

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Module 1*

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, Ph.D., CFLE

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist in Family Life, Auburn University, Alabama

Karen Shirer, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Michigan State University

Slide 1 – Introduction

Hello, and welcome to Module 1 of the Family Life Electronic Seminars Series, entitled “*What's Love Got To Do With It? The Role of Healthy Couple Relationships and Marriages in Promoting Child, Family, and Community Well-being*.” I am Francesca Adler-Baeder, Associate Professor in Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University in Alabama and State Extension Specialist in Family Life with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

I am Karen Shirer, Assistant Professor in Family and Child Ecology and State Extension Specialist in Human Development at Michigan State University Extension.

Slide 2 – Objective

We hope that as a result of viewing this module you 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

Slide 3 – Embracing a “new” area of family life education

We expect that you are involved in family life education, either with the Cooperative Extension System or a similar outreach organization. We also assume that your work involves the offering of programs and services that promote child, family, and community well-being. Lastly, we are assuming that you are either beginning the work or considering the work of incorporating a focus on healthy couple relationships and healthy marriages into programmatic efforts.

Although this may seem to some as embarking in a “new” direction, we can confirm that there is a long history of providing family life education that is inclusive of education on healthy adult relationships and marriages. All one needs to do is examine Family and Consumer Science textbooks and materials used

in community-based Extension family life education in the past. In the last several decades, 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

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Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

and marriages continued to be taught in high school and college courses in Family and Consumer Sciences and Human Development and Family Studies university departments, for most community family life educators this has not been an area of focus over the last 20 years.

Therefore, we are offering in this presentation a “new beginning” approach: A complete process for examining whether and how this area of family functioning should be addressed in community family life education.

Slide 4 - Considerations

We will consider:

1. Are healthy couple relationships and marriages related to child and family and community well-being?

We will also consider briefly other important criteria for offering family life education:

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?

Slide 5 – More Considerations

We will also briefly consider the methods and the context for this work:

4. Is there evidence of positive impact?
5. Are programmatic goals and implementation clearly linked to the research base?
6. Does my organizational leadership support this work?

Slide 6 – Are Healthy Couple Relationship and Marriages Related to Child, Family and Community Well-Being?

Let's spend some time now examining the very important question – **Are healthy couple relationships and marriages related to child, family and community well-being? And how are they linked?** Research in the Human Sciences draws for us quite a clear picture for predicting which children will do well, which families will be the most stable, and which communities will prosper. There is not one overall key or panacea. Research identifies multiple critical needs of individuals and families.

Slide 7- What factors are related to individual and family well-being?

We know that some of the most important factors related to individual and family well-being are:

- Access to educational opportunities, stable employment, quality childcare, and quality healthcare.
- A community or environment that offers social networks and connections, and safe neighborhoods.
- The opportunity to learn parenting skills, child development knowledge, financial management skills, spiritual strength, and self-care skills for monitoring both physical and mental health.

We can add to this list a vital element associated with healthy children and families. It has become increasingly clear that healthy couple relationships and healthy, stable marriages are linked with individual, family, community, and societal well-being.

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Slide 8 – Healthy Couples, Healthy Children

Although we acknowledge parents in other family forms often work hard and can provide nurturing, healthy environments for children, we also know that 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 to stay in school. 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.

Slide 9 – Benefits for Children

Studies also find that family structure is linked to parent involvement and parenting practices, particularly for fathers. When couples are not married, there is a 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 nonmarried families.

Slide 10 – Benefits of Healthy Marriages for Adults

There are also clearly benefits for adults. People in healthy, stable marriages, 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.

Most studies find these average differences by only examining family structure. However, the study cited here (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001) looked at only married adults and distinguished between “healthy” and “unhealthy” marriages. As a result, the researchers established the importance of examining not just family structure but also the quality of the relationship. We’ll discuss this in more detail in a moment.

For adults, there also appears to be economic advantages associated with healthy marriages. Adults in healthy marriages tend to accrue more capital (financial?) and are more financially stable.

Slide 11 – Benefits of Healthy Marriages for the Workplace and 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 & Smith, 2002; Gray & Venderhart, 2000; Daniel, 1995; Schoeni, 1995; Cornwell & Rupert, 1997; Nakosteen & Zimmer, 1997).

