

Making the Link between Strengthening Families and Relationship and Marriage Education

► Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families is a research-informed, strengths-based approach to increase family stability, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Five *protective factors*¹ are the foundation of this approach:

- **Parental resilience.** The pressures that parents face can be overwhelming at times. Parents who have the skills to manage stress and function well when faced with stressors, challenges or adversity are more likely to respond consistently, warmly and sensitively to their children's needs.
- **Social connections.** All parents need people—family members (including a spouse or a partner), friends, neighbors, co-workers and community members—who care about them and their children; who can be non-judgmental listeners; who they can turn to for well-informed advice; who they can call on for help with different tasks and in solving problems; who help fulfill their need for affiliation and social stimulation; who can provide encouragement and hope when they need it; and who can affirm their healthy parenting efforts.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development.** Children's early environments, experiences and attachments shape the processes that influence brain development, learning, executive functioning, self-regulation, socialization and behavior control. Children do best when parents have accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for their behavior, respond in positive ways during each developmental stage and adapt their parenting style to meet children's individual needs and unique circumstances. Early brain development can be compromised when a child is exposed to hostile, neglectful or non-responsive parenting.
- **Concrete support in times of need.** All parents need help sometimes to address needs and manage stress caused by challenges and adversity. Accessing concrete informal or formal sources of support in times of need requires positive help-seeking behavior (i.e., self-advocacy), the availability and accessibility of resources and services and high-quality service delivery.
- **Social and emotional competence of children.** Self-regulation, executive functioning, social cognition and

Relationship and marriage education (RME) is an important component of family support that can help families build protective factors that promote optimal child development and make child maltreatment less likely to occur. This document outlines the Strengthening Families approach to building protective factors, as well as a model developed by Cooperative Extension to inform RME, and identifies ways that programs and professionals may be able to use them together to improve outcomes for children and families.

self-awareness are the essential components of social and emotional competence. These competencies lay the foundation for learning and problem solving, identity development, communication skills and effective interpersonal relationships. The development of social and emotional competence is directly related to consistently nurturing and responsive care from parents and other adult caregivers whose social and emotional competence is also well developed.

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help programs work with children and families to build protective factors with families. Many states also use the Strengthening Families approach to inform state prevention strategies, strengthen families in the child welfare system and engage parents and communities in building protective factors.

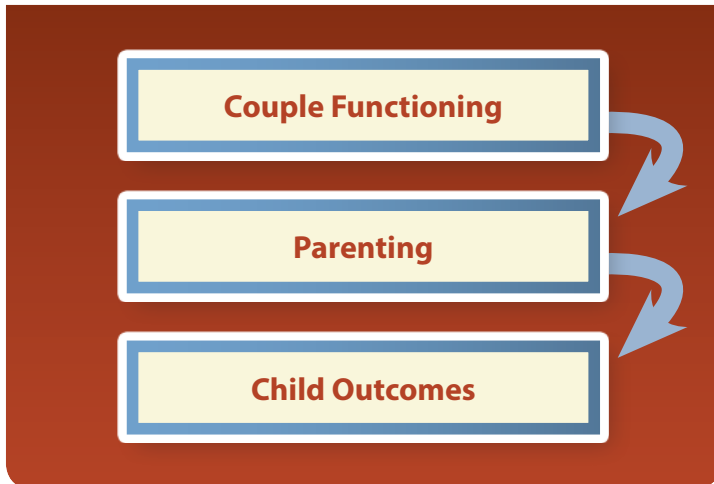
► Why Healthy Couple and Co-Parenting Relationships Matter

Children are safer, healthier and more likely to thrive when the adults in their lives have healthy relationships – whether their parents are married or unmarried and currently in a romantic relationship or not. In fact, evidence of the link between relationship quality and parenting from the last decade of research is overwhelming, and the findings are quite robust.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, healthy couple relationships *spill over* into healthy parent-child relationships. In other words, elements of the couple relationship impact parenting practices which, in turn, impact child outcomes. This has been found among studies of married and non-married couples, post-divorce couples, low-income and higher income couples and ethnic majority and minority couples. The impact is found on mothers' and fathers' parenting, and on outcomes for young children, school-age children and adolescents.

