



Engaging Men in Marriage Education

How-To Guide

November 2009

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Engaging Men in Marriage Educaiton

Background

Although both men and women are involved in marriage, relationship matters are often considered the woman's domain. For practitioners offering marriage and relationship education (MRE), this general belief can often make engaging men in your program a challenge.

Information is relatively sparse with regard to how men can be engaged in marriage education. There is research on men and commitment, and there are relatively frequent pop culture references to men and marriage regarding infidelity or gender roles, but very few resources are available for married men to support their relationship. However, we know from the field that men are interested in having a healthy marriage.

Men come to MRE services for a variety of reasons. It may be because of their wife's or partner's encouragement, because another man recommended it, or because of an underlying fear of marriage or relationship trouble — with little hope for what else to do. Practitioners, however, should not assume that just because a man attends an MRE course, that he has already bought in to the value of the program. This “How To” guide will provide some ideas for practitioners seeking to recruit and engage men in MRE programs.



Truly engaging men in MRE requires that practitioners make thoughtful and intentional efforts from the beginning. It starts with marketing and is carried through staff interaction during MRE workshops.

How to Get Men to your Relationship/Marriage Education Program

Men who benefit from marriage education are from all walks of life. This includes men of all ages, education levels, faiths, races, and cultures. Men who are CEOs can benefit from marriage education as much as unemployed men do. In fact, they are typically facing similar relationship challenges (being heard, parenting, meeting expectations, etc.).

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to fix things by emphasizing the workshop will teach strategies for problem solving and conflict resolution. Offer solution-based insights and teach the positive elements of marriage ("keys") that emphasize successful outcomes. For instance, "solve problems and create solutions" and "see results" could be integrated into your marketing materials to illustrate these concepts (See Appendices 1, 2, and 3). Brochures that promote "sharing feelings," "couple time", and "talking more" may not be as appealing to guys. "Talking about it" isn't itself an outcome. Make sure your materials have pictures of men on them and include testimonials from men. In fact, it is helpful to include all of the following elements on your web site and brochures.

Recruit in man-friendly venues. Be strategic in your outreach by handing out brochures at local sporting events or barber shops, for example, or by working with a local Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or employment program to obtain referrals. Your marketing materials could use metaphors that compare a marriage education program to an automotive "tune-up," or going to the gym for a workout, indicating

the preventive nature of the program. Also, materials could underscore the wider array of skills-application, such as more effective communication, conflict resolution, and anger management—all skills that can be used in the workplace, and not just at home. Finally, you could emphasize the importance of fathers and that having a strong marriage is part of being a good father. Flyers can also be effective when placed in churches and universities.

Establish credibility. Men, even more so than women, tend to ask, "Why? Why are you qualified to give me advice on my marriage? Why will this workshop help us? Why do I have to come?" Start things off by forthrightly describing the facilitators' credentials, the purpose of the class, and the key takeaway goals for each participant.

Understand that most men work, or want to work. It is critical to offer workshops that accommodate work schedules. Depending on your community, this means you may have to offer evening or weekend sessions. Some program operators even offer workshops in a factory break room during the midnight shift's "lunch" hour. Remember that if your program interferes with work, men won't come. Conversely, if your program is supported by their employer, offered at work, or marketed as something that will help at work, you may capture their attention.

State the benefits of marriage to men. Most men got married because they fell in love and thought it was the right thing to do. It's unlikely they were told that marriage can actually be more sexually fulfilling, create more wealth or help a person live longer!



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- Marriage promotes better health habits and greater longevity among men, largely due to the care, attention and monitoring by their wives. In fact, men appear to reap the most physical health benefits from marriage and suffer the greatest health consequences if they get divorced.

- Annually, married men earn more money than do single men with similar education and job histories.
- For men, marriage provides as many benefits as education. Research shows it is likely that married men benefit from understood roles and responsibilities within marriage, and from the emotional support they receive from wives.
- Marriage strengthens the bonds between fathers and children. Again, countless research studies show that married fathers have better relationships with their children than unwed or divorced fathers.

Affirm that program participation doesn't imply there is a problem in a man's relationship/marriage. Keep your recruitment messages strength-based. Many men will respond well to the idea of doing this for their wife or to make her happy.

Assert that there is a link between being a great dad and being a great husband. Sometimes men will be drawn to a service that emphasizes their important role in their child's life, and this can be a great motivator to successfully engage and retain men (See Appendix 4).

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Make sure your marriage program is not confused with counseling. Choose your words carefully when

recruiting men. In all likelihood they may not want to “attend group,” as that may sound like counseling or, even worse, men may fear sitting in a circle “sharing their feelings.” While some men may be drawn to these, many programs have found greater success by marketing their program for its benefits to the couple (or family), and for the new tools it provides for couples who want to work out their challenges.

