



HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP & MARRIAGE EDUCATION TRAINING

Survey of Child Welfare Professionals: Missouri (2010)

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**COOPERATIVE
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I. Overview of Survey

The goal of the Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training Project (HRMET) is to meet the safety, permanency, and well-being needs of vulnerable children and reduce racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. HRMET's approach is to increase child welfare workers' access to relationship and marriage education (RME) by creating a cost-effective and sustainable multi-state, five-tier delivery saturation model. This model brings together Cooperative Extension's existing resources and experiences, and linkages from two recent federal Healthy Marriage grants, social work's experience developing curricula and training child welfare workers, and an eight-state team of the nation's leading Extension Specialists in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS).

This portion of the project will contribute to the HRMET effort by gathering information from the University of Missouri's HDFS and Social Work graduate students and current child welfare professionals. The information gathered from these participants will provide insight into the attitudes of the current and future child welfare workforce on the role of marriage and relationship education in their work with vulnerable children and families. This information can help the research team refine the curriculum being written as well as develop a better understanding of workforce attitudes at all levels (i.e. administration, case worker, and student).

The survey results will be used to determine: (1) how child welfare professionals and students view marriage and relationship education, and (2) the current attitude toward training and courses on this topic.

The major findings of the 2010 survey include the following:

- Divorce is thought to be either a somewhat or very serious problem by the vast majority (87.8 percent) of respondents.
- Around three-quarters (76.7 percent) of respondents thought unwed child rearing to be either a somewhat or very serious problem.
- The majority of respondents agreed that child welfare professionals need knowledge and skills about enhancing marriages and relationships (71.9 percent) or working with couples (75.3 percent) in order to do their jobs more effectively.
- Seventy-eight percent of respondents agreed that strong marital/couple relationships lead to successful parenting.
- The majority of respondents agreed that clients can benefit from participating in programs that focus on enhancing marital/couple relationships (83.3 percent), and that participation in such programs can help reduce incidences of child abuse and neglect (76.9 percent). Ninety-one percent felt that it is appropriate for child welfare professionals to help clients develop skills needed to have healthy relationships/marriages.
- Three-quarters of respondents agreed that training on recognizing characteristics of healthy marital/couple relationships will strengthen their assessment and case planning skills to reduce abuse and neglect, and eighty percent felt comfortable discussing with clients how their marital/couple issues and problems impact children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

- More than half (67.5 percent) of respondents agreed that too many couples rush into marriage, and eighty-nine percent felt it somewhat or very important that couples prepare for marriage through educational classes, workshops, or counseling.
- Eighty-six percent of respondents felt that young couples focus too much on the happiness they expect from marriage and not enough on the hard work a successful marriage requires and that they rush into child bearing without having a strong couple relationship.
- The vast majority of respondents (91.2 percent) felt that it was a good or very good idea to require marriage counseling or therapy before divorce when there are children in the home.
- While almost all respondents (93.4 percent) thought that a state-wide initiative to support healthy relationships and marriages was a good or very good idea, 64.5 percent were not aware at all of any state efforts to do so.
- Eighty percent of respondents felt that it would be helpful or very helpful for child welfare professionals to attend training on supporting healthy relationships and marriages, but 70 percent had never received training to teach or help others form or maintain relationships and marriages.

II. Survey Development and Response

The HRMET survey instrument was developed by the evaluation team at the University of Georgia as well as the PIs for the project. In addition, the survey instrument was piloted with the Missouri state advisory board. The data presented in this report were collected from child welfare professionals in the state of Missouri. The survey instrument was administered using Survey Monkey.

The Missouri state child welfare agency provided the faculty at the University of Missouri with the names and email addresses of 1757 child welfare professionals across the state. An initial invitation, prepared by the UGA investigators describing the survey (with a link to the survey), was sent via email to all 1757 professionals on May 21, 2009, with two follow up email reminders sent one and two weeks later. Only 22 emails were returned as undeliverable. At the close of the survey, 620 people agreed to participate and completed the survey, yielding an approximate 35.7 percent response rate. As shown in Figure 1, the majority (87.8 percent) of respondents were made aware of the survey via email, followed by professional organizations, work listserv, or another manner.

