

# Australian Couples in Millenium Three

February 2000

A research and development agenda for  
marriage and relationship education.  
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Prepared for the Department of Family and Community Services  
as a background paper for the National Families Strategy

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## PREFACE

This is a report on how to enhance the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education in strengthening marriage and relationships in Australia. The report includes two major sections. The first section is a review of the scientific evidence on the effects of marriage and relationship education. The second section is a series of action research proposals for extending the accessibility and effectiveness of marriage and relationship education. The proposals include several collaborative projects between service providers and researchers for the development and evaluation of innovative approaches to marriage and relationship education.

The Department of Family and Community Services appointed Professor Kim Halford of the School of Applied Psychology at Griffith University to undertake a consultation into research on marriage and relationship education in August 1999. The consultation brief was to conduct a major review of literature, and to consult with key stakeholders, in order to develop a series of action research proposals on marriage and relationship education. The required research proposals were to include action research that would lead to enhanced accessibility or effectiveness of marriage and relationship education. In addition, the consultation was to propose research that could be done to enhance knowledge about the medium and long-term effects of marriage and relationship education. This report on the consultation was to be delivered to the Department of Family and Community Services in October 1999.

In conducting the consultancy I undertook an extensive review of the available scientific research literature on the determinants of relationship satisfaction and stability, and the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education. In addition, I had a large number of consultations with stakeholders in the delivery of marriage and relationship education. These stakeholders included current providers of marriage and relationship education, through both religious and secular organisations, civil and religious marriage celebrants, representatives of different community and ethnic minority groups, researchers who look at marriage and family issues, senior public servants from the Department of Family and Community Services and the Attorney-General's Department, and social policy analysts. Due to the time constraints imposed on the conduct of the consultation, much of this work was done by telephone conference. I also made extensive use of e-mail consultations. In addition, I also had a series of face-to-face individual and group meetings with many stakeholders.

I have found it a challenging and exciting opportunity to review the research and ideas of others on marriage and relationship education in close detail. The openness and generosity of educators and researchers in sharing their ideas and resources has been truly inspirational. I am most grateful to all those many people

throughout Australia, and people from many other parts of the world, who sent me papers, met with me, sent me materials, and participated in telephone conferences. I have benefited greatly from the knowledge and experiences they shared, and hope I have reflected their wisdom in my report.

I am very grateful to that my employer Griffith University gave me special leave to conduct this project. In particular, my boss Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor Max Standage, who recognized my passionate interest in the area of marriage and relationship education, and Acting Vice Chancellor Bill Lovegrove both supported me devoting my time to this project. My colleague Professor John O’Gorman was extremely supportive behind the scenes, and I am grateful to have him as a colleague. I also want to thank Dr. Sharon Dawe who stepped in as Acting Head of the School of Applied Psychology whilst I was undertaking this consultation. Knowing the school leadership was in good hands allowed me to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

I have a large set of acknowledgements at the end of this report. In addition, I want to extend a special thank you to Ms. Carmel Dyer, Ms. Susie Sweeper, Dr. Sue Osgarby, and Ms. Lisa Phillips who were research assistants on this project. Each of these people helped collate and summarize key aspects of the research reviewed. A very special thank you to Ms. Di Fisher, my personal assistant, who helped organize the many and varied tasks involved in getting the consultation done in eight weeks.

Finally, and most importantly, I want thank Barb, James and Chris who put up with frenetic bursts of activity from me to get this project done. Their love and support mean the world to me.

