**SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY**
**COLLEGE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY**

**Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Healthy Marriages, Relationships and Families Project**

*Project funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.*

Keith A. Alford, Principal Investigator
Sharon W. Alestalo, Project Manager

# PROMISING PRACTICES FOR MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION AND CHILD WELFARE/LOW INCOME POPULATION LITERATURE SUMMARY POINTS

1. **Foundational precept (Ooms, 2007):**
   - **a.** Researchers have found that disadvantaged individuals value marriage very highly but face may barriers and disincentives.

2. **The program should have a foundation that uses inclusive lifestyles and language (McClintock-Commeaux, et al., 2004).**
   - Curriculum must include examples of varying family development paths that are realistic to the experience of these families. (e.g., giving birth, cohabitating, and co-parenting with a former mate, multi-partner fertility.)
   - Low-income families have diverse family structures.
   - Programs need to use relevant levels of literacy and higher order thinking.
   - Many low-income families have complex personal lives (McClintock-Commeaux, et al., 2004):
     - Identify realistic program goals (Ooms and Wilson, 2004).
     - In complex cases, relationship education should be integrated within a comprehensive plan for the couple. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004).
     - Screening for Domestic Violence and safety planning must be a part of the process.
   - Multiple societal influences impact the families and are crucial to planning content and implementation (McClintock-Commeaux, et al., 2004).
   - Families structure may differ based on culture but also based on immigration status of each member. It also depends on whether or not the family is 1st, 2nd or even 3rd generation immigrants. (Ooms, 2007).
   - Multi socioeconomic influences impact families and family structure. Consideration for this impact is crucial to planning content and delivery of programs. (Ooms, 2007)

3. **Development of culturally competent programs and trainers.**
   - Culture is a broad-based, multidimensional concept comprised of a host of interrelated dimensions (race, religion, gender, poverty, etc.) It is complex, fluid and dialectical. Culture is also a powerful organizing principle in human lives. Therefore, all work is cross-cultural; each of us is working across and through boundaries. We must attend to how all relationships, including the practitioner-client relationship, as they are shaped by differences and interconnections (Hardy and Laszoffy, 2002).
   - Outcomes and other results should be evident over a broad spectrum of people and outcome evaluations must be designed to measure this. (Ooms, 2007)
   - Program goals, lessons/treatment plans and materials should be reviewed periodically for cultural competence and for their ability to take into account the complex personal lives of many low-resource families. (Ooms, 2007)
   - Inclusive program leadership must be culturally competent. Methodologies for achieving this include:
     - Use of cultural guides and role models from the culture represented by the participants.
     - Using leaders/facilitators who speak the participant's native language and are familiar with their background.
     - Hire married couples as co-facilitators or a male & female leadership team. (Dion, et al., 2008)
   - All facilitators should receive intensive curriculum training and expert supervision. (Dion, et al., 2008)


© 2008. All rights reserved.

4. **Program developers and trainers need to gain greater understanding of different cultures, including the culture of poverty, and gain the skills needed to effectively work with people who operate within that culture (Payne, DeVol and Smith, 2005).**
   - To better understand people living in poverty, define poverty in broader terms then financial. Poverty is the "extent to which an individual does without resources." Resources can be financial, emotional resilience, cognitive, spiritual, physical and mental health and mobility, support systems, relationships/role models, knowledge of the hidden rules and coping strategies. Some people can be very rich in resources.
   - It is important to understand the culture of poverty and to develop effective skills for working with people in poverty. It is equally important *not to use it to stereotype or oppress people* based on these collective characteristics and behaviors gleaned from research. This work is based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions. Treat people as individuals and with dignity and respect.
   - Hidden rules exist in poverty, in middle class and in wealth, as well as in other units of people. Hidden rules are about unspoken cues, habits and understandings of a group. For example, in suburban schools access to supplemental information that will benefit your child is often dependent on parents' active presence in the school day and in school activities. If they are living in that area but both must work or their work is inflexible, their child misses out on many of the resources that are informal or not well publicized. It is an unspoken mandate to be involved not just a good idea.
   - Three major resources, motivators and coping strategies for people in poverty are relationships, survival, and entertainment. For the middle class the motivators are work and achievement. A middle class worker trying to help a person who is from the poverty culture must understand how each of their cultures impacts their relationship, expectations and results.

5. **It is important that consumers be represented in the development and implementation of curriculum devoted to culturally competent delivery (C. Jefferson Smith, personal communication, May 14, 2005).**

6. **Programs should serve as gateways to getting help for other problems that can profoundly affect the quality and stability of relationships. The lives of many of those in the child welfare system are often complex and in great flux with frequent schedule and job changes and other demands on their time. Programs need to be responsive to this reality. (Ooms, 2007)**

   - Offer supports relevant to the participant's and could include transportation, child care, hours convenient to their schedules, etc.
   - Provide support services and/or referral services.

