



**national  
healthy marriage  
resource center**

*Strengthening Families, Communities, and a Nation – One Marriage at a Time*

## **“Working with Couples”**

**National Healthy Marriage Resource Center Webinar Training  
September 19, 2007 ♦ 12:30pm-2pm (EDT)**

### **Presenters**

**Patrick Patterson**, National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

**Paula Plasky**, Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI

**Terri and Mike Gibbs**, Participants from Paula’s Science of Great Families Program

**Afra Vance White**, Center for Workforce Development, Baltimore, MD

**Nicole and Tavon Hawkins**, Participants from Afra’s Building Strong Families Program

**[www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org)**

# Learning Objective

- The purpose of this Webinar is to help grantees and programs expand their understanding of the needs, goals and life circumstances of the couples they are likely to serve with healthy marriage programming.
- Provide opportunity for Webinar participants to hear first-hand from program participants and practitioners regarding work with couples.



# For Starters...

- Your marketing materials, staffing, organizational culture and environment, etc. should reflect and cater to both male and female participants as opposed to an individual driven target population.
- To be effective, recruiting, retaining, and working with couples (two people) is *DIFFERENT* and sometimes requires double the effort and planning than recruiting and working with individuals.



# For Starters...

- In general, couples have expressed highest satisfaction with programs that listen and respond to their needs, have staff and facilitators that can relate, and are providing useful/practical skills and information that they can apply away from the program setting.
- Working with couples is not *Business as Usual*.



[www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org)

# Working with Couples

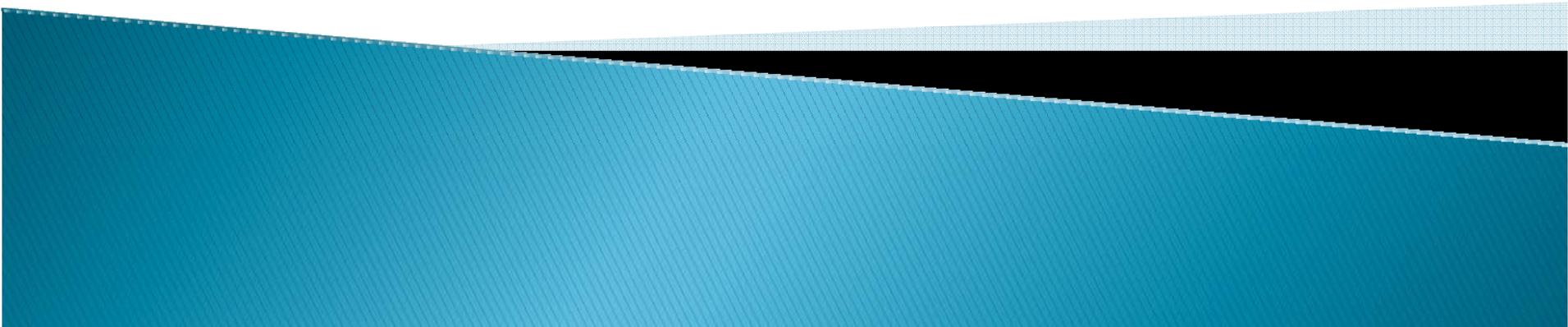
The Great Families Program  
Adoption Resources of Wisconsin

Paula Plasky, MSW

Project Manager

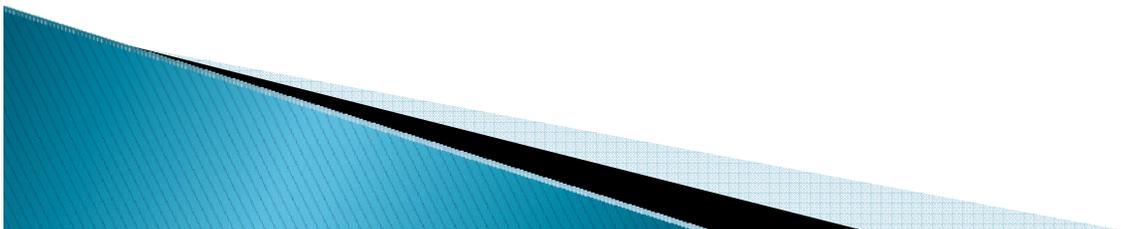
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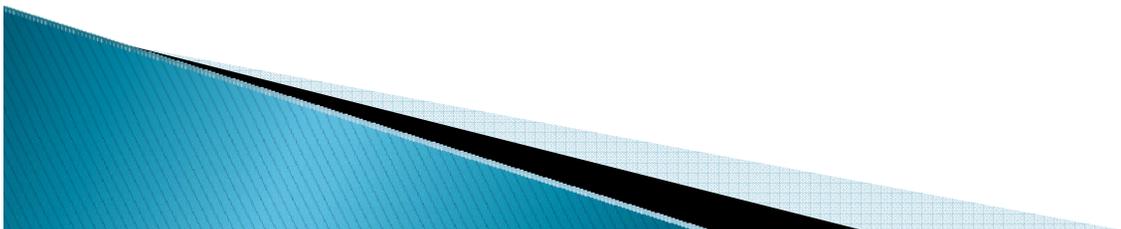
# Great Families Program Overview

