The Smart Steps, *Embrace the Journey* program: Enhancing relational skills and relationship quality in remarriages and stepfamilies

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Abstract

*Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey* is an innovative program that teaches relationship skills for couples and children in stepfamilies. Results from 200 ethnically and economically diverse participants attending *Smart Steps* classes at eleven different sites suggest that *Smart Steps* is effective in improving healthy relationship skills, increasing commitment, and decreasing relationship instability.

**Keywords:** remarriage, stepfamily, relationship, education

Introduction

Stepfamilies often are more complex than first families. There is no sequencing of relationship development; the couple relationship, relationships with children, and relationships with former partners have to be established and navigated simultaneously; and stepfamilies are more likely to have varying degrees of closeness and attachment between family members (Ganong and Coleman 2004). In the field of family life and marriage education, there is a growing understanding among educators that best practices in relationship education should consider developmental differences between couples in first marriages, and those who partner or remarry and have children from previous relationships (Halford, Markman, Kline, and Stanley 2003).
There is little evidence to suggest that the processes important for couple functioning in first marriages are not also important for couples in stepfamilies (e.g., communication skills, shared values and beliefs, conflict management skills, etc.). However, scholars have noted that the research on the broad population of marital couples offers an incomplete examination of the full range of factors related to couple functioning in stepfamilies. Consequently, educators who offer programs that are built on general marital research may be providing educational experiences that are inadequate to meet the unique needs of couples in stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004). These needs include information on healthy stepparent-stepchild relationship development, healthy co-parenting relationships, and discussions of unique financial issues (e.g., child support, obligations for stepchildren’s college education, etc.) (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004; Ganong and Coleman 2004).

In a recent review of stepfamily programs designed to be offered as educator-facilitated group sessions, only eight different curricula were found (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham 2004). Three of these were created by Extension specialists. While the programs varied in the amount of research-based information provided, none provided any recent evidence of program effects or impact. Educators can be most confident in providing a program when it is found to be both research-based and evidence-based.

**Program description**

*Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey* (Adler-Baeder 2007) was developed with support from Cornell University, the Stepfamily Association of America, Auburn University, and the National Stepfamily Resource Center. The program provides a comprehensive educational experience, covering the key areas that predict marital stability among couples in stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder 2007). The 12-hour program contains lessons for adults and for children, and covers such areas as understanding stepfamily development, effective co-parenting strategies, effective step parenting strategies, nurturing the couple relationship, improving external family supports, conflict management, use of empathy and shared perceptions in stepfamilies, and negotiating finances in stepfamilies.

**Program impacts**

Between February and May 2007, *Smart Steps* classes were offered at 11 different sites in Utah. These classes were offered through a partnership between Utah State University and community family-service agencies. A total of 200 adults attended, including ninety-five couples. Sixty-one percent of participants were in a remarriage; 30 percent were in an unmarried relationship, and 10 percent were single parents. Single parents were allowed to attend because their next relationship or marriage would create a stepfamily. Fifty-six percent of participants were Caucasian, and 40 percent self-identified as Latino. The average age was 35, with a range of 18
to 55. Fifty-six percent had 12 years of education or less. Fifty-nine percent made less than $25,000 annually, and 60 percent had children who received free or reduced school lunches. In attendance with their parents were 248 children between the ages of 5-17.

At the end of each lesson, participants completed an evaluation that captured their self-reported skill-level in various areas before and after attending the class. Due to the nature of the dependent data, analyses were run separately for men and for women. Paired-sample t-tests revealed that both male and female participants reported significant increases (p < .05) in all of the following skill areas:

- ability to recognize stepfamily myths
- ability to communicate about financial issues
- ability to identify sources of conflict
- ability to identify individual/family strengths

Before beginning the classes (T1), participants answered questions about their commitment to and the stability of their couple relationship (92 males and 108 females). At the end of the classes (T2), participants answered the same questions (71 males and 92 females). One month later (T3), after a booster session, participants (38 males and 49 females) once again responded to the same questions. Comparison tests on key demographic features (e.g., education and income) reveal that those who completed T3 data did not differ significantly from those who did not.

![Figure 1. Male and female participants total commitment scores](image)

[Alt tag content for Figure 1: Total commitment scores for male and female participants at Times 1, 2, and 3]
Figure 1 depicts total mean scores for male and female participants on the commitment scale (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 2002). On a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, participants rated the following statements: (a) My relationship with my partner/spouse is more important to me than almost anything else in my life; (b) I may not want to be with my partner/spouse a few years from now (reverse coded); (c) I like to think of my partner/spouse and me more in terms of “us” and “we” than “me” and “him/her;” and (d) I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter. Total commitment scores (average of all four) increased significantly from T1 to T2 for men (p = .031). Sustained program effects are suggested by statistically significant increases in men’s (p = .006) and women’s (p = .012) commitment scores at the T3 follow-up. Change in scores across time did not differ by ethnicity or gender.

Results from the relationship instability index (Booth, Johnson, and Edwards 1983) are presented in Figure 2. On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, participants rated the following questions: (a) Have you ever thought your relationship might be in trouble? (b) Has the thought of getting a divorce or separation crossed your mind? (c) Have you discussed divorce or separation with a close friend? and (d) Have you or your partner/spouse ever seriously suggested the idea of divorce or separation? As measured by the total instability score (average of the four), instability decreased for women from pre- to post-program (p <.001). Instability continued to decrease (stability increased) at the one-month follow-up survey, although the trends were not significant. Changes in instability scores did not differ significantly for the Latino and Caucasian participants.

![Figure 2. Male and female participants total relationship instability scores](Image)

[Alt tag content for Figure 2: Relationship instability scores for male and female participants at Times 1, 2, and 3]
Summary

The prevalence and unique needs of remarrying and repartnering couples have been noted by leading scholars in the field (see Ganong and Coleman 2004), and Extension educators are already beginning to meet those needs (see the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network, www.NERMEN.org). Recently, the federal government has commissioned reports by Extension specialists focused on the distinct educational services needed for these families (Robertson, Adler-Baeder, Collins, DeMarco, Fein, and Schramm 2006) and has funded Extension faculty to provide healthy marriage programs for couples in stepfamilies in Alabama and Utah (see www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/funding/index.html). As illustrated by the results of this study, Extension-sponsored education classes for couples in stepfamilies have the ability to not only attract participants, but to impact their relationships in a positive way.

The data indicate that key targeted skill and relationship quality variables are enhanced over the course of program participation. Importantly, the changes in ratings of relationship instability and commitment to the relationship are most pronounced a month after participation in the program. Presumably, this is the result of putting new knowledge and skills into practice for a period of time. While an important piece of evidence for the Smart Steps program, this has even broader implications for evaluation studies. This finding highlights the importance of tracking follow-up information after program participation to clarify whether positive effects found at the conclusion of program participation taper off or indicate a positive trajectory toward increasing improvements.

Results of this study on program effects of the Smart Steps program are promising for Family and Consumer Science Extension agents who are involved in or are interested in providing community educational programs for couples in stepfamilies – including those who are low-income. Notably, the program appears to benefit men and women, Latino and Caucasian participants.

Extension educators interested in using the Smart Steps curriculum should visit the National Stepfamily Resource Center (www.stepfamilies.info).

References


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