Premarital Education Programs for Youth: Investing in Prevention

Amy Olson-Sigg
Life Innovations


Premarital education programs for youth are becoming more frequently implemented as a preventative approach for strengthening relationships and future marriages. This paper reviews and evaluates five marriage and relationship education programs currently available: The Art of Loving Well, Building Relationships, Connections, PAIRS for Peers and Partners. Their approach is preventive, has potential to be cost-effective, and useful in a variety of settings. While all five programs have strengths there is limited outcome data on their effectiveness.

Many believe relationship education for youth should be as integral in the educational system as the other 3 "R's"—reading, writing and arithmetic (Olson, DeFrayn, & Olson, 1999). Youth need help with relationships more than anytime in the past, as the social conditions in which they live have changed significantly during the 20th century (Weissberg, Walberg, O’Brien, & Kuster, 2003). We live in a time of instability and change in our marriages and families. Divorce rates continue to be about 50% and half of all children will live in a single parent situation at some time in their lives (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001). Although the structural changes caused by divorce and single-parenting are not inherently destructive, the adult stress and parental absence that often follow negatively impact the child (Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003).

Even intact marriages and families are not immune to difficulties. Studies show that of the marriages surviving divorce, a significant proportion are unhappy, conflicted or both (Berger, & Hannah, 1999). Marital distress has been linked to damaging consequences for both the children and adults (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Gardner, 2001). For children there has been increased incidence of violence, theft and sexual crimes; poor self-esteem, and social and emotional disturbance. For adults marital distress increases the incidence of depression, substance abuse and domestic violence.

Parenting is a challenge in the best of circumstances, but add divorce or marital distress and it is easy to understand that many young people have never experienced a positive role model of marriage and family life. Although parents are an ideal source to teach, model and reinforce positive relationship skills, many parents may not have the skills or ability to provide an adequate model of healthy relationships.

Marriage education courses are needed by youth today (Stanley, 2001). Many assume that parents have the time, resources and qualifications to
adequately teach the concepts and skills youth need to understand the richness and complexity of love relationships, yet too often they are lacking (Doherty, 2000). Teens need and desire information and support in understanding their own families, their close relationships and a potential partner. In fact, even though young people express pessimism about their chances for a happy marriage, they still identify a happy and lasting marriage as one of their highest goals in life (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Recent efforts have been made to reduce the probability of future divorce and marital distress using premarital prevention programs (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Several states have proposed or enacted legislation that requires and/or offers incentives for couples to participate in premarital education (see Brotherton & Duncan, this issue). Recent empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that premarital education programs improve the quality of a couple’s relationship and interpersonal skills (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2003).

Many professionals are in favor of teaching marriage and relationship skills to all youth while they are in school, rather than waiting until they are considering marriage (Gardner & Howlett, 2000; Durlak, 1995). Marriage educators believe it is possible to impart the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions and skills that contribute to happy and lasting marriages. Their approach is preventative and designed to help youth more effectively deal with current relationship issues and learn how to make more positive choices in the future. Theoretically, there is dramatically less emotional and financial cost in preventing divorce and marital distress than there is in fixing the devastation divorce can cause to individuals and families.

The current preventative approach for relationships is based on the realization that treating a problem is more complicated than preventing one (Small & Memmo, 2004). The foundation of marriage education programs is primarily preventative, as the key strategies are to reduce or eliminate risk factors (e.g. immaturity, cohabiting) through education, and promote developmental assets and/or protective factors through skill-building (e.g. communication and conflict resolution skills).

Marriage education for youth has come a long way from the traditional home economics and sex education of the past. Today’s programs acknowledge that relationships affect all facets of human life, and thus, span a range of disciplines. Marriage education can take place in school health science, psychology, law or even English classes, church-based settings, or community youth groups. The content and focus of programs for youth is diverse and can include: understanding emotions, resolving conflict, managing finances, abstaining from sex, learning communication skills and taking personal responsibility for the quality of their relationships.

