

# Cultivating healthy couple & marital relationships

A GUIDE TO  
EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING



NATIONAL  
EXTENSION  
RELATIONSHIP &  
MARRIAGE  
EDUCATION  
NETWORK

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## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

**Ted. G. Futris, Editor**

### A publication from the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network

The original development of this collection of papers was supported by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) Innovation Program and presented during the 2006 Family Life Electronic Seminar on Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Education hosted at The Ohio State University Extension <http://www.nermen.org/cultivatinghrm.php>. These papers were later published in *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, a referred e-journal at <http://ncsu.edu/ffci>.

Thank you to the authors for their contributions to the development of these theoretically and empirically informed resources to advance the delivery and impact of relationship and marriage education programming. Also, appreciation is extended to Jacquelyn McClelland, Editor-in-Chief, and Jill Steffey, Editorial Associate, of the *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, as well as other colleagues who served as external reviewers, for their advice and assistance in the development of these papers.

United States  
Department of  
Agriculture



Cooperative State  
Research, Education  
and Extension Service



Washington, DC 20250

Dear Colleagues:

Greetings and welcome to this publication on relationship and marriage education. As National Program Leader for Family Science Research and Extension at the United States Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (USDA/CSREES), I have the privilege of serving as a federal partner to family and human development faculty and educators throughout the Land-Grant University and Cooperative Extension System. Many of these scholars have dedicated their professional careers to enhancing quality of life for the people of this nation through effective research and practice in relationship and marriage education.

Relationship and marriage education helps couples and those who have chosen marriage for themselves to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy relationships. Relationship education has been ongoing in land-grant and Extension outreach efforts for decades. This work is supported by sound research on the many individual, family, and community benefits of outreach and support that enhances physical and emotional health, parenting and child outcomes, workforce productivity, and economic stability.

I encourage you to read through and reflect on the chapters in this publication and to further explore the systematic and ongoing scholarship and engagement in relationship and marriage education by land-grant and Extension faculty. Noted author Stephen Covey once said that if we as a society work diligently in every other area of life and neglect the family, it would be analogous to straightening deck chairs on the Titanic. Land-grant universities and the Cooperative Extension Service have long worked to enhance the quality of family life. Through current efforts in relationship and marriage education, this rich tradition continues.

Sincerely,

Caroline E. Crocoll, Ph.D., CFLE, CFCS, NCC  
National Program Leader-Family Science Research and Extension  
Families, 4-H and Nutrition  
CSREES/USDA





## Table of Contents

- 4** **About the Authors**
- 7** **Cultivating healthy couple and marital relationships: Introduction**  
Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia
- 9** **What's love got to do with it? The role of healthy couple relationships and marriages in promoting child, family, and community well-being**  
Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University  
Karen Shirer, University of Minnesota  
Angela Bradford, Auburn University
- 19** **Using research in marriage and relationship education programming**  
Brian J. Higginbotham and Katie Henderson, Utah State University  
Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University
- 27** **Offering relationship and marriage education in your community**  
Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Kansas State University  
Karen Shirer, University of Minnesota
- 37** **Youth focused relationships and marriage education**  
Jennifer L. Kerpelman, Auburn University
- 47** **Marriage education for stepcouples**  
Francesca Adler-Baeder and Mallory Erickson, Auburn University  
Brian J. Higginbotham, Utah State University
- 57** **Working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences**  
Linda Skogrand, Utah State University  
Karen Shirer, University of Minnesota
- 65** **Building community collaborations to support healthy and stable marriages**  
Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia
- 75** **References**



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**Brian J. Higginbotham, Ph.D., LMFT** is an Assistant Professor and Family Life Extension Specialist in the Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development at Utah State University. Dr. Higginbotham provides statewide leadership and support for programs that strengthen relationships and developmental assets in families, youth, and children. He is also a licensed marriage and family therapist and has served on the Board of Directors of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Dr. Higginbotham has implemented and evaluated various grant-funded relationship education initiatives including programs for high school students, married couples, stepfamilies, and non-married pre-natal couples. Currently, Dr. Higginbotham is the Principal Investigator on a five-year, federally funded project that is teaching relationship skills to an ethnically diverse group of children and adults in stepfamilies.

**Jennifer L. Kerpelman, Ph.D.** is a State Adolescent and Family Life Extension Specialist with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and a Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University. Dr. Kerpelman has extensive experience conducting research and providing outreach resources, programs and workshops in the area of adolescent development. Her applied research has focused on the risk and resilience of low income, rural African American adolescents, and on youth-focused programs designed to enhance adolescents' self-development and interpersonal skills. Currently, Dr. Kerpelman is the Principle Investigator on a state and federally funded project designed to implement, and evaluate the impact of, a relationship/marriage education curriculum for adolescents. The findings from this 5-year evaluation study are anticipated to result in a national model for youth-focused relationship education.

**Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D.** is a State Family Life Extension Specialist in Family and Consumer Sciences and an Associate Professor in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University. Dr. Shoup Olsen specializes in programming that addresses couple relationships, family communication, stepfamily living, and family divorce. She has developed several extension programs, including *CoupleTalk: Enhancing Your Relationship* and *Stepping Stones for Stepfamilies*, that have been adopted in other states and has been invited to give training at numerous national and state professional conferences on these programs. Prior to Extension, she had considerable experience in international and cross cultural settings in family support programs, including Peace Corps and at-risk programs for youth from New York City and the state of Kansas. Dr. Olsen was a member of the original network of Extension Specialists in 1998 that developed programming resource materials distributed through the national Extension system on marriage and couples' education. She currently is working collaboratively with Dr. Skogrand in developing marriage education resources for Latino families.

**Karen Shirer, Ph.D.** is an Associate Dean for Extension and Capacity Area Leader for Family Development at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Karen Shirer has 32 years of experience as an educator, manager, researcher, and administrator for family and consumer sciences programs in both formal and non-formal settings. Prior to coming to Minnesota, Dr. Shirer served as Assistant Professor and Extension Human Development Specialist with Michigan State University where she provided statewide leadership for Extension programs in early childhood care and education, and relationship enhancement education for at-risk and low-income families, which also encompass her research interests. She is co-author of *Caring for My Family: Encouraging Family Formation and Father Involvement*, a program designed to help mothers and fathers of newborns learn about building healthy relationships with each other and their children, and equip unmarried parents with skills for making healthy decisions and to explore future options for their relationship. She has a strong interest and expertise in participatory processes for planning, implementing and developing community-based educational programs and services.

**Linda Skogrand, Ph.D.** is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist in the Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development at Utah State University. Dr. Linda Skogrand's 25-year professional career has been a combination of social services in inner city communities and scholarship in colleges and universities. She has co-authored *Surviving and Transcending a Traumatic Childhood: The Dark Thread*, which describes how adults who experienced a traumatic childhood became healthy as adults. She has also co-authored a marriage and family textbook, *Marriages and Families: Intimacy, Diversity, and Strengths*, 6th edition. She has co-authored multiple articles about ways to better serve diverse populations through family education. Current research includes what makes strong marriages in Latino and the Navajo cultures and a national study about what makes great marriages.



The **National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN)** envisions a nationwide outreach through Extension specialists and educators in partnership with agencies and organizations at the national, state, and community levels that supports individuals and couples preparing for, developing, and enriching healthy relationships and healthy marriages. NERMEN's mission is to provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice of relationship and marriage education.



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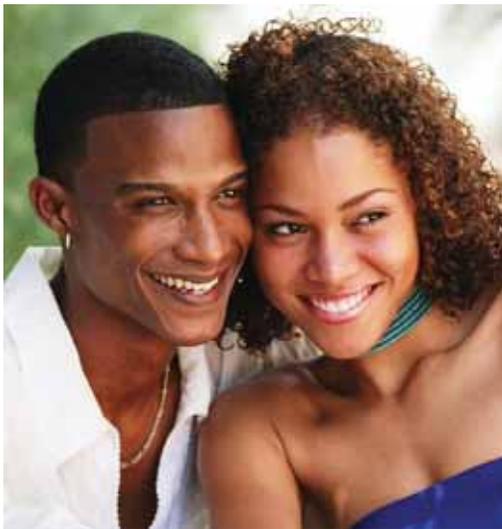


# Cultivating healthy couple & marital relationships

## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER I: Introduction

Ted G. Futris, Ph.D., CFLE  
University of Georgia



#### A Public Interest

A recent report, based on a national telephone survey of 1,503 Americans age 18 and older, revealed that although only 37 percent of currently or previously married persons had any kind of premarital counseling before marriage, 73 percent of unmarried respondents said that they would attend premarital education classes; of those who were currently married, 57 percent expressed an interest in attending a marriage education class (Glenn 2005). State specific surveys reveal an even higher level of interest in relationship education opportunities. (see Chapter 2).

There is mounting research evidence that trends of increasing marital and family instability are negatively impacting children, adults, families, and communities. The research is clear: healthy relationships and healthy marriages, and resulting family stability, benefit the physical, social, and emotional well-being of adults and children as well as the community. (see Chapter 2) Recognizing the importance and challenges of sustaining healthy relationships, the general public has developed a great interest in relationship and marriage education.

In an effort to support healthy and stable relationships for those who choose to marry, the federal administration has emphasized the need to promote the availability and accessibility of educational resources that strengthen relationships and families (Brotherson and Duncan 2004; also see [www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage)). The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has a long history of addressing marital quality in educational programs; therefore Extension is a natural partner in this current effort (Goddard and Olsen 2004). Recent CES work has focused on building a coherent system of resources and guides for best practices in this program area (e.g., Alberts et al. 2000; Futris 2006; Greder 2005). One such organized effort includes The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN). NERMEN has been involved in identifying and promoting existing CES resources as well as creating new educational resources to support the development and maintenance of healthy couple and marital relationships for diverse audiences. (See [www.nermen.org](http://www.nermen.org) for more information.)

Educators and professionals in the field are creating and striving to effectively implement quality, research-based programs that support the development and maintenance of healthy couple and marital relationships. As such, there is a clear need to ensure that these practitioners are informed of current research on this topic and the practical implications of this research for programming with diverse audiences. To support Cooperative Extension educators and partnering professionals in acquiring the knowledge needed to effectively conduct this programming, NERMEN presents this special publication, *Cultivating Healthy Couple and Marital Relationships: A Guide to Effective Programming*. This collection of papers, offer theoretically and empirically informed recommendations for developing and offering effective relationship and marriage education programs.

Chapters 2 through 4 establish the empirical basis for relationship and marriage enrichment programming and offer strategies for developing and evaluating these programs. In Chapter 2, authors Francesca Adler-Baeder, Karen Shirer, and Angela Bradford explain the impact of couple functioning on individual, family, and community well-being, articulate the rationale for addressing couple relationships in family life education, and describe appropriate goals and approaches for relationships/marriage education. Next, Brian Higginbotham, Katie Henderson, and Francesca Adler-Baeder describe a framework to develop and modify programs using existing research as well as techniques to evaluate existing marriage education programs. In Chapter 4, authors Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Karen Shirer follow with a presentation of principles and strategies for designing relationship and marriage education programs and common challenges that may arise while planning and implementing these programs.

The next series of chapters outlines the needs of diverse audiences and programmatic strategies for serving them. In Chapter 5, Jennifer Kerpelman reviews aspects of adolescent relationships, proposes goals and objectives of relationships and marriage education targeting youth, and offers an example of an existing youth-focused relationships education curriculum. Next, Francesca Adler-Baeder, Mallory Erickson, and Brian Higginbotham summarize the unique needs of stepcouples in marriage education, review appropriate theoretical approaches, offer specific content and learning objectives, and present ideas to consider when working with stepcouples. In Chapter 7, Linda Skogrand and Karen Shirer provide educators with an understanding about how to learn about and partner with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. They also share ideas, based on their own and existing research, about how relationship and marriage education might be different for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences.

In the final chapter, Ted Futris reviews the importance of building community collaborations, the advantages and challenges of doing so, and effective strategies for developing sustainable community collaborations that support healthy relationships and marriages.

I encourage readers to consider these papers as a whole as they establish an empirically informed foundation for marriage education that reaches diverse audiences. I also call on readers to follow the recommendations of Higginbotham, Henderson and Adler-Baeder to evaluate the efficacy of these programs in order to clarify how CES is impacting the health and stability of relationships and marriages as well as to continually enhance the quality of programs being delivered. Emerging outcome research is showing that premarital education is generally effective (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Carroll and Doherty 2003; Gardner, Giese, and Parrot 2004; Stanley et al. 2006), however many marriage enrichment programs have received little or no rigorous empirical validation (Jakubowski et al. 2004). Given its connection to university and community-based resources and expertise, CES is a clear partner in advancing this effort. I hope this resource provides a useful guide to what we know about, and effective approaches for creating programs that support, healthy couple and marital relationships.





## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER 2: What's love got to do with it?

#### The role of healthy couple relationships and marriages in promoting child, family, and community well-being

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#### Introduction

Involvement in family life education, with the Cooperative Extension System or a similar outreach organization, generally includes the offering of a variety of educational programs and services that promote child, family, and community well-being. Recently, stimulated by a White House initiative focused on “Healthy Marriages” and earmarked funding support, there has been an increased focus on providing relationship and marriage education.

Although this may seem to some as embarking in a “new” direction, there is actually quite a long history of providing family life education that is inclusive of education on healthy adult relationships and marriages. An examination of Family and Consumer Science textbooks and materials used in community-based Extension family life education in the past reveals a great deal of information on building and maintaining healthy marital relationships (e.g., Boyd 1981). In our more recent history, other areas of family life education have received comparatively more support and attention, such as family resource management, parenting, and promoting school “readiness.” Although healthy relationships and marriages continue to be central curriculum content in high school and college courses in Family and Consumer Sciences and Human Development and Family Studies university departments, for most community and Extension family life educators this has not been an area of focus during the last 20 years.

Therefore, a “new beginning” approach is offered. We explicate here the process we undertook in examining whether and how this area of family functioning should be addressed in community and Extension family life education. We used several important questions as a guide:

1. **Are healthy couple relationships and marriages related to child, family, and community well-being?**
2. **Is it an expressed community need?**
3. **Is there a research base to inform the program content of educational programs? Are there knowledge and skills that can be taught?**
4. **Is there evidence of positive impact?**
5. **Are programmatic goals and implementation clearly linked to the research base?**
6. **Does your organizational leadership support this work?**

### **The benefits of healthy couple relationships and marriages**

Research in the human sciences provides a great deal of information for predicting which children will do well, which families will be the most stable, and which communities will prosper. Importantly, there is not one “best” predictor. Research identifies multiple critical needs of individuals and families.

...the quality and stability of couple relationships and marriages are linked with child, adult, family, and community well-being.

Some of the most important factors related to individual and family well-being are access to educational opportunities, stable employment, quality childcare, quality healthcare, a community or environment that offers social networks and connections, safe neighborhoods, the opportunity to learn parenting skills, child development knowledge, financial management skills, and self-care skills for monitoring both physical and mental health. In response, these are common topics for family life educational programs.

It has also become increasingly clear that the quality and stability of couple relationships and marriages are linked with child, adult, family, and community well-being. Yet, it is comparatively less likely that Extension or similar family life educators offer educational programs on this topic.

**Healthy marriages, healthy children.** Although parents in other family forms often work hard and can provide nurturing, healthy environments for children, it is in families where the adults are in a healthy, stable marriage that children, on average, are more likely to perform better in school, have fewer emotional and behavioral problems, and stay in school (Amato 2000; Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). In addition, these children are less likely, on average, to engage in delinquent behaviors, including early and risky sexual activity, criminal activity, and abuse of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, to experience a teen pregnancy, and less likely, on average, to have sleep or health problems (Amato 2000; Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000).

Studies also find that family structure is linked to parent involvement and parenting practices, particularly for fathers. When couples are not married, there is greater risk for fathers to not be as involved with their kids. The quality of parent-child relationships and quality of parenting are higher, on average, in married families compared to non-married families (Doherty and Beacon 2004).





### Family Structure versus Process

Although comparison studies can be a useful starting point, it is the examination of family processes that helps explain these differences and provides information that informs educational efforts. A specific family structure cannot be taught or “prescribed.” Family life educators work with individuals in a variety of family forms and seek to find ways to enhance family dynamics associated with healthy outcomes for individuals and families, regardless of family structure or lifecycle “stage.” When attention is given to the research that examines relational processes, practical information is obtained for programmatic work.



**Healthy marriages, healthy adults.** There are also clear benefits for adults. Married people, on average, are healthier and live longer. They have comparatively lower stress levels and better health habits and practices. They are, on average, more stable emotionally and have lower incidence of mental health issues. There also appear to be economic advantages associated with marriage. Married individuals tend to accrue more capital and are more financially stable (Waite 1995).

While most studies have focused on family structure alone, important information comes from studies among married couples. Individuals in healthy marriages compared to those in unhealthy marriages have clear benefits physically, socially, and emotionally (Bookwala 2005; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001). As a result, the importance of examining not just family type, but also the quality of the relationship has been established.

**Healthy marriages, healthy communities.** Recent research links healthy couple relationships with benefits for communities and specifically, for the workplace. Adults in healthy marriages are more likely to be homeowners, and are more likely to be involved in their communities (schools, churches) and to offer volunteer time to support community-strengthening activities. Adults in healthy relationships are better employees. Research has documented that they have lower rates of absenteeism, greater work commitment, higher levels of productivity, and lower rates of job turnover (Forthofer et al. 1996; Lupton and Smith 2002; Gray and Venderhart 2000; Daniel 1995; Schoeni 1995; Cornwell and Rupert 1997; Nakosteen and Zimmer 1997).

**Costs of unstable relationships and marriages.** The outcomes are tangible; the potential costs of unhealthy, unstable relationships are real and increasingly quantifiable. It is estimated that 30 percent of sick time is taken for marital distress, rather than physical illness (Gottman 1998). Work loss associated with marital problems translates into a loss of approximately \$6.8 billion per year for U.S. businesses and industry due to such related issues as absenteeism, reduction in productivity, increased healthcare costs (Forthofer et al. 1996). One study found that in the year following divorce, employees lost an average of over 168 hours of worktime (equivalent to being fully absent four weeks in one calendar year) (Mueller 2005). Although divorce is a private decision, its consequences are not. According to recent research, divorce costs the state and federal governments an estimated \$33.3 billion annually in direct and indirect costs. These estimates include divorce costs related to delinquency, poor academic performance, drug use, medical services, lost productivity, charity costs, family support and mental health services, and lost social capital (Schramm 2006).

### The couple relationship, parenting, and child outcomes: The linkages

The impact of parenting on child outcomes is a research base out of which most family life educators operate on a daily basis. They work to enhance parenting practices because of the demonstrated link between positive parenting practices and healthy child outcomes. Importantly, there is also a large body of literature demonstrating how impactful the quality of the couple relationship is, regardless of family structure. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that high levels of adult couple conflict is directly related to negative outcomes for children (e.g., Cummings and Davies 2002). Children who have experienced high levels of parental conflict tend to use more aggressive and “acting out” behaviors, tend to have lower academic achievement and have higher rates of depression. Children in families where couples have a high quality relationship tend to have more positive outcomes.

There is a body of “second generation” research that has further developed the study of direct effects on child outcomes to the study of the indirect effects of couple conflict on child outcomes through parent involvement and parenting practices (Buehler and Gerard 2002; Cummings and Davies 2002; Fincham 1994). This approach is consistent with a family systems perspective that suggests there are linkages or “spillover” between and among subsystems in the family (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993).

In the developmental psychology and psychopathology literature, there has been substantial recent attention given to the link between parent conflict and parent involvement and parenting practices (Grych and Fincham 2001). El-Sheikh and Elmore-Staton (2004) looked at the ways that couple conflict, parenting practices, and child outcomes are interrelated and found that a strong parent-child relationship protects a child from a couple relationship of poor quality. In other words, a strong parent-child bond can serve as a protective factor from the spillover of negative couple interactions on child outcomes. This link has also been found in the research on families after divorce. These findings reinforce the importance of directly strengthening the parent-child relationship through our program efforts.

In the same study, though, there is also evidence of the spillover effect into parenting. In other words, in many cases, the quality of the couple relationship is not kept separate from the parent-child relationship, and in fact, aspects of the couple relationship spill over into the parent-child relationship, which then directly affects children’s outcomes. There is a positive relationship, meaning that positive aspects of the couple relationship appear to promote positive parenting and negative aspects of the couple relationship appear to promote negative and ineffective parenting.

