Relationship education programmes for adults

What are relationship education programmes for adults?

In using the term relationship education, this briefing is referring to both marriage and relationship education programmes (MRE) and couple relationship education programmes (CRE). These programmes can be delivered in a range of formats, including inventory based approaches as well as curriculum based ones.³

A leading researcher in this field, Alan Hawkins, defines MRE as programmes which “provide information and teach attitudes, skills, and behaviors designed to help individuals and couples achieve long-lasting, happy, and successful marriages and intimate couple relationships. This includes making wise partner choices and avoiding or leaving abusive relationships. MRE is generally distinguished from face-to-face, individualized couples counseling or therapy” (Hawkins and Ooms, 2010). Another prominent researcher, Kim Halford, defines CRE as the “provision of structured education to couples about relationship knowledge, attitudes and skills” (Halford et al., 2008). MRE and CRE therefore have a significant degree of overlap.

What does the research on relationship education programmes say?

Between 2003 and 2013, seven meta-analyses¹ of studies into relationship education programmes were conducted in the United States, and this briefing presents the findings from these.

The first of these (Carroll and Doherty, 2003) found that the average person who participated in a premarital prevention programme experienced about a 30% increase in measures of outcome success (e.g. improvements in interpersonal skills and overall relationship quality). This meta-analysis included a small number of studies which had relatively extended follow-up periods. The authors conclude that premarital prevention programs are generally effective in producing significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality, and that these gains appear to hold for at least 6 months to 3 years, but that less can be concluded about longer-term effects.

The second of these meta-analyses (Hawkins et al., 2008) concluded that the most rigorous RCT-design studies demonstrated that those who attended relationship education programmes were 40–50% better off overall in terms of relationship quality and 50–60% better off in terms of communication skills compared to those who did not.

The few studies considered by this meta-analysis that looked at divorce rates found that relationship education programmes appeared to increase marital stability, at least in the first 2–3 years of marriage (Hahlweg et al., 1998) (Markman et al., 1993) which are high-risk years for divorce.

The third of these meta-analyses (Blanchard et al., 2009) found that well-functioning couples improved or maintained learned communication skills, training and information (Meier, 2014) ((Coleman and Stoilova, 2014)) – which comprise this part of relationship support framework.

The Relationships Alliance has explored elsewhere a number of activities – including those which promote relational capability through skills, training and information (Meier 2014) – which comprise this part of the relationship support framework. This briefing therefore focuses on relationship education programmes for adults as an area of the relationship support framework which this set of briefings has hitherto not explored.

²Presentation by Mark Molden to APPG for Strengthening Couple Relationships, 04.11.14 - http://www.tccr.ac.uk/policy-research/appg/711-previous-meetings-1
³Inventory based approaches tend to provide couples with an individualised profile of their relationship strengths and vulnerabilities while curriculum based ones provide couples with the chance to develop new knowledge and skills.
⁴A meta-analysis sets out to contrast and combine results from different studies in the hope of identifying patterns among study results, sources of disagreement among those results, or other interesting relationships that may come to light in the context of multiple studies.
For more information contact Richard Meier, Policy and Communications Manager, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships on 0207 380 1964; rmeier@tccr.org.uk

The question of whether relationship education programmes are effective for low-income groups has also since 2002 been investigated in the States through three large-scale studies which focus on low-income couples. A large-scale, longitudinal, multi-site randomized controlled trial, Building Strong Families (BSF) is designed to serve low-income unmarried, romantically involved parents who were expecting or who had recently had a baby. This study has reported mixed results, in as much as that when the results were averaged across all eight programme sites at about one year after the program, BSF did not make couples more likely to stay together or get married, nor did relationship quality improve.

However, one program site (Oklahoma), had numerous positive effects on couple relationships and father involvement for African American, Hispanic and White participants. This site was the most successful at keeping couples engaged in the programme, with nearly half receiving at least 80% of instructional time (compared to only an average of 10% at the other sites). This site also used a different (and shorter) curriculum than most of the other sites. Another site (Baltimore) reported a number of negative effects including the quality of couples’ co-parenting relationship being lower in the intervention than the control group, as well as fathers in the intervention group spending less time with their children and being less likely to provide them financial support than control group fathers (OPRE, 2012a).