The five youth programs included for this review are in alphabetical order: The Art of Loving Well (Ellenwood, 1998), Connections + PREP (Kamper, 2003), Building Relationships (Olson, DeFrain, & Olson, 1999), PAIRS for Peers (Gordon, 2000), and Partners (American Bar Association, 1999). They were selected from the directory of youth programs assembled by the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE) (Sollee, 2004). One program, Relationship Intelligence (Panzer, 2003) was not reviewed, as they did not respond to a request for materials. This review is not comprehensive in
its scope, rather it attempts to summarize and evaluate the adequacy of the content and focus of five premarital education programs by assessing how well they address the 22 specific premarital factors that have been shown to be important in predicting marital quality and stability (Larson & Holman, 1994), as well as to provide information on the training and cost of the programs. We critique the five programs and make recommendations for their future development. Although these programs vary in length and content, they are similar in that they all strive to increase self and relationship awareness and knowledge, and impart attitude and behavior change that positively influence relationships.

Criterion for Evaluating Programs
The five programs are summarized and then evaluated in terms of how well they address premarital criteria that have been associated with later marital quality and stability in first marriages (Larson & Holman, 1994). Larson and Holman's model was chosen because of its systematic and comprehensive review of the empirical literature on premarital predictors of marital quality and stability. To understand how mate selection and romantic relationships transpire and endure, they organized 50 years of research findings using an ecosystemic framework (as conceptualized by Bubolz and Sontag, 1993). This framework allows an understanding of the relationship as impacted by multiple influences from inside and outside of the system. In analyzing the research on premarital predictors influencing marital quality and stability, they were able to divide the factors into three major subcategories: background and contextual factors, individual traits and behaviors, and couple interactional processes.

A total of 22 more specific factors were identified within these three more general subcategories (See Table 1). The background and contextual factors found to predict marital quality or stability are: parental divorce, parental mental illness, family dysfunction, support from parents and in-laws, age at marriage, education, income and occupation, social class, race, support from friends, and internal and external pressures. Individual traits and behaviors that have predictive powers are: emotional health, interpersonal skills, conventionality, and physical health. Couple interactional processes that have predictive ability include: homogamy, interpersonal similarity, and interactional processes such as cohabitation, premarital sex, and communication skills. Sociocultural factors such as education, income and occupation, social class and race have been shown to be relatively weak predictors of marital outcomes.

One of the unique and practical characteristics of Larson and Holman’s review is that they provide implications for practice based on their findings. They offer concrete criteria for marriage educators or premarital counselors to consider in evaluating programs that are designed to help individuals more effectively prepare for marriage. The five programs were evaluated to assess how many of these important premarital factors were included in their programs. The programs are presented in alphabetical order.

The Art of Loving Well
The Art of Loving Well (Ellenwood, 1998) is a literature-based approach to helping adolescents develop values and attitudes toward relationships that are conducive to responsible sexual behavior. Through literature, teens are exposed to the complexity of love and relationships, which produces opportu-
nities to exercise critical judgment and self-reflection. Developed at Boston University by Ellenwood (1998), The Art of Loving Well is designed for eighth grade English or health classes, but has been used effectively with many ages (ages 12 through adulthood) in other settings such as faith and community organizations.

Our analysis shows that The Art of Loving Well covers 10 of the 22 (45%) premarital predictors of marital quality and stability (see Table 1). Important premarital predictors that are not included in this program are: family dysfunction, age at marriage and interpersonal similarity. Since The Art of Loving Well was originally developed as a teen pregnancy prevention project, the anthology of stories and activities strongly discourage premarital sex and deal with ramifications of pregnancy outside of marriage. Some issues are not taught directly; rather the literature is a means to develop critical thinking and skills. For example, the emphasis on classroom discussion of stories encourages the development of the communication skills of effective listening and speaking. It is through this classroom discussion process itself and discussing the communication processes within the anthologies where adolescents experience and learn about communication.

The main component of the program is The Art of Loving Well book which is a 340-page anthology of 40 selected short stories, poems, essays, drama, folk tales and myths, divided into three content areas: “Early Loves and Losses”, “Romance”, and “Commitment and Marriage”. “Early Loves & Losses” explores early experiences with love such as in family relationships, and also what it means to be male or female. For example, “If Only”, a story about the loss of a young sibling, encourages teens to think about who they love, how they express that love and how sometimes we tend to mistreat those who are closest to us. One of the suggested activities is for students to write a letter to someone important to them as if it were the last chance they would have to communicate with this person.