Overall, evidence of the link between relationship quality and parenting from the last decade of research is overwhelming, and the findings are quite robust. Elements of the couple relationship impact parenting practices, which in turn, impact child outcomes. This has been found among studies of married couples, non-married couples, post-divorce couples, low-income couples, higher income couples, ethnic majority couples, and ethnic minority couples (Carlson and McLanahan 2006; Fauber et al. 1990; Gonzales et al. 2000; Kitzman 2000). The impact is found on mothers’ parenting and fathers’ parenting (Belsky and Kelly 1994; Brody, Neubaum, and Forehand 1988). And, the connection is made from this spillover to outcomes for young children, school-age children, and adolescents (Buehler and Gerard 2002).

“Co-parenting” is a distinct dimension or part of the couple relationship that also has received the attention of researchers. There is growing evidence that the quality of the couple relationship impacts the co-parenting relationship in married and non-married families alike. Co-parenting refers to the level of support and cooperation between parents in regard to their parenting. The co-parenting relationship is also shown to impact parenting behaviors and the parent-child relationship. Co-parenting has been discussed in research on post-divorce and non-married families, but more emphasis is now being given to this dynamic in married families as well (Doherty and Beacon 2004).

Considering this evidence, it becomes very clear that education on the couple relationship can be beneficial to co-parenting and parenting and in turn, can promote child well-being. Many in the field believe we have a critical breakdown between research and educational family services. Cummings,



Goeke-Morey, and Graham (2002) wrote that the research shows that “marital functioning merits inclusion as a dimension of parenting.” Overall, research establishes the link between couple functioning and child, family, and community well-being. Therefore, a vital piece of the puzzle in family life education is missing if couple relationships are not addressed.

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**The community’s interest in relationship and marriage education**

Establishing the research basis for this area of programming is the first step. It is also necessary to investigate community needs and interests. Family life educators may think this is an important area to address; however, community members, who in most cases are accessing family life programs and services voluntarily, also have to think it is an important area in their lives.

Florida, Oklahoma, and Utah (Johnson and Stanley 2001; Karney et al. 2003; Schramm et al. 2003) have conducted statewide surveys and found overwhelmingly positive responses to questions about the appropriateness and the relevance of offering educational programs on healthy couple relationships and marriages (Table 1). Participants responded to many questions related to marriage education services. In response to a question regarding potential use of relationship education, such as attending workshops or classes to strengthen their relationship, 64 to 79 percent of respondents indicated that they would consider using relationship education. People also were asked to identify whether or not they consider it a good or very good idea for government to develop programs to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce. Sixty-seven to 87 percent considered it a good or very good idea for government to develop relationship education programs. Notably, these percentages are higher among respondents who were currently receiving government assistance and higher among ethnic minority respondents.

**Table 1. Percentage of general population and government assisted survey respondents supporting relationship and marriage education efforts**

Survey Questions	Statewide Samples			Government Assistance		
	FL	OK	UT	FL	OK	UT
Would consider using relationship education, such as workshops or classes to strengthen relationship	67	85	87	90	88	86
Considers it a good or very good idea for government to develop programs to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce	79	64	74	87	72	83

In a qualitative study involving 75 fragile family couples (i.e., nonmarried couples with young children), participants reported that they hold a very positive view of marriage, even though most had not experienced their own two parents being married. They also indicated many barriers to marriage for themselves, including financial concerns and relationship problems. They expressed being open to learning relational skills and discussing marriage as an option (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2003). Similarly, in pilot and demonstration projects of relationship and marriage education conducted with very low-resource, ethnic minority parents, there has been documentation of overwhelming positive responses and interest in these programs (Adler et al. 2004).

## Is there evidence of positive impact?

Ideally, it is helpful to move forward in programmatic work when there is not only research-informed program content and design, but also, research-validated program content and design. Importantly, there is evidence of positive impact in the educational and intervention efforts of programs focused on relationships and marriages (Carroll and Doherty 2003). Most interestingly, several studies have documented that by adding in couple-focused programs and interventions, there may be a greater likelihood of promoting healthy child outcomes by positively impacting parenting practices and the parent-child relationship (Carlson and McLanahan 2006).

Several studies have shown that addressing marital and co-parenting issues along with parenting issues resulted in greater reduction of sons' problem behaviors than parenting skills training alone (Dadds 1987; Brody and Forehand 1985). Webster-Stratton (1994) conducted an intervention study which showed that offering a parenting intervention alone had positive impacts on child aggression. But parents who also received marital therapy showed improvements in parental communication, problem-solving skills, parenting satisfaction, and children's knowledge about pro-social solutions to social problems that were significantly greater than the improvements of those who received the parenting intervention alone.

Cowan and Cowan (2002) offered couples education at the time of baby's birth to a sample of parents and have been able to show sustained positive impacts. At 3 years post-partum, no divorces had occurred in the treatment group versus 15 percent in the comparison group. At 3.5 to 4 years post-partum, those who had participated in couples education had comparatively higher parent well-being and their children had higher levels of adjustment to kindergarten. At 6 years post-partum, they documented higher marital satisfaction and family adjustment for the participant group.

In a more recent study, Cowan et al. (2005) compared the impact of a marriage-focused program and a parenting-focused program offered to parents at the transition to kindergarten. This study highlights the value of marriage-focused interventions for child outcomes. Participation in the marriage-focused program resulted in more positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships. Follow-up studies show that children whose parents were in the marriage-focused group showed greater academic competence and fewer behavior problems in 4th grade when compared to the children whose parents had participated in the parenting-focused program. Evidence of positive effects has been documented up to the 11th grade.

In pilot studies of marriage education for low-resource, ethnically diverse parents, statistically significant increases were found in couple quality dimensions, individual empowerment, understanding the importance of recognizing and leaving an unhealthy relationship, and the level of cooperative co-parenting attitudes and practices (Adler-Baeder et al. 2004). Statistically significant decreases were found in individual distress level and level of negative couple interaction. Comparing pre-program evaluation scores to post-program scores resulted in low to moderate effect sizes (.26 to .56). These changes were consistent for all participants, whether married or not, and whether they came alone or together. Michigan State University Extension also provided further evidence that these changes are related to program participation. Comparing participants to a control group indicated



### Research-informed program content

To move forward with empirically informed program content, there must be an assurance of research knowledge about what factors and processes are related to healthy couple functioning and healthy marriages and that these factors can be changed by educational efforts. Just as there is research on patterns of parenting that are most likely to produce healthy outcomes for children and, therefore, inform the content of parenting programs, so too there exists research evidence of patterns and practices associated with healthy, stable couple relationships and marriages (e.g., Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, and Lamke 2004). Indications are that these patterns of thinking and behaviors can be taught in an educational setting.

that change across time for participants differed significantly from the control group's change over time (whose scores either remained the same or worsened) (Shirer and Cox 2007). Participants also noted that programs increased their awareness of the importance of healthy relationships (Shirer, Adler-Baeder, Contreras, and Shoup-Olsen 2004).

### **Appropriate goals and objectives**

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network ([www.nermen.org](http://www.nermen.org)) has been working to assist with the links between programmatic goals and implementation approaches and the research base. The NERMEN spent a great deal of time discussing the wording of their vision for this work so that programmatic goals and objectives would be clear. Their fundamental assessment of the research was that educational programs should be very inclusive (e.g., target youth or adults, married or non-married individuals), and objectives and goals should be “process-focused.” That is, appropriate goals and objectives, given the research, are improved individual skills/knowledge, more positive relational behaviors, reduction or elimination of risk factors associated with unhealthy and unstable relationships, and improved dyadic and family relationship quality. Goals do not include the “prescription” of marriage or encouraging or coercing individuals to stay in abusive or harmful relationships. In fact, a marker of program success should be a movement out of an abusive relationship.

Many scholars also agree that programs should help parents – whether married, divorced, unmarried, separated, or remarried – cooperate better in raising their children (e.g., Ooms and Wilson 2004). It is also recommended that educators “contextualize” this work and not think of relationship/marriage education as a “stand-alone” panacea for promoting child, family, and community well-being. Providing wrap-around services or connecting to other vital programs is the best approach, given the broad research and the evidence that multiple factors combine to create nurturing, healthy families.

... [do] not think of relationship/marriage education as a “stand-alone” panacea for promoting child, family, and community well-being.

### **Planning and implementing**

Family life educators should recognize the broad range of potential target populations. Although everyone can benefit from information on healthy couple relationships, an effective practice is to think about implementing programs for participants by their developmental phase and by specific content. For example, one's program goals and corresponding content for youth will differ from the program goals and corresponding content for married new parents. (For more information about youth-focused relationships education see Chapter 5.) In addition, family life educators should recognize that couples living in stepfamilies face unique issues and developmental processes that impact the couple relationship, and consideration should be given to these unique needs in marriage education programs. (For more information about programming for stepcouples see Chapter 6).

In addition to the “who,” educators also need to consider the “how.” We suggest two possible approaches: an Additive Model and a Blended Model. An Additive Model uses topic-specific, stand-alone curricula on couple relationships. Efforts should be made to ensure that participants are connected to other available family life education. However, the state-of-the-art design is the use of a Blended Model. Efforts are under way to design more family life education material and curricula that combine lessons that promote individual life skills, parenting skills, intimate couple relationship skills, and co-parenting relationship skills. This model of implementation is linked most clearly to our research base. (For more information on program development see Chapter 4).

Program implementation and design should also continue to use a development process to guide efforts. It is recommended to start with the research base and a clear theoretical framework and use an iterative, “action research” approach (Dumka et al. 1995) to program implementation. This means that the research on program implementation is fed back into the program design, thus moving toward “best practices” models of relationships and marriage education. (See Chapter 2 for more information.)

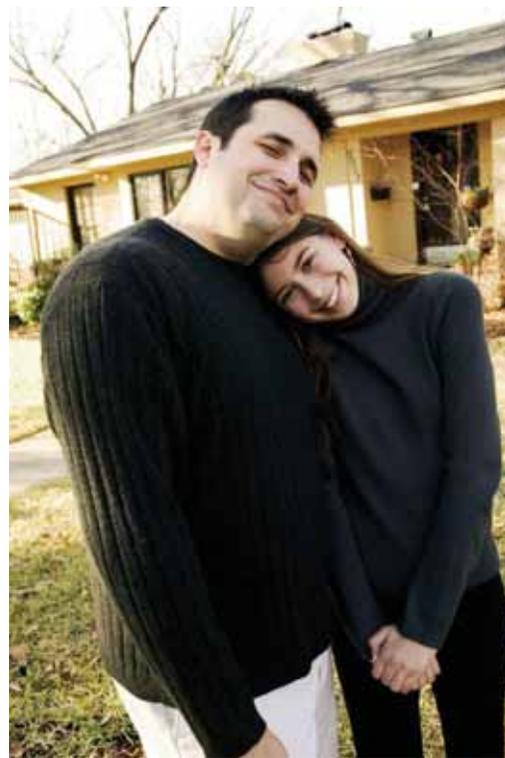
### **Organizational support, concerns, and misconceptions**

Another consideration is whether the leadership of one’s organization understands and supports offering relationship and marriage education. We know that both organizational leaders and educators alike have expressed skepticism or questioned the appropriateness of offering relationship/marriage education. Some believe that the programs “promote” the structure of marriage as a stand-alone goal, which might suggest that participants stay in abusive and dangerous relationships. Some are concerned that educators are not adequately equipped to teach about adult relationships, and that this is the domain of trained therapists. Others believe that offering marriage education discriminates against nonmarried individuals. Some have questioned if relationship and marriage education is relevant in today’s world or if community members are interested in this topic.

These concerns may stem from either unclear or unknown answers to the considerations we have presented in the previous sections. For example, there appear to remain misperceptions or incorrect assumptions about program design and programmatic goals. As has been emphasized, the research does not suggest the “promotion” or the “prescription” of marriage as a solution. Rather, research suggests the implementation of process-oriented work that is focused on increasing knowledge and skills associated with healthy relationships and marriages. It is this information that makes up the program content of research-based marriage education.

**...research does not suggest the “promotion” or the “prescription” of marriage as a solution. Rather, research suggests the implementation of process-oriented work that is focused on increasing knowledge and skills associated with healthy relationships and marriages.**

In regard to the reaction that this work is therapeutic and inappropriate for educators, we emphasize again the research base that identifies factors and patterns of behaviors that are associated with healthy relationships and healthy marriages. As in parenting education, information and skills training can be provided in educational settings, and evidence already suggests that these educational efforts can have desirable impacts.



The suggestion that marriage education is only for married individuals is a misperception. Clearly, research supports the offering of educational programs to married and non-married adults and to youth. In fact, the target population for relationship and marriage education is perhaps the most inclusive of any family life education program.

Regarding the doubt that community members have an interest or need for marriage education, both state and national surveys indicate a strong interest and desire to participate in these educational programs. In addition, pilot projects suggest interest and relevance through successful recruitment, high retention rates, and clear feedback from educators and participants on the value of these educational programs.

Overall, criticism may stem from not having a clear understanding of the strong evidence that points to the centrality of healthy relationships as a key element associated with desirable outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. We suggest that educators continue to do more to share the research evidence that provides the basis for focusing on healthy relationships and marriages as a vital area in comprehensive family life education programs and services.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, support for this work is warranted given the evidence of several key points. The quality of adult relationships in the family is a vital area of family functioning related to child, adult, and family well-being. Addressing the couple relationship along with the parenting relationship has added value for promoting child and family well-being. There is documented community need and interest. We have an empirical knowledge base from which to teach. There are initial indications of positive program impact, such that we are building evidence for “best practices” through action research. The bottom line is this: *Addressing healthy relationships and marriages is consistent with any organizational mission that includes the promotion of child, family, and community well-being and quality of life.*





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**A GUIDE TO  
EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING**

**CHAPTER 3:  
Using research in marriage and relationship  
education programming**

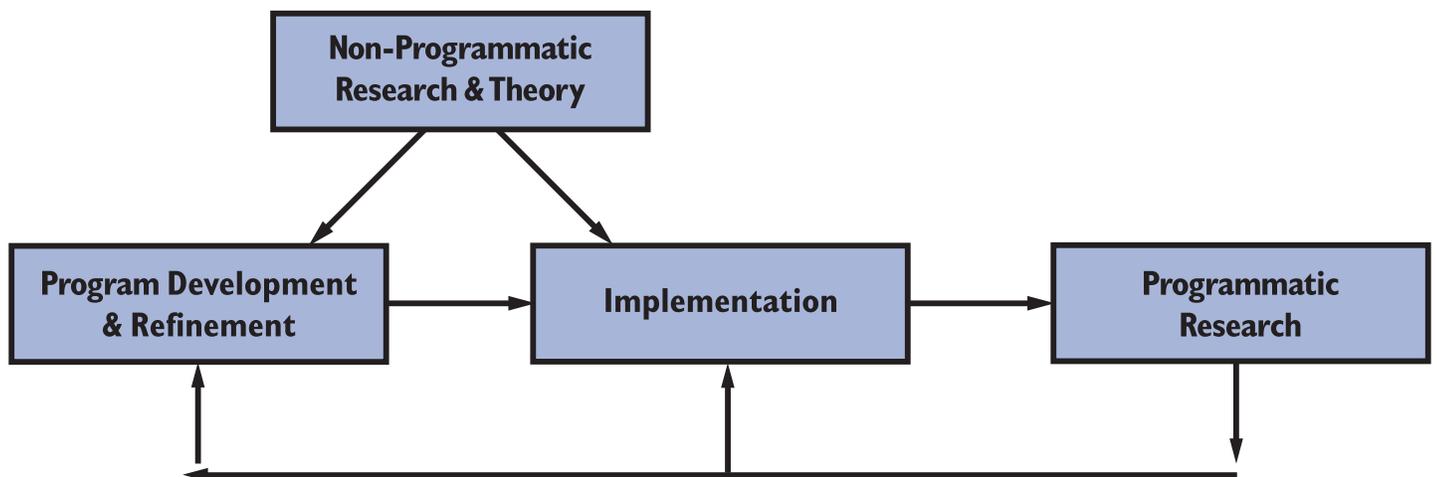
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**Introduction**

Family life educators have been encouraged to use existing research as the basis for what they offer programmatically (Hughes 1994). Educators have also been admonished to approach “prevention as a scientific enterprise as well as a service mission” (Dumka et al. 1995, 78). In light of these endorsements for research to be both the foundation and a goal of programmatic efforts, this chapter discusses the dual-role of research in marriage and relationship education programming. As depicted in Figure 1, research and programming are interrelated. Research can be used to both inform programmatic decisions (research informed programming) and to explain the outcome of programmatic efforts (programmatic research).

*Figure 1. A model of the interrelated nature of research and programming*



Programmatic research includes information gleaned from evaluative studies of existing programs. It details “if” a particular program works. It can also describe “why” and “for whom” the program is effective. This type of information should inform decisions about “which” program to offer, “how” and “where” the program should be offered, and “who” should be the target audience. Non-programmatic research includes empirical studies on factors related to relationship and marital quality and should inform “what” topics are taught in relationship education programs. Theories related to relationship development and adult learning also can inform program content and program implementation.

The research literature on marriage and relationship education programming continues to grow and evolve as more and more programs are implemented. For example, with the government’s recent funding of Healthy Marriage Demonstration grants, 126 programs with different curricula, implemented in different contexts, and targeting different populations are currently being executed and researched around the country (see [www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage)). Each of these federally funded programs will report on what did and didn’t work. The lessons learned from these programs, as well as research from non-federally funded programs currently underway, will in turn inform new and existing programs. Research informed programming and programmatic research are both critical components in the recursive process of developing, implementing, and refining successful relationship and marriage education programs.

### Research Informed Program Selection

When current and research-validated programs are not available or difficult to identify, an alternative approach is needed to guide decisions about program selection. One such alternative strategy involves comparing program content with findings from an appropriate empirical research base (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, and Lamke 2004). This approach is consistent with best practices in family life education and exemplifies what is meant by research informed programming (e.g., Hennon and Arcus 1993). Robert Hughes explained “...a well-grounded family life education program needs...a demonstrated research basis in regards to the topic, the content, and the application techniques” (1994, 75). In other words, when choosing an established program, it is important to verify that program content is still clearly supported by current literature. If a new program is developed, it is important to translate the extant research into program content. The extant literature refers to all the existing literature related to program goals. The process of identifying, reviewing, or translating all the relevant literature into its appropriate programmatic application may seem daunting. Systematically following a few steps can assist in this process (for a detailed description of this process see Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, and Lamke 2004).

#### Step 1: Determine and gather the relevant literature related to program goal(s).

The overall program goal of education programs should dictate the research topic area to be investigated. Since the goals of marriage and relationship education are centered on the improvement and or enhancement of marital quality (e.g., Parke and Ooms 2002), a review of literature should center on factors related to marital quality. There are a number of electronic search engines, such as EBSCO and PsychINFO, which will generate a compilation of the literature associated with specified key words such as “marital,” “satisfaction,” “relationship,” and “quality.”

### Selecting Research Validated Programs

All facets of programming can and should be informed by research, including the decision of which curriculum to offer. There is a plethora of marriage and relationship education curricula in circulation, and a directory that includes most of these programs is available at [www.nermen.org](http://www.nermen.org). After seeing the choices, one may ask, “How do I select a curriculum from all those available?” One legitimate, respected approach is to choose a curriculum based on empirical evaluations of program effectiveness. Trustworthy evidence of program effectiveness can be found in peer-reviewed academic journals. For recent reviews of curricula with demonstrated short-term and/or sustained positive program effects see Caroll and Doherty (2003) and Jakubowski et al. (2004). Unfortunately, well-known and well-researched curricula may not be within one’s budget.

It would be unfair to discredit or discount curricula that have not been researched. Many programs have not been empirically evaluated; yet, it is plausible that they are quite effective. The absence of documented programmatic effects may be due to the lack of funding to support evaluation research or the lack of evaluation expertise by those offering the program. However, when research is available, educators should be mindful of its relevance and significance. Programs that have not been updated for some period of time may be missing important information. The absence of program updates may indicate that program developers are not evaluating their program – or worse, not refining the program by incorporating alterations indicated by programmatic evaluations.

**Step 2: Narrow the potential studies for review.** The narrowing process should be guided by a clear and defensible rubric. In the case of general marriage education programming, articles should be (a) empirical, (b) peer-reviewed, and (c) published during the past 10-15 years. A rationale for this is that juried articles have undergone scrutiny of methods and interpretation(s), and they are likely to represent the most rigorous basis for guiding applied efforts. Studies published more recently are most likely to include data that relate to the current generation of couples.

