
Healthy Relationship Education: What, Why, and How it Relates to Strengthening Families

Webinar Question and Answer (Q&A)

Monday, December 17, 2012 2:00-3:30 PM EST

Question: During the presentation, you referenced statistics about how the total taxpayer cost of family fragmentation in the U.S. has been estimated at \$112 billion. Can you explain how those costs were defined? How do you know that those costs are attributable to family fragmentation instead of other factors?

Answer: *From Ted Futris, Training and Technical Assistance Specialist, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

These statistics are based on taxpayer revenue, loss, and direct costs as a result of expenditures that go towards Local, State, and Federal programs. More specifically, the statistics are from a report written by Benjamin Scafidi called “The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States” (2008). The report takes into account that the proportion of households with children living with two married parents has dropped from 85% to 68% (according to U.S. Census data) and roughly more than one-third of children are now born outside of wedlock. And so, from a combination of the divorce and out of wedlock trends in the U.S., you’ve got a lot of anti-poverty services being directed towards these families.

The higher cost to the taxpayers results from these efforts, programs, and services [see Slide 16: Costs of Family Fragmentation]. The Scafidi report also provides a breakdown of costs by state. You can access this report in the virtual library on the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org.

So I hope that answers your question, again, I think you’ll find the report quite detailed in how it calculates those costs.

Question: Is there a specific curriculum that the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families recommends?

Answer: *From Robyn Cenizal, Project Director, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

Actually, the Resource Center does not recommend a specific curriculum. Instead, we have a guide to curricula that are free and low cost. The cap on the cost of the curricula reviewed in the guide is \$300 or less and a lot of the curricula included in it are free. All included curricula are research-based and the guide breaks them down by their contents. The curriculum guide is available on our website through the virtual library at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.com.

The Resource Center is also in the process of launching a curriculum that will be available online and free for stakeholders through our Training and Technical Assistance program.

Question: Do you have any tips for serving couples when one is unwilling to actively participate in marriage relationship education?

Answer: *From James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor -Family Life, University of Arkansas:*

Some therapists and marriage educators out there talk about the idea that, 'it really takes one to tango.' This means that even if one partner in a relationship doesn't initially seem willing to participate in any way shape or form—in either relationship education or counseling—if the other person is willing to participate that can change the relationship dynamics. It's a 'systems theory' idea, where a change in one part of the system can affect every other part of the system.

So yes, it can do a lot of good to have the one partner who is willing to participate learn some new ideas to change ways of thinking, doing things, and even the whole system. You don't have to have both partners in a couple participate in order for relationship education to be effective.

From Ted Futris, Training and Technical Assistance Specialist, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:

I'd love to also encourage our audience not to think about relationship and marriage education as working with current couples. Think about it also in terms of working with future couples. For example, when working with clients who are single parents, approach them as individuals who will likely be in a future relationship, rather than as someone who isn't currently in an established relationship.

And you can use relationship or marriage education to teach clients how to establish and build a healthy relationships; 'deciding, not fighting' as some—such as Scott Stanley and Howard Markman—have coined it, to make really wise choices in the relationship

decisions they make that put them, and importantly their children, at low risk for safety issues and promote stable healthy future marriages and relationships.

From James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor -Family Life, University of Arkansas:

One other thing is that John Van Epp, for example, has written a book called *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*. And there are some great ideas in that book for people who are not yet in a relationship, but are dating or think that at some point they will be in a serious relationship. And one of the key ideas that he shares in that book is that we ought not to let our commitments get ahead of our knowledge. And what he means by that is we ought to spend a fair amount of time getting to know prospective partners before we become physically or intimately committed to them in some way.

Question: Can Title I funds be used to support safety-net service providers for marriage support services (funds are generally used for parenting, parental engagement and involvement)?

Answer: *From Robyn Cenizal, Project Director, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

Yes, particularly if you're thinking about Title 1 dollars for elementary schools or schools within low-income challenge communities, those Title I funds can be used through the parent liaison that is usually assigned to the school. The parent liaison can provide these types of training programs under those funds, much like what they do at Head Start.

Question: Are there any legal issues to be concerned about regarding service providers providing marriage support services?

Answer: *From Robyn Cenizal, Project Director, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

The Resource Center is promoting the integration of healthy marriage and relationship education skills. We're focusing on the skills, not marriage per se. These happen to be skills that are research-based and the funds to support the Resource Center come from the National Healthy Marriage Initiative legislation.

It really isn't about promoting marriage. I think as long as we're all clear that we're focusing on these skills that we have discussed in our presentation—communication, conflict resolution, parenting, and financial literacy—, I don't think there are any challenges that we need to be concerned about there.

From James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor -Family Life, University of Arkansas:

And just from a therapist's point of view, if you're not a therapist you just want to be real candid and upfront and say, "Hey, you know what, I'm not a licensed clinician. I'm happy to share ideas on what the research says 'happy couples do' or 'what works in couple relationships,' but I'm not here to diagnose you and I'm not here to provide treatment in any way. I'm not qualified for that and that's not my role." Then I think you're on pretty safe ground.

Question: Is there evidence to support the idea that marriage education is a good strategy for reducing poverty?

Answer: *From Ted Futris, Training and Technical Assistance Specialist, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

There is an increasing body of research emerging as a result of several years of Federal funding towards initiatives that have targeted high-risk low-resource populations to promote healthy relationship skills and healthy future marriages.

Now is it actually reducing poverty? The jury's still out on that, but I think the research is able to show that teaching these skills translates into using these skills. There still needs to be more research to show if marriage education results in greater family stability and reduced poverty. However, we do know from longitudinal studies that the practice of these skills in general—using effective communication strategies, managing differences and conflicts—is effective. And so what we try to promote and educate couples on is how to manage differences in healthy ways and the skills and understanding about how to discuss finances, how to manage stress together, how to parent your children as teens, etc. Those skills can be all learned. And research shows strong links between those practicing those skills and long term relationship and marital stability.

