

# The New Kid on the Block: What Is Marriage Education and Does It Work?

By Theodora Ooms

**A**fter decades of obscurity, marriage education has suddenly emerged into the national spotlight. In 2001, the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, announced its Healthy Marriage Initiative and since then has committed over \$100 million in funds to support marriage education research and programs. It now proposes to spend a lot more. Pending legislation to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program would commit \$200 million to \$300 million a year for five years for a variety of marriage education services.

Marriage education's rapid rise to stardom has stimulated considerable controversy. Some are hailing marriage education as a silver bullet, a valuable new

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### *About the Author*

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strategy in the fight to reduce child poverty and family breakdown. Others deplore investing in what they call these unproven, risky programs for which they claim there is little or no evidence they work. Still others—such as CLASP—are concerned that too much funding is proposed for healthy marriage programs at a time when many basic economic supports and services for poor families are facing funding cuts.

To help understand this policy debate, this brief addresses two questions: What is marriage education? Do we know whether it "works"?

### **What Is Marriage Education?**

Marriage education is the provision of information designed to help individuals and couples achieve long-lasting, happy, and successful marriages. It aims to impart knowledge and attitudes and teach the skills and behaviors needed to have successful intimate relationships. The field is sometimes referred to more broadly as "relationships educa-

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tion." In this brief we use an umbrella term—marriage and relationships education (MRE)—to include information provided to individuals and couples across the relationship life-cycle, including the unattached, unmarried, married, and once-married.

MRE can be provided to the general public through media campaigns, websites, fact sheets, brochures, self-help books, self-guided Internet courses, and other kinds of community outreach activities. Most commonly, however, marriage education refers to structured programs, classes, and workshops for couples and individuals offered on a voluntary basis in the community, churches,

campuses, and schools. (It is these MRE *programs* that are described in this brief.)

The MRE approach is preventive and generally addresses relationship choices and challenges "upstream" before problems become entrenched and destructive. Thus, marriage education programs are usually distinguished from face-to-face individualized counseling and therapy, which is generally offered to already distressed couples. (One well-known marriage education program, *Retrouvaille*, is specifically for highly distressed couples.)

MRE programs grew out of studies on middle and upper-income white couples and have mostly been offered to these populations. MRE programs are typically offered to committed couples—engaged or already married—but sometimes attached or unattached adults participate on their own. A handful of programs have been designed for high school students. A few MRE programs are specifically designed for whole families—parents, children, and even grandparents. MRE programs are generally offered in a group format, although church-based premarital programs frequently give couples self-administered marital inventories that are then discussed in an individualized couple-counseling session.

MRE programs employ a variety of teaching methods, and

programs typically include a mixture of didactic (lecture) material and experiential exercises designed to teach specific communication and other relationship skills. These are often supplemented with video tape and movie clip illustrations, role-playing, workbook exercises, and practice assignments in between sessions. Programs vary in duration and intensity from a single afternoon to day-long or weekend session to multiple two-hour sessions provided over a 6-10 week period. Instructors teach singly or sometimes in male-female pairs, sometimes aided by coaches who help with the classroom practice sessions. As follow up, a few programs offer to match participating couples with married mentor couples who meet with them after the course is completed to reinforce and help them apply what has been learned.

#### Historical Roots

Books and tracts offering marriage advice and instruction have been around for centuries. But MRE only began to emerge as a field with solid theoretical and research underpinning in the 1960s in response to the recognition that one of society's bedrock institutions—marriage—was undergoing a transformation. By the mid-1990s the rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation had soared, and, as a result, increasing proportions of children now spend part of their childhood in

a single-parent family and experience multiple, disruptive transitions in their lives. Many powerful economic, legal, cultural, and technological forces have contributed to these changes in family formation.

These changes transformed the internal landscape of marriage as well as removed many of the external supports and constraints that used to hold marriages together. Individuals now have higher expectations of happiness in marriage, and when these expectations are disappointed it has become more acceptable to divorce. As a consequence, while a happy marriage remains the goal of the vast majority of people across income and race, it clearly has become harder to achieve.

The nature of what is considered a "good, healthy" marriage is also changing. The ideal of "companionate" marriage based on affection between two equals is fast replacing the ideal of "traditional" marriage based on economic necessity, gender specialization, and hierarchy. This emerging egalitarian marriage ideal places a premium on the quality of marital relationships, not mainly on their stability.

#### Research Foundations

In recent years, a growing body of research has documented the negative consequences of the decline in marriage and the benefits of healthy marriage for adults and children alike. While

this research provides the rationale for policy intervention, it is three less well-known strands of research that have laid the foundations for MRE programs.

