

Within *Our* Reach TM

Overview of Curriculum

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August 2006

Within *Our* Reach™

Overview of *Within Our Reach*

Within Our Reach is a new curriculum from PREP designed to help low-income *couples* achieve their goals in marriage, family, and relationships. The curriculum is designed to build on the existing strengths of couples and add critical life and relationship skills that will help participants create safer, more stable couple relationships, and by extension, better environments for their children. (Note: *Within My Reach* is a similar, new curriculum from PREP designed for individuals, not couples. *Within **Our** Reach* is the curriculum for couples.)

Various studies demonstrate that the aspirations for marriage among those who are economically disadvantaged are as high or higher than others, the research is also clear that those at the lower end of the economic scale have a greater difficulty becoming and remaining married. *Within Our Reach* was developed with a careful eye on the implications of research on fragile families and low income couples. This literature informs *Within Our Reach* by identifying issues that place low-income couples at higher risk for relationship difficulties as well as significant barriers to marriage and marital success.

Though *Within Our Reach* has PREP (the *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program*) as its foundation, it is a completely new curriculum. Empirically, it therefore represents an integration of current research on fragile families with tried and the empirically-tested materials from PREP.

Through extensive contact, interviews, and piloting in ethnically and financially diverse communities, the *Within Our Reach* team has worked to make the curriculum as accessible and practical as possible for participants from a variety of communities. A great deal of feedback has been (and continues to be) elicited from low income families as well as those who work extensively with them. Along with understandings gained by research, these practical sources of input are part of a process of ongoing development and refinement make for a curriculum that is relevant, sensitive, and flexible to the needs of the couples it is designed to serve.

Within Our Reach is similar to PREP in that it is a cognitive-behavioral curriculum, where the focus is on helping couples identify thoughts and behaviors that are associated with likelihood of success in marriage. As such, *Within Our Reach* has a strong skill base, rooted in research on how couples communicate and handle conflict. Like PREP, *Within Our Reach* includes a core focus on the types of safety (physical, emotional, commitment, and contextual) that characterize stable and satisfying marriages that provide the best foundation in life for adults and children.

This innovative curriculum also includes several new emphases. On the broadest level, it is a strengths-based approach; a central aim of *Within Our Reach* is to help partners identify and overcome barriers to meeting the goals that they have by drawing on the positive qualities they share. Further, there is a primary focus on helping participants discover new ways to cope with the specific stressors of economic strain, including the stress that is common among low-income families. Personal responsibility and self-knowledge are emphasized as well as the classic PREP

theme of focusing on what you can change rather than what you have less control over. New Like with PREP, there is an emphasis is on commitment, expectations, and the maintenance of a strong and positive relationship (such as through friendship, fun, and spiritual connection). However, *Within Our Reach* (which is a longer curriculum) contains substantial new units designed to foster a greater understanding among partners of each other's pasts, a focus on developing a vision and roadmap for the future, and the importance of developing or strengthening community connection and involvement.

The format for the presentation of *Within Our Reach* is structured, yet flexible and couple-centered. Compared to PREP, there is a greatly increased emphasis on engaging activities in addition to lessons and skills practice in order to better support multiple learning styles, increase connections among group members, and maintain attention and pacing. Hence, the curriculum includes many types of training: engaging activities, short lectures, couple discussions, self-assessments, and skill practice time. Further, couples take an active part in generating many of the themes that are discussed and examined using the broad themes of the curriculum.

Facilitators receive detailed, easy-to-follow written materials, high-quality videos, and a toolkit of engaging training strategies. The supporting materials were designed to provide facilitators with clear guidelines regarding core concepts and material, and the flexibility to meet the needs of diverse populations and settings.

Themes of *Within Our Reach*

Within Our Reach is designed so that the core elements of creating safety (e.g., skills for dealing with conflict, stress management) and building connections (fun and friendship, couple identity) come early in the curriculum, laying the foundation for further work on self-awareness, commitment, forgiveness, learning new ways to cope with stress and build community connection, and deepening positive connections through strengthening couple identity and sexuality, as well as building teamwork around broader contextual issues.