The second content area, “Romance”, contains literary selections that deal with sexual attraction, expression of feelings, love vs. infatuation, physical appearances, and pressures to be sexually active. Many of the literary selections have the common theme of “learning the hard way”, and for students to embrace lessons from the literature so they do not have to experience the painful consequences that can result from poor decisions such as being sexually active before marriage. Teen pregnancy is explored in two real-life examples from the perspective of a teen father and from the perspective of a teen mother.

Section three, “Commitment and Marriage” examines love and commitment over a lifetime, with emphasis on discerning romantic love with mature love and commitment. The values of committed faithful love reverberate throughout the literary selections of this section.

Following each literary passage are Activities, which may include vocabulary, review questions, discussion questions, class activities, writing and homework assignments. For example, one of the discussion questions following the Grimm Brother’s version of Cinderella is, "Most of us are startled by the scene where Cinderella’s sisters cut off part of their feet in order to fit into the golden slipper. This mutilation is a symbol of the extreme ways people sometimes act. What are some of the ways that people actually harm themselves in order to "fit" or be accepted?" (Ellenwood, 1988,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Category</th>
<th>22 Specific Factors</th>
<th>The Art of Loving Well</th>
<th>Building Relationships</th>
<th>Connections + PREP</th>
<th>PAIRS for Peers</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Parental Divorce</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Dysfunctions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents and In-Laws Support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age at Marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Income &amp; Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal &amp; External Press.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individ. Factors</td>
<td>Emotional Health</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conventionality</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Process</td>
<td>Homogamy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal Similarity</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cohabitation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Premarital Sex</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Premarital Pregnancy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
items measuring adolescent attitudes and behaviors related to delaying sexual activity and beliefs about reproductive health risks was developed. Examples of questions include: "I intend to talk to my parents or guardian about sex", "It is too risky for young teens to have sex", and "I think many of my friends are having sex". The survey was given to a sample of 468 students who participated in the Art of Loving Well program who were compared with a sample of 168 who served as a control group. Students were not randomly assigned to control and experimental groups but were from intact classes for which treatment conditions were chosen by the teacher. The mean age was 13 for both experimental and control groups, but control group students tended to be older. There was greater minority representation among controls, who were less likely to consider post-college education (8% vs. 21%).

In order to control for the pre-test differences between the groups, the 31 items at post-test for the experimental group were compared to the control group where the pre-test scores were used as covariates. From this analysis, 8 of the 31 items were found to differ at post-test and the experimental group had significantly higher scores on seven of the eight items in the direction of the program goals.

In summary, while this one study demonstrated some significant changes on single items, the study should only be considered a pilot study. The limitations include lack of random assignment to groups, no evidence of scale reliability or validity, only item analysis was completed and the effect size analysis demonstrated the impact of the findings were small (below 2).

The Art of Loving Well's approach to relationship and marriage preparation
is distinctive and non-assuming. Teens can enrich their study of the English language while simultaneously gaining insight into love and relationships from the symbolism of literature. The uniqueness of the Art of Loving Well program may also limit its utility. The Art of Loving well was originally designed to supplant English classes. Although the authors claim it has been used successfully in other interdisciplinary settings, it is perhaps most effective as a way to insert values and knowledge about relationships into the standard English curriculum.

Building Relationships

Building Relationships: Developing Skills for Life was developed by Olson, DePrain, and Olson (1999). Based on family systems theory, communication and conflict theory, as well as on research from the PREPARE Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation (PREPARE) premarital assessment program by Olson and colleagues (Olson, 1996), the goal of the book and program is to help youth develop their personal and relationship skills and create a more realistic view of marriage.

Building Relationships focuses on 13 of the 22 (59%) premarital predictors (see Table 1). Five of the seven dyadic processes identified by Larson and Holman are included in this program (see Table 1). Interpersonal skills are an integral part of the program and conventionality (‘traditional vs. equalitarian relationships’) is discussed in depth, although an assessment of physical and emotional health is not included. Four areas are covered in the area of background factors related to marital satisfaction: Parental divorce, family dysfunction, parental and in-law support, and age at marriage. A chapter on family-of-origin includes an assessment and discussion of family influences on current behavior and attitudes. Notable premarital predictors not covered include: Emotional health, premarital sex, and premarital pregnancy.