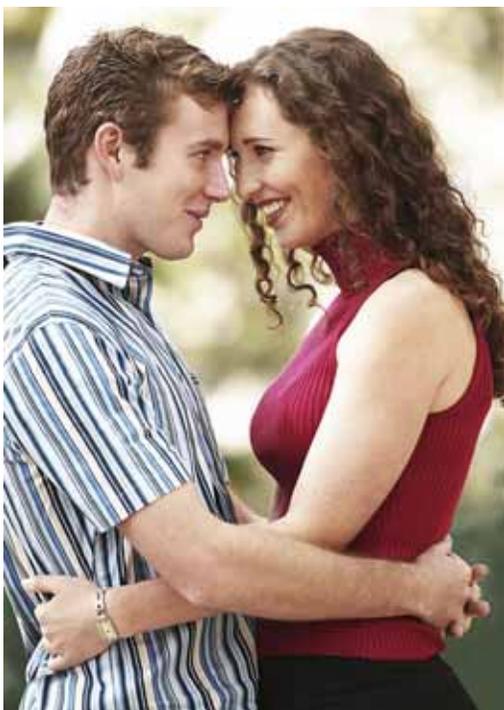
Additional narrowing should involve focusing on articles that assess interactional variables. In marriage and relationship education programs, family and couple interactional processes, not family structure, should be the center of programmatic attention. Interactional variables, such as spending time with one's partner, are factors that are considered changeable or modifiable (Karney and Bradbury 1995) and are considered to be the most appropriate targets for educational prevention and intervention work (Halford 2004). For example, negative processes, such as criticizing one's spouse, can be addressed through educational programming with the intention of reversing or avoiding them.

Interactional variables ...are factors that are considered changeable or modifiable and are considered to be the most appropriate targets for educational prevention and intervention work.

**Step 3: Check the rigor of the articles that may be used to inform programmatic decisions.** There are no clear guidelines on what constitutes "rigorous research;" however, four criteria may assist in this process. Educators can have the most confidence in studies that include (a) longitudinal designs, (b) representative samples, (c) observational methods, and or (d) multi-method or multi-informant procedures. These types of studies are generally of higher quality than studies that are not characterized by these methodological features.

As compared to cross-sectional studies, longitudinal research provides more reliable information on directional effects and causal determinants of marriage quality and or satisfaction (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Thus, longitudinal findings provide the best support for anticipated desired program impact. A representative sample offers more opportunities to generalize findings for a broader array of program participants. Observational methods of data collection generally are considered to have greater validity than reports from a single informant. If self-report or survey data collection methods are used, rigor can be established through use of multiple methods and multiple informants (Babbie 2001).

**Step 4: Identify research themes.** After separating out and reviewing all the appropriate articles on couple interactional processes, Adler-Baeder et al. (2004) identified three broad categories of empirical findings: positive emotions and behaviors (Positivity), negative emotions and behaviors (Negativity), and cognitions. Table 1 summarizes the list of research-supported topics within each category. This list can be used to examine curricula that educators are currently using, or may consider adopting, to determine how inclusive the curriculum is of these topics.



**Table 1. Research-supported themes and subcategories of marriage education content**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Positivity</b> <i>Protective factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive emotions</li> <li>• Affectionate behaviors</li> <li>• Supportive behaviors</li> <li>• Time together</li> <li>• Relational identity</li> <li>• Expressivity and self-disclosure</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Negativity</b> <i>Risk factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative emotions</li> <li>• Overt negative behaviors</li> <li>• Withdrawing, nonresponsive, or dismissive behaviors</li> <li>• Demand-withdraw pattern</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Cognitions</b> <i>Protective factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realistic beliefs and perception of expectations met</li> <li>• Knowledge and understanding</li> <li>• Consensus</li> <li>• Perceived equity/fairness</li> <li>• Positive attributions and biases</li> </ul>
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Source: Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, and Lamke 2004

The four steps detailed above can be applied to other aspects of marriage and relationship education programming. Curriculum choice is only one of the decisions that must be made, and it should not be the only research-based decision. When doing marriage and relationship education, the extant literature should also inform a host of implementation decisions. By identifying and categorizing appropriate research and then reviewing whether a program is consistent with research-supported themes, one can have greater confidence that the program will have the desired effect. When the content and implementation design of educational programs are consistent with the relevant bodies of literature, educators should theoretically provide participants with an effective learning experience (Hennon and Arcus 1993).

**Programmatic research**

By definition, research informed programming relies heavily on programmatic research. Without programmatic research, educators are left to make decisions based on theoretical assumptions or best guesses. Educators currently offering programs can greatly contribute to the field by doing programmatic research. Sharing results and lessons learned can guide future programmatic efforts. Although programmatic research does take time and money, there is likely some sort of research that every organization can undertake. Recognizing that each organization is different in terms of scope, budget, and evaluation expertise, Jacobs (1988) has outlined a five-tiered approach to evaluation. Although the levels differ in terms of the type and scale of research activities, all levels share common assumptions about the role and value of program evaluation. These assumptions include the following (Jacobs 1988, 49):

- “Evaluation should be viewed as the systematic collection and analysis of program-related data that can be used to understand how a program delivers services and/or what the consequences of its services are for participants.” Consequently, evaluation is both descriptive and “judgmental.”
- “Evaluation is a necessary component to every program, regardless of its size, age, and orientation.” All programs should engage in some sort of evaluation, if for no other reason than to improve their own effectiveness.
- “There are numerous legitimate purposes for evaluation. Programs must be committed to providing an effective service, but not all evaluations should attempt to determine program impact per se.”

- “There are also many legitimate audiences for an evaluation.” The intended audience of the evaluation should impact the evaluation design.
- “Evaluation activities should not detract from service delivery.”

### Five-tiered approach to evaluation

Each level of Jacobs’ five-tiered approach to evaluation demands greater efforts, increased precision in program definition, and a larger commitment to the evaluation process. Programs can engage in several levels of evaluation simultaneously. It is also important to note that one level of evaluation is not better than another. All aspects of evaluation have inherent value and can contribute to the refinement of individual programs and to the field as a whole.

**Level one: The Pre-implementation tier.** The first level of Jacobs’ five-tier framework is the Pre-implementation tier. Activities in this tier include needs assessments, determining the fit between the community and the program, detailing program objectives, and establishing the basis on which the curriculum was developed. The activities in this tier provide the foundation for the credibility of the program and all subsequent evaluation efforts. The process highlighted earlier in this chapter – evaluating curricula against the standard of the extant literature – is an example of an evaluation activity in the Pre-implementation tier, and it can support the appropriateness of the topics included in a chosen curriculum. In this tier of evaluation, “the minimum expectation would be that program developers show evidence that the program was developed through a process in which the needs of a particular audience were considered” (Hughes 1994, 77).

In addition to providing programs that we feel couples need, it is essential to provide programs that couples want.



All organizations should go through this level of evaluation before offering a marriage or relationship education program. Agencies that don’t will often learn this lesson the hard way. The author knows one agency that paid handsomely for a large number of facilitators to be trained in a well-known curriculum. The facilitators were then responsible for offering marriage education programs in their respective counties. To their surprise and dismay, couples did not come swarming to the workshops. This agency learned that just because their funding source believed in the merits of marriage and relationship education did not mean that the targeted audience would see the value of the program or that couples would be willing to take the time to attend the workshops. In addition to providing programs that we feel couples need, it is essential to provide programs that couples want. Because every community and target audience is different, it is important that potential participants be asked what it is they want and what format they want it in. Participant attendance is most likely to increase if a needs assessment is performed first and incorporated into the program design. This can be done by holding focus groups with potential participants. (See Lengua et al. 1992.) It is likely that at some point, information about the relevance of, and need for, the program will be requested. Therefore it is advantageous to have this information readily available. Done well, evaluations at this level provide the foundation and baseline for the broader range of future evaluation activities (Jacobs 1988).

**Level two: The Accountability tier.** The Accountability tier involves the documentation and systematic collection of client-specific and service-utilization data. It is called the Accountability tier because service reports to funders and other interested parties are almost always expected, if not required. At a minimum, programs should be able to report that in a specified period of time X couples were provided Y services at a cost of Z. Examples of ways to do this include keeping track of the number of couples registered for classes, the number who attend, and their demographic characteristics. To document these details, one may track the number of sessions offered, amount of time per session, and other aspects of the workshop format. For those familiar with the logic model approach to program development and evaluation, this is consistent with what is referred to as outputs.

Although it may be assumed that programs regularly collect this type of data, research indicates that relatively few actually do. In one national program study, more than 20 percent of programs kept no data at all, and among those who did, there was a wide variety of data collection methods (Hite 1985). If data collection is sporadic or unsystematically gathered, programs may have difficulty reporting the numbers of people they serve, whom they have reached, how staff spend their time, etc.

Tier two evaluations do not require the documentation of outcomes. To quote Jacobs, “second tier evaluation simply documents what exists – client characteristics, service/intervention descriptions and costs – and it may be the correct place to stop to allow newly organized programs to ‘catch their breath’” (Jacobs 1988, 56). It is important to keep this accountability data and to make sure it is frequently updated. This information will be useful in grant applications or requests for increased funding.

**Level three: The Program Clarification tier.** The third level of evaluation includes the clarification of information gathered, with the opportunity for feedback and improvements to the program. Jacobs explains,

...often this is the most useful genre of evaluation, with many data collection and analysis options open to younger, low-budget programs. At this level, program staff relies primarily on their own ‘collective wisdom’ to answer the question of ‘how can we do a better job serving our clients...This information often can be put to immediate use, and evaluation here remains close to the program, reflecting the ever changing beliefs and behaviors of the real people who work there and participate in it.’ (Jacobs 1988, 57-59)

Data is put to use at this stage. For example, an educator may notice from Tier two data that a program is attracting couples in first marriages, but cohabitating and remarried couples are not attending. This is the time to ask, “Why might this be case? Have we clearly identified our target audience? Is this the group we want to be attracting? What aren’t we doing that might possibly attract the couples we intended to serve?”

At this point, pondering a quote attributed to Albert Einstein may be helpful: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” If the expected results are not being achieved, altering methodology or at least clarifying program goals may be necessary. Based on further analysis of Tier two data, adjustments should be made to ensure that objectives are realistic and that the implementation design is conducive to the achievement of those objectives. Educators and program administrators should be able to

## Helpful Resources

There are a number of on-line resources related to the evaluation of family life education. Some are more general while others provide specific examples and resources for marriage and relationship education. Examples include:

- Child Trends’ compendium of measurement instruments. This on-line resource contains a wide array of measurement instruments commonly used in the field of marriage research. Scoring guides are also provided.

[www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org)

- Harvard Family Research Project’s evaluation periodical, *The Evaluation Exchange*, focuses on current issues facing program evaluators. Information is available for programs of all levels and articles are written by prominent evaluators in the field.

[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval.html)

- The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center has compiled a variety of resources related to marriage and relationship education programming. Resources include academic and government reports, fact sheets, and evaluation tools.

[www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org)

- University of Wisconsin Extension has a web site dedicated to program development and evaluation. Free resources on this site can guide you through logic models, program planning, and program evaluation.

[www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/)

Visit the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) website at

[www.nermen.org](http://www.nermen.org) for access to additional resources to support your program development and evaluation efforts.

examine the programmatic content, instructional processes, and procedures to determine what is working and what is not. This, of course, requires program staff to work cooperatively. Staff that work on different parts of the program or with different audiences may have different but insightful viewpoints on what is and is not working. Engaging in this “self-evaluation” is critical to improving the implementation and content of individual programs.

**Level four: The Progress-Toward-Objective tier.** At the fourth level of evaluation, the focus turns to program effectiveness. Activities include progress toward short-term objectives, measuring client and staff satisfaction, and assessing for differential effects (i.e., does the program work better for couples of one particular cultural group?). This type of an evaluation is often undertaken with more established and financially secure programs. To document progress toward objectives, programs must have the time and resources to collect and analyze the necessary information. Often professional evaluators are hired, either from universities/colleges or the private sector, to assist in designing and implementing these types of evaluations. These evaluations may consist of several methods including pre-/post-test evaluation or standardized tests that assess variables that may explain differential impacts such as participants’ age, race, or gender. This level of evaluation increases knowledge about the effectiveness of the program and is usually expected when applying for large grants.

**Level five: The Program-Impact tier.** The fifth and final tier of evaluation pertains to documenting program impacts. This type of evaluation includes a rigorous experimental design to (a) assess the program’s effectiveness and (b) discern whether the positive results are attributable to chance or some other unaccounted variable. Random assignment and comparison groups are typically employed to identify and measure long- and short-term impacts. These evaluations typically require longitudinal designs and in the case of long-term impacts an organization may be looking at a multiyear effort. Although program-impact studies can certainly inform individual programs, usually these studies are “externally directed, meant to contribute more broadly to developmental theory and clinical or evaluation practice” (Jacobs 1988, 61). It is these types of studies that provide the most convincing data to policy makers. They demonstrate that outcomes did not occur by chance or by other controllable factors. Rather, results from these studies provide evidence of the utility and unique contributions of the program.

### Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed two important ways in which research can and should be used with relationship and marriage education programming. The first is to make sure that research supports the content and design of any program you may be using or developing. The use of extant literature to inform practice is a critical step in developing seamless connections between research and practice. Evaluating existing programs is also critical. Research informed programming is a recursive process that is fueled by new literature and evaluations. As we draw upon research to inform practice and concomitantly research our programs, we will enhance our efficacy and effectiveness in providing programs that truly enhance healthy relationships.





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## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER 4: Offering relationship and marriage education in your community

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#### Introduction

Principles and strategies for designing relationship and marriage education programs require a thoughtful, responsible approach. Even though a program may address a huge need in the community, the response can sometimes be disappointing. Successful program planning efforts in any community require attention to the environment, the setting, potential participants, and the type of educational program that will be delivered. Thus, this chapter will address the following questions:

- What does a professional need to know to plan relationship and marriage education that produces positive outcomes for the community and the families that are being served?
- How does a professional work with others in the community to offer relationship and marriage education especially when controversial issues arise?
- What are the different elements that need to be considered when planning relationship and marriage education in a community?

#### Professional requirements for delivering relationship and marriage education

Scholars in the field of adult education (Cervero and Wilson 1994) delineate three types of knowledge and skills needed to plan responsible community-based programs. For relationship and marriage education, they include technical skills and knowledge, an ethical vision of what constitutes beneficial relationship and marriage education, and negotiation skills for effectively partnering with the numerous constituencies within a community.

**Technical skills and knowledge.** The practical skills and knowledge (sometimes called “technical”) probably are familiar to many community educators. Over time, various program planning models that incorporate these steps have been developed and tested. A successful community-based professional uses this knowledge and these skills to design and implement new

programs as well as to sustain programs over time (Apps 1979; Hughes 1994; Dumka et al. 1995; Taylor-Powell 2005). These models all share these critical steps:

- Bring to the planning table all relevant stakeholders (both those who support the specified effort and those who do not).
- Identify community needs and strengths to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, including what factors can be changed for the target audience(s).
- Design and implement the program.
- Conduct an evaluation that shows program impact as well as effectiveness of the entire programming process.
- Re-design the program and continue implementation.

**Ethical vision for relationship and marriage education.** The next requirement for professionals wanting to deliver relationship and marriage education is thinking about and developing an ethical vision for this kind of programming. Just the fact that a family life educator decides relationship and marriage education programs need to be offered in a community suggests that this type of education is important. This vision implies a good use of public and private resources to help people gain skills and knowledge to improve their lives and the lives of their families, to increase the well-being of their communities, and to ultimately meet the needs of our society and the world (Cervero and Wilson 2001).

An ethical vision includes a professional's personal beliefs related to program planning for improving people's lives. Questions to be answered include:

- What does the community educator see as the purpose of relationship and marriage education for the families within a community? What does the professional hope to gain? What are the desired outcomes or impact? Will the community educator's intended audience share this same purpose?
- What is the best way to go about program planning? Does the initial organizer believe that planning needs to include all relevant stakeholders, including other organizations and participants? Engaging other interested groups within a community and allowing their voices to be heard during program planning and delivery indicates a value given to a democratic planning process and participation of all key stakeholders, including those most affected by the proposed program.

By asking insightful questions throughout the program planning process, ethical consideration also is being given to personal beliefs and values of adult learners.

- How does the community professional view adult learners? As empty vessels that passively permit themselves to be educated, or as people having rich experiences that can contribute much to the educational environment?
- Other aspects to be considered are personal belief systems and how people learn. Is it by sitting and listening or by becoming actively involved? Do they learn better in groups or alone?

Thinking about these questions is important when embarking on a new area of program planning. Discussing these questions with community partners helps the planning group come to agreement on the ethical vision for working together on relationship and marriage education.

**Negotiation skills and knowledge.** A program planner does not work in a vacuum, and therefore, cannot ignore the context or the community in which he or she works. Planning a community educational program, in reality, is a social activity. Consideration needs to be given to the people with whom the planner works, the employing organization, and the larger community, as well. As a result, planning becomes “political.”

## Planning a community educational program... is a social activity.

Politics is important when considering community-based program planning since people working together most probably will represent specific interests, with some having more power than others (Cervero and Wilson 1994). Hence, a family life educator needs to understand the community’s power relationships and who has a vested interest in relationship and marriage education to determine which agencies, organizations, and individuals can “make or break” the program. Others may have more power and a larger say in deciding the purposes, content, and format for a program to be successful.

Being sensitive to timing also is important for program success. For example, the federal initiative of promoting healthy marriages (see [www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage)) needs to be considered along with the way it fits into the mix among a community’s interested parties. The skills and knowledge needed to do this effectively include being able to work with others to develop trust, to locate opposition and support, and to understand the informal “ropes” as well as the formal community structures (Forester 1989, as quoted in Cervero and Wilson 1994).

Effectively working with others also involves intentionally thinking through assumptions about the program and the community (Taylor-Powell 2005). What assumptions are being made about relationship and marriage education and the community’s readiness, one’s own organization’s readiness, or one’s personal and professional readiness for the initiative? What assumptions are being made about the people in the community who might have a vested interest? Who are they and why do they have a vested interest? For example, a family life educator may assume that affirming marriage does not imply that an individual remain in a physically or emotionally abusive relationship. Can it be assumed that others who have the power to impact program planning make the same assumption? The definition of who can legally marry is another assumption that needs very intentional thought as perspectives among individuals and organizations on this issue will have critical importance in program planning.

### The importance of reciprocity and negotiation

Knowing how and when to respond to differing assumptions in an ethical way and with thoughtful discussion is the key to nurturing a democratic planning process. Two important requirements to successfully navigate these potential conflicts are reciprocity and negotiation. Reciprocity is a practice that involves exchanging resources with others for mutual benefit. Negotiation involves discussions aimed at reaching an agreement. These two processes are often referred to as “collaboration.” Success in negotiations results in reciprocity and, thus, a successful collaboration.



A program planner needs skills to be reciprocal and to negotiate between conflicting interests such as in the previously identified examples (i.e., Healthy Marriage Initiative; abusive relationships). It also means remembering that relationships of power among interested community organizations and people are never constant and can shift as program planning proceeds. An effective planner is aware of exchanges that occur and watches for potential conflict that can undermine successful collaborations (Cervero and Wilson 1994).

Skills of reciprocity and negotiation begin with asking ethically insightful questions at the right time and place. Central ethical questions to getting started in program planning are (Cervero and Wilson 1994):

- Whose interests will be represented?
- How will those persons be represented?
- When should they be involved?

These questions are vitally important for community-based programming and inherently involve power relationships. For example, if an organization is interested in offering relationship education to youth, it is important to ask whose interests will be represented in the program. One community entity may be interested in promoting abstinence education with youth and teaching this through assertive skills. However, others may want to include information on family planning. If youth were asked what they wanted, what would their answer be? Would the youth's answers be considered? Even more important, how will youth be involved, not only in identifying needs and interests, but also in decision making about the program content? Typically youth are not involved in decision making about programs that are designed for them.

Intentionally thinking about the questions to be asked helps others to move the program planning process along. A program planner needs to be clear on what issue is being addressed as well as who should be asked to answer. A strategic question does not allow a situation to stay stuck, but creates motion by generating new options to consider equally. Questions that ask “why” or require only a “yes” or “no” answer generally stop discussion and do not generate alternatives. Strategic questions are empowering because they imply confidence in the person being asked. However, it is important that these questions not be manipulative or perceived as such.

