



# Tip Sheet

## My Relationship Isn't Perfect - How Can I Help Couples?

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This tip sheet addresses how safety net service providers can effectively utilize marriage and relationship education to assist the children, couples, and families served. It also provides examples of helpful strategies and addresses the importance of using research-based principles.

### Why Should Safety-Net Service Providers Attempt to Promote Healthy Relationship Skills When Working with Adults/Parents?

One of the primary responsibilities of safety-net service providers is to protect and strengthen the lives of children and families. One important way this can be done is by helping them have more stable relationships. Research has shown that an unhealthy or abusive relationship between parents is detrimental to children's development and safety.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Therefore, helping individuals and couples learn healthy relationship skills is an effective strategy for improving outcomes for parents and children alike.



### Are Safety-Net Service Providers Qualified to Teach Healthy Relationship Skills to Others?

Safety-net service providers know that many of the people they serve are struggling in their relationships. Some clients may even ask for

relationship advice. When this happens, many may think, "I am not a relationship expert. How can I be of help?" Others may think, "How can I help struggling couples when I am single, divorced, or when my relationship has its own challenges?"

Thankfully, safety-net service providers do not have to be relationship experts, have ideal relationships themselves, or even be in relationships in order to help couples have stronger and more stable relationships. The fact is, no one, and no relationship, is perfect. To be

helpful, one simply needs to be willing to learn, practice, and share a few proven (research-based) principles of healthy couple relationships. It is important to share proven principles of healthy couple relationships, rather than personal opinion, because those are the things researchers have found to

work. To learn more about proven principles for healthy couple relationships, visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website at

<https://healthymarriageandfamilies.org/>.

Interestingly, research shows that lay leaders can teach healthy marriage education skills as well as most mental health professionals.<sup>5,6</sup> That is because marriage and relationship education is not therapy, and it does not involve diagnosis or treatment. Just as it does not take a professional chef to teach someone how to prepare a meal, it does not take a trained therapist or relationship expert to help someone learn the skills necessary to have a better relationship.

## How Can Safety-Net Service Providers Share or Teach Healthy Relationship Skills Effectively?

Sometimes safety-net service providers may be tempted to see the families they serve as the source of problems and themselves as the source of solutions. In this view, families bring their ignorance and their problems to safety-net service providers who bring their knowledge, answers, and suggestions to the families. There are several problems with this approach:

- Families know far more about their own lives, challenges, and resources.
- Any solutions imposed without the conviction and commitment of family members will not be effective.
- Some of the most important answers in any teaching opportunity will come from the families themselves. The most important answers are those that represent the family's best thinking and commitments to growth.

### Building trust with couples.

In any discussion with couples, some partners do not volunteer answers to questions because they are not sure how they will be treated. They may wonder if they will be embarrassed, corrected, or condemned. If they are unable to express themselves clearly, they may worry about being humiliated.

Safety-net service providers earn trust with couples by the way they treat them. It is natural for individuals to be reluctant to comment until they feel safe. A professional will set couples up for success by asking questions that allow for many different answers. Ask open-ended questions that encourage couples to come up with their own solutions like:

- "What do you think will work?"

- "What have you seen other couples do in this situation?"
- "Do you have an idea of how to apply this principle?"

After asking a clear, open-ended question like those above, safety-net service providers should allow time for responses. Sometimes it is clear that one or the other of them has ideas but is reluctant to volunteer. They can be encouraged to speak by saying something like, "It looks like you have an idea for something that may work. Are you willing to share it?"

If safety-net service providers jump in with answers of their own during times of silence, couples will learn that providers don't really want to hear from them. They are then less likely to answer in the future. Silence is okay. It allows individuals time to think and formulate their responses. If input is welcome, they quickly warm up. When a partner makes a comment, safety-net service providers can encourage this effort by expressing their appreciation for the idea that was shared.

