

What's Working in Marriage and Relationship Education

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ACF HMI Mission Statement

To give men and women, especially those who are preparing to marry or are considering marriage, **greater access to marriage and relationship education** for the sake of teaching the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage.

What is marriage & relationship education?

Marriage education is

- a broad range of educational practices, curricula and programs
- that prepare, teach and equip individuals and couples at any stage of a relationship
- with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.



Components of a Healthy Marriage/Relationship

- Commitment of the couple
- Communication
- Conflict resolution
- Satisfaction
- Lack of domestic violence
- Fidelity
- Interaction/time together
- Intimacy/emotional support
- Commitment to the children
- Duration/legal marital status

<http://www.childtrends.org>

Common themes

- Benefits of marriage to children and health
- Safety: physical, emotional safety
- Language or cultural adaptations (simpler language, symbols, values)
- More interactive & dynamic methods
- Increased use of video clips
- Role play scenarios that are realistic
- Stress reduction



Specialized content for Fragile Families Programs

- Baby or child care
- Child support
- Parenting, parent relationships
- Father involvement
- Abstinence or youth character themes
- Foster or adoption
- Financial education or handling finances
- Step-family issues

HMI Demonstration Projects under Various Program Offices

- Child Support Enforcement
- Children's Bureau (Foster Care & Adoption)
- Office of Family Assistance (\$150 million)
- Office of Refugee Resettlement
- Administration for Native Americans
- Office of Head Start
- Office of Community Services

Must connect with program office objectives to promote well being of children and families

ACF Conducting Three Healthy Marriage Research Projects

- Building Strong Families (BSF)

<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info>

- Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM)

<http://www.supportinghealthymarriages.org>

- Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives (CHMI)

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/eval_com/index.html

Types of HM Research

- Process and Outcome Research
- Curricula specific:
Examples: PREP, Gottman Institute, PAIRS, Dibble Institute
(www.prepinc.com)
- Population specific:
Poor couples, Unwed parents, incarcerated, refugee couples, foster to adopt couples, ethnic (Hispanic, AAHMI)
- Model specific
Integrated approaches with support services, stand-alone, multi-session, retreat mode

Common outcomes tested

- Marital quality; couple satisfaction
- Friendship quality
- Communication and conflict
- Sex satisfaction
- Goals, shared meaning
- Verbal or physical abuse
- Trust and/or commitment
- Program satisfaction
- Problem solving, role satisfaction

Meta-Analytic Study, 2008

Alan Hawkins, et.al. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*

- Reviewed previous 117 studies on marriage or relationship education for two outcomes: **relationship quality and communication skills**
- Experimental (pre-post with control) and Quasi-experimental studies included
- Moderate dosage programs had greater effects than low-dosage programs
- Communication skills improvement
- Lack of racial and ethnic diversity in samples

Alabama HMI Study (Year 2)

- ACF funded 5 year project (Auburn U and Children Trust Fund and other partners)
- Testing individual, couple functioning and parenting outcomes
- Sample = 678 racially and economically diverse adults
- Pre and post surveys with 131 items

Alabama Study Results

Pre to post improvement for

- Relational skills – interaction quality, disclosure and conflict management
- Couple & Marital quality – confidence, dedication, trust, stability, adjustment
- Individual strengths – individual functioning, depression
- Parenting and co-parenting
- Attitudes and beliefs

Participant comments

“Without this program we were headed for divorce. Now that we have taken this class we are headed for recovery.”

“I need a stronger relationship with my child’s other parent. I need to know what a strong family looks like.”

“It helped me know myself and my husband better. I now know when to talk and when not to.”

Effectiveness of the Art & Science of Love 1999-2003 (Gottmann)

- Tested different levels of workshop participation + marital therapy
- Randomized clinical trial, racially diverse sample (100 distressed couples)
- Pre and Post program + 1 year follow-up
- 5 outcome measures: Quality of marriage, friendship, sex and romance, conflict patterns, shared meaning and goals

5 Groups – “Dosage”

- First day only of 2-day workshop
- Second day only of 2-day workshop
- Both days of 2-day workshop
- Both days + read book, *7 Principles for Making Marriage Work*
- Both days of workshop + 9 sessions of marital therapy using Gottman methods

Results

- All groups showed improvement on quality of sex and romance and less negative conflict
- 2-day workshop showed greatest gains
- 2-day w/o therapy also improved friendship and shared goals but relapsed in both at 1 year
- Therapy group did not show relapse in either friendship or shared goals/meaning

Who showed no improvement?

