



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

Laying the Foundation: Starting a Marriage and Relationship Education Program in Your Organization

How-to Guide

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Laying the Foundation: Starting a Marriage and Relationship Education Program in Your Organization

Background

Marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs are designed to equip couples and/or individuals with the skills necessary to have and maintain healthy, stable relationships and marriages. The skills include effective communication, conflict resolution, commitment, physical and emotional safety and maintaining emotional and sexual fidelity. The goal is to improve relationship quality and contribute to better outcomes for adults and their children by providing a stable, two-parent home for the children. It is important to have a basic understanding of the general purpose and function of an MRE program (and what it isn't) as you consider delivering these services.

This How-to Guide is designed for family strengthening practitioners who wish to start an MRE program and provide direct services within an established agency. It is relevant to practitioners working in religious or grassroots organizations, national non-profits or government agencies that either offer a variety of programming or are just beginning.

The objective of this Guide is to help you lay the foundation as you prepare to either start up an MRE program or add MRE to an existing program. You do not need to have experience in

Marriage and relationship education is:

- Education, not counseling or therapy
- Audience specific (couples, singles, teens, etc), not one size fits all
- Preventative
- Skill-based
- Not a dating violence or domestic violence intervention

organizational development or program design. The tools and steps in this Guide are designed to walk you through the process, step-by-step. Laying the foundation includes:

- Deciding how MRE aligns with your organization's mission and goals
- Assessing the needs of your community
- Determining the services you want to offer
- Developing plans for funding, sustainability and evaluation
- Engaging your organization's leadership

These steps are just the beginning, but the foundation is essential to program success.

Align with the Organizational Mission and Goals

When considering how to best incorporate MRE into the current work that you do, the first step is to become very familiar with your organization's mission statement. To gain support from your organization's leadership, board of directors (or other governing body) and staff, you will need to make certain that the intended program is complementary to the vision and mission of the organization.

For example, if your mission is to heal, strengthen and provide hope to your community's most vulnerable populations¹, you will want to know how your organization defines "vulnerable" and be able to explain how relationship education can help these populations. Also, you will want to know what parameters, if any, there are under providing services that heal and strengthen.

If your mission includes strategies to improve lives, consider how and when relationship education can improve lives. Unhealthy relationships often send individuals of all ages on negative trajectories. The ability to recognize healthy relationships and learn how to function better in relationships can ultimately benefit the individual, the individual's family and the community.

Reference your agency's goals by locating and reviewing your organization's strategic plan. If you don't have a strategic plan, your agency's goals may be listed in other internal documents. Consider how relationship education meets your agency's goals. Does it teach skills that help individuals served by your organization achieve desired

¹ Adapted from the mission of Lutheran Family Services of Colorado

outcomes? Does it enhance other services? Relationship education may be a natural fit with parenting, family reunification, teen pregnancy prevention, prisoner re-entry or a host of other community-based services.

Assess the Need for MRE Services

To assess the need for MRE, you must 1) look internally at what your organization offers, who you serve and how MRE fits; and 2) look externally for existing community MRE services, gaps, and the needs of potential clients.

Looking Internally at the Need

Assess how MRE can enhance or supplement the services your organization already provides. Review program goals and the curricula/ tools used to determine what skills they address. For example, if you have a pregnancy prevention program, do you teach about healthy relationships? If you offer parenting classes, do those programs discuss problem-solving skills between co-parents, or do they focus only on the dynamics between parent and child? If you offer employment services, do you teach about the basics of emotional intelligence, such as how to regulate emotions? These are examples of places where relationship education can enhance existing services.

Examine existing services and ask:

1. What other services are provided by your agency that can support the delivery of MRE (such as child care, housing assistance, access to educational or health-related supports, home visiting, etc.)?

2. What do you currently do to demonstrate that your organizational values include supporting healthy relationships?
3. What do you currently do to educate your clients that healthy relationships are violence-free and involve mutual respect?
4. What curricula are used that MRE lessons could supplement? (Such as parent education, sexual education, father involvement, etc.)
5. Which staff members teach workshops or facilitate groups?