Kim Halford, PhD. MAPsS, Professor of Psychology, Griffith University.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Marriage and other committed couple relationships are extremely important influences on the health and well being of partners, children and the community. A healthy, well functioning and stable relationship is associated with greater resilience to stressful events, better physical and mental health, and greater work productivity. Relationship problems and breakdown are associated with increased domestic violence, poorer health, and loss of work productivity. Divorce and relationship problems accrue substantial economic costs to the couple, and to the community. The strengthening of marriage and family relationships, and the reduction of the prevalence of relationship problems and separations have the potential to greatly enhance the personal, social and economic well being of Australians.
2. There is a large body of research evidence showing that certain static risk indicators predict couples at high risk for relationship problems and separation. For example, parental divorce or violence in the family of origin, living together before marriage, being under 21 at the time of marriage, and a history of depression or anxiety disorders in either partner, all predict high risk of relationship breakdown. Whilst many of these risk indicators cannot be modified (e.g. family history), most risk indicators can easily be assessed. Risk assessment can guide couples and service providers as to which couples are at most risk for future relationship problems. Such information can be used to ensure high-risk couples are able to access marriage and relationship education.
3. There also is a substantial body of research evidence showing certain dynamic risk factors predict relationship problems. Risk factors potentially are changeable, and include poor communication and conflict management, unrealistic relationship expectations, inadequate partner mutual support, lack of a balance of shared and individual activities, and inequitable division of household tasks and responsibilities. Helping couples acquire the knowledge and skills to change these risk factors should be the primary targets of relationship education.
4. Relationship problems often develop during times of transition for couples. In particular, the initial transition to marriage or cohabitation, the transition to parenthood, times of crisis, major illness, and retirement are times when couples need to adapt to changing circumstances. The time after separation and when re-partnering, particularly when forming a stepfamily, also constitute high-risk times for the development of relationship problems. Couples with known risk factors often find these transitions difficult, and this is associated with increased risk for relationship problems. However, couples are particularly open to education to cope at these times of transition, and marriage and relationship education should be targeted at couples who are undergoing such transitions.

5. Relationship education as delivered in Australia, and in most western countries, varies widely in the content, mode of delivery and skills of the educators delivering the programs. Three general approaches to relationship education can be identified: information and awareness, assessment and feedback via standardized inventories, and skills training. Information and awareness usually involves provision of didactic or written materials, and discussion of expectations and relationship processes. There may be demonstrations of key relationship skills, but there is little or no active skills training. Assessment and feedback involves the completion of standardized inventories by the partners, and the provision of feedback and sometimes relationship goal setting with couples. Recently some demonstration of skills has been added to some of these assessment and feedback programs. Skills training involves structured training of key relationship skills such as communication and conflict management. Most relationship education offered in Australia is of the information and awareness approach, with increasing use of assessment and feedback. The use of skills training programs is limited in the field at the moment.
6. The vast majority of research on the effects of relationship education is focused on the short-term effects of programs for couples getting married or entering a cohabiting relationship. The research shows that well-run information and awareness, assessment and feedback, and skills training premarital relationship education programs all consistently are evaluated positively by participants. Moreover, participants report they learn ideas they value. Skills training programs have been shown to produce reliable improvements in communication and conflict management. The effects of information and awareness, and assessment and feedback, programs have not been evaluated within controlled trials, and their effects on couples' relationship skills are unknown.
7. There is very little research on the medium and long-term effects of relationship education in enhancing relationship satisfaction or reducing rates of separation in couples in committed relationships. There are no studies on the medium or long-term effects of information and awareness, or assessment and feedback approaches to relationship education. A small number of studies have been published on the long-term effects of skills training approaches to relationship education. Skills training is associated with enhanced relationship satisfaction, and may decrease risk of divorce, across the first four to five years of marriage. The effects of skills based premarital education programs appear to attenuate over a 5 to 10 year period.
8. Relationship education to assist the transition to parenthood, adjustment after separation, formation of stepfamilies, and coping with major stresses have all been described in the literature, but there is a dearth of systematic research on these programs. The few available controlled trials suggest that skills

training programs that focus on particular knowledge and skills associated with the transition concerned have the best effects.

9. The content of many marriage and relationship education programs have developed relatively independently of available knowledge on the determinants of relationship satisfaction and the effects of different approaches to relationship education. Given that skills based marriage and relationship education has the strongest scientific support for its effectiveness, this approach is under-represented in the practice of marriage and relationship education in Australia.
10. Most marriage and relationship education currently is targeted at couples entering committed relationships or getting married. This is an important transition at which to encourage couples to relationship education, and should continue to be a major focus of marriage and relationship education efforts. However, it is unlikely that relationship education offered only at the transition into committed relationships will attract all couples likely to benefit from relationship education. Nor is it likely that relationship education offered only at the transition to marriage or cohabitation will prevent relationship problems in couples 10 or more years after marriage. There is a need to broaden the transition points at which marriage and relationship education is offered.
11. Approximately one third of couples marrying in Australia attend some form of relationship education. The two-thirds of couples who do not access relationship education tend to be: ethnic minority couples, particularly indigenous Australians and people from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds, couples with fewer years of formal education, couples living in rural and remote areas, couples married in civil rather than religious ceremonies, couples cohabiting with their partner before marriage, and young couples.

