

Marriage Education and Government Policy:  
Helping Couples Who Choose Marriage Achieve Success

Scott M. Stanley

Howard J. Markman

*University of Denver*

Natalie H. Jenkins

*PREP*

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## Marriage Education and Government Policy: Helping Couples Who Choose Marriage Achieve Success

*We know enough to act and we should  
take action to know more.<sup>1</sup>*

### ***The Goal***

The vast majority of ALL Americans desire happy, lasting marriages, whether rich or poor, male or female, and regardless of cultural background. There is ample evidence that individuals, as well as the society at large, benefit when those citizens who choose marriage for themselves are able to maintain healthy marriages. It is therefore a worthy goal, in both public and private sectors, to make this dream more attainable for more Americans.

### ***The Strategy***

One key element of a comprehensive government strategy to strengthen families is marriage and relationship education. Over the past 30 years, marital researchers have discovered that marital success is not a matter of luck nor is marital failure a matter of mystery. Using a growing knowledge base, *the best practices in marriage education are scientifically based, regularly refined based on ongoing scientific findings and field experience, and have demonstrated beneficial effects in accordance with scientific standards for dissemination.*

### ***Scientifically Tested***

Over the past three decades, scientifically based relationship education programs have demonstrated considerable promise. For example, our own program, The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), has been studied intensively, including long-term outcome studies by six different research teams in four different countries, and more than 25 years of ongoing research funded by branches of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). While the interpretation of outcome studies is very complex, and researchers can differ in interpretation of the data that exist, there is evidence of effectiveness in both specific studies and meta-analytic studies combining the results of many individual studies. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley (2001).

the following results have been obtained across a range of studies with a range of specific programs:

- Couples can learn to reduce patterns of negative interaction that are known risk factors for marital failure, adult depression, poor child outcomes, and work related problems. For example, couples who have deficits in how they handle conflict are more likely to fail and also more likely to have children with behavioral problems. Studies have shown that couples can be taught critical skills that are useful for handling common relationship conflicts (e.g., money, children, chores, and sex). The evidence that couples can learn to communicate less negatively and more positively is quite robust.<sup>2</sup>
- In several significant studies, there is evidence that couples can lower rates of premarital break-up and post marital divorce. For example, in an earlier study at the University of Denver, PREP couples had a 12% break up rate compared to control couples who had a 36% break up rate at the 5 year follow-up. In a study on a variation of PREP in Germany, 3% of the PREP couples had divorced at a 5-year follow-up compared to 16% of couples who received traditional premarital education. Not all studies on variations of PREP or other programs show these kinds of effects. However, in one of the most promising sets of findings based on a large random sample, those who received premarital education for their relationship exhibited lower levels of conflict in their marriages, higher levels of satisfaction, higher levels of commitment, and were less likely to divorce.<sup>3</sup>
- Couples can learn ways to maintain higher levels of relationship satisfaction and emotional support of each other as they work as a team both inside and outside the home

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<sup>2</sup> Various references cited at the end of this document pertain to these findings. The meta-analyses by Carroll & Doherty (2003) and Hawkins et al. (2008) shows these effects to be robust across many studies.

<sup>3</sup> See Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006 in references.

on their jobs, education, parenting, and so forth.

- In some studies, higher risk couples have shown the strongest effects, with benefits being less clear for low risk couples. This is a very complex area of research with ongoing work being conducted. However, there are many scientifically supported reasons to believe that the greatest benefits can be obtained for those in greatest need as long as appropriate services are provided.
- People with various backgrounds can be trained to be effective providers of these services. Therefore, government workers can reach couples in need with high cost efficiency. People such as social workers, clergy, lay leaders, therapists, and public health nurses have been successfully trained to deliver marriage and relationship education services. Using existing caregiving systems enables marriage education to be delivered by service providers who are known to the recipients and who understand the cultural and community context of their work.

It is important to note that the beneficial effects of the more empirically based approaches appear to last up to 5 years after the training for many, but not all, couples. Beyond that, the effects probably weaken over time; therefore it is important for couples who benefit from such material to periodically review it or to participate in booster classes.

### ***Relationship Education Can be Successfully Delivered to Low Income Couples and Individuals***

A number of the most important questions raised about relationship education is whether or not services can or should be applied to lower income couples and families. These are important questions directly related to the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our society. We briefly highlight three specific questions.

*Are Low Income Couples and Individuals Interested?* It has been noted that low income people have not traditionally participated in such relationship strengthening activities. We make the

point that has been made by others<sup>4</sup> that one should not infer interest where there is not equal access. Relationship education services have been less available to those who are most economically disadvantaged; where access has not existed, no knowledge is actually gained about interest. Further, large scale survey work consistently shows that those who are lowest in income and resources report both the highest interest in marriage and the highest levels of interest in marriage and relationship education services to help them in their goals.<sup>5</sup> It is our impression (anecdotal at present) that the current projects around the country that are most directly designed to reach disadvantaged couples and individuals are enjoying the greatest success in reaching those they seek to help.