- ▶ A series of six workshops—36 hours
- ▶ Offering a marriage strengthening curriculum and a Forgiveness curriculum
- ▶ For couples who adopted or are in the process of adopting children from foster care
- ▶ For couples with children ages 5 – 11 years old who experienced abuse/neglect/abandonment in their birth family or in foster care
- ▶ Asking couples to commit to attending all six workshops



# KEY ELEMENTS To Effectively Work With Couples

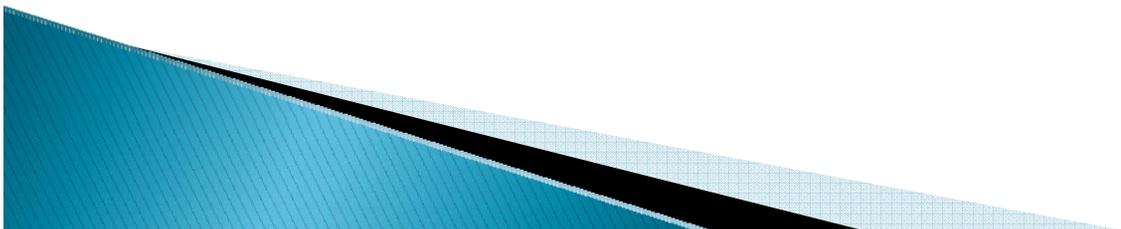
- ▶ Relationship Building
- ▶ Program Incentives
- ▶ A Welcoming and Safe Environment
- ▶ Competent Facilitators
- ▶ A Curriculum *Your Couples* Can Relate To
- ▶ Awareness of Community Resources
- ▶ Ongoing Evaluation



# *RELATIONSHIPS! RELATIONSHIPS! RELATIONSHIPS!*

## The Key Element of Successful Programs

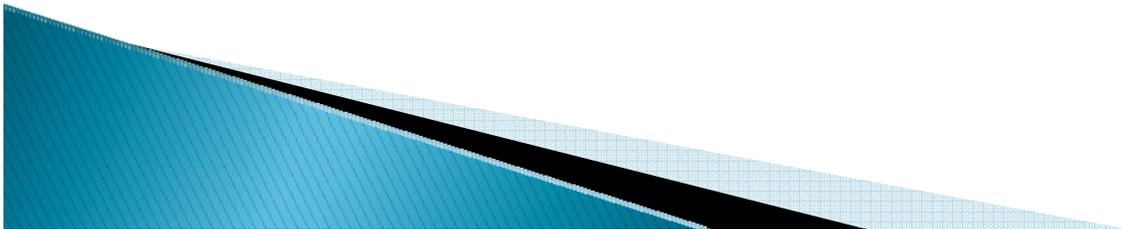
- ▶ **Must happen early, often and at every opportunity:** i.e. in your marketing materials, with that first phone call or e-mail inquiry, a pre-first workshop phone call, when greeting them at the door at the first workshop and everyone that follows.
- ▶ **Neutralize terms such as marriage education, strengthening or enhancement—try strengthening family relationships:** Often individuals or couples perceive marriage education as therapy or view it as a program to “fix” unhappy marriages. Consider marketing your program as one that “strengthens family relationships.”
- ▶ **Consider beginning with a “welcoming event”:** i.e. Plan a welcome breakfast or supper. Program staff introduce themselves and focus on characteristics similar to their participants. Have couples interview one other couple and later each introduces the couple they have interviewed.



