

Best practices for couples education: Summary of a dialogue between researchers and educators

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Abstract

Because the health of the couple relationship in a family is inextricably linked with the well-being of the family's children and with the overall well-being of the family, many family and consumer scientists are beginning to focus on including couples/marital education in their program offerings. The following article summarizes a unique dialogue between leading researchers in the field of marital quality and Extension faculty/staff who focused on the research implications for key program content and implementation.

Introduction

Recently, leaders and policy makers at the highest levels have begun to emphasize the need to promote community-based programs to strengthen marital relationships (Parke and Ooms 2002). This renewed interest in offering programming to promote couple/marriage quality is based in part on research evidence that demonstrates the importance of healthy couple relationships for children's healthy development (Waite and Gallagher 2000).

Family and Consumer Science (FCS) specialists and educators in six states used on-line technologies to communicate directly with each other and with prominent researchers in the area of couple and marital relationships about recent findings that should inform couples education content and the delivery processes. Participating in the May, 2002 Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar, *Couple Relationships: Research and Extension Programming*, were FCS educators

from Ohio, Alabama, New York, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Kansas. The following lists the panelists and the papers they provided:

- Dr. Frank Fincham, Re-conceptualizing Marital Quality
- Dr. H. Wallace Goddard, Applying the New Marriage Research to Better Marriages
- Dr. John Gottman, Predicting Marital Happiness and Stability
- Dr. Larry Kurdek, The Nature and Predictors of Marital Quality Change
- Dr. Charlotte Shoup Olsen, CoupleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationship
- Dr. Scott Stanley, Marriage and Premarital Education.

For more information on each panelist and their paper, see <http://hec.osu.edu/eseminars/couples/presenters.htm>.

The papers provided information and commentary on empirical research on couple relationships and programming implications as the basis for the discussion. (For a detailed description and summary of the e-seminar experience as a methodology see Futris, Adler-Baeder, and Dean 2004, or visit <http://hec.osu.edu/eseminars/couples/>).

The following summarizes the discussion content posted across five days and was stimulated by educators' questions to researchers about key considerations for best practices. The written dialogue was assessed for themes. Overall, discussions regarding research-prescribed content centered on the importance of cognitions (e.g., attitudes and expectations) in relationships, effective communication skills, and diverse marital types (e.g., first vs. second marriages). Discussions regarding program delivery centered on appropriateness of involvement by FCS educators, required background and training for educators, education vs. therapy, and marketing. The purpose of this article is to review the important points and helpful recommendations that were made by the panelists to launch FCS educators' offering of such programs.

Using research information in programming

Panelists emphasized three key areas for inclusion in couples education program content that have strong research support (e.g., Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000; Gottman 1999) . These are

- the "thinking" in relationships, particularly attitudes and expectations

- effective communication in conflict
- recognition of diverse couple situations and the potential for differences in issues.

Attitudes and expectations. Panelists cited research suggesting that the way couples think about their relationship and the way they think about each other is key to explaining marital quality (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000). Educators noted that it was interesting that feelings, emotions, and thinking processes were such a prominent part of the discussion, since educational programs are typically focused on behaviors as the targets for skills training.

From the research, it is clear that one's perspective about a spouse is related to feelings of happiness and commitment to the relationship. Gottman and Fincham discussed the phenomenon of negative sentiment override (NSO), which are negative feelings toward the partner and the relationship in which negativity dominates interactions. When NSO has developed, a person is negatively biased toward his or her partner and sees and interprets mostly negative intent, even if the intent or behavior is neutral. The good in the person and in the relationship is literally difficult to see.

Research indicates that the quality of the couple's friendship is one factor that influences NSO (Hawkins, Carrere, and Gottman 2002). The best method for avoiding or negating NSO is to maintain or rebuild the couple's friendship. Because individuals change, the relationship with those individuals needs to be continually updated and the friendship actively maintained. In his book *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (1999), Gottman outlines several methods for building friendship: making love maps (knowing the relevant information about a partner's life), maintaining expressions of fondness and admiration (beliefs that a partner is likeable and worthy of respect and honor), and making and accepting 'turning toward' bids (attempts to gain attention, affection, humor, or support from partner and acknowledging these bids). The idea is that promoting positive feelings results in a more positive view and more positive attitudes towards a person's partner and relationship.

The expectations a person holds for the relationship and his or her partner also affect that person's attitudes. If expectations are met or exceeded, then the person will be satisfied. If a person's expectations are not met, then the person will be unsatisfied. It is also important to note that a person may have unreasonably high expectations - or may not disclose his or her expectations to a spouse. This results in low relationship satisfaction.

According to Fincham, "too often expectations are unrealistic (e.g, beliefs that disagreement is destructive, sex must be perfect) and implicit, ultimately leading to marital problems." Therefore, couples need to make their personal and couple expectations explicit by clearly communicating them to their partner and regularly evaluating them.

