Marriage Education Curriculum Assessment Guide[1]

As representatives of organizations planning to provide marriage education services in the community, you have many critical decisions to make before offering programs or adjusting existing services. One of the most important decisions is the choice of curriculum. There is a variety of marriage education curricula designed to educate different types of audiences or designed for specific delivery contexts or approaches. The goal of the Marriage Education Curriculum Assessment Guide is to help you select a curriculum that is most appropriate for the couples and individuals you will be serving.

The process of completing the Curriculum Assessment Guide can aid you to effectively review and compare marriage education materials. The Guide offers a practical and easy-to-use review and assessment process. It is a tool that will help you identify the marriage education program that includes methods and topics most suitable for your project. It also may be useful for service providers considering the option of developing a curriculum of their own. Creating a comprehensive or specialized marriage education curriculum is a time-consuming and challenging undertaking. Before beginning this endeavor you are advised to thoroughly examine the available curricula, as well as the research base on effective marriage education programs. This knowledge will help you include subject matter on couple relationships that research has shown to be effective in supporting healthy marriages and relationships. A thorough review of the research, available methods and approaches to marriage education will help ensure your decision is fully informed.

For those organizations providing marriage education services under the support of the Administration for Children and Families' Healthy Marriage Initiative, it is especially critical to make an informed curriculum choice. The curriculum selected should clearly offer participants who have already chosen to marry or who are interested in learning about marriage, the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage. It is also important to note that many ACF funded projects must provide a minimum of eight hours of instruction delivered over time or delivered in accordance with guidelines of the curriculum itself. If your organization provides marriage education under a grant funded by ACF please refer to the grant announcement and consult your program officer for specific requirements concerning content or instructional hours. In addition projects funded by ACF may not choose a curriculum that includes explicitly religious content.

Selecting a Curriculum

Selecting the most appropriate curriculum for your audience can be challenging. Some questions to consider when choosing the best curriculum for your audience include:
- What topics are most important to cover according to research?
- What other topics are important to participants?

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[1] DRAFT for informational purposes only. Developed by ACF Marriage Education Curriculum Committee: Josephine Hauer, Larry McDowell, Barbara Andrews, Lewissa Swanson, Pam Marr and Bridget Minor in consultation with Bill Coffin. Please send comments to: bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov

- Does the curriculum encourage active participation and focus on acquiring practical knowledge and skills?
- Is the curriculum likely to increase the knowledge and skills needed to support a healthy marriage?
- Is the curriculum likely to enhance participants' understanding of the benefits of marriage?
- Is the curriculum likely to enhance participants' understanding of the role of commitment in marriage?
- Does the curriculum address the particular needs or special circumstances of participants including the presentation of information in a culturally appropriate manner?
- Is the curriculum appropriate for the setting (i.e. prisons, rural communities, retreats, home-based, etc.)?
- What is the full cost of being appropriately trained in the curriculum, including initial and ongoing training, the cost of equipment, workbooks or other supplemental materials? Are the materials reproducible?

As you examine marriage education program materials, you will find a wide range of approaches, topics, activities and emphases. Some topics, such as communication, problem-solving and conflict management, are included in most curricula, while others do not appear as consistently. Consider several factors when thinking about subject matter that is essential to teaching the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage or relationship. To some extent, your decision will depend upon the particular needs and concerns of the participants you are serving. Often these concerns are based on the stage of a couple's relationship (e.g., dating, engaged, cohabiting, newly married, married, etc.), an individual's age, cultural background or other special circumstances. Although the characteristics and needs of participants vary, it is important to ensure that the curriculum includes content is linked to a healthy marriage namely, communication, conflict resolution and commitment.[2]

Using the Marriage Education Assessment Guide

Using the Marriage Education Curriculum Assessment Guide will help you systematically analyze a curriculum or compare curricula. Through a systematic examination of content you will identify the specific topics included in the curriculum's materials and identify how each is communicated to the audience. Completing the checklists helps you to indicate the range of topics and skill-building activities. Using the Guide will help to ensure that your review has been comprehensive and that you are well prepared to select the marriage education curriculum that includes topics critical to the needs of your audience, delivery context and program goals.

For the purposes of the assessment, topics are arranged under Minimum Required Content, Advised Content and Optional Content lists. ACF funded programs must include topics on the role of commitment, communication and conflict resolution. It is also important to teach about the benefits of marriage and the role of beliefs and values in a healthy marriage. The wide-range of Advised Content is comprised of priority topics associated with best practices of effective research-based marriage education

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[2]Adler-Baeder F, Higginbotham B, Lamke L. Putting Empirical knowledge to Work: Linking Research and Programming on Marital Quality in *Family Relations*, 2004, 53:5, 537-546.

programs. These topics are combined uniquely in different curricula. Optional Content denotes topics which are important to achieving the learning goals of marriage and relationship education for a particular type of audience or within a specific context. These are supplemental topics that enhance or contextualize the Required and Advised Content.