Addressing taboo issues must be done delicately because they can challenge the values and assumptions that the whole issue rests upon. For instance, going back to the earlier example of who can be legally married, a community-based marriage education planning process may stall if no one is willing to take up the risk of having a conversation about this issue. Finally, simple, straightforward questions will be easier to answer than long, complex questions that create confusion and perhaps distrust (Peavey 2004). For example, the question, “How should we recruit our audience?” is more easily understood and has a more definite focus than a question such as, “What are the marketing strategies necessary in attracting persons to programs in which one or both partners need to attend?”

### **Specific elements of community program planning and implementation**

In 2005, the Urban Institute published the results of an investigation they conducted on existing programs to strengthen and support healthy marriages (Macomber, Murray, and Stegner 2005). The strength of the framework

### **Guidelines for managing difficult conversations**

Asking questions is integral to having a formal conversation process in community-based program planning. Margaret Wheatley (2002), a scholar in the field of leadership, describes several guidelines necessary for people with differing viewpoints to start the process of listening to each other. Acknowledging each other as equals is not always easy with the reality of power relationships within a community, but each entity needs the other for creatively expanding programming ideas to address the challenge. Being curious about each other requires humility and helps the conversation become more truthful, but takes time to happen.

Understanding also requires learning to listen to each other. Listening slows a conversation and gives time for reflection rather than concentration on who “wins” the conversation. Language is a means by which people get to know each other, but interrupting others, monopolizing the conversation, or speaking too fast drives others away. Even though conversations can become difficult, the important issue is that everyone is heard or is given an opportunity to be part of the conversation. It may take time to make sense of the conversation, but it is necessary for thinking, getting things done, and creating richer relationships in community-based programming (Wheatley 2002). Often program planners can begin group discussions by establishing guiding principles for the ensuing conversation to protect everyone's participation and involvement.

developed by the Urban Institute lies in its analyses of the context for marriage education and its identification of key aspects of the landscape of marriage education. The framework allows different kinds of community-based programming, depending on the community's needs and interests. Four key aspects identified for understanding the landscape when planning potential marriage programs are environment, setting, clients, and educational program

**Environment.** Planning relationship and marriage education and its funding possibilities does not occur in isolation from what is happening in the larger environment. Environmental influences include (1) public and private funding streams to support marriage education; (2) federal, state, and local policies and initiatives; and (3) other relationship and marriage education programs available in the community.

*Funding* includes the way planners hope to support relationship and marriage education. It might be from (a) mixed sources, including government grants, foundation grants, client fees, and private donations; (b) client fees only, which give program planners more flexibility, but increase the cost of services; and (c) public funding, in which social service agencies might have government funding for relationship and marriage education. The latter source of funding could mean redirecting current funds to marriage education efforts or obtaining additional funding.

A second part of the environment is involvement in *local, state, and/or federal healthy marriage initiatives*. Many communities have initiated a healthy marriage initiative, receiving federal funding that is a part of the Healthy Marriage Initiative. An important set of questions needs to focus on the community's awareness and participation in these healthy marriage initiatives that results in three options: (1) being fully on board, (2) still deciding if it is a feasible option for the community, or (3) deciding that it is not a good fit. Again, these options need to be discussed with community partners in offering relationship and marriage education.

Last, any group considering relationship and marriage education needs to be highly aware of *what is being offered in the community*. If there is education available and the providers are not involved in current planning efforts, collaboration might be an option for creating a more successful program (For more about building community collaboration in this program area see Chapter 8).

**Setting for relationship and marriage education.** The setting for relationship and marriage education is the location where the program is delivered and the organizational context in which the program operates. Four elements of setting need to be considered during the planning process. The first element is the *organizational setting* and whether the program will be free-standing or a part of a menu of programs offered by an organization or community collaboration.

The second element is *collaboration*. How formally will a collaboration with partners be established? Sometimes there may be an agreement in which another organization's space is used for meetings or referrals come from another agency. These arrangements tend to be more informal, but can become more formal with a memorandum of agreement or even a contract.



The third element of the program setting relates to *staffing decisions*. What kind of credentials, background, and training are desired for the program facilitators? Because there are a number of choices, determining training needs and level of supervision will enter into the decision making.

Clearly, the presenter is extremely influential in the effects of a program. If the presenter is not interesting or is inappropriate, the intended message of the program may be missed. It is important for educators to be sensitive to group dynamics and the specific needs of their audience in order to cultivate this trust and credibility. Flexibility and changes in teaching methods, material, or even the facilitator may be needed.

Scholars (e.g., Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, and Willoughby 2004) have noted in regard to facilitator characteristics that “gender may be an important issue. Some men are more responsive to the content of a program if delivered by a male-female team instead of just one instructor” (pp. 26-27). As well, facilitators who are familiar with the issues being covered may be the most credible presenters. Credibility is vital in order to gain trust and respect of program participants (Hawkins, et al. 2004). Morris, Cooper, and Gross (1999) have found that in marriage education, participants prefer a facilitator they can trust; one who can be supportive, empathic, and caring. However, successful instructors do not necessarily have to have the exact life-experiences or characteristics of their program’s participants. The more the instructor has experienced and learned about the participants’ context, the better the instructor will be able to understand and relate to his/her participants (Hawkins, et al. 2004).

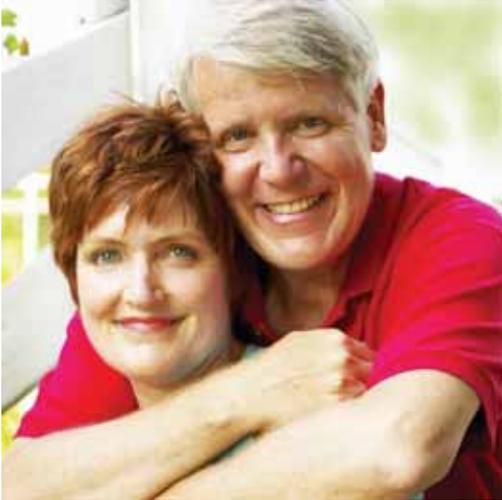
The last element of setting focuses on the *range and level of services* that a program will offer. Perhaps an organization or collaboration wants to offer only educational programs. However, the decision might be made to work with an audience requiring additional services, such as therapy, job training, or even intensive family support services.

**Program participants.** This aspect focuses on the people who will be served or reached by the relationship and marriage education program. To effectively target a program, consideration must be given to the population served, attendance issues, and the target life stage of the potential participants.

First, for the population to be served, program planners will need to *identify the income group to be reached*. Most curricula have been designed for middle- or upper-income couples of European descent. Typically, relationship and marriage education has not been offered to low-income audiences; however, the government is increasingly funding program development for this audience.

Several years ago Michigan State University Extension worked with the Michigan Department of Human Services to develop a relationship and marriage education curriculum *Caring for My Family* (Michigan State University 2003) for low-income, unmarried new parents. If this is the target audience, several approaches can be taken (see Chapter 7). Clients could be referred to a provider of relationship and marriage education in the community for that specific audience, or an educational curriculum such as *Caring for My Family* could be integrated or adapted into an existing menu of services. The Cooperative Extension Services in most states has access to a number of low-cost relationship and marriage education resources.

Where possible, participant groups should be homogeneous in regards to socio-economic levels as well as other characteristics (e.g., first vs. repeat marriages; couples with vs. without children). Not only does this help the facilitator tailor his/her message, stories, and examples, but it also appears to help participants feel more comfortable (Lengua, Roosa, Schupak-Neuberg, Michaels, Berg, and Weschler 1992). Although group-specific program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, the program will likely be more effective if couples participate in a homogeneous group.



The second area to consider when making decisions about program participants focuses on *attendance issues*. What is the target number that the program hopes to serve? The target audience will determine whether or not potential participants will encounter barriers to participation. If serving low-income couples, location, child care, and transportation may be necessary issues to consider. In addition, thinking carefully about how participants will be recruited and enrolled into the program could result in inexpensive ways to get the word out, depending on the target audience. It may be through news releases, TV and radio spots, newsletters, school and web announcements, community groups such as social services coalitions and faith-based alliances, and flyers posted at grocery stores, laundromats, and other businesses.

the program will likely be more effective if couples participate in a homogeneous group.



The final area of decisions related to program participants is targeting the program based on the *participants' stage in the life course*. Relationship and marriage education is not a one-size-fits-all program. Participants' stage in the life span will determine what content will best meet their needs. Will the program target couples that are premarital, having their first baby, in crisis, raising children, or empty-nesters caring for elderly parents? Or is the program interested in reaching youth or young adults who are not yet in a serious relationship? Some communities are looking at ways to promote healthy dating and stem dating violence among youth (see Chapter 5).

**Educational program.** Educational programs include any face-to-face interaction that occurs with the target audience. Macomber, Murray, and Stegner (2005) use the term “intervention” to describe this aspect of the relationship and marriage education framework. Health care professionals often use this term to describe their services; however, prevention specialists also apply this term to educational programs as well as services such as therapy and job skills preparation. To attain healthy couple relationships, program participants may require an array of intervention strategies.

Four elements of the educational program will require program planners to make decisions: curriculum, dosage, format, and approach. First, in terms of *curriculum*, think about these questions:

- Is there an already developed curriculum in mind for the program?
- Or will pieces from several curricula be used?
- Or does the program need to develop its own curriculum?
- Does a curriculum need to be translated into another language?
- How will the target audience be included in the review and selection process?

Also, culturally appropriate material is an important factor in creating a successful program. Culturally insensitive examples, as well as material that under- or overestimates the reading ability or educational level of the participants, may quickly induce an audience to tune out or dismiss the presenter's message. With a diverse audience (e.g., ethnically, economically, number of times married, etc.), the program and staff must be able to meet the needs and expectations of everyone in the room. This is not an easy task. For example, citing a Biblical scripture about marriage may be really meaningful to a Christian participant. However, for non-Christian participants the use of the Bible in what was billed as a community relationship education program may be seen as inappropriate or even offensive. That being said, if a family life educator is interested in offering a program in a religious setting, Hawkins et al. (2004) suggest that "couples united by a particular faith may be best served by those who can communicate content within their culture and language of their religious beliefs and practices" (pp. 26-27) better than those who are not.

Next, planners need to consider *program dosage*. This term refers to the length of sessions and the number of sessions offered in a program. Most commonly, the higher the dosage, the more likely meaningful participant change will occur; however, participants are very busy and oftentimes do not want to make large commitments of time to programs. An appropriate balance is needed.

Next, planners need to determine the *format* of their program, which refers to the way the educational program will be offered. A variety of formats may be used, but they generally follow three basic means of delivery:

- Work with only one individual or couple at a time, such as in a home visit format, which tends to be more therapeutic and costly, but can be better tailored to the couple's specific needs.
- Offer educational sessions to a group of individuals or couples. These sessions usually include some lecture followed by interactive strategies to let participants practice what was learned.
- Use support groups in which the group discusses specific topics with the help of a trained facilitator who may or may not have a pre-planned list of topics or curriculum.

Last, providers of relationship and marriage education programs may select a variety of *approaches* to program delivery. The first approach involves clarifying the *reason for the program*. There are generally three reasons for a program, and the program may focus on all three. However, one of the reasons will tend to dominate. First, is the primary purpose to improve the couple relationship? Often this purpose indicates that program planners believe that relationship and marriage education is the solution to other problems facing a couple. Second, is the program interested in strengthening people's human capital, including their education, job skills, and income? Or, third, is the program interested in helping people meet their basic needs for food and shelter so that they can address their personal relationships?

A second approach involves deciding the *focus of the intervention*, whether that includes the couple, the child(ren), or the family. Most marriage curricula focus primarily on the couple and are designed to improve their communication skills. Many providers who target low-income families are



interested in reaching the child and the family as well as the couple, taking a more comprehensive approach. At the child level, this usually involves a focus on father involvement and co-parenting. At the family level, this may mean including other education such as money management or work-family balance, and providing family support services.

The third and final approach involves specifying the professional orientation of the program. In other words, will the program have a therapeutic or clinical approach, or will it focus more on skill building? Very often, planners of relationship and marriage education try to take an approach that includes both orientations. Often people enroll in educational programs and later discover that they need more intensive services than the education can provide. The facilitator needs to have providers of therapeutic service to which participants can be referred.

### **Conclusion**

These program planning elements are designed to be used by an organization or by a group of organizations that are working together to plan relationship and marriage education. All relevant members of a planning team need to be aware of each element and understand how it is to be used. Second, participation of the target audience throughout the planning process is critical. A program planning effort can have the people with positions of power involved, but if meaningful participation of the target audience is neglected, efforts may fail. Third, using these elements should be within the context of what was discussed throughout the article. In particular, an ethical vision for relationship and marriage education programs needs to be developed and retained throughout the entire planning process. In addition, addressing the political dimensions of planning relationship and marriage education is important for a program's success and sustainability.





NATIONAL  
EXTENSION  
RELATIONSHIP &  
MARRIAGE  
EDUCATION  
NETWORK



## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER 5: Youth focused relationships and marriage education

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#### Introduction

Information about romantic relationships may be especially relevant and timely for adolescents in high school. During this time, individuals may enter couple relationships based upon passion and idealized beliefs about love and commitment. Cognitively, many adolescents are still developing the capacity to think abstractly and realistically about the future; some may get engaged or married thinking that passion is all one needs for a stable marriage (Niehuis, Skogrand, and Huston 2005). Romantic relationships are an important part of adolescent development and influence both positive and negative youth outcomes. Adolescents can benefit from developmentally appropriate relationships education that promotes their understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships and that builds skills needed to function effectively within committed relationships and marriages.

#### Benefits and risks of adolescents' romantic relationships

The existing literature addressing the role of romantic relationships during adolescence is sparse. Of what is known, there appear to be important developmental benefits of adolescent dating relationships. Adolescent romantic relationships are the strongest predictors of adolescent well-being indicators such as self-esteem, depression, and suicide attempts and completions (Brent et al. 1993; Conger et al. 2001; Joyner and Udry 2000). In addition, romantic relationships provide opportunities for adolescents to rethink who they want to become in the future, and they help adolescents determine who they are within the romantic domain of identity (Furman and Shaffer 2003).

According to Bouchey and Furman (2003), adolescents often behave differently across romantic relationships because they are experimenting with possible selves as they seek to establish a sense of identity. Romantic partners also can influence career plans and aspirations in the extent to which they support or discourage an adolescent's dreams and goals (Kerpelman and Lamke 1997; Kerpelman and Pittman 2001). Although the implications of romantic relationships for expression and understanding of sexuality during adolescence are varied, romantic relationships are a primary context in which adolescents learn about their sexuality and try out different sexual behaviors. Common reasons that adolescents give for having their first intercourse experience is the desire to increase the love their partners feel for them (Furman and Shaffer 2003).

Also noted in the literature is that learning about oneself, and how to relate effectively with a dating/marriage partner, begins before the formation of romantic relationships. Research indicates that it is important for adolescents to understand how experiences with peers and friends help prepare them for romantic relationships (Kuttler and La Greca 2004) and how patterns of interaction with peers often are reflected in patterns with romantic partners (Furman 1999). Furthermore, empirical findings show that some behaviors, beliefs, and emotional characteristics that are predictive of marital outcomes are present in couple relationships before marriage (Huston and Houts 1998; Leonard and Roberts 1998; Noller and Feeney 1998).

...it is important for adolescents to understand how experiences with peers and friends help prepare them for romantic relationships.

Risks also exist in adolescent romantic relationships. There are alarming rates of relationship violence occurring among adolescent dating partners. Well over 20 percent of adolescents experience psychological or physical abuse from a dating partner (Roberts and Klein 2003). According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2006), each year approximately one in 11 high school students is a victim of physical dating violence; the rates are similar for males and females.

Conflict within peer and dating relationships is a particularly important area to address, as many adolescents do not realize that conflict in romantic relationships is inevitable (Shulman 2003). In fact, adolescents often believe that conflict is negative and use maladaptive strategies to cope. Their tendency to hold idealistic, rather than realistic, beliefs about romantic relationships (Montgomery 2005) can lead to ineffective coping with relationship problems that emerge.

Another risk is teen pregnancy. Out-of-wedlock child bearing prior to marriage is associated with increased risk of divorce (Amato 2000), and approximately 70 percent of women who have their first child out of wedlock will have all of their children nonmaritally (Seltzer 2000). Thus, adolescents' concerns with, and abilities to manage, issues relevant to forming enduring intimate relationships are developmental in nature, and a lack of accurate information and effective skills can increase the risk of poor decision making and negative outcomes.

### Emotions and adolescents' romantic relationships

Emotions are a central part of romantic relationships at any age, and can be positive, as well as negative (Larson, Clore, and Wood 1999). Often adolescents need help understanding and managing the emotional aspects of relationships. Positive romantic emotions, such as elation, increased energy, and a positive outlook on life can increase motivation. Adolescents may become more engaged in social activities and put greater effort into daily tasks because of the positive feelings they are experiencing. However, these positive emotions also can cloud judgment, leading some adolescents to make poor choices. For example, because she is "in love," a teen that ordinarily uses good judgment may get into a car being driven by her drunken boyfriend. Sexual risks also may be taken with a romantic partner, such as engaging in sex without protection because an adolescent cannot believe his partner would give him an STD.



Negative emotions also accompany romantic relationships (Larson et al. 1999). Many adolescents experience jealousy, anger, longing, and grief because of problems in their dating relationships and the relationship break-ups they experience. Often adolescent dating relationships are short in duration and can involve great fluctuations in positive and negative emotions. Some adolescents do not cope well with the negative emotions, becoming depressed, suicidal, or violent. In addition, some use drugs/alcohol to cope with their negative emotions.

According to Larson et al (1999), educating adolescents about emotions associated with romantic relationships can enhance their emotional intelligence. Learning what is healthy and what is not can help adolescents gain a better understanding of the feelings they experience and how to manage them. They can learn to step back during emotional situations and consider the full range of factors involved. Taking a broader perspective and learning effective relationship skills can help adolescents use adaptive responses, such as directly communicating feelings in a nonthreatening matter, when they become upset with their romantic partners' behaviors. Emotional intelligence also helps adolescents recognize common misattributions that often come with idealizing romantic relationships. When an adolescent is infatuated with a dating partner, he may believe the person is infallible and only see her positive qualities. It may be difficult for him to confront her if she mistreats him in some way. Increasing emotional intelligence facilitates more accurate appraisals of romantic relationship dynamics.

...educating adolescents about emotions associated with romantic relationships can enhance their emotional intelligence.

### **Objectives of relationships/marriage education targeting youth**

Based on an understanding of adolescent development and the functions and effects of romantic relationships in adolescents' lives, a number of important objectives can be met through relationships education designed for youth. The overarching goal of youth-focused relationships and marriage education should be to increase the numbers of adolescents and young adults who have the skills and knowledge needed for forming and maintaining healthy romantic relationships and, ultimately, well-functioning partnerships/marriages.

Objectives for these programs should include increasing adolescents' knowledge of healthy and unhealthy relationships and their skills for facilitating healthy relationship interactions. Because adolescents are developmentally different from adults, it also is important to address healthy identity formation and self-efficacy as these have been shown to impact adolescents' behaviors and decisions about dating relationships (Montgomery 2005). Finally, programs targeting youth should include objectives to reduce risky sexual behaviors and their outcomes. Below is a description of these three primary objectives.

- *Objective 1.* Increasing knowledge about healthy and unhealthy relationships includes learning about healthy dating patterns, such as using effective approaches to conflict management and communication, as well as addressing factors related to healthy and stable marriages, such as mutual respect, shared values, and commitment. It also is important to help adolescents recognize patterns of unhealthy and abusive relationships that may include verbal or physical aggression, controlling behavior, and a lack of respect between partners.
- *Objective 2.* Strengthening skills for facilitating healthy relationship dynamics involves increasing adolescents' levels of self-efficacy in relationships to help them feel empowered to make good choices and stand up for themselves when needed. It also includes enhancing problem-solving and communication skills by helping adolescents learn ways to communicate effectively with partners about their needs and views. Adolescents can be taught ways to manage conflict in their relationships using effective communication and self-control strategies.
- *Objective 3.* Enhancing understanding of the choices and behaviors that put physical and emotional health at risk includes addressing adolescents' knowledge of and attitudes toward risky sexual behaviors, reducing misconceptions about risky sexual activity, and increasing knowledge about healthy relationships and choices.

By teaching adolescents about healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns, adolescents may recognize problem behavior patterns, such as engaging in risky sexual behavior to please a romantic partner, and actively choose to reduce their levels of risky sexual activity. Physical and emotional health also are put at risk in abusive relationships. Increasing adolescents' understanding of what abuse looks like in close relationships may help reduce adolescents' selection of abusive dating partners, and may increase the likelihood that adolescents will seek help if they find themselves in abusive relationships.