Figure 1. How respondents found out about the survey, having checked all that apply



III. Demographic and Employment Profile of Respondents

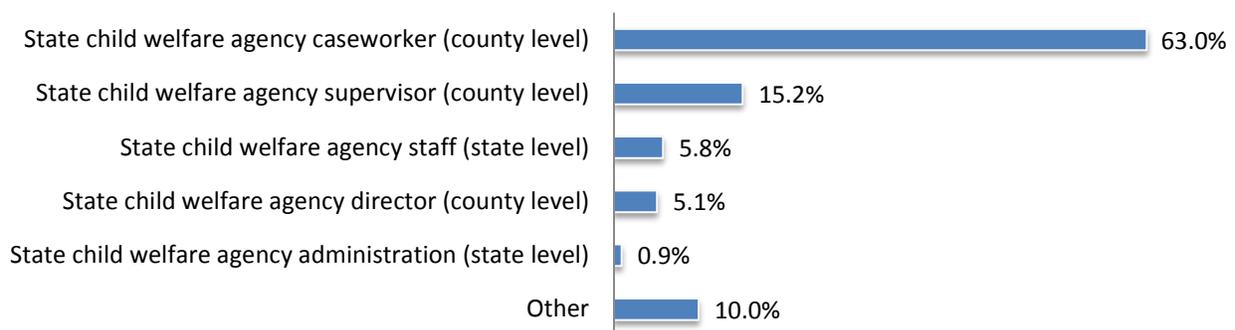
Basic demographic information was collected on the participants including age, race, gender, and educational level. Almost all (91 percent) of the respondents were female, which is not uncommon in the child welfare field. Participants ranged in age from 22 years to 67 years, with an average age of 38.6. Around one-third (34.6 percent) of respondents were in their thirties, with about one-quarter of respondents in their twenties. Ninety-one percent of respondents reported their race as Caucasian, 7.6 percent as African American, 0.4 percent as American Indian, and 1.1 percent as other. Only 4 percent considered themselves to be of Hispanic origin.

In order to gain a better understanding of the opinions of the participants and how their background may help form those opinions, they were asked about their current living/marital situation. Only 21.3 percent of respondents reported being single, leaving 78.7 percent who had been married at one time or another: 63.2 percent were currently married, 14.0 percent were divorced/separated, and 1.3% were widowed.

Regarding education, the majority (68.2 percent) of respondents have at least a Bachelor’s degree, which is expected because of educational requirements for most positions in the child welfare field. Around one-third (31.4 percent) of respondents had an advanced degree, such as a Masters or PhD. At the time of the survey, only 9.6 percent were currently enrolled in a graduate program. Of those currently enrolled in a program, the most common departments in which students enrolled were social work and counseling/psychology.

With regards to their current position, the majority (63 percent) of respondents classified themselves as being state child welfare agency caseworkers, at the county level. There were more county level respondents (83.3 percent) than state level (6.7 percent). Other positions held by respondents included specialists (n=13 respondents), contract employee through a state agency (n=8), child abuse investigators (n=7), and county level agency staff (n=3).

Figure 2. Current positions held, by percentage



Respondents were asked about the number of years they have worked in the child welfare field as well as in their current position. As seen in Table 1 below, the average number of years employed in the child welfare field was 10 years, but respondents had only spent an average of 4.8 years in their current position.

Table 1. Years of employment

	Average	Min	Max	N
Years in child welfare field	10	0.2	40.8	493
Years in current position	4.8	0.1	30	543

When looking at the numbers of years that respondents have spent in the child welfare field, a little more than half (57.3 percent) have spent less than ten years in the field. For the number of years spent in their current position, almost all (93.4 percent) respondents had been in their current position for less than ten years, and most (68.2 percent) had only been in that position for less than five years. It is not surprising that respondents have spent fewer years in their current position than in the child welfare field as a whole due to the natural progression through the workforce.