Recommendation 1: A project should be undertaken to develop and disseminate resource materials to assist educators to provide skills based relationship education. The provision of resource materials should be complemented by the provision of affordable training opportunities to develop educator skills in skills based relationship education. The skills based relationship education resource materials should be designed to prepare couples for a variety of life transitions including the entry to committed relationships, the transition to parenthood, formation of step families, and providing mutual support during time of severe illness, relocation, and retirement. The resource materials should be developed collaboratively with multiple relationship education agencies and be evaluated for their participant satisfaction and effect on dynamic relationship risk factors.

Resource materials development should also be targeted at enhancing access to skills based relationship education by indigenous Australians and ethnic groups from non-English speaking backgrounds. An emphasis should be on the development of culturally appropriate resource materials that support skills based

relationship education. Development of materials needs to be a collaborative effort between the communities to be assisted to access programs, and relationship educators. Training should be available to culturally appropriate leaders for delivery of programs. These initiatives should be evaluated for their success in engaging low access couples, the satisfaction of those couples with the services they receive, and the extent to which couples change on key risk factors believed to predict subsequent risk of relationship problems.

12. Low attendance at premarital education also is associated with reported attitudes that marriage “should occur naturally”, “is private”, and that marriage education “is only for people with problems”, “is irrelevant to me”, “would try to force certain values on me”, or “would not be useful”. There is a widespread opinion within the field of relationship educators that marketing to promote a view of pre-marriage education as normal would enhance attendance of relationship education programs. However, to date there is little evidence that mass media marketing programs have been successful.
13. Almost all relationship education programs in Australia are offered in a face-to-face format. Flexible delivery relationship education programs offered through printed material, audiovisual materials, or web sites have the potential to enhance accessibility of programs for couples.

Recommendation 2: The development and evaluation of flexible delivery relationship education programs for couples need to be encouraged through a series of pilot initiatives. These flexible development programs should focus on the teaching of relationship skills, and different programs should be developed to target key couples transitions such as the entry into committed relationships, the transition to parenthood, separation, re-partnering and forming stepfamilies, supporting each other during major illness, and retirement. Programs should be subjected to preliminary evaluation in terms of participant satisfaction and effects on relationship risk factors. Should the programs show promise, randomized controlled trials of programs should be undertaken.

14. Couples at high risk for relationship problems probably are less likely to attend marriage and relationship education than other couples. The extent of this under-representation of high-risk couples in attendees of marriage and relationship education in Australia is unknown. Most education providers do not assess levels of risk.
15. Most marriage and relationship education programs in Australia are targeted at couples entering a committed relationship, primarily couples getting married. Most couples in Australia who attend marriage and relationship education do so on the recommendation of a religious marriage celebrant; civil celebrants are much less likely to offer or recommend marriage and relationship education. Increasing the accessibility of marriage and relationship education to couples not attending religious marriage ceremonies is important.



Recommendation 3: A project should be initiated between relationship educators and researchers to develop agreed-on methods for routinely assessing the risk profiles of couples attending marriage and relationship education. Once baseline data are established, a collaborative project to enhance the engagement of high-risk couples in relationship education should be initiated.

A collaborative project working with civil celebrants, the providers of marriage and relationship education, and researcher(s) to enhance rates of provision of marriage and relationship education to couples being married by civil celebrants is highly desirable. This project should focus on the development of better materials to inform couples of the benefits of relationship education, and provide clear information on the content of a wide variety of education programs.