*Are Such Services Effective for Low Income Couples and Individuals?* This is another important question for which knowledge is not ideally formed. Yet, the various large scale research projects and demonstration projects currently funded by federal and state governments will be providing a wealth of information. In other words, more definitive answers are on the way because of the current level of investment in such projects around the country. Existing research, however, suggests that there is every reason to believe that effects will turn out to be as good for low income couples and individuals as they are for anyone else.<sup>6</sup> Accumulating knowledge will be immensely useful in refining all such efforts.

*Can Relationship Education Services be Properly Adapted to the Economically Disadvantaged?* We believe the answer to this is a resounding “yes” based on various projects around the country. In fact, the current federally and state funded efforts have led various curriculum providers to make significant changes in their approaches to accommodate the differing or greater needs of those who are disadvantaged. For example, we have expended

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<sup>4</sup> We are aware of this point having been publically made by numerous experts, including Theodora Ooms, Howard Markman, and Barbara Devaney.

<sup>5</sup> See Karney et al. (2003) and Johnson et al. (2002) in references.

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of a large, random sample of premarital education shows that those at lower income and education levels, and those of different racial backgrounds, achieve essentially the same benefits as those more advantaged, but that such services are far less available to those who are disadvantaged. See Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006.

great effort in developing *Within Our Reach*, a program designed for low income couples, for use in a large federal research project: Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM). Based on existing research, a great deal of field experience, and input from numerous scholars who study poverty, we have developed a new model that includes all the strengths of prior work but adds a strong focus on matters such as dealing with stress, emotional support between partners, and ways to strengthen community ties. Time and research will tell, but we believe that the attention to the needs of those at lower incomes has greatly strengthened our entire field, and likely will result in more effective services for all couples. It has been our resounding experience in the context of the SHM study that our new approach has been extraordinarily well received by the lower income couples being served.

### ***Other Benefits***

In addition to the specific effects of relationship education for couples, we and other experts in the field argue that marriage and relationship education can benefit participants through at least five other pathways:

(1) Marriage and relationship education provides scientifically based information about the benefits of strong and healthy marriages for both adults and children. Such benefits include being better providers, living longer, being less reliant on government services including welfare, health care, and mental health care, and earning and saving more money.

(2) Marriage education provides information about what to expect in marriage—a roadmap of expected challenges such as the birth of the first child, parenting of adolescents, empty nest, common gender differences, etc. For example, best practice marriage education programs teach couples how to handle differences respectfully—and to have confidence that they can do so. As importantly, it can teach couples that when differences occur, it does not mean they've necessarily made the wrong choice in partners (as many young individuals believe), but that even people who love one another will disagree on key issues and need to have strategies for handling differences constructively.

(3) Marriage and relationship education is a cost effective way to make couples more aware of other public and private sector resources, including marital counseling for couples who need it.

(4) Marriage and relationship education can help couples better understand principles about commitment, acceptance, forgiveness, and sacrifice that are known to be associated with healthy relationships. For example, individuals can learn about how a stable sense of a future together (long-term view; where appropriate) is a fundamental aspect of healthy and successful marriages, and that one way they can act on that knowledge is to learn not to threaten the sense of a future during conflict merely because of the frustration of the moment.

(5) Some individuals can learn about risk factors and conclude that a marriage (or partner) they are considering is not a good choice, or not a good choice at this time. In fact, David Olson has data on premarital counseling that suggests that 10-15% of couples who take PREPARE within 6 months of their intended wedding date decide not to marry. Further, this figure representing constructive break ups goes even higher when couples take PREPARE 6-12 months prior to marriage, along with feedback sessions.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Ongoing Refinement of Methods***

Social scientists always hope to gain more knowledge about risk and protective factors for marital outcomes. Indeed, in another decade, we will know even more about key dynamics contributing to marital distress, as well as more about strategies for helping couples succeed. We will also be learning more about which couples respond best to which kinds of strategies. Yet, the societal need to strengthen marriages and families is so great that we should act now on what we now know. Later, when we know more, we can and will refine our efforts based on new knowledge gained, including knowledge gained as a result of government marriage initiatives across the U. S.

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<sup>7</sup> David Olson, personal communication with first author, 2/10/00.

## Key Questions

Q: Does marriage and relationship education simply apply pressure to people to marry?

A: No. Marriage education can empower those who choose marriage for themselves to improve their odds. Also, best practice programs can lead some couples to a clearer awareness of their risks such that they conclude they are not ready or not suitable for marriage. Further, now that there are many demonstration projects and large scale research projects, we are personally not aware of any setting where people are being pressured to marry, and we are aware of many where just the opposite is true depending on circumstances. In fact, some of the more advanced curricula recently developed directly encourage exiting (in safe ways) from unhealthy and dangerous relationships. For example, our group has developed a curriculum for participants—such as women receiving TANF—that is optimized for imparting knowledge about how to recognize and develop safe and healthy relationships for themselves and their children; the focus being on the participants' own life goals.<sup>8</sup>

Q: Don't these people just need intensive therapy?

