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Enhancing Knowledge and Agreement Among Ethnically and Economically Diverse Couples in Stepfamilies with the Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey Program

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Abstract: Because of unique challenges associated with stepfamily living, couples in stepfamilies have distinct educational needs. Smart Steps is an innovative program that teaches relational knowledge and skills for couples and children in stepfamilies. Results from 195 ethnically and economically diverse participants attending Smart Steps classes at 11 different sites suggest that Smart Steps is effective in enhancing knowledge and agreement on stepfamily issues such as finances, parenting, and co-parenting with ex-partners.

Introduction

Extension educators who provide marriage and relationship education programs are increasingly serving couples who have been previously married (Adler-Baeder, 2002). Census estimates indicate that approximately half of all marriages are remarriages for one or both partners (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Best practices for couple education should account for the developmental differences between couples in first marriages and those who have been previously married and/or who bring children from a prior relationship (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003).

Basing programs on general marital research to inform practice may result in educational experiences that are inadequate to meet the unique needs of remarrying couples (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Examples of common challenges in remarriage include negotiating parenting roles among step and biological parents, finances (i.e., receiving or sending money to an ex-partner), and decision making across households (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). These issues do not exist for couples entering first marriages without children and are the areas in which remarrying couples often experience the most stress and disagreement (Ganong &

Coleman, 2004).

Program Description

Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey (Adler-Baeder, 2007) is a research-based marriage and family life education program developed originally through a collaboration between Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Stepfamily Association of America. It was further developed in connection with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and became available for distribution in 2002. With a family systems approach, the program provides a comprehensive educational base that recognizes the complexities and the interdependent nature of relationships within stepfamilies.

Smart Steps is a 12-hour program that is designed to be offered as a series of 6 two-hour sessions for parents and youth ages 6-17 living in stepfamilies. Separate classes for adults and children are held concurrently, ending with a joint family activity. The sessions focus on building couple and family strengths while addressing the unique needs and issues that face couples in stepfamilies. Topics include: communication, stepparenting strategies, co-parenting strategies, stress management, and financial management. Lessons are interactive and involve media, lecture, discussion, and activities. Additional information about the curriculum is accessible from the National Stepfamily Resource Center <<http://www.stepfamilies.info/>>.

Program Evaluation

Between February and May 2007, Smart Steps classes were offered at 11 different sites in northern Utah. Each of the sites handled incentives slightly differently, but all offered dinner and small completion awards. A total of 195 adults in committed relationships attended (52% female, 48% male). Attendance was voluntary, and over 80% of participants attended at least four of the sessions.

Sixty-eight percent of participants were in a remarriage, and 32% were in an unmarried relationship. Fifty-eight percent of participants identified themselves as Caucasian and 38% as Hispanic/Latino. Demographics did not differ by ethnicity. The average age was 36, with a range of 21 to 55. Fifty-four percent had 12 years of education or less. The majority was low-resource. Sixty-four percent made less than \$30,000 annually, and 59% had children who received free or reduced school lunches. 248 children between the ages of 5-17 attended with their parents.

What Did Participants Learn?

At the end of each lesson, participants completed a retrospective pre-post questionnaire, which captured their level of knowledge before and after attending the class (Davis, 2003). Due to the dependent nature of the data, analyses for men and women were conducted separately.

Using single item indicators, male and female participants reported significant ($p < .01$) increases in all of the following knowledge areas:

- Awareness of stepfamily financial issues
- Knowledge of stepparents' legal status
- Knowledge of child/adolescent development

- Understanding of parenting styles
- Awareness of stepparenting strategies
- Understanding of healthy communication patterns
- Knowledge of strategies that "buffer" the negative effects of divorce
- Understanding of healthy co-parenting strategies
- Awareness of ways to handle stress

Does the Program Enhance Agreement on Relational Issues?

Participants answered various questions about their couple relationship prior to beginning the classes (T1), at the end of the classes (T2), and 1 month later, at the end of an optional booster session (T3). Those who completed T3 surveys (n = 75) did not differ significantly from those who did not by ethnicity gender, income, education, or age.

As illustrated in Figure 1, men and women generally reported increased agreement with their partner on key relational issues: handling finances, dealing with extended family/relatives, dealing with ex-spouses/partners, and parenting (1 = Always Disagree to 5 = Always Agree). For men, the changes emerged at Time 2 for parenting issues and Time 3 for family and ex-spouse (Table 1). Women reported significant improvements across time in all areas except dealing with ex-spouses.

Figure 1.
Mean Scores of Males' and Females' Reports of Agreement on Relational Issues

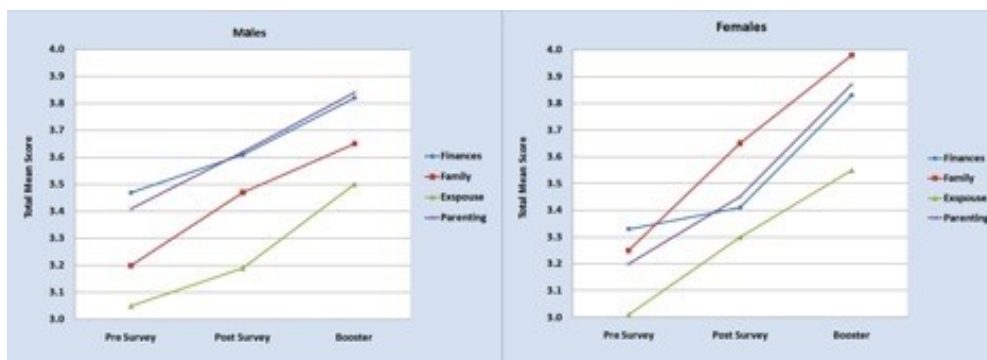


Table 1.
Paired-Sample t-tests for Agreement on Relational Issues

		Males	Females
Finances			
	Time 1 to Time 2		
	Time 2 to Time 3		-2.504*
	Time 1 to Time 3		-1.924 [†]
Family			
	Time 1 to Time 2		-3.111**
	Time 2 to Time 3		
	Time 1 to Time 3	-1.880 [†]	-3.347**
Ex-spouse			
	Time 1 to Time 2		
	Time 2 to Time 3		
	Time 1 to Time 3	-1.944 [†]	
Parenting			
	Time 1 to Time 2	-1.824 [†]	-2.119*
	Time 2 to Time 3		
	Time 1 to Time 3		-2.074*
[†] p < .07; *p < .05; **p < .01			

Conclusion

Although a variety of stepfamily life education programs are in circulation, there have been virtually no published studies of program effectiveness (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Results from the evaluation presented here are promising and suggest that Smart Steps enhances participants' knowledge and agreement on relational issues. The data also suggest that positive program effects are sustained and actually continue on the desired trajectory one month following the in-class sessions, particularly for women.

Further work with larger samples can illuminate whether men's experiences differ slightly due to receptiveness to the program or simply due to methodological issues such as smaller sample size and decreased power in analyses. The ethnic and low-resource demographics of this sample help to fill another gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of relationship education for ethnically and economically diverse stepfamilies. The study of stepfamily education reported here is, to our knowledge, the first one that includes low-income Hispanic stepfamilies, and there were no differences in outcomes due to ethnicity. Additional follow-up evaluations are needed to identify the extent to which program effects are sustained over longer periods of time and if or how long-term effects vary by demographic characteristics.

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