16. Existing research on the long-term effects of marriage and relationship education is very limited. The content of skills training approaches best reflects what the research evidence suggests is most likely to enhance relationship satisfaction and stability. Moreover, skills training approaches have the most evidence collected but still lack replication of a randomized controlled trial establishing effectiveness. The use of assessment and feedback methods of marriage and relationship education has grown enormously in Australia in the last 10 years. These programs have the advantages of being structured, which enhances quality assurance, and being developed from psychological research on predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability. Unfortunately there is no scientifically adequate research evaluating the effects of these programs.

Recommendation 4: Large-scale multi-site trials of the long-term effects of best practice approaches to relationship education are needed. More specifically, a randomized clinical trial of skills based relationship education is needed. This study should compare an information and discussion program, and a skills training program. Couples volunteering for the research should be randomly assigned to the intervention condition, and assessment of outcomes should continue for at least four years after the program is delivered. The design should include evaluation of the effects of the programs on couples at high and low risk for relationship problems.

A controlled trial of PREPARE, FOCCUSS, or both, also is highly desirable. Tenders should be called for experienced researchers to conduct such a study in Australia. Collaboration in the conduct of this study between the researcher(s), service providers, and the original developers of the programs to be evaluated is desirable. The research should evaluate the effect of inventories against an information and awareness approach, and the effects should be evaluated at least four years after delivery of the program. The design should include evaluation of the effects of the programs on couples at high and low risk for relationship problems.

17. The above recommendations can be summarized as falling into four projects. First, to promote the use of empirically supported approaches to marriage and relationship education through the development of resource materials and training opportunities for educators. Second, to develop resource materials that can be used as flexible delivery, self-directed learning programs. Third, to promote accessibility of relationship education by diversifying the points of entry to relationship education, and promoting access by couples whom currently under-utilize relationship education. Fourth, to conduct rigorous scientific evaluation of the long-term effects of best practice approaches to relationship education.

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## 1. SIGNIFICANCE AND NATURE OF STRONG MARRIAGE AND COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

“Marriage is one of the most nearly universal of human institutions. No other touches so intimately the life of practically every member of the earth’s population.” (Terman, 1938 p.1)

Across almost all countries and cultures almost all people are involved in marriage, or in cohabiting committed couple relationships, at some point in their life (Buss, 1995). In Australia, over 85% of the population marry by age fifty (McDonald, 1995). Of those people who choose not to marry, most are involved in committed couple relationships either as a prelude, or as an alternative, to marriage (McDonald, 1995). At the beginning of committed relationships almost all couples report high levels of relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, 1998; Markman, 1991; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). However, the mean level of relationship satisfaction typically declines each year over at least the first ten years of the relationship, with a substantial proportion of couples reporting dramatic declines in satisfaction that are associated with contemplation or enactment of separation (Glenn, 1998). Deteriorating relationship satisfaction and separation are associated with a range of adverse outcomes for partners and any children of the relationship (Halford, Kelly & Markman, 1997).

In Chapter 1 of this report I describe what research has established about the consequences and causes of deterioration in relationship satisfaction and stability, and review the evidence on the effects of marriage and relationship education in promoting strong, satisfying couple relationships. The first section of this chapter is a brief description of the significance of marriage and couple relationships. I begin by briefly summarizing current trends in couple relationships, marriage, separations and divorce. Then the impact of strong couple relationships on adult partners and children is described. A research-based analysis of the characteristics of strong couple relationships is presented. A summary with conclusions is the final part of this chapter.

### Changing patterns of couple relationships, marriage and divorce

Over the course of this century in Australia there have been major changes in patterns of couple relationships, marriage, and rates of relationship dissolution. Similar changes have occurred in the United States, and much of Western Europe (McDonald, 1995). Projection of these trends into the next millenium suggests that marriage and couple relationships will continue to change. It is beyond the scope of this report to review all the evidence, but I do want to summarize the key trends in marriage and relationships, as these trends provide the changing context within which marriage and relationship education is provided.

The House of Representative Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs prepared a report entitled “To have and to hold: Strategies for strengthening marriage and relationships” in 1998. In that report was a review of much of the evidence on trends in marriage and relationships in Australia. McDonald (1995) also has reviewed major trends. The key trends these two sources noted in marriage over the last 50 years that are of particular relevance for marriage and relationship education are as follows.

