

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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Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

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1

Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Explain the impact of couple functioning on individual, family, and community well-being
- Articulate the rationale for addressing couple relationships in family life education
- Describe appropriate goals and approaches for relationships/marriage education

2

Embracing a “New” Area of Family Life Education

- This may seem like a “new” area, but there is actually a long history of providing family life education.
 - e.g., parent education, school readiness, family resource management
- There are some important considerations we must address for this “new beginning” in family life education.

3

Considerations

1. Are healthy 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 educational programs? Knowledge and skills that can be taught?

4

Considerations

4. Is there evidence of positive impact?
5. Are programmatic goals and implementation approach clearly linked to the research base?
6. Does leadership of my organization support offering relationship and marriage education?

5

Are Healthy Relationships and Marriages Related to Child and Family and Community Well-being?

- There is no one key link between healthy relationships and child, family, and community well-being.
- However, there are some empirically based predictors related to individual and family well-being.

6

What Factors are Related to Individual & Family Well-being?

- Access to education, jobs, child care, and health-care
- Safe communities with strong social networks
- Access to family life education and skills training

7

Healthy Couples, Healthy Children

- Better school performance and lower truancy and dropout rates
- Fewer emotional and behavioral problems
- Lower rates of substance abuse, criminal activity, and delinquent behaviors
- Lower rates of risky sexual behaviors and out-of-wedlock births
- Fewer sleep and health problems

8

Benefits for Children

- Family structure linked to parent involvement and parenting practices, particularly for fathers
 - Married fathers are more involved compared to non-married fathers
 - On average, higher quality parent-child relationships and parenting are found in married families compared to nonmarried families

9

Benefits of Healthy Marriages for Adults

- Lower stress levels
- Better healthy habits and practices
- Better mental health
- Better physical health
- Greater financial well-being

10

Benefits for the Workplace and Communities

Adults in healthy marriages:

- More likely to be homeowners
- Are better employees

11

Costs of Unstable Relationships and Marriages

- Work loss associated with marital problems is approximately \$6.8 billion/year
- 30% of sick time due to family conflict
- Costs of divorce = \$33.3 billion annually

12

Moving Beyond Comparison Studies

- Work with families with “where they are” so they can enhance their family dynamics
- Utilize research that examines elements of couple relationship process (i.e., “news you can use” in programming)

13

Important Linkages

- A large literature on associations between parenting and child outcomes.
- Level of adult couple conflict is linked to outcomes for children



14

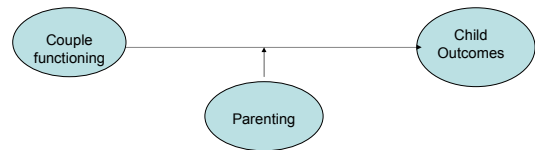
The “Second Generation” of Research

- Couple relationship, parenting practices, and child outcomes are interrelated.
- Quality of the couple relationship is linked to level of parental involvement
- Quality of the couple relationship is linked parenting practices.

15

Parenting Can “Buffer”

- Quality parenting and a strong parent-child bond can “buffer” or protect a child from the negative impact of an unhealthy couple relationship
- ***Implies that direct work on parenting skills and the parent-child bond is useful.***

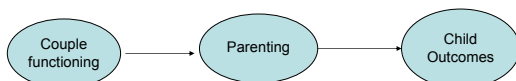


e.g., El Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004; post-divorce literature

16

Couple Functioning “Spills Over” into Parenting

- The quality of the couple relationship is not separate from the parent-child relationship.



17

The Spill-Over Effect

Elements of the couple relationship “spill over” into parenting, impacting child outcomes

- This is true for:
 - Married couples, non-married couples, post-divorce couples
 - Low-income couples; higher income couples
 - Ethnic majority couples; ethnic minority couples
 - Mothers’ parenting and fathers’ parenting
 - Young children, school-age children, and adolescents.