7. **Better designs for programs include (Payne, DeVol and Smith, 2005):**
   - A mindset that participants are problem solvers and a willingness to tap those skills. People in poverty solve numerous problems daily as a matter of survival.
   - Build on the strengths of the participants - their gifts, talents, skills and resources.
   - Efforts to bridge distrust must be evident and genuine.
   - Communication should be meaningful and understandable.
     - Communication consists of 3 aspects: registers of language, discourse patterns and story structure.
     - People in poverty tend to rely on the casual register of language that incorporates a great deal of non-verbal communication and sentence syntax is often incomplete.
     - The discourse pattern is also casual. Instead of getting straight to the point, the organizational pattern is circular, going round and round till they get to the point. In addition, the language the person first acquired and their ability to use the discourse pattern of the larger society influence the discourse pattern.
     - Story pattern, or method the person uses to relate information, differs by culture. In the poverty culture, the story structure is also casual. The story begins with the end or the part that carries the greatest emotional intensity and is told in vignettes with others adding to the story freely as it is told. The story often ends with a comment about the character and his/her value. The most important part of the story is the characterization.


© 2008. All rights reserved.

- There are a number of key strategies for addressing the issue of language outlined in "Bridges Out of Poverty" by Payne, DeVol and Smith (2005).

8. **Practices that promote engagement of low-income couples:**
   - Focus on key access points where windows of opportunity exist, such as transitional periods in life (Stanley and Markham, 1997). For example, the birth of a child.
   - Maternal health care systems are a good source of enrollees. (Dion, et al., 2008)
   - Agencies who will provide the service should have a proven track record with low-income populations. Considerable groundwork is needed to prove their genuine support (Ooms and Wilson, 2004).
   - Enrollment improves with the dedication of resources to recruitment including promotion, identification and collaboration with new sources of referrals and use of a wide variety of techniques. (Ooms, 2007)
   - Likelihood of enrolling participants, especially couples, is increase by (Dion, et al., 2008)
     - First contact is in person and both parents are approached together.
     - Conduct outreach and intake in one step.
     - Use male-female recruitment teams.
     - Staff demonstrated enthusiasm about the program and emphasized services to enhance couple relationships and marriages.
     - Screening for domestic violence at intake and later as couple participates.
   - Provide immediate services that meet the participant's most pressing needs. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Offer the program at convenient times and places, and in settings where individuals feel most comfortable and secure. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Use former program participants as recruiters who can speak first hand about the benefits of the program. Word of mouth from a satisfied participant is crucial. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Forging meaningful collaborative relationships with agencies and their personnel that work with the target population. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Implement strategies that will get the couples started and keep the going. (Dion et al., 2008)
     - Activity based intake. Incorporate an interactive "lesson" into the intake.
     - Provide make-up sessions.
     - Include social activities such as date night, celebrations, etc. to foster friendships within the group.
     - Ensure comfortable settings. Ex: Pregnant women could be provided with a means to elevate their feet during the training.
     - Offer incentives for participating at intervals.

9. **Helpful Program methodologies include:**
   - Start where the participants are. Evaluate needs. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Address specific challenges. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Build on solid program content based on research. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Actively engage participants. Use interactive methodologies and multiple learning styles.
   - Provide follow-up. (Ooms and Wilson, 2004)
   - Less emphasis on didactic, lecture-oriented teaching and offer more interactive exercises, group discussions, videos/DVD, role playing and coaching. (Ooms, 2007)
   - Actively engage participants. Use interactive methods and multiple learning styles. (Ooms, 2007)

10. **Employ Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Access (Snell-Johns, et al., 2004):**

11. **Employ Strategies for Decreasing Attrition (Snell-Johns, et al., 2004):**
    - Address the need when the client is willing. Decrease the time families spend on the waiting list.
    - Monitor facilitator's for cultural competence and ability to engage low-income populations. The facilitator should be readily available to participants.
    - Offer incentives for attendance.
    - Offer brief, short-term interventions for targeted needs in cycles.
    - Conduct motivational interviews, in person or by phone, prior to starting the program.


© 2008. All rights reserved.

12. **When serving refugees and immigrants, identify and overcome myths and cultural expectations about relationship education and seeking help (Refugee Resettlement Program, 2005).**
    - Example: A typical, hidden understanding among Russians is the belief that happy families do not participate in programs. The act of participating means there are problems in the family. It is a public declaration.
    - Anticipate and address issues related to culture shock not just upon arrival but also for years afterward.
        - Assess for intergenerational conflict regarding cultural expectations around relationships and seeking help.
        - Consider if there is fear of authority figures of any kind.
    - In close-knit refugee and immigrant communities, confidentiality and other activities that promote safe participation must be highly effective for people to risk participation.

