



# Spotlight on Integration: Economic Self-Sufficiency Services

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On average, parents and children tend to fare better on a range of outcomes when they live in low-conflict two-parent families; parent-child relationships are more supportive and nurturing when parents experience less distress in their marriages and children are less likely to live in poverty when they grow up in two-parent families.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, divorce is associated with a number of negative economic outcomes and challenges due to the division of income, property settlements, and child support.<sup>2</sup> Integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into existing service delivery systems is a promising strategy for improving relationship stability and, thereby, outcomes for parents and their children.<sup>3</sup>



## Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education

The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families promotes the integration of healthy marriage and relationship education into safety-net service systems as part of a holistic approach to strengthening families. Healthy marriage and relationship education includes teaching interpersonal skills like communication and conflict resolution, along with critical skills such as parenting and financial literacy.

Integrating healthy relationship education into safety-net service systems can benefit families when stakeholders:

- Distribute healthy relationship resources and information;
- Form partnerships with other organizations and agencies providing relationship education; or
- Incorporate relationship education directly into existing educational programming offered to clients.

The type and level of integration that stakeholders pursue will differ depending on the service delivery system and resources available.

## Integrating Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education to Promote Economic Self-Sufficiency

This tip sheet compiles lessons learned from two stakeholders at programs that have successfully integrated healthy marriage and relationship education in order to promote economic self-sufficiency:

- Patricia To, Program Manager of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program of Sacramento County, CA, has been offering relationship education as part of a comprehensive economic self-sufficiency program (including nutrition education, parenting skills, and job counseling) since 2007.

- Melanie Reese, Coordinator of the Utah Commission on Marriage through the Department of Workforce Services, has been part of a program that integrated relationship skills education into workforce services and employment training programs in 19 of Utah's 29 counties.

These stakeholders shared information on the challenges they have faced and overcome, partnerships they have created to make integration of healthy marriage and relationship education successful, and benefits to their agency and clients.

## Overcoming challenges

One of the primary roadblocks both programs faced in integrating relationship skills education into workforce services has been that such education is not mandatory or incentivized (e.g., not counted as an allowable activity that qualifies for child care reimbursement) under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) guidelines. Another challenge was related to “making do” with limited agency and participant resources, such as space and time.

Based on their experiences, they offered the following tips to overcome these challenges:

- *Start with good information:* Pamphlets and reading material can quickly educate staff and participants about the goals of healthy marriage education and the potential positive impacts it can have.
- *Get buy-in from staff:* Well-educated, motivated, and trained staff members are crucial to program success.
- *Conduct community outreach and messaging:* Successful programs are those that are most visible to their target audiences. Use of technology, such as a websites, or advertising in a variety of media, including billboards, radio, and

television, are ways to reach a wider audience and attract attention. Advertising by client word of mouth in the community is another effective and highly affordable strategy.

- *Make it transferable:* Adding presentations on healthy marriage and relationship education into existing classes, such as parenting, budget management, or financial counseling classes can bolster impact without relationship education seeming like an additional service.

“Integration helps us better serve our clients, our staff, and ourselves. No program is an island!”

Patricia To, Program Manager,  
WIC, Sacramento County, CA

## Forming effective partnerships

Partnerships are essential to successfully integrating and sustaining any family strengthening effort. For WIC in Sacramento County, the primary partnership was with the Sacramento Healthy Marriage Project, part of the National Healthy Marriage Initiative, to provide healthy marriage and relationship education components within existing WIC-offered services. The primary incentive was the WIC voucher program. Additional partnerships led to program attendee supports including child care, transportation to and from the WIC office, and meals. Program supports eliminated barriers and increased participation. According to Patricia To, as these partnerships were strengthened, opportunities for cross-referrals increased and expanded access to social services for families already being served by WIC or partner agencies.

Melanie Reese described her key partner—the Utah governor's office—as “a champion” because of its role as a policymaker and leader

in the State. The governor's office provided foundational "funding and focus" in the early days of the integration effort. In addition, the Utah Commission on Marriage assembled a volunteer board made up of academics, business leaders, and family-oriented agency representatives to serve as advocates for healthy marriage and relationship education. This volunteer board provided feedback on what services were needed and what could be enriched by adding a healthy relationship component. Another important partner was Utah State University Cooperative Extension, which assisted service providers by delivering research-based training and facilitating programs.

## Benefits

According to these stakeholders, integrating healthy marriage and relationship education has many benefits.

Benefits for participants:

- Participants gain knowledge about healthy relationships and learn warning signs for unhealthy and abusive relationships.
- Participants obtain interpersonal skills (e.g., communication, conflict management) that are transferable to a job search, the workplace, and the community.
- Participants learn techniques to improve parenting and financial management, which can reduce stressors.
- Participants identify personal values and set goals for themselves and their future. These goals can assist families in improving their self-efficacy.

Benefits for community:

- Enhanced service delivery systems, where families with complex needs have better access to appropriate services.

- Partnerships increase collaboration and reduce competition for limited resources.
- Engaging community leaders can increase awareness of the needs of low-resource families so funding can be more appropriately allocated.

Despite the challenges in integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into their services, these stakeholders also confirmed that the benefits for service providers outweighed the challenges; agencies that integrate healthy marriage and relationship education skills into existing service delivery systems not only support TANF goals to strengthen families, but also strengthen their communities through partnerships and leadership engagement.

**The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families offers valuable information, resources, and technical support for integration efforts. Visit [www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org](http://www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org) and search the library or request technical assistance in locating resources appropriate to your needs and audience.**

## Notes

- 1 Gaubert, J. M., Gubits, D., Alderson, D. P., & Knox, V. (2012). *The supporting healthy marriage evaluation: Final implementation findings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, OPRE Report 20122-12.
- 2 Lerman, R. (2002). *Marriage and the economic well-being of families with children: A review of the literature*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- 3 Harris, D. A. & Parisi, D. (2005). Gender role ideologies and marriage promotion: State policy choices and suggestions for improvement. *Review of Policy Research*, 22(6), 841-858

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