

FOCUS

ON

Healthy Relationships

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University
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The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) evolved through a statewide collaboration initiated by Governor Frank Keating. In 1998, Governor Keating asked economists from Oklahoma State University and the University of Oklahoma to identify how Oklahoma could become a more prosperous state. Two social indicators reported to be hurting Oklahoma's economy were a high divorce rate and high rates of out-of-wedlock births. Children living with married parents or stepparents are significantly less likely to be living at or below the poverty rate. Therefore, the OMI was launched. Funding was secured and a commitment made to deliver educational services across Oklahoma. The stated goal was to reduce the divorce rate by one-third by the year 2010.

The Bureau for Social Research at Oklahoma State University administered a baseline survey to 2323 households to assess Oklahomans' attitudes about marriage and divorce (Johnson et al., 2001). Results indicated that 32 percent of Oklahoma adults report having been divorced at least once. Among Oklahomans who have been divorced, 78 percent have children with a previous spouse. Among Oklahomans who have never been married and are romantically involved with someone, 37 percent live with their partner. Among currently married persons, 32 percent report having premarital preparation (educational class, workshop or counseling).

The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) was selected as the education program for the OMI due to (1) positive research findings regarding its effectiveness and (2) its flexibility in teaching relationship skills to a variety of audiences. Studies indicate that couples who have participated in the program have been less likely than couples not receiving PREP to break-up or divorce up to five years following the program (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, and Clements 1993). In addition, couples who have participated in PREP are more likely than other couples to gain in or maintain higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Renick, Blumberg, and Markman 1992).

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) Family & Consumer Sciences program views PREP and the statewide initiative as an opportunity to teach individuals and couples how to have healthy relationships. OCES Family & Consumer Sciences educators have been teaching PREP since 2001. The skills provided by this program are useful within any relationship whether it be couples, parent-child, siblings, peers, coworkers, or employee- employer. OCES is dedicated to enhancing the lives of Oklahomans, and continues to teach the program as a way to enhance healthy relationships.

This issue of Focus includes articles by two FCS educators who have delivered PREP to different types of audiences.



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OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION SERVICE



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Joe Wilmoth – OCES/FCS PREP Coordinator & Graduate Assistant

Hundreds of individuals throughout Oklahoma, many of them in at-risk situations, have learned skills for building healthy relationships through workshops conducted by Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service.

In conjunction with the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI), 21 county extension educators have presented 68 PREP workshops since August 1, 2003, to such diverse audiences as high school and college students, TANF recipients, Headstart parents, church groups, and inmates.

The OMI selected PREP (the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) as the curriculum for these workshops. This program has a strong research basis and evaluation record. Some of the topics covered include how to talk safely without fighting, preserving fun and friendship, maintaining commitment, and avoiding common pitfalls.

Educators such as Brenda Medlock in Kiowa County often work with individuals who have received funds from TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). She also conducts workshops open to the public, especially to accommodate couples referred by a judge who Medlock says “goes the extra mile” to help couples avoid divorce.

“Everybody is pretty receptive,” Brenda reports, who has conducted seven workshops this year. “They say they wish they had received the training earlier in their relationships so they would have known things they should and shouldn’t do.”

Cynthia Griffith presents primarily to TANF populations in Rogers County. Participants in her latest workshop were so positive about the classes that they asked her to present the training again so they could bring their spouse, significant other, or children next time.

Griffith recalled one participant who was particularly excited about taking the classes. Her husband, who was incarcerated, had been taking PREP in prison, and she was looking forward to trying out the skills with him since he also knew how to use them. She said she was eager to see how she and her husband will interact when he is released in a few months.

Glenda Wiley, an educator in Bryan County, has found that it works well to partner with other agencies in teaching PREP, and referrals come from judges, DHS, and others.

Referring to courses taught in high schools, she noted, “We had some girls change their minds. They decided, ‘There’s more to getting married than I realized.’ At least a couple postponed getting married, and one made plans to go to college and begin a career before getting married. Even some of the guys signed testimonials that they had reevaluated marriage plans as a result of the course, discovering there was more to marriage than they realized.”

In an adult class, a divorced couple joined the class because they wanted to rebuild their marriage for the sake of their children. Wiley reported, “As soon as they learned the Speaker/Listener technique, they started using it, and it really helped. They said they discovered how they really had not been listening to each other; they had been interested only in getting their own messages across.”

Karen Armbruster, from Woods County, has focused on correctional facilities and substance abuse treatment centers, where she reports that responses to the workshops have been extremely positive.