# ***RELATIONSHIPS ! RELATIONSHIPS ! RELATIONSHIPS!***

## **The Key Element of Successful Programs**

- ▶ **Build in enough time for couples to network:** Plan enough breaks and networking opportunities for participants. Encourage them to linger after the formal workshop activity ends to build relationships among themselves. *You want to create connectedness and community* among participants.
- ▶ **When appropriate, self-disclose personal experiences or background information:** i.e. I too have experienced what you just said, I also came from a family that..., As a parent I also struggle with...
- ▶ **Listen, learn, empathize, and support your participants and build fun and laughter into your activities**



# Program Incentives

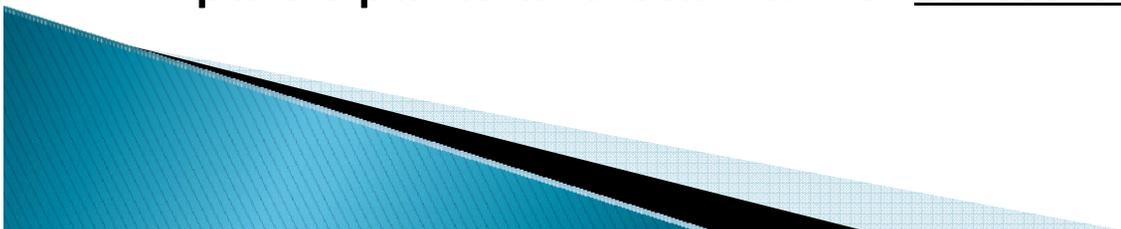
*(Or, why do I want to spend my free time at this program?)*

- ▶ Highlight several program incentives in your marketing materials
  - Child care stipends or on-site child care
  - Food—let them know you'll have brunch, lunch, supper or snacks and/or a celebration dinner upon completion.
  - Stipends, gifts or gift certificates
  - Date Nights
- ▶ Plan sessions on a day of the week and at a time and location that makes it as easy as possible for your participants to attend.
- ▶ Also plan family events that include their children
  - Couples want to “show off” their children.
  - Pizza lunches, family portrait days or holiday parties can be cost efficient events.



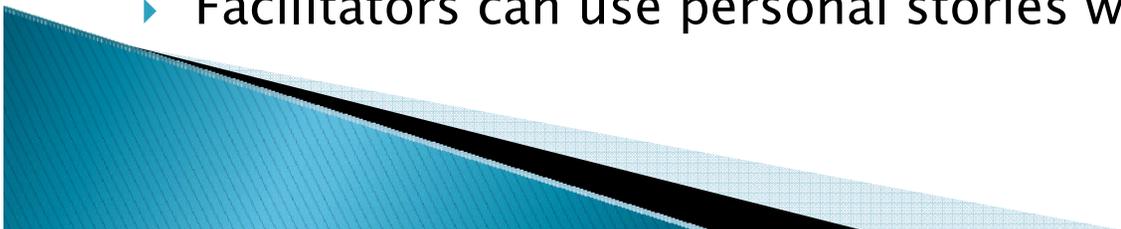
# Create a Welcoming and Safe Environment

- ▶ Greet couples when they arrive and leave. Use name tags so people can call each other by name.
- ▶ Make your meeting room as comfortable as possible.
- ▶ Make sure that persons with special needs are able to participate comfortably and appropriately.
- ▶ Sit with participants in the circle.
- ▶ Allow cell phones to remain on during sessions.
- ▶ At the first meeting list “ground rules” (or more gently refer to them as “group expectations”) that must be adhered to by participants and staff alike. *Stress confidentiality.*



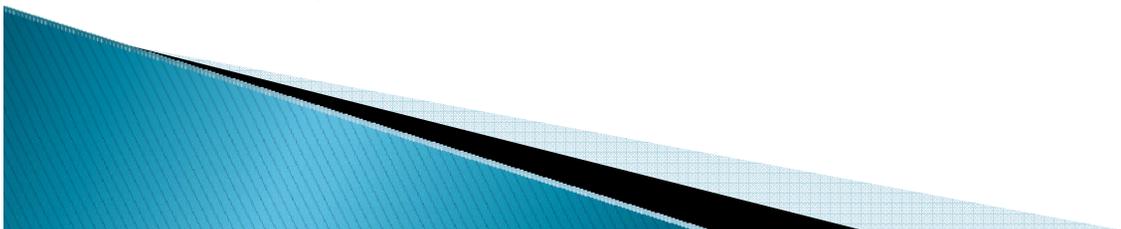
## *only* Competent Facilitators *need apply*

- ▶ Facilitators should be trained in the curriculum they will be delivering.
- ▶ Male and female co-facilitators are preferred and well received by male and female participants alike.
- ▶ Facilitators who share common experiences or circumstances with the participants, more quickly gain the trust of participants.
- ▶ Facilitators must communicate genuineness, empathy and support.
- ▶ Facilitators are responsible for building community and connectedness among participants.
- ▶ Facilitators can use personal stories when appropriate.