There is a wide variety of marriage education programs and most incorporate one or more of the following components: awareness, feedback, cognitive change and skills training. There is considerable evidence that skill-based relationship education helps couples acquire and maintain behaviors that promote positive communication and reduce conflict. Research on participants' experiences consistently points to communication skills training as the most helpful aspect of marriage education.[3] This training uses a variety of techniques including lectures, learning activities, demonstrations and the opportunity to practice skills and receive feedback. Adults often learn best when they are active participants in the learning process, making concrete applications of knowledge through practice.

In the article "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," researchers concluded that, "regardless of the content of marriage education offerings, decisions need to be made about how the content is presented and learned . . . Most marriage education programs that we know of include a variety of methods tailored to diverse learning styles, such as didactic presentation of information, showing examples (e.g., video), interactive discussion and role-playing. The choice of methods requires careful and empirically informed tailoring."[4] While many programs teach behaviorally based skills, they also implicitly or explicitly promote qualities such as, respect and responsibility, and explore common themes such as commitment or resiliency.

Additional Resources

As you select a curriculum and carry out your important work, there are several other resources that you may find useful. For more information visit:

- The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Healthy Marriage Initiative website at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage

- The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center at http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/

- See http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/oro for a list of ACF regional office contacts or contact Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education at ACF: bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov.

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[3] Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller. A Review of Empirically Supported Marital Enrichment Programs in *Family Relations,* 2004, 53:5, 528-536
[4] Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty & Willoughby. A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education in *Family Relations,* 2004, 53:5, 547-558.

Marriage Education Curriculum Assessment Guide

1. Name of curriculum: _____

2. Identify the learning goals for participants as stated in the curriculum

    a) _____

    b) _____

    c) _____

3. Identify the audience you will be serving. Check more than one if applicable.

____	Youth (high school)	____	African-American
____	Single adults	____	Asian or Pacific Islander
____	Couples (dating, engaged, cohabiting)	____	Caucasian, European American
____	Couples (married, remarried)	____	Hispanic, Latino
____	Couples (distressed, at risk, divorcing)	____	Mixed race, bi-racial
____	Low-income singles or couples	____	Military
____	Other - list (example, low-literacy, adoptive)	____	Native Americans
		____	Refugee, Immigrant

4. Number of sessions required or recommended in curriculum: _____ Hours per session recommended in curriculum : _____
   Total hours: _____

   (REMINDER: For many ACF funded projects, it is required that participants experience a minimum of eight hours of instruction delivered over time, or that program hours be aligned with the recommended duration based on the guidelines of the curriculum itself.)

5. Number of participants per session recommended in curriculum: _____

6. Estimated preparation time by instructor per session suggested by curriculum: _____

7. Briefly describe the recommended qualifications of instructors:

8. Special training in the curriculum for presenters is:

    a) not required (teach "out of the box" curriculum)   b) recommended but not required   c) required

9. What materials, instructional methods and participant learning activities are included in the curriculum?
   (Check all that apply):

Materials	Instructional Methods	Learning Activities
___ Facilitator guide or workbook	___ Lecture or similar presentation (by facilitator or co-facilitators)	___ Communication or conflict resolution skills practice
___ Participant workbook	___ Guided discussion (between partners, within groups, whole group)	___ Role play or other creative, musical or artistic activity
___ Take-home resources or homework	___ Guest speakers on special topics	___ Written exercise (in session or for homework)
___ Additional document, book or text	___ Reading of text	___ Journal entry
___ Audio Visual aids (Computer, DVD, CD, VCR, overhead projector, TV)	___ Coaching or demonstration of skills by instructor, peer or mentor couple	___ Survey, quiz or relationship assessment inventory
___ Internet or web-based resource(s) including podcast, webcast	___ Use of pictorials for low-literacy groups	___ Situational analysis of case study, couple interaction, role play
___ Flipchart or posters	___ Use of AV to present educational content (video, DVD, CD, audiotape)	___ Other individual exercise(s)
___ Other material(s) - list (prop, supplies, learning tools, resource, etc.):	___ Other instructional method(s) – list:	___ Other couple or group interactive exercise(s) – list:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

10. Is the curriculum available in other languages?   If so, which one(s)?

11. Are supportive materials (video, DVD, CD, etc.) available in other languages?   If so, which one(s)?

12. Describe any special features or other noteworthy aspects of this curriculum that are important to your project:

_____

_____

_____

Instructions

Review the curricular materials and identify the range of topics and skills associated with each curricular resource (facilitator's guide, participant's workbook, other documents or media)

Assess Info
Put a checkmark (✓) in the "Info" column next to each topic that is presented or addressed at least once in the curriculum. Remember topics and associated content may represent subject matter that is represented explicitly as well as implicitly in the skill-building activities and information of each lesson, session or module.