18

Findings on the Effects of “Spill Over”

- Studies have found that poor marital quality is associated with:
 - Lax control and monitoring, psychological control, parent rejection, inconsistent discipline, and hostile control
 - Increases in adolescents’ depression and conduct disorder
- However, studies have found that high marital quality is associated with
 - More positive parenting
 - Less punitive parenting practices

e.g., Buehler & Gerard (2002); Carlson & McLanahan (2004); Fauber, et al. (1990); Gonzales, et. al. (2000)

19

A “Picture” of Spill-Over

The spillover of affect from a couple interaction to a parenting interaction.

- Couples who had just had a pleasant conversation engaged in more positive co-parenting and parenting practices in a subsequent interaction with their child.
- Couples who had just had a conflictual interaction engaged in fewer positive and more negative co-parenting and parenting practices in a subsequent interaction with their child.

e.g., Kitzman (2000)

20

Co-Parenting

- Co-parenting refers to the level of support and cooperation between parents in regards to their parenting
- Work on couple functioning can be beneficial to co-parenting and parenting and promote child well-being.

21

Is it an Expressed Community Need?

- Even if providers recognize that family life education is an important to offer to the community, the community members must also recognize the importance of participating in these programs.

22

Community Needs/Interest

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

23

Fragile Families

Fragile Families:

Consists of poor children born outside of marriage whose two natural parents are working together to raise them – either by living together, or through frequent visitation.

24

In-depth Interviews with 75 Couples

Reported

- Holding a positive view of marriage
- Postponing marriage due to financial concerns and relationship problems

25

Facilitator Comments from Demonstration Projects

- Overwhelmingly positive responses
- Enjoyment and comfort with the curriculum
- *“Participants were more responsive to this curriculum and topics than any other program I’ve worked with”*
- *“We had some sessions where they didn’t want to leave”*
- *“They asked if they could keep coming back”*

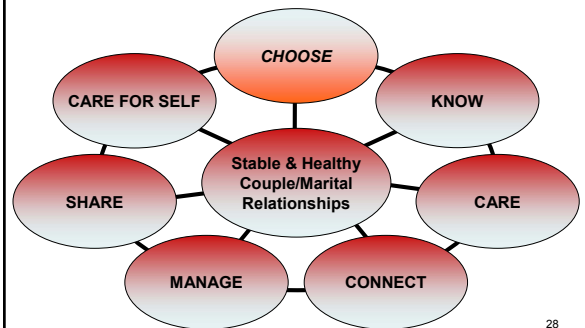
26

Is there a research base to inform educational programs? Are there knowledge and skills that can be taught?

- In order to move forward, there should be an assurance that the research and knowledge related to healthy couple functioning can be changed by educational efforts.
 - e.g., Can we demonstrate that these skills are teachable in an education setting?

27

Core Concepts Associated with Stable and Healthy Couple and Marital Relationships



28

Is There Evidence of Positive Impact?

- There is evidence that education and intervention efforts are impacting couples’ relationships.
- Research has shown the following programs to be successful:
 - marital therapy/education
 - parent education
 - marriage education

29

Adding Marital Therapy/Education to Parenting Interventions Led to Greater Positive Impacts

- Addressing marital and co-parenting issues along with parenting issues resulted in greater reduction of sons’ problem behaviors than parenting skills training alone
- The parenting intervention alone had positive impacts on child aggression. But parents who also received marital therapy showed significant improvements in parental communication, problem-solving skills, parenting satisfaction, and children’s knowledge about pro-social solutions to social problems

30

Couples Education at Time of Birth

- Showed sustained positive impacts
 - 3 years post-partum – no divorces in treatment group vs. 15% in comparison group.
 - 3.5 to 4 years post-partum – higher parent well-being and children's adjustment to kindergarten.
 - 6 years post-partum – higher marital satisfaction and adjustment for treatment group.

