

Implementing Relationship Education with Low-Income Audiences

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Abstract

This paper reports on the implementation of a nationally established research-based curriculum, *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk or Jerk-ette*, with TANF recipients. Classes were held at the Department of Workforce Services (Utah's TANF regulating agency) in an urban county, Weber County, in northern Utah. The goal of this paper is to discuss the details of this program's development and replication by Extension agents in their counties or nationally. The program's development was successful because of community partner collaborations.

Key words: healthy relationships, Extension, low-income, education, TANF

Introduction

According to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) there are currently about 11,502 individuals receiving federal financial assistance in Utah through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF Program (US Department of Health and Human Services 2008). Of these recipients, 3,143 are adults who are required to participate in the Family Employment Program (FEP), (the name of Utah's TANF program) administered by the Department of Workforce Services (US Department of Health and Human Services 2008; Vogel-Ferguson 2008). The vast majority of these FEP participants are women, and about 35 percent report that assistance is needed due to dissolution of a romantic relationship (Vogel-Ferguson 2009; Taylor and Vogel-Ferguson 2009). They may need to deal with personal issues as a result of previous relationship issues before it is possible to move toward a healthy marriage relationship.

The purpose of this program was to help FEP participants move toward more healthy future relationships using a nationally recognized and research-based curriculum called *How to Avoid*

Marrying a Jerk (or Jerk-ette) by Dr. John Van Epp (Van Epp 2008). This curriculum includes: how to recognize warning signs of unhealthy partners, steps to building a healthy and safe relationship, and how to recognize the importance of working on past personal issues in order to attract healthy future partners. The goal of this paper is to document program details including the development and successes enabling Extension agents to replicate similar programs in counties throughout the nation.

Program Development

In order to reach the intended FEP audience, a partnership was formed with the local Department of Workforce Services (DWS) in an urban county, Weber County, in northern Utah. A brief overview of the curriculum was presented to the manager, supervisors, and case management staff in order to demonstrate the value of the materials for the clients. Once there was adequate staff support, the workshop was added to the scheduling of case management programs and appropriate clients were referred to the class.

To encourage attendance at the classes and to gain appropriate referrals, presentations were provided for staff members about the content of the materials. Colorful flyers and posters were provided to staff to post in their offices and on lobby bulletin boards or to hand out to clients. Phone calls, e-mails, and reminders during staff meeting were utilized to encourage referrals to the class. Flyers were also given to other local partnering agencies that served the same clientele such as the domestic violence shelter and food bank in order to encourage additional referrals.

In Utah a portion of TANF funds are allocated for educational purposes. A grant received from the TANF funds covered the cost of workbooks and learning tools for each class participant.

An evaluation approved through the Utah State University Institutional Review Board was given at the end of the class to understand the impact of the course on the participants and to receive feedback for class improvement. Attendance at each class was also recorded and provided to the referring case manager for participant accountability.

Program Implementation

While the suggested format for the class was one two-hour session each week for five weeks, the format for the DWS classes was changed to a condensed two-day format (Tuesday and Wednesday) from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. While this schedule is not ideal for maximum retention of the materials, it was used to accommodate child care, required internships and other obligations, and to discourage attrition. Classes were scheduled approximately every other month in order to give staff time to recruit new participants. Clients were recruited as deemed appropriate by case managers during intake or monthly appointments. Classes were added to

clients' individual plans as negotiated with case managers to receive their monthly federal financial assistance.

Classes were taught by the county Extension agent who is certified to teach the curriculum, has a background of relationship education, and has experience working with low-income populations. In order to ensure participant engagement through long class sessions, numerous teaching methods were used including a colorful PowerPoint, video clips, worksheets, group work, and discussion. Stretch breaks and refreshments were also provided to help the participants maintain focus and comfort.

Participant Retention

Since the class inception, three classes have been held within a six-month time frame, and almost 30 individuals have attended the training. Attendance for this class was similar to that of other classes offered for this targeted population in the community. The majority of participants were adult women with an average age of 24. Only three individuals had ever taken a relationship education class previously. The number of participants who were assigned to the workshop was significantly higher (45), many (17) did not choose to attend, and of those in attendance 79 percent or 22 completed the course.

Previous experience with presentations of this curriculum in the community suggests that the name of the program often intrigues individuals and encourages initial attendance at the class. Once they attend the class, the style of the presentation keeps the participants engaged and makes the class materials personally meaningful, which, in turn, reduces attrition.

Understanding and Overcoming Barriers to Success

An understanding of several factors related to the challenges and requirements of the DWS participants is critical to a successful program. Some of the main points to consider when implementing a similar program include:

1. TANF participation requirements. In order to receive TANF funds, the majority of individuals must participate full-time in federally approved activities. While the curriculum supports the overarching goals of the TANF program, this class is not currently supported as a federally approved participation activity; and, therefore, may be challenging for case managers to refer clients to this class. Despite this, many case managers find it helpful to refer their clients while they are waiting for an approved participation activity to begin or for those who may have documented restricted participation abilities. The class may also be a helpful referral for those that are in noncompliance with program requirements and need to demonstrate their participation efforts in order to retain their assistance.

2. Participant current life challenges. Individuals who receive FEP assistance often have many barriers to becoming self-sufficient, some of which include relationship issues, lack of child care, inadequate education, substance abuse issues, and medical and/or mental health issues. Some of these challenges could also interfere with class attendance. While providing a condensed format of the class during hours when child care is available and paid for by DWS will not guarantee all referred clients will attend, this convenient format will encourage attendance and support participants in completing the class in its entirety.

3. Staff support. Many staff are overwhelmed with the amount of the workload or federal guidelines they are required to follow; and, because of this, may overlook additional options and programs for their clients. Providing an overview of the materials may motivate some staff to refer their clients. Ongoing personal contact with managers, supervisors, and case managers will also encourage referrals. A handful of supportive case managers can provide more than an adequate amount of referrals for a well-attended class. In addition, as these supportive case managers promote client participation, other case managers may be more likely to refer their clients as well.

4. Funding considerations. While TANF is most commonly known as the financial assistance provided for needy households, the goals of TANF also include forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Taylor and Vogel-Ferguson 2009). As mentioned previously, in Utah a portion of TANF funds have been allocated for educational purposes, specifically to help individuals and couples develop and sustain healthy relationships. Because the funding for this program is competitive, continued funding from TANF for this program for the last two years has demonstrated the validity of this program from the funders. As participants incorporate changes learned in class, some may choose to make changes that could decrease their reliance on TANF funds. This potential decreased demand on TANF funding would demonstrate additional value.

Impacts

While it is challenging to know the long-term impact of the curriculum on the participants, the evaluations completed at the end of the course indicated that many found the class helpful. Common comments from participants indicated that they learned more skills on how to listen, communicate, and resolve conflicts and have made plans to implement these skills in their lives to improve their relationships. Many participants also shared that they felt confident they now know how to avoid negative old patterns. They planned on making some personal changes to improve their current relationships or before they begin a new relationship. Many stated they had already shared some of the information they learned with others and intended to refer their friends to the class.

In addition, the way this program was implemented through existing partnerships was successful because it strengthened those partnerships through creating new collaborations within the community to provide important information to those who could really benefit from the classes. Furthermore, the experience was very positive in promoting Extension education. Through collaboration with DWS, staff and class participants have expanded awareness of other programs available through Extension by receiving flyers, e-mails, and information about additional Extension offerings. This expanded awareness has led many class participants and additional community members to attend at least one other healthy relationship class offered by Extension.

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