To further ascertain respondents experience in the field and to help measure the impact of the number of families that could potentially benefit from healthy relationship and marriage education, respondents were asked the number of families they served in the last six months. On average respondents worked with about 71 families during the past six months, with a total of 28,630 families served. When broken down into families that include a married couple or families with a mother and live-in (not married) boyfriend or father, the averages were 28.3 and 30.1, respectively.

Table 2. Number of families served in the last 6 months

	Average	Min	Max	Response Total	Response Count
Total families	71.40	0	1200	28,630	401
Families that included a married couple	28.30	0	589	10,160	359
Families with a mother and live-in (not married) boyfriend or father	30.10	0	400	10,443	347

IV. Views on Marriage and Divorce

First, because the training being developed was funded with the intent to facilitate the formation and stability of healthy marriages, respondents were asked a series of questions to gauge their views on marriage and divorce. As shown in Figure 3 below, respondents were asked the degree to which they agreed with a series of statements on marriage in general. More than half (67.4 percent) of participants agreed that too many couples rush into marriage, but remained split between agreeing (30.7 percent), being neutral (39.8 percent), or disagreeing (29.5 percent) that there should be a longer waiting period required before marriage. A similar split pattern was seen when asked whether living together before marriage improves chances for a good marriage. The majority (86.2 percent) of respondents agreed that young couples focus too much on the happiness they expect from marriage and not enough on the hard work a successful marriage requires. Participants were also in agreement (86.7 percent) that too many couples rush into childbearing without having a strong couple relationship.

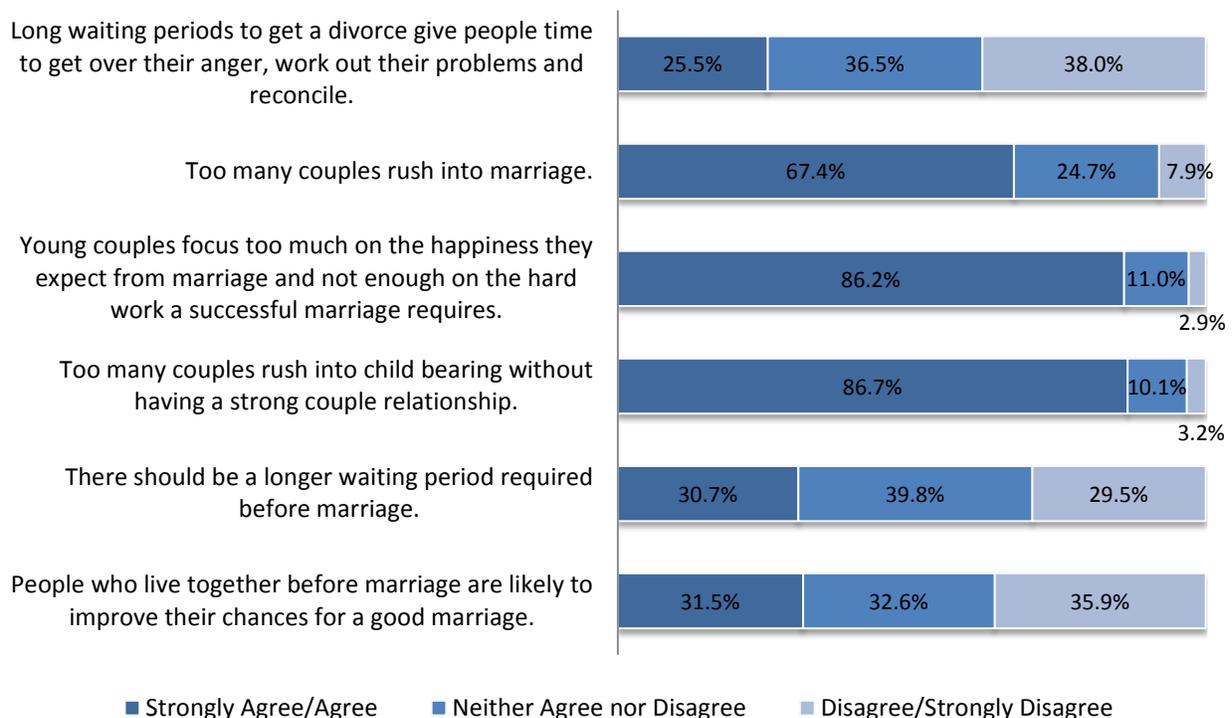
Respondents also were asked to share comments about their responses to these questions. The most common theme was that marriage and love are about commitment. Another common opinion was that