- Couples troubled by “intense physiological flooding, minimal ability to repair destructive interactions and high negative sentiment override.”
- Holding on to resentment and weak ability to practice forgiveness
- Need for more intense intervention to reduce rage and enhance self-soothing
- Role of other stressors in couple interaction

Building Strong Families (BSF) Program Model

**Family
Support
Services**

**Marriage and
Relationship
Education and
Skills**

**Family
Coordinators**

Group Sessions Designed as Intensive Core of the Intervention

Curriculum	Number of Sessions	Intended Group Size (Couples)	Session Length (Hours)	Total Hours
Loving Couples, Loving Children (5 sites)	21	4-6	2.0	42
Becoming Parents (1 site)	6 or 10	10-15	5 or 3	30
Love's Cradle (1 site)	21	6-8	2.0	42

BSF Evaluation Conducted in 7 Sites, 11 Locations

Site	Enrollment Period	Organization
Atlanta	Dec. 05 – Feb. 08	Georgia State University; Latin American Association
Baltimore	Dec. 05 – Nov. 07	Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development
Baton Rouge	Dec. 05 – Feb. 08	Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge
Florida - Orange - Broward	July 05 – June 07 Dec. 05 – Nov. 07	Healthy Families Florida
Indiana: Allen, Marion, Lake Counties	Jan. 06 – Feb. 08	Healthy Families Indiana
Oklahoma City	June 06 – Feb. 08	Public Strategies, Inc.
Texas: Houston, San Angelo	July 05 – Nov. 07	Healthy Families Texas

Enrollment: Current and Projected

(Couples)

Site	Enrollment Through September 2007	Total Projected Sample
Atlanta	772	930
Baltimore	533	601
Baton Rouge	497	649
Florida	675	790
Indiana	386	520
Oklahoma	729	1,107
Texas	622	776
TOTAL	4,214	4,939

Three Different Approaches Were Used to Organize BSF

- Three sites integrated BSF into a Healthy Families program
 - Florida, Indiana, Texas
- Two multi-program agencies added BSF to their menu of other services for low-income families
 - Baltimore, Baton Rouge
- Two sites created BSF “from scratch”
 - Oklahoma, Atlanta

Recruitment Procedures

- Initial contact with couple more efficient than with one partner
- “Sorting out” eligible couples is key step if marriage education part of broader program
- Follow-up with second partner can be challenging

Recruitment Lessons

- Sites had to learn to recruit and work with couples
- Most couples were identified through the maternal health care system
- Accountability and creative approaches have played a role in achieving targets
- Active outreach needed to achieve enrollment of both partners

Who are the BSF couples?

Basic Sample Characteristics

(Enrolled through March 2007)

	Mothers	Fathers
Age (average)	23	26
African American	57%	60%
Hispanic/Latino	23%	23%
White	16%	13%
Number of children	1.9	1.9
Multiple partner fertility	31%	29%
Primary language is Spanish	12%	13%

Most Have H/S Education, Many Fathers Work, but Earnings Are Low at Baseline

	Mothers	Fathers
High school diploma or GED	67%	66%
Currently employed	29%	75%
Earnings past year		
Below \$15,000	62%	53%
\$15,000-\$25,000	11%	26%
Receiving any public assistance	81%	44%

Most BSF Couples Cohabit, Expect to Marry, and Have History at Baseline

	Mothers	Fathers
Time known one another	3.4 years	3.4 years
Cohabiting	72%	73%
High chance of marriage	65%	70%
Relationship quality score <small>(8-32)</small>	25	26
Birth intended	31%	42%

