

# Marriage Education

## What do we know?

## What should we do about it?

### Summary

As a response to the growing problem of family breakdown in the UK, fledgling community initiatives are emerging. These offer marriage & relationship education programmes to adult couples. The aim of this paper is to show how both research and experience might be applied to ensure these initiatives are genuinely effective.

Worldwide, only three educational courses to date have demonstrated any real promise in reducing divorce rates substantially: the “PREP” skills-based course, and the “FOCCUS” & “PREPARE” inventories.

Outcome research suggests that almost all other courses – on their own – tend to focus on improving “marital satisfaction” (happiness) with little evidence of improvement in “marital stability” (divorce rates). This paper attempts to explain the distinction.

Encouraging evidence from the USA however suggests that divorce rates can also be reduced effectively within the broader community – when set within an appropriate public policy or context.

Three key principles appear essential in doing this:

- A public policy promoting the value of marriage & commitment
- Access to regular marriage & relationship education as a healthy norm
- Access to the support of ordinary married “mentor couples” as a healthy norm



## Introduction

In order to learn whether couples can improve their odds of staying happily married, thereby reducing rates of family breakdown, we need to know three things.

- (1) We need to know what “risk factors” make marriages more likely to succeed or fail. For example, we might reasonably assume that couples who are better-off or those who communicate well together will probably have a more successful marriage. But this would be our personal assumption. We need objective research to check this out.
- (2) We need to know whether any of these “risk factors” can be changed by outside influence – specifically by “marriage education”. Ideally we would learn this over time by comparing couples who receive a programme with similar couples who do not.
- (3) We also need to know which approaches to marriage education are most effective, simply because there are so many of them.

## Predictors of marital stability

A good starting point is to establish that an array of research studies have identified many factors predictive of the “stability” of a marriage – whether a couple will stay together or not. Howard Markman and Scott Stanley helpfully arrange these factors into two groups <sup>(1)</sup>.

“**Static**” factors are those things we probably can’t do much about. These include a defensive personality, parental divorce, prior cohabitation; prior divorce, previous children, different religious beliefs, marrying young, whirlwind romances, and serious financial difficulties.

“**Dynamic**” factors are those things we definitely can do something about. These include a negative style of communication, difficulty with handling disagreements, unrealistic beliefs about marriage, different attitudes about important things, and a low level of commitment to one another.

To illustrate this more clearly, couples who stay married tend to have fewer negative automatic interactions – bad habits. Couples who divorce

tend to have more. Markman’s research group describes these destructive patterns of behaviour in terms of “Escalation, Invalidation, Negative Interpretations, & Withdrawal” <sup>(2)</sup>. Another prominent research group, led by John Gottman, describes them in terms of “Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, & Stonewalling” <sup>(3)</sup>.

It is striking that all of these predictive factors are **negatives** – things that have been done badly. Positive factors – things that have been done well – are far less powerful predictors of marital stability. In other words, it’s both the **negative** aspects of our background as well as the extent to which we handle our differences **negatively** that predict marital success or failure.

Therefore in order to improve “**stability**”, we should now be thinking of marriage education as an attempt to reduce these **negative** factors.

## Predictors of marital satisfaction

But as well as looking at “marital stability”, researchers have also looked at “marital satisfaction” – how happy couples are together.

It should be no great surprise to discover that these two issues are not the same. Most of us know of seemingly unhappy couples who stay together. We also know of seemingly happy couples who split up.

Research provides more specific instances. New parents, for example, report that their marital satisfaction deteriorates with the arrival of a new baby. Yet in those early years, the same couple is less likely to get divorced <sup>(4)</sup>.