With answers to these questions, you have identified natural places for integrating MRE into your service delivery strategy. You may also have identified organizational values that align with the goals of MRE. In contrast, you may learn of growth areas for your organization or identify gaps in services. This information will help you prepare for later discussions with key decision makers in your organization.

Carefully consider the population your organization serves and the need for MRE. Are they single parents? Marriage and relationship education teaches conflict resolution skills that can help them more effectively co-parent. Do your clients work with case managers, parole officers, and teachers? Good communication skills can help participants interact successfully with those professionals. Has much of your population experienced some form of physical or emotional abuse, including witnessing or being a victim of domestic violence? Understanding what a healthy relationship looks like could change the way these participants make future decisions about friends and intimate partners.

If your organization's mission is to promote positive youth development, your services might be enhanced by adding youth relationship education. If you are working with parents, teaching MRE to both teens and parents can improve family dynamics. Teens can apply healthy relationship skills to their peer interactions. Parents would have the tools to model good relationships and communicate more effectively with their child(ren) and the other parent.

Organizations that target a low-income population should also understand how issues such as family finances, step-children, unstable housing, extended family/family support (or lack thereof), un- or under-employment, child care, history of incarceration, having children with multiple partners, and other challenges can affect a family. These issues are common couple stressors. Giving people the tools to effectively manage these challenges can support other program goals within your organization.

Finally, you should review any evaluations completed by your current clients. Have they

identified any gaps in your programming? Is there anything they would like to learn more about? Alternatively, find opportunities to talk with clients. Ask them where they go to seek relationship help or if they think they have the skills to manage their intimate partner relationships. Hearing directly from your potential target audience can be a powerful tool when pitching your idea to leadership.

Looking Externally at the Need

It is important to assess the needs of the community you intend to serve as you frame your MRE program. You may want to conduct a community needs assessment so that you are familiar with local rates of marriage and divorce, out-of-wedlock and teenage births, single-parent led households, etc. These factors may be indicators of the need for MRE services. Learning about the demographics of the population that you serve, or intend to provide MRE services to, is important as well (i.e. geographic area, ethnic/ racial makeup, income level, etc.).

Identify the other family services that are available in the community (i.e. housing, job training/ placement, transportation, parenting, education, etc.). There may already be some types of MRE services provided in the community (most likely through the faith community). It will be important to learn what is being offered and by whom. You may not want to replicate service but rather identify natural partnerships, referral sources or determine the current supply and demand to meet the needs of the community.

A community needs assessment will require you to spend time talking with community leaders, agencies, program staff and the general public. One way to do this is to conduct focus groups representing different areas of the community to assess the needs of the population you intend to

serve. *Appendix 1* provides sample questions you may want to ask focus group participants to help inform the development of your MRE program.

Determine the Type of Services You Want to Provide

Once you have assessed your organization and the community, you will be ready to think about the type of MRE services that best fit your needs. Although you may ultimately desire to offer young people and adults MRE services at various stages of intimate partner relationships, you should narrow the focus to keep things simple at first. Additional program elements can be added over time. Identify a core target audience and determine which service model will best meet their needs. *Appendix 2* provides a list of various program types offering services for those in various life stages.

There are two general MRE programming strategies to consider:

1. *Integrated MRE Program*: Selecting an MRE curriculum or certain MRE lessons to be integrated into a current program with the goal of enhancing it and offering a more comprehensive experience
2. *Stand-alone MRE Program*: A MRE program that is regularly offered as part of your organization's services

Integrated MRE Services Model

Your organization may have an existing program or service that could be enhanced by MRE lessons. Many adult services (for couples or individuals), can be enhanced with the additional MRE lessons. For instance, your fatherhood or parenting program could integrate a special session on communication skills that focus on co-parenting. Or, you may

offer a pregnancy prevention program to teens that could be enhanced with certain lessons (e.g. conflict resolution, problem-solving and emotional intelligence) to help young people think about sex/pregnancy within the context of an intimate relationship. Because relationship choices affect other critical areas in life such as employability, educational pursuits and initiation/continued involvement in sexual activities, relationship management skills can be integrated into a variety of employment, vocational training, parenting and life skills programs.