Slide 12 – Costs of Unstable Relationships and Marriages

The outcomes are tangible; the potential costs of unhealthy, unstable relationships are real and increasingly quantifiable. For example, a recent research study indicated that roughly 30 percent of sick time is due, not to illness, but to family conflict (Gottman, 1998). Another study estimated that work loss associated with marital problems translates into a loss of approximately \$6.8 billion per year for U.S. businesses and industry (Forthofer et al., 1996). Many marriages in our country end in divorce. 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.

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

These estimates include divorce costs related to delinquency, poor academic performance, drug use, medical utilization, lost productivity, charity costs, family support and mental health services, and lost social capital (Schramm, in-press).

Slide 13 – Moving beyond comparison studies

Although comparison studies can be a useful starting point, it is when we begin to examine the processes – what is it about that type of family? – that helps explain these differences and provides us information that informs our educational efforts. We cannot “teach” or “prescribe” a specific family structure. We work with families wherever they are in their lifecourse and we seek to find ways to enhance family dynamics associated with healthy outcomes for individuals and families. When we look to the research that examines elements of the couple relationship process, we find “news we can use” in programmatic work.

Slide 14 – Important linkages

Here we see two important linkages. First, the impact of parenting on child outcomes is a research base out which most of you operate every day. You are probably doing work to enhance parenting practices because of the demonstrated link between positive parenting practices and healthy child outcomes.

Importantly, there is also a large literature that has demonstrated how impactful the quality of the couple relationship is, regardless of family structure. Over and over we find that high levels of adult couple conflict predict negative outcomes for children. Children who have experience 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.

Slide 15 – The “Second Generation” of Research

What we will emphasize in the next several slides is the evidence from “second generation” research that has gone beyond just the associations of couple conflict and child outcomes and documented the impact of couple conflict on parent involvement and parenting practices. This approach is consistent with a family systems perspective that suggests there are linkages among subsystems in the family.

In the Developmental Psychology and Psychopathology literature there has been substantial recent attention given to this link (Grych & Fincham, 2001). We pulled together an annotated bibliography on the couple functioning/parenting/child outcomes linkages and have that available for you as a hand-out on this website. I hope that you will take a look at that and explore more of these published studies in detail. I want to point out that the bibliography is 24 pages and yet is only a sampling of the published studies and reviews on this linkage! That should give you an idea of the amount of research evidence we have on the connection between couple functioning, parenting, and child outcomes.

I'd like to offer some highlights here:

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Slide 16 – Parenting Practices can “Buffer”

Couple conflict, parenting practices, and child outcomes are all connected.

One of my colleagues, Mona El Sheikh, recently published study that looked at the ways that these three areas are inter-related. She 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 is 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.

Slide 17 – Couple functioning “spills over” into parenting

In the same study, though, Dr. El Sheikh also provided evidence – consistent with *many* other studies – 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. We can say that couple quality has an “indirect” impact on children by impacting the parenting practices and the parent-child relationship.

Slide 18 – The “spill-over” effect

The evidence from the last decade of research is overwhelming and the findings are quite solid – 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 and higher income couples
- Ethnic majority couples and ethnic minority couples

The impact is found on mothers’ parenting and fathers’ parenting.

And the connection is made from this spillover to outcomes for young children, school-age children, and adolescents.

Slide 19 – Findings on the effects of “spill-over”

Here are some of the details:

Buehler & Gerard found that marital conflict was associated with harsher discipline and low parental involvement, which in turn, was associated with maladjustment in younger children (2-11) and adolescents.

Belsky and colleagues reported that declines in marital quality were associated with more negative parenting behaviors on the part of fathers with their young children (0-3). Brody and colleagues had similar findings with school-age children.

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Fauber and colleagues (1990) found that higher levels of inter-parental conflict among intact and divorced couples predicted more lax control and monitoring, psychological control, and parental rejection, which in turn, was associated with adjustment problems of young adolescents.

In terms of low-income, ethnic minority pre-adolescents in married/nonmarried families, Gonzales and colleagues (2000) found that inter-parental conflict affected levels of acceptance, inconsistent discipline, and hostile control and in turn, affected pre-adolescents' depression and conduct disorder.

On the other hand, Carlson & McLanahan, 2004 found that higher relationship quality among married and nonmarried ethnic minority, low-income parents was associated with more positive parenting engagement and less punitive parenting practices of young children for both mothers and fathers.