All of the core themes of PREP are contained in Within Our Reach, along with a number of important new themes that are strongly emphasized. Themes include:

- Emotional safety, physical safety, commitment safety and security
- Friendship and fun
- Communication
- Conflict and Communication Danger Signs, and effects of conflict on children
- More extensive work on Negative Interpretations and Partner Appreciation
- Stress: effects, sources, and how to cope and support one another/relaxation skills training
- Deeper themes that affect relationships: acceptance, respect, commitment, etc.
- Personal and family backgrounds, including personality differences (with personality assessment) and childhood experiences that affect the couple relationship
- Vision and future planning: couples build roadmap for the path ahead.
- Acceptance and forgiveness
- Love Styles: with strong emphasis on sensuality, sexuality, physical connection

- Community connection, giving, and support
- Partner Support (emotional connection and support behaviors) & Contentment
- Commitment: decisions and priorities; including strategies for strengthening clarity of commitment
- Co-parenting: coping with children from prior relationships
- Money management as a couple

Curriculum Elements

The teaching components of *Within Our Reach* have been carefully chosen to keep the pace moving, keep interest high, build a strong sense of personal relevance and meaning, and reinforce the core content of the curriculum. Elements include:

- Group activities and discussions
- Core lessons to present content, including small video segments to emphasize themes
- Weekly group check in on use of new skills and concepts
- Couple activities, discussions, and skills practice

Curriculum Format

As with PREP, *Within Our Reach* is built with flexibility in mind. Outside of the presentation of the initial units, the order of units and number of units can be varied to suit the site employing the curriculum (there would be less flexibility for sites participating in the large, federal research project called Supporting Healthy Marriage). The entire, fullest use of the curriculum could take around 36 hours. In contrast, PREP has traditionally been used in a 12 hour format. The time difference is accounted for by both additional content (for example, emphasis on community) and additional curriculum elements (for example, group activities). Sites do not have to use all of what is available and can customize the use of units to their use and the best interests of their clients.

For sites employing the fullest versions of *Within Our Reach*, the most probable format that will be feasible in the lives of the couples (and families) would be something like this:

- An initial workshop day to cover foundational units
- Ongoing, weekly meeting to go through the other units
- Occasional workshop days on special topics such as money management

In training and ongoing technical assistance, the PREP team will advise site personnel on how to manage the format issues in such a way that sites can effectively cope with couples missing sessions as well as the need to be able to start new couples in the process without substantial delay in time.

Staffing *Within Our Reach* for SHM

The *Within Our Reach* curriculum involves two very important kinds of people in the lives of participating couples: Instructors and Family Support Coordinators.

Instructors: A core philosophy of this marriage education model is that *the messenger matters!* It has been the history of PREP to rely on the local instructor to be able to use the curriculum flexibly and sensitively to meet the needs of the couples served. This is all the more true with *Within Our Reach*. The many small group activities and discussion points provide rich opportunities for the couples in the group to put their imprint on the workshops. The best instructors will be those who know their audience well and who the couples trust. That does not always mean that the instructor has to be of a similar background and experience in life as the couples participating, but it a very potent combination to have a skilled instructor who really cares, and who is also as much like the participants as possible. Great instructors are people who are engaging and at ease with groups, they are warm, genuine and have a good sense of humor. Particular academic or professional credentials are of secondary importance to having people capable of truly connecting with participants and delivering the material well.

It would also be ideal, though not always possible, to have male-female instructor teams. Having a male presenter is particularly important in order for men to feel engaged with the classes. Experience suggests that engaging men in marriage education programs is of fundamental importance. After all, without the men, you cannot work with couples.