### **An example of an effective youth-focused relationships education curriculum**

*The Relationships Smarts Plus*<sup>1</sup> curriculum (RS+; adapted from Love U2: *Relationship Smarts*, Pearson 2004) provides an example of an effective youth-focused relationships education curriculum. RS+ is a research-based curriculum that incorporates hands-on activities to focus on skills and knowledge necessary for healthy dating relationships, for making good choices about partners, and for later healthy marital relationships. The RS+ curriculum has features that are especially appropriate for lower-resource, ethnically diverse youth, many of whom are attending the Alabama schools where RS+ is being offered. These features include less didactic and more experiential learning material, "common" teen language, materials that show diversity, and language that assumes teens are living in diverse family structures.

RS+ is consistent with key aspects of successful youth programs. The curriculum offers developmentally appropriate content, such as material that addresses identity development, current relationship dynamics, and future-orientation, and a hands-on approach that makes the material accessible and

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<sup>1</sup> RS+ will be distributed by the Dibble Institute in the fall of 2007. RS+ is being tested as part of the Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth project, a 5-year evaluation study funded by the Administration for Children and Families/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; it is also supported with funding from the State of Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (The Children's Trust Fund of Alabama).





helps adolescents internalize the information being taught. For example, adult facilitators (e.g., high school teachers) assist youth in personal strength building processes, adolescents are viewed positively and as capable of making good choices, adolescents actively participate in the program and are empowered by it, and the RS+ curriculum is flexible and can be adapted to the needs of the participating adolescents.

The RS+ lessons, each of which is 60-90 minutes long, address the establishment of a foundation for understanding the nature of romantic relationships, followed by several lessons that address dating processes and decisions. Also addressed in the curriculum are important communication skills within romantic relationships and the promotion of future-oriented thinking about relationships. Below is a summary of the RS+ lesson content.

### **Section 1: Establishing a Foundation for Understanding Romantic Relationships**

- **Lesson 1:** “*Who am I and Where am I Going?*” helps adolescents get in touch with their sense of identity and possible selves. Identity formation is a central task of adolescence that influences and is influenced by experiences in romantic and other close relationships. Emphasis is placed on who the adolescent is within his or her family, friendship, and dating relationship contexts. Adolescents create a possible-selves tree to visualize their future self-goals and ways to attain them. The lesson concludes with addressing ways to stay true to themselves when faced with peer pressure.
- **Lesson 2:** “*Maturity Issues and What I Value*” explores the concept of maturity. It identifies four aspects of maturity — physical, emotional, mental, and social — and points out that the latter three don’t happen on their own, but take conscious effort. The lesson then moves on to an activity, “a values auction,” that helps participants identify the values that are important to them.
- **Lesson 3:** “*Attractions and Infatuation*” begins with a “relationship pyramid” schematic that assists teens in thinking about the building blocks of good relationships. Adolescents visualize the foundation of good relationships that include common interests, having fun together, talking to each other, and developing a real friendship. In addition, the chemistry of attraction and the nature of infatuation are explored.
- **Lesson 4:** “*Love and Intimacy*” gets teens thinking about the meaning of the words love and intimacy. First, teacher-selected pictures from teen magazines are used to help adolescents learn about the differences and connections between love and lust. Next, the three important aspects of mature love – that is, passion, intimacy, and commitment – are examined. The last part of the session builds an understanding of intimacy and how it develops.

### **Section 2: Fostering Knowledge about Dating Relationship Processes**

- **Lesson 5:** “*Principles of Smart Relationships*” provides practical guidance for developing positive relationships. The first part introduces seven principles for “smart” dating. Teens learn that they can fall in love with their brain turned on by paying attention to these seven principles. Activities such as identifying Smart and Not-so-Smart relationship decisions provide practice for applying these insights to real world teen relationships.

- **Lesson 6:** *“The Approach to Relationships: Decide, Don’t Slide!”* explores why people can easily get swept up and involved with poor relationship choices. Too often young people slide into situations instead of making clear decisions with good knowledge about the individuals they are attracted to. This lesson aims to build skills and awareness for how to take a “go-slow, go-smart” approach toward building relationships and avoiding the sometimes high-costs of sliding. Teens explore, through four different activities, steps to take to really get to know the people they are dating.
- **Lesson 7:** *“Is It a Healthy Relationship?”* offers concrete and practical guidance about how to tell if a relationship is healthy or unhealthy. By trying to answer three essential questions, the lesson explores what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like in the real world. A fun sculpting activity aids in visualizing the negative and positive answers to the questions.
- **Lesson 8:** *“Breaking up and Dating Abuse”* increases teens’ awareness of what abuse looks like in relationships and stresses that abusive relationships are unhealthy and unsafe. Thought-provoking activities and an educational video are used to help teens understand the forms abuse takes and ways to avoid or get out of abusive relationships. In addition, adolescents learn that even relationships that are not abusive may need to end, and guidelines are offered for knowing when it’s time to break up, better and worse ways to break up, and steps for moving on.

### Section 3: Facilitating Communication Skills for Healthy Relationships and Marriages

- **Lesson 9:** *“A Foundation for Good Communication”* provides students with a strong foundation for effective communication in couple relationships. After considering the positive and negative communication patterns students have learned within their families, the basic elements of listening openly and speaking clearly are reviewed. Ways to engage in problem solving also are covered. The lesson concludes with opportunities to practice important skills for good communication.
- **Lesson 10:** *“Communication Challenges and More Skills”* looks more extensively at challenges to good communication and ways to address negative communication patterns in a relationship. Students are introduced to patterns that damage relationships and how to recognize the warning signs of troubled communication. Next, students have opportunities to practice different strategies to change negative communication patterns into positive ones.

### Section 4: Encouraging Future Orientation: Marriage, Family, and Planning for the Future

- **Lesson 11:** *“Through the Eyes of a Child: Parents’ Relationships Matter”* aims to build an awareness of how and why a healthy marriage matters. Specifically, teens learn how parents’ relationships matter for their children’s well-being. They also focus on the importance of fathers. Activities are designed such that teens can vividly see things from a child’s eyes and heart.
- **Lesson 12:** *“Increasing the Odds of Having a Healthy Marriage Someday”* helps teens learn about wise mate selection and reasons why some marriages succeed and others fail. Through activities, they learn why the choices they make in the present can take them down paths that will either lead them towards or away from a successful marriage.

### Program implementation.

In addition to focusing on the content of a youth education curriculum, it also is critical to focus simultaneously on implementation in order to ensure that programs targeting youth are employing best practices. Thus, it is necessary to evaluate carefully the outcomes of youth education programs using quantitative measures of change and program impact, as well as qualitative methods to gain understanding of program implementation issues. Both educators and students should be included in this process. Key areas to assess are

1. Fit of the material and activities to the audience. Are the examples and activities used to promote learning relevant to and engaging for the adolescents participating in terms of age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.
2. Clarity and ease of the delivery of the material. Are the lessons easy to understand and implement; are the messages being conveyed clear?
3. Dosage needed to effect change. Does the program cover the range of material needed in adequate quantities to facilitate the desired changes?
4. Aspects of the setting that may affect the implementation and understanding of the material. How does class make-up, regional location, teacher characteristics, or factors in the larger community influence the effectiveness of the program being implemented?

- **Lesson 13:** “*Follow Your North Star*” provides a final lesson where teens first review core concepts and then work together to produce a mural summarizing the key insights and information they have learned in RS+. Then, they begin to work individually on their own “success plans” in session. They continue and finish these plans outside of class.

### **Establishing an exemplar curriculum and model of best practices**

The Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth (HCHCTY) evaluation project will help to establish an exemplar curriculum and model of best practices for educating youth about close relationships. Between 2005 and 2010, more than 200 teachers and their classes will participate in this project. Both Family and Consumer Science classes and Health classes are being included. The impact of the program content and effectiveness of the implementation are evaluated through pre-/post- evaluations that assess the adolescents’ knowledge, attitudes, perceived skills, and behaviors. In addition, a post-test with retrospective pre-test measure assesses participant learning that is module-specific. This careful evaluation includes comparisons of adolescents who do and do not receive the course. In addition, some students who receive the course also receive follow-up booster sessions to determine if booster sessions further extend the effects of the course. Each year of the study, data are collected that can help determine how effective the curriculum is and where changes are needed to improve the curriculum. Every time the curriculum is revised, it will be tested with a new group of teachers and students.

The procedures used in the development and ongoing refinement of RS+ are expected to result in a model of best practices. Interviews conducted with teachers and students participating in RS+ are used to gain additional insights regarding program implementation. Each year, teachers and students provide feedback about program content, areas they think need to be strengthened or added, and ways in which the fit of program materials to the audience can be improved. Teachers also provide feedback on the quality of the training they received and on aspects of implementation of the curriculum that need to be adjusted. Based on these qualitative assessments, as well as quantitative questionnaire data, changes will be made to the materials and delivery methods in ways designed to increase the effectiveness of the curriculum. Guidelines for best practices will be derived from what is learned.

### **Curriculum fit with the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) model**

As part of the process of evaluating the RS+ curriculum as an exemplar curriculum for teaching adolescents about healthy relationships and marriages, RS+ was examined in terms of its correspondence with the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) model. This working framework was established to guide and evaluate efforts to strengthen relationships and marriages. Its dimensions are strength-based, and focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements of relationships. The dimensions tap key areas of creating and maintaining stable healthy marriages and couple relationships. Examples of how RS+ fits with the NERMEN model are provided in Table 1.



*Table 1. RS+ fit with the NERMEN model*

<b>NERMEN Concept</b>	<b>Fit with Relationship Smarts Plus Curriculum</b>
<p><b>Choose</b> (intentionality in the creation and maintenance of healthy relationships)</p>	<p>RS+ at its core is designed to promote the importance of intentionality. Across the lessons, adolescents are made aware of the important choices they are making in their lives and the value of carefully considering the partners they select and the ways they interact with their dating partners. They also come to understand why sustained commitment to working on a relationship is central to its success and are made aware of the elements that comprise a healthy relationship.</p>
<p><b>Know</b> (development of interest, affection, and closeness)</p>	<p>RS+ stresses the importance of taking the time to really get to know the person one is dating in order to find out about compatible interests and values and to establish a relationship that is based on mutual respect.</p>
<p><b>Care</b> (the value of kindness, understanding, respect, and caring support)</p>	<p>Demonstrating affection, understanding, respect, and support for a relationship partner are emphasized throughout the RS+ curriculum. Also addressed are the steps needed to leave an unhealthy or abusive relationship.</p>
<p><b>Share</b> (the importance of friendship, positive interactions, and meaningful time together)</p>	<p>The dating lessons of RS+ focus considerably on the importance of developing a caring friendship with a dating partner and the value of spending meaningful time together in order to build intimacy.</p>
<p><b>Connect</b> (the role of social support and community)</p>	<p>The RS+ curriculum recognizes the influences and values of the broader social network. Activities help adolescents become aware of these influences and to understand how their dating relationships fit within their broader social worlds.</p>
<p><b>Manage</b> (strategies of engagement, interaction, and healthy resolution of differences)</p>	<p>The RS+ curriculum, especially the communication skills lessons, provide adolescents with activities that help them practice effective communication, and to learn strategies for dealing with relationship challenges and problems.</p>
<p><b>Care for Self</b> (the priority of maintaining one’s physical, psychological, and sexual health and wellness)</p>	<p>RS+ begins with a focus on self – one’s sense of identity and goals for the future. Throughout the curriculum, issues of self-awareness and self-respect are emphasized.</p>

The RS+ curriculum appears to fit well with the NERMEN model. Across the lessons, RS+ provides adolescents with an understanding of the balance between caring for self and caring for the relationship, and with an appreciation for factors outside the relationship (family, peers, community) that have important implications for relationship functioning.

**Summary of key findings during the first year of HCHCTY**

Before the 5-year HCHCTY project, a pilot study examining the efficacy of RS+ was conducted in nine Alabama high schools in low-resource, ethnically diverse areas. Results indicated that adolescents participating in the program showed gains in knowledge from Time 1 to Time 2 and had better outcomes



### Student Response

Student focus groups revealed that the participants liked the RS+ curriculum. Student comments included

- *It will help dating teenagers avoid abusive relationships.*
- *I liked that it taught me some things about dating and being in a relationship that I didn't know before.*
- *I liked how in depth the program was – it was really informative about dating and what should and shouldn't happen.*

Students also described how they were using skills learned in RS+, for instance

- *I tried avoiding negative starts – discussion did not turn into an argument.*
- *I used my [RS+] notebook to improve my relationship by getting my boyfriend to read it.*
- *I used some of the communication skills we learned – being aware of voice tone, prevented arguments.*

Although they liked the content, students recommended that the instructional videos be updated with “teens of today.” They noted that some of the lessons presented too much information in certain areas. They also requested that the number of hands-on and experiential activities be increased.

than those in the control group (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007). Importantly, this study provided the first empirical evidence of positive program impact of marriage education among a sample with a strong representation of low-income, African-American youth. Because our pilot work yielded promising results, we applied for and received funding in 2005 for the 5-year HCHCTY evaluation study.

Data collected from 1,215 Alabama high school youth who received the RS+ curriculum during the first year of the HCHCTY study in the spring of 2006 indicated that the lessons were effective in increasing knowledge about healthy/unhealthy relationships and improving interpersonal skills. Of the 1,215 students, the majority were African-American (33.7 percent) and Caucasian (59.4 percent). The mean age of participants was 16 years (SD = 1.3). More than half of the participants (56.4 percent) reported that they were currently in dating relationships. A control sample (N=243) was drawn from students in FCS classes at comparable high schools.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the imbalance in the sizes of the RS+ and control samples, which limited the power to detect mean group differences, significant differences were found.

For the group receiving RS+, changes in perceived knowledge occurred across all of the targeted program areas. Knowledge increases were found for planning for the future; understanding the nature and importance of values, maturity, love and intimacy; identification of healthy dating strategies; understanding of what abuse looks like in relationships and ways to address it; and how to implement effective communication within romantic and other close relationships. Across the areas assessed, means increased significantly ( $p < .001$ ); the average increase was from 2.5 to 3.5 on a 4 point scale (1 = knowledge is poor; 4 = knowledge is excellent).

Faulty relationship beliefs of RS+ participants (e.g., there is only one person out there for you, love is enough to solve all relationship problems) were found to decrease from pre- to post-test (dropping from 3.6 to 3.1 on a 5-point scale; significant at  $p = .001$ ). Those in the control group did not show decreases in faulty relationship beliefs over this same time period. For those in the RS+ group who started a new dating relationship while receiving the program, verbal aggression in their new relationships was significantly lower ( $p < .01$ ) than in the previous relationships they had been in (decreased from 1.2 to .50 on a 5-point scale, higher scores indicate greater aggression). Finally, those who received the RS+ lessons evidenced a modest but significant increase ( $p < .05$ ) in their conflict management skills (3.3 to 3.5 on a 5-point scale; higher scores indicate greater conflict management ability). Those in the control group did not show increases in conflict management ability.

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<sup>2</sup> Data collected from additional students with demographic backgrounds similar to the RS+ group are being added to increase the size of the control sample.

Interviews with teachers also indicated that both teachers and students enjoyed the lessons. Many specific examples of lesson strengths were provided. In addition, the dating abuse lesson was seen as critically important. In general, teachers perceived that their students were receptive to the curriculum, and especially enjoyed the activities in which they could be active. Teachers noted that male students differed from female students in their response to the curriculum. Male students preferred participating in active games and activities, but often became uncomfortable when there were lengthy discussions about relationship issues. Efforts to make the curriculum and its delivery more supportive of male student participation and learning will be important to strengthening the efficacy of RS+. Collectively, the teacher and student feedback offered important directions for making improvements to the RS+ curriculum.

Overall, the findings from the first year of the HCHCTY project indicated that RS+ was effective in educating youth about healthy romantic relationships and marriages. We have learned important lessons about teacher preparation and support that we will incorporate into the subsequent years of our project. The RS+ curriculum prepares participants with critical knowledge and skills for establishing healthy, lasting close relationships and marriages.

### **Conclusion**

Adolescence is a key time to offer relationships/marriage education, as it is during adolescence that youth begin to actively explore romantic relationships. Providing effective relationships education can support positive youth development and help reduce impulsive and health-compromising behaviors. Relationships education also can facilitate movement toward well-functioning committed relationships and marriages in adulthood. Using rigorously evaluated research-based curricula will optimize efforts to provide adolescents with effective learning experiences. Creating model curricula and determining best practices will ensure that more adolescents gain the knowledge and skills needed for healthier close relationships and marriages.





# Cultivating healthy couple & marital relationships

## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER 6: Marriage education for stepcouples

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#### Introduction

To meet the needs of all couples, marriage educators and practitioners must understand diversity in regard to family development and composition. This includes the recognition and consideration of developmental and couple dynamic differences between couples in first marriages and those who marry and have children from a previous relationship (Halford et al. 2003). An understanding of the unique experiences of stepfamilies coupled with an appropriate theoretical framework will facilitate research-based program content and implementation design in educational programs for couples in stepfamilies.

#### The prevalence of stepfamilies

The formation of higher-order unions has always been common practice in the United States; however, in our earlier history the commonality of stepfamilies was a result of shorter life expectancies for men and women as well as high rates of maternal mortality during childbirth (Coontz 2002). It is the combination of a high divorce rate and a high remarriage rate that has brought the growing phenomenon of complex stepfamily systems into current focus. These stepfamily systems include members of the new household as well as connections to other family members outside the household such as former partners and children residing with former partners (Coontz 1992).

Higher-order marriages account for nearly half of all marriages performed in the United States each year

Government statistics indicate that 75 percent of divorced people remarry within 10 years, and serial remarriages are increasingly common (Bramlett and Mosher 2001; National Center for Health Statistics 1993). Higher-order marriages account for nearly half of all marriages performed in the United States each year (Wilson and Clark 1992), and the majority of these remarriages (approximately 65 percent) include children from previous

relationships (Chadwick and Heaton 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998). Typically, these new marriages are formed quickly. The average divorced individual will remarry within 2 to 5 years after divorce (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Kreider and Fields 2001). In addition, because of increased rates of nonmarital births (1 in 3), more adults are entering first marriages with someone other than the child's other parent and forming stepfamilies as well (Ganong and Coleman 2004; Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995).

It is also noteworthy to consider that the growing number of cohabiting unions form stepfamilies as well. It is estimated that of cohabiting couples with children, half are living in a stepfamily situation (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995; Seltzer 2000). In fact, the vast majority of married couples living in a stepfamily report having cohabited prior to marriage (Ganong and Coleman 2004). Consistent with these demographic reports is growing evidence from family science research and the marriage initiative work to date that finds that a large proportion, if not majority, of low-income nonmarried couples are dealing with co-parenting and stepparenting relationships. The Fragile Families study found that 43 percent of nonmarried low-income mothers had children with at least two men (Parke 2004; McLanahan et al. 2003). In the Family Connections in Alabama project, which piloted marriage education with low-resource parents, 55 percent of participants reported living in a stepfamily situation.

Among lower-income individuals, both rates of divorce and rates of remarriage are higher (Ganong and Coleman 2002). In addition, rates of nonmarried births are higher among low-income individuals (Ooms and Wilson 2004), suggesting that married stepfamilies (from both first marriages and remarriages) are even more common among low-income groups than in the broad population. A recent state survey conducted in Florida (Karney et al. 2003) showed that among married couple households with children, 36 percent Hispanic/Latino, 55 percent African American, and 39 percent White respondents reported at least one stepchild. In addition, nonmarital births are highest among African-Americans, making it comparatively more likely that African-Americans are forming stepfamilies through first marriages. Low-income and ethnic minority adults also have higher rates of cohabitation (Seltzer 2000). Combined with high nonmarital birth rates, it is likely the prevalence of low-income cohabitators living as stepfamilies is much more than half.

### **Theoretically grounded approaches to working with stepcouples**

It is always good practice for educators to be explicit about the theoretical assumptions guiding their approach and their work (Hughes 1994). For work with couples in stepfamilies, it is critical to use an *ecological systems perspective* (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The ecological perspective recognizes environmental influences on individual behaviors. Many factors influence human development and these factors are nested within four ecological levels: the background and characteristics of the individual (ontogenetic level), family relations (microsystem level and mesosystem interactions), family interactions with elements outside the family (community – or mesosystem and exosystem level), and socio-cultural variables at the macrosystem level. In practice, this framework allows for the consideration of such variables as stress management skills, which is an individual characteristic; the co-parenting relationship and the stepparent-stepchild relationship, which are microsystems and mesosystems; the lack of support from in-laws, which is an element of the exosystem; and community bias in favor of first families, which is an element of the macrosystem. All these factors are associated with stepcouple marital quality.