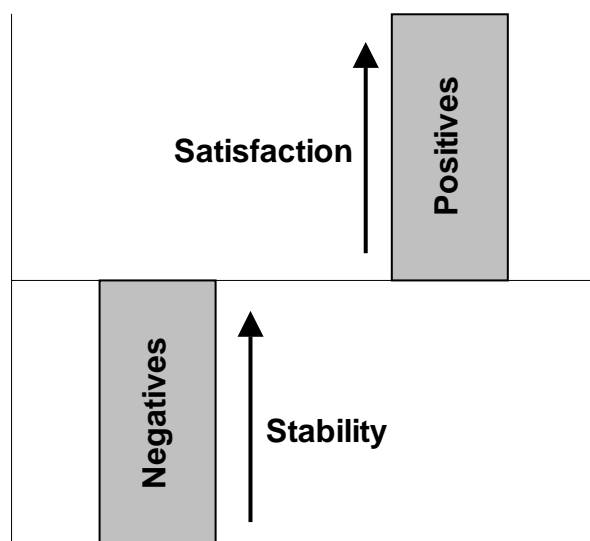
The predictors of marital satisfaction also tend to fall into static and dynamic groups. “**Static**” factors concern the **positive** aspects of a couple’s background. For example, one major survey found that happy couples are far more likely to say they have a good personality match and shared beliefs & values.

“**Dynamic**” factors concern the **positive** ways couples handle their differences. For example, the same survey found that happy couples are also far more likely to communicate well, handle differences well, discuss problems well, show affection to one another, and agree how to spend their time and money together <sup>(5)</sup>.

Therefore in order to improve “**satisfaction**”, we should now be thinking of marriage education as an attempt to build up these **positive** factors.

### Addressing stability and satisfaction

A simplified working summary of research findings thus might look something like this:



- (a) “**Stability**” depends largely on the **negative** aspects of family background and the extent to which couples handle their differences **negatively**.
- (b) “**Satisfaction**” depends largely on the **positive** aspects of family background and the extent to which couples handle their differences **positively**.

This is of course only a simplified model about the respective roles of positive and negative factors. Although it holds true in general, there is some overlap. For example, a study by John Gottman shows how negative factors predict divorce in the early years of marriage. But in later years, the absence of positive factors is the better predictor as it “eventually takes its toll” <sup>(6)</sup>.

### Positives and negatives

An obvious question now arises as to whether a course that concentrates on the building of new positive skills, raising levels of “satisfaction”, will also be effective at reducing the existing negative patterns of behaviour that influence “stability”.

In some cases, this is clearly not possible. It is not the positive that is important. It is the absence of the negative. For example, having divorced parents (negative) predicts a greater risk of instability. Having married parents (positive) predicts nothing. Likewise, a low level of commitment (negative) predicts greater risk of instability. A high level of commitment (positive) predicts nothing.

Yet some positive and negative factors do appear to overlap. Those couples who communicate poorly, for example, are more likely to be unstable. Those couples who communicate well are more likely to be satisfied. Much the same applies to the handling of disagreements. Educators might therefore assume that teaching positive communication & conflict resolution skills should have the twin benefits of both increasing satisfaction and reducing instability.

But this assumption is risky. The negative factors in question represent “old automatic” patterns of behaviour. These are subtle, persistent, natural interactions that may have been learnt and repeated – perhaps subconsciously – by a couple over months or years. When a new more positive interactive skill is learnt – such as active listening – the “new artificial” skill may be used consciously to good effect. With time and practice, the new skill may even become more automatic and subconscious.

Yet researchers contest this issue vigorously. For example, many programmes apply “active listening” skills as their central theme. Gottman and others dismiss such skills as rarely used in everyday life, predictive of nothing, ineffective in outcome studies, and hard to use when needed – i.e. when angry, tired or upset <sup>(7)</sup>.

Therefore we should be very cautious in assuming that teaching positive skills & satisfaction will have a corresponding impact by default on negative factors & stability. Positives and negatives are separate factors that may or may not be related.

### The “myth” of marital happiness

The key distinction between stability and satisfaction is further complicated in everyday life because of a widespread belief that happy

couples do stay together <sup>(8)</sup>. In addition almost all couples, when asked, rate their own marriage in terms of their ability to communicate. It turns out that happiness and communication are virtually inseparable in research studies <sup>(9)</sup>.