1. The vast majority of families in Australia are couple families (86%). Single parent families make up most of the rest of Australian families, and the proportion of all families that are single parent families is increasing (from 3% of all families in 1966 to 14% in 1996).
2. About half (48%) of married couples have dependant children, 11% have non-dependant children, and 41% have no children at all. These figures represent a substantial decline in the proportion of couples with dependant children over time. This trend is attributable to increasing life expectancies, decreased average numbers of children per couple, and increased proportions of couples delaying or choosing not to have children.
3. There has been a decline in the rates of marriage over the last 50 years, particularly in the last 20 years, though the most recent statistics show that trend has slowed. Those people who marry do so at later ages on average than in the past. However, still 85% of Australians will marry before age 45.
4. Increasing proportions of couples choose to be married by civil celebrants, and decreasing proportions by religious celebrants. In 1998 a little over half of all marriages in Australia were performed by civil celebrants, compared with less than 2% in the early 1970s.
5. Rates of cohabitation by couples has increased, with over 65% of marrying couples having lived with a partner before marriage, and about 8% of couple families being cohabiting couples.
6. Rates of divorce have increased dramatically, with estimates that about 40 to 45% of Australian marriages will end in divorce. Increasing proportions of couples divorce in the early years of marriage, with more than 20% of couples divorcing within 10 years of marriage. Rates of relationship separation of cohabiting couples are hard to estimate, but are higher than for married couples.
7. The number of children involved in divorce has increased dramatically, and by age 18 about 18% of Australian children will experience their parents divorcing.
8. The overwhelming majority of people who separate from couple relationships become involved in subsequent couple relationships, either by marrying or cohabiting with a new partner. Rates of remarriage after divorce have decreased, particularly for women, and for people who are older when they divorce.

9. The majority of children who experience parental divorce live with their mothers (80%), and about half of these children will have a step-father living with them within 6 years of the divorce. Rates of break-up of stepfamilies are particularly high, and many children are exposed to two or more separations of their parents with partners.

The trends to lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce covary with a number of societal changes such as the increase in women working outside the home, increased acceptance of divorce, changes in divorce laws, the increased geographical mobility of couples, and reduced contact with extended family (Markman, Halford, & Lindahl, in press). This complex of changing factors makes it hard to determine which variables may be crucial in determining the changing patterns of couple relationships.

Associated with a range of complex social changes is a transformation in the nature of couple relationships. In the past, couple relationships had clear gender roles and definitions of power (the so-called “traditional marriage”), now there are more gender role flexible and egalitarian relationships (Notarius & Markman, 1993). Not surprisingly, these changes can generate conflict. For example, there may be differences over issues such as whose career is more important, who will be the predominant caregiver for the children, or whose opinion will prevail regarding family money matters. Partners who feel their relationship does not meet their expectations often feel severely dissatisfied (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996). Unfortunately there have been no concomitant changes in social institutions to provide couples with the skills to handle such inevitable conflicts. Research has shown that couples who are not able to handle conflicts and negotiate the transitions in a couple’s life together are at increased risk for relationship distress and separation (Halford et al. 1997; Markman, Stanley, Blumberg, 1994).

The trends in delaying marriage, and high rates of divorce have led some commentators to speculate that marriage is an outdated social institution that may soon disappear (e.g. Demo, 1993). However, despite the high rates of relationship breakdown and divorce, most young unmarried Australian adults expect to marry at some point in their lives, and want their marriage to be life-long (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1997; Millward, 1990). Whilst not universally endorsed, the majority of young adults have expectations of their spouses which include sexual monogamy, honesty, expressions of affection, emotional intimacy and support (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1997). Even after marriage the vast majority of partners maintain extremely positive views of their spouse, and report great optimism about the future of their relationships (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996).

In summary, sharing a close couple relationship is highly valued by most Australian adults, they aspire to be in such a relationship, and the vast majority of people believe being in such a relationship is good for them. The pervasiveness

of the valuing of couple relationships across cultures and recorded history is striking, and this suggests that in the foreseeable future such relationships will continue to be valued.