Slide 20 – A “picture” of spillover

An interesting study –by Kitzman (2000) provides a picture of the spillover of affect from a couple interaction to a parenting interaction in a lab study. Parents participated in either a pleasant discussion or a conflictual discussion and then participated in an observed interaction with their child. Those parents who had had the pleasant discussion exhibited more supportive co-parenting behaviors and more positive parenting practices than those who had had the conflicted discussion.

Slide 21 – Co-parenting

“Co-parenting” is a distinct dimension or part of the couple relationship that has also 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 regards 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 nonmarried families, but more emphasis is now being given to this dynamic in married families as well.

As we consider this evidence it becomes very clear: ***Education on the couple relationship can be beneficial to co-parenting and parenting, and promote child well-being.*** Many in the field believe we have a critical breakdown between research and educational family services. Mark Cummings and colleagues (2002) wrote recently that the research show that “marital functioning merits inclusion as a dimension of parenting.”

Overall, we are missing a vital piece of the puzzle in family life education that is focused on individual, family and community well-being – if we don't address couple relationships in our work.

Now we turn to Karen to talk about the need for these types of programs in the community.

Slide 22– Is it an expressed community need?

Thank you, Francesca. Now, as we further explore the rationale for this work, we consider – Is it an expressed community need?

In any area that we address, we need buy-in. We may think this is an important area to address but our community members, who in most cases, are accessing our programs/services voluntarily, have to also think it is important in their lives.

Slide 23- Community needs/interests

Florida, Oklahoma and Utah 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. On the table, two questions asked of survey respondents are shown in the first column. The first one asked people to indicate whether or not they would consider using relationship education, such as workshops or classes, to strengthen their relationship. The second question asked people 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.

The next set of columns shows the percentages of respondents in the three states who answered this question in the affirmative. As you can see, 64% to 79% indicated that they would consider using relationship education, and 67% to 87% considered it a good or very good idea for government to develop relationship education programs.

The final set of columns shows how respondents who were currently receiving government assistance answered these two questions. The percentages are even higher with 72% to 87% answering they would consider using relationship education and 86% to 90% answering they consider it a good idea for government to develop relationship education programs.

In addition, several recent national surveys establish the need and interest among a broad population, including youth.

Slide 24 – Fragile Families

An important recent study examined family and couple dynamics among a sample of fragile families. Fragile families consist 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 (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, Teitler, Carlson, & Norland Audigier, 2003).

Slide 25 – In-depth interviews with 75 couples

In a qualitative study involving 75 fragile family couples, participants reported that they hold a very positive view of marriage, even though most had not experienced their own 2 parents 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, Edin, & McLanahan, 2003).

Slide 26 – Facilitator comments from demonstration projects

In pilot and demonstration projects of relationship and marriage education conducted with very low-resource, ethnic minority parents, we have documented overwhelmingly positive responses to participation in these programs (Adler et al. 2004). Facilitators relate their own enjoyment and comfort with the curriculum and program, and stated that:

- *“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”*

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

So, there appears to be evidence of substantial community interest and relevance to community members' needs.

Slide 27 – Is there a research base to inform educational programs? Are there knowledge and skills that can be taught?

Another important consideration is whether there is a research base to inform educational programs. Are there knowledge and skills that can be taught? In order to move forward with empirically-informed program content, we want the assurance that we have research knowledge about what factors and processes are related to healthy couple functioning and healthy marriages and that these factors can be changed by our educational efforts. In other words, we want to know that there is information that can be taught and skills that are teachable in an educational setting.

Slide 28 – Core Concepts Associated with Stable and Healthy Couple and Marital Relationships

We know what these information and skills are. The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network has worked to identify empirically-derived core concepts associated with stable and Healthy Couple and Marital Relationships. As with parenting programs, we have research evidence of patterns and practices associated with healthy, stable couple relationships and marriages that can be taught in an educational setting. We invite you to look through the explanation of the core concepts in the hand-outs provided with this e-seminar.

Slide 29 - Is there evidence of positive impact?

Ideally, it is helpful to move forward in programmatic work when we have not only research-informed program content and design, but also, research-validated program content and design.

Importantly, we do have evidence that we're on the right track with our educational and intervention efforts.

