

# Introduction

to “What Works in relationship education?”

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This is a book full of hope where hope is badly needed.

For years, western nations have experienced huge changes in family life. The most prominent of those changes has been a steady and relentless reduction in family stability and increase in family breakdown. Until recently, the prevailing assumption appears to have been that such change is inevitable, that family breakdown is largely unavoidable. The political, social and economic priority has been how to manage this decline.

In the UK, family breakdown has risen under all governments since the 1960s (Callan et al, 2006). In the 60s and 70s the driver was divorce: annual divorce rates rose from 0.2% in the early 1960s to 1.2-1.4% from 1980 onwards (ONS, various). Since 1980 however, the driver has been the separation of unmarried families. Across the US and Europe, the separation rate of unmarried parents is higher than the divorce rate of married parents (Kiernan, 2003).

To illustrate this, Stephen McKay of the University of Birmingham and I conducted an analysis of family breakdown amongst 14,600 parents with five year old children using new data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. We found that 9% of *married* parents, 26% of *cohabiting* parents and 60% of self-described *closely involved* parents had split up before their child's fifth birthday. Combining the latter two categories means 35% of *unmarried* couples split up during this period.

Put another way, 71% of family breakdown affecting children under five now involves the break-up of unmarried parents. In contrast, using national birth and divorce data and assuming this marriage/cohabitation gap in outcomes has remained largely stable over time (see Kamp Dush et al, 2003), I estimate this figure has risen steadily from 20% in 1980.

We also compared the break-up rates of the 12,500 parents who started as either *married* or *cohabiting*, leaving aside the couples who started parenthood as *closely involved*. Across five education categories – from the best to least educated – and five income groups – from the highest to lowest paid – cohabiting parents were consistently 2 to 2.5 times more likely to split up.

These figures should shock us. How can 1 in 11 married new parents split up? How can 1 in 3 unmarried new parents split up? Given the well-documented impact of family breakdown on children (e.g. Amato, 2005; Callan et al, 2006), are such high rates of family breakdown really inevitable?

It is not obvious that these changes are inevitable. Many families clearly do come through difficult times intact. It is perhaps little known that, even today, most UK marriages still last a lifetime (Wilson & Smallwood, 2008).

The primary purpose of this book is to gather together a wide range of scholarly papers and reviews that investigate whether and how both married and unmarried couples can improve their odds of success of staying together, of being happier, of fighting less.

For policy-makers, commentators, practitioners and ordinary members of the public who are no longer prepared to accept the inevitability of family breakdown, this book offers many compelling rays of hope, grounded in top quality research and practice.

This collection of papers includes contributions from some of the leading researchers and practitioners in the US and Europe. There is a considerable degree of overlap between the various authors' perspectives on the central theme of early intervention, the influence of prediction research and longitudinal studies to inform new theory and practice, the emphasis on the use of empirically-informed and tested programmes – especially but not exclusively PREP

(Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001) – and the creative ways in which programmes are being adapted and applied in different settings.

Relationship education – the teaching and coaching of individuals and couples on how to have a happy, healthy and stable relationship – can contribute significantly to an overall strategy geared towards stemming and turning back the rising tide of family breakdown. This book tells you how and why.

## Chapter 2 – Relationship education

Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades' review of the state of the field of relationship education and of the latest advances in research into relationship formation is a must-read for relationship educators.

Headed by Stanley and colleague Howard Markman, the research group at the University of Denver has long been at the forefront of relationship research and its application into marriage and relationship programmes and wider family policy. Their relationship education programme PREP has undoubtedly been studied more than any other, is probably the most widely used programme in the US, and has now been developed into several different variants for use in prison, in the military, amongst unmarried new parents and amongst singles.

As a response to family fragmentation, relationship education has shown considerable promise. The most robust findings from the best studies show that couples can improve relationship quality and reduce conflict over a sustained period following a relationship course. Although programmes and research have tended to focus on white middle-class engaged couples, recent years have seen expansions of relationship education across a broad range of access points and socio-economic groups.