The BUILDING RELATIONSHIP textbook contains 13 chapters that focus on current issues for teens such as dating, love, values, communication skills, and conflict resolution and areas that are important in premarital education, such as family-of-origin issues, preparing for and adjusting to marriage, role relationships, sex, finances, and parenting issues. The book begins with an overview of marriage and families today underscoring the diversity of families today, how the media obscures our understanding of family life, as well as presenting some basic research such as correlation between age of partners and success of marriage. The final chapter provides an opportunity for students to delve deeper into their own families by mapping the family’s interaction between cohesion and flexibility with the mediating dimension of communication.

Each chapter begins with a 10-item true/false “AWARE” quiz to stimulate the student’s curiosity and to begin thinking about relevant ideas and issues related to that content area (chapter). “AWARE” quiz items measure both factual information such as “Most people who get divorced don’t ever remarry” and attitudinal information, such as “The best relationships are those in which couples spend all their free time together”. The student finds the answers to the quiz items in the text contained in each chapter.

A Teacher’s Manual contains key terms, classroom activities, life skill activities (activities to do with peers, parents and/or other adults), and a power point or transparency package. Classroom activities focus on classroom dis-
discussions and role-playing, giving students the opportunity to practice the speaking and listening skills they have learned. Students brainstorm answers to questions such as, "What makes a marriage successful?"; "What are some ways to ensure that your marriage has these qualities and is successful?"

Life skill activities consist of assignments, which use a concept from the book and show how it plays out in everyday life. They are designed to bridge classroom lessons with real world applicability. Each chapter has at least one life skill activity to be completed with peers and one to be completed with a parent or another adult. For instance, in the chapter on Role Relationships, students are asked to make a list with their own families (or another family) of household tasks for which each family member is responsible. They then decide and discuss whether their tasks are based on interest, ability and time or on the person's gender. Assignments such as this have a primary goal of thinking about (the topic area) how roles become solidified in families, and a secondary goal of increasing family communication.

Building Relationships has been used in schools, church youth groups, and youth organizations with 13-19 year olds. Each chapter can be taught separately or integrated with other subject areas or they can be taught as a 13-chapter unit. The program has a flexible format and can vary in length from five to twenty hourly sessions. Pre-testing and post-testing materials are included in order to assess the extent of knowledge and attitude change as a result of the program. The Teacher's Manual with power point or masters for transparencies is $55.00. The Building Relationships textbooks are $12.95 each; or $11.95 for 11 or more.

A unique aspect of the Building Relationships Program is a pre-post-test package in the Teacher's Manual which serves two functions: tailoring the course and assessing the effectiveness of the course. The pre-post test is a compilation of the students' scores on ten quiz items from each of the first 12 chapters. These 120 questions are randomly arranged, and a one-page reproducible answer sheet handout is available in the Teacher's Manual as well as a scoring key which elucidates the chapter corresponding to each question. This enables the instructor, upon giving the pre-test, to emphasize chapters or topics where the students appear to need extra instruction, tailoring each course based on the needs of the students. Post-tests can be administered at the end of the program to assess knowledge gain and attitude change.

Outcome studies are currently being conducted on the value of the Building Relationships program for use in public school settings and with young adults who are from more disadvantaged families. Many of the content areas in Building Relationships are similar to a college-level textbook by Olson and DeFrain (2003). In a pilot study, Olson (1998) taught a ten-week course to college students and completed a pre-post assessment using the same AWARE Quiz scales used in this program. Pre-post test changes were found to be significant in ten of the eleven categories with a sample of 67 college students. These results suggest that significant attitude changes about relationships and marriage may occur in a marriage education course. Future research is needed to assess the impact of the program when taught in a variety of settings with both achieving and high-risk youth.
Connections + PREP
Connections + PREP: Relationships and Marriage was initially developed by Kamper (2003). In 2002, they collaborated with Stanley and Markman's marital program PREP (The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) as described in Fighting for Your Marriage by Markman, Stanley and Blumberg (1994) to include research-based knowledge about marital success and failure. PREP is a skill-based program for engaged or married couples based on over 20 years of research (see Markman et al., this issue). Connections + PREP combines the interpersonal relationship skills supporting marriage from Connections and the empirically-informed and tested strategies and knowledge from PREP. The result is an 18-lesson program, divided into four sections: Personality, Relationships, Communication and Marriage.