Don't promote the fact that it's a “free” service. For many people — and possibly men even more than women — there is a deep sense that “you get what you pay for.” Depending on your funding restrictions, you may want to consider charging a nominal fee. Alternatively, some programs charge participants a deposit, refunded at the completion of the program, which helps the couple commit to attending. You may want to let men know they are getting a \$500 service (for example) at no charge to them.

How to Keep Men in your MRE Program

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Pick the right curriculum for your audience. Depending on the demographics of your group, try to find a curriculum with an overall language and

tone appropriate to your audience. There are many curricula available now for targeted groups like expectant parents, low-income couples or that are faith-based. You can find a list arranged by category on www.smartmarriages.com or on the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center Web site www.healthymarriageinfo.org. Assess the program using the Marriage Education Assessment Guide at http://www.acf.gov/healthymarriage/doc/ACF_curriculum_assessment. The National Fatherhood Initiative also has a father-friendly and marriage-readiness curriculum for men (www.fatherhood.org). Talk with curriculum developers or other practitioners about the curriculum and how it has been received.

Make your workshop space comfortable to men. Successful programs engage men, in part, by creating a male-friendly environment. Create an aesthetically warm and inviting atmosphere that won't make men feel like they just walked into the women's section of a department store. Consider having couches or recliners, without floral upholstery. If there are posters on the walls, they should depict men as well as women. Some social service organizations host workshops and display posters with negative images of men as delinquent on child support, or show families that don't include men. Be aware of what you are telling men by the way you decorate

your space. ESPN or another similar channel should be on the TVs if you have them. Man-friendly magazines and other reading materials should also be readily available (See Appendix 4). The men attending the workshop

or class should be met by a male mentor or a male facilitator.

Make it work. In order to keep men in the program, it is essential for practitioners to create a learning environment conducive to the male learning style. This can be done through using interactive elements and concrete tools that couples can immediately use. Have other men in the room and add some humor! Make sure to integrate the kinds of problems men

Make sure to integrate the kinds of problems men experience, or can relate to in marriage within your actual workshop. Doing so will help establish a good rapport with all attendees. For example, employment-related stories about how a communication skill can be applied in the workplace (as well as with one's spouse) might really hit home with the working men in your group.

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Let the men talk! Women tend to talk more than men. Be intentional about engaging men in couple sessions and including break-out sessions specifically for men. Alternatively you can offer a "dads group" as a supplement to MRE. This will help keep the men returning to your program, and encourage them to share their positive experience with other men. Similarly, your curriculum should be interactive. Few adults (especially men) want to be talked to or lectured to for a long time. Men typically feel a real sense of accomplishment when they are given a tool and an opportunity to problem-solve right then and there.

Use innovative approaches. A fun way to engage men is to utilize a personality test (e.g. Myer's Briggs Assessment), which can help men better understand themselves and their spouses (some curricula include this). This can lead to opportunities for self-determination that can then allow for activities to help the relationship. For example, make a list of shared activities the man enjoys that can be done as a couple. If he enjoys the activity, he is more likely to commit to sharing this time together. Another effective tool could be an exchange of emails or letters between partners which allows the man to collect his thoughts and express himself more confidently.

Train your entire staff — not just your healthy marriage instructors — to better understand men. This is especially important if your organization has traditionally served women and children. Some marriage educators say that engaging and retaining men in your program starts with your first contact with them. Developing rapport is essential; it is helpful to have male staff who can relate to the stressors and challenges of a relationship from the male perspective. All staff members, no matter what their gender, should be aware of the common male objections to participating in marriage education and be prepared to address them up front. Lack of adequate training can have a negative impact on the retention of men in the program, preventing them from seeking other assistance from your organization. To assess how men/father-friendly your organization is, see Appendix 5.

Talk about sex. Sex is an important part of any healthy, committed relationship. Address this issue by using language with which your entire program

team can be comfortable.

Serve refreshments. Everybody likes food, and one of the best ways to demonstrate that you appreciate the time a couple is investing in your program is to offer them a meal. This also provides an opportunity for some male bonding among the husbands.

Make the message appropriate to your clients. The literature on marriage programs shows that the overall messages in the program offered should be tailored to the participants' developmental/life stages. Some researchers call this being "temporal-specific." For example, what is perceived as relevant for a young engaged man will differ from a more seasoned father or a man starting his second marriage. The wise educator must work to ensure that the curriculum and program connects to the recipient's current experience. It may be helpful to take an inventory at the beginning of class to see what life stages your participants are in. Be sure to include relevant examples of each in your sessions.