Expanded delivery and the emergence of several new large-scale trials offer new opportunities to increase understanding of relationship dynamics and strategies for preventive education.

However, Stanley & Rhoades also argue that the greatest potential for early intervention may lie in improved understanding of, and education about, risk and transition in relationship formation. Much of this derives from their development of a theory of commitment, a topic given surprisingly little attention in relationship research considering its perceived importance to the average couple.

Commitment theory, as framed here, involves two main factors: "dedication", the internal force that causes couples to think of themselves more as "us" than "you" and "me"; and "constraints", the external forces that view individuals as a couple and thereby raise the costs of leaving the relationship. This compelling model encompasses the ideas of "inertia" and "sliding/deciding" as partial explanations for why non-marital cohabitation and pre-engagement cohabitation raise the risk of subsequent separation. Inertia makes it harder for cohabiting couples to leave a relationship that might otherwise have dissolved had they not cohabited. Couples who slide into marriage – through cohabitation before engagement – thus tend to be less dedicated and stable than couples who decide to commit – through engagement before cohabitation.

These theories hold considerable promise as a basis for future early intervention programmes aimed at individuals before they form couple relationships. Rhoades & Stanley outline some of the possibilities in a later chapter. However all relationship educators will benefit greatly from the full description in this chapter of the development of commitment theory and

its associated ideas of inertia and sliding/deciding, as pertains to the risks associated with various pathways of how romantic relationships now form.

### Chapter 3 – Pre-relationship education

One of the perennial debates about relationship education surrounds the point at which services are available. Currently, in the US at least, almost all relationship programmes are offered to couples in existing marriages or relationships.

Galena Rhoades and Scott Stanley propose that pre-relationship education become more readily available to individual adults not yet in a relationship or in the earliest stages of forming a relationship. Existing relationship education programmes tend to focus on relationship dynamics that are changeable and not to worry too much about static relationship formation factors that, for couples at least, are hard or even impossible to change. However for singles, some of these relationship formation factors remain dynamic and still very much open to change. Therefore new programmes that focus on relationship formation as well as maintenance are needed.

Topics with a strong empirical base of information that are also especially suitable for pre-relationship education include mate selection, personal assessment, relationship development, stepchildren and safety. The new programme from the PREP stable “Within My Reach” has already had some success with these.

Perhaps the bigger problem for pre-relationship education remains access. Most existing programmes are run for couples. The perceived stigma of attending relationship intervention at any stage remains a significant barrier. Rhoades and Stanley include sensible proposals for reducing these barriers, whether perceived or real, and making pre-relationship education more accessible and attractive to singles. These include high quality marketing, possible offers of food, childcare and even transport, and flexible programmes that allow individuals to start as soon as possible

### Chapter 4 – Cohabitation and relationship education

Harry Benson’s study of bad habits in 236 parents attending post-natal clinics in the UK draws heavily on the theories espoused by the Denver group, in particular commitment theory and the principle of “sliding or deciding”.

Current UK studies show that during the first few years of parenthood unmarried couples are twice as likely to split up compared to married couples of similar age, income, education and ethnic group. Benson’s study looks at the distribution of negative behaviours that predict stability to see how and whether parents differ. These negative behaviours or bad habits are described as STOP signs: S=Score points; T=Think the worst; O=Opt out; P=Put down.

The findings in this study are striking. In terms of use of each individual bad habit, parents differ by gender but not by marital status. For example, mothers are more likely to ‘score points’ more whereas fathers are more likely to ‘opt out’, highlighting the gender-specific nature of the wife-demand—husband-withdraw phenomenon. However mothers score points and fathers opt out similarly, regardless of their marital status.

Nevertheless in terms of the way couples interact, two specific complex patterns of negative behaviour are found more often amongst unmarried parents than married parents. One

half of unmarried parents, compared to one quarter of married parents, either "*back off*" – where both parents opt out - or "*fire back*" – where fathers put down and mothers think the worst and either score points or put down.

