

Recruiting Expectant Couples

Having a baby is a key transition in a couples' life.

So you're having a baby... many programs target expectant parents to teach about child birth, caring for a newborn, fatherhood, prenatal health/fitness, etc. This is a point in people's lives when they are open to new information and making positive life changes. They may test their home for lead paint, quit smoking, start exercising more, change eating habits and maybe even try to mend family relationships to create a better place to raise baby. This is a great opportunity to recruit for your healthy marriage program!

New parents make a lot of preparations when a baby is on the way. Some of the things couples have to consider are where the baby will sleep and who will stay home with the baby. With these and other preparations, many couples don't prepare for the change that the baby will have on their marriage. Research indicates that both married and unmarried couples experience decreased relationship satisfaction around the time of a baby's birth. For some, the birth of a new baby can place considerable stress on the marriage. Surprisingly, the joy of the new addition to the family can also be stressful.

Figure 1. Relationship Education

Programs for Expectant Couples
Becoming Parents Program
Loving Couples, Loving Children
Love's Cradle

Why Target Married Couples Around The Birth Of A Baby?

John Gottman at the University of Washington studied 82 newly-wed couples and tracked them for four to six years, before and after the birth of a baby. Two-thirds of the 43 couples that became parents in that time cited marital dissatisfaction within three years of birth. He found that many new mothers and fathers experience increased irritability, postpartum depression, fighting and a lack of intimacy, which can lead to infidelity. The National Institute of Mental Health financed the research.

That stress can be what begins the downward spiral towards break up or divorce. A study of low-income unmarried new parents found that many were considering marriage at the time the baby was born but that less than 10% achieved that goal by the time their child reached its first birthday.¹

Experts have maintained that key life transitions (such as the birth of a baby) allow the best opportunities for preventive interventions. Helping couples, who are committed to one another, to support their family through accessing couples, parenting and other community services may improve child well being by improving family stability. More of these children

¹Fragile Families <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/briefs/ResearchBrief14.pdf>

would have a chance of being raised in healthy, two parent families headed by parents that have formed and sustained healthy marriages.

Expectant couples are likely to benefit from marriage education. Some relationship education programs are designed for expectant couples (see Figure 1). Expectant couples may however be interested in general marriage education. They may be more open to marriage education at this stage in their relationship and can be recruited through a variety of sources.

Some potential recruitment sources:

- Prenatal Clinic
- WIC office
- Stores where parents can register for baby products. You may be able to place brochures in the store, provide a flier that is distributed with registry information, or some larger stores host in-store events on child safety, breastfeeding, etc. and can offer an opportunity for your program to have a display or booth.
- Health clinics that offer pregnancy testing
- Community events for expectant parents (Many communities have baby equipment or consignment sales/events, child safety workshops, child care open houses, etc. to orient expectant parents to the variety of resources. Sometimes these events are led by community agencies, hospitals or other new parents.)
- Professionals working with expectant parents such as OB/GYN staff, doulas, breast feeding coaches, nurse home visiting program staff and child birth educators. Invite these individuals to see your program and talk about how your program can help the families they work with.
- Adoption agencies (you don't have to be pregnant to expect a baby!)

Figure 2. Expecting Couples Need Support Services

- One-half of new parent couples experience moderate to severe declines in marital satisfaction (Belsky & Kelly, 1994).
- One-third to one-half of new parent couples experience as much marital distress as couples already in therapy for marital difficulties (Cowan & Cowan, 1995).
- One-third or more of both mothers and fathers experience significant depression as they become parents (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Jordan & Fry, 2000).

Source: *Becoming Parents Program*

Related Resources:

<http://www.bbhonline.org/> (for practitioners)

<http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/healthymarriageprogram.pdf> (for policymakers and evaluators)

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/mp/2005/004/13.20.html> (for couples/individuals)

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16767082/> (for couples/individuals)

<http://www.becomingparents.com>

National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Courtney Harrison, MPA, of the Resource Center for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.