Stand-alone MRE Program Model

Stand-alone MRE programs may be one-time events lasting four to eight hours or shorter sessions over a period of weeks. They are typically delivered through workshops led by trained facilitators using an MRE curriculum. It may be difficult to launch a stand-alone MRE program, as people will have to be educated about what it is and why they should attend, and may be more costly than the integrated model.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for a stand-alone program model. Some communities offer the classes in the evenings, on the weekends, or in a one time retreat model. The structure of your program will vary greatly based on the needs of your community and your experience with various program models. The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) has many additional resources on program planning, start-up and operations at

www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

Curricula

This Guide does not endorse any particular curricula but rather suggests features of curricula

that should be considered when building your service delivery strategy. These features include:

- Length (total number of hours)
- Cultural relevance (“culture” may be reflected in the language used, the ethnicity represented in pictures, characterization of youth culture, perceived educational attainment of participants, a culture of marriage in a community, etc.)
- Evidence base
- Appeal (by gender, age, and current relationship status)
- Format (is it a sequential structure or can sessions be taught independent of one another?)
- Training requirements
- Group size
- Copyright requirements
- Additional materials required or suggested (including videos, activities, etc.)
- Cost
- Adaptability
- Interactivity and teaching style

Most MRE curricula share common content. However, the costs, training requirements, and



orientation of each varies. The curriculum you choose for your program may affect your service delivery strategy (e.g. workshops delivered over a period of several weeks or a one-day event). Some curricula take on more of a lecture style, while others incorporate activities or include “coaching” exercises that require additional materials and/or staff. There are curricula for particular target populations (single individuals, youth, parents, distressed couples, etc.) and others that are more appropriate for a broad audience (dating, engaged, married or unmarried).

Certain curricula are offered in a “Teach-Out-Of-The-Box” (TOOB) format, providing facilitators with all of the preparation and training materials required to deliver the program. Other curricula require facilitators to spend time at training sessions (generally conducted by the curriculum developers) which provide insight and important instructions to effectively deliver the curriculum. The costs associated with using curricula requiring facilitator’s training are often greater than using TOOB curricula, and you should give careful consideration to your program’s needs and budgetary constraints when reviewing curricula options. Finally, costs for participant materials, copies and supplies for activities should be considered.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) developed a list of free/low cost curricula as well as a tool to support the selection process.

- [Marriage Education Curriculum Assessment Guide](#)
- [A Guide to Low-Cost Curricula and Resources for Marriage and Relationship, Fatherhood and Parenting, and Financial Education](#)

Funding, Sustaining and Evaluating Your MRE Services

Funding

Raising funds for a new program or existing program can be challenging. You may decide to charge a registration fee, seek grant funding from public and/or private organizations and philanthropies, or some combination thereof. Regardless of where the funding will come from, there are important issues to consider related to funding and sustaining your MRE program.

First, you need to estimate how much funding is necessary to operate your program. How much will it cost to deliver the services based on the chosen program design (stand-alone or integrated) and curriculum you believe to be most appropriate for your target audience? How much will it cost to staff workshops, provide referral services, purchase curriculum materials, train facilitators, etc.? You may want to map out the costs of delivering the “gold-standard” program (meaning you include all of the elements making your program top-notch) and “bare bones” scenarios (meaning you estimate the costs of the elements you think are essential).

Breaking down your program costs by service provides some flexibility in how you approach your search for funding. The services you offer may include curriculum and teacher/student materials, refreshments/meals, facilitation/teacher time, equipment (such as laptops, projectors, etc.), supplies (pens, paper, modeling clay or other curriculum-required materials), marketing and recruitment (fliers, brochures, radio ads, etc.), child care, transportation for participants and administrative costs. This exercise will provide your agency’s leadership with insight related to funding

needs as you develop your long-term strategic plan.