Benson argues that these combinations of behaviours are consistent with the nature of a relationship where fathers are less committed and mothers are less secure. These new findings point the way to further investigation of the links between commitment, security, behaviour and stability.

For relationship educators, the study also highlights the utility of a short relationship intervention applied in antenatal and postnatal groups. Almost all parents in the study report that they found the one hour "*Let's Stick Together*" programme useful. Best of all, regardless of whether married or cohabiting, two thirds of mothers in the "*back off*" or "*fire back*" categories report that they are likely to change their behaviour as a result of recognising their own STOP signs.

### **Chapter 5 – Singles, Muslims and relationship education**

Howard Markman and colleagues present two interesting new topics in their paper. The first investigates the effectiveness of relationship education programmes amongst low-income communities where only one partner attends. The second explores the potential for use of the PREP relationship programme in particular within Muslim communities.

Markman's study invited either one or both partners of low-income couples to attend a shortened version of PREP. Although 7% of women and 35% of men did not show up initially, very few of those that started the programme missed any subsequent sessions. Both singles and couples reported that they found the sessions useful, suggesting that individual attendance is helpful. Interestingly non-attending partners reported they found the course as helpful as their attending partners, suggesting a strong transfer effect. Both singles and couples reported reductions from pre- to post- in their negative communication. The transfer effect was especially strong where men attended the sessions. This preliminary finding supports the use of relationship education programmes where only one partner may be attending, for example in postnatal clinics or in prisons.

The authors conclude with a discussion of the potential applicability of the PREP model in Islamic communities, drawing on PREP's strengths of a focus on education and mutual understanding and also delivery by local trainers who are familiar with their audience.

### **Chapter 6 – Challenges facing relationship educators**

As Brian Doss points out in his thoughtful paper on some of the challenges facing relationship educators, relatively few couples seek relationship support of any kind, whether through preventive education or remedial therapy. In each case, couples who do access some kind of programme are not necessarily those couples at highest risk who might benefit most.

One of the many suggestions is to improve the advertising and marketing of relationship programmes. For example, pre-marital programmes could better highlight the quality of the course leader because engaged couples rate this as the most important programme characteristic. Marital therapy programmes could better highlight their relevance to couples with money or sex problems, two common sources of argument yet rarely the reason given for seeking help. Other suggestions include expansion of self-help resources accessed via the internet, TV and books, as well as investigation into their effectiveness.

Amongst the empirical data that inform his sensible suggestions, three findings seem especially noteworthy. The first is that local government has an interest in promoting pre-marriage programmes: one US\$15m state-wide programme is estimated to pay for itself if there is just 0.03% subsequent reduction in divorce rates. The second is that employers have an interest in supporting their employees' family life: marital distress has a unique impact on work functioning. The third is that those that seek help through books are a different group to those that go on a course: one quarter of all couples read a self-help book on relationships during their early years of marriage but only one third of these also attend a programme of some kind.

Doss summarises his proposals as follows: improve the reach of existing programmes; prioritise investigations of the effectiveness of existing support and programmes; and develop new programmes that better fit where couples are looking for help.

### Chapter 7 – Early interventions

The transition to parenthood is a vulnerable time for a relationship but also an opportunity for early intervention. Yet practitioners in health, education and social services, to whom parents routinely turn for support at this key moment, report uncertainty in how best to respond.

Penny Mansfield of the London-based relationship organisation One Plus One describes the "Brief Encounter" model that has been used to train 3,500 health visitors in how to recognise the moment they are turned to for help with relationship problems, how to encourage parents to discuss relationship issues, and how to conclude or refer onwards appropriately. Evaluations show that almost all professionals feel more confident discussing relationship problems as a result of the training and are then able to identify more mothers potentially in need of support. Mothers are also more likely to report having received help from their health visitor as a result.