A natural conclusion from these beliefs is that strengthening marriages can be achieved almost entirely through learning positive communication skills. Whilst this is undoubtedly important for improving marital satisfaction, it does not necessarily address the issue of stability.

We can now look at the existing field of marriage education aware of two possible caveats.

- (1) Teaching mostly positive skills will not necessarily reduce the negative automatic behaviours that predict stability.
- (2) Teaching mostly communication skills will also not necessarily reduce the negative automatic behaviours that predict stability.

### **Methods of delivery**

In looking now at “what is out there”, the first observation is that a huge range of courses is available. Kim Halford identifies four major dimensions that describe method of delivery <sup>(10)</sup>.

- (1) The basis for the course. Some courses base their ideas entirely on research findings. Others rely on the experience of groups or an especially compelling individual experience.
- (2) The method of delivery. Courses can range from reading self-help books or watching a marriage video, to one-to-one couple work or group sessions.
- (3) The course intensity. Some courses involve a short seminar lasting a couple of hours. Others involve a residential weekend or a series of evenings.
- (4) The goal of the course. Some courses focus on dispelling myths by imparting good information. Others focus on teaching skills.

### **Evaluation and methodology**

The second observation to make about marriage education is that objective evaluation of course

effectiveness is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Scott Stanley highlights the examples below as illustrative of some of the pitfalls <sup>(11)</sup>:

- (1) People tend to be poor evaluators of courses. Responses are biased towards how much they paid, whether they were comfortable, and whether the presentation was good. Consistently positive feedback may simply reflect these factors rather than whether the course is actually any good.
- (2) Couples tend to be poor at evaluating their marriage. Typical responses are biased unrealistically high. When scores are high to begin with, it becomes difficult to detect an improvement.
- (3) The “dynamic” factors that influence couple stability are often very subtle, reflecting body language, eye contact, and the way words are used. These nuances are generally not picked up by the couples themselves but by trained observers using videos of couple interactions. These kinds of studies are both expensive and time-consuming.
- (4) Designing a study comparing couples who do a course with couples who don't is also very difficult. It's hard to make sure that the people who do the course aren't the kind of people who would have done well anyway. This is called a “selection effect”. It's also hard to follow-up the group of couples who didn't do the course. Most likely those who can't be traced have split up. But that can't be assumed. So there is a problem with “attrition” between groups.

### **The effects of “Marriage Education”**

Nonetheless many courses have been evaluated - for better, for worse. They can be described in terms of three general course types <sup>(12)</sup>. Understanding the distinction between stability and satisfaction should help explain the differences in subsequent course evaluation.

- (1) “**Information & Awareness courses**”.

These courses seek to raise awareness, dispel myths and generally impart helpful information and insight about marriage. The nature of these courses tends to be eclectic and personal.

Typical subject matter might include the so-called five “love languages”. Many people find it helpful to learn that husbands and wives may communicate their love in different ways – whether Time, Touch, Gifts, Words or Actions. Other subject matter might include “emotional needs”, “marriage maps”, “sexuality”, “in-laws”, “money”, and simple exercises in “communication” & “conflict resolution”.

But because different courses are so personal and non-standardised, they are especially hard to evaluate. Nonetheless, many small-scale studies have generally found that these type of courses help improve self-reported marital satisfaction in the short-term. This suggests that courses are successful in building up the key positive factors.

Unfortunately, even this evidence is somewhat diminished because almost all of these studies are methodologically weak. For example, most studies have no control or comparison group of similar couples who did either a different course or no course at all. Most also do not follow-up couples beyond six months.

But what should be of more concern is that there is no published evidence to date that any of these courses improve marital stability over time. This may seem surprising given the claims sometimes made about such courses. The finding may be easier to accept by considering whether any of these courses specifically address the all-important negative factors affecting stability.

