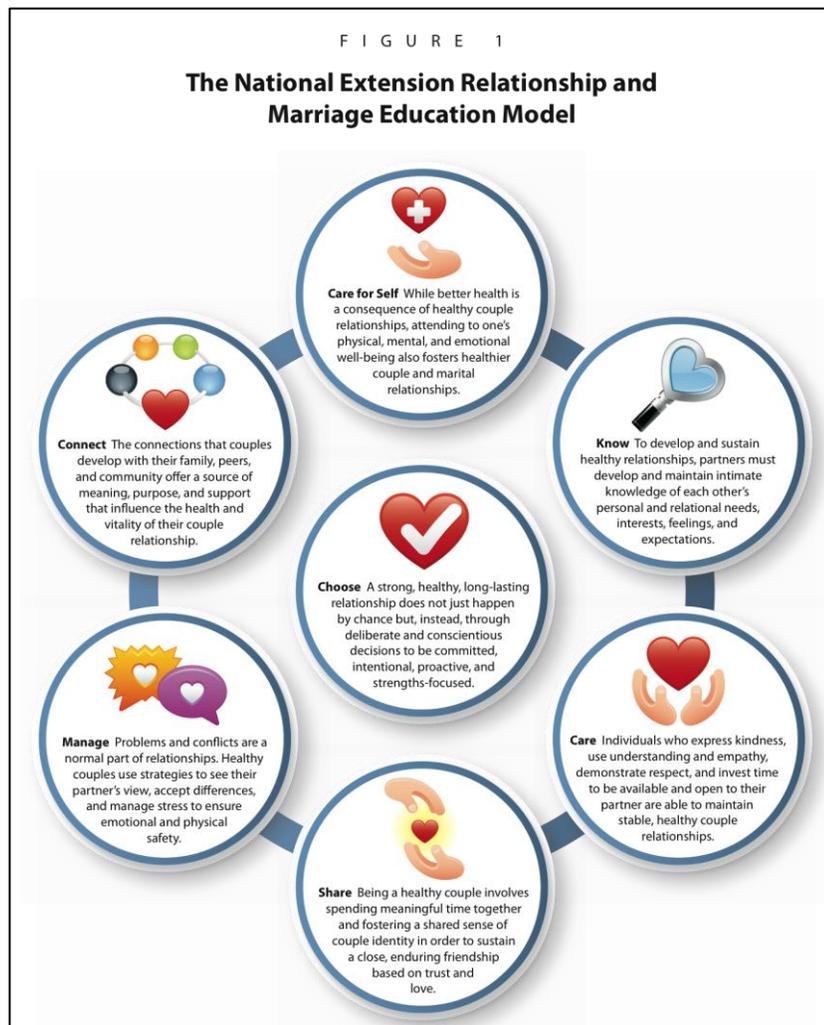
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² Although this document refers to foster parents, the same can also be applied to kinship care providers, who experience greater stress and challenges because of their biological relationship to the foster child, as well as adopting parents. Also, our focus is on all couples whether married or unmarried.

Teaching Skills to Promote Healthy Relationships

Since 2006, federal funding has supported the launch and evaluation of several couple relationship education (CRE) initiatives to promote family stability and child well-being. CRE involves teaching principles and skills (e.g., listening to understand, avoiding criticism and defensiveness during conflict) that foster healthy couple and co-parenting relationships. More than two decades of research has demonstrated that RME can positively impact relationship attitudes, behaviors, and quality across diverse and at-risk audiences. As well, when combined with parenting education, research reinforces the added benefits of CRE (versus parenting education alone) on promoting positive parenting behaviors.