Family Support Coordinators: Each couple who participates in the SHM project will have a Family Support Coordinator (FSC). As anyone who has been around the preventive education field knows, the Achilles heel of marriage education is that what is learned in a class may very well stay in the class—or at least, very much of it. Good intentions, good attention, good skills, and great ideas can only yield benefit to the degree that they are worked into the actual lives of the participants. The FSC role is unique in that they will form a relationship with the couple that extends the reach of the material taught in *Within Our Reach* more deeply into the day-to-day lives of the couples. The FSC will serve as coach, mentor, cheerleader, and advocate to the couple over the course of the training. Among various activities, their role is to coach the couples in their use of skills outside of the workshops, as issues arise, and to weave the couple into a supportive, healthy community of couples.

FSC staff will receive training in the basic components of *Within Our Reach* and should be familiar with resources and social groups in the broader community. In a relationship that extends beyond mere case management, the FSC person provides a healthy, supportive relationship to each participating couple, linking them to the broader community of couples in the Supporting Healthy Marriage program. The *Within Our Reach* training and technical assistance will train the FSCs in using the most essential skills taught in the curriculum in their ongoing work with the couples.

Materials for Using the *Within Our Reach* Curriculum

There are a variety of materials for using *Within Our Reach*. They include:

- Instructor manual

- Participant materials
 - Manual for core content
 - Manuals for ancillary content such as about money management
 - Personality assessment tools
 - Relaxation training audio CD
- Video DVD of couple interaction sequences
- Video DVD of interview segments of key themes
- Overhead transparencies in PowerPoint format

How Does *Within Our Reach* Differ from Standard PREP?

Standard PREP

The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is a research-based approach to teaching couples (premarital or marital) how to communicate effectively, work as a team to solve problems, manage conflicts without damaging closeness, and preserve and enhance commitment and friendship. The PREP Approach is based on over 30 years of research in the field of marital health and success, with much of the specific research conducted at the University of Denver and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

PREP is empirically informed, meaning that, to the extent possible, the strategies of PREP are based on the growing body of research on marital and family health. PREP is also empirically tested. PREP has been studied intensively, including long-term outcome studies by six different research teams in four different countries. Further, the curriculum is regularly refined based on the latest research. In fact, WOR can be seen as the most significant refinement of PREP based on new research and pilot testing in decades.

PREP is a cognitive-behavioral curriculum, meaning the focus is on helping couples identify thoughts and behaviors that are associated with likelihood of success in marriage. As such, PREP has a strong skill base, rooted in research on how couples communicate and handle conflict, with additional strong emphases in areas such as commitment, expectations, and the maintenance of a strong positive bond in areas such as friendship, fun, and spiritual connection.

Within Our Reach

The following points summarize the ways in which WOR has been built and some of the major distinctives from PREP. The following emphasizes the different or new elements of WOR. WOR and PREP share the same cognitive-behavioral tradition, skill emphasis, and core focus on types of safety that characterize solid and satisfying marriages.

WOR differs from PREP in several important ways briefly identified here: the range of themes and concepts, specific emphasis on the needs of those experiencing economic disadvantages, and style of instruction.

Core Emphases

- Increased emphasis on strengths
 - Goal is to address many vulnerabilities, but in context of these as barriers to aspirations, not immutable risks.
- Flow of sessions will promote *participants defining major themes*, with structure of schema based on research, piloting, and experience with couples applied secondarily.

- Goal is to have participants drive their issues and perceptions into the flow, but have the structure of what is taught already well aligned with the dominant themes that will be raised.
- We will supply the garage and the tools; they can drive their issues into it and work on their stuff.
- Facilitate sense of curriculum being tuned to their issues—which it will be and process will make this very apparent by the way things are introduced.
- Great emphasis on what the individual thinks, does, reacts to
 - Emphasis on personal responsibility
 - More emphasis on controlling one's own reactions and behavior, regardless of partner response and actions
- Dominant themes that summarize all major points being taught:
 - Decide, don't slide. (Make decisions together and follow through rather than letting major things come about by sliding into them.)
 - Do *your* part. (The individual can be most effective when focused on what he or she can do to improve and strengthen things rather than on wanting partner to change.)
 - Make it safe at home. (Safety thinking flows throughout the curriculum, founded on our model of 1) physical safety, 2) emotional safety, 3) commitment safety and security, and 4) community safety and connection. So, handling conflict well, taking Time Outs, talking without fighting, and partner support are all examples of building core foundations of safety for a great marriage.)