Manage "hecklers." Some men may instinctively become the joker in your workshop. This may be a defense mechanism or a way to mask their own fear of being in a MRE workshop. Pull these guys aside, and try to get to know them. Early on, work to bring them into the group, rather than treating them as a distraction.

Keep things funny. Humor (like food) is an effective way to engage men. You don't have to be a stand-up comedian to engage men in your workshop, but explore video clips, cartoons, and quotes that drive home key classroom insights.



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Use incentives. Ideally, the value of your program will speak for itself, and keep men and women alike coming back. Yet, with people's busy schedules and the chaos of life, if you expect participants to return each week, you may want to consider the use of an incentive. If you do, keep men in mind when selecting these program-supportive incentives. You don't have to give away a lawn mower at the end of the workshop series, but a fuzzy blanket and romantic movie may not encourage the guys to fully commit. Sports tickets can be donated or simple things like a tool or a gift certificate to a hardware store could be

well received by the men in your audience. Think through whatever incentives you may offer, to make sure they appeal to men and women.

Conclusion

There are several challenges when it comes to recruiting men for participation in marriage and relationship education services. Practitioners should understand what attracts and appeals to men to not only bring them into the program, but also to keep them engaged in the curriculum. Considering men's needs will keep them confident that the services will result in a healthier relationship.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Dr. Errol Bolden, a fatherhood consultant on program planning, development and evaluation for his contributions to this How-To Guide. We would also like to thank Josh Good, Rachel Derrington, MSW, Courtney Harrison, MPA, and Ervin Lucero of the Resource Center and Seth Caton from Dad's Matter for their contributions. 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.

Additional Resources

Men Not Immune to Marriage

<http://catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=1395&page=2>

National Fatherhood Initiative FatherSOURCE

<http://www.fatherhood.org/FatherSOURCE/Fathersource.html>

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

<http://www.fatherhood.gov/index.cfm>

No Cry Zone: Psychotherapy With Men

<http://www.continuingedcourses.net/active/courses/course040.php>

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Magill. (2008). *Marriage Help for Men*. <http://www.ArticleBiz.com>

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Ooms, T. (2007). Center For Law and Social Policy. Couples and Marriage Series, March 2007 Brief No. 10

Marriage Tools for Regular Guys

DUCT TAPE
AND
CANDLE LIGHT

A marriage enrichment workshop
from Community Marriage Builders
that uses the LINKS curriculum.

Thursdays
Oct. 29 - Nov. 20
6pm - 8pm

Childcare and
Dinner Provided



Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families

Appendix 2: Sample Flyer

Marriage is a Journey... What Path Are You On?

PREP[®] is your passage to...

- Listen and be heard
- Talk about tough subjects without fighting
- Show respect for each other
- Protect your friendship
- Understand each other better
- Keep the romance and spark alive!
- Get the tools for a lifetime of love

PASSPORT

Destination: Healthy Marriage

Couples Workshop

December 4th, 10 am – 4 pm
&
December 5th, 8 am – 4 pm

Health and Wellness Center
Tinker AFB

To sign up,
call Family Advocacy at 734-4390

FREE & Open to Everyone!

5
OMI
OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE
5

OMI-088

Appendix 3: Sample Flyer

This example is from the Family Expectations Program. This background and theme can easily be adapted to your healthy marriage and relationship education program.

Team DADD

KICKOFF

You're invited to help us 'kick-off' our next
Team DADD group meeting!

FREE! **DOOR PRIZES!**

Join us for
Food! Fun! Friendship!

Special Guest
Jim Traber



- "Sports Animal" WWLS radio host
- Played baseball for Baltimore Orioles
- Played baseball & football for OSU

August 20, 2007 • 5:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Family Expectations

301 N.W. 63rd Street, Suite 150, Oklahoma City, OK 73116 • www.familiesok.org

Score a touchdown for your family - sign up now!
Call Chad or Darius at 639-2054

*Open to all dads in the Family Expectations program

Appendix 4: Sample Newsletter

This example is from the Dad's Matter Fatherhood Program. This gender-neutral newsletter style can easily be adapted to your healthy marriage and relationship education program.

The

Dad Difference

January 2009

Published by
Dads Matter
480A Coolspring Road, Uniontown PA 15401
Phone: 724-437-2590 x322
Fax: 724-437-8159
E-mail: dadsmatter@dadsmatter.info
Web: www.dadsmatter.info

How to make New Year's resolutions WORK

By Ryan Butter, Dads Matter Case Manager

3-2-1, Happy New Year!!! Yes it's that time of year again, time for New Year's resolutions. Did you quit smoking or lose 30 pounds last year?

If you gave up on last year's resolutions, then get your family involved. It will increase your chance of success and your kids will learn to set goals for themselves.

