Promoting Child Health and Safety: Why Healthy Couple, Co-Parenting, and Marital Relationships Matter to Caregivers and Children

June 25, 2012
How to Ask Questions

1. Click on the word “Q&A”
2. Type your question in the top box
3. Click on the word “Ask” to submit your question
Presenters

- **Brian Higginbotham**, Ph.D., *Associate Professor and Extension Specialist*, Utah State University
- **Colleen Ellingson**, *Executive Director*, Adoption Resources of Wisconsin
Goals and Mission

Webinar Goals

• Describe healthy marriage and relationship education & its relevance to promoting child health and safety.

• Share examples of how it can be integrated into services for caregivers.

• Announce upcoming events and training opportunities.

Resource Center Mission

Connecting healthy marriage education skills and safety-net services as an integrated approach to strengthening families.
Our Audience and Focus
Individual Benefits

- Getting and maintaining a job
- Financial self-sufficiency
- Reducing co-parenting conflicts
- Increasing family safety and stability
- Strengthening parent-child relationships
What We Offer

• Research that supports and promotes integration of healthy marriage and relationship education skills

• Resources, tips, and tools to use and share with the families stakeholders serve

• Training and technical assistance to support stakeholders, including you, as you work to implement integration strategies
Virtual Resource Center

www.healthymarriageandfamilies.org
Research and Statistics

The nature of marriage and families is constantly changing. As societal and economic factors influence the lives of individuals and families, strategies and best practices for strengthening these relationships continue to emerge. Here you will find the latest information on current trends most relevant to enrichment programs and best practices.

These publications provide a framework for helping to create healthy marriages and offer concise summaries on how healthy marriages impact children, adults, and communities.

What Is a Healthy Marriage? (PDF, 116 KB)
Why Marriage Matters, 3rd Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences
The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing (PDF, 1413 KB)

Research Trends and Reports

In addition to highlighting the latest relevant research and reports related to healthy marriage and families, this section provides resources that articulate the connection between those issues and the broader impact on society and safety-net services.

Family Structure and Children’s Educational Outcomes (PDF, 49 KB)
Marriage & Family Wellness: Corporate America’s Business? (PDF, 363 KB)

Additional research and reports are available in our Library on a wide range of topics such as Youth, Marriage, Family Formation, Family Safety, Cohabitation, Divorce, Step-families, etc.
Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education

- Efforts or programs that provide education, skills, and principles that help individuals and couples increase their chances of having healthy and stable relationships

- Goal is to improve individuals’ chances of enjoying healthy relationships (regardless of whether or not they are married)

Markman & Rhoades (2012), page 169
The Purpose

• Promote healthy relationship skills and reduce qualities that lead to problems:
  o Communication
  o Conflict Management
  o Co-Parenting
  o Intimacy / Friendship / Commitment
  o Self Care
  o Finance Management
  o Decision Making
Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Skills

- Our focus:
  - Interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict resolution;
  - Along with critical skills like parenting and financial education.

- These skills can be successfully integrated individually or collectively.
Why Healthy Couple, Co-Parenting, and Marital Relationships Matter to Caregivers and Children

Brian Higginbotham, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University
Healthy Children, Healthy Couples, Healthy Communities

- Child Welfare
- Adult Welfare
- Workforce Welfare
- Taxpayer Cost of Divorce
Why is Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Important in this Domain?

• “Integrating individual-oriented relationship education into existing systems is likely the most effective way to reach potential participants”

(Rhoades & Stanley, 2009, p. 52).
**Client Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Statewide Samples</th>
<th>Government Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would consider using relationship education, such as workshops or classes, to strengthen relationship</td>
<td>FL 79 OK 64 UT 74 KY 43</td>
<td>FL 87 OK 72 UT 83 KY *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers it a good or very good idea for government to develop programs to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce</td>
<td>FL 67 OK 85 UT 87 KY 64</td>
<td>FL 90 OK 88 UT 86 KY 79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not reported
Child Welfare Professional Support

Agreement with the following statements:

