

Effectiveness of Marriage Education Programs

Research Synthesis Paper: [Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works](#)

Marriage Education Programs would teach relationship skills to unmarried couples at the time of pregnancy with the goal of helping couples develop strong, healthy marriages. The programs would also provide marriage-skills training to low-income married couples to help those couples improve their relationships and avoid marital breakup.

1. Studies on Marriage Education Programs

Critics of Marriage Education Programs claim that no evidence shows that the marriage education and enrichment programs envisioned in this initiative would work.

This charge is simply false. The evidence is overwhelming that programs that provide marriage-skills training help couples increase happiness, improve their relationships, and avoid negative behaviors that can lead to marital breakup. For example:

- Social science research provides ample evidence from the real world that marriage education, training, and counseling programs—some of which have been around for more than 40 years—significantly strengthened the marriages of couples that have taken advantage of such programs. These studies—integrating findings from well over 100 separate evaluations—show that a wide variety of marriage-strengthening programs can reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.
- One analysis (called by scientists a meta-analysis) that integrated 85 studies involving nearly 4,000 couples enrolled in more than 20 different marriage-enrichment programs found that the average couple, after participating in a program, was better off than more than two-thirds of couples that did not participate.¹⁾
- One meta-analysis examining over 23 separate studies revealed that the average program participant was significantly better off than 79% of nonparticipants. They documented that program participants experienced gains in the areas of interpersonal skills and overall relationship quality.²⁾
- Another meta-analysis of 16 studies of one of the oldest marriage-enhancement programs, Couple Communication, observed meaningful program effects with regard to all types of measures: Couples who took the training experienced moderate to large gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities.³⁾ For example, the average couple, after taking Couple Communication training, was able to out-perform 83 percent of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.
- An analysis of the Relationship Enhancement program shows that it significantly improves marital relationships. As a result of the program, participating couples did better than 83 percent of couples that did not participate.
- A study conducted in 2002 documents the effectiveness of premarital inventory questionnaires and counseling in preventing marital distress. This approach yielded a 52 percent increase in the number of couples classified as “most satisfied” with their relationship. Among the

remaining couples, more than half improved their assessment of their relationship; among the highest-risk couples, more than 80 percent moved up into a more positive category.⁴⁾

- A 1993 meta-analysis of marriage and family counseling found that, among 71 studies that compared counseling to no-counseling, couples who took marriage counseling were better off than 70 percent of couples that did not take counseling.⁵⁾
- An extensive review of the literature on the effectiveness of marital counseling in preventing separation and divorce found dozens of studies demonstrating that counseling was effective in reducing conflict and increasing marital satisfaction.⁶⁾
- The results of a 2007 study showed a MRE (marriage and relationship education) program led to couples reporting higher relationship satisfaction and commitment, and less conflict and chance for divorce.⁷⁾

This scientific research demonstrates that marriage programs—whether they are called marital preparation, enhancement, counseling, or skills training—are effective. These studies make the case that marriages are not merely enabled to survive, but can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationships work. Moreover, the research shows that the programs are effective in a variety of socioeconomic classes. Polls indicate that the overwhelming majority of low-income couples at risk of out-of-wedlock childbearing or marital breakup would like to participate in programs that would help them improve their relationships.

2. Studies on Marriage-Centered Programs

Many other studies provide additional evidence that marriage-centered programs are effective. Whether they offer marital-skills training, counseling, or intervention for distressed marriages, such efforts have been found to increase the chances of marital success and happiness.

For example, in a study of a two-session marriage intervention program called Marriage Checkup, the use of a marital assessment questionnaire and “motivational interviewing” of couples recruited by a newspaper advertisement significantly improved marital satisfaction; gains were maintained at a one-month follow-up.⁸⁾ In another study of 137 couples (62 percent of whom were maritally distressed) participating in a four-month workshop called Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS),⁹⁾ couples reported significant increases in both intimacy and overall marital adjustment. PAIRS reports that more than 70% of participating couples indicate either “some improvement” or “much improvement” in aspects pertaining to their relationship after completing the course.¹⁰⁾ While both men and women reported improvements, gains for women were more immediate and dramatic.¹¹⁾

The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, a yearlong marriage relationship education program for low-income couples with children, reported that participants experienced less physical and psychological abuse from their spouse after program completion.¹²⁾