Connections + PREP deals with 13 of the 22 premarital predictors (59%) (see Table 1). In the category of couple interactional processes, the program deals with 5 of the 7 factors. The program deals with two of the four individual traits and behaviors. The emotional health factor of self-esteem is an important part of this program, which also focuses heavily on interpersonal communication skills. Five areas within the Background category are described in the program: Parental divorce, parents and in-law support, age at marriage and education. Notable premarital predictors not covered include: Family dysfunction, premarital sex and premarital pregnancy.

Connections + PREP can be used in schools, youth groups and youth organizations with 16-20 year olds. Lessons can be taught sequentially or separately, or integrated across a class curriculum. Although materials are written to allow the instructor flexibility, lessons as written are designed to last 55 minutes.

Section I-Personality is comprised of three lessons in self-awareness. The first lesson examines the uniqueness of the characteristics that comprise their personality. Students may create a poster that represents their selves (i.e. favorite activities, foods, future plans, personality characteristics) and share it with their peers. Lesson 2 provides teens the opportunity to assess their personality using the Kiersey Temperament Sorter (1978), a self-scoring personality questionnaire (Kiersey, 1978). The goal for students is not only to better understand themselves, but also to understand and appreciate differences in others. In Lesson 2 of Section I, students are also assigned to interview someone who knows them well and ask that person to describe characteristics of their personalities they have observed. Lesson 3 of Section I considers the importance of being intentional about planning for the future. In their workbook teens are assigned to think about goals they have concerning education, career, finances, health, home life, personal fulfillment and aging.

Section II-Relationships consists of four lessons exploring change: casual relationships versus key relationships, expectations and core beliefs that drive relationships, attraction, dating and emotions and breaking-up. One of the objectives of this section is for students to learn how expectations and core beliefs will affect how they behave in important relationships including marriage. Students learn that unrecognized expectations lead to unhappiness in relationships and by being aware, reasonable and open in your expectations, disappointment can be minimized.

Section III-Communication con-
tains three lessons on the importance that good communication skills play in maintaining healthy relationships. Adolescents first think about the family communication patterns they were exposed to and the possibility that these influences affect current behaviors or preferences. Negative patterns of dealing with conflict are replaced by teaching them a simple communication technique called "Speaker/Listener". The third communication lesson involves practicing paraphrasing and learning the principles of verbal and nonverbal communication.

Section IV-Marriage contains eight lessons designed to increase awareness of specific areas of importance within the marriage relationship. Teens learn the three components of relationships as proposed by Sternberg (1988)—intimacy, passion and commitment—and how they can be combined to form different types of relationships. As part of this section on marriage, students learn about the risk factors associated with marriages that are more likely to end in divorce. The goal of learning risk factors is to encourage students to think about how experiences affect them and their marriage potential and to make better choices about whom to marry. Teens also choose a 'marriage partner' as part of this section on marriage—someone either within or outside the classroom with whom they can role play working through some common marital issues such as sharing household tasks, sharing responsibility for the children, understanding family finances, and working through a family crisis. The rationale behind these lessons and activities is for students to anticipate problems as a normal aspect of marriage and gain practical experience in managing problems.

An Instructor Kit contains an outline of each lesson with an overview, objectives, vocabulary, key concepts, preparation guidelines, teaching instructions and lecture notes. Reproducible handouts, overhead transparencies and game cards are also provided in the Instructor Kit. Each student receives a workbook, which contains assignments for each section. The Instructor Kit is available for $179.00; 10 student workbooks are $55.00. A Starter Package with the Instructor Kit and 30 workbooks is $330.00.

A recent study by Gardner (2001) evaluated changes in students' attitudes and behaviors from pre-test to post-test related to participation in the Connections program. The program was offered in 15 one-hour lessons and it consisted of four units: personality, relationships, communication and conflict resolution and marriage. Two hundred thirteen high school students were included in the final sample with 132 participating in the Connections curriculum as part of an elective marriage and family course and 81 in the control group who were enrolled in family and consumer science courses such as housing and advanced foods. A questionnaire assessing self-reported behaviors in relationships such as frequency of tactics used to resolve conflict and attitudes about relationships, marriage and counseling, such as willingness to attend premarital counseling was given to both groups prior to and after the curriculum being taught to the experimental group.

