U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

Administration for Children & Families

Premarital and Marriage Education

Mission

"My administration will give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages. Many good programs help couples who want to get married and stay married." President Bush, February 26, 2002.

ACF recently launched the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative **to help couples who choose marriage for themselves develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.** The Initiative's concept of healthy marriage is guided by Lewis and Gossett (1999), who define eight essential characteristics of a healthy marriage:

- Both partners participate in the definition of the relationship
- There is a strong marital bond characterized by levels of both closeness and autonomy
- The spouses are interested in each other's thoughts and feelings
- The expression of feelings is encouraged
- The inevitable conflicts that do occur do not escalate or lead to despair
- Problem-solving skills are well developed
- Most basic values are shared
- The ability to deal with change and stress is well developed.

Overview

Marriage education, a relatively new approach to preventing marital distress and breakdown, is based on the premise that couples can **learn how** to build and maintain successful, stable marriages. Couples can learn how to increase the behaviors that make a marriage successful and decrease those associated with marital distress and divorce. Strong, healthy marriages have benefits for couples and their children. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) concluded that destructive parental conflict is one of the generic risk factors for child and adult mental health problems. Mismanaged conflict predicts both marital distress and negative effects for children. Conflicts at home can even lead to decreased work productivity, especially for men.

The marriage education approach is based on years of research into the characteristics that distinguish marriages that succeed from those that fail. The difference between couples that survive and thrive in marriage and those that do not lies primarily in how couples understand and accept the fact that at times they will disagree and how they handle their inevitable differences. Behaviors and attitudes that predict success can be effectively and economically taught to couples, regardless of background, and at any stage of their relationship.

Along with the skills that teach couples how to communicate more effectively, manage conflict, and work together as a team, the courses also teach the benefits of marriage for couples and their children and what to expect in the course of marriage. Some programs have been adapted for specific populations (e.g., teenagers).

Program length ranges from several hours to semester-long courses. Most are 8 to 20 hours long and are taught over a weekend or through weekly classes. They are delivered in a variety of settings, including classrooms, community centers, childbirth clinics, houses of worship, courts, prisons, extension agencies, schools, and military bases. In addition to classes, workshops, and seminars, premarital and marriage education efforts can utilize assessment inventories and meetings with mentor couples.

Results

Numerous studies suggest that marital outcomes can be predicted with a high degree of accuracy based primarily on aspects of a couples communication and ability to manage conflict. Some of the more popular programs (e.g., PREP) have been studied extensively. Longitudinal studies (some funded by NIMH) clearly demonstrate that couples can learn and use relationship skills, with some studies of PREP suggesting that participation affects both marital satisfaction and stability. Interventions seem especially effective for higher-risk couples.

Other Benefits

In addition to strengthening relationships, marriage education can benefit couples interested in marriage in other ways:

- Marriage education highlights the benefits of strong and healthy marriages for both adults and children. These include being better providers; living longer; earning and saving more money; and being less reliant on government services, such as welfare, health care, and mental health care.
- Marriage education provides a roadmap about what to expect in marriage, including challenges such as the birth of the first child, different philosophies on parenting, and negotiating work and family responsibilities.
- Marriage education can help couples better understand principles about commitment, acceptance, forgiveness, and sacrifice that are known to be associated with healthy relationships.
- Marriage education teaches individuals about risk factors so participants can decide whether or not a marriage they are considering is a good choice.

Additional Information: For more information, or to request technical assistance, visit the ACF website at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/key.html. Or contact Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education, at bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov or (202) 260-1550.

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