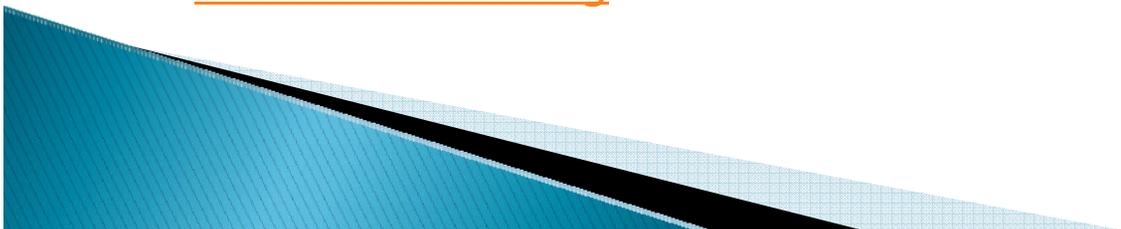
# Community Resources

- ▶ **Couples can better focus on their relationships when their basic needs are being met.** i.e. food, housing, health care, employment, etc.
- ▶ **Provide informational brochures on a variety of community resources or other resources or programs offered by your agency.** Always have a “resource table” at each of your program sessions.
- ▶ **Invite couples to call you for information related to an individual need or issue.** Often specific physical, social or psychological issues may be too private for an individual to raise in a group setting, i.e. sexual abuse, financial problems, problems with extended family members, legal issues, ect.
- ▶ **Don't forget to share information about free or low cost couple or family fun events.**



# Special Notes

- ▶ The information gathered for this presentation is based on two years of our experiences conducting the Great Families program with five groups of adoptive couples. Sixty-one couples have completed the program series. Attendance over the five groups averaged 90%. Only one couple dropped out of the program.
- ▶ Recognition for some of the material in this presentation must go to LCLC (Loving Couples Loving Children) Inc. of Seattle, WA who diligently worked with Adoption Resources of Wisconsin to modify the Loving Couples Loving Children curriculum for adoptive parents raising children with special needs.
- ▶ The LCLC curriculum was originally developed for young unmarried couples, of whom several were also parents.
- ▶ Loving Couples Loving Children is based on the work of John Gottman, Ph.D. of the Gottman Institute in Seattle, WA.
- ▶ Information about the Loving Couples Loving Children can be found at [www.lclconline.org](http://www.lclconline.org)



# **Working with Couples**

Afra Vance-White

Interim Director/Program Coordinator

Baltimore Building Strong Families



# Know your Target Audience?

- **Who** (males/females)
- **Age Range** (18 and older, teens)
- **Where** (Eastside, Westside, North, South)
- **Segment of Population** (low income, mid-income, current cliental/congregation)

# Working with Men and Women

## What you need to KNOW

- Most social services programs are designed to assist women.
- Men WILL participate in activities geared toward couples.
- Men respond best to other men.
- Let the client guide the marriage conversation.
- Keep the clients interest with incentives and other activities.
- Be Prepared to deal with barriers to healthy relationships and marriage  
(i.e. employment, education, mental/physical health, intimate partner violence)

# Partner! Partner! Partner!

## *Don't Reinvent the Wheel*

- Visit other community organizations that work with families, fathers, and/or women.
- Participate in community events
- Always have marketing materials close by (you never know when you will meet a potential client)
- Form partnerships with other direct service agencies (i.e. housing resources, Food banks, etc..)

# Lessons Learned from the Field

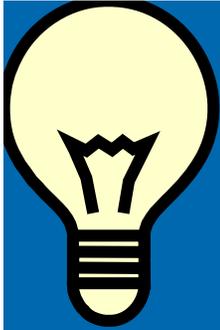
Once couples engage they see the value of program

Group starts to form community

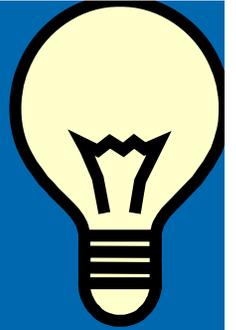
Couples workshops alone not enough to stabilize families

Some couples will realize that they are not in a healthy relationship that can lead to marriage

Domestic Violence is an issue for some couples



# Remember



- It is okay to bond with your client
- Always maintain a professional demeanor
- Do not take sides
- Stay positive!

# Case Study

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Tavon and Nicole Hawkins



# Couple Overview Prior to BSF

Nicole: No high school diploma or GED  
Pregnant with first child  
Living w/family members and  
significant other  
Not working

Tavon: High school diploma  
Girlfriend expecting  
Living w/family members and significant other  
Working sporadically: main bread winner

# After Enrollment in BSF

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Couple graduated from program with an attendance rate was 95%.

Couple graduate from program in January and were married in March

Couple referred to several programs (i.e. job training, GED, housing, etc..)

Where are they Now???