### (2) “Inventories”.

In the UK, two inventories (or questionnaires) are available – “FOCCUS” and “PREPARE”. These are basically personalised awareness-raising courses facilitated by an individual or couple. An inventory consists of a standardised list of statements based on subjects or domains that predict marital outcomes. A profile is then produced based on the degree of agreement within the couple on each subject.

Studies have found that these profiles are remarkably accurate predictors of both satisfaction and stability up to 5 years later<sup>(13)</sup>. What this means is that the inventories are covering the right territory – in terms of both positive and negative factors. Unfortunately it is

by no means clear that the courses are necessarily changing marital behaviours and outcomes for the better – which is the ultimate aim.

However anecdotal evidence from both programme originators suggests that 10-15% of all couples are choosing to defer or cancel their weddings after completing the inventory. These couples tend to have high risk profiles anyway<sup>(14)</sup>.

### (3) “Skills courses”.

These are structured programmes usually involving teaching, demonstration and coaching of the skills that predict marital outcomes, according to research. Three courses of this type have been studied: “Relationship Enhancement” (RE), “Couple Communication” (CC), and “Prevention & Relationship Enhancement Programme” (PREP).

Studies comparing RE with “Information & Awareness courses” find that RE is the more successful at increasing marital satisfaction. RE’s main goal is to build “empathy”.

PREP’s twin goals are to reduce negative behaviours – those “dynamic” factors that are both open to change and most predictive of marital stability – and to increase positive behaviours – those “dynamic” factors most predictive of marital satisfaction<sup>(15)</sup>. The only published studies that have looked at changes in marital stability beyond six months using control groups as comparison involve PREP.

Four recent studies in the US, Germany & Australia - all with PREP - showed increases in marital satisfaction and sustained reduction in divorce rates up to 5 years later. Two other studies of PREP, both of which have major methodological shortcomings making them hard to interpret, found no apparent benefits. A major study is currently underway in the US that aims to address these and other shortcomings<sup>(16)</sup>.

### Other successful approaches

Two other community-oriented approaches appear to have reduced divorce rates<sup>(17)</sup>.

#### (1) “Community Marriage Policies”.

Community Marriage Policies represent a public statement in support of marriage by clergy in a

city. Over 160 cities in the US have now signed such policies.

A typical policy consists of several statements of intent such as: the offer of marriage education to every couple getting married; training of ordinary married couples as “mentors” to these engaged couples; and provision of appropriate ongoing education and support for married couples, those in distress, and those in stepfamilies.

Of these, 29 cities publish divorce data against which the success of such policies can be evaluated. The median reduction in divorce following a CMP signing appears to be 10% over 2 years <sup>(18)</sup>. (An independent report on these figures is expected in early 2003.) The size of this reduction suggests that the CMP signing has an effect across the non-church population.

Two cities present especially striking figures. Modesto in California was the first city to sign a CMP in 1986. Since then divorce rates have fallen 56%, marriage rates have risen 12%. These data stand in stark contrast to US national figures. Given these changes in family structure, other social factors associated with family structure should also have improved in Modesto. Sure enough, school truancy rates are down 20% and teenage pregnancies are down 30%.

Kansas City comes close to providing a control study. Since the 1995 CMP signing in “Kansas City, Kansas”, divorce rates have now fallen 46%. Across the river in “Kansas City, Missouri”, there is no CMP and no accompanying media publicity. Divorce rates there are just 6% lower.

## (2) “Marriage Savers”

A related project in US churches called “Marriage Savers” may have had even more dramatic effect on divorce rates. Marriage Savers churches agree to promote the benefits of marriage, and offer regular education and support to all couples. Support most often comes through the idea of couple to couple “mentoring” – where those with more experience of marriage spend time with those with less experience. Some couples also use mutual support groups like Marriage Encounter.