As part of this discussion, realistic expectations about patterns in relationships were also pointed out. According to Kurdek (1999), declines in marital satisfaction are normative (e.g., on average, one year after the wedding and five years into the marriage), particularly following the transition to parenthood. Educators can teach couples to expect this and to understand that it reflects the realities of being married and dealing with conflict and change. According to the literature (Gottman, 1999) Goddard noted that every relationship has irresolvable differences, and that "emphasizing the positive and corraling/managing/ignoring/balancing negatives is vital to positive relationships." Many issues will not disappear and a compromise or tolerance will have to occur. This realistic expectation can positively impact couple quality.

Overall, the "thinking" in relationships is an important element of couples education programs. In presenting his paper on marriage education, Stanley suggested that educators encourage couples to discuss topics such as their dreams and their future together because "people who think longer term about their marriages are likely to have better marriages." Also, he encouraged educators to discourage couples from frequently thinking unrealistically about attractive alternatives because it diverts energy from the current relationship. Helping couples change the ways they think about each other and their relationship should be integrated into couples education programming.

Stanley remarked "I think good premarital preparation should be full enough, long enough, and provocative enough NOT to give couples a false sense of security, but to give them a sense that it will take work and it may be difficult at times."

Effective communication strategies in conflict. Some of the discussion centered on effective communication in conflict. There was substantial discussion of "active listening" as a useful skill and strategy. Some of the participants (both panelists and educators) were concerned that use of this strategy might feel "artificial" during an emotional exchange. Based on his research (Gottman and Lvenson 2000) Gottman noted that active listening is a form of speaker exchange that requires non-judgmental, non-defensive responses and does not appear to emerge spontaneously in observational research on couples in conflict. Stanley's program evaluation research (e.g., Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, and Clements 1993) indicates that some couples will learn to use strategies very deliberately and consistently while others may not use them so much in their full expression over time. He pointed out, however, that the strategy may be a vehicle or framework for using more appropriate communication during conflict (e.g., that there are two people with viewpoints here, that both deserve to be heard, and that slowing things down can help keep the situation safe when the subject is difficult). Stanley and Goddard also emphasized the importance of using empathy skills when listening (i.e., acknowledging the speaker's feelings and trying to understand his or her perspective).

Gottman provided other examples of communication techniques that are effective during conflict. These include self-soothing, taking a time-out, reflecting on the strengths of the relationship, thinking about partner's purpose rather than one's own defenses, and softening the start-up (e.g., finding gentler, less confrontational methods of initiating the discussion). Goddard offered an example of a soft start-up: "Since our relationship is so important to me, I have been trying to think of ways we could spend more enjoyable time together. I have some ideas. May I share them with you and get your thoughts?" That is far softer than, "You never take time for me!"

Gottman also mentioned the importance of addressing "stonewalling," which is emotional disengagement and withdrawal from the relationship. This communication pattern is related to lower marital quality indicating that educators should focus on emphasizing comfortable ways for couples to stay engaged with each other during conflicts.

Panelists also emphasized the importance of friendship-building behaviors in everyday living for effective communication during conflict. That is, when couples work on maintaining or rebuilding couple intimacy and connection in everyday interactions - showing affection, admiration, turning towards each other - they build an "emotional bank" that seems to serve them well during moments of conflict and stress. These couples appear to use more appropriate, less destructive communication strategies when in conflict.

Couple type diversity. Panelists emphasized that not all marriages are alike. Especially noteworthy are our country's high divorce and remarriage rates. Stanley noted that second marriages are less idealized, more complex, and suffer more resistance to becoming "we." Kurdek noted that this resistance to becoming "we" increases the risk for divorce. Also, children tend to be the focus of conflicts in remarriages whereas financial issues tend to be the center of most fights in first marriages. Kurdek added that although the content of the conflict may vary, the "general pattern of destructive arguing between partners predicts relationship distress" and this is similar for all marriages. Kurdek's research (Kurdek 1999) further illustrates that "the general course of change in marital quality is not affected by divorce history." Stanley agreed that "many core relationship processes are similar in all kinds of romantic relationships. Importantly, however, the 'content' (issues) and the context may be very different and should be considered by educators. For example, educators might help couples talk constructively and openly about expectations for their remarriage and stepfamily formation and their plans regarding children and stepparenting."

Panelists also noted that couples may face different issues depending on race and social class. Kurdek noted that research was not diverse with regard to race/ethnicity but it was with respect to social class. Stanley added that "dissemination is generally going to be most effective when accomplished by people who are relatively embedded in the community they are working with,

so that they can utilize whatever materials they are choosing with sensitivity to the cultural history, stories, and metaphors of a group." It may be helpful to involve an educator or co-facilitator with a background similar to participants' backgrounds in order to be sensitive to unique contexts and issues.