Most recently One Plus One has been establishing new routes for early intervention, such as training volunteers how to support mothers in deprived areas who do not access mainstream services, and also introducing new internet-based services to support the parental relationship.

### Chapter 8 – Coping with stress

In a slightly different approach to relationship education, Swiss psychologists Kathrin Widmer and Guy Bodenmann evaluate a programme – developed by Bodenmann – that teaches couples how to cope better with stress. Their premise is the compelling link between chronic stressors from outside the home, such as work, and marital satisfaction. Stress can lead to poorer communication, less time together, and more health problems.

By focusing on improved coping strategies, the 18 hour course – Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET) – aims to reduce communication problems that are often the result of badly handled stress in everyday life. CCET has now been delivered to over 600 couples in Switzerland. Whereas most relationship courses tend to focus on communication and conflict resolution, this approach is interesting because of its additional focus on stress and coping.

In their paper, Widmer and Bodenmann explain the rationale behind CCET and summarise three recent outcome studies evaluating the effectiveness of the programme.

In the first and most elaborate study using both observational and self-report measures, individuals showed improved coping and reduced dysfunction. Couples showed more supportive coping and less negativity up to two years later, especially amongst the women.

The second study used a shorter version of CCET that excluded the sections on individual coping. Using self-report measures only, couples still showed improvements in couple coping, though less than with the longer programme. However there was no improvement in individual coping. Although not conclusive, these two studies suggest that marital quality is influenced by the ability to cope well both as individual and couple.

The third study, still underway, is looking specifically at the effectiveness of CCET in reducing stress amongst parents, doubtless a popular subject. Couples have reported the course helped improve marital quality and reduce the stress of parenting.

## Chapter 9 – Screening distressed couples

As Doug Snyder and colleagues point out in "Screening for Marital Distress", marital satisfaction is the strongest single predictor of life satisfaction. Correspondingly, relationship distress has a unique influence on other emotional and behavioural indicators. Happier couples have happier lives. Distressed couples have more problems in their lives.

Historically, assessments of marital or relationship quality have tended to focus on continuous measures or sliding scales – such as "satisfaction", "adjustment", "discord" or "distress". However in assigning couples into distinct categories, such as "distressed" and "non-distressed", a fairly arbitrary dividing line or cut-score must be set.

Snyder's paper provides evidence that couple distress is more than just a sliding scale. At some key tipping point, distress becomes a *taxon*, a distinct category of its own that differs both qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

For researchers, the finding that distress is *taxonic* opens the way for greater clarity in use of cut-scores to identify distressed couples. For clinicians, the realisation that some couples have crossed some tipping point of distress may influence the nature of intervention offered.

Snyder and colleagues provide a simple 10-item questionnaire. Different users can apply different cut-scores. A lower cut-score of 3 or more can be applied in clinical settings where the requirement is for sensitivity and referral of individuals. A higher cut-score of 5 or more can be applied in research settings where the requirement is for specificity and categorisation of groups. The emergence of a taxonic measure with good reliability and validity also offers interesting opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons.

Although screening may be unnecessary for most preventive programmes, relationship educators working in remedial or treatment settings will find this a helpful tool for providing an appropriate level of referral and subsequent intervention.

## Case study – The Marriage Course

It is possible that a reader of this book may learn a great deal of the rationale and evidence underlying relationship education yet may still be none the wiser as to what a typical course involves. The Marriage Course is an excellent example of relationship education. It is not typical in that other courses mentioned in this book have a clearer empirical foundation (a detailed evaluation is currently underway). But it is very typical in that it is easy to access, easy to teach, easy to apply, and non-threatening. Nicky & Sila Lee's description of their Marriage Course describes how it all works.

We felt it important to include this case study for one other reason. The Marriage Course is comfortably the most popular relationship education programme in the UK, with over 1,000 trainers registered and around 7,000 couples attending each year. As with other leading pioneers of relationship education, some of whom writing or described in this book, the Lees deserve great credit for opening up the market.