- It is appropriate for child welfare professionals to help clients develop skills needed to have healthy relationships/marriages (91%)
- Clients can benefit from participating in programs that focus on enhancing marital/couple relationships (83%)
- Participation in such programs can help reduce incidences of child abuse and neglect (77%)
- Strong marital/couple relationships lead to successful parenting (72%)
- Training on recognizing characteristics of healthy marital/couple relationships will strengthen assessment and case planning skills to reduce abuse and neglect (75%)

What Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education is NOT

• Coercing anyone to marry or remain in unhealthy relationships
• Withdrawing support from single parents or diminishing the work of single parents
• Stigmatizing those who choose divorce
• Limiting access to divorce
• Promoting the initiative as a panacea for achieving positive outcomes for children and families
• A dating service
• An immediate solution to lifting all families out of poverty
Smart Steps to Healthy Relationships in Utah

Project Director
Dr. Higginbotham
Utah State University

Co-Investigator - Skogrand
(Cultural Competency)

Co-Investigator - Bradford
(Performance Assessment)

Domestic Violence & Child Maltreatment Advisory Team

Project and Performance Assessment Managers – Morrill and Smith

Coordinators at Local Family Service Agencies
Smart Steps for Stepfamilies

State Office of Education
Utah Healthy Marriage Handbook

Office of Recovery Services
Child Support

Association of County Clerks
Utah Healthy Marriage Handbook

Richter7 Advertising campaign

Utah State University Extension

Box Elder family support center; Centro de la Familia; Cache county Child and family support center; Davis Head Start Family connection center Layton; Family support center Salt Lake; Family support center Ogden; Ogden-Weber community action partnership; Kids on the Move, Mountain Land Head Start; The Learning Center

All High School FCS teachers who instruct the Adult Roles and Responsibilities & Financial Literacy courses around the state.

Department of Workforce Services
Utah Commission on Marriage

Job seeker guides; job postings; and eligibility screening tools for food stamps, financial assistance, and subsidized child care. Monthly workshops available on topics such as basic computer skills, resume writing, interviewing skills, skills identification, networking, job search, and budgeting. Case management services for families who qualify for assistance.

County Marriage/Relationship Educators
Classes on marriage, relationship skills, parenting, finances

On-line Divorce Education
The “U5”

- **Training for Healthy Marriage and Family Formation Project**
  - Forest Institute in Springfield, Missouri

- **The Prevention of Child Maltreatment through Child Welfare Training on Healthy Marriage and Family Formation**
  - University of Louisville, Kentucky

- **Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Healthy Marriages, Relationships, and Families Project**
  - Syracuse University

- **Healthy Marriage and Family Formation Project**
  - Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver

- **Expanding the Family Circle: Child Welfare Training on Healthy Marriage and Family Formation Project**
  - University at Albany (SUNY)
Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for Child Welfare Professionals

- Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training (HRMET)
  - Utilizes the University Extension System
Conclusion

• Safety-net service providers offer a vast array of services to families and individuals

• As a preventative tool, they can also provide healthy relationship and marriage education services in an effort to promote child safety, family stability, and self-sufficiency
Safety, Risk & Well-Being

He says it won’t happen again
Family Safety & Prevention

- A human being has to learn how to become humane. -- B. Perry

- An essential component of an individual's "humaneness" is communicative interaction with others. -- T. Dean Thomlison

- It is not possible to not communicate. -- P. Watzlawick, J. Beavin, & D. Jackson
Helping Children by Promoting Healthy Parent/Caregiver Relationships

Colleen Ellingson
Executive Director, Adoption Resources of Wisconsin

Adoption Resources of Wisconsin
6682 W Greenfield Ave
Milwaukee, WI 53214
414-475-1246
cellingson@wiadopt.org
Who are the Kids?

408,425 in Foster Care (2010)

471,878 adopted from the child welfare system (2002-2010)

472,000 children under 18 are adopted (U.S. Census, 2000)

1,092,280 are step-children (U.S. Census, 2000)
Post-Placement Issues for Foster/Adoptive Families

• Families are challenged by children’s past trauma and current behavior
  o At re-entry, kids are twice as likely to go into institutional/group care
  o At exit, kids often stay in care twice as long as children newly coming into care

• Couples become kid-focused and forget to take time to build relationships

• Parents stop communicating with each other and their children in healthy ways
How Do We Find Something that Promotes Family Stability?