living together before marriage is not good or will not help prevent divorce. Respondents also believed that couples do not discuss marital expectations or know how much work marriage is before they become married. Some example comments include:

I strongly believe most people do not realize how much work a relationship takes to make it positive for both spouses and their children.

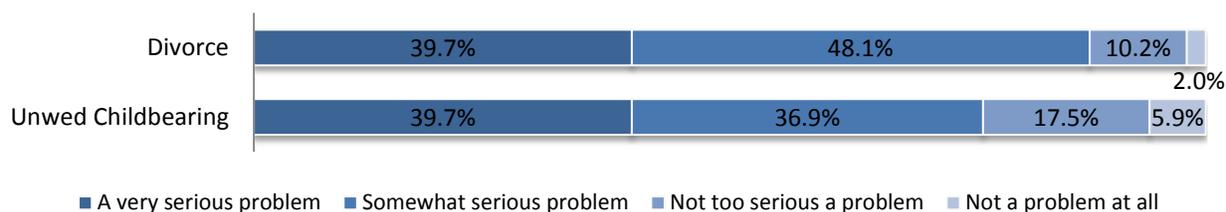
Marriage is about commitment not feelings, and though we all enter marriage with expectations, we need to understand that living in the real world does not afford most of us the luxury of having the fairy tale marriage. A strong relational foundation is key both prior to marriage and after marriage prior to child bearing. In my opinion Living together prior to marriage is not wise! it fosters the relational mentality that there is always an out, and fails to promote the realizations of commitment to the relationship.

Figure 3. The degree to which respondents agreed or disagreed to the following statements



As well, participants expressed concerns toward divorce and unwed childbearing in general. As seen in Figure 4, the vast majority (87.8 percent) of respondents felt that divorce is either a very serious (39.7 percent) or somewhat serious (48.1 percent) problem. Around three-quarters (76.6 percent) of respondents felt that unwed childbearing is a very serious (39.7 percent) or somewhat serious (36.9 percent) problem. Based on respondents' comments about these questions, one of the most common opinions was that parents' commitment to parenting is more important and a greater predictor of successful child bearing than the marital status of the parents. Although recognizing that children can thrive in non-marital households, the second most frequent comment was that children deserve and should have two parents.