¹ Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families.

Figure 1
The Influence of Couple Relationship Quality
on Parenting and Children



“Co-parenting” is a distinct dimension or part of the couple relationship that also has received the attention of researchers. Co-parenting refers to the level of support and cooperation between parents in regard to their parenting. There is growing evidence that the quality of the couple relationship impacts the co-parenting relationship in married and non-married families alike, which impacts parenting behaviors and the parent-child relationship.

► What is Relationship and Marriage Education?

Research on couple and marital relationships has significantly informed our understanding of what makes relationships “work.” While couples can interact in a variety of ways and consider themselves in healthy relationships, there emerges from research overarching patterns of interactions that seem to be fundamental to forging healthy relationships over the long term. As couples seek to share their lives with each other, understanding these recommended practices can help them build and maintain healthy and satisfying relationships.

Simply put, relationship and marriage education (RME) involves teaching principles, practices and skills with the intent of helping individuals develop and maintain happy and healthy couple, co-parenting and/or marital relationships. Based on decades of research, the *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model*² (NERMEM) outlines seven core principles or concepts that promote healthy relationship development and stability.

These core components of a healthy relationship, summarized in **Figure 2**, are grounded in principles similar to those that guide the Strengthening Families Approach:

- **It is research-informed.** Research confirms key patterns of thinking and behaviors associated with healthy couple relationships. Also, research reinforces that RME programs do make a difference.

- **It is strengths-based.** All individuals and couples exhibit unique strengths, capabilities and potential to form and maintain healthy relationships. This model reinforces the importance of identifying, acknowledging and building upon the strengths of individuals and couples, and empowering them to take responsibility in the care and quality of their relationships.
- **It is process-oriented.** Healthy couple relationships develop over time. The practices that support healthy couple functioning are dynamic, not static, and evolve as the relationship adapts to the changing needs of the individual partners, couple and growing family over time. This model reinforces skills that couples can use to manage and adapt to their evolving needs.
- **It is sensitive to diversity.** The model respects the various types of relationships individuals develop and emphasizes process (i.e., how couples interact) over structure (i.e., marital status). Also, there is diversity in how couples from various socio-economic, racial and ethnic groups interact within relationships and marriages.

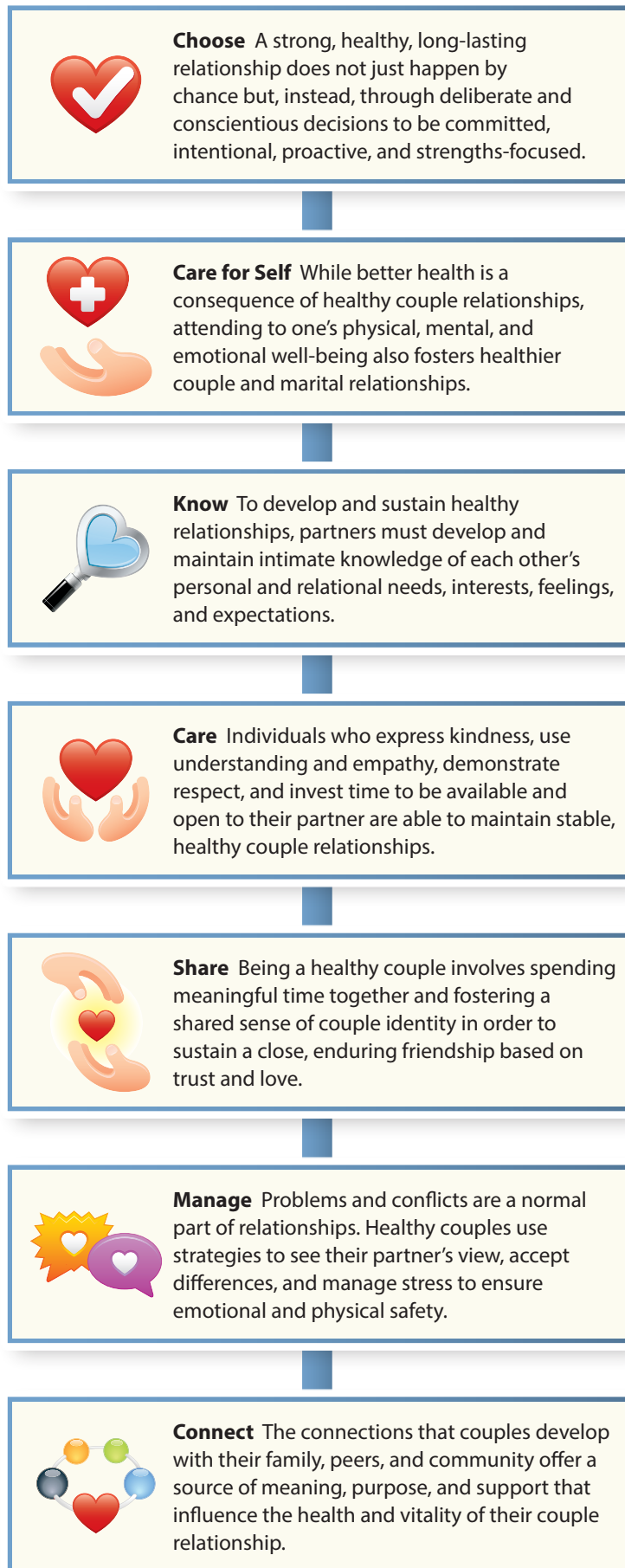
What RME is Not!