31

Maritally-focused vs. Parent-focused

- One study targeted parents of pre-K children and highlight the value of maritally-focused interventions for child outcomes.
 - Resulted in more positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships
 - Effects of this pre-school intervention extend to 4th grade

Cowan & Cowan (2005)

32

Results From Marriage Education Program with Low-resource Parents

Statistically significant *increases* in:

- Couple quality dimensions
 - Level of trust
 - Level of happiness in relationship
 - Individual empowerment
- Cooperative co-parenting
 - Better attitudes and practices
- Father Involvement

33

More Changes

- Statistically significant *decreases* were found in:
 - Individual distress level
 - Negative Couple Interaction
- Effect sizes ranged from .26 to .56
- Impact did not differ by attendance status (i.e., came together/came singly) or marital status
- Comparison subjects did not demonstrate a similar pattern of change across time

34

Participant Comments

- *I wish I'd had this class before...I know I was in an abusive, unhealthy relationship before*
- *It pulled me and my partner closer together...it gave me a better heart*
- *Me and my baby dad was not getting along until we started this class*

35

From One Young Mother:

"We've been to other programs that helped us with the baby – you know, childbirth, taking care of her, knowing what to do with her – and that's great – but this is the first time we've gotten to talk about **us** and how **we** get along and how **we** can be strong together – and we know working on that is really good for the baby, too."

36

Are Programmatic Goals and Implementation Approach Clearly Linked to the Research Base?

- The National Extension Relationships and Marriage Education Network has been working to assist this program with:
 - Who we should target
 - When should an individual or couple be targeted
 - What are the objectives or goals of this work

37

National Extension Relationships and Marriage Education Network

Vision:

- We envision individuals and couples preparing for, developing and enriching healthy relationships and marriages.

Mission:

- We provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice in the area of relationships and marriage education.

38

Appropriate Goals and Objectives

- Improved Individual Skills/Knowledge
- More positive relational behaviors
- Reduction or elimination of risk factors associated with unhealthy and unstable relationships
- Improved dyadic and family relationship quality

Goals do NOT include:

- The “prescription” of family structure alone
- Encouraging or coercing individuals to stay in abusive or harmful relationships

39

Marriage + Approach

- Help more children grow up in healthy, married families.
- When this isn’t possible, help parents – whether married, divorced, unmarried, separated or remarried – cooperate better in raising their children.
- Provide wrap around services or connect to other vital programs

40

Who should we target?

A broad range of target populations

Educational Program Targets

Youth	Singles	Pre-marital or newly married couples	Married New parents	Non-married new parents	“Step Couples”	Married couples	Co-parents

41

Target Youth

- Developmentally relevant – a “teachable moment” in the lifecycle
- Early prevention for later choices and behaviors
- Alter learned models that may be negative; reinforce positive learned models



42

Intervention:

- Youth at risk of dating violence
 - Nationally - 9.8% of teen girls and 9% of teen boys report being victims of physical violence in dating relationships



CDC (2001)

43

How?

- Additive Model
 - Stand-alone, but connected
- Blended Model
 - Family Life Education (e.g., individual life skills, parenting skills, intimate couple relationship skills, co-parenting relationship skills).

44

How Should We Design the Program Content and Approach?

- Use a development process to guide efforts
 - Start with research base and theoretical frame
 - Iterative, “action research” approach (Dumka, Roosa, Michaels & Suh, 1995)

45

Does the Leadership of My Organization Support Offering Relationship and Marriage Education?

- There are concerns about relationship and marriage education:
 - Can both heterosexual and homosexual be served?
 - Does relationship education promote participants to stay in abusive relationships?
 - Are staff equipped to provide this type of education?

46

Address Concerns/Misinformation

- Not promoting marriage as a prescription or solution
- Focus only on information and skill building, not therapy
- Invite a variety of audiences to participate
- Have the research evidence to support its inclusion

47

Summary

- Couples education is a vital area of family functioning.
- Important to combine parenting and couples education.
- An expressed community need.
- An empirical knowledge base from which to teach.
- Initial indications of positive program impact.

Addressing healthy relationships and marriage is consistent with any organizational mission that includes the promotion of child, family, and community well-being and quality of life.

48