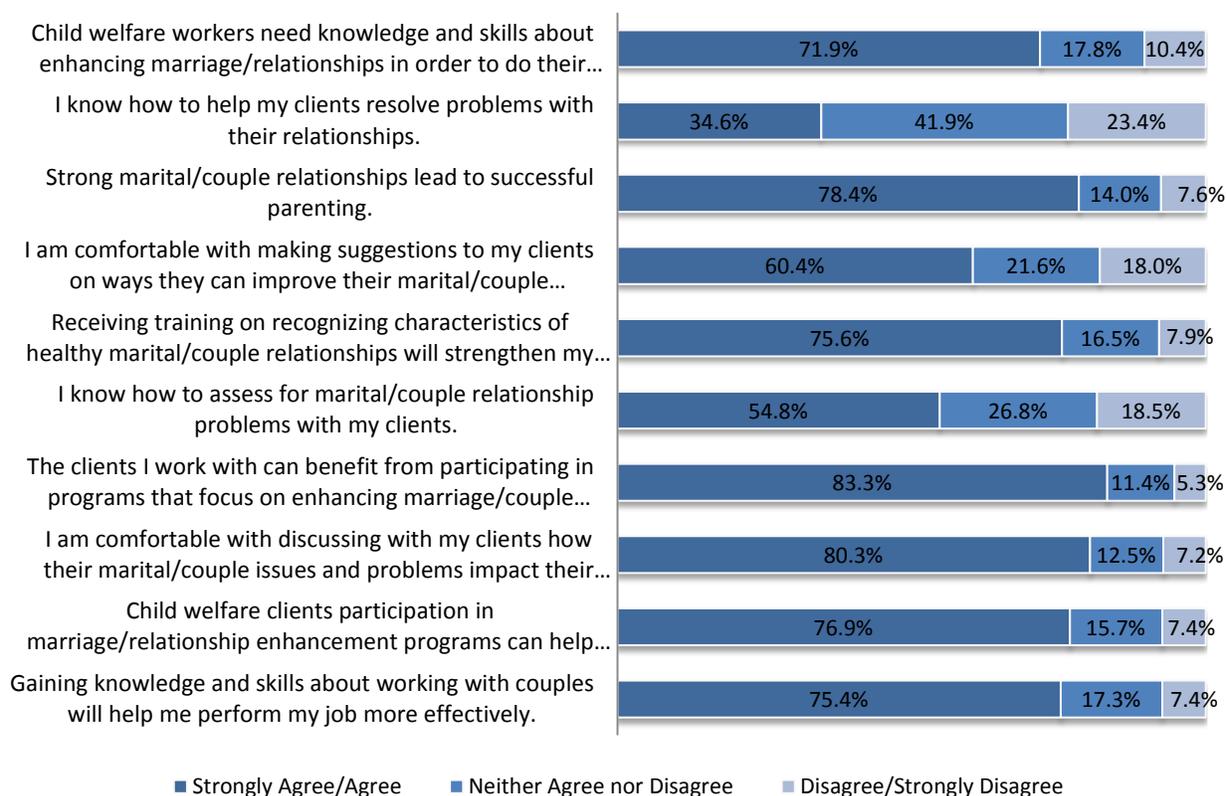
Figure 4. The degree to which participants think divorce or unwed childbearing is a problem



V. Appropriateness of Relationship & Marriage Education

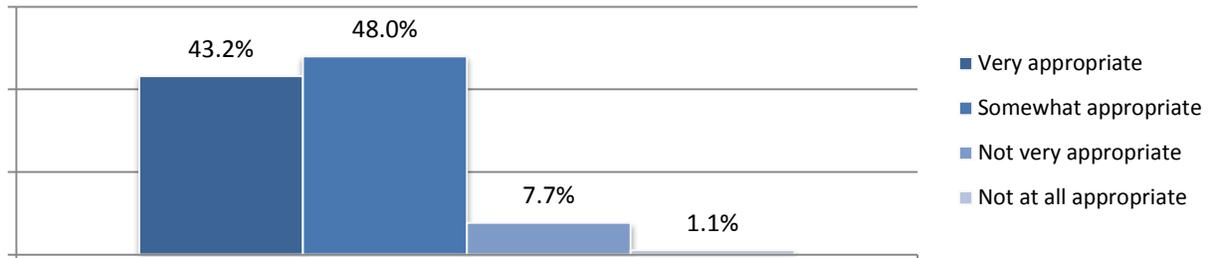
Next, given the focus of the training being developed, questions were asked of respondents to determine how child welfare professionals view their role in educating clients about healthy relationships and marriages. As illustrated in Figure 5, the majority (83.3 percent) of respondents felt that their clientele would benefit from participating in programs that focus on enhancing marriage and couple relationships. Overall, respondents agreed that knowledge of and training in healthy relationships and marriages will help them perform their jobs more effectively. While the majority of participants (80.3 percent) said that they were comfortable discussing with clients how their marital/couple issues impact their children, only half (54.8 percent) agreed that they knew how to assess for marital/couple relationship problems. Only 34.6 percent felt they knew how to help their clients resolve relationship problems.