While those in the Connections program improved in their verbal reasoning for resolving conflict, the difference was not significantly different compared to the control group. The Connections students developed a significantly more negative attitude toward divorce after the course compared to the control group. While the Connections students also reported being more open to marriage.
preparation and counseling the change was not significant compared to the control group. Thus, it appears that only their attitude about divorce changed significantly. While the sample size and assessment scales seemed adequate, there was no random assignment to groups.

PAIRS for Peers
PAIRS for Peers: Practical Exercises Enriching Relationship Skills is an experientially-based program designed to provide adolescents with an understanding of emotions, behaviors and attitudes about relationships. Developed by Gordon (2000), this program is an adaptation of the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) courses for adults, and can be used with upper elementary, middle school or high school students and their families. Materials can also be adapted for after school programs, clubs, community and faith-based settings.

The PAIRS for Peers program covers 10 of the 22 factors (45%) identified by Larson and Holman (1994) as premarital predictors of marital success which can be used as a foundation to teach and support individuals and relationships (see Table 1). The program deals with three important couples' processes. The basic relationship skills of communication, mutual respect and conflict resolution serve as a building block to enhancing current and future relationships. There are four background factors included in the program: parental divorce, family dysfunction, support from family and support from friends. At the individual level, the program focuses substantially on interpersonal skills and emotional health issues. Important premarital predictors that are not covered in this program include homogamy, cohabitation, premarital sex and age at marriage.

PAIRS for Peers is used in some Florida public schools as partial fulfillment of the state mandated requirement for marriage education (personal correspondence with PAIRS office). Students use a “Relationships Roadmap” to examine their relationships and understand that good relationships don’t just happen, rather they result from knowing yourself and others as well as using good communication. Students learn and practice skills that are basic to all relationships: communication and conflict resolution. PAIRS for Peers also teaches youth how to vent anger constructively and how and why it is important to forgive.

PAIRS for Peers uses the instructional strategies of brief lectures, role-plays, student-peer coaching, guided imagery and personal journaling to teach how to develop and sustain healthy positive relationships. An important goal of this program is developing “emotional literacy” defined as the result of understanding yourself and your own feelings, developing empathy for others’ feelings and the ability to take responsibility for how your emotions and behaviors affect others. Other program goals include: avoiding misunderstandings, resolving conflict fairly, improving communication and respecting differences.

The program contains 3 Units with 10 sessions in each unit. The Basic 10 covers Communication and Conflict Resolution; the Advanced 10 covers Self Understanding; and the Enrichment 10 provides deeper understanding of self and others and extended skills practice. The program can be taught as a unit or individual units or sessions can be integrated into other subject matter.

The PAIRS Foundation trains teachers, counselors and youth leaders with teaching or counseling credentials in a four day intensive training workshop and/or participation in a semester-long PAIRS class. Training is offered several
times a year and instructors receive a video, instructor’s guide, student handbook, and transparencies. The video demonstrates typical problem situations with adolescents enacting both negative and healthy approaches for dealing with problems such as releasing anger constructively.

Three small-sample unpublished research studies have shown a positive impact of PAIRS for Peers on youth (2000). Each of the three groups studied had met for ten sessions, one hour per week. The first study was conducted in 1995 and was intended to ascertain if the goals of PAIRS for Peers were consistent with the benefits that students reported. The sample was eight males and eight females who answered 24 true/false questions, one yes/no question and two open-ended questions. Authors found a consistency between the objectives of the program and the perceived benefits by the students with the strongest area of benefit being increased self-esteem, followed by improved communication and conflict resolution skills. Most students also reported improvement in their anger management, communication and ability to express themselves. A second study of 18 students posed the question, “Does the PAIRS for Peers program provide participants with improved relationship skills in the areas of anger, anxiety and curiosity?” The State Trait Personality Inventory (Spielberger, 1999) was administered pre- and post-test and a decrease was found in participants’ levels of anger, anxiety and curiosity after completing the PAIRS for Peers program, although the difference was not statistically significant. A third small study with 19 students was conducted in 1999 utilizing a survey with open-ended questionnaires. It was determined from analyses that ten of the nineteen students felt their relationships had improved as a result of the PAIRS for Peers program, 13 of the 19 perceived progress with their anger management, 17 of 19 reported improved communication, and 14 of the 19 felt they were better able to express themselves.