**How much do couples
participate?**

“Dosage” of Core Group Sessions Is Affected by Attendance

**Percent of couples ever attending group
Across all sites
Range across sites**

**61%
43 – 80%**

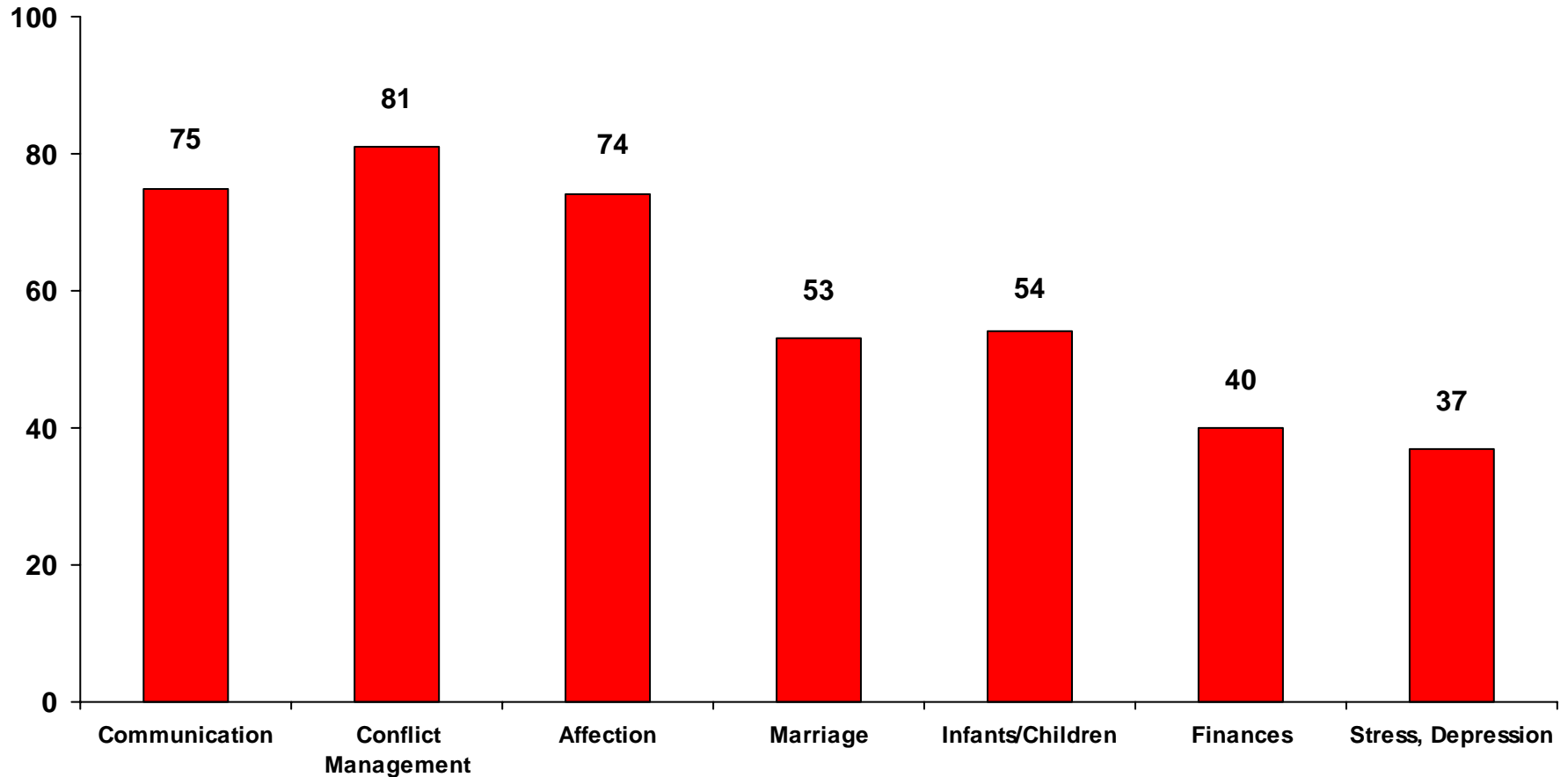
**Average attendance by couples who start
groups (all sites)
Across all sites
Range across sites**

**21 hours
10 – 30 hours**

**Percentage of program group attending
sessions for > 40% of curriculum (all
sites)**

31%

...But Most Are Exposed to Key Curriculum Topics (If Carefully Sequenced)



Percentage of Attending Couples Receiving Instruction in Major Content Areas

What Steps Promote Attendance?

- Flexible scheduling
- Clever Marketing – Relationships for Real Life
- Inviting venues
- Incentives and social activities
- Transportation
- Lots of attention from staff

Couples Value Group Sessions and Bond with Other Couples

145 focus group participants from all sites ...

- Before BSF, many couples had trouble communicating and managing conflict
- Most couples were excited about BSF and had high hopes; skeptics relaxed after 2-3 sessions
- Couples form friendships and supportive relationships with other couples

Communication and Conflict Management Skills Cited As Among the Most Helpful

- Focus group participants described learning skills in a wide range of areas...
 - Being more respectful of each other
 - Compromising
 - Trusting one another
 - Expressing feelings constructively
 - Preventing harmful fights
 - Making decisions together
 - Learning their boiling points
 - Helping each other heal old traumas



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

Strengthening Families, Communities, and a Nation – One Marriage at a Time

- “First stop shop” with current info on marriage education, training, technical assistance, grants
- Materials:
 - Tip-sheets, Power point presentations
 - How-to Guides, Promising Practices Briefs
 - Research Database
- www.healthymarriageinfo.org



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Strengthening Families, Communities, and a Nation – One Marriage at a Time

- Training and Technical Assistance
 - Program design and delivery assistance
 - Webinars & Moderated Audio Forums
 - Phone and email consultation
 - To request a program consult: Email to info@healthymarriageinfo.org or
 - Call 1-866-91-NHMRC

Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education

- www.smartmarriages.com
- Clearinghouse for general public to find marriage classes, books, trainings and courses (both secular and faith based)
- Supports private and public marriage/relationship education initiatives
- Listserve with daily emails of info and news

Cooperative Extension Services

- Publicly funded non-formal education system via land grant universities
- To advance knowledge for “Agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being...”
- Network of campus, community based staff
- Long history of family-life education
- Marriage/Family curricula, fact-sheets
- Evaluation and technical assistance



ACF Healthy Marriage Initiative

- News and Events Listing
- Current and Past Funding
- Curriculum Assessment Guide
- List of ACF Grantees\

African American Healthy Marriage Initiative www.aahmi.net

- Link to AAHMI Research to Practice conference presentations, articles, resources

Questions?

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