Figure 5. The degree to which respondents agreed or disagreed to the following statements



In light of the responses to the statements in Figure 5, it is not surprising that almost all (91.2 percent) of respondents felt that it was very (43.3 percent) or somewhat (48.0 percent) appropriate for child welfare professionals to help clients develop healthy relationship/marriage skills (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Appropriateness for child welfare professionals to help their clients develop the skills needed to have healthy relationships/marriages



The same pattern was seen when asked about the importance for couples to participate in pre-marital educations classes, workshops, or counseling. As seen in Figure 7, almost all (89.3 percent) of respondents felt it was very (42.7 percent) or somewhat (46.6 percent) important that couples prepare in some way for coming nuptials. Respondents also felt that it was a very good (39.2 percent) or good (52 percent) idea that marriage counseling or therapy be required of couples before divorcing when there are children in the home (Figure 8).

Figure 7. The importance for couples to prepare for marriage through educational classes, workshops, or counseling

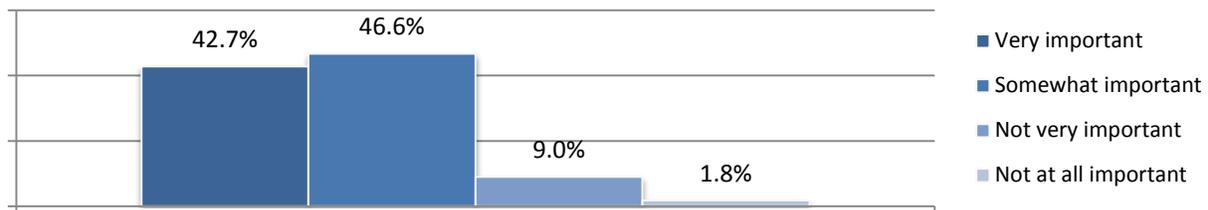
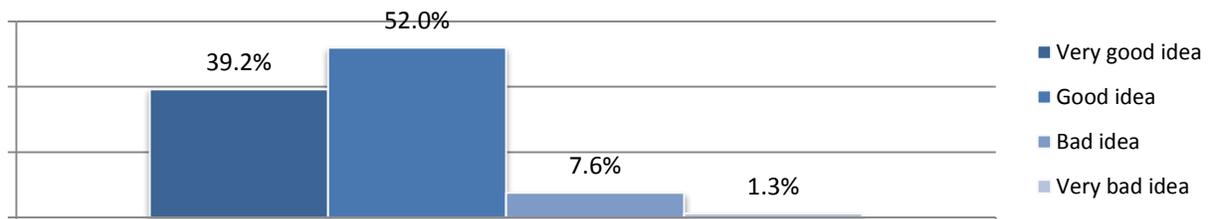


Figure 8. Opinions on required marriage counseling or therapy when a married couple with children in the home is considering divorce



Respondents were asked to share comments about the questions in this section. Overall, there was mix of opinions reflecting the appropriateness of case workers involvement in relationship and marriage education. On the one hand, and consistent with the findings reported above, many respondents shared that providing this service is important. In contrast, many shared the belief that case workers are not the

appropriate people to provide marital therapy/counseling and should only conduct referrals. Underlying these contrasting opinions appears to be some confusion regarding the distinction between relationship and marriage education versus counseling and therapy. Respondents also seemed to think that such services offered by child welfare professionals are dependent upon the individuals and circumstances involved with the case. Here are examples of comments shared:

Child Welfare should be focused directly on the safety of children...Child Welfare funding SHOULD NOT be used to pay for marital/relationship therapy. The resources are already strained to the breaking point and priorities have to rest on the safety of children.

I believe it is appropriate for a Child Care worker to assess a family in regards to Health Relationships or Marriage as we do for Domestic Violence and other issues so we can make referrals. Since we are not therapist it would not be appropriate for Child Care Workers to work in a counseling or therapeutic methodology with our clients.

