

Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage: What's the Connection?

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Marriage and relationship education (MRE) and responsible fatherhood (RF) programs share the goal of improving the lives of children by strengthening the interpersonal skills of their parents. The origins of these program areas are distinct: MRE began primarily as a way to prepare couples for marriage whereas RF was originally designed to prepare unmarried fathers to reconnect with their children and families. However, a common purpose has emerged between the two fields. According to the U.S. Census, more than 2.5 million children are raised in families without their biological father. This statistic confirms the need for fatherhood-specific and relationship education programs. Such programs help families communicate effectively and understand the importance of father involvement and healthy co-parental relationships, regardless of relationship status. Responsible fatherhood and MRE programs both address the diverse needs of fathers and their families in effort to improve child well-being. Recent research indicates that these programs, when

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working collaboratively, can have a positive impact on fathers, children, and their families. This Tip Sheet highlights the commonalities and strengths of each program area and suggests strategies for practitioners interested in bridging the two fields.

Marriage and relationship education and responsible fatherhood programs tend to have different target audiences and service delivery strategies. For example, MRE usually targets couples who are dating, engaged, or married, but is also offered to singles. Group-based workshops are the most common form of service delivery, providing peer support while teaching relationship education skills and addressing common challenges experienced by couples like commitment, communication, co-parenting, and managing finances. RF mostly targets unmarried, custodial or non-custodial fathers, often with the goal of improving involvement with their child. Typically, fatherhood programming is conducted in father-only group sessions, providing a

comfortable environment for fathers to share, provide/ receive peer support, share personal challenges and success strategies, and to learn effective parenting and communication skills for interacting with the child(ren's) mother or caregiver. In addition, many fatherhood programs address child support, visitation, legal issues, substance abuse, and employment, all issues that frequently serve as barriers to fathers being involved with their child and family. The main commonality between MRE and RF programs is that they both operate on the framework that healthy relationships and positive involvement of both parents in the lives of the children are key ingredients for child well-being.

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- Researchers have found that the relationship between the mother and non-custodial father is the number one indicator for the father's involvement in the child's life.
- Research shows that children (on average) have the best chances in life when raised by two biological parents in a low-conflict, stable marriage.
- Psychological research illustrates that the more parts of life that are going well, the better all the other parts will go.

- Researchers have found that the relationship between the mother and non-custodial father is the number one indicator for the father's involvement in the child's life. For many couples who are separated or divorced, the father has to negotiate with mom (or the primary caregiver) to have access to the children. Thus, improving communication and conflict resolution skills between parents can directly increase and support long-term father engagement in the lives of his children.
- Research shows that children (on average) have the best chances in life when raised by two biological parents in a low-conflict, stable marriage. For those couples who are still together at the time they receive services, MRE teaches moms and dads the skills to communicate and problem-solve as a couple.
- Psychological research illustrates that the more parts of life that are going well, the better all the other parts will go. If RF and MRE providers can improve the dynamics at home, relationships at school, work, and elsewhere are likely to improve as well.

It is equally important for relationship education practitioners to talk about the importance of fathers as it is for fatherhood practitioners to talk about relationships. What strategies can practitioners implement to encourage this connection?

Fatherhood programs can:

- Integrate a relationship education component into a fatherhood program. Recent research indicates couple-based intervention improved father engagement with his children more than the father-only intervention.
- Equip divorced or single men with communication tools to prepare for future romantic relationships.



- Teach men how to apply relationship education skills to all relationships—including professional relationships—in order to stabilize employment and help fathers better provide for their children.
- Teach skills and provide peer support to help men form and maintain healthy relationships with their partner and children.

Marriage programs can:

- Help men develop the skills to manage conflict and improve communication and closeness with their partner.
- Demonstrate how these skills can improve the quality of relationships in other areas of life, including employment.
- Teach parents the skills to manage conflict and improve communication to navigate co-parenting issues.
- Educate both mothers and fathers about the important role a dad plays in a child's life.
- Include men-only sessions to provide opportunities for men to express themselves and problem-solve among peers.

MRE and RF programs both offer services that teach communication skills, conflict resolution, anger management/emotional regulation, financial

management and parenting skills. These are essential to creating a family environment that is conducive to children's healthy development. As RF and MRE fields continue to grow, various program models will emerge that build on the strengths of each field. These are complementary approaches to strengthening families by enhancing the quality of the parental relationship to ultimately improve outcomes for children.

Additional Resources

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Ooms, T., Boggess, J., Menard, A., Myrick, M., Roberts, P., Tweedie, J., & Wilson, P. (2006). *Building Bridges Between Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood, and Domestic Violence Programs*. Center for Law and Social Policy & National Conference of State Legislatures. Available at www.clasp.org.

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