A: Some used to think that ineffective parents were simply bad parents, or parents in need of intense therapy. However, decades of experience and research on parent education demonstrates that people can learn how to be more effective parents. Marital and relationship education is no different. It can help people learn ways to be more effective in their pursuit of stable and thriving marriages.

Q: Don't jobs matter more than marriage for success in life? Shouldn't government be focused only on helping people become more employable?

A: Policy debates often sound as if government can only do one thing or another at a time. There is extensive evidence that family break down contributes to economic problems and also that economic problems contribute to family stress.

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<sup>8</sup> This curriculum is called *Within My Reach*, and it is not only being used in settings such as TANF, but also other service settings like Head Start where there are many individuals who are single parents, where relationship success or failure is strongly linked to all other types of important program goals for single parents and their children.

Government has a vested interest in helping people access both stable employment and stable family environments. Strategies should not be limited to one domain when failure in either is directly linked to dependence upon the government. It is, in fact, commonly understood in settings such as TANF that relationship problems have much potential to wipe out all other forms of progress for the recipients of government supports. Not only can government reduce unintended barriers to marriage, government can help citizens achieve better access to the benefits of marital success by helping couples who choose marriage to be more successful at it.

Q: Do relationship education programs damage couples who have more serious problems, including domestic violence and mental health disorders?

A: No. Not only is there no evidence that best practice marriage education harms couples, but there is evidence to the contrary. For example, PREP shows promising results with higher-risk couples. Further, research and clinical experience (e.g., throughout the U.S. Military) suggest that educational approaches are the best way to reach all kinds of couples, where the needs of many couples can be met efficiently, and where those who need more intensive services can learn more about how to access them. In all cases, the preeminent concern is for safety—at times in the form of the female distancing from the male. Regardless, even when it comes to concerns about domestic violence, part of what relationship education can do is teach people about what sorts of behavior are unacceptable, and what options there may be for further help to improve health, safety, and quality of life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this theme, see Dion et al. 2003 and Stanley, Pearson, & Kline (2005).

### **Biographical Information:**

**Scott M. Stanley, Ph. D.** is a research professor and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. He has published widely in terms of journal articles and book chapters, with research interests including commitment, communication, conflict, confidence, risk factors for divorce, the prevention of marital distress, and couple development. Along with Dr. Howard Markman and colleagues, he has been involved in the research, development, and refinement of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) for more than 25 years. Stanley and Markman are currently engaged in a long term study of the effectiveness of PREP disseminated in the community, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). They are also conducting a large, randomized trial of a variant of PREP in the U. S. Army, also funded by NICHD; and Stanley, Galena Rhoades, and Howard Markman are conducting a longitudinal study of cohabitation and couple development, funded by NICHD. Stanley has authored or co-authored various books including *Fighting for Your Marriage* and *The Power of Commitment*. He is a founder of PREP and co-author of the *Within Our Reach*, an experiential-based curriculum for couples, and the *Within My Reach*, an experiential-based curriculum for individuals.

**Howard J. Markman, Ph.D.** is a professor of psychology and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. He has devoted his career to research on the prediction and prevention of marital distress and success. He has worked privately with couples and conducted long term research studies funded by the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation for 28 years. These studies have resulted in more than 100 publications in scientific journals, books, and chapters. In addition to the grants that he and Scott Stanley are co-principal investigators on from NIH (see above), Dr. Markman and colleague Dr. Martha Wadsworth, also at the University of Denver, are conducting a study of marriage and relationship education delivered to low income couples, funded by the Administration for Children and Families. Dr. Markman has co-authored 12 books including, *We Can Work It Out*, *12 Hours to a Great Marriage* and the best seller, *Fighting For Your Marriage*, and regularly appears as an expert on marriage, marital therapy, marriage education and divorce in the media, including Oprah, The Today Show, NY Times, Time Magazine, Washington Post, Redbook, Men's Health, Wall St. Journal, and USA Today.

**Natalie H. Jenkins** is vice president and marketing director of PREP, Inc. Natalie began her business career with a degree from Colorado State University, and has extensive experience in the dissemination of program

materials to providers and users of educational services. For the last decade, she has spearheaded PREP's efforts to bring its research-based materials out of the research lab and into the hands of couples. She is co-author of the book *You Paid How Much for That: How to Win At Money Without Losing at Love*. She also is co-developer of *The PREP One-Day Leader's Manual*, *Christian PREP One-Day Leader's Manual*, and *The PREP Coaching Video*. She is also co-author of the *Fighting for Your Marriage Workbooks*. Natalie is centrally involved in PREP's efforts to translate academic research findings into usable strategies for couples.

### **References**

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