Both big and small church communities are experiencing unusually low divorce rates using this approach. For example, divorce rates in 6 “Marriage Savers” churches (representing 8,000 people and 560 weddings over a 3-10 year period) are one tenth what they should be. That’s an apparently remarkable reduction of 90% <sup>(19)</sup>.

Even if there is no particular reason to doubt any of the figures above, the lack of well-designed research studies on either policy invites scepticism over cause and effect. Publication of the independent report will undoubtedly add credibility, simply through sheer weight of evidence.

## Hard evidence of fewer divorces

There are now compelling indicators that suggest three ways in which divorce rates have been reduced substantially.

- (1) **“FOCCUS” and “PREPARE” inventories** used as pre-marriage courses appear to filter out some 10-15% of couples at high risk before they even get to sign the marriage register. This could represent the majority of couples at risk of divorce in the first five years of marriage. It may also account for much of the success of Marriage Savers in reducing divorces in church populations.
- (2) **One particular skills course, PREP**, reduces divorce risk substantially over 5 years. One study found 3% of PREP couples divorced compared to 16% of non-PREP couples within a 5-year period. Another study found divorce rates of 1.5% and 10.3% respectively. Both these studies demonstrate an 80% reduction in divorce risk within the first five years of marriage <sup>(20)</sup>.
- (3) **Publicly-stated “Community Marriage Policies”** in both cities and churches appear to change the prevailing culture in ways that reduce divorce rates.

It needs to be acknowledged again here that courses focusing mostly on awareness raising, communication or empathy undoubtedly do improve “marital satisfaction”. However there is no evidence to date that such courses – on their own – have any effect on “marital stability”.

## Ingredients of a successful policy

If a community – whether city, county, church or other group – wished to construct an effective policy for strengthening marriages and reducing divorces, it appears that a combination of three essential ingredients is necessary.

- (1) A publicly stated policy in open support of marriage appears to have impact on marital stability both in the immediate and wider community.
- (2) The availability of regular ongoing marriage education for all couples as a healthy norm – within such a policy – appears to contribute to improvements in marital stability. The inclusion of PREP for its well-documented stand-alone effects seems sensible. However this is by no means essential. Successful community marriage policies have combined inventories and information & awareness courses to good effect.
- (3) The availability of regular ongoing support, mainly through “mentoring”, also appears important. Easy-to-use inventories make mentoring very accessible to virtually any ordinary married couple.

## The benefits of “extended family”

It could be argued that these ingredients represent a rediscovery of the benefits of “extended family”. “Extended family” offers intimate exposure to several couples as a source of reinforced values, role models and support.

In contrast, modern “nuclear families” offer children intimate exposure to just one couple – their parents. Where there is dysfunction between the parents – as is inevitable in all relationships at some level – the children lack an alternative trusted source of values, or role model from whom to learn intimacy, or source of support in their own relationships.

As evidence of this generational influence, Judith Wallerstein’s studies highlight the gulf in relational behaviour between children of either divorce or intact marriage when they become adults <sup>(21)</sup>. Paul Amato’s studies even more clearly show that divorce breeds divorce and marital problems breed marital problems <sup>(22)</sup>.

The key ingredients can be restated as follows:

### (1) Marriage Policy

= “Marriage is important”

### (2) Marriage Education

= “Ongoing education is normal”

### (3) Marriage Mentoring

= “Ongoing support is healthy”

## Bristol Community Family Trust - an example of this approach

Bristol Community Family Trust intends to apply these principles as follows <sup>(23)</sup>:

- (1) An ongoing media campaign is aimed at raising awareness of the benefits of marriage and commitment, as clearly identified by research <sup>(24)</sup>. Compared to all categories of unmarried people, married people are (and become) happier, healthier, longer living, wealthier and safer to be around. Getting and staying married produces a long-term mindset that tends to change married peoples’ behaviour for the better.
- (2) As Bristol couples pass certain key life events, they will be offered a course of relationship education – regardless of whether married or not. This will be offered when couples get married, have a baby and send a child to school. The key personnel involved in accessing couples are Registrars, church leaders, health visitors, midwives, GPs, and head-teachers.
- (3) The educational course of choice is a short version of PREP. This is combined with follow-up sessions where the FOCCUS inventory is facilitated by ordinary “married mentor couples”. Both of these courses are ideally suited to a wide population, regardless of status or belief. Most importantly, both courses also have known track records in substantially reducing divorce rates and improving satisfaction.