- RME is distinct from couples counseling or therapy. Whereas therapy is more specific to the individual or couple and focuses on improving particular problems that are often serious, RME is a type of family life education that focuses on increasing individual and couple understanding of relationship principles and skills by sharing information, tools and strategies.
- The focus of RME is not advocating that people ‘get married’ or remain in unhealthy relationships. RME is not about withdrawing supports from single parents or diminishing the important work of single parents. RME does not stigmatize or limit access to divorce.
- RME skills can prevent and reduce household stress levels. But it’s not a panacea, particularly for families experiencing physical abuse, intimate partner violence or chronic neglect. These cases may require the intervention of trained domestic violence or family safety experts. Couples who experience a pattern of ongoing relationship distress or are exposed to intimate partner violence should be referred to a trained clinician.

²Futris, T.G., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2013). National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Linking Research to Relationship and Marriage Education. P. In T.G. Futris & F. Adler-Baeder (Eds), *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Core Teaching Concepts for Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Programming*. (Publication No. HDFS-E-157). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Available at www.nermen.org.

Figure 2

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model



► How Relationship and Marriage Education Links to the Strengthening Families Framework

RME develops parental resilience. RME seeks to empower parents to assume responsibility and control over their actions. For example, RME emphasizes to parents the importance of healthy self-care (eating, exercise, sleep, stress management) behaviors in relationships (see “Care for Self” in Figure 2). When parents are able to care for themselves, they are also more likely to properly care for their children and model these behaviors to them. As well, parents’ poor management of stress and emotions in the couple relationship can create an unhealthy environment for children. As they choose to avoid actions that put their child at risk of harm and choose to engage in behaviors that positively promote their child’s well-being, it is important that they also consider how their relationship choices may impact their own and their children’s lives. When parents are intentional in their actions, they can make decisions that ultimately benefit their children and teach children how to make good choices themselves.

RME reinforces the value of healthy social connections. In addition to teaching couples and co-parents strategies for fostering positive interactions with each other, RME reinforces that varying connections with others are highly influential to the health and vitality of their relationships. This is reflected in the concept “Connect” in Figure 2. The skills learned in RME can help parents develop social connections with friends, family members and people in the community, thereby exposing their children to positive social connections as well. This creates opportunities for both parents and children to independently engage in activities outside of the home and build supportive relationships with others.

