

What Difference Does Marriage Education Make?: Making a Case for Marriage

Part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage

The Situation

Marriage education is an important element of a broader marriage formation process that spans one's entire life. Marriage education programs help relationships to succeed, acknowledge that relationships require work, address common marital problems, and build supportive environments. (*The New Kid on the Block: What is Marriage Education & Does It Work?*, Theodora Ooms, Center for Law & Social Policy, www.clasp.org/publications/marriage_brief7.pdf)

Marriage preparation is the first experience most couples have of marriage education. While marriage prep is a good first step, its benefits diminish after a few years. Therefore, marital education and formation must continue throughout a couple's lifetime. Continuing education enables couples to keep their relationship fresh by fostering new skills and renewing community support and spousal commitment. (*Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting it Right*, Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University, 1995, p. 20. See #2 of the USCCB Family, Laity, Women, and Youth summary of this document: www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/preparation.shtml)

Marriage education is offered by community, religious, and government organizations. It may last a few hours, encompass multiple sessions, or be taken as a home study course. The primary elements of all marriage education programs are to evaluate relationship expectations, teach communication skills, and prepare couples to handle problems in a positive manner (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, www.healthymarriageinfo.org). Trained clergy and lay leaders can teach marriage education and relationship skills as well as, or better than, professional counselors or therapists. Leader training often takes only a few days (www.smartmarriages.com/atlanta.press.html). Some marriage education programs are tailored for particular types of relationships such as couples in an inter-faith marriage, those facing life-altering changes, and spouses dealing with abuse, violence, and addiction. (Ibid.)

Social science findings

Pre-marital education encourages couples to take time to reflect on their relationship. It sends a message that marriage matters, helps couples to learn about options if they need help in the future, and lowers the risk for subsequent marital distress or divorce in some couples. (Scott Stanley, *Making a Case for Premarital Education*, *Family Relations Journal*, 2001, 50, 272-280)

Couples who participated in skill-building programs for a total of 20-30 hours found results such as increased marital satisfaction, higher conflict resolution skills, strengthened spousal commitment, and more frequent expressions of positive feelings and affection. Other studies

confirm that similar positive effects result from programs as short as a few hours.
(www.healthymarriageinfo.org, Marriage Education – About Marriage Education Programs)

In a survey of over 3000 adults, 31% had attended premarital education. Research suggests that participation in such programs rises with an increase in their availability. It also found that premarital education is associated with a 30% decline in the odds of divorce. (Scott Stanley, Paul Amato, Christine Johnson, Howard Markman, *Premarital Education, Marital Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings from a Large, Random Household Survey*, Journal of Family Psychology, 2006, Vol. 20, No. 1, 117-126)

The effect of marital education on divorce rates differs for low-income couples with lower education. Although the divorce rate was not significantly reduced for this population, such couples still experienced an increase in marital satisfaction after receiving marriage education. (M. Robin Dion, *Healthy Marriage Programs: Learning What Works*, Marriage and Child Wellbeing, Vol. 15, No. 2, 139-153, www.futureofchildren.org)

Church teaching and pastoral practice

Pope John Paul II insisted that the “pastoral intervention of the Church in support of the family is a matter of urgency.” He called attention to three stages of marital preparation and also recognized the need for pastoral care after marriage. He entrusted the mission of marriage education to the Church community (especially the parish), the family (in itself and by ministering to other families), and associations of families. (*Familiaris Consortio*, 65-72)

The Pontifical Council for the Family recognized that marriage preparation is a favorable time to begin the on-going pastoral care of marriage and the family. The Council said that it would be beneficial to follow up marriage preparation with post-marriage courses, especially in the first five years of marriage. (*Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, #57, conclusion, 1996)

The U.S. Bishops stated that married couples can often be discouraged because of the difficulties that married life brings. They insisted that couples can find hope and confidence in the Church through marriage education and formation programs, but also primarily through the grace of Jesus Christ, who enables couples to be “faithful to each other forever.” (*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, p.138) The U.S. Bishops’ *National Directory for Catechesis* claims that marriage education and formation is needed specifically for adults in all stages of married life. (p. 142)

Conclusion

A growing body of social science data confirms the beneficial effects of marriage education. The Church encourages couples at all stages, starting at the pre-marital, to take advantage of marriage education programs. It also calls on parishes and church organizations to use the resources of marital education so that married couples may recognize and live out the sacramental nature of their relationship, a human love that shares in and represents divine love.

Resources

Here are some organizations that provide directories of marriage education programs: Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family, & Couples Education, L.L.C. (www.smartmarriages.com/directory.html); The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (www.healthymarriageinfo.org, click “Marriage Education” then “View a list of Marriage Education Programs and Curricula”); and The National Association of Family Life Ministers (www.nacflm.org and click on “Resource Links”).