Second, identify where funding may come from. Be creative. Starting a new program takes time and flexibility, both in management and identifying resources. Your organization may determine it is able to fund a portion of the program while another funding stream covers a specific activity that you have identified as crucial to the program's success (i.e. providing childcare during workshop sessions or subsidizing transportation costs). You may also seek funding from a variety of sources (public, foundation, etc.) —which may play an important role in the longevity of your program. Not only will funding amounts differ, but the length of time funds are provided may differ as well allowing your program to operate beyond the limitations of one funding source. Additionally, by garnering financial support from a variety of entities, you demonstrate that your program complements the mission of a number of organizations/groups and is a vital service in the community. This is essential to your sustainability.

Questions to consider as you brainstorm funding options include:

- Should services be provided for a fee? If so, how much should you charge? Should you provide a sliding-scale fee structure based on income?
- Can my organization afford to implement this program without additional/ new financial resources?
- If additional financial resources are needed, where will it come from?
- Who might we be able to partner with to support the program? And what is the “cost” of that partnership? For example, if another organization allows us to use their space for



MRE, do we need to allocate a certain number of slots in each workshop to their clients?

- What grants are available? How long does the grant process take, and what are the deadlines? What are the requirements for accepting a grant?
- What are the costs to the agency to operate this program, including staffing, additional insurance, additional space, etc? Will grants allow you to grow your capacity to sustain services over time?

When reviewing grant opportunities, think about the bigger picture goals of your organization and how the delivery of MRE can enhance what you are already doing. MRE can be part of a strategy to improve parenting/co-parenting, improve family stability, etc. Typically, there is not a lot of available funding for healthy marriage or relationship education services. Creative funding opportunities may come in the form of innovative family strengthening, parenting, family stability or other prevention opportunities that encourage service providers to offer holistic services that engage multiple family members. For youth, MRE services can be funded as adult preparation, transition to adulthood or positive youth development. Funding opportunities may be found in a variety of issue areas, including corrections, public health, mental health, child support, child welfare, violence

prevention, education or general human services funding announcements.

Set Program Goals and Expectations

Developing a sustainable MRE program requires setting goals and measuring outcomes. Many grant applications, for example, require the development of a logic model or similar planning tool that guides evaluation. A logic model is a visual illustration depicting a program's activities and explains why they are believed to result in the intended outcomes. Thinking through the broad inputs, processes and outputs necessary to reach the overall goal/outcome will help you set specific short-term and long-term goals. Use a logic model in your broader strategic planning efforts and revisit it frequently to keep your goals in sight and assess whether they should be revised. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has a tool that you might find useful when developing your logic model and setting goals: [Creating and Using the Logic Model for Performance Enhancement](#).

Most organizations decide to implement an MRE program because they want to help families in their community. While this is a commendable motive, you should think through what the specific focus of your program will be, or your goals and expectations may not be reasonable. For example, reducing the divorce rate or the rate of nonmarital births are goals that often require years of intervention to reach. You may want to set specific goals that are more achievable. When setting goals, use the SMART goals approach and make them specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely (see *Appendix 3* for a tool on developing SMART goals).

Be realistic about what you can achieve *and* measure. Program outputs, such as the number of people served and the number of hours of services offered, are essential. But many funders and community stakeholders will want to know “did it work?” It is highly unlikely that you can decrease the divorce rate in your community by offering an eight-week marriage education class. It is likely, however, that you could improve how couples communicate with each other about difficult issues (money, kids, in-laws, etc.) between the start and end of the class. If you can, plan to track participants over time and follow up on their use of MRE skills a few months after participating. This will demonstrate the prolonged impact your program had on participants. Funders are frequently interested in this type of data, especially in a prevention program.

Consult with a local university or evaluator with expertise in marriage/family to identify program benchmarks and appropriate evaluation strategies and costs. The NHMRC [Evaluation Toolkit](#) is another resource for program administrators in developing strategies to evaluate their MRE program.

Program funding, evaluation and sustainability go hand-in-hand. It may seem strange to discuss evaluation when you are considering creating a foundation for a program, but it is necessary to think through how you will evaluate your program from the start in order to create implementation processes and budgets. Evaluation will also be a crucial part of supporting future funding opportunities to sustain your services.