### **The importance of specialized content for stepcouples**

Couples who form stepfamilies (i.e., “stepcouples”) are at slightly higher risk for divorce than couples who both are in their first marriage without children (Ganong and Coleman 2000). Factors associated with higher marital quality and stability for first marrieds (i.e., communication skills, empathy, common values and beliefs, and conflict management skills) are also important for stepfamily couples, but there is evidence to suggest that stepfamily couples experience unique family developmental patterns and face unique issues that are related to healthy marital functioning (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004; Halford et al. 2003). This is an important consideration for program content.

The general research on marital couples offers an incomplete examination of the full range of factors related to high quality marriages in stepfamilies. Therefore, relying solely on the general couple and marital research to inform our programs for couples in stepfamilies may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet their unique needs. Thus, educators run the risk of leaving out important information and skills necessary for the development and maintenance of healthy marital relationships in stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004). Marriage education programs can serve as a primary resource contributing to the formation and/or maintenance of strong relationships within stepfamilies by presenting topics and developing skills specifically related to stepfamily functioning.

Assumptions underlying *systems theory* are used and have been validated in studies specifically related to stepfamilies (Ganong and Coleman 2000; White and Klein 2002). Most importantly in this research is the evidence of spillover effects from one relationship in the family to another. This framework draws attention to and even prescribes targeting other subsystems within the family – such as co-parenting relationships and stepparent-stepchild relationships – in marriage education work because of these subsystems’ impact on the couple relationship.

Assumptions from *cognitive-behavioral theory* can also inform work with stepcouples. Essentially, cognitive-behavioral theory maintains that (a) beliefs about how relationships should function and (b) expectations about relational dynamics affect one’s behavior in a relationship (Baucom and Epstein 1990). To the extent that the beliefs and expectations positively affect relationships, the beliefs/expectations are considered functional; to the extent they negatively affect relationships, the beliefs/expectations are considered dysfunctional (Epstein and Eidelson 1981). Beliefs can also be realistic or unrealistic based on generally supported “truths” about stepfamily living. According to cognitive behavioral theory, program design and content should suggest the consideration of or reflection on distinct beliefs and expectations about stepfamily living because of their potential impact on the quality and stability within the stepcouple relationship.

Work with stepcouples should also use a *lifecourse perspective*. This perspective takes into account differential effects of events based on the interaction of the individuals’ and the family’s development. In practice, this means that “it matters when.” Different information is relevant for different families based on developmental considerations. For example, it matters when you marry following a divorce/separation in terms of timeframe; it matters how long you have been a stepfamily in terms of the recency or duration of that family system; and it matters when in a child’s development he or she experiences parental divorce and remarriage.

Using a strengths perspective in work with stepcouples would also include the assumption that despite the increased risks to individual, couple, and family functioning that stepcouples face, building strong stepcouple marriages can result in nurturing home environments within which adults and children thrive.

Finally, it is recommended that work with stepcouples uses a *family strengths perspective*. This perspective assumes that all individuals and families have strengths and that focusing on adding to these strengths (rather than focusing on deficits) best facilitates improvements in individual, relational, and family functioning. Strength-building strategies used in programming can include adding to individuals’ knowledge base, encouraging awareness of negative cognitive and behavior patterns, and practicing skills that enhance individual and family well-being. Using a strengths perspective in work with stepcouples would also include the assumption that despite the increased risks to individual, couple, and family functioning that stepcouples face, building strong stepcouple marriages can result in nurturing home environments within which adults and children thrive. Marriage education for stepcouples requires this multifaceted theoretical framework to best meet the needs of couples forming and sustaining their union within the context of complex families.

## Program content and learning objectives

Prevalent issues and factors associated with healthy couple functioning in stepfamilies include: negotiating roles and rules within a family structure in which few social norms exist, promoting realistic expectations, strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and navigating relationships with children's other parent(s). While this is not an inclusive or exhaustive list of unique areas to address with stepcouples, these are the general categories and most common issues that should be addressed in program content to promote healthy family development. Specific learning objectives associated with each of these areas should help guide the educational approach used by marriage educators.

**Incomplete institution: Negotiating roles/rules.** Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies, norms about roles and rules (i.e., patterns of functioning) have yet to be developed. Cherlin (1978) described this phenomenon as the “incomplete institution” of stepfamilies and noted the lack of societal prescriptions for how stepfamilies should operate. Stepparents do not have a legal parental relationship with stepchildren, which likely impacts a stepparent's perception of his or her relationship to a stepchild. There are no agreed-upon names for stepparents and other step-relationships. Especially relevant for low-income stepcouples is the lack of norms about financial management in stepfamilies.

There is no social prescription for stepfamily roles and rules; instead, individual families need a common agreement of expected roles and rules between family members. Agreement on family and parenting roles between spouses is associated with less couple conflict and greater marital satisfaction (e.g., Bray and Kelly 1998; Palisi et al. 1991; Pasley et al. 1993). For example, research indicates that agreement about combining separate assets and agreement about the level of support provided to stepchildren and nonresidential biological children is related to healthy stepcouple functioning (e.g., Engel 1999; Lown, McFadden, and Crossman 1989). Overall, research indicates that relational quality and stability is associated with congruent beliefs regarding stepfamily member roles. Researchers have observed that well-functioning stepfamilies and couples in their longitudinal studies actively negotiated roles and rules and worked toward consensus (Bray and Kelly 1998; Hetherington and Kelly 2002).



There is no social prescription for stepfamily roles and rules...

Marriage education program content for stepcouples should include explicit discussions of stepcouples' “non-normed” existence. For examples, messages would center on raising awareness of these issues, including the ambiguous legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren, validating feelings of “not fitting in,” and promoting the use of negotiating skills for establishing their family-specific roles and rules. Topics should focus on the names they will use for each other (in the household and across households), financial management practices, financial responsibilities to children and stepchildren, parenting strategies, and individual roles (including gender roles) in the family as well as within each dyad. From a lifecourse perspective, program content should also raise awareness of the dynamic nature of these processes. That is, negotiating roles and rules is not a one-time event, but rather, is a continuing, evolving process that incorporates family experiences and developmental changes. Unlike skills training, these program content suggestions focus on

cognitions – expectations, attitudes, and knowledge – rather than behavioral skills. Research on marital quality demonstrates that several dimensions of individuals’ “thinking” are important predictors of actual behaviors in relationships and powerful predictors of marital quality (e.g., Bradbury and Fincham 1990). Thus, these topics can be integrated into specific learning objectives that facilitate the negotiation of roles and rules. Marriage educators should ensure that participants will:

- feel validated in their experiences in a non-institutionalized family structure;
- have an increased understanding of the importance of reaching consensus on roles and rules (i.e., understand that there is no “prescription”);
- be able to articulate their couple consensus in several important areas of family functioning (e.g., balance of family responsibilities, financial management practices, names for stepfamily members, etc.); and,
- be able to identify their strengths as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

**Realistic expectations and positive beliefs/views.** When individuals are open with each other about their expectations and have similar beliefs and expectations, they are more likely to be satisfied in their relationships. This is true for all couples, and especially true for stepcouples. It is also important to identify whether some expectations are unrealistic. Research indicates that successful couples in stepfamilies have realistic and congruent expectations about stepfamily dynamics and development at the onset of stepfamily formation.

...it is more realistic to expect that levels of connection and attachment will vary between stepfamily members. The more important dimension of healthy stepfamily functioning is the level of mutual agreement about the nature of each relationship within the stepfamily system.

A key element of appropriate expectations/beliefs is an understanding of the time necessary to establish roles and to determine their family’s particular functioning pattern for success (e.g., Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Visher et al. 2003). Therefore, when expectations of “instant love” among family members and “instant parent-child relationship adjustment” are not held, higher marital quality is more likely to result (Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Visher et al. 2003). Evidence suggests that not only do successful stepfamilies form relationships slowly (3-5 years), but also they form relationships dyadically rather than as a family unit – so expecting family “blending” may not be realistic (e.g., Ganong et al. 1999). Research also suggests that a cohesive, blended stepfamily unit may not be essential for a well-functioning stepcouple and stepfamily. Rather than striving for equally cohesive bonds and feelings of connection between stepfamily members, it is more realistic to expect that levels of connection and attachment will vary between stepfamily members. The more important dimension of healthy stepfamily functioning is the level of mutual agreement about the nature of each relationship (i.e., subsystem) within the stepfamily system.

Programs should promote the understanding of realistic expectations for stepfamily development. This includes first raising awareness of individuals' beliefs and expectations, because these may not be consciously recognized or actively processed. Open discussions can also be facilitated on the unrealistic expectations regarding (a) instant love, (b) quick adjustment, (c) equal attachment and bonding among stepfamily members, and (d) first family functioning. In addition, program content can include the use of communication and negotiating skills to facilitate consensus-building between couples regarding their assumptions, beliefs, and expectations for their family. It is suggested that marriage educators include specific learning objectives related to positive beliefs and expectations in that participants will:

- identify their individual beliefs and expectations about stepfamily living;
- identify how stepfamily experiences and development are different from (not better or worse than) first family experiences;
- recognize common “myths” of stepfamily living and common realities of stepfamily living;
- hold positive expectations for the possibility of healthy stepfamily functioning;
- be able to articulate their couple consensus regarding their beliefs and expectations for their family; and,
- be able to identify their strengths as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

**Stepparent-stepchild relationships.** A critical and consistent pattern observed in research on couples in stepfamilies is the potential negative impact of poor stepparent-stepchild relationships on the quality and stability of the couple relationship (e.g., Bray and Kelly 1998; Crosbie-Burnett 1984). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) noted that

*In first marriages, a satisfying marital relationship is the cornerstone of happy family life, leading to more positive parent-child relationships and more congenial sibling relationships. In many stepfamilies, the sequence is reversed. Establishing some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren ... may be the key to a happy second marriage and to successful functioning in stepfamilies. (p. 181)*

Therefore, knowledge and skills that facilitate positive stepparent-stepchild relationships are viewed as marriage strengthening knowledge and skills for stepcouples.

...knowledge and skills that facilitate positive stepparent-stepchild relationships are viewed as marriage strengthening knowledge and skills for stepcouples.

Research suggests that the biological parent and child(ren) play a key role in the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., O'Connor, Hetherington, and Clingempeel 1997; Weaver and Coleman 2005), whereby the biological parent ultimately holds the power to support or not support the creation of bonds between the child(ren) and stepparent. Conversely, the role and supportive behavior of the stepparent also facilitates healthy development. Stepparents who continually exhibit caring behaviors are much more successful in developing more effective and loving relationships with their stepchildren (Ganong et al. 1999) than stepparents who disengage, interact very little with their stepchildren, and/or use punitive discipline.

Program content should include the recommendation that the biological parent remain the primary disciplinarian for a given time; the stepparent should ease into a parenting role over time. Information on the developmental differences found among stepchildren (i.e., adolescent stepchildren and younger stepchildren) and their impact on stepparent-stepchild relationships and the potential for bonding should be included. Raising awareness of the potential difficulties with older stepchildren may promote proactive steps on the part of both the biological parent and stepparent to lessen the intensity of the potential conflict. Normalizing the likelihood of developing less of a bond between stepparent and older stepchildren is suggested. Information on child development and behavior management techniques may be especially helpful for stepparents who are not also biological parents. Program content should also include information for children on healthy stepparent-stepchild interactions and stepfamily development. Suggested learning objectives related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship promote the participant's ability to:



- understand the importance to their couple relationship of working on healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships;
- understand and use recommended strategies that build positive stepparent-stepchild relationships;
- understand how age of the child affects the recommended processes and goals for the stepparent-stepchild relationship;
- understand normative child/adolescent development; and,
- identify their strengths as individuals and as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

**Navigating relationships with children's other parents.** Because the majority of stepfamilies are formed after separation or divorce from a partner, rather than death, we can assume that co-parenting relationships with ex-partners exist. Especially for low-income parents, this may include multiple co-parenting relationships (Ooms and Wilson 2004). The quality of co-parenting relationships is shown to impact relationship quality of the new couple (e.g., Buunk and Mutsaers 1999; Knox and Zusman 2001). Another critical element in marriage education with stepcouples, therefore, is the inclusion of information on successful co-parenting strategies. Substantial empirical evidence shows that both a highly negative and a highly involved relationship with a former spouse negatively affects the new couple's relationship quality (e.g., Buunk and Mutsaers 1999; Knox and Zusman 2001). Emotionally divorcing and establishing appropriate boundaries with a former spouse or partner are essential elements for healthy remarriages (Weston and Macklin 1990). High-conflict co-parenting relationships also negatively affect children and may result in children's negative behaviors (Amato 2000). Therefore, children's negative behaviors are just as likely to be attributable to post-separation/divorce adjustment issues and conflict between parents as they are to stepfamily adjustment issues. As previously noted, children's negative behaviors can negatively impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship, which in turn, negatively impacts the marital relationship.

**The quality of co-parenting relationships is shown to impact relationship quality of the new couple.**

Research on co-parenting relationships indicates that the quality of the relationship is enhanced when individuals communicate unemotionally in

a “business-like” manner; when they use neutral mediators; when they use supportive language; when they honor agreements; when they use written communication; when they maintain privacy regarding other aspects of their lives; and when they actively support their child’s connection to the other parent. It is critical that program content in marriage education for stepcouples include information and skill-building that promote a cooperative, business-like relationship with a former spouse or partner in order to prevent or alter the negative impact of an unhealthy former partner relationship on the current couple relationship. This may include (a) practices in nondefensive listening and nonconfrontational communication, (b) strategies for having “business” meetings regarding the children’s schedules, needs, etc., and (c) awareness of “pitfalls” or “games” that may lead to co-parenting conflict.

Educators should also be prepared to acknowledge the experience of having multiple co-parents in the stepfamily system as this situation appears to be quite prevalent among lower-income families (Ooms and Wilson 2004). Recommendations for how to navigate these relationships and promote positive co-parenting relationships are the same regardless of whether an individual has one co-parenting relationship or five. Marriage educators may best address co-parenting relationships by implementing learning objectives that enable the participants to:

- understand the importance of positive co-parenting relationships for the well-being of their children and their marriage;
- understand and use co-parenting strategies that maintain privacy between households; support a non-emotional, “business-like” connection between co-parents; enhance nonconflictual communication; and support the child’s relationship with each parent; and,
- be able to identify their strengths as individuals and as a couple in this area and specific areas of challenge that will require further work and focus.

Stepfamily relationships encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to distinctive challenges facing stepcouples, thus program content should address each of these core areas. The four key areas of program content— negotiating roles and rules, promoting realistic expectations, strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and navigating relationships with children’s other parent(s) – and the suggested learning objectives serve as a basic structure for areas critical to the formation of healthy relationships marriages in stepfamilies.

### **Minority or immigrant stepcouples**

Because empirical studies to date have not focused on diverse samples of stepfamilies, information is provided from clinical observations and qualitative interviews with ethnically diverse stepcouples (Berger 1998). Among immigrant families, those from a country of origin that has similar levels of divorce and Western norms (e.g., Israel) appear to function similarly to predominant culture Americans in stepfamilies. When country-of-origin norms emphasize conventionalism and traditionalism (e.g., China), immigrant stepfamilies may be much more likely to disguise their stepfamily status and impose first family roles on stepfamily members (Berger 1998). When the country of origin is highly religious (e.g., Ireland, Latin American countries, and most Middle Eastern countries) stepfamily status also may be stigmatizing. In these situations, educators may have difficulty with recruitment of and/or identification of



“invisible” stepcouples. If identified, these stepcouples may have the most difficulty with altering negative views about stepfamilies and understanding that stepfamilies can operate differently than first families and be successful. In addition, some of these stepcouples from more traditional countries of origin may not subscribe to the idea that nonresidential biological parents should remain involved with their children and that stepparents should ease into a parenting role. Because of cultural pressures, the biological parent may abdicate his (in most cases, the father) parental role and the stepparent may assume a primary parental role very quickly. Educators should be sensitive to these cultural norms.

Scholars also assert that when working with African-American stepcouples, educators should consider both socio-historical context and current family practices. It has been suggested that acceptance of the stepfamily structure may be comparatively less of a strain for African-American stepcouples. Black families bring with them a legacy of a communal philosophy, permeability of external boundaries, informal adoption, and role flexibility (Berger 1998). It appears that some salient issues among higher-resource, white stepcouples may not be as relevant among African-American stepcouples, for example, difficulties with norming the practice of parenting someone else’s child or the parenting of a nonresidential child. These issues may not be as pertinent among African-American couples because kinship ties are not necessarily dictated by bloodlines and movement of children from one household to another and shared parenting responsibility among multiple parents are common. The African-American community began developing coping strategies for such circumstances in the context of slavery (Boyd-Franklin 1989; Skolnick and Skolnick 1992).

Program content, therefore, should not assume difficulties with the concept of multiple parents, difficulties with parenting nonresidential children, or a negative view of complex families. Instead programs may focus on affirming and/or enhancing strategies for effective co-parenting among multiple parents, involvement in parenting nonresidential children, and reinforcing positive views of complex families. Another consideration, though, is that because of these readily accepted norms of parenting nonbiological children, it may be that African-American stepparents move more quickly (or immediately) into primary parental status. It is not clear whether this is functional or dysfunctional, as empirical studies have not documented comparisons of approaches in African-American stepfamilies. Without clear empirical guidance, it would still seem that the recommendation to ease into a primary parental role could be used until further studies indicate otherwise. Clinicians note that, in general, the recommendations derived from empirical studies of stepfamilies are useful for African-American stepfamilies as well (Berger 1998).

### **Implementing programs for stepcouples**

Following are some suggestions for issues to consider when targeting stepcouples in family life education. These strategies, coupled with research-based, theoretically sound materials, can serve to improve the experience and development of stepfamilies in family life education programs.

**Recruitment.** Educators know that the cliché “if you build it, they will come” is not necessarily true in family life or marriage education. Despite the prevalence of couples in stepfamilies, many may not willingly or knowingly self-identify as stepfamily couples (e.g., Visher and Visher 1996). It may be because of the negative stigma attached to stepfamilies that still persists in our



culture or it may be that couples simply do not think of themselves as any different from first family couples (Coleman, Ganong, and Chanel 1994). Educators may need to actively elicit information that identifies a couple as a stepcouple. Recruitment and retention efforts may also be enhanced with the use of “like” facilitators, supplemental marriage education, and the involvement of children and teenagers.

**Group homogeneity.** Indications are that potential participants in family life education programs feel most comfortable with others like them. This may be especially true for couples in stepfamilies because of the negative stigma commonly associated with them. Although program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, effectiveness will likely be enhanced if couples forming stepfamilies participate in a homogeneous group. Similarly, it may be useful for at least one facilitator (if co-facilitators are used) to have experience in a stepfamily.

**Supplemental marriage education.** Curricula that address the unique needs of couples in stepfamilies need not serve as a substitute for general marriage education curricula. Indications are that couples in stepfamilies need both. Remember, no evidence suggests that processes involved in healthy first marriages are unimportant in remarriages. It is probably best to think of stepcouples as having “compounded needs.” Educators may address these either by having stepcouples participate in a group together or by having stepcouples attend general marriage education sessions with a mixed group of couples, and then break out in later sessions to address stepcouple-specific topics with other stepcouples.

**Involve children/teens.** Because children, especially teens, play a vital role in the overall functioning of the stepfamily, we can assume that couple functioning is enhanced in stepfamilies when preadolescents and adolescents learn about stepfamily development and common issues, as well as learn effective communication skills, anger management, and conflict de-escalation strategies. This is consistent with the family systemic approaches often used in therapy (see Nichols and Swartz 2001). Educators should consider methods for delivering educational services to children in stepfamilies, either via their parents (e.g., take-home information) or through participation in a parallel educational program. Marriage educators may want to partner with experienced youth development leaders in these efforts.

