

Connecting for families: a pilot relationship education program for low-resource Latino families

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Abstract

Research in the field of family studies shows increasing evidence that the quality of the couple relationship in a family has a significant impact on children's development. In practice, however, addressing this vital part of healthy family functioning and stability is often overlooked, especially in programs serving Latino couples. While many curricula exist to provide families with healthy relationship/healthy marriage education, often the teaching materials, the format, and the facilitation need adaptation to be successful in working with a Latino audience. Connecting for Families is a pilot program specifically designed for low-income parents with the goal of building healthy relationships, which helps foster healthy development in children. In the process of developing this program for all low-resource couples, the authors also created a program specific to Latino couples. As such, a number of effective recruitment strategies and innovative learning opportunities for Latino families were identified. This article will showcase the program as well as lessons learned.

Introduction

Research suggests that on average, children reared in a two-parent home tend to have fewer behavior problems and higher education status (Mincy, Pouncy, Reichert, and Richardson 2004). Similarly, couples in a healthy relationship are more likely to enjoy health benefits (Brotherson and Duncan 2004), and they are less likely to be depressed, have alcohol problems, or commit suicide (Nock 2005). A parent's marital status is also associated with the financial stability of the family. The financial discrepancy between two-parent and single-parent families is clear: 63 percent of children in poor families live in single parent households (National Centre for Children and Poverty 2010).

Latino families face significant barriers that make lasting relationships difficult to sustain. Current statistics show that Latinos have the highest rate of teen pregnancy and the greatest rate of out-of-wedlock births (National Campaign 2009). Single and teen parents are at significantly higher risk for poverty and other risk factors than married or older parents (Amato & Maynard, 2007). In fact, Latino families are 200 percent more likely to live in poverty than white families (Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative 2009). The good news is that research shows that healthy couple relationships and marriage are closely linked with child well-being (Schulz, Pruett, Kerig, and Park 2010; Teubert and Pinquart 2010) and could be a successful strategy for poverty reduction (Amato & Maynard 2007). Relationship and marriage education (RME) has been found to be a highly effective approach to helping distressed couples (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, and Fawcett 2009) and great strides have been made in RME to create programs for vulnerable audiences. However, there is a growing need for culturally relevant services targeting vulnerable Hispanic couples. Educational couples' relationship programs in Spanish are a new trend, and there is a great need for RME programs that deliver the message to Latinos that healthy relationships can act as a protective factor for families.

Program overview

The lack of healthy relationships and marriages creates a host of negative consequences for the parents and children in low-income families with small children. This can be particularly true for low-income Latino families as they have additional stressors affecting their families. In addition to the high stress of poverty, low-income Latino families face additional legal scrutiny and immigration fears, language barriers, and cultural differences. Based on the unique factors that affect Latino couples and on the need for culturally competent resources, the Connecting for Families (CFF) program was created and piloted for one year. Preliminary results and lessons learned may help other programs with a similar target audience gain a better understanding of how to reach, educate, and support Latino low-resource families.

CFF was designed to provide participants with the necessary skills and resources to help them build stronger, healthier relationships that will benefit their children, families, and society. Another principle of the CFF project is to improve participants' chances for relationship success by giving families the opportunity to build friendships with others in similar situations and thus form informal social support groups. Participants not only learn skills critical for relationship success, but they are also in an environment where they learn about each other. It is clear that spending time with other couples that are successful in their relationships improves the odds for participants' success.

Method

Format

Recruiting Latino audiences requires cultural competency, strong relationships with community partners and a relationship with Latino community members (Allen, Gudino, and Crawford 2011). Low-resource couples — any couple with children ages birth through age 5 eligible for Head Start — were recruited from local Head Start agencies, health departments and other community-based programs serving Latino families. Recruitment was primarily by verbal invitation from staff at the local agencies and through the bilingual staff hired for this program, although flyers were also distributed. Ultimately, recruitment happened through word of mouth from former participants. Families were invited to attend a weekend retreat and follow-up sessions. According to top relationship education researchers, having fun and spending quality time together is important to any relationship program (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 2002). Weekend retreats were chosen as the RME format. The retreat format allowed couples the time to kindle or rekindle their romance and to spend quality time together to work on relationship issues while having a relationship expert and a support system immediately available.