## References

- (1) Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.L. (2001). *Fighting for your marriage, New & revised*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- (2) Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.L. (2001). *Fighting for your marriage, New & revised*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- (3) Gottman, J. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- (4) Sanders, R.M., Nicholson, J.M., & Floyd, F.J. (1997). Couples relationships and children. In W.K. Halford & H.J. Markman (Eds). *Clinical Handbook of Couples Intervention*. Chichester: Wiley.
- (5) Olson, D.H. & Olson-Sigg, A. (2000). *Empowering Couples: Building on your strengths*. Canada: ENRICH
- (6) Gottman, J. & Levenson, R. (2000). The timing of divorce: Predicting when a couple will divorce over a 14-year period. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **62**, 737-745.
- (7) Gottman, J., Coan, J., Carrere, S., & Swanson, C. (1998). Predicting marital happiness and stability from newly-wed interactions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **60**, 5-22.
- (8) Fowers, B.J. (2000). *Beyond the myth of marital happiness*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (9) Fowers, B.J. & Olson, D.H. (1993). ENRICH Marital Satisfaction scale: A reliability and validity study. *Journal of Family Psychology*, **7**, 1-10.
- (10) Halford, W.K. (2000). *Australian Couples in Millenium Three*. Canberra: Department of Family and Community Service
- (11) Stanley, S.M. (2001). Making a Case for Pre-marital Education. *Family Relations*, **50**, 272-280.
- (12) Halford, W.K. (2000). *Australian Couples in Millenium Three*. Canberra: Department of Family and Community Service
- (13) Williams, L. & Jurich, J. (1995). Predicting marital success after five years: Assessing the predictive validity of FOCCUS. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, **21**, 141-153.  
  
Fowers, B. J., Montel, K. H., & Olson, D. H. (1996). Predicting marital success for premarital couple types based on PREPARE. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, **22**, 103-119.
- (14) David Olson, personal communication cited in Stanley, S.M. (2001). Making a Case for Pre-marital Education. *Family Relations*, **50**, 272-280
- (15) Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.L. (2001). *Fighting for your marriage, New & revised*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- (16) Stanley, S.M. (2001). Making a Case for Pre-marital Education. *Family Relations*, **50**, 272-280
- (17) Data from [www.marriagesavers.org](http://www.marriagesavers.org)
- (18) H.Benson analysis of Marriage Savers data
- (19) H.Benson analysis of Marriage Savers data
- (20) Stanley, S.M. (2001). Making a Case for Pre-marital Education. *Family Relations*, **50**, 272-280
- (21) Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Blakelee, S. (2000). *The unexpected legacy of divorce: a 25 year landmark study*. New York: Hyperion.
- (22) Amato, P. & De Boer, D. (2001). The transmission of marital instability across generations: Relationship skills or commitment to marriage? *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, **63**, 1038-1051.
- (23) See BCFT website [www.bcft.co.uk](http://www.bcft.co.uk)
- (24) Waite, L., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The Case for Marriage*. New York: Doubleday.  
  
For a UK review of this research by H Benson, see [www.bcft.co.uk](http://www.bcft.co.uk) or [www.2-in-2-1.co.uk](http://www.2-in-2-1.co.uk)

## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to those who made constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

In particular, thanks to Dave Percival of "2-in-2-1" for challenging and encouraging me to clarify my thought process. Thanks also to Jill Kirby of the "Centre for Policy Studies". This paper expands on a presentation I gave at her invitation. Finally thanks to Nick Gulliford of "FOCCUS".