RME promotes knowledge of parenting and child development: Conflict between parents does not go unnoticed by children. In fact, parental conflict can impact children’s social, emotional and physical well-being. When high amounts of conflict and stress are present in couple and co-parenting relationships, parents are more likely to be overly punitive, harsh or hostile toward their children. RME promotes a more respectful, positive family environment – one in which both parents and children feel comfortable and safe to express their needs and share their thoughts and beliefs. When parents become comfortable with demonstrating “care” (see Figure 2) to each other, they are more likely to do so toward their children. Also, co-parents who participate in RME are better equipped with skills to discuss and manage inevitable conflicts and differences in parenting approaches. Parents (married and unmarried) who maintain a cooperative parenting alliance are more likely to promote the physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of their children.

RME encourages concrete support in times of need: In addition to reinforcing the value of meaningful social connections that provide a support system for couples when they encounter challenges and stressful experiences, RME encourages parents to identify and seek out formalized sources of support in their community. This may include counseling or therapy if their

challenges and conflicts cannot be managed with the skills they develop through RME. As well, while parents may learn how to discuss and set financial goals through RME, additional financial support services may be helpful in facilitating economic stability and addressing a common stressor among couples.

RME cultivates the social and emotional competence of children. The communication and conflict management skills parents learn in RME not only enhance relations between parents but can also facilitate more positive relationships with their children. Parents serve as role models for children's interpersonal relationships. When children see their parents expressing care for one another or for a new partner, they learn how to do so themselves. In contrast, children whose parents engage in frequent conflict and have poor coping techniques may never have the chance to see what healthy relationships look like. If children are unable to envision a healthy relationship, they may have greater difficulty navigating their own relationships with friends, family members and future romantic partners.



► Implementing RME within a Strengthening Families Framework

States, communities and organizations will find that RME and Strengthening Families are mutually supportive; that is, implementing RME will strengthen and support the implementation of Strengthening Families, and vice versa. Together, RME and Strengthening Families can enrich ongoing work to improve conditions for children and families.

Healthy relationships and positive parenting practices go hand-in-hand. The promotion of a safe and supportive home environment for a child is inextricably linked to creating a safe and supportive couple and co-parenting relationship between parents, and RME offers a direct means for creating this safe and supportive family environment. When adults have more supportive and less conflicted couple and co-parenting relationships, the entire family system is equipped to better handle stressors in their lives. In turn, children experience greater family stability, are at less risk for abuse, and fare better on a broad range of child outcomes.

Application of RME to Family Strengthening Programming

When offering parenting education programs, are you actively recruiting both parents to participate? When both parents attend your program, do the messages and resources shared make them both feel valued? Applying the RME skills yourself during meetings, conversations and classes will not only help you develop more positive relations with the parents you serve, but it will also model for parents what these skills look like. Integrating RME into your existing programming can help parents develop healthy couple and co-parenting relations while also learning effective parenting practices.

Below are a few examples of how to apply RME in child- and family-serving programs:

- Ask parents to identify barriers that prevent them from establishing or maintaining healthy relationships. How can they make a conscious effort to overcome those obstacles?
- Encourage parents to identify the stressors in their lives and how they typically manage those stressors. Are any of the coping mechanisms unhealthy? If so, help them make an action plan for curbing that behavior and incorporating healthy coping into their life.
- Help single parents explore important things to learn about new partners, the benefits of moving slowly into new relationships as they get to know new partners and the influence of their relationship choices on their children's safety and well-being.
- Have partners each make a list of actions that would make them feel loved. Have them share their lists with one another so they better understand what each can do to make the other feel more loved.
- Have parents begin to actively express appreciation to their partner (and children). Have them strive to do and say something that expresses gratitude to their partner daily.
- Address the value of a team approach to decision-making. Individuals in healthy couple relationships express their value for each other by promoting "we-ness" when in conflict rather than using a win-lose approach. Teach conflict management strategies that reinforce understanding and teamwork.
- Create and/or promote opportunities in the community that bring couples together and/or strengthen relationships and marriages. This could include offering workshops, coordinating community dance or dinner events where couples can get to know each other and build relationships, promoting awards to recognize healthy relationships (e.g., Couple of the Year Award, 40 Years Together Award, etc.), sharing Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and other community messages through local radio and printed media outlets.

Additional information and resources to teach RME are available from the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network at www.nermen.org.