Assess Skills or Activities
Put a checkmark (✓) in the "Skills or Activities" column when you find a skill-building exercise or activity that enhances knowledge or understanding of that particular topic. Skill exercises and activities encourage participants to "learn by doing or discussing" and serve to enhance knowledge, values, self-awareness or relationship skills. These practices require interaction or dynamic participation by individuals, among couples or within groups. When "Skills or Activities" are clearly associated with information on a specific topic, place a checkmark in both columns. Examples of skill exercises and activities are:

- Practicing communication skill exercises (examples: structured dialogs, guided conversations, listening/speaking skills practice, etc.)
- Discussing a case study and problem-solving strategies in pairs or groups
- Completing homework on steps to conflict reduction for couples
- Filling-out a self or couple-relationship assessment
- Participating in a role-play, game or other creative activity

Info	Skills or Activities	**Minimum Required Content**
		Commitment to healthy marriage (for current or future relationship) • Role of commitment, long-term vision on relationship qualities, dynamics • Perseverance and patience in relationship
		Communication • Listening and/or speaking skills, effective communication dynamics • Body language, non-verbal communication
		Conflict resolution • Dealing with issues, events, disagreements, quarrels and arguments • Speaking and listening skills to reduce verbal conflict, escalation
		Beliefs about marriage or family (cultural and/or faith-based) • Attitudes, ideas, values about marriage or family life related to couple relationship
		Benefits of marriage (for adults, children, community and society) • Impact on marital and social well-being; economic, education and health outcomes, social indicators, finances, crime rates, etc. • Role of marriage in society and culture(s), marriage as a social institution
		Qualities of healthy relationships and healthy marriages • Research based qualities, characteristics and aspects of healthy relationships and healthy marriages • Values, attitudes associated with long-term, low-conflict partnerships
		Total number of checks under each Minimum Required Content column
Info	Skills or Activities	**Advised Content**
		Anger management • Emotional regulation • Managing emotions/feelings • Recognizing, understanding and expressing feelings appropriately
		Caring & empathy, appreciation or soothing behaviors • Empathy skills (verbal and non-verbal), kindness, thoughtfulness • Emotional supportiveness
		Cohabitation • Issues, reasons for, disadvantages of living together before marriage • Research on cohabiting relationships

		Danger signs in relationships, recognizing unhealthy patterns
		• Risk factors for chronic conflict, negative interactions
		• Destructive, violent or controlling behavior patterns in couple communication or interaction
		Extended Family Relationships
		• Relationships with couples' parents, siblings and kin
		• Relationships with mother or father of a child other than the current relationship
		• Relationships with child's grandparent when mother or father is not the current relationship
		Financial Literacy
		• Basic money management skills (budgeting, banking, saving, planning, investing)
		• Attitudes, beliefs, practices of effective money management
		• Individual and/or couple financial responsibility
		• Negotiation or communication skills related to distribution and/or expenditure of financial resources
		Forgiveness
		• Factors to consider in making a decision to forgive, impact of forgiveness on relationships
		• Forgiveness versus fairness, justice and forgetting
		• Forgiveness behaviors (taking responsibility, apologies, letting go)
		Gender roles, issues, male-female differences
		• Beliefs & behaviors about man or womanhood
		• Gender-based role expectations
		Goals (personal, couple and/or family)
		• Goal-setting, planning for the future
		• Hopes and dreams
		Infidelity/fidelity
		• Trust or commitment related to emotional, financial and sexual fidelity
		• Fidelity and social boundaries
		Knowledge of partner
		• Partner-awareness activities
		• Identify partner strengths, qualities and values
		Knowledge of self, personality
		• Self-awareness activities, self-management skills
		• Identify personality strengths, qualities and values
		Problem-solving
		• Identifying problems, brainstorming, exploring options
		• Building consensus and exploring solutions