This year, set realistic goals for yourself. For example, don't plan to lose 30 pounds this year if you haven't worked out since the Steelers won the Super Bowl.

Make smaller, incremental goals like "I'm going to lose 10 pounds by June." Then look at how things are going in June.

Make a family workout night. You can burn 100 calories by

- Playing tag for 25 minutes
- Going on a science walk and talk about the seasons for 30 minutes
- Dancing with your "special someone" for 25 minutes.

Set goals as a family. Have everyone make a goal and write a plan to set them



up for success. Nothing can raise your self-worth quicker than being successful.

Each month have a family meeting to talk about what's been working and how to improve your plan.

And make it fun, even if it's saving money or working out. Make it a game to see who's the biggest loser or winner!

Reward the winner with their favorite food or their choice of a movie for family movie night. It's always easier to be successful when you have support.

Sample resolutions: try them out in 2009!

These can work

"I will join the gym on January 4th."
- Write down the phone number and put it by the phone.

"I will watch only 10 hours of TV this week."
- Tape it to your TV.

I am spending 30 minutes jogging every Tuesday and Thursday before work.
- Tape it to your alarm clock, so you can set it 30 minutes early.

"I will only eat a snack before bed on Friday and Saturday."
- Tape it to your fridge.

"I'm going to cut my cigarette smoking from one pack a day to half a pack a day by June."
- Write down how many you smoke each day, so you can keep yourself going.

"I'm going to forgive myself if I slip, and I won't give up."
- Tape it everywhere.

These don't work

"I don't want to be lazy."

"I won't watch TV ever again."

"I'm going to get in shape."

"I won't eat snacks ever again."

"I'm going to quit smoking."

"I slipped...so I give up."

Free stuff to do!

All activities should be free to attend, but there's generally a cost for rides and food. Questions? Call us at 724-437-2590 x322.

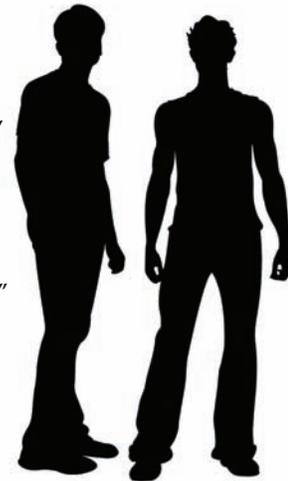
Dad 2 Dad - get \$\$\$ for gas! Free food!
@ Bud Murphy's every week for six weeks starting Wed., Jan. 7, 5:30-7:30pm
Rt. 119 in Connellsville

- AND -

@ The PIC Office every week for six weeks starting Mon., Jan. 26, 5:30-7:30pm
480 Coolspring Road in Uniontown
Relax with other dads and learn how to deal with the tough stuff you face: discipline, communication, what to expect from your kids, physical and mental health, and more.
Call 724-437-2590 to sign up!

Caring After Christmas - MLK Food Drive

Mon, Jan 19 - all day
Downtown Brownsville
This food drive begins on MLK Day and lasts for one month in honor of the contributions of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Food will be collected in BARC main offices or the Welcome Center at 33 Market Street.



Got questions?

Dads Matter has answers - and if we don't, we'll find them!

Call us at 724-437-2590 x321

Appendix 5: Sample Organizational Self-Assessment and Planning Tool

This example is from The National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership (NPCL) and The National Head Start Association (NHSA) Fatherhood Programs. This assessment can easily be adapted to your healthy marriage and relationship education program.



FATHER-FRIENDLINESS ORGANIZATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING TOOL

This self-assessment package can help Head Start and other family service programs assess their organization's readiness to provide services to fathers and father figures. It was developed by:

**The National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community
Leadership (NPCL)**

In Partnership With

**The National Head Start Association (NHSA)
The U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Administration for Children
and Families, Region V
The Illinois Department of Public Aid, Division of Child Support
Enforcement**

There are three parts to the self-assessment package:

- ◆ Organizational Self-Assessment
- ◆ Action Plan for Becoming More Father Friendly
- ◆ Feedback on Usefulness of Tool.

NHSA and NPCL are FATHERHOOD PARTNERS

We are working in partnership to develop and enhance the provision of fatherhood services by Head Start agencies. The goal is to create an environment where staff, mothers, and fathers respect each other's roles, work together, and collaborate with other community organizations to ensure the availability of comprehensive services that support the role of fathers in the lives of their children. We do this in order to promote and enhance the well-being of every child.

For more information, contact:

**Nigel Vann, NPCL's Director of Partnership Development, at (202) 822-6725
JoAnn Nelson-Hooks, NHSA's Fatherhood Coordinator, at (703) 739-7560.**