13. **Strategic/Structural Therapy has a competency-based orientation that is especially suited to low-income populations where they personally are their major resource (Popchak and Wells, 1993).**

14. **Creating effective relationships with people in the child welfare system and those in poverty is essential to facilitating constructive change (Drake, 1994 and Payne et al., 2005).**
    - From the client's perspective, workers must (Drake, 1994):
        - Show basic human respect.
            - Not be pushy or rude.
            - Ask permission to look in rooms or examine contents of cupboards.
            - Willing to spend time.
            - Be consistently honest.
            - Be aware of the dehumanizing context of child welfare work.
        - Be able to effectively communicate with clients.
            - Speak at the client's level using an adult voice.
            - Use direct and clear language. Avoid sounding threatening.
            - Really listen to what the client says.
            - Use small talk as an aid to establishing effective communication.
        - Be able to develop a comfortable relationship with clients.
            - Ability to develop relationships that are warm, not simply non-hostile.
            - Able to cast themselves as friend and an asset to the family.
            - Must use empathic presentation.
        - Not prejudge families on the basis of reports from others or the nature of the initial report.
        - Have the ability to remain calm and to defuse client anger, especially initially.
        - Child Welfare Worker's added
            - Do not impose your own values. Avoid presenting a judgmental or blaming demeanor.
            - Must clearly acknowledge the client's right to participate in the process and to define the situation as he or she sees it.
            - Must have an awareness of the impact of child protective services intervention and understand its intrusive nature.
            - Must have skills in dealing with and diffusing anxiety.

    - The most successful relationships between workers and clients are formed when the worker uses strategies and relationship skills that are valued by the clients from poverty (Payne, DeVol and Smith, 2005). Examples may be:
        - Appreciation of humor and entertainment provided by the client.
        - Acceptance of what the individual cannot say about a person or situation.
        - Respect for the demands and priorities of relationships in the client's life.
        - Assisting with goal setting rather than dictating goals. Helping to design goals that are achievable.
        - Identifying options related to <u>available</u> resources.


© 2008. All rights reserved.

- Payne, DeVol and Smith (2005) have developed checklists of core competencies for human service workers based on types of positions. For example, workers who establish long-term relationships with clients must have the core competencies of –
  - Utilizing team interventions and mentors.
  - Using metaphor stories.
  - Assisting clients in developing informal support teams.
  - Teaching procedural self-talk.
  - Offering structure and choices.
  - Teaching coping skills and providing respite.
  - Bridging the cultures of poverty and the middle class (by understanding the hidden rules of class and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school, at work and in the community.)

- Important understandings for every child welfare worker (Payne, DeVol and Smith, 2005)
  - Poverty is relative. It occurs in all races and in all countries.
  - Economic class is not a clear-cut distinction.
  - Generational poverty and situational poverty are different.
  - An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised.
  - Schools, agencies and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class.
  - For our clients to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them skills and hidden rules that will make them successful in middle class settings such as schools, work and in the community organizations.
  - In order for a person to achieve their goals and move more toward middle class work and lifestyle goals, they will need to give up some relationships for at least a time. For some people in poverty, this will be very challenging as relationships are a prime motivator, coping strategy and survival resource.
  - We cannot blame the victims of poverty for being in poverty. Nor can we discount the resources and skills someone in poverty has successfully used to survive.
  - We cannot continue to support stereotypes and prejudices about the poor.

**References:**


Dion, M. R. (2005), Healthy marriage programs: Learning what works. *The Future of Children*, 15 (2), 139-157.

Dion, M.R., Hershey, A.M, Zaveri, H.H., Avellar, S.A., Strong, D.A., Silman, T.and Moore, R. (2008). Implementing of the building storng families program. MPR Reference No: 8935-134. Washington DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc..

Drake, B. (1994). Relationship competencies in child welfare services. *Social Work 39*(5), 595-602
Hardy, K.V. and Laszloffy, T.A. (2002), Couple therapy using a multicultural perspective. *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*, New York and London: The Guilford Press. Pp. 569-593

McClintock-Commeaux, M., Anderson, E. & Kuvalank, K. (2004). TANF and marriage education: Utilizing marriage legislation to design a new educational curriculum that meets the needs of low-income families. *Vision 2004: What is the Future of Marriage.* Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations. 77-83

Ooms, T. (2007). Adapting Healthy Marriage Programs for Disadvantaged and Culturally Diverse Populations: What are the issues? Center for Law and Social Policy. *Policy Brief No. 10*, March 2007.

Ooms, T., & Wilson, P. (2004). The challenges of offering relationship and marriage education to low-income populations. *Family Relations, 53*, 440-447

Payne, R.K., DeVol, P. and Smith, T.D. (2001 and revised 2005), Bridges out of poverty; Strategies for professionals and communities. Highlands, Texas, Aha! Process, Inc.

Popchack, G.K., & Wells, R.A. (1993). Brief family therapy with a low-socioeconomic family. *Casebook of the Brief Psychotherapies*, 308-314.

Snell-Johns, J., Mendez, J.L., Smith, B.H. (2004). Evidence-Based solutions for overcoming access barriers, decreasing attrition, and promoting change with underserved families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 18* (1), 19-35.

Stanley, S. M. & Markman, H.J. (1997). *Acting on what we know: The hope of prevention.* Family Impact Seminar. Washington, D.C. 1 – 32.




© 2008. All rights reserved.