Slide 30 – Adding marital therapy/education to parenting interventions led to greater positive impacts

Several studies have documented that by adding in couple focused programs and interventions, we may be even more likely to promote healthy child outcomes by positively impacting parenting practices and the parent-child relationship.

Several studies conducted in the 1980's (Dadds, et al, 1987; Brody & Forehand, 1985) showed that addressing marital and co-parenting issues along with parenting issues resulted in greater reduction of sons' problem behaviors than parenting skills training alone.

Webster-Stratton (1994) conducted an intervention study in 1994 and showed that offering a 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.

Slide 31 – Couples education at time of birth

Cowan and Cowan (2000) 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

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

occurred in treatment group vs. 15% in 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.

Slide 32 – Maritally-focused vs. Parent-focused

In a more recent study, the Cowans (2005) compared the impact of a maritally-focused program and a parenting-focused program offered to parents at the transition to Kindergarten. This study highlights the value of maritally-focused interventions for child outcomes. Participation in the maritally-focused program resulted in more positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships. They have documented effects of this pre-school intervention up through the 4th grade so far.

Follow-up studies show that children whose parents were in the maritally-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.

Slide 33 – Results from marriage education program with low-resource parents

In our 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
- The level of cooperative co-parenting attitudes and practices

Slide 34 – More changes

Statistically significant *decreases* were found in individual distress level and level of negative couple interaction. Effect sizes for these pre/post program score comparisons ranged from .26 to .56 (these are low to moderate effect sizes). Impact did not differ by attendance status (i.e., came together/came singly) or marital status, meaning all participants appeared to benefit from the program in similar ways.

The Michigan study also provided further evidence that these documented changes are related to program participation. Score comparisons with a control sample showed an interaction effect of change over time by group, meaning that the change across time for participants was a statistically significantly different pattern than the scores across time for control subjects (whose scores either remained the same or worsened across time).

Slide 35 – Participant comments

We also have evidence of program impact from the analyses of qualitative data that were gathered. Participants noted that they had gained an awareness of the importance of healthy relationships: One said, *I wish I'd had this class before...I know I was in an abusive, unhealthy relationship before.* They noted improvements in relationships because of the class. One participant reported, *It pulled me and my partner closer together...it gave me a better heart.* Another said, *Me and my baby dad was not getting along until we started this class.*

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Slide 36 - From one young mother:

Another participant, a young mother who attended with her boyfriend who was the baby's father, explained what she had gained from the class this way -

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.

These studies are building an evidence-based foundation for moving forward in this work.

Slide 37 – Are programmatic goals and implementation approach clearly linked to the research base?

We also want to point out that when moving forward in this work we should also consider whether the programmatic goals and implementation approach are clearly linked to the research base. The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network has been working to assist with these links. Who should we target? When should an individual or couple be targeted? What are the objectives and goals of this work?

Slide 38 – National Extension Relationships and Marriage Education Network

The NERMEN spent a great deal of time discussing the wording of our vision for this work so that programmatic goals and objectives would be clear. Refer to the handouts that accompany this module for information on the NERMEN framework. Our bottom-line 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 related to knowledge and skills for developing healthy, stable relationships. Here is our stated vision and mission:

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.

Slide 39 – Appropriate goals and objectives

Through our discussions and other work, we determined that 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
- 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

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Slide 40 – Marriage + Approach

Another articulation of linking the goals and implementation of relationships/marriage education with the research is described by the Center for Law and Social Policy's Marriage Plus Approach (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Their suggestion is for programs to focus on: Helping more children grow up in healthy, married families. When this isn't possible, programs should help parents – whether married, divorced, unmarried, separated or remarried – cooperate better in raising their children. They also recommend contextualizing this work – not thinking of this education as a “stand-alone” panacea for promoting child, family and community well-being. We concur. Providing wrap-around services or connecting to other vital programs is the best approach, given our research knowledge and family systems approach. Francesca will now continue discussing the implications for planning and implementing relationship and marriage education into your family life education programs.

Slide 41 – Who should we target?

Thank you, Karen. Our first recommendation is to 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, your program goals and corresponding content for youth will differ from your program goals and corresponding content for married new parents. We also highlight here the recognition 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. This is the topic in the upcoming Module in this series on Marriage Education for Stepouples.