### Working together to solve problems.

Safety-net service providers have the opportunity to help families solve problems. In order to best help families, safety-net service providers should utilize proven, research-based knowledge about healthy couple relationships, like that found on the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website, with the families they serve. Safety-net service providers should also seek to draw the best answers, and a desire for growth, out of the families they serve. When safety-net service providers think of their responsibilities in this way, there are several things they can do to bring out the best from the families they serve:

1. Demonstrate respect for the efforts, skills, experiences, and challenges that families bring. This can be done by listening carefully to their comments and offering words such as:

- "You face so many difficulties."
  - "I admire your courage to keep trying."
  - "You have tried many things to make your life better."
  - "You have a lot of good ideas."
2. Honor families (and bring out their best) by inviting them to be creative problem solvers. Safety-net service providers not only share information designed to strengthen couple relationships, they also invite families to think of good ways to apply those principles to their lives. For example, one might ask:
- "What do you think would work with your family?"
  - "How would you apply that principle to make your relationship better?"
  - "What have you learned from your experience?"
  - "Can you think of other ideas that might be helpful?"

The most effective safety-net service providers help families find ideas and solutions to problems within themselves.

3. Honor a family member's efforts in situations where there may be disagreement. There may be times when a family member will make a

statement with which a safety-net service provider disagrees. When this happens, a professional will respect the family member's experience and perspective by validating that they were heard, while inviting them to consider other possibilities. For example, if a parent suggests that "what kids these days need is a good whipping," one might say:

- "You really want your children to respect boundaries. What do you do that works best for helping your child value boundaries, even when you're not around?"
- "Letting children know that you are serious about limits is important. In my experience, children are more likely to follow the rules when they understand them and believe that they are important. How can we help children with this?"

Or, in a couple's relationship, if partners seem to respond to one another's pain, disappointment, or frustration with unhelpful responses, one might suggest more helpful alternatives. Below are some examples of unhelpful things partners might say to one another as well as some helpful ways to show understanding.

<p><b>Unhelpful things partners may do and say to one another:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give advice (e.g., "What you need to do</li> <li>• Talk about their own feelings and experiences instead of their partner's (e.g., "That same thing happened to me...").</li> <li>• Make their partner's pain seem unimportant (e.g., "Everyone suffers. What makes you so special?").</li> </ul>	<p><b>Helpful ways that partners can show understanding to one another that safety-net service providers might suggest:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite more discussion (e.g., "I would like to understand. Please tell me more.").</li> <li>• Acknowledge one another's feelings (e.g., "I can see that you feel strongly about this.").</li> <li>• Acknowledge that their partner's pain is real for him or her (e.g., "You must feel awful.").</li> </ul>
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When safety-net service providers combine a respect for individual family members with empathy and a willingness to help, family members are more likely to feel supported in their efforts to learn effective ways to solve their own problems.

Safety-net service providers are in a position to bring knowledge and compassion to the families they serve. They can make a real difference for couples, parents, and children.

## Resources:

National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families -

<https://healthymarriageandfamilies.org/>

National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network - [www.nermen.org](http://www.nermen.org)

Sauro, C., Harrison, C., & Webb, J. (2009). *My relationship isn't perfect - how can I be a marriage educator?* Retrieved from National Healthy Marriage Resource Center website: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/download.aspx?id=375>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Appel, A. E., & Holden, G. W. (1998). The co-occurrence of spouse and physical child abuse: A review and appraisal. *Journal of Family Psychology, 12*(4), 578-599.
- <sup>2</sup> Davies, P. T., Harold, G. T., Goeke-Morey, M. C., Cummings, E. M., Shelton, K. & Rasi, J. A. (2002). Child emotional security and interparental conflict. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 67*(3), 1-113.
- <sup>3</sup> Downs, S. W., Moore, E., McFadden, E. J., Michaud, S. M., & Costin, L. B. (2004). *Child welfare and family services: Policies and practice* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- <sup>4</sup> Erel, O., & Burman, B. (1995). Interrelatedness of marital relations and parent-child relations: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin, 118*(1), 108-132.
- <sup>5</sup> Markman, H. J., Whitton, S. W., Kline, G. H., Stanley, S. M., Thompson, H., Peters, M. T., & Cordova, A. (2004). Use of an Empirically Based Marriage Education Program by Religious Organizations: Results of a Dissemination Trial. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies, 53*(5), 504-512.
- <sup>6</sup> Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Prado, L. M., Olmos-Gallo, P., Tonelli, L., St. Peters, M., & Whitton, S. W. (2001). Community-based premarital prevention: Clergy and lay leaders on the front lines. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies, 50*(1), 67-76.

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