

Types of Premarital Education Programs

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

Among the various types of marriage programs, the most basic and perhaps most common form occurs before marriage. Unlike “intervention” programs or therapy that deals with troubled marriages, premarital programs focus on preventing marital distress by soliciting discussion of hidden assumptions about marriage and teaching couples communication and relationship skills before problems develop. Working primarily, although not exclusively, with engaged couples, these skills-based programs help prepare couples for the demands and stresses of married life.

Although clergy have traditionally provided this type of marital education, teachers, social workers, and counselors can also be effective. The assumption is that the earlier couples discuss issues and learn marriage skills, the fewer problems they will encounter.

1. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program

The most extensively researched program of this type, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), was initially developed by Howard Markman and Scott Stanley of the University of Denver more than 20 years ago.¹⁾ PREP teaches skills that are necessary for a good marriage: effective communication, teamwork, problem solving, and conflict management, as well as preservation and enhancement of love, commitment, and friendship.

A longitudinal study in Denver that evaluated the effectiveness of prep found that, compared to couples without the training, couples that participated in PREP:²⁾

- Maintained higher levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training;
- Demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction; and
- Reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.

These positive results speak volumes, as the lack of such patterns has been strongly correlated with marital distress, violence, and marital breakup.³⁾ They also explain why couples enrolled in PREP faced a statistically significant lower chance of premarital breakup four to five years later. Such positive results are not limited to the United States and have been confirmed by studies in Austria and Germany.⁴⁾

Contributing to the success of premarital education programs like prep is the use of assessment questionnaires that help couples discover the extent to which they agree on issues of marriage, children, and life in general. Such testing helps to identify potential areas of conflict so that a couple becomes sensitive to their vulnerabilities and can initiate corrective action, including skills training. Some instruments are so sophisticated that they can predict, before a couple marries, whether the two will stay together after marriage. These programs may be particularly helpful to non-married expectant mothers, a majority of whom say they are interested in marrying the father-to-be and believe they have a very good chance of doing so.⁵⁾

Three major instruments—PREmarital Preparation And Relationship Enhancement (prepare); Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study (foccus); and RELATIONSHIP Evaluation (RELATE)—have achieved robust scientific validity. According to Professor Thomas Holman of Brigham Young University:

Each of these assessment tools has solid evidence for validity, reliability, comprehensiveness, ease in administration and scoring, and practicality. Using these questionnaires as part of premarital counseling increases the couple's interest and investment in the process, provides a convenient and concise way to provide a couple with feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship, themselves as individuals, and their social context, and provides a way for couples to set goals for improvement before they marry. They are also all similar in that they assess about 90% of the premarital predictors of marital satisfaction and stability.⁶⁾

2. PREPARE Inventory

Prepare is a 195-item inventory that assesses relationship issues such as marital expectations, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, sex, and parenting. According to how they answer the questions, couples are placed into four categories: vitalized, harmonious, traditional, and conflicted. The discussion that this assessment tool generates is a large part of its effectiveness. A 1996 study of 393 couples that examined the relationship between the four premarital types and their real-life outcomes after three years found that “conflicted” couples were the most likely to separate or divorce and that “vitalized” couples had the highest levels of satisfaction.

Interestingly, about 10 to 15 percent of couples that took prepare before their intended wedding decided not to marry. The scores for these couples were similar to those who did marry but later developed dissatisfied marriages.⁷⁾ This means that PREPARE can be very effective in helping couples to make informed marital choices and avoid troubled marriages and relationships.

PREPARE also helps couples improve their relationships. A study conducted this year documents the effectiveness of premarital inventory questionnaires accompanied by feedback sessions 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. Even among the highest-risk couples, more than 80 percent moved up into a more positive category.⁸⁾

3. FOCCUS

FOCCUS, an inventory similar to PREPARE but with a religious orientation, has demonstrated similar results.⁹⁾ A study of 677 adults who completed foccus between 1987 and 1993 and were interviewed eight years later found that more than 66 percent agreed that the assessment instrument program had been valuable in their lives. Respondents in the early years of marriage were most likely to judge the training as helpful; among those in the first year of marriage, 88 percent agreed that foccus was valuable.¹⁰⁾

4. RELATE

A premarital inventory built upon the experience of older questionnaires, relate,¹¹⁾ was developed by the Relationship Institute, a group of family professors, researchers, and educators. In contrast to prepare and foccus, this instrument solicits the respondent's perceptions of his partner, not just himself. It also has the benefit of providing direct feedback to the couple, not just to the professional. Studies have also documented the effectiveness of this tool in predicting marital satisfaction and stability.¹²⁾

¹⁾ see <https://www.prepinc.com/?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>

²⁾, ³⁾ H. J. Markman et al., "Prevention of Marital Distress: A Longitudinal Investigation," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 56 (1988), pp. 210-217, and "Preventing Marital Distress Through Communication and Conflict Management Training: A Four and Five Year Follow-up," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 62 (1993), pp. 1-8.

⁴⁾ B. Silliman et al., "Preventive Interventions for Couples," *Family Psychology: Science-Based Interventions*, ed. H. Liddle et al. (Washington, D.C.: APA Publications, 2001), pp. 123-146; K. Hahlweg et al., "Prevention of Marital Distress: Results of a German Prospective Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 12 (1998), pp. 543-556; and K. Halford, "Can Skills Training Prevent Relationship Problems in At-Risk Couples? Four-Year Effects of a Behavioral Relationship Education Program," *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 15 (2001), pp. 750-768.

⁵⁾ Sara McLanahan et al., *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Baseline Report: the National Report*, Princeton University Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, August 2001.

⁶⁾ Thomas B. Holman, *Premarital Prediction of Marital Quality or Breakup* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001), p. 206.

⁷⁾ Blaine J. Fowers et al., "Predicting Marital Success for Premarital Couple Types Based on PREPARE," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, Vol. 22 (1996), pp. 103-111.

⁸⁾ Knutson et al., "Effectiveness of the PREPARE Program with Premarital Couples," *Journal Review* (2002).

⁹⁾ See <http://www.foccusinc.com/>

¹⁰⁾ Lee M. Williams and Lisa A. Riley, "An Empirical Approach to Designing Marriage Preparation Programs," *American Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol. 27 (1999), p. 271.

¹¹⁾ See <http://relateinstitute.com/>

¹²⁾ D. M. Busby et al., "RELATE: Relationship Evaluation of the Individual, Family, and Cultural, and Couple Contexts," *Family Relations*, Vol. 50 (2001), pp. 308-316.

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