From James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor -Family Life, University of Arkansas:

One website that I might point you to that would have a lot more information on this subject is the Heritage Foundation's website. Earlier this year, I think it was September 6, 2012, they had an article that was called "Marriage: The Greatest Weapon against Childhood Poverty." So they have a fair amount of research that they've done or that they've looked at that talks about how strengthening marriage relationships really does have a positive impact on childhood poverty.

Question: We have a very diverse population and a wide range of family parental relationships. How broadly do you define family and marriage?

Answer: *From Robyn Cenizal, Project Director, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

The Resource Center doesn't actually get into defining family. Again, our focus is on integrating healthy relationship education skills. As we've heard some of the other panelists discuss, these skills are just as valuable to individuals as they are to couples. Change typically has to be come from the inside out. So thinking along those lines these relationship skills—communication, conflict resolution—they are just as valuable to grandparents who are raising grandchildren, other relatives, single parents, almost any kind of relationship.

As a matter of fact one of the key things about these types of skills is that they actually transfer into the workplace. So communication and conflict resolution skills are just as important among coworkers as they are within the family itself. So, no, we don't really get into all of that. We just try to make sure that these skills are made available through safety-net service providers for any individuals who would like to take advantage of them.

From Debra Gilmore, Family Safety Expert, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:

I'll just add that it's really a part of the Resource Center's purpose, to make these as universally available as possible. That's why the Resource Center provides training and technical assistance across safety-net services because there are so many lives—regardless of family structure or other social structure—that are touched by safety-net service providers. It's about those core and critical skills that we've mentioned being universally provided. That's ideal for any family regardless of how that family defines itself.

Question: There are out of wedlock parents who are economically and emotional self-sufficient. When you mention the increase in out-of-wedlock parents are you counting all of them as being at high risk?

Answer: *From Ted Futris, Training and Technical Assistance Expert, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

On average, children raised in single-parent households are at higher risk for various negative outcomes when compared to children in healthy two-parent married households. It is important to note that these are averages, which means that not all children in single-parent households are at-risk much like not all children in married households avoid negative outcomes. The risk for negative outcomes can be even higher for children born out-of-wedlock because of the higher likelihood that they will experience greater economic and family instability throughout their childhood. Thus, when children grow up in high stress environments like this, their parents are more likely to struggle in meeting all of their child's developmental needs. Promoting the healthy relationships that foster healthy marriages and families can create safe and stable environments where children are more likely to thrive and succeed.

Question: Do you have material in other languages besides English?

Answer: *From Robyn Cenizal, Project Director, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

While the Resource Center does offer culturally appropriate material, most of our resources are in English. This is because our primary audience is the safety-net service provider who works with families - not the families directly. Safety-net service providers represent federal, state, local and tribal government agencies working with families to access services. These providers speak English, even if it was not their primary language growing up. We are planning to have some of the informational handouts translated into Spanish for those providers who work Latino families and would like to share the material.

Question: Have there been any new studies concerning providing relationship education to same-sex couples?

Answer: *From Debra Gilmore, Family Safety Expert, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:*

One article that was recently published is "Using Relationship Education Programs with Same-Sex Couples: A Preliminary Evaluation of Program Utility and Needed Modifications" by Sarah Whitton and Brian Buzzella in *Marriage and Family Review* (Oct 2012, Vol. 48 Issue 7, p. 667-688).

Question: Is it ever too late for marriage counseling?

Answer: *From James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor -Family Life, University of Arkansas:*

Well, that's a tough one. A lot depends upon the willingness of people to work to consider new ideas. As a therapist, I lean towards saying 'no, it's never too late.' And like I was saying before, it only takes one person to be willing to see and do things differently. Ideally, it's great if both are willing to participate. So there's not a definitive answer on that. You know, there's always some good that can be done, whether that's improving and saving the current relationship or creating more knowledge and ideas and perspective for a future relationship (if the current one by chance doesn't work out).

But I tell the couples with whom I work that I'm very pro-marriage and I will be the last one to give up on their marriage. I never tell people yes I think you ought to get a divorce. You know, unless there are cases of abuse and things of that nature, that's a different ballgame. But, just in general, if couples are having a hard time getting along I'll

tell them, 'hey I'm willing to work with you as long as you want to. And we'll do our best to straighten things out but I'm not going to give up on your marriage.'

From Debra Gilmore, Family Safety Expert, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:

I would just add that the reason that we really had James answer that question is because of his licensed background. If you were a service provider and faced with that question, you would most likely want to suggest that the person talk with a therapist or another expert.

And particularly if you are having concerns about the safety or stability of the relationship and feel that it's beyond the scope of what you would be providing in terms of healthy marriage and relationship education. So always feel free to rely on your resources and make sure that you do have those connections in your community so that you can refer people out when they need more intense support.

From James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor -Family Life, University of Arkansas:

That's a great idea. There's nothing wrong with saying, 'hey I don't know the answer to that,' when somebody asked you a question that you honestly don't know the answer to. What you can do is say, 'here's what I do know, here's what the research has shown to be effective.' And if they are asking questions that seem very personal, as was mentioned, it's perfectly fine to say, 'you know what, let's find someone else that you can talk with that can answer some of those questions.'

Question: Where can I find the slides from this webinar?

Answer: Visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org/events-archive to download a copy of the slides, recording, transcript, and Q&A document from today's webinar.

Question: Who should I contact if I have more questions about this webinar?

Answer: Visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org/ or email us at info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org.