Evaluation data can inform program management/operational decisions, which can improve services and, ideally, decrease program costs by improving efficiency. To sustain your program, it is essential

to create and maintain documentation of what you accomplished through your program. Evaluation data and participant feedback are tools for capturing this information. These resources can then help you make the case for future/ongoing funding.

Engage Organizational Leadership and Board of Directors

With an understanding of the needs in your community, a solid plan, and program goals, you are ready to engage leadership in a thoughtful discussion about the role of MRE in your organization. To design and implement a successful stand-alone MRE program, it will be imperative that you gain buy-in and support from your organization's leadership and/or its governing board. Keep in mind that the MRE field is still relatively young and the members of your organization's leadership may not be familiar with the type of program you want to create. You will need to spend time educating leadership about MRE and why it is needed in your community.

Develop an overview document describing what marriage education is so your organization's leadership and governing board members have a better idea of what you are proposing. The goal is to be specific enough so that they gain an understanding what MRE services are and what they are not. *Appendix 4* offers a sample of what this overview might include.

Use the information you gained from your community needs assessment and focus group interviews to inform leadership of the needs of the population that you would like to serve. Offer them a summary of any evaluations from your current programs offered, if the information is applicable



to the need of the MRE service. The more specific you can be about the gaps in community services to address the need for family strengthening services, and how your organization can help meet those needs, the better chance you will have of gaining their support.

In your efforts to engage your organizational leaders and board members, identify those individuals who may have a personal interest or stake in MRE. Is anyone also actively involved in child well-being, abuse prevention, fatherhood, or education programs? Illustrate the connection MRE has with other family- and child-centered issues to encourage board members to support your efforts as well as advocate to other members on behalf of the program.

Establish the expectation that you need leadership to be involved with every aspect of the MRE program – from strategic planning to designing the program to implementing your service delivery strategy. The strategic planning process will be unique for each agency, but the basic principles are the same: determine who you are as an organization, identify where you want to go with your MRE program and how you will get there and recognize when you've arrived and/or when you need to change course. Strategic planning for your MRE program is an ongoing, dynamic

process requiring long-term commitment from your organization. If you propose to integrate MRE into existing programming, consider how relationship education fits into the goals of your organization's strategic plan.

In addition to engaging leadership in the strategic planning process, you may want to create special committees or work groups to maintain their involvement. These committees might be focused on reviewing potential curricula, identifying referral partners, designing the program's evaluation and identifying potential funders. Providing board members with an opportunity (and responsibility) to help develop the program will create a deeper sense of ownership of the program and commitment to its success.

Remember to start small. Offer to operate a pilot program so your leadership can “see” the program in action and so you can evaluate and revise your plan if necessary. Then, you can refine your curriculum selection and focus on the specific identified relevant program components based on their experiences.

You can expand and adapt your program later for other populations based on feedback and suggestions from initial participants, too.

Conclusion

This How-to Guide includes considerations to help you lay the foundation for your MRE program. The initial steps — aligning MRE with the organization's mission and goals; assessing the needs of your organization and community; creating leadership buy-in; and seeking funding — can be a challenging and time-consuming process. However, this is an important planning process that will lay the foundation for your MRE services. A strong foundation to build on is essential to overall success.

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Appendix 1: Community Needs Assessment - Sample of Focus Group Questions

Start by introducing what MRE is and how people can benefit from MRE.

Focus Group Questions for Discussion	Comments
What types of family services are already available within the community? (i.e. health care, parent education, job training, public transportation, GED preparation, after-school programs, etc.)?	
What marriage and relationship education services are already available? Who are those programs serving?	
Discuss the quality of MRE services already provided. How might agencies better serve the community?	
What are the opportunities to develop and disseminate resources about healthy relationships to families?	
What barriers might prevent an agency from addressing healthy relationships?	