The findings to date in using the PAIRS for Peers program have been limited to these three small study groups using mainly qualitative assessment with no control groups or random assignment to groups. Although students reported that they improved in some important areas such as communication, expressing feelings, anger management and relationships, more systematic randomized control studies are needed to adequately assess the impact of the program.

**Partners**

Partners: a Curriculum for Preserving Marriages was developed by the American Bar Association Section of Family Law (1999) to teach marriage preservation skills and the legal responsibilities of marriage. The curriculum, based on the work of the PAIRS Foundation, was designed for junior and senior high school students to enrich social studies, health, psychology, sociology, home economics and business law curricula and to help students gain a better understanding of the challenges and legalities of marriage.

Partners covers 6 of the 22 (27%) premarital predictors (see Table 1). Many of these predictors are discussed in the program in the context of family law education rather than primarily as traits or factors of successful marriage. For example, in terms of age at marriage students learn the legal age required by states for marriage, not research about the relationship of age at marriage and marital outcome. A list of nine discussion questions is included at the end of the program that address several of the
premarital predictors: “Is premarital sex appropriate?” and “Should couples live together before marriage?” Major premarital predictors that are not addressed in this program include age at marriage, emotional health, cohabitation and premarital sex.

Teachers receive a program video and a curriculum manual for $200. The American Bar Association or the State Bar Association helps teachers make arrangements for a local attorney to act as a consultant/resource in the classroom to clarify how family law issues are handled in their particular states. Local attorneys often purchase the program and act as a consultant for a school.

Partners is a 10 week curriculum containing five videotape units which are presented sequentially. Each unit takes two classroom hours and is devoted to discussing one aspect of family law and a lesson in one communication skill. For example, in Unit 1, students explore the marriage contract and obligations in the event of a divorce (grounds for divorce) followed by tips for avoiding common communication pitfalls.

In the video, students see an example of a young couple demonstrating negative communication. After viewing the vignette, a therapist discusses the couple’s communication and gives suggestions for changing communication to allow mutual understanding. The young couple then repeats the same scenario; this time incorporating these communication tips. Last, the video segment summarizes the unit and homework assignments for the following week such as researching the grounds for divorce that are specific to the state in which the participants live and practicing communication tips they have learned.

The curriculum manual emphasizes a family law objective and a communication skills objective for each unit. Information and skills conveyed in each unit are presented in question and answer form (for the information about family law) and in outline form (for communication skills). Classroom/small group activities are suggested in the Curriculum Manual as well as questions to discuss with the lawyer consultant and a transcript of the video vignettes. There is currently no research available on the Partners program.

Critique and Recommendations for Programs
When examining these five programs in terms of their coverage of the three major dimensions identified by Larson and Holman (1994), it was found that couple interactional processes was the general category most frequently included in all programs (see Table 1). Within this category, all five programs discussed the topic of communication skills and acquaintance, while four dealt with interpersonal similarity. In the individual traits category, four of the five programs focused some on interpersonal skills, three explored emotional health and two dealt with conventionality. For background factors, all five programs described the influences of internal and external pressure and four programs focused some on the roles of parental divorce and support from friends. Effects of parental mental illness and physical health are two important premarital factors that are not addressed in any of these programs. Premarital sex and premarital pregnancy are only adequately addressed in one program despite their negative relationship to marital stability. In addition, the relationship between young age at marriage and marital instability is only referenced in two of the five programs even though it has been soundly and consistently documented in the research literature. In summary,
these programs as a whole are not considered adequate in their coverage of premarital predictors of marital satisfaction and stability. Even the programs that were the most comprehensive covered only 59% of the predictors.