## Conclusion

Couples in stepfamilies could be a significant portion – if not the majority– of the population served by relationship/marriage educators. Research indicates that these couples face unique issues not addressed by general marriage education curricula. The functioning of couples in stepfamilies is inextricably tied to the overall functioning and development of the stepfamily. Educators have access to research-based information and materials that address the skills and attitudes observed among successful couples in stepfamilies including negotiating roles and rules, promoting realistic expectations, strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and navigating relationships with children’s other parent(s). This information is best used preventively. A list of several curricula is currently available for educational work with stepfamilies in Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) and from the National Stepfamily Resource Center ([www.stepfamilies.info](http://www.stepfamilies.info)).

## Education Equals Prevention

Pioneers in the field of intervention with couples in stepfamilies, John and Emily Visser (1996) found education to be the highest need for couples in stepfamilies and suggested that *many couples would not reach the level of clinical need if education on stepfamily dynamics and development were provided preventively*. Relationship/marriage educators can provide a valuable service to couples forming stepfamilies by distinguishing them from non-stepfamily couples and offering additional program content specific to their needs.





## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER 7: Working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences

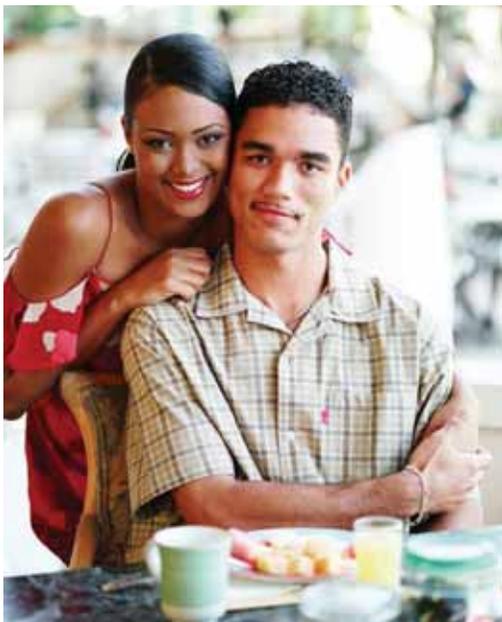
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#### Introduction

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, educators are being asked to develop and implement programming that will benefit these ever new and growing populations. This chapter will provide knowledge and resources to address that need. The objectives of this chapter are (1) to provide educators with information on learning about and partnering with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences, and (2) to provide ideas about how relationship and marriage education might be different for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences.

...spend time with prospective audiences to develop partnerships to learn what people value.



Extension educators with the Cooperative State Research, Education Extension Service (CSREES) have directives concerning serving individuals and families in the nation, states, and territories. There are several documents that provide edicts about serving *all* people in our communities proportionately, including low-resource and culturally diverse populations (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1992). In addition, Extension educators need to develop partnerships with members of low-resource and culturally diverse audiences when developing and implementing programming (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges 2002). Finally, educators need to draw on what Extension has done historically, which is to spend time with prospective audiences to develop partnerships to learn what people value (Schauber and Castania 2001). Many Extension educators work in communities that are more culturally diverse and more complex than they were in the early days of Extension, but the principle is the same. These directives serve as backdrop for the work we are describing.

## Low-resource audiences

Relationship and marriage education can be of tremendous benefit to low-resource audiences. At the same time, there are multiple barriers to making marriages work because of the stresses that these audiences face. In addition, Extension educators historically have had limited success in getting low-resource couples to participate in relationship education. The term “low-resource” rather than “low-income” will be used to describe this population in this chapter. However, many individuals and families who are poor or have low incomes are very resourceful. Many are not limited-resource in the sense that they have rich networks of support and are very good at meeting their basic needs with little money.

**The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.** The *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* (McLanahan et al. 2003) provides an excellent research base for thinking about low-resource relationship and marriage education. The research team for the fragile families study has defined a *fragile family* as an unmarried, low-income couple with a new baby. At the time of the baby’s birth, the couple is living together or romantically involved with each other. This definition is important because the researchers showed that for the majority of these families, the couples were no longer together by the time the baby reached two years of age. Something happened over time that prevented these families from forming.

Data from the 1997 National Survey of American Families (Urban Institute 2005) showed that as children get older, father involvement declined sharply. By the end of their first year, almost 30 percent of these children live with their mother only, 27 percent live in a fragile family, and 38 percent live with two biological married parents. By the time the children reached their teens, 59 percent lived with their mother only, 5 percent in a fragile family, and 19 percent with two biological married parents. To put it simply, two factors were contributing to this increase in single parent families: (1) fragile families were not forming; and (2) married families were dissolving, hence, the use of the term “fragile,” which is meant to denote potential but also a great vulnerability in these poor families (Fragile Families Study 2003; McLanahan et al. 2003).

Based on these early patterns, the *Fragile Family and Child Wellbeing Study* was implemented (McLanahan et al. 2003) primarily to learn more about these couples. The study was intended to inform policies and programs to help these families realize their family formation goals. Researchers are following a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in the United States between 1998 and 2000. The study has also oversampled for births to unmarried couples. Early and subsequent findings from this study have created a great deal of interest in offering relationship and marriage education to low-income, unmarried parents (Carlson and McLanahan 2005; Seefeldt and Smock 2004). Importantly, the findings show that 82 percent of fathers are highly engaged with their children and partner at the child’s birth. Both fathers and mothers reported high hopes for their relationship and their future as a family at this time. The researchers have called this a “magic moment” and a “reachable moment” when unmarried couples are committed to each other and optimistic about the future.

## Case study

Diane and Kevin recently had a baby girl. Diane and the baby live with her mother in a trailer, and she is finishing up high school this year. Kevin also lives with his parents. Neither of their families has much money, but they give a great deal of emotional support to their children. Kevin really wants to marry Diane. He says that he loves her and the baby, and he wants to live with them full-time. Kevin works part-time at a gas station. He did not finish high school; he found the reading and math very difficult. Kevin does not have enough money to rent a place for him and Diane to live together. Kevin’s parents have invited Diane and the baby to live with them in their house until they have enough money to get a place of their own. However, Diane is unsure of this arrangement. She views Kevin’s parents as “pushy” and “opinionated.” Diane is happy living with her mother, but is frustrated because she would like to live with Kevin, too.

Diane and Kevin probably sound like people that Extension serves with nutrition education, parenting, and other family programs. They have a desire to get married or live together as a family, but they do not have the financial resources to do so. Their lack of money relates to working in low-wage jobs and not having finished high school. How might a couple like Diane and Kevin be helped through relationship and marriage education? Efforts were made to address this question, and the Caring for my Family curriculum resulted (Michigan State University Extension 2003). This curriculum was designed to help unmarried, new parents make healthy decisions about their relationships, and give them the skills to work together to raise their childrens. Most marriage education curricula available at the time were developed for middle-class, European American populations who did not face the issues that Diane and Kevin faced.

Both [low-income, unmarried] fathers and mothers [report] high hopes for their relationship and their future as a family at [the child's birth].

As a result, intervening with unmarried parents at or near the time of a child's birth may offer the best chance for success (McLanahan et al. 2003). If new parents can learn the skills and attitudes for a healthy couple relationship, they might be able to better manage conflict and avoid other difficulties that lead to relationship dissolution. However, these interventions need to go beyond offering skill-building for a healthy couple relationship.

**Barriers to marriage.** Diane and Kevin, whose relationship was described above, faced several barriers to marrying and living together as a family. The case study showed that Diane still needed to complete high school and Kevin had low-wage, part time work. The fragile families study (Fragile Families Study 2003; Haskins, McLanahan and Donohue 2005) has also revealed that couples like Diane and Kevin face many additional barriers to attaining and sustaining a stable marriage including:

- Mothers and fathers both have low human capital. They lack the education and training to obtain jobs that pay a livable wage.
- The employment they are able to obtain is unstable and pays low wages.
- They have health problems or substance abuse problems that interfere with their ability to work and maintain healthy family life.
- A parent may have children by several different partners, none of whom are spouses, leading to step family issues.
- Parents report relationship problems related to infidelity and high levels of conflict and violence.

These barriers show that most of these couples need more than relationship education to create a stable marriage and family. Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson (2004) conservatively estimated that about one-third of all fragile families would benefit from relationship and marriage education alone. For the remaining two-thirds, a Marriage Plus Approach is needed (Ooms and Wilson 2004). In addition to relationship education, participants would be involved in a comprehensive program that continues their education, provides employment assistance, addresses mental and physical health problems, and deals with challenges of having children with other partners.

..about one-third of all fragile families would benefit from relationship and marriage education alone. For the remaining two-thirds, a Marriage Plus Approach is needed.

**What has been learned about working with fragile families?**

In the last few years, marriage and relationship education programs have begun to be developed and tested for fragile families. Although few of these intervention studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals, promising practices are beginning to emerge to guide this work (Ooms and Wilson 2004; Shirer et al. 2004). These practices are described below.

**Determine realistic goals for the program you are designing.** It is important to set realistic and flexible goals for what can be accomplished. For example, we learned that for many couples we have worked with, marriage was not a realistic or even safe goal for them. Instead of focusing on getting people married, focus on helping them build the interpersonal and personal life skills that build the foundation of a healthy relationship.

**Focus your educational efforts on a specific target audience.** It is also important to consider the target audience when offering relationship and marriage education. In addition to considering an audience with limited financial means, also consider race and ethnicity, community, and other differences. As well, consider a Marriage Plus Approach by including not only relationship education but other services as well that are needed to build strong and healthy families.

**Be attentive to domestic violence concerns.** An important consideration when working with any target audience on relationship and marriage education is the issue of domestic violence. It is strongly recommended that a relationship is developed with the local community's domestic violence program and that a screening process and protocol be established for addressing domestic violence issues when they arise.

#### **Finding and testing innovative approaches to recruiting participants.**

Based on information gleaned from pilot testing of the *Caring for my Family* program (Michigan State University Extension 2003), many strategies may prove useful for recruiting and working with low-resource audiences in relationship and marriage education programs:

- Use men, including former program participants, to recruit men to sign up for the class. Consider how the men will be involved in the program if you are not accustomed to having them in family life programs.
- Secure a time and location that fits the needs of your participants and helps them to feel comfortable. This may not be the local human services office, but could be a church or someone's home.
- Build partnerships with community agencies that can provide referrals to your program. If you are new at offering relationship and marriage education to low-resource couples, spend some time explaining what the program is designed to do and designed NOT to do. Even trusted community partners can be skeptical at first. Thus, building relationships with agencies that serve that population will be extremely useful.
- Examine other programs that are currently offered to low-resource families. Extension also has nutrition education or money management programs, and participants in these programs might also be interested in relationship and marriage education. Also consider offering relationship and marriage education in conjunction with parenting or childbirth education.
- Invite members of the target audience to a focus group where they examine the curriculum and other materials that will be used. Have them critique the materials and then modify them based on their critique. If possible, provide refreshments and compensate them for their time and expertise.

#### **Selecting and training facilitators who can connect with the target audience.**

Quality of instruction makes or breaks any educational program. Extension, through its work with low-resource audiences, has learned that instruction needs to be warm, personal, engaging, interactive, and experiential. In



addition, facilitators who can serve as positive role models for the participants and can see their strengths and assets are essential. Having a sense of humor, including the ability to laugh at oneself, is also effective. It is also important to have male co-facilitators and to have men involved in leadership roles by partnering with a local fathering program or a faith-based group that facilitates male involvement. Last, educators need to be aware of their limitations and avoid crossing the line of counselor or therapist. Community referral sources need to be in place for participants who need support beyond what the educator is able to deliver.

### **Working with culturally diverse audiences**

Culturally diverse audiences usually have not had good experiences with the dominant European American, middle-class component of society; therefore, extra efforts need to be made in working with these audiences. Developing partnerships is important in effectively reaching not only low-resource audiences but also diverse populations. A significant distrust of the dominant culture may exist in culturally diverse populations. Leadership also needs to be shared and partnerships formed with those who have the most relevant information and who operate at a level close to the issues (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges 2002; Skogrand 2004).

**Developing partnerships is important in effectively reaching not only low-resource audiences but also diverse populations.**

Most Extension educators would agree that when providing programming in traditional ways, they typically do not have participation from diverse audiences. Even when educators deliberately advertise to diverse audiences, typically European American, middle-class attendees are attracted to the programs. What are educators doing wrong? Why don't the intended audiences come? Educators are likely not developing and implementing programming that is meeting the diverse audience's needs or that is consistent with their cultural values. Therefore, educators must learn about the audience they wish to serve in order to create programming that is culturally meaningful and relevant.

**Strategies for learning about a diverse audience.** There are several strategies that are useful in learning about an audience (Skogrand 2004):

- Read about the targeted population. The reading could include journal articles, books, and online materials. The field of marriage and family therapy has produced several books about values in various cultures. Authors such as McGoldrick (1998) and Sue and Sue (2003) and have provided overviews of various cultures. McAdoo (2007) and DeGenova (1997) have also written books about family ethnicity. Articles such as those of Anguiano and Kawamoto (2003) also provide information about cultural groups.
- Reading scholarly literature might be a place to start, but it is only the beginning. Every group served has values and needs that are unique within a local community. Therefore, educators must learn about the population locally, as well. For example, read newspapers created by and for the targeted population. To pick up on cultural values and practices, attend cultural events and celebrations to observe interactions between men and women, couples, and adults and children, for example.



- Visit locations frequented by the targeted population. For example, visiting locations such as grocery stores, market places, galleries, and restaurants can help an educator understand foods that are eaten, cultural influences, and history. These things all have an impact on relationships and family life.
- Identify a *cultural guide*, someone representing the diverse audience, who can teach about and help the educator enter the community. A formal or informal relationship can be developed with one or more cultural guides. For example, an individual may have an occasional, informal relationship with a person who answers questions. A more formal arrangement that includes regular meetings might also be important. In some cases, depending on the time involved and the relationship, the cultural guide should be compensated for his or her time and knowledge. This compensation should be appropriate within the person's culture. In some cultures, money is not considered an appropriate gift to show appreciation; rather, giving an item of value within that culture may be more appropriate. Some individuals from some cultural groups are very willing to teach others about their culture and others are not. There are no clear-cut guidelines for how to find cultural guides, but they are likely to emerge as the other strategies are pursued. An attitude of respect for the culture and the cultural guide's way of teaching are important. Let the cultural guide teach in the way he or she chooses to teach, which may be the way that teaching is done in that culture. In some cultures, teaching is done through storytelling, and questions are not answered directly. If the Extension educator has a desire to learn and gain an appreciation for the richness of a specific culture, a member of the diverse audience will most likely emerge as a teacher.



In summary, all of this learning must occur with an attitude of respect. Sometimes an educator needs to observe and not participate in events (e.g., pow wows; Cinco de Mayo) because he or she does not understand the cultural significance of the activity. It is also important to know that learning takes time, and that it will continue for the duration of a relationship with a community.

..the educational model preferred by members of the dominant culture might not be appropriate for other audiences.

**Learning may be different.** As an educator learns about a diverse population, he or she might begin to ask questions about how learning might affect the creation of a program. Educators are often very comfortable with participants sitting around a table with the educator providing information. PowerPoint slides might be used; coffee breaks might be included. A typical format might be for the educator to provide information, followed by equal time for a discussion by participants. Learning about a specific diverse audience through the strategies described so far may teach an educator that the educational model preferred by members of the dominant culture might not be appropriate for other audiences. Some questions one might ask after learning about a diverse population are:

1. How do members of this audience learn? For example, people in some cultures learn through storytelling, which is true in the American Indian culture.
2. Who participates in learning? For example, Latino couples are less likely to participate in relationship and marriage education if they have to leave their children at home (Skogrand, Hatch, and Singh in press).

3. Where does learning take place for this audience? As noted earlier, identify places for relationship and marriage education where the audience will feel comfortable and welcomed, such as schools or churches.

What has been provided is certainly not an exhaustive list of questions to be asked. This chapter might raise other questions for you as you think about providing programming focusing on relationship and marriage education.

### **Lack of research about relationships and marriage in diverse audiences**

As noted earlier, scholarly materials are available about *cultural themes and features* of diverse populations. However, very little *research* on marriage and family dynamics has been done with many culturally diverse populations. When research has been done, it usually compares a particular ethnic or low-resource population to European American, middle class couples and identifies what is wrong with the diverse population (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, and Gallardo-Cooper 2002). The research findings often do not describe the strengths present in these relationships or in the cultural or economic group that family life educators can capitalize on to help couples. Relationship and marriage education needs to validate the strengths of couple relationships and families, even though these strengths may clash with the values in the dominant culture (Santiago-Rivera et al.).

In addition, when research findings based on European American, middle-class couples are used to inform programming, education is not provided within a cultural context. As a result, couples from diverse populations may not attend, and if they do attend, they do not benefit. If members of diverse audiences do try to implement practices that are in conflict with strengths of their own populations, an educator can actually cause harm to the family because there can be a “cultural clash” that negatively affects family life. For example, if communication skills that are effective with the dominant culture are taught and they are different and clash with ways of communicating in the culturally diverse community, harm to that family system can be done. Currently, general cultural themes or features of the culture that are written about such as “family is an important value in the Latino culture” are often used to inform programming. Certainly this is helpful, but more research is needed about what makes families work in culturally diverse populations.

### **New research: Strong marriages in Latino culture**

A rare and recent study about Latino marriages provides an example of how research findings about a cultural group can have implications for developing educational programming for a diverse audience (Skogrand, Hatch, and Singh in press). The goal of the study was to better understand what makes strong marriages in Latino culture in order to inform programming for other Latino couples who want to have strong relationships and marriages. Based on interviews with 25 Latino couples who had strong marriages, three major themes emerged and are summarized below along with implication for relationship and marriage education.

**Children and family are central.** Forty-seven of the 50 individuals in this study indicated that children were a key component in making the marriage strong, the “glue” that keeps the marriage and family together. One man in the study said, “a man can leave his wife, but he can’t leave his children,” so one needs to find a way to solve problems and not divorce. In addition, these couples made it clear that they typically did not do things as a couple,



they only did things as a family. Thus, these couples did not talk about their marriage separate from family life, but rather their couple life was subsumed within the context of family life. Because the family is so important to members of this culture, educators need to reframe programming as being for the family. Content may be about how family members rely on and support each other, which can strengthen marriages and family life. In addition, educational programs need to provide opportunities that allow Latino couples to bring their children with them.

**The importance of communication.** Forty-five out of the 50 participants identified communication as a necessary component of having a strong marriage. These couples emphasized the importance of spending time together and talking often which would help them understand each other better. This understanding also led to greater love between them. They also indicated that couples needed to talk in order to solve problems and make decisions. These findings suggest that content about communication should be included in programming. The couples in the study did not talk about “I” messages or focus on listening skills. Instead, they simply talked about spending time together so they could talk to each other, better understand each other, and the result would be increased love between the husband and the wife.

**The role of religion.** Thirty-seven out of the 50 participants stated that religion was a key component in having a healthy marriage. Religion contributed to a healthy marriage by providing guidance to stay on the right path in marriage. It also provided spiritual strength to cope with crises, and it helped participants stay committed to their spouses. Because religion is an important value in Latino culture, relationship and marriage education for Latino couples might include content about how couples benefit from affiliations with religious institutions or how a spiritual connection can be helpful in marriage and family life. As well, programming should be planned in partnership with spiritual leaders. Religious leaders who serve Latinos appear to be trusted community leaders, and religious organizations might be trusted meeting places for couples.

## Conclusion

Providing relationship and marriage education for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences creates new challenges for us as Extension educators. Needs, values, and teaching techniques are likely to be different than our traditional way of delivering educational programming. It is, however, within our historical mission to meet those challenges by doing what Extension educators have always done, which is getting to know our audiences. The future will require that we use creative and innovative approaches to working with low-resource and ever increasing culturally diverse audiences.





## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

### CHAPTER 8: Building community collaborations to support healthy and stable marriages

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#### Introduction

The involvement of the community, in general, and particularly stakeholders and the target audience, is an important element in the development and implementation of quality programs (Dumka et al. 1995). For example, these persons can help identify the needs of the community as well as the resources or barriers that can influence the program's impact. They can also serve as sounding boards for assessing the quality of the program and how the community will receive it.

From an ecological and developmental perspective (Bogenschneider 1996), the community may be a viable partner in resolving the challenges associated with forming and sustaining healthy marriages. In other words, the community can help define the problem of programmatic need, identify effective strategies for addressing these needs, and generate various resources to assist in carrying out and evaluating your program. More importantly, involving the community in planning “helps ensure that prevention programs fit the community, promotes local ownership, and engenders commitment to seeing that the program is implemented and maintained” (Bogenschneider 1996, 132). This chapter will describe the role and importance of community collaborations, their advantages and challenges, as well as effective strategies for developing sustainable community collaborations that support healthy relationships and marriages.