PREP is an educational relationship enrichment program designed to provide the skills necessary to have healthy relationships and decrease marital distress



and divorce. PREP attempts to increase protective factors (e.g., friendship, fun, commitment) and decrease risk factors (e.g., destructive conflict). Through workshops, core concepts are discussed and participants practice key techniques to achieve the skills related to those concepts (e.g. active listening, effective problem solving, etc.). In addition, homework assignments are provided to par-

ticipants to reinforce concepts and skills (Stanley, Blumberg, and Markman, 1999).

Since the OCES partnership with the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative began, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Educators have presented over 246 workshops throughout the state. Each year the OCES Family and Consumer Sciences program has contracted with the Depart-

ment of Human Services to provide PREP workshops in counties throughout Oklahoma. Extension FCS educators have provided 68 PREP workshops during the current contract period. Audiences reached include diverse populations such as high school and college students, TANF clients, couples, Headstart parents, church groups and inmates

PREP as Sweethearts Weekend

Mary Rhyne – Key County

In observance of the valentine season, a PREP class promoted as “sweethearts weekend” was offered February 6-7, 2004 by Kay County FCS Educator, Mary Rhyne. Committed couples who were engaged, newlyweds, or those who had been married a number of years was the target audience for the event. Class participants included couples from each of these categories.

Sweethearts weekend began Friday evening at 7:00 p.m. and concluded Saturday at 5:00 p.m. Friday evening consisted of introductions with an ice breaker and the first two lessons on danger signs and safety, structure and communication. The evening concluded after coaching each couple on the speaker/listener technique. The homework assignment was to practice the speaker/listener technique before morning and to identify their goals for sweethearts weekend.

Saturday included a mix of lecture, role play, and practice sessions to reinforce what was learned, practice skills and complete a problem solving assignment.

Exit evaluations and comments made throughout the class provided positive reactions overall from the participants.

One young couple that attended the sweethearts weekend was of special interest. They had been married only a few months and were very much in love. However, neither had anticipated the dynamics of married life. Although they had double-booked themselves for this particular weekend, they chose to attend Sweethearts Weekend because of their desire for their marriage to survive. The differences in lifestyle and personality that originally attracted them to each other became an annoyance after marriage. They had imagined “living happily ever after” and were taken by surprise to find out how marriage affected their personal habits and schedules and how hard marriage was. Although they wanted their marriage to succeed, they both realized changes had to be made. Throughout the class they shared with each other their feelings respectfully, candidly. The speaker-listener technique was effective in resolving an incident that came up between them during the weekend and they developed some good solutions when working on problem solving. They asked questions, listened, and were interested in what others had to say.

At the end of the class when names



for door prizes were drawn, this young couple won one. They selected an educational book on relationships although chocolates and popular videos were also among the choices. Since the class, they have expressed gratitude for the availability of PREP and suggested that others attend. They have made efforts to use PREP skills in their marriage and feel like they have had some success getting used to living with one another in cooperation and as helpmates. They responded in a follow-up evaluation, that they hope to be able to attend such a class each year.

FOCUS is a publication designed to direct attention to innovative Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs and to share program philosophy and updates of new and changing program directions. Your comments and suggestions for future issues are welcomed and appreciated. Please send all correspondence to FOCUS, Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension, 104 HES, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078. FOCUS is published three times yearly by the Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension program.

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PREP reaches NW Substance Abuse Center clients in Woods County

Karen Armbruster – Woods County

Woods County Extension Educator, Karen Armbruster, was asked by the Northwest Substance Abuse Center Director to provide PREP classes, after Karen introduced the curriculum to the facility staff. Karen had previously taught a series of weekly nutrition/wellness lessons to the female clients. She taught six PREP classes (two hours each for five to six weeks). Class sizes range from 10-15.

The average female client has two or three children under five years of age,

she's in her early- to mid-twenty's and she comes from any town in Oklahoma. She may be a registered nurse, a college graduate, or she may have only completed the eighth grade. She has most likely served time in the county jail or in prison. She's currently married, recently separated or free from any type of relationship. She's committed to being here at the NW Substance Abuse Center for 120 days, taking classes to prepare her for the next step in her life. The one

common bond many of these individuals have is they all want to start over "clean and sober."

Evaluations point out the positives of the PREP course. Better communication techniques have been learned and ways to deal with conflict have been approached. A common response is, "I wish I would have known this before I got married the first time!"