Respondents also were asked to share any suggestions they had about how they can help the families they work with establish a healthy and stable relationship and/or marriage. There was a great deal of variation in their responses. However, most of the respondents mentioned the importance of aiding clients in the development of communication skills and in the provision of education, from birth control and marital expectations to commitment and job skills. These varied responses reinforce that their clients have a diversity of needs that case workers strive to meet. Although relationship skills development is one of these needs, responses clearly convey that case workers are not equipped to meet this need.

VI. State Initiatives

The next section of the survey addressed knowledge and attitudes about any potential state initiatives to address healthy relationships. There has been a growing emphasis on supporting and educating couples about healthy relationships across the country. These types of initiatives may influence how human services professionals feel about this type of programming and education.

Almost all (93.4 percent) of respondents felt that it would be a very good (40.8 percent) or good (52.6 percent) idea to have a state-wide initiative to support healthy relationships and marriages (Figure 9), but only 35.5 percent were aware of or involved in any state efforts to do so (Figure 10).

Figure 9. Feelings about a state-wide initiative to support healthy relationships and marriages

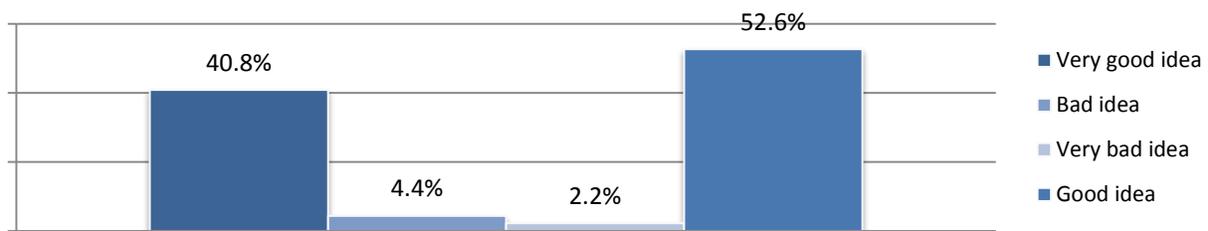
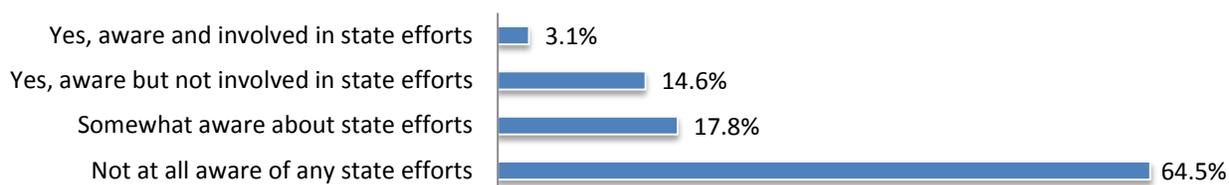
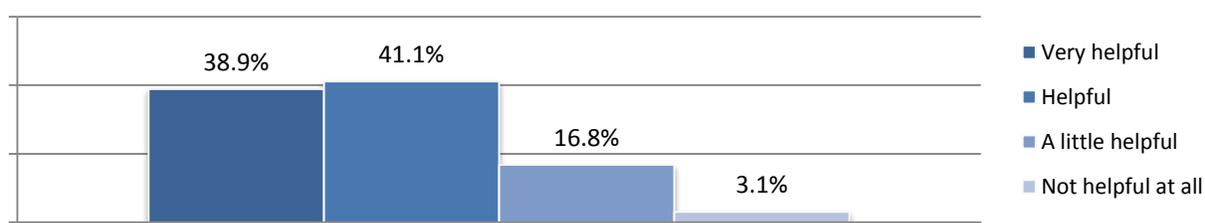


Figure 10. Awareness of any state efforts to support healthy relationships and marriages



When respondents were asked about the helpfulness for child welfare professionals to attend training on supporting healthy relationships and marriages, almost all (96.9 percent) felt that such training would be helpful at some degree (Figure 11). This attitude is consistent with the responses of earlier questions.