First, and perhaps most important, is the research of clinical psychologists and others who closely examined relational processes. They videotaped couple interactions in laboratories over years and pin-pointed the positive and negative communication patterns, attitudes, and behaviors associated with marital success and failure. This discovery led to programs that help couples change dysfunctional patterns through educational, skills-based programs.

Second, neuroscientists located the areas of the brain primarily responsible for feelings and emotions and identified the pathways linking them with the rational centers of the brain. This research led to the concept of "emotional intelligence," which fosters empathy, self-awareness, and self-control—emotions considered necessary to good marriages (as well as other personal relationships). These findings provided additional support for marriage and relationship education, since emotional skills are considered *dynamic* factors that can be learned.

Third, research by biologists, endocrinologists, and linguists found important differences in

the ways males and females develop as infants, respond to environmental stress, and communicate and behave as adults. (Some of these differences appear to be biologically "wired" and others socially constructed.) Marriage educators believe that helping couples become aware of these gender differences can improve mutual understanding and acceptance, as well as create a greater willingness to modify the patterns when this would be helpful.

The overarching implication of the research to date is that, contrary to much popular opinion, the keys to marital success are not whether you choose a compatible mate—though this is important—nor how many differences you have, nor whether you can manage to stay "in love." Rather, success largely depends on the kind of relationship you build together and how you handle your differences.

### **Growth of the Field**

Although marriage preparation programs have existed since the 1930s, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that marriage preparation and enrichment programs began to be widely offered to couples in the U.S., Australia, and other Western countries. Pioneer programs were the Pre-Cana premarital counseling programs now universally required of couples wishing to marry within the Catholic Church; the world-wide Marriage Encounter weekend

programs sponsored by the Catholic Church and led by lay couples and a priest; and couple discussion and support groups sponsored by the Association for Couples and Marriage Enrichment (ACME).

These were followed by a plethora of MRE programs and curricula that mushroomed in communities around the country and are now being offered to individuals and couples at various life stages in both secular and religious settings. The cost to participants ranges from zero to \$300-\$500, depending on the setting and number of hours. However, in spite of the recent rapid growth in the field, MRE programs are still not widely available in many communities, and in most low-income communities they do not exist at all.

As a further stimulus to the growth of marriage education, in 1996 the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE) was founded to serve as a forum to strengthen and publicize the emerging field. It operates an annual conference—Smart Marriages—attended by between 2,000-3,000 individuals; hosts an informational website, which includes a directory of many leading programs; and produces an online newsletter. In 2004, the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR), together with a consortium of five university research centers and Child Trends Inc., received a five-year award from the

Administration for Children and Families to design and manage the first national Healthy Marriage Resource Center, a web-based clearinghouse of information and research.

As yet, there are no accepted national or state standards or credentialing procedures for MRE programs. Some are very informal and others are more highly structured. In the informal category are the many individual mental health professionals, ministers, lay members of the faith community, and other individuals, who may or may not have had any special training, who conduct occasional marriage education or enrichment workshops for couples in the community or church. These free-standing programs typically use an eclectic or hybrid curriculum based on the leader's experience, often drawing upon some components of well-known program curricula.

More formally there are a dozen or so well-known, typically secular, trademarked, curricular-based programs offered across the U.S. and around the world by individuals who have been specially trained to teach the particular curriculum. The programs generally agreed to be the "flagship" or "best practice" programs are evidence-based—meaning that the concepts and skills they teach are explicitly grounded in the findings of research. They have developed standardized training programs

and teaching manuals; and many, though not all, have been evaluated.

### **"Best Practice" Program Characteristics**

MRE "best practice programs" share several basic assumptions and values:

- The attitudes, skills, and behaviors needed to have a successful marriage can be taught. In public health terms, these programs foster dynamic "protective" factors to counter-balance the "risk" factors that many individuals bring into their marriages and are difficult to change.
- The educational, group format of MRE is more easily accepted and less stigmatizing, reaches more people, and is more cost-effective than individual couples therapy and counseling.
- Marriage educators believe that marriages naturally decay unless we put energy into them. A strong marriage takes conscious work and effort. Some couples know this instinctively, but many others need to learn it.
- Men and women need to respect each other as equal partners and share in decision making. The general view is that "companionate marriage" can only be achieved with a foundation of equality between partners.

- Many people can benefit from MRE, not just those whose relationships are already in trouble. Marriage, like babies, comes with no instructions. Marriage educators urge couples to approach marriage in the same way many parents now approach parenthood, turning to books, classes, or experts to learn how to be good spouses.