## Chapter 10 – Relationship education policy in the US

With a \$47 billion budget for programmes that support children and families, it is perhaps unsurprising that some federal resources be allocated to help reduce problems and prevent them from happening in the first place. Originating from welfare reform in 1996 that acknowledged the protective function of married couple families, the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) has been funding marriage education programmes and research since 2002.

That the initiative has achieved widespread support amongst policy-makers, researchers and practitioners is in no small way due to the active engagement with difficult and sensitive issues. As Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education in the Administration for Children and Families, makes clear in his paper, it is equally important to understand what the initiative is not about as well as what it is about.

It is not about promotion, coercion, stigma or restrictions. It is not a dating service. Nor is it about reducing support for lone parents. All funded programmes must consult and engage with domestic violence issues and there are specific initiatives aimed at different cultural and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans. HMI has never been presented or intended as a panacea.

HMI is intended as a research-informed attempt to improve access to relationship education and support services that help individuals and families to succeed. Annual funding for the combined HMI and Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives stands at \$166m in the 2008 fiscal year. Although representing less than 1% of the entire family support budget, it is not yet clear whether and how the incoming administration will continue this programme.

Amongst many high profile state-wide programmes operating to date, seven states are using the Building Stronger Families model that comprises individual services, group programmes, and referrals. Other models include Supporting Healthy Marriage and Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives. Two national research centres have been established and an ongoing programme of evaluation is well underway. These research efforts will continue through to 2013.

## Chapter 11 – Relationship education policy in Norway

The Norwegian state has been arguably more proactive in the field of preventive relationship education than any other European country. Guro Hansen Helskog asks whether the upward trend in marriages and downward trend in divorces over the last few years may be the result of this effort.

Government support and funding for relationship education programmes began in 1994. The growing popularity and political significance of these courses was reflected when budget cuts threatened to end funding in 2006 and the programme was notably reinstated.

Although a number of different programmes have emerged, the two most successful have

been the Norwegian variant of PREP for young couples and a one day relationship course for new parents. Two other programmes on post-separation parenting and relationship education for ethnic minorities have also shown promise.

As the most widely used relationship programme, Norwegian PREP is aimed at couples establishing a serious relationship – because almost all couples getting married have previously cohabited. Since inception in 1999, some 1,300 workshop leaders have been trained and over 9,000 couples have attended workshops.

More recently the Norwegian government established a one day relationship programme for all new parents entitled “Living Together Nicely”. In 2007, over 2,000 couples attended one of 335 courses offered in health and social centres.

## **Chapter 12 – Relationship education policy in Malta**

Angela Abela’s review of families in the tiny island of Malta provides a fascinating case study of a country reconciling traditional beliefs and gender roles with the demands and expectations of a more liberal, modern western culture, for better and for worse.

Malta shares the distinction of being one of the only two countries in the world that prohibit divorce, the other being the Philippines. Yet the prevalence of divorce (conducted overseas) is low by western standards and marital conflict is also low. Distressed couples comprise an estimated 20% of married couples in Malta (including separated couples) compared to 32% of married couples in the US.

However a generation gap is fast emerging where teenagers and young couples engage in behaviours that no longer reflect their own values and expectations. Underage drinking, unsupervised internet use and pornography are all commonplace amongst Maltese teenagers. Contraceptive use is the lowest in international literature, according to one researcher. As a result, the rate of births outside marriage has doubled in recent years from 13% in 2001 to 25% now, almost one third of which to teenage mothers.

Young couples also report a clash of expectations about gender roles. Young fathers report difficulty in adjusting to their new role. Young mothers not only report difficulty in adjusting to the role expected of them but also disappointment in their marriage.

Although access to pre-marriage education and parenting classes is widespread, courses are not necessarily meeting the needs of young couples. However their prevalence provides ample opportunity to evaluate how relationship education can be more effective and relevant than it appears now. Abela concludes that Malta also needs to set these programmes within the broader context of a more substantial family policy.

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