		Remarriage, stepfamily issues • Healing from loss (examples: death of spouse, divorce) • Step-parenting or co-parenting responsibilities, complex in-law relationships • Issues with other parent of partner's child, multiple-partner fertility impact on relationship
		Relationship assessment • Completion of an informal assessment process or standardized assessment tool
		Relationship choices (dating, mate selection) • Qualities of a good mate, process of getting to know another person • Understanding risk factors and danger signs
		Relationship history, past relationships • Dating, cohabitation, non-marital parenting • Previous relationship's impact on partner or children
		Relationship phases and stages • Stages or phases of love, couple bonding, marriage, family cycle • Processes of engagement/disengagement
		Roles and responsibilities in couple relationships • Manage basic household, family and relationship tasks • Boundaries, duties
		Sexual intimacy • Role of sex in marriage, intimacy, impact on health • Communication about sexual desires, habits of couple • Bio-chemistry, social-emotional dynamics of sex • Abstinence until marriage, delayed sexual intimacy, pregnancy and STD prevention
		Shared activities, spending time together as a couple • Planning and implementing couple activities • Nurturing fun, friendship
		Social supports • Using or developing network systems including friends, kin, neighborhood and faith community that support the couple or marriage by providing financial or other backing and assistance (e.g., child care, socio-emotional, cultural)
		Stressors, change, crisis • Common marital/relationship stressors such as, schedule changes, relocation, job or employment issues • Special family circumstance such as, foster parenting, children in foster care, adoption • Caretaking of chronically ill family member, aging parent and/or a special needs child • Strategies for handling internal/intrapersonal and interpersonal distress

Info	Skills or Activities	
		Teamwork, couple identity • Collaboration and cooperation as a couple • Couple unity --- the "us" or "we" as a couple
		Trust & trustworthiness • Reliable, consistent behavior in relationships • Rebuilding trust after infidelity or other breach of trust
		Values • Beliefs, principles, morals, ethics • Ideals that influence commitment, marriage, behavior in personal relationships, family or kin dynamics and/or social norms
		Total number of checks under each Advised Content column
Info	Skills or Activities	**Optional Content**
		Abstinence • Delaying sexual activity until marriage
		Addictions/substance abuse • Impact of addictions/substance abuse on relationship/marriage (examples: alcoholism, substance abuse, gambling addiction, eating disorders, co-dependence or other addictions) • Awareness of and referral to treatment and recovery resources
		Adoption, foster care • Deciding to adopt a child or provide foster care • Impact of adopting a child or providing foster care (couple relationship/family dynamics)
		Child support • Importance of providing emotional and financial support to non-residential children • Understanding the child support enforcement system • Strategies for healthy relationship between the residential and non-residential parent
		Criminal behavior/Criminal justice system • Experience with the criminal justice system • Impact of criminal behavior or incarceration on relationships • Maintaining relationships during and after incarceration
		Death and dying • Negotiating and dealing with medical aspects of death and dying • Relationships and life closure issues • Memorial and burial arrangements, estate planning and disbursement

		Employment • Making decisions about employment • Seeking employment, enhancing employability skills and maintaining employment Impact of employment or lack of employment on couple/family dynamics
		ESL, assimilation • Overcoming language/cultural barriers to enhance couple and family communication or stability • Resettlement issues impact on couple and family relationships
		Health, illness, safety • Health and safety behaviors (examples: preventive health care, immunizations, safety belts; bicycle helmets; smoke/carbon monoxide detectors) • Illness (examples: short-term, chronic, and/or terminal illness, surgeries) • Accidental injuries, Awareness of referrals for health and safety information
		Housing • Locating stable and safe housing • Financial aspects of housing (renting, buying a house)
		Mental health, mental illness • Mental illness, such as: bi-polar, depression, anxiety, post-partum depression, ADHD • Awareness of referral resources for mental health services
		Parenting, co-parenting (fatherhood, motherhood) • Impact of becoming and/or being a parent on the relationship/marriage • Parent involvement and parenting strategies – discipline plans, parenting responsibilities • Impact of parent, couple relationship on well-being of children
		Pregnancy, Prenatal, Post-Natal • Impact of pregnancy on couple relationship and family dynamics • Prenatal healthy care • Preparing for the birth of a child • Infant development and care • Impact of infant on couple relationship and family dynamics
		TANF services • Understanding the child support enforcement system • Impact of being a TANF recipient on couple/family dynamics • Preparing to discontinue TANF supports
		Total number of checks under each Optional Content column

Curriculum Summary

In summarizing the number of topics and skills/activities found in the curriculum consider the following questions:

1. Does the curriculum contain all of the Minimum Required Content topics?

2. Do the range of topics, instructional methods and learning activities in the curriculum meet the needs of the participants?

Content Type	No. of chart topics	Total "Info" topics	Total "Skills or Activities" topics
Minimum Required Content	6		
Advised Content	26		
Optional Content	14		
Total	46		

Preparation and Implementation (Optional)

If instructor training or certification is required, consider the following:

1. Is training offered at a time and location convenient to your program implementation plan?

    a. Locations where training will take place:

    b. Possible or actual dates for instructor training:

2. What are the estimated costs associated with preparation and implementation?

    a. What are the estimated **one-time costs** associated with instructor training or certification (include registration, materials fees and travel)?

    b. In order to implement the curriculum, what equipment or materials need to be purchased?

    c. What are the estimated costs *per participant* for participation (e.g., workbooks, scoring services, etc.)?