### **Content of Curricula**

Though the best practice curricula vary a good deal in content and emphasis, most of the skills-based programs focus on teaching relationship skills, such as how to listen and speak clearly and positively, manage anger, negotiate disagreements, solve problems, avoid mind-reading and negative attributions, and increase the ratio of positive-to-negative interactions. Learning these skills develops both self-awareness and empathy for the partner. The MRE programs also discuss the benefits of marriage, the typical areas of couple conflict and stress, and the destructive attitudes and behaviors that often evolve over time and can erode a good relationship. These curricula often strongly emphasize how to protect and preserve intimacy, friendship, and fun. In addition, some programs are increasingly focusing on the importance of commitment; the value of forgiveness; and the need to nurture generosity, kindness, and loyalty to

develop and sustain a strong marriage.

Some questions have been raised about whether MRE programs may simply reinforce patriarchal and gender-stereotyped roles. This may sometimes be a valid concern—such as in some informal programs offered in conservative, religious settings—but leading marriage educators point out that the "best practice" curricula do not promote a particular model of how family roles and tasks should be divided within the marriage. The processes and skills taught in these programs are clearly egalitarian and carefully structured to create and model a level playing field.

For all the focus on improving relationship quality, however, most marriage education programs do not explicitly discuss the dark side of couple relationships and marriage, nor what constitutes violent and abusive intimate behavior. (As discussed later in this brief, this is beginning to change.)

### **Do We Know Whether Marriage Education "Works"?**

Policymakers are interested in knowing whether government-funded programs are effective in achieving their goals. Program evaluations can serve different purposes, but it is generally agreed that an experimental (random assignment) or quasi-experimental (matched compar-

ison or control groups) design is the preferred gold standard for determining effectiveness, with impact defined as what would have happened in the absence of the program. However, experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations are very expensive to conduct and require considerable evaluation expertise. Thus, in any new field it can take years, even decades, before there are enough rigorous evaluations to definitively answer the question—does it work? Although dozens of MRE program evaluations exist, very few meet this gold standard.

The following are brief summaries of three recently published comprehensive reviews of MRE evaluations.

**1. Marriage preparation programs.** A comprehensive meta-analytic review of 23 well-designed studies of programs offered to engaged couples, including 13 experimentally designed studies (11 using random assignment), was published in 2003. The authors concluded that these "programs are generally effective in producing significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality, and that these gains appear to hold for at least six months to three years."

**2. Best practice in couples education.** An article focusing on best practices published in 2003 identified 12 controlled

trials evaluating skills-based relationship education programs that included follow-up assessment of six months or more. Five of these—all variants of one well known program, PREP—have follow-ups of more than 12 months, and one of these is ongoing. Three of these studies (two-quasi experimental and one randomized controlled trial) found that program participants showed enhanced relationship satisfaction two and five years after marriage, and one found significantly fewer instances of spousal physical violence than the control couples.

**3. Systematic review of the impact of marriage and relationships programs.** The most recent and rigorous of all the reviews to date was conducted by a team at the Urban Institute, and the report was published in February 2005. The team conducted an extremely extensive and systematic search for relevant studies, obtaining nearly 13,000 abstracts of research on marriage education, counseling, and therapy programs. Of these, approximately 500 were selected for full-text review. Only 39 of these evaluations passed the rigorous screen for inclusion in the detailed meta-analysis. (Several of the MRE programs that have had the strongest positive results to date did not meet the cut.) It's important to note that the study was not restricted to MRE programs. Just over half

of the 39 programs chosen for the meta-analysis were counseling and therapy programs for distressed couples. Reviewers conducted a meta-analysis of data on two program outcomes—satisfaction and communication—creating an effect size (standardized mean difference) for each.

The study concluded that their finding "supports evidence from previous narrative reviews and meta-analyses that marriage and relationship programs provide benefits for the couples they serve." Statistically significant average effect sizes were reported of 0.68 for relationship satisfaction (considered a "medium" effect) and of 0.26 for relationship communication (considered a "small" effect). The therapy and counseling programs had the largest effect sizes.

The report's authors explain that while this group of 39 studies represents the "highest quality evidence available in the field," the review should be interpreted with caution for several reasons: numerous quality concerns, inability to examine the raw data, 39 studies represents a very small sample, and most of the studies did not collect follow-up data to see if the changes persisted over time.