Appendix 2: Example of Program Types

Program Types	
Mentoring Programs	These programs typically serve married or engaged couples. They offer one-on-one interactive relationship education provided by a married couple. Meeting with marriage mentors can provide hope, focus and insight for the marriages of the participants, as services are tailored to fit the needs of the specific couple. Mentoring can also be an enriching experience for the mentors themselves.
Marriage Enrichment	This is a form of primary prevention for married couples. It is strength-based and focused on skill-building. Workshops in a variety of formats (typically a weekend retreat or weekly sessions) teach spouses communication and conflict resolution skills. Marriage enrichment may also include inventories or another one-on-one support. This program can serve a diverse audience since anyone regardless of how many years they've been married, how many children they have or what issues the couple may be grappling with.
Engaged/ Pre-marital	The focus of these programs is on marital preparation. These programs prepare participants for life after the wedding with skills training on conflict management and effective communication in addition to tools to facilitate discussion about expectations.
Expectant Couples	These programs focus on the relationship between couples who are expecting a child or have recently had a child. Expectant parents discuss how a new baby can affect the couple relationship, learn skills to manage those challenges and talk about expectations and strategies around parenting.
Distressed Couples	These programs are still skills-based, but they focus more on intervention for couples. The immediate goal is to reduce marital distress and chance of divorce among participants. These participants might be referred by courts, human services or other entities.
Step Families/ Blended Families	The program is offered to couples in which one or both spouses have children from a previous relationship. In addition to core relationship skills, these programs present tips to help the couple resolve conflicts and guide their children through the transition to a new family structure and dynamic.
Youth/Young Adults	The focus of relationship education for young people is on such topics as knowing one self, making smart choices, dating, selecting a partner, breaking up, dating safety and determining what a healthy relationship looks like. Programs discuss sex to varying degrees. Some programs are designed for school-based implementation. Age appropriate curricula are available for young people ages 12 to early 20's.
Singles	Programs for singles teach healthy relationship skills such as effective communication and conflict management. Some also talk about domestic violence and/or discuss decision making around living together and marriage.

Appendix 3: Example of SMART Goals

SMART GOALS

Specific

- q Uses action word(s) to describe what the program is going to do
- q Describes what the program wants to accomplish
- q Specifies when the program is expecting to see results

Measurable

- q Identifies the indicator of what the program will see when it reaches the goal
- q Ensures there are data that will be collected to demonstrate results (in quantity or quality) that can be calculated

Attainable and Achievable

- q Stretches the program to improve but is possible to attain
- q Targets the population(s) that data show is in greatest need

Realistic and Relevant

- q Implementation is possible within the capabilities of the program
- q Goal is consistent with the mission
- q The bar is set high enough for significant achievement
- q The goal does not contradict other goals

Timely

- q The goal has an end point
- q Time frame for accomplishment of the goal is realistic

Appendix 4: Sample Overview of MRE Services

What is a Healthy Marriage Initiative?

The initiative is primarily about helping couples acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy relationships through educational workshops.

Marriage Education...

- Provides a roadmap on what to expect in a relationship
- Helps youth, singles and couples better understand key principles associated with healthy relationships
- Teaches participants how to identify and counter act common risk factors in relationships
- Is skill based

A Healthy Marriage Initiative is NOT:

- Marriage counseling/therapy
- Encouraging anyone to enter into or remain in an abusive relationship
- Stigmatizing or reducing resources for single parents

Why is the issue of healthy marriages so important?

- Research shows that children who grow up in a healthy, two-parent family do better on a host of outcomes.
- Research shows that healthy relationships yield many benefits for adults & communities.

Benefits of healthy marriage for children:

- Better school performance and fewer dropouts
- Fewer emotional and behavioral problems
- Less substance abuse
- Less abuse or neglect
- Less criminal activity
- Less early sexual activity and fewer out-of-wedlock births

Benefits of healthy marriage for adults:

- Lower mortality
- Better health
- Greater financial well-being
- Fewer incidents of suicide
- Greater happiness
- Less violence by intimate partners

Knowledge and skills:

- Participants learn and practice behaviors essential to healthy relationships through:
 - interactive exercises
 - role playing exercises
 - communication exercises

Marriage Education topics include:

- Communication skills
- Problem-solving/decision making
- Conflict resolution
- Qualities of healthy relationships/marriages
- Managing emotional intimacy
- Beliefs about roles/expectations
- Relationship commitment