The *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN)* developed a model derived from existing research on couples to guide RME efforts and programming. As illustrated in Figure 1, the model consists of seven core principles and skills needed to maintain healthy couple relationships³. It serves as the foundation for three curricula developed with funding provided by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, including *ELEVATE* which is used for the CARE for Foster Parents Project:

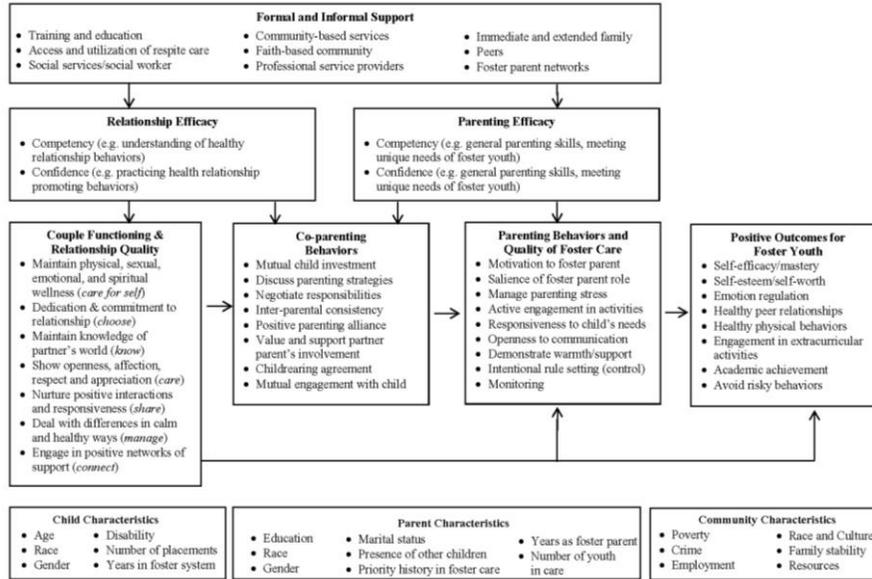


- ***ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level*** was developed in collaboration between Auburn University and the University of Georgia as part of the Alabama Healthy Marriage & Relationship Education Initiative (Grant #90FM0006). ELEVATE is a couple's education curriculum that blends practical skills with an understanding of the physiology of human interaction (the heart-brain-behavior connection) to enhance individuals' and couples' healthy relationship knowledge and skills.

Relationship education will not address all the needs of foster parents, and it is not intended to serve as a substitute to existing trainings. However, relationship education will meet an unmet and critical need in foster parent training. Supporting healthy couple and co-parenting functioning is essential to family stability and the promotion of children's health and safety. **Figure 2** depicts a conceptual model of the research-informed connections between resources, attitudes, behaviors, and environmental factors that may inform how we understand the impact of a healthy, stable home environment on the well-being of children in foster care.

³ Learn more about the model at <http://www.nermen.org/NERMEM.php>

FIGURE 2
A Holistic Approach to Supporting Quality Foster Care and Positive Outcomes for Foster Youth



Project F.R.E.E. (Fostering Relationship and Economic Enrichment)

With funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Gran t#90FM0081) and in partnership with the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services in Region 5, Project F.R.E.E. provides couple relationship education (CRE) to parents involved in child welfare services and foster caregivers (foster parents, kinship care providers, fictive kin providers). For foster caregiver participants, Project F.R.E.E. hosts a free weekend retreat that includes participation in the 8-hour CRE program, *ELEVATE*. Participants receive 8 hours of continuing education units for participation in this training, and grant funds allow us to provide them free hotel accommodations and meals as well as child care, when necessary.

To date, 179 foster caregiver couples (358 individuals) have participated in one of three weekend retreats. Overall, preliminary analyses examining the effectiveness of the program indicate positive change on several indicators described in Figure 2 (above). Results indicate:

Increase In		Decrease In
• Self-Care	• Relationship Efficacy	• Depressive Symptoms
• Friendship between Partners	• Parenting Efficacy	• Financial Distress
• Healthy Conflict Management	• Positive Financial Management	
• Affection	• Financial Self-Efficacy	

With these positive results, the next steps for the CARE for Foster Parents Project is to expand these services to foster caregiver couples across Georgia, including new foster caregivers prior to or immediately following their first placement.

To learn more about Project F.R.E.E. and the ELEVATE Weekend Retreat for Foster Caregivers, you can visit the websites below:

Project F.R.E.E. Elevate Weekend Retreat for Foster Caregivers
<https://www.fcs.uga.edu/hmre/projectfree-fostercaregivers>
Video Testimonials from Previous Participants
<https://www.fcs.uga.edu/hmre/projectfree-participants-videos>

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