Studies also document the effectiveness of more intensive forms of marital invention: counseling and therapy. An extensive review of the literature on the effectiveness of marital counseling in preventing marital separation and divorce found dozens of studies demonstrating that counseling was effective in reducing conflict and increasing marital satisfaction. This review combined two meta-analyses to find that 90 percent of distressed couples that took a full program of therapy were still together 18 to 24 months later, compared with 61 percent of those who took only a partial program.¹³⁾

- A 1993 pooling of 71 studies that compared counseling to no-counseling yielded an effect size of 0.51, meaning that the average couple who participated in marriage counseling was better off than 70 percent of couples who did not participate. In addition, it found that 41 percent of couples moved from the distressed to non-distressed category following counseling.¹⁴⁾
- A 1988 review showed that the outcomes of marriage counseling were comparable to other forms of psychotherapy. Couples that were counseled were 40 to 60 percent more likely to improve their marriage than couples foregoing counseling.¹⁵⁾

Finally, studies provide evidence that marriage-skills programs can dramatically improve behavior even for couples in very troubled circumstances. For example:

- A 1999 study found that, two years after a program for 75 alcoholics and their wives, reports of spousal (husband-to-wife) violence dropped from 48 percent to 16 percent.¹⁶⁾
- Among 88 alcoholics and their wives participating in marriage-centered alcohol-treatment programs, both husbands and wives showed significant, substantial reduction in verbal aggression two years after the program.¹⁷⁾
- A review of the Controlling Alcohol and Relationship Enhancement program (CARE), showed that participating couples experienced an improvement in relationship communication including more positive listening and less negative speaking.¹⁸⁾
- Among 80 married or cohabiting substance-abusing patients assigned to 12 weekly sessions of marriage counseling or a no-treatment control group, those who received the marriage counseling had better relationship outcomes at 12 months, including increased satisfaction and reduced separation, than couples in which the husband participated in individual drug-treatment only. Husbands receiving marriage guidance also reported fewer days of drug use, longer periods of abstinence, fewer drug-related arrests, and fewer drug-related hospitalizations.¹⁹⁾
- In a 2001 study of married or cohabiting men with substance abuse problems, participants were randomly assigned to either individual counseling or marriage counseling. Those in the marriage-centered program reported significant decreases in drug use and increases in marital happiness, compared to men assigned to individual counseling.²⁰⁾

Perhaps the most solid evidence comes from a meta-analysis of 20 different marriage programs conducted by Paul Giblin, Douglas H. Sprenkle, and Robert Sheehan. The 20 diverse programs in this meta-analysis covered a wide range of various types of programs, including pre-marital, marriage enrichment, and family interventions. Using a sophisticated statistical procedure that integrated 85 studies of programs involving 3,886 couples, the researchers translated the studies' diverse findings into common expressions of program or treatment effectiveness called "effect size." The result: When measured against control groups that had not participated in the programs, the various marriage programs-involving couples that differed in age, income, and geographic location-yielded an average positive effect size of 0.44. This represents a substantial improvement in behavior, given that effect sizes typically range between -1 to +1.

An effect size of 0.44 means that the average couple participating in any one of the programs studied improved their behavior and relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any program. Specifically, before the training began, the experimental and control groups were equally matched: The median couple that participated in the training scored better than half the couples in the control group and vice versa. After participating in the program, the average participant couple improved their relationship to the point where they performed better than 66 percent of the control couples who did not participate. This represents a substantial improvement in the couples' relationships. Some of the programs yielded effect sizes as high as 0.96, meaning that couples who took the program performed better than 83 percent of those

who did not participate.²¹⁾

3. Opposition to Marriage Education Programs

While much of the opposition to marriage education programs is emotional and ideological, some criticism is couched in pragmatic terms. For example, critics assert that either marriages fail to form or fall apart in low-income communities primarily for economic reasons. According to this logic, the only way to strengthen marriage is to increase funding for job training and conventional welfare programs.

This reasoning is faulty. Aside from the simple fact that marriage continued to erode as the government spent hundreds of billions of dollars on such programs in the past, the basic premise that low-income marriages fail primarily for economic reasons is inaccurate. A recent survey in Oklahoma asked divorced welfare recipients about the reasons their marriages had failed. The three most common reasons were lack of commitment, too much conflict and arguing, and infidelity.²²⁾ These problems are precisely what the marriage-strengthening programs are designed to address.

The most common pragmatic charge made by opponents of marriage education initiative is that there is no evidence that marriage-strengthening programs are effective. This charge is simply untrue. The social science evidence more than amply demonstrates that marriage programs can and do help couples develop enduring, healthy marriages.

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