#### Sustaining community-based programs

As educators, we strive to maintain, or sustain, quality programs that yield positive impacts. In fact, program sustainability, defined as the capacity of programs to provide continued benefits to families and communities, is contingent on seven major elements (Mancini and Marek 2004). These elements, illustrated in Figure 1, include:

- Competent leadership, or the ability to clearly develop a program's vision and objectives, perform regular needs assessments, facilitate ongoing program planning and adaptation, secure funding, support and supervise staff, and foster healthy communication among stakeholders and collaborators;

- Intentional planning for continued funding from diverse sources;
- The inclusion of committed, qualified staff (or volunteers) in the development and execution of the program, particularly persons who are from the community being served;
- An ability to effectively evaluate the processes and outcomes of the program;
- A clear understanding of the community needs and resources as well as the inclusion of community members in the program;
- The ability of a program to adapt in response to changes in the community needs; and of particular focus in this chapter,
- Strong and effective collaborations with relevant stakeholders who actively support the goals of the program and have clearly defined responsibilities.

**Figure 1. The seven major elements of program sustainability**



Source: Mancini and Marek (2004)

### **The community saturation model**

Specific to relationship and marriage education programming, there are various approaches to fostering sustainability that rely heavily on effective community collaborations. For example, local and state efforts are emerging across the country to facilitate what is referred to as a community saturation model of marriage education (Hawkins et al. 2004). The intent of this model is to recruit partners and leaders from within communities who will support marriage education efforts and “then flood the community with messages and opportunities to build and sustain healthy marriages” (Hawkins et al. 2004, 553). These initiatives strive to create cultural-level changes where marriage is viewed, not only as a private concern but also a public matter that impacts the well-being of the community. Hence, a community’s involvement in the development of programming is as important as its involvement in delivering and sustaining the message that the program is intending to convey; in this case, that healthy marriages are important!

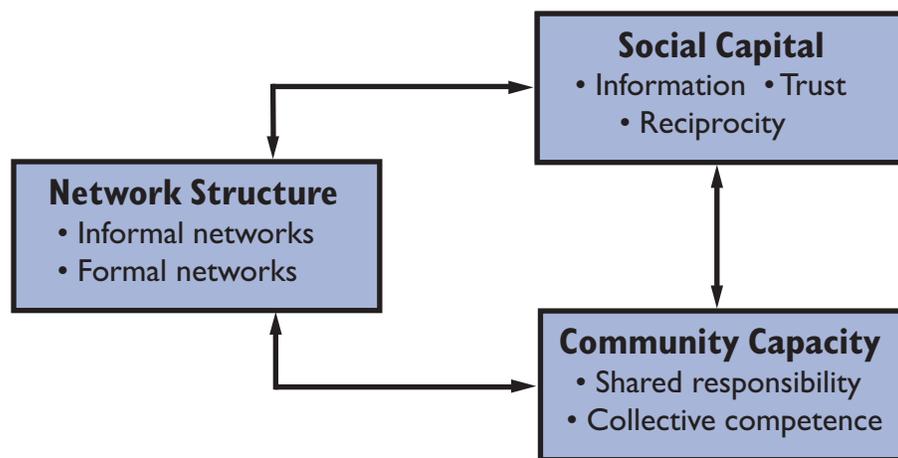
## Community social organization

Similar to what is accomplished through community saturation is what has been referred to as social organization or “the collection of values, norms, processes, and behavior patterns within a community that organize, facilitate, and constrain the interactions among community members” (Mancini, Martin, and Bowen 2003, 319). In the case of supporting healthy marriages, this would involve the process by which communities build and sustain healthy and stable marriages by creating a culture and support mechanisms to help individuals and couples acquire the necessary skills and resources to do so. Another way of thinking about social organization is to view it as a process that builds community assets or maximizes opportunities for individuals, families, and the community as a whole (Mancini, Bowen, and Martin 2005).

Mancini and his colleagues (2005) note that “social organization includes networks of people, the exchanges and reciprocity that transpire in relationships, accepted standards and norms of social support, and social controls that regulate behavior and interaction” (572). As illustrated in Figure 2, they discuss three key elements that affect social organization:

- Community networks composed of informal and formal relationships. Informal networks include those with work colleagues, friends, neighbors, and other voluntary relationships, and formal networks consist of associations between agencies and organizations. These networks are interrelated and each has the potential for strengthening the other.
- Social capital, a key component of community social organization. This is the accumulation of resources – including information, opportunities, and instrumental support – that are created through the reciprocity and trust that forms in these community networks.
- And last, community capacity, or the action component of social organization.

*Figure 2. The three elements of social organization*



Source: Mancini, Bowen, and Martin (2005)

Bowen, Martin, Mancini, and Nelson (2000) define community capacity as “the extent to which community members (a) demonstrate a sense of shared responsibility for the general welfare of the community and its members, and (b) demonstrate collective competence in taking advantage of opportunities for addressing community needs and confronting situations that threaten the safety and well-being of community members” (7). More specifically, they note that community capacity focuses on:

- A concern for both the community in general and for particular parts of the community;
- The degree of capacity, rather than simply the presence or absence of it;
- Taking action, rather than merely making statements about supporting the community;
- Seizing opportunities to take action as opposed to being reactive; and
- Incorporating action into normative everyday life situations as well as responding to situations of threat.

Hence, effective social organization yields community action where shared outcomes desired by community members are the result, and direction is given for “targeted application of resources to resolve issues and address concerns, as well as to achieve positive community goals” (Mancini et al 2005, 575).

A central element of social organization (and community saturation) that produces social capital and fosters community capacity to support healthy marriages, is the bringing together of formal and informal networks. The needs of couples (and families) cannot be fully addressed by any single entity. Examination of successful community marriage initiatives across the country (e.g., Doherty and Anderson 2004) shows that they include collaborators from various sectors of the community.

These partners, or stakeholders, assume clearly identified responsibilities and work together to actively support a shared vision that leads to helping couples and marriages grow and develop in healthy ways. Also, as noted earlier, including couples and other volunteers from the target community is critical to building community capacity that supports healthy marriages. For more information about important formal networks to approach, review The Lewin Group resources on coalition building for a community healthy marriage initiative (<http://www.lewin.com/Spotlights/LewinHP/Marriage.html>).

### **Defining community collaboration**

It may be helpful to clarify certain characteristics that define a collaborative. Although community groups may be working toward supporting healthy relationships and marriages, the extent to which groups share resources and develop a common identity or shared vision may vary. As shown in Table 1, Hogue (1994) defines five levels of relationships that differ in their purpose, structure, and process. These relationships vary along a continuum from low to high integration:

- Networks function primarily to exchange information and foster communication;
- Alliances are a bit more formal in process and serve to reduce duplication of efforts;

### **Possible Community Collaborators**

- Government
- Social Services
- Cooperative Extension
- Head Start agencies
- Faith community
- Housing/Urban Development
- Family Services
- Other agencies or groups
- Community action agencies relevant to your community
- School/youth programs
- Volunteers
- Public health and WIC
- Couples

Table 1. Community linkages – choices and decisions

Levels	Purpose	Structure	Process
<b>Networking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue and common understanding</li> <li>• Clearinghouse for information</li> <li>• Create base of support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-hierarchical</li> <li>• Loose/flexible link</li> <li>• Roles loosely defined</li> <li>• Community action is primary link among members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low-key leadership</li> <li>• Minimal decision making</li> <li>• Little conflict</li> <li>• Informal communication</li> </ul>
<b>Cooperation or alliance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Match needs and provide coordination</li> <li>• Limit duplication of services</li> <li>• Ensure tasks are done</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central body of people as communication hub</li> <li>• Semi-formal links</li> <li>• Roles somewhat defined</li> <li>• Links are advisory</li> <li>• Group leverages/raises money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitative leaders</li> <li>• Complex decision making</li> <li>• Some conflict</li> <li>• Formal communications within the central group</li> </ul>
<b>Coordination or partnership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share resources to address common issues</li> <li>• Merge resource base to create something new</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central body of people consists of decision makers</li> <li>• Roles defined</li> <li>• Links formalized</li> <li>• Group develops new resources and joint budget</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous leadership but focus in on issue</li> <li>• Group decision making in central and subgroups</li> <li>• Communication is frequent and clear</li> </ul>
<b>Coalition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems</li> <li>• Develop commitment for a minimum of three years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All members involved in decision making</li> <li>• Roles and time defined</li> <li>• Links formal with written agreement</li> <li>• Group develops new resources and joint budget</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared leadership</li> <li>• Decision making formal with all members</li> <li>• Communication is common and prioritized</li> </ul>
<b>Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks</li> <li>• Build interdependent system to address issues/opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus used in shared decision making</li> <li>• Roles, time, and evaluation formalized</li> <li>• Links are formal and written in work assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership high, trust level high, productivity high</li> <li>• Ideas and decisions equally shared</li> <li>• Highly developed communication</li> </ul>

Source: Teresa Hogue (1994)

- Partnerships involve sharing helpful resources to support each others' interests and goals and some joint planning and activity, while still maintaining autonomy;
- Coalitions bring members together to work toward complementary goals through coordinated efforts and sharing of resources; and
- Collaboratives entail working toward a common vision, jointly taking action, and sharing the decision-making process.

In some cases collaboration is the ideal relationship, while in other cases a partnership or coalition may be more appropriate. What's important is that members understand and agree upon the mission or purpose of the group. In the remainder of this chapter I refer to collaborations, but similar ideas and strategies presented could apply to other forms of community relationships.

### **Advantages and challenges of community collaboration**

Building community collaborations to support healthy marriages and families offers several advantages. For many couples, particularly among low-income populations (Ooms and Wilson 2004), the issues and risk factors that inhibit movement to or the sustainability of a healthy marriage are interrelated, such as employability, economic stability, health concerns, relationship maturity (e.g., skills and knowledge needed to develop/maintain a relationship). Working together helps the community not only deliver a consistent message (e.g., that marriage is important and that healthy marriages require work) and develop joint goals and objectives to convey that message, but creates opportunities to reach couples through a variety of channels. Collaborations link available community resources and produce new resources that make it possible to support healthy marriages.



**Collaborations link available community resources and produce new resources that make it possible to support healthy marriages.**

Building community collaborations can also be challenging. Disagreements are likely to arise in formalizing project goals and carrying out strategies to achieve the collaborative's mission. Turf and boundary issues may exist regarding who specializes in the delivery of certain services. Competing demands for other worthy projects in the community coupled with limited funding to carry out these projects may impede collaboration. And, opposing perspectives and opinions about priority needs or strategies can create friction within the collaboration and delay progress. Hence, it is important (yet challenging) to find the balance between broad community representation and having people who work well together.

### **Composition of community collaborations**

When selecting community partners, it is important to be inclusive to ensure representation from the community being served as well as the diverse services available for couples and families. Working with a core leadership group or steering committee – which is also diverse and representative – to think strategically about which agencies or partners to involve, in what order, and the best way to approach them is an important first step (The Lewin Group 2003). Here are some questions to consider in determining the composition of your collaboration (<http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov>):

- What skills, information, and resources do we need?
- What resources already exist in the community?
- How can we reach stakeholders?
- What expertise and services can other groups and organizations contribute?
- What members of the community can help bring credibility to our cause?
- Do members represent a variety of different constituent groups or cultural perspectives?

As noted earlier, recruiting a broad and representative number of partners to work together will enable the collaboration to effectively address community issues around marriage as well as access and attract a great number and variety of resources to support the collaboration's efforts. Importantly, a broad membership will increase the community's "buy in" because of the multiple perspectives contributing to the group's decision and action plan (The Lewin Group 2003). While some community members are natural partners already working on marriage enrichment issues, others may need to be approached carefully and sounded out to understand their issues and concerns (The Lewin Group 2003). Once you identify potential members to participate in the community collaboration, consider the following questions

(<http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov>):

- What can each potential member contribute (e.g., staff time, money, space, allies, data, media relations, credibility, skills)?
- Do the individuals represent a variety of different constituent groups or cultural perspectives? Are any groups or perspectives missing?
- Will certain organizations or individuals need incentives to join? What will they gain by joining the effort (e.g., increased skills, networking, access to policymakers)?
- What constitutes membership within the community partnership?

### **Making community collaborations work**

The Lewin Group (2003) provides a rather complete outline of the critical steps to follow in building a successful healthy marriage coalition and establishing a collaborative partnership among a diverse set of members. While each of these steps needs to be addressed, they do not need to be implemented in a particular order. Briefly, these steps include the following:

- Clearly define the core working group
- Assemble the broad membership
- Clearly define the leadership
- Clearly define the shared mission and vision, goals, and action steps
- Define structure, staffing, and communication
- Identify resources and funding sources
- Implement strategies and action plans to achieve the mission and goals
- Evaluate the work of the collaboration as it progresses
- Sustain the collaboration

The first two steps have been discussed already. I will briefly describe the remaining steps, but for more information and a list of questions to consider



in making sure the essential components of each step are addressed, visit <http://www.lewin.com/Spotlights/LewinHP/Marriage.htm>.

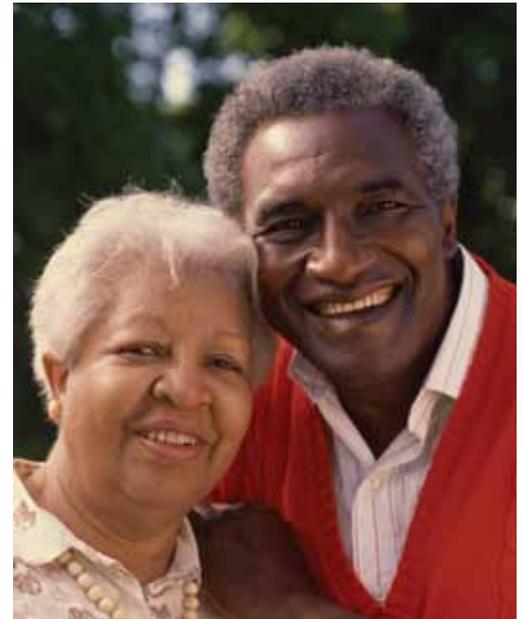
**Clearly defined leadership.** It is crucial to select a leader or a steering committee able to attend to the many aspects of organizational functioning, including convening meetings, communication, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and decision making. A good leader will also maintain the focus and momentum of the collaboration and facilitate and coordinate activities. The leader should be able to effectively negotiate between organizations and individuals with different agendas and assist in bringing conflicts to the surface, addressing those conflicts, and resolving them. Successful leaders will also demonstrate trustworthiness as well as establish trust among members of the collaboration and the community. Last, leadership should be shared or rotated, rather than falling on the shoulders of one or two individuals.

**Clear and shared mission, goals, and plan.** A successful collaboration is defined by its ability to accomplish a shared vision and meet its impact benchmarks. Thus, creating a clear mission that is shared by the members of the collaboration and to which everyone is highly committed is a critical step in achieving this success. There are several resources available to guide this process, and it may be advantageous to seek expertise from the community, including your local or state Cooperative Extension Service, to facilitate a workshop or retreat to cultivate the group's vision, short- and long-term goals, and action plans. The process should include the following steps (The Lewin Group 2003):

- State the **mission** to concisely describe what will be accomplished and why it is important. The mission should be outcome-oriented and use widely inclusive language to enroll potential new members and avoid limiting participation.
- Specify the **goals and objectives** to indicate what and how much will be accomplished by when. These should be realistic and include a combination of short- and long-term goals. Clearly specify the changes to be achieved that represent your goals and objectives.
- Identify **action steps** that specify which members will do which tasks by when. During this planning process identify **strategies** for how the work will be accomplished and try to anticipate potential challenges and obstacles. Create a plan that is flexible enough to respond to unanticipated changes in the community, resources (e.g., funding, staff support), or the composition of the collaboration. Periodically review your plan and analyze its effectiveness.

A successful collaboration is defined by its ability to accomplish a shared vision and meet its impact benchmarks.

**Structure, staffing, and communication.** To function efficiently and effectively, the collaboration should establish a **structure** that defines the procedures for building and sustaining collaborations within the community. This may include how members are identified and accepted, leadership is chosen, differences are resolved, decisions are made, and work and responsibilities are delegated. Pending the availability of funding, hiring **staff**



with strong organizational and communication skills and a connection with or understanding of the community can help organize, facilitate, and mobilize the collaboration. If funding is limited, recruit committed volunteers or use existing staff within partnering organizations. Last, open communication – both internally, among the collaboration’s members, and externally, with the broader community – is important to ensuring that a clear understanding of what the collaboration is attempting to accomplish and how exists, as well as engendering trust, commitment, and credibility. Allow for adequate time to network and develop these processes and relationships.

**Identify resources and funding.** Funding is needed to sustain the collaboration’s efforts of coordination, information exchange, resource development, and program deployment. Before seeking funding, consider for what purposes funding will be used (e.g., hire staff, pay for printing and mailings, support marketing activities, pay for projects or activities). Identify and build a diverse “portfolio” of funding through a variety of sources, including grants, fund-raising activities, in-kind support, private sector (e.g., businesses), foundations, membership dues, or other creative approaches to soliciting support. Note, however, that collaborations that cooperate only to seek funding are more likely to fail than collaborations that form as comprehensive community-wide responses to a problem (National Network for Collaboration 1995).

...collaborations that cooperate only to seek funding are more likely to fail than collaborations that form as comprehensive community-wide responses to a problem.

**Implement strategies and action plans.** In addition to establishing processes to achieve the collaboration’s mission and goals, take action on achieving the short- and long-term goals to fulfill the mission. Build on your successes in meeting small goals as you strive to achieve the next set of goals – celebrate small and big successes both within the collaboration and the broader community. Sharing the collaboration’s milestones and accomplishments can help engender feelings of success among the members, maintain momentum and energy, and help to continue to attract new members, resources, and support from within the community. Use media outlets to share these successes.

**Evaluation and documentation of impact.** Evaluation efforts are essential to monitoring progress related to the collaboration’s goals and objectives and to make modifications where necessary. Although a brief overview of what to evaluate is provided here, a thorough description of this process is beyond the scope of the current chapter (see Chapter 2). Collaborations would benefit from partnering with universities or other specialists to assist in evaluation and documentation of their accomplishments. Seek out existing resources that outline effective strategies for evaluating programs, in general, and, more specifically, collaborations. For example, the University of Wisconsin Extension has developed a compilation of such evaluation guides that are available on-line (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/index.html>).

Consistent with a logic model, evaluation efforts should assess process, outcomes, and impacts that coincide with the mission and goals of the collaborative. Evaluating **process** involves documenting and assessing the inputs, or the investments being made, and outputs, or the procedures, activities, and products produced. This may involve asking questions such as:



- Are the right people on board? What is the level of involvement?
- Are we working effectively together as a group? Are members satisfied?  
Are we achieving what we want?
- Are programs being implemented as planned?
- Are we using resources wisely?
- How can we sustain people's involvement?

**Outcomes** represent the desired conditional changes that the collaboration seeks to achieve that answer the question, “What was accomplished?” In other words, outcomes are the verifiable results of the activities and products delivered, and may include changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations of the participants and community. Last, **impacts**, the highest level of outcomes, include those results that usually take longer to achieve and have wider socioeconomic and environmental benefit (University of Wisconsin-Extension 1998). Impacts answer the question, “What were the long-range effects?” and are associated with the mission of the collaboration (e.g., reductions in divorce rates, fewer out-of-wedlock births, and healthy/stable families).

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

**Sustainability of the collaboration.** Effectively following the steps outlined in this chapter for building a collaboration should move communities towards achieving capacity to sustain efforts that support healthy and stable marriages. According to The Lewin Group (2003), a collaboration needs to develop a maintenance plan to sustain its

- Guiding vision and mission, and related goals and objectives.
- Basic governance structure and rules for operating within that framework or structure.
- Leadership and membership.
- Roles, responsibilities, and functions of members.
- Funding and public support.
- Visibility in the context of the broader community.

Instituting systems to provide sustained membership, resources, and strategic program planning will enable collaborative efforts to continue and for healthy and stable relationships to flourish.

## Conclusion

Making positive and sustainable impacts on current and future marriages is more likely to occur when the community is actively engaged. Effective community collaborations create cultures and support mechanisms that help individuals and couples acquire the necessary skills and resources to form healthy and stable marriages. This chapter provides ideas to help move communities forward in supporting healthy marriages. Use the resources specified here for more details on how to build and evaluate a collaboration. Reach out, build collaborations, and work together to make a difference in the quality of marriages and families in your community.



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