On the positive note, each of these programs offers students an opportunity to think deliberately about meaningful relationships: how they develop, how they are sustained, and how they dissolve. The programs enforce positive values such as commitment. They each serve to challenge youth’s beliefs and expectations of relationships while gaining a better understanding of self.

Choosing a program to use entails knowing the characteristics of the audience, the setting, and the preferred method of teaching. The Art of Loving Well curriculum is based on literature and requires good facilitator skills in leading the group discussion of the readings. Building Relationships is a middle-school reading level textbook with 13 chapters focusing on marriage expectations and positive relationship skills. Students take quizzes, read text and complete activities inside and outside of the classroom. Connections + PREP is an 18-lesson program covering personality through marriage for 16-20 year olds. Lessons are taught from lecture, discussion, exercises and a workbook. Partners is intended for older high school students since it is more focused on the legalities of marriage. This format would appeal to a facilitator who appreciates and is able to effectively use video segments. All of these programs are flexible and are and appropriate for school, church or youth group settings.

In general, there has been very limited systematic evaluation to assess the effectiveness of these marriage education programs for youth. The limited research to date suggests that premarital education programs may offer both preventive and remedial benefits for teens. The attitudes, expectations, and skills that are central to these programs can be applied to youth’s current familial and interpersonal relationships, and may have positive effects on current and future relationships.

However, more rigorous studies of these programs are needed to test the effectiveness of these programs in the short-term and long-term and demonstrate their value to potential professionals, participants, schools, church leaders, etc. Research should include larger samples with the random assignment of youth to experimental and control groups. These investigations should include both short-term (pre- vs. post-test) and long-term assessment (6 and 12 months) and should include both subjective (e.g., self-report) and objective (behavioral measures) assessments. All programs should consider designing pre and post-test evaluations to measure three important constructs: information gained, attitude change and behavior change. These outcome studies could help in the marketing process since decision makers increasingly want to know about the short-term and long-term impacts of programs. Independent evaluations using standardized rather than author-produced questionnaires could add to the validity of future studies.

One challenge for these programs is that of marketing. Schools are a logical place to educate and prepare youth for good relationships and marriages, but these courses are often the first to be cut-back when time/scheduling or financial constraints surface (Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004). Relationship skills are not given the priority they deserve in school curriculums. A few states are taking the initiative to support these programs in
schools (e.g., Oklahoma and Florida) (Ooms, Boucher, & Parke, 2004). Hopefully, this will lead to a positive trend that will catch-on in other states.

Another major challenge for these programs is to evaluate the relevance and value of the programs for more diverse populations. Most of these programs were developed and used with mainly middle-class Caucasian audiences. The programs need to be evaluated with adolescents from a variety of family structures, from various ethnic groups, and with lower income and education levels. These under-served populations are often at a higher risk for relationship problems (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Ooms & Wilson, this issue). They are more often in need of models of healthy relationships and relationship skills to help them develop and maintain successful couple relationships. The potential impact of these programs for helping youth develop healthier relationships is promising, but more research and development is needed to demonstrate their impact and to increase their cultural relevance.

Amy Olson-Sigg, Research Associate at Life Innovations, is currently completing a master's degree in MFT. She is co-author of Empowering Couples book and group program, Building Relationship book and group program and several articles on PREPARE/ENRICH and couple relationship topics.

References
Gardner, S. & Howlett, L. (2000). Changing the focus of interventions: The need for primary prevention at the couple level. Family...
Science Review, 13, 96-111.


Appendix

Art of Loving Well Project, Nancy McLaren, Boston University School of Education, 605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215, 617-353-4088 or http://www.bu.edu/education/loving-well/

Building Relationships, Life Innovations, Inc., P.O. Box 190, Minneapolis, MN 55440, 800-331-1661 or www.lifeinnovations.com

Connections + PREP, Charlene R. Kamper, The Dibble Fund for Marriage Education, P.O. Box 7881, Berkeley, CA 94707, 800-695-7975 or skills@dibblefund.org or www.BuildingRelationshipSkills.org

PAIRS for Peers, Lori Gordon, PAIRS Foundation, Ltd., 703-861-4600 or epairs@aol.com or www.peers4youth.org

Partners, The American Bar Association Section of Family Law, 750 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, IL 60611, 312-988-5154 http://www.abanet.org/family/partners/