

Marriage Education Content:

A Review of Five Relationship Intervention Curricula for Low-Income Couples

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Availability of marriage education programs for low-income couples has increased.

In 2001, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) announced a Healthy Marriage Initiative that has since funded over 300 healthy marriage programs that allow couples greater access to marriage education services. Prior to this, marriage programs were primarily offered to White, middle-class, engaged or married couples. However, the specific challenges faced by low-income couples have recently become more salient in research and programming initiatives. In order to serve this population effectively, existing programs were revamped to address the concerns, learning styles, and values of low-income couples.⁷

- About 85% of low-income men and women indicate they are interested in participating in classes or sessions to help them with their relationships.⁴
- Low-income couples tend to be less well educated, have lower levels of literacy, have had less success in school, and be members of minorities.

These factors have implications for the content included in marriage and relationship skills education for low-income couples.⁵

Not all marriage education programs are the same.

When choosing a relationship program, it is important to assess program content to make sure that the curriculum is both current and research-based. When a marriage education program's content is consistent with implications from empirical research, educators are equipped with material that theoretically will provide participants with an effective learning experience.⁶

Programs for low-income participants should:

- Be based on concepts that research shows are important and helpful to low-income couples.¹
- Be written at a fifth-grade reading level, and have concrete illustrations to convey abstract concepts⁴
- Be tailored to the learning styles of low-income

populations (discussion and activities).⁴

- Teach processes that can be changed (e.g., communication and conflict resolution strategies)
- Include information and activities on: ¹
 - **Positivity:** Expressions of positive emotions and affectionate behavior (e.g., fondness, touch). This includes promoting spending time together, developing a sense of 'we-ness,' and encouraging expression of thoughts and feelings.
 - **Negativity:** Negative affect (e.g., anger, disgust, fear), overt behavioral expressions (e.g., coercive behavior, angry outbursts, aggression) and disengaging behaviors (e.g., withdrawal, nonresponsiveness). Programs should present conflict as normal and teach conflict diffusion and resolution techniques.
 - **Cognition:** Thoughts about the relationship (e.g., unrealistic beliefs - my

partner should be able to read my mind - knowledge of partner). Programs should facilitate realistic relationship beliefs, partner knowledge, and perspective taking.

- More specifically, researchers have identified common issues in low-income couples:
 - Women’s mistrust of men, co-parenting problems, financial pressures and conflicts, incarceration, and children from previous partners. ^{5, 8}

In light of these specific needs, and with the aid of federal initiatives to promote marriage, a number of marriage education programs have been adapted or developed for low-income couples. The following are summaries of five of these programs.

Program	Loving Couples Loving Children ³
Information	http://lclconline.org/
Research based:	Yes. Loving Couples Loving Children is based on concepts from Bringing Baby Home (e.g., conflict resolution techniques). In evaluation, Bringing Baby Home participants reported higher marital quality and lower hostile affect. ³
Target Population:	Low-income couples who are expecting a child.
Written at a fifth-grade reading level:	Unsure
Concrete illustrations and use of discussion:	Yes
Material:	LCLC uses a series of video “talk-shows” in which racially and ethnically diverse real low-income couples discuss relationship challenges and how they overcame them. The 42 sessions, which begin with a talk show segment, lead to discussion among group participants. The second half of each session is devoted to activities that teach specific skills and techniques that couples can use to address the issues raised in the video. Participants practice the skills and have individual attention from the male and female co-facilitators as needed.
Teach processes that can be changed:	Yes
Includes information and activities on:	
Positivity:	Building intimacy and communication between parents.
Negativity:	Normalizing conflict and teaches couples how to deal with conflict (e.g., learn to take a break, calm down and talk again with respect).
Cognition:	Helping couples build shared meanings of their relationship.
Address issues common to low-income couples:	Loving Couples Loving Children also addresses trust, fidelity, dealing with ex-partners, effective parenting, avoiding relationship violence, understanding the importance of the father’s role, and dealing with incarceration and addiction.
Has the program been evaluated:	No, but it is a part of the Building Strong Families (BSF)* project, which is currently being evaluated. <i>*Building Strong Families (http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/) is a 9-year project (2002 – 2011) that is testing the effectiveness of interventions for low-income couples.</i>