• Need to engage both parents

• Need to focus on healthy relationship skills that enable them help their kids

• Need to evaluate and test programming

• Need to build something that would work and could be used by others

• Adoption Opportunities Grant (2004-2009)
Our Beliefs

We believe relationship education should empower couples to strengthen their relationship with each other and their children. It should provide people with engaging tools that encourage them to work together to learn new concepts and practice skills that allow for both immediate and long-term impacts.
Curriculum Content

- Post Placement Realities
- Child Development Stages and Foster Care/Adoption
- What Children do to Relationships
- Child Traumatic Stress
- Respecting the Child
- Birth Family Connections
- Family Tasks and Responsibilities
- Constructive Problem Solving
- Emotion Coaching
- Working Towards Compromise
- Handling Stress Together
- Relationship Recovery Conversations
- Honoring Dreams
- Building Emotional Connections
- Healing Emotional Wounds
Curriculum Structure

Group-Based Weekly Workshops for Couples

- Mock Talk Show
- Facilitated Group Discussion
- Information Sharing
- Skill-Building Exercise
Implementation Support

- Community Partnerships
  - Wisconsin Department of Children and Families provided lists of potential program participants
  - Outreach via other public child welfare agencies

- Participant Provisions
  - Child care stipends for time spent at program
  - “Date nights” + child care stipend
  - Access to other resources (e.g., social work staff, other classes)
  - Scholarships for yearly post-adoption conference
Program Outcomes for Couples

• **Increased Relationship Satisfaction**
  
  “We are talking more, being kinder with each other, and trusting each other more.”

• **Reduced Depression**
  
  “I was able to address some things that were locked down within.”
Program Outcomes for Couples

- Parents Feel Better

**Our Home Our Family**

- **Concerns for Adoptive Kids**
  - 5 years after Training
  - 64% No Concerns
  - 26% Some Concerns
  - 10% Major Concerns

**Incidence of parents Losing their Temper**

- Days between Parental Temper Loss
  - Before Training
  - 5 Years After Training
  - 92% Better

**I feel few others understand What I go through**

- Before Training
- 5 Years After Training
- 99% Better

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER for HEALTHY MARRIAGE and FAMILIES
Program Outcomes for Children

- Fewer Behavior Problems

![Graphs showing the reduction in behavior problems over time](image)
Program Outcomes for Children

- Reduced Foster, Residential, or Institutional Treatment

**Number of Therapists Adoptive Kid have seen (lifetime)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Therapist</th>
<th>1 Therapist</th>
<th>2-4 Therapists</th>
<th>5-8 Therapists</th>
<th>10-13 Therapists</th>
<th>14+ Therapists</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adoptive Kids Entering foster, residential or institutional treatment in the past year**

- Before Training
- 5 Years After training

19% FEWER
Why Should States Prioritize Post-Placement Education?

• It works to promote healthy families

• Return on investment
  o Families are more stable and happier
  o Fewer divorces
  o Families call earlier when they are in difficulty
  o Families access more “soft services” (e.g., trainings, support groups, library usage)
  o Cost savings – re-entry at higher levels of care/costs are high
How to Go from Grant to Reality?

• Obtain support to achieve necessary “next steps”...for example:
  o Final refinement of curriculum for foster parents and all types of adoptive parents
  o Development of online survey to allow further testing of effectiveness
  o Testing of webinar/online course for selected modules

• End goal is widespread dissemination
How the *National Resource Center* Can Help

- New resources to be featured on website
- Future Webinar: Integrating Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education into Services (August 2012)
- Online training opportunities
- Regional, state, local and tribal training and collaboration opportunities
Contact Us

National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

www.healthy_marriage_and_families.org

Email:
info@healthy_marriage_and_families.org

Phone:
866-916-4672