Modifications from Existing PREP Model

- Process and Flow
 - Lecture content from basic PREP reduced and lectures broken up in much smaller pieces, interspersed with activities, exercises for couples, and skills practice
 - Smaller segments of content in lessons with more activities in between.
 - Practice skill time: more and with more variations
 - Activities: Many more group and couple activities that teach principles and key themes: high energy and meaningful.
 - Expand total time of contact and training.
 - Add in regular self-assessment pieces that are driven toward either feedback about progress or understanding that builds connection. Many sessions will have this aspect as well.
 - More time built into the format for skills practice and exercises to allow for more practice skills of skills within program in case there is less opportunity because of time pressures for couples outside of the program.
 - Some emphasis on homework, but measured to what is reasonable and what a particular site is able to do in this way with its clients.
 - Global themes and specific, customized themes:

- Some core content areas dealt with directly for all participants (e.g., communication and conflict management; expectations clarification; commitment).
- Some important themes like dealing as a team with racism or joblessness or depression will not be dealt with as major content themes for all participants, but will be introduced as grist for the processing mill (skills practice and working with the couples to strengthen their ability to work together).
- Instructor facilitation (making it easier and more fun to teach)
 - More user-friendly formatting
 - Scripts provided for facilitators (as in Within My Reach)
 - More activities in addition to lecture and skill practice designed to engage and teach core themes and competencies
 - More movement between types of teaching methods, per the categories listed next
 - New videos with more content, including skill based video and also video designed to help focus teaching of concepts and focus discussions

Unit Structure (Generic)

15 Minutes: Checking In

Opening group process of checking in and talking about how the last week has gone. A focus would be what people have been trying or doing based on what they learned last time. Key would be if we could make this a group activity that would be FUN but also instill some sense of accountability in terms of doing and trying things based on what people are learning.

This opening part will be used by instructor to pull together a review of the core ideas around the theme of the last lesson.

5 Minutes: Overview

Thumbnail sketch: Enough to get the ideas flowing and juices going, but not the main lesson of materials being taught.

For example, on social support: People could be first asked to think about all the kinds of people in life that are helpful to others, and vice versa (where they are helpful to others as well). They could brainstorm about types of helpers and supporters in life. Then, a schematic of different types of supports and people could be put up briefly.

25 Minutes: Group Activity

Group activities (small groups or one large, but NOT couple level for this): This activity would engage the participants in the theme of this lesson. The activity could be of variety of sorts, with the specific model chosen for a specific lesson being based on the needs of that lesson. [This could be discussions, drawing-led discussions, group card/content driven activities, etc.]

For example, on social support: There could be small groups discussing how tends to be supportive of their relationships and who does not. How does it help when a couple has others supporting them? What kinds of supports are most powerful and helpful?

20 Minutes: Lesson

Instructor presents core teaching related to the themes of the lesson, using didactic, video, and other tools. This lesson includes processing what small groups came up with in the activity time.

35 Minutes: Couple Activity and Planning

Couple focuses on theme of lesson in guided activity or skills practice (depending on what the theme is and best use of their time). Key is for couple to start learning a new skill or develop a plan of action on the theme of the lesson.

For example, couples could work through materials helping them to think and share about their perceptions of supportive folks in their lives, and what they can do differently as a couple to enhance their support network. For topics like that, emphasis would be on specific, doable,

action plan that couple leaves session with and for which there would be follow up in the program structure.

10 Minutes: Wrapping Up

Group comes together to share any further thoughts and encouraging ideas or words. Instructor gives couples motivational charge as they leave.

References Related to PREP and Research by the PREP Team

An extensive list of references (by many different scholars) that informs our work can be found on our website: www.PREPinc.com
http://www.prepinc.com/main/docs/other_useful_refs.htm

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