#### **Unmeasured Benefits**

MRE programs may well provide a number of benefits that are thus far unmeasured by any of the evaluations, and indeed

some of them may be hard to measure. For the couples, their families, referral sources, and the community at large, some marriage educators believe these programs convey the following positive "meta" messages:

- Introducing "hope" that relationships can succeed and divorce can be avoided.
- Normalizing relationship problems and challenges.
- Asserting that relationship and marital success takes work and conscious effort.
- Building a more supportive environment in which to nurture relationships.

Additional potential MRE program benefits include:

- Decisions by engaged or cohabiting couples not to marry each other (thus presumably preventing a later divorce).
- Increased likelihood that individuals or couples will seek help later when they face some serious problems in their relationship.
- MRE programs may serve as a gateway to getting help with unemployment, substance use, depression, or other chronic health problems—all issues that can have a serious negative effect on the couple's relationship or marriage.
- Some participants may for the first time become aware that

they are in unhealthy, abusive, violent relationships and decide to take the first steps toward help.

- Couples may become better connected within their communities with other couples.
- If the quality of a couple's relationship improves and they stay together to raise their children, children may benefit indirectly.

#### **Conclusions about MRE Evaluations**

A few general conclusions emerge from this review of the MRE evaluation literature. The large majority of couples completing these courses generally report high satisfaction with the programs. There is a consensus that skills-based relationship programs benefit couples. Programs have been found to improve relationship satisfaction and some relationship skills in the few experimental and quasi-experimental studies that have been conducted.

However, randomized clinical trials are few, and studies that measure impact on marital stability are virtually non-existent. Only relationship education with a strong skill-based focus has been evaluated in controlled clinical trials. Indeed several of the best known and highly regarded programs, whose content is empirically based, have never been empirically tested.

The field of marriage and couples education is greatly under-researched. The outcomes measured to date have been short-term and do not measure many of the attributes and contexts that have been found to be components of healthy marriage. No information is available on program costs or cost-effectiveness. We know very little about what components of programs are most critical, or which kinds of programs work best for whom. Thus, it is premature to conclude that the research to date provides an adequate assessment of the field. Rather, it shows the limitations of the evaluations conducted to date.

The federal government is investing in high-quality evaluation by funding in 2002-2003 two large-scale, multi-site, multi-year experiments of MRE, one specifically targeting low-income unmarried parents (Building Strong Families Demonstration) and the other targeting low-income married couples (Supporting Healthy Families Demonstration). These experiments face numerous challenges; nevertheless, within a decade we should know a great deal more about how to design and deliver effective MRE programs for low-income populations. However, these experimental programs will be intensive and costly, and it is not clear how widely replicable they will be.

### Future Directions and Challenges

Marriage and relationship education is now at a critical crossroads. Federal funding is gradually making MRE services available to more diverse target populations in different settings, including TANF clients, military families, adoptive and foster families, prisoners and their partners, refugee and migrant families, high school students, and others. This raises a host of questions about whether and how programs designed for relatively small numbers of white, middle class, committed couples can be adapted for more economically and racially diverse populations and delivered to scale, and, if they can be adapted, how effective will they be? (These questions will be addressed in a forthcoming brief.)

Some important efforts are already underway to adapt and expand upon the design and curriculum of existing MRE programs to meet the needs of low-income and special populations, such as unwed parents and particular racial and ethnic groups. Also, some marriage educators are working with the domestic violence community to address the meaning of "healthy" and "unhealthy" behaviors and to become aware of the signs of abusive and violent relationships, as well as share information about how to assure personal safety and where to go for help.

### Conclusion

Marriage and relationship education is currently attracting attention and government support because it has considerable popular appeal, some strong research underpinnings, and is relatively inexpensive. Initial evaluation results suggest that it is a promising intervention and

#### Selected Resources

*Family Relations*. October 2004, Vol. 53, No. 5. This special journal issue has several key articles related to marriage education, including "The Challenges of Offering Relationship and Marriage Education to Low-Income Populations" by Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson, pp. 440-447. Additional information about marriage-related research and programs is available at [www.smartmarriages.org](http://www.smartmarriages.org) and [www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org).

provides benefits to participants. We do not yet know, however, whether programs can reach sufficient numbers to strengthen marriage as an institution and improve child well-being overall. Nor do we know how relevant and effective MRE can be to disadvantaged populations struggling to overcome poverty and related hardships.

However, to the extent that marriage is demonstrated to strengthen families, reduce poverty, and improve child well-being, effective MRE programs should be considered a potential tool in achieving these important outcomes.

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### ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national non-profit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series focuses on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

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