Figure 11. Helpfulness for child welfare professionals to attend training on supporting healthy relationships and marriages



Respondents were asked to share their feelings about whether or not it would be helpful for child welfare professionals to attend training on supporting healthy relationships and marriages. While some respondents expressed reservation about the government’s or a state agency’s involvement in personal relationships, others recognized that “state wide initiative doesn’t imply Missouri government run” and reinforced the value of regional and local community efforts. The most common sentiments shared by respondents was regarding case workers lack of “time to do marriage counseling” and concern that the state had limited funding to support training and services in this area. Example comments included:

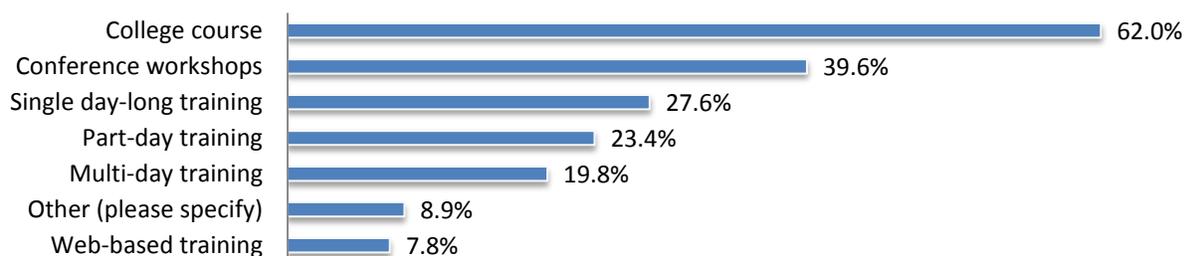
State wide initiatives cost money. Unless there is significant research to show that the cost of such an initiative would be outweighed by the benefit, I would be opposed.

Training on the subject would be interesting but it is not the focus on our jobs..we refer to resources that can provide the actual counseling when needed.

VII. Relationship/Marital Education Training Experience

Even though respondents had stressed the helpfulness of relationship or marital education training, only 30 percent had received such instruction. Of those who had received training (see Figure 12), the majority attended training sessions (70.8 percent) or took a course in college on the topic (62 percent). Respondents also reported attending conference workshops (39.6 percent) and web-based training (7.8 percent). Other types of training attended included church/faith-based sessions or courses in a Masters program.

Figure 12. Type of training attended, having checked all that apply



VIII. Conclusion

Overall, based on responses from a fairly representative sample of child welfare professionals across the state of Missouri it is evident that strengthening the health and stability of marriages in Missouri, and especially of families within the child welfare system, is valued. Importantly, responses and comments shared by these professionals reinforce the following points:

- The vast majority of respondents report working with clients who are not married, and many commented that they do not believe relationship and marriage education is appropriate or needed by their clients. It will be important to clarify through marketing and training materials that the vast majority of single parents form intimate partner relationships and many will result in short-term and/or frequent cohabiting living arrangements. Thus, relationship and marriage education can be beneficial to helping these single parents understand how to establish and maintain a healthy relationship that reduces their child(ren)'s exposure to risk for neglect and abuse.
- There is a need to clarify the distinction between relationship and marriage education and marriage therapy/counseling services. Many respondents did not feel it was appropriate for them to provide counseling. To help these professionals in feeling more comfortable with supporting their clients' relationships and marriages, it will be important to clarify that the knowledge and skills needed to establish and maintain a healthy relationship can be taught and that this training does not encompass counseling. Clarifying the boundaries between education and counseling and when referral to counseling is warranted will be important in establishing comfort in and acceptance of providing this service.
- The recognition of the relationship between strong couple/marital relationships and successful parenting indicates that the foundation is present to continue to expand child welfare professionals understanding of why this type of information and education is important to their ability to do their jobs in the most effective manner possible.
- Although the majority of respondents work with unmarried clients, they do agree that having resources available and understanding strategies for enhancing couple and marital relationships is important to doing their jobs more effectively. There seems to be some disconnect between understanding the value of this information and knowing how it can be implemented and used on a regular basis with current case loads. Conversations at both state and community level are needed to help facilitate clarity about this and create capacity for implementing this service.