But while the results from this trial are generally acknowledged to be disappointing, a leading researcher in the field has highlighted the fact that the statistically significant finding from the Oklahoma site that 49% of the families in the program group had lived together continuously since the birth of the child compared to only 41% for the control group equates to a 20% increase in the likelihood of these families continuously living together if they were in the program group. Thus the benefits of a systematic and robust
For more information contact Richard Meier, Policy and Communications Manager, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships on 0207 380 1964; rmeier@tccr.org.uk

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Supporting Healthy Marriages (Stanley, 2013). If realised across larger populations of attendance, could be substantial with assiduous efforts to maintain rates of delivery of the programme, coupled with assiduous efforts to maintain rates of attendance, could be substantial if realised across larger populations (Stanley, 2013).

Findings from a second study, Supporting Healthy Marriages – a voluntary, yearlong, relationship and marriage education program for low-income, married couples who have children or are expecting a child – indicate that the programme produced a consistent pattern of small positive effects on multiple aspects of couples’ relationships. That is, relative to the control group, the programme group showed higher levels of marital happiness, lower levels of marital distress, greater warmth and support, more positive communication, and fewer negative behaviours and emotions in their interactions with their spouses (OPRE, 2012c).

A third study, Community Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Evaluation, covers a range of large-scale, community-wide projects that “use various methods to support healthy marriages community-wide” and which were originally funded from 2006.

Findings published in 2012 indicate that two years after implementation, there were no demonstrable improvements on any of the primary outcomes, which included relationship status, relationship quality, relationship and marital stability and parenting (OPRE, 2012b).

Availability/provision of relationship education programmes for adults in the UK

Research into, and evaluation of, relationship education programmes in the UK lags some way behind that being conducted in the US. However, a report into UK provision (Percival, 2008) found that relationship education programmes are delivered in four main formats, i.e. extended residential programmes, non-residential one-day programmes, multi-session programmes, and on a “couple to couple” basis (often with inventory). Relationship education programmes in the UK are delivered almost exclusively by a volunteer workforce, about a third of whom have been trained in course content for specific approaches. Of the relationship education programmes surveyed in this report, only 25% had any kind of evaluation process in place.

A limited number of marriage and relationship education programmes are available online, e.g. http://catholicmarriageprepclass.com/ and http://www.catholicmarriageprep.com/ The FOCUS intervention\(^1\) – one of those evaluated in 2013 by the Department for Education (Spielhofer, 2014) – is also available in this format (as well as face-to-face).

The Department for Education’s report, which encompasses a number of relationship support interventions, found that “receiving marriage preparation was associated with positive changes in relationship quality or well-being, depending on the type of preparation attended and changed people’s attitudes towards receiving relationship support in future” and that “FOCUS© marriage preparation [was] cost effective: for every pound spent on such provision there is a benefit of £11.50” (Spielhofer, 2014).

Where next for relationship education programmes?

Researchers are now beginning to take stock of, and respond to, what the evidence tells us about the effectiveness of relationship education programmes. For example, acknowledging that “basic concerns remain about the long-term effectiveness of these interventions”, Bradbury et al. identify “six problems that we believe are hindering progress in the field”, including the incomplete understanding of couple communication, the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining high-risk couples in intervention programmes, and the lack of attention given to specific stages of relationship development in interventions (Bradbury and Lavner, 2012).

Similarly, Wadsworth and Markman stress that while “we have generally demonstrated that our interventions work (at least in the short run),” they question “to what extent

\(^1\)Using an inventory-based assessment and feedback from a trained facilitator, FOCUS90 is a personalised consultation. Each member of the couple completes a questionnaire, either online or at an initial meeting with a facilitator.
The Relationships Alliance believes that strong and stable personal and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.

Relationship health is an essential part of the UK’s economic recovery – relationship breakdown will cost the UK £46 billion this year alone, an unsustainable figure.

Good quality personal and social relationships are central to our health and well-being.

The quality of people’s relationships is an important ‘social asset’, yet one that is often ignored or undermined by public policy.

have we shown that the skills and processes we teach are in fact responsible for the success of the intervention?” [Wadsworth and Markman, 2012]. Such statements suggest that the world of relationship education is at something of a crossroads.

Policy implications/ recommendations

• There is limited, but growing, evidence of the effectiveness of relationship education programmes generally, while research on their suitability for vulnerable groups at present less conclusive;

• Relationship education programmes represent a promising approach to improving relationship quality and increasing rates of family stability but one which would benefit from a more robust evidence base;

• To this end, organisations providing relationship education programmes in the UK need to do more to put effective evaluation processes in place.

• The evidence from relationship education programmes could help shape approaches to relationship education in young people as part of sex and relationships education.

References


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This briefing was produced by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships on behalf of the Relationships Alliance. The Relationships Alliance, a consortium comprising of Relate, Marriage Care, One Plus One and the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, exists to ensure that good quality personal and social relationships are more widely acknowledged as central to our health and wellbeing.