

# When an Incentive Isn't an Incentive

**Incentives are rewards for participating in marriage education programs.**

## Introduction

An incentive, for purposes of this Tip Sheet, means a reward available for participating in a marriage education program. An incentive may have direct value, like a restaurant gift card, or may have an indirect value, like a certificate of completion for a free/reduced marriage license. Incentives can be for each couple, participant or just one lucky person. Depending on your needs and the resources

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available to your program, you may choose to offer incentives as a one-time drawing to reward program completion, something for every participant at the beginning of the program or something at certain points along the way.

## Issues to Consider

Offering free marriage education programs is not always an incentive for participants. As a practitioner, you may be well aware of all the benefits and logical reasons why couples should attend your workshop but it can be hard to explain that to couples. Strong recruitment materials show what the couples will learn from the program. Benefits may include: time together with your spouse, ways to solve problems as a team

or the chance to meet other couples. Practitioners have found that incentives given throughout the program can get more people in the door or help them to finish the program. They cannot (and should not) be used to make up for program quality.

Think about the following practical tips to get couples to attend for the first time and complete the program:

### Give something immediately useful

Often times couples need an immediate reason to attend. Depending on your target audience and funding streams, gift cards from a grocery store, major department store, restaurant or movie can work very well. Gift cards in the amount of \$25-50 help get a couple's interest and attendance. If the amount is too little it is not an incentive. The value should be equal to the amount of time a couple is putting into the program. By giving a gift card or other incentive up front, you are thanking them for their time.

### Placement of incentives

The number of classes and how long they last will



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determine if incentives are needed midway through the program and again at the end. Incentives should take key program goals into account. If your program occurs over multiple sessions/weeks, ask yourself the following questions when deciding on incentives:

- What are the main lessons I want couples to learn? Tie incentives in with these lessons to keep people coming during these points in the program.
- What have I noticed in attendance? If you are offering a 10-week program and usually see a drop in attendance during weeks 7-9, first make sure the sessions are of high quality and then add incentives to sessions 6 and 8 to keep couples returning.
- What appeals to my target population? For busy, working parents, a “date night package” with a babysitter, movie pass and restaurant gift certificate might be popular. For couples who are stressed out about money, gift cards for food/gas or a drawing to pay someone’s utility bill that month may be well-liked.

### Look to community partners for discounts or donations

Local businesses are very open to supporting marriages. Business owners will often donate coupons to support a date night package. Local restaurants will often give food for the workshops or cater them at reduced rates. There are other creative ways in which area businesses can help your program:

- If you plan to purchase a lot of gift cards, reach a deal so that for every 10 you buy, you get the 11th free or a similar bulk buy discount.

- If you provide a meal for couples at the workshop ask the restaurant/ caterer to provide a free entrée gift certificate as a donation in exchange for your repeat business.

- Find vendors/providers who are new to the community. Create coupon books to advertise for the new vendors in exchange for allowing you to put up a poster/flier advertising your program at their place of business.

### Offer something that supports skills taught and ideas from the workshop

Incentives are most valuable when they encourage behaviors taught in the curriculum. Many curricula encourage couples to develop a hobby together, spend time together (either as a couple or with the family), put fun and friendship first, learn to relax/find healthy ways to deal with stress, manage a budget, etc. Use incentives to support these ideas creatively. For example:

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**A one-night getaway at a local bed and breakfast** Give the couple a chance to escape and focus on each other

**A “his” and “hers” massage or other pampering service** Promotes stress relief and relaxation

### **Books on couple relationships**

Encourages further study to find healthy ways to connect as a couple

### **Free passes to a museum, the zoo, theme park, or other fun venue**

Fun family activity that might otherwise be cost prohibitive

### **Puzzles to practice problem solving**

Working together one piece at a time can create something beautiful!

### **Fun stationery to encourage writing**

**love notes** Something fun can make the difference in trying new things

### **Dancing or cooking lessons for couples to work on teamwork/ communication skills**

On the dance floor or in the kitchen – being together can be lots of fun!

**A horse and carriage ride** Some good, old-fashion romance goes a long way

### **Free passes to theatre or stage performances**

Admission is often a barrier for couples – what a great date night!

### **A calculator or coupon for tax services/financial planning services for couples**

Offer this with some gourmet snacks to make this bookkeeping event more fun

## **Make them feel like winners**

Everyone likes to win something and drawings can be exciting. Here are some planning tips:

- Conduct drawings at the end of each class

- Host your drawings in such a way that every couple wins something special over the course of the workshop
- Give away one big prize at the very end to celebrate completion

The rewards couples receive for taking the time to attend can make the difference as to whether couples return for more sessions.

## **Final recommendations regarding the use of incentives**

Getting couples to attend a marriage education workshop takes creativity. The experience and atmosphere must be fun, inviting, informative, safe and rewarding. The rewards couples receive for taking the time to attend can make the difference as to whether couples return for more sessions. By the way, if you are tempted to view child care, food and refreshments as incentives – don't! Those elements should be available to anyone taking part in your program.

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*This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.*