

Tip Sheet



Merging Marriage and Relationship Education into Child Welfare Services

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Improving Child Outcomes by Strengthening Couple Relationships

When it comes to strengthening families and improving child outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being, the fields of healthy marriage and relationship education and child welfare services share the same vision. For decades, however, these two fields have generally worked separately to provide assistance to parents, couples, and children. As the goals of healthy marriage and relationship education have been clarified and better understood in recent years, these efforts have been expanded and included in other social service programs. Because these bridges of understanding are being built, the areas of healthy marriage and relationship education and child welfare services can work collectively toward commonly shared goals and practices to create coordinated services for children, youth, and families.

“Integrating individual-oriented relationship education into existing systems is likely the most effective way to reach potential participants. Whenever possible, practitioners and policy makers will reach the most people most cost-effectively by adding relationship education to existing programs or communities.”
(Rhoades & Stanley, 2009)

Background

Children are safer and healthier when the adults in their lives have healthy relationships—whether their parents are currently in a romantic relationship or not. When parents are kind and supportive to each other they are more likely to be positive in their parenting. In fact, children whose parents have healthy relationships are at less risk for abuse, experience greater stability, and do much better on a broad range of child outcomes.^{1,2}

Very simply, relationship and healthy marriage education teaches principles and skills that can strengthen couple and co-parenting relationships. The ultimate goal of merging healthy marriage and relationship education with child welfare services is to improve the stability and well-being of children by helping parents/caregivers develop the knowledge and skills needed to form and maintain healthy couple and coparenting relationships.

The primary role of child welfare professionals is to promote the safety and well-being of children. They investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect, provide services to families that need assistance in the protection and care of their children, arrange for living arrangements for children when there is an unsafe environment, and assist with reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children leaving foster care. These services are generally separated into two categories:

- 1) family preservation services provided to children who are at risk of abuse and/or neglect; and

- 2) services that require the removal of a child from a home and placement into other living arrangements (e.g. foster care, kinship care, adoption).

During Federal fiscal year 2009, an estimated 3.3 million referrals (included approximately 6 million children) were made to child protective services agencies, while an estimated 210,000 children were removed from their home as a result of a child abuse investigation or assessment.

This tip sheet will focus on merging healthy marriage and relationship education into child welfare services in ways that are related primarily to family preservation services rather than unsafe situations where a child is removed.

Healthy marriage and relationship education services for families in the child welfare system

Child welfare professionals serve many roles and provide vital services to families and their children. Some even provide services related to parenting and finances to individuals and families when needed. They are in a unique position to have an even greater positive influence on at-risk children and families if they are provided with the proper training, tools, and skills in healthy marriage and relationship education.

Training in healthy marriage and relationship education can be viewed as adding a “tool” to a child welfare professional’s toolbox.

Educating child welfare professionals on the value of healthy marriage education and strategies to address the topic with families they serve could be viewed as adding a “tool” to their

existing toolbox of knowledge and skills, which can be used to help individuals or couples when needed.

Merging healthy marriage and relationship education into child welfare services

There are various ways child welfare professionals can integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into the services they offer parents. Even if they have received training in healthy marriage and relationship education, the heavy demands and caseloads child welfare professionals regularly experience, may limit the amount of time they have with each family. Therefore, unlike traditional delivery of healthy marriage and relationship education efforts, which often takes place in group settings and incorporates a rigid curriculum in an established order, child welfare professionals may find shorter tools more useful, and select them based on what the parents want or need at the time.

However, above all, safety is the number one priority. Individuals and couples experiencing domestic violence as well as those with serious mental health issues, substance abuse problems, and other serious challenges require professional intervention that is beyond the scope of healthy marriage and relationship education. Healthy marriage and relationship education may be helpful in some cases, but it will not always be the best option so caution should be used when determining what services will be best for parents and children.

The following tips and strategies may be helpful when incorporating healthy marriage and relationship education into child welfare services.

- Build rapport with parents before offering healthy marriage and relationship education information. This can be as simple as asking questions about how they met, what they enjoy doing, or how long they have been

together. Over time, parents are more likely to listen and talk about their relationship if they know a child welfare professional cares about them.

- Helping parents understand why a healthy relationship with one another is important to their children (and how unhealthy relationships negatively affect children), even if they are not romantically involved, can be a great place to start.
- Healthy marriage and relationship education can be used with all types of family structures. How healthy marriage and relationship education is applied in these situations will vary depending on the needs and the situation. For example, sharing information about expectations or ways of staying connected with a parent whose partner is in prison may be most beneficial, while providing information about the importance of finding quality alone time together, celebrating the positive, and sharing the joys and stresses of the day may be most helpful for foster/adoptive parents and grandparents raising grandchildren. For youth aging out of foster care, the focus may be on identifying personal values and goals, and making healthy relationship choices, while commitment and communication may be the topic that is most relevant for cohabiting families. No matter the structure, it is important to identify parents' needs and goals and adapt healthy marriage and relationship education principles and skills accordingly.
- Healthy marriage and relationship education also applies to single parents.



Most single parents will become romantically involved with a partner. Healthy marriage and relationship education principles such as caring for themselves or knowing what to look for when choosing a partner and potential parent to their children can be helpful. Couples and individuals who have children but who are no longer romantically involved (i.e., co-parenting) can learn the skills to communicate, manage problems, and be respectful, which ultimately leads to healthier outcomes for both parents and children.

Sharing simple one or two-page handouts with the families that describe a relationship principle may be beneficial in situations where there is little time. These can be shared together or left with one of the parents to review or discuss with their partner. Also having brief one-on-one discussions with healthy marriage and

relationship education tools and role playing may be useful for some parents. For examples of handouts or tools that can be used with families, please visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website, <https://www.healthymarriageandfamilies.org>, as well as Cooperative Extension websites, such as <http://www.nermen.org> or www.cyfernet.org. When there is little time, or in situations where it is not clear what to offer, it may be helpful to refer parents to other community resources such as Cooperative Extension, marriage or relationship workshops in the area, or marriage and family therapists if needed.

Summary

The healthy marriage and relationship education and child welfare fields share a common purpose in strengthening families for the benefit of children. Integrating the teaching of healthy marriage education skills into child welfare services is a developing area that will continue to grow as these fields learn more about each other. Because both foster/kinship families and families involved with child welfare services face numerous risk factors that often put strain on their romantic or co-parenting relationships, it is important to tailor healthy marriage and relationship education to their specialized needs. Providing resources and teaching skills that strengthen and stabilize couple, coparenting, and marital relationships can foster safety, permanency, and well-being of children in the families served by child welfare professionals.

Works Consulted

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Notes

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