Slide 42 – Target Youth

There is good reason for working with youth as our target population for relationships/marriage education. More details will be provided in the Module titled Youth Focused Relationship and Marriage Education by Jennifer Kerpelman in this e-seminar series. We know that it is important to include in our educational programs for youth information on healthy couple relationships and marriages. First of all, discussions of couple relationships are **developmentally relevant** for youth. This is about all they talk about! A highly teachable moment in the lifecourse. Relationship education for youth can be considered **early prevention** (decision-making; skill-building) for later marital choices and behaviors. We also know that **relational patterns “spill over”** into later adult relationships for the child (for better or for worse). Youth may have witnessed and learned from healthy models of couple interactions. However, many may have witnessed only poor models of couple relationships. Educational programs on healthy relationships and marriages can provide new information and skills for many youth.

Slide 43 – Intervention:

These programs can also be considered **intervention**. Current dating violence statistics are alarming. Nationally, 9.8% of teen girls and 9% of teen boys report being victims of physical violence in dating relationships. In my state of Alabama, our Children's Trust Fund has supported our demonstration work in this area as we conceptualize dating violence as another form of child maltreatment.

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Slide 44 – How?

In addition to the Who, we also need to consider the “how?” More details on this will be given in the Module titled Offering Relationship and Marriage Education in your Community by Dr. Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Dr. Karen Shirer in this e-seminar series.

Implementation can utilize one of two approaches: an Additive Model or 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 underway to design more Family Life Education material and curricula that incorporate lessons that promote individual life skills, parenting skills, intimate couple relationship skills, and co-parenting relationship skills into existing programs. This model of implementation is linked most clearly to our research base.

Slide 45 – How should we design the program content and approach?

Program implementation and design should also continue to use a development process to guide efforts. Again, Drs. Shirer and Olsen are discussing program planning in the module titled Offering Relationship and Marriage Education in your Community. We recommend that you start with the research base and a clear theoretical framework and use an iterative, “action research” approach (Dumka, Roosa, Michaels & Suh, 1995) to program implementation. This means that we feed back the research on the program implementation back into the program design, thus moving us towards “best practices” models of relationships and marriage education.

Slide 46 – Does the leadership of my organization support offering relationship and marriage education?

Our final consideration is does the leadership of my organization support offering relationship and marriage education? Several years ago when renewed interest in relationship and marriage education was beginning to surface, some organizational leaders were skeptical about or even against the idea of offering this kind of education. Their concerns related to issues of diversity – can we serve same sexed couples as well as those who were heterosexual? In other organizations, there were fears that the promotion of the structure of marriage would be a stand-alone goal, which might suggest that participants stay in abusive and even dangerous relationships. Others were concerned that staff were not adequately equipped to provide this kind of education, and that this was the domain of trained therapist.

Slide 47 – Address concerns and misinformation

We believe these concerns stem from either unclear or unknown answers to the considerations we've presented. For example, we believe there are misperceptions or incorrect assumptions about program design and programmatic goals. As we've 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.

There have been assumptions that this work is therapeutic and focuses on giving individual advice. As we've pointed out, there is a research base that has identified factors and patterns of behaviors that are associated with healthy relationships and healthy marriages. As in parenting education, information

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

and skill training can be provided in educational settings and evidence already suggests that these educational efforts can have desirable impacts.

There have also been misperceptions that programs are only for married individuals. Clearly, research supports the offering of educational programs to married and nonmarried adults and to youth. Some have questioned if relationship and marriage is relevant in today's world or if community members are interested in this topic. Both state and national surveys indicate a strong interest and desire to participate in these educational programs. In addition, we have documented interest and relevance in our pilot projects by demonstrating successful recruitment and retention rates and clear feedback from educators and participants on the value of these educational programs.

Lastly, 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. This indicates that all educators must continue to do more to share the research evidence that provides the basis – the reasons - for focusing on healthy relationships and marriages as a vital area in comprehensive family life education programs and services.

Slide 48 – Summary

In sum, support for this work is warranted given the evidence that:

- 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 expressed community need and interest.
- We have an empirical knowledge base from which to teach.
- There are initial indications of positive program impact.
- We're building evidence for "best practices" through action research.

The bottom line is that: 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.

Module 1 References

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