Program delivery

Participant interest in program delivery issues focused on

- appropriateness of FCS educator involvement
- background and training
- maintaining a distance from clinical work
- marketing

Appropriateness of FCS educator involvement. Educators emphasized the importance of establishing the appropriateness of Extension involvement in couples education within our organization and in the community. Stanley remarked that FCS educators "...would be among the most natural, obvious, and successful at provision of couples educational materials." An educator commented that it is an obvious next step. "How can we better impact children than to strengthen communication and relationship skills of their primary role models?" Olsen encouraged the careful communication of the role that FCS educators would play in delivering marriage and couples education and urged educators to "think ahead on 'scripting' . . . [and] deciding the language we should use when responding to others in Extension, advisory boards, and other community groups who have concerns." Furthermore, she suggested that educators practice the communication skills we teach (e.g., not responding defensively when challenged on doing marriage and couples education, but acknowledging concerns and having appropriate language to explain the impact on child and family well-being).

Background and training. Olsen pointed out the critical need for preparation by agents before establishing a marriage/couples program. Typically, educators have not had experience in presenting on adult relationship quality; therefore, investments in professional development and training are critical. Stanley recommended reading books written for couples by the panelists, as well as the work of other researchers in the same area of study. He also suggested that educators read a book in the model that they would likely use because that will begin to immerse them in the core constructs of that particular model. "The more immersed a person gets, the sooner it gets to be fun presenting content and the easier it becomes to customize and tailor the message to

specific groups." Also, developers of specific curricula provide training opportunities for educators.

Education vs. therapy. It appears critical that educators openly acknowledge to participants the prevention and educational focus of marriage education and, in practice, their methods should reflect this. Stanley emphasized that all trainers in educational models should have a clear sense of the boundaries about the nature of their work and that it is probably "...easiest for non-clinically trained people to maintain the boundary." Olsen emphasized that an educator's responsibility is not to diagnose relationships, but to create changes in awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and perhaps, behaviors. Olsen emphasized the importance of monitoring and maintaining an appropriate level of personal self-disclosure in educational sessions. Goddard provided the following example for responding to the disclosure of sensitive information: "That is a very sensitive issue. Let's talk after class about what you might do." After class it would be important for the educator to refer participants to appropriate professionals.

Marketing. The discussion on the delivery of programs centered on how to market a relationship class, the best period in a relationship to provide couples education, and the best locations for class offerings. It was noted that relationship classes may carry a stigma that "something is wrong." Therefore, work needs to be done in communities in order to normalize this educational opportunity. Olsen suggested writing a series of newspaper articles prior to announcing a workshop. Stanley recommended emphasizing that

- the program is a "class" or "workshop" designed to give couples some tools to add to their toolkit
- the classes are for couples who want to learn more and
- the classes are designed to help couples keep and deepen a great relationship.

In other words, marketing materials should be as different as they can be from what people think of as therapy. Panelists and educators agreed it was best to emphasize the programs as prevention rather than intervention. Fincham remarked that this is similar to preventive maintenance on a car - rather than "...waiting for your car to break down before you give it attention!"

Location may also be key. Stanley encouraged educators to hold programs at a neutral institution (e.g., school setting, library, recreational center) because the public would view attending classes in such a setting as normal. In addition, Goddard pointed out that workplace training and faith-community partnerships have been under-used by Extension. It was noted that more couples go to religious leaders for marital help than to the entire mental health professions combined;

therefore, religious institutions may be a key to successful outreach in the area of marriage/couples education.

It was also suggested that couples education become part of other FCS programs (e.g., parenting, money management). Stanley recommended that educators build a relationship element into other classes, pulling in and trying out a couple-level task/exercise or technique and then saying, "We have a whole other class starting up that will build on that kind of thing, why not give it a try?"

Panelists also suggested that educators market to couples experiencing a specific life event, such as becoming engaged, becoming parents, and becoming empty nesters. Kurdek further recommended targeting a younger audience. He noted that from a prevention standpoint, it would be useful to provide educational opportunities to adolescents who are beginning to explore intimate partner relationships. Evidence suggests that some of the problems in adult relationships (poor anger management, ineffective conflict resolution skills, unrealistic expectations about relationships, distorted templates about men and women, etc.) are already present in adolescence.

Conclusion

A unique discussion among FCS educators, specialists, and experienced researchers in the field of marital quality and relationship education resulted in recommendations that can serve as a solid base from which FCS educators can move forward in the area of couples education. Using these discussion summary points, FCS educators can ensure the inclusion of important research knowledge in program content and can use the suggestions offered for training, marketing, and program delivery. Participants agreed that FCS educators can provide a meaningful contribution to the educational programs in their communities that promote child and family well-being by focusing on healthy couple relationships.

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Web site

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