Instruction

Relatively few curricula had been developed for our target population; therefore, another element of this program was the development and implementation of a curriculum designed specifically for low-resource families with young children. The curriculum was designed specifically for low-resource families, and instruction format was based on adult learning and experiential learning theories. Instruction delivery was conducted through activities, practice, and team/relationship building. Topics were chosen based on RME literature, specifically the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model (NERMEM) (Futris and Adler-Baeder 2007) and through poverty literature. The sixteen-hour weekend retreats focused on the following topics:

- Lighten Up – Love and Laughter (the importance of caring in relationships)

- Couple Communication (the importance of sharing in relationships)
- Family Ties (the importance of connecting with others)
- Fire Prevention (the importance of managing conflict in couple relationships)
- Getting to Know You (the importance of knowing and staying connected)
- Healthy Minds (the importance of self care in relationships)
- Healthy Relationships (the importance of choosing in relationships)

Results

Any family that had Head Start eligible children were recruited to the program, including English and Spanish speakers. Latino recruitment efforts accounted for 40 percent of all couples and are the focus of this article. In the first year of the project, sixty-two Latino couples (124 adults with 230 children) participated in retreats in Spanish, for a total of sixteen hours of RME. Adults were, on average, 25 years old, and all fell under 125 percent of the national poverty level. Participants were given a pre-program questionnaire to complete after signing in and a post-program questionnaire at the end of the retreat and at the completion of every four-lesson module. In addition, participants are asked to provide verbal and written qualitative feedback. Questionnaires were written in Spanish and analysed by bilingual research staff. The questionnaires were then translated by bilingual research staff and analysed by English-speaking staff. Pre- and post-program questionnaires that include Likert-scale and open-ended questions revealed that participants acquired important relationship skills while participating in CFF.

With regard to conflict management, before participating in the program, 78 percent (N=97) of participants indicated that they “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that they “could resolve conflicts respectfully, fairly, and to the satisfaction of both parties.” After participating in at least one portion of the program, the rate increased to 92 percent (N=114) of participants. Another program outcome was an increase in the number of participants who indicated that they could work with their child’s other parent to raise the child together.

Participatory evaluation results showed that although some were initially hesitant to participate, nearly all participants expressed satisfaction with the retreats. One male participant said, “I thought this was not a good idea at first. I didn’t really want to participate, but after awhile it got easier.” Another participant said, “The longer we were together as a group in and out of class, it was easier to open up and share.” Following a retreat, a Latino participant said, “This is a very good program for Latinos.” Many who participated indicated that the program gave them the

opportunity to build a closer connection with their partners. One participant stated that CFF was “Wonderful!! We had a great time connecting with others and reconnecting with each other!” Another person said, “This program helps a lot. I have learned a lot, and it has helped me. It will be a good idea that more couples was able to participate and receive this help. Thank you for everything [;] we are very grateful.” Many also felt that this kind of program could improve their community: “This is a very good program for Latinos hoping that in the future, with the time, this type of program continue on taking Latinos into account.”

Discussion

The Connecting for Families program yielded great success as well as some challenges. Throughout the process, the project team has documented lessons that would be useful should other programs choose to replicate.

Collaboration

Pairing Cooperative Extension with organizations that already served Latino audiences proved very successful. The local health department has a parenting program for Latino families, and 80 percent (N=99) of the families served were recruited into CFF as a result of that partnership. Furthermore, hiring a professional from the Latino community gave the program credibility, and many participants stated that they came to the retreat because they already had a relationship with the trainer.

Logistics

Parents were allowed to bring their children and a child-care provider to the events, and although families enjoyed the experience, it proved to be cost ineffective. The policy changed so that childcare stipends are now offered to families. Also, participants receive financial incentives as part of the program. In order to document the incentive for auditing purposes, we found that gift cards to local retailers and gas cards were the preferable method of payment. The weekend training sessions were long, and participants need the information to be well presented and meaningful. With this in mind, trainings were adapted to include a great amount of fun as well as educational activities and the opportunity to practice skills learned.

Recruitment

As with any family life education program, recruitment was a challenge, especially at the beginning. Developing relationships with Latino participants is vital to recruitment (Allen, Gudino, & Crawford, 2011), therefore we made sure to hire bilingual staff that were already a part of the Latino community. Taking the time to socialize and develop personal relationships

fostered participation and interest in the program. As participants became comfortable with the trainer and the other participants, they were more likely to develop trust and feel a sense of ownership in the program. Word of mouth from former participants ended up being one of the best recruitment approaches.

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