Program	Caring for my Family ⁹	Love's Cradle ³
Information	http://fcs.msue.msu.edu/cfmf/	http://www.skillswork.org/index;.php/mnl-curriculum/introduction
Research based:	Yes. The program was developed by researchers at Michigan State University. The curriculum draws from research on family stress and coping, unmarried parenting, marriage education, the impact of welfare reform, and father involvement.	Love's Cradle combines the research based Relationship Enhancement (RE) program with content topics developed as part of a contract with Mathematica Policy Research for the ACF Building Strong Families Project.
Target Population:	Low-resource unwed parents who are not in a relationship or are in a committed, but distressed relationship.	Unmarried parents Love's Cradle teaches skills at a slower pace and provides more individual coaching
Written at a fifth-grade reading level:	Unsure	Written and taught at a 5th grade reading level.
Concrete illustrations and use of discussion:	Yes	Yes. It uses activities and discussion and has little lecture.
Material:	The curriculum is designed to be taught over 24 hours, typically over 6 to 8 sessions.	Curricula consists of 21 2-hour group sessions. The first 10 sessions are devoted to simplified RE skills (e.g., empathy, discussion, and problem/conflict resolution). There are 11 follow-up sessions that allow couples to use their new skills to address issues that are common in low-income couples (e.g., building trust, and making financial decisions together).
Teach processes that can be changed:	Yes	Teaches 10 communication and problem-solving skills that people can use to address relationship issues.
Includes information and activities on:		
Positivity:	Improving communication, learn how to give positive comments to others.	Emphasizes building trust, working as a team ("we-ness"), and stresses the development of empathy and mutual understanding.
Negativity:	Non-defensive listening and conflict resolution skills.	Managing emotions during conflict.
Cognition:	Understanding others, looking for positive meanings in situations.	Teaches how to reframe the meanings of marriage.
Address issues common to low-income couples:	Builds decision making skills, encourages father involvement, co-parenting behaviors and attitudes, encourages marriage readiness, strengthens parenting and family relationships. Also promotes personal health and well-being, developing a support network, and strengthening the family unit.	Love's Cradle also addresses adjusting to parenthood, maintaining a couple identity, parenting an infant, building trust, the meaning of marriage, making financial decisions, together, and working with "ex's" and extended family.
Has the program been evaluated:	Yes. ² Evaluation of "Caring for my Family" showed increases in trust, happiness, mother's support of father, and individual empowerment (e.g., ability to take action). In addition, there were decreases in individual distress level and negative interactions.	No, but it is part of the Building Strong Families national evaluation.

Program	Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families³	Becoming Parents Program
Information		http://www.becomingparents.com/
Research based:	Yes. Teaches strategies that reflect the African world view that promotes cooperation, integrity, and personal responsibility.	Yes
Target Population:	Low-income never-married parents, especially African-Americans, between the ages 18 and 35 who are expecting or just had a baby and are interested in marriage.	First time expectant parents. Can be adapted for partnered couples who are diverse in age, race/ethnicity, educational level, and socio-economic status.
Tailored to low-income population:	Yes	Yes.
Written at a fifth-grade reading level:	Unsure	Unsure
Concrete illustrations and use of discussion:	Yes – uses group conversation and role play.	Yes, uses videos, role-play, and group discussion to facilitate learning.
Material:	Three components: one for mothers, one for fathers, and one for couples, consisting of eight, 2-hour sessions. Each single-gender component is for parents in the early stages of deciding whether to make relationship commitment. The couple component is aimed at helping couples explore marriage.	A 27 hour program for expecting couples that consists of 21 hours of class during pregnancy and two 3-hour ‘booster sessions’ when the baby is 6 weeks and 6 months old. It uses a series of brief lectures, videos, group discussions and activities, and individual and couple homework exercises to teach communication skills.
Teach processes that can be changed:	Yes	Yes. It teaches the Speaker-Listener technique that helps couples communicate during an argument without escalation.
Includes information and activities on:		
Positivity:	Communication skills.	Improves communication and interaction (listening and talking) and praise.
Negativity:	Conflict resolution, builds skills for conflict control.	Prevents the escalation of conflict, teaches how to give criticism constructively, problem-solving, how to forgive, manage jealousy and anger, and short-circuit destructive interactions.
Cognition:	Personal and familial goal setting.	Helps couples establish basic rules and procedures for the couple relationship, identify and deal with hidden issues, and teaches how expectations affect satisfaction.
Address issues common to low-income couples:	Gender distrust and infidelity, strengths of extended families, multiple-partner parenting, male unemployment and incarceration, effective parenting, planning for the future, avoiding putting down their partner.	Teaches self care (e.g., creating a healthy lifestyle, managing fatigue, creating a support network, negotiating who does what) and relating to the baby. The first sessions focus on building relationship skills, such as communication and having fun together in order to strengthen and solidify the relationship. After the baby is born, the booster sessions focus on child development and parenting.
Has the program been evaluated:	No	No, but it is part of the BSF evaluation.

Summary:

Although these programs were created by a diverse group of researchers, program specialists, and government agencies, they share the common goal of improving the quality of relationships among America's poor. To this end, they have created similar strategies for teaching low-income couples how to communicate effectively, navigate conflict smoothly, and invest in the relationship through fidelity, acts of affection, and setting common goals. Professionals across the U.S. largely agree on a set of unique challenges faced by low-income couples.

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