The form and expectations of couple relationships are undergoing substantial change. Increasing proportions of Australian couples cohabit without getting married. The choice to cohabit or marry is a function of many factors. For gay and lesbian couples cohabitation is their only choice as marriage currently is not available to them. For heterosexual couples cohabitation is a choice, and this choice is exercised for a diverse range of reasons. For many couples marriage has positive connotations of public commitment to a partner, and often marriage has important religious and spiritual dimensions. Some couples view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage. For example, cohabitation can be a chance for development of the relationship and to establish if a commitment to marriage is desired. Some couples dislike particular connotations they attribute to the institution of marriage (e.g., it is too conservative, too religious, too high a level of commitment). Couples also may have positive connotations they attribute to cohabitation (e.g., they feel they can define the nature of their relationship for themselves, rather than have it defined legally), and for this latter group of couples cohabitation may be seen as preferable to marriage as a means of being in a committed relationship.

The vast majority of research on committed couple relationships has been conducted on married couples (Halford & Markman, 1997), and the generalizability of this research to unmarried cohabiting couples is open to question. In this report I assume that much of the evidence on the nature of strong relationships, the influences on those relationships, and the impact of relationship education will be similar for cohabiting and married couples. This does not mean cohabitation is identical to marriage. Many cohabiting couples do not view their relationship as having the same characteristics as marriage, and cohabiting couples do have significantly higher relationship break-up rates than married couples (Hahlweg, Baucom, Bastine, & Markman, 1998). However, where comparisons have been made about the nature and determinants of relationship quality across cohabiting and married couples, similar patterns have been found (e.g. Hannah, Halford, & Dadds, 1999). In instances where the research seems relevant only to marriage, I use the term marriage to describe the phenomena being studied. In other instances I use the term couple relationship to include marriage and other committed couple relationships.

### Benefits of strong couple relationships for partners

Mutually satisfying marriage is good for the physical health of adults (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Waite, 1997). Relative to never-married or divorced people, married people, and in particular people in a mutually satisfying marriage, live longer and have lower rates of many diseases and illnesses (Hu & Goldman, 1990;



Burman & Margolin, 1992; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Larson, Sawyers, & Larson, 1995). Moreover, married adults who do develop health problems tend to recover faster, and more effectively from many illness than other adults (Schmaling & Sher, in press).

There are a number of mechanisms by which being happily married may impact upon physical health. Couple relationships can have effects on health mediated through health related behaviors. For example, happily married partners tend to lead healthier lifestyles, (e.g., do not smoke tobacco, drink less alcohol, exercise more) than other adults (Burman & Margolin, 1992). Moreover, happily married partners make greater use of health promotion and early detection of disease services (Shmaling & Sher, in press), and take more active roles in management of their illnesses than other adults (Shmaling & Sher, in press). In addition, unhappy marriages may have direct deleterious physical effects that harm health. For example, relationship conflict is associated with suppression of the immune system (Kiecolt-Glaser, Fisher, Ogrocki, Stout, Speicher, & Glaser, 1987) which increases risk of major health problems.

A mutually satisfying long-term couple relationship is associated with greater resilience to the negative effects of life stresses (Coie et al. 1993; Halford et al. 1997), and reduced rates of psychological disorder (Halford, 1995). In contrast, relationship problems and separation are very stressful life events, often associated with substantial adjustment problems (Bloom, Asher & White, 1978). Marital distress is associated with higher rates of many forms of individual maladjustment, including substance abuse (Halford, Bouma, Kelly, & Young, (1999); Halford & Ogarsby, 1993; Jacob & Krahn, 1988), depression (Gotlib & Beach, 1995; Halford, 1995), bipolar disorder (Miklowitz, Goldstein, Neuchterlein, Snyder & Doane, 1988) and anxiety (Halford et al. (in press). Marital problems often precede the onset of individual problems like excessive drinking and depression (Maisto, O'Farrell, Connors, McKay, & Pelcovits, 1988; Paykel, Myers, Diefelt, Klerman, Lindenthal, & Pepper, 1989). Moreover, marital problems predict much poorer prognosis for people receiving treatment for a range of psychological disorders (Halford, 1995; Halford et al. in press).

Marriage has a major impact on the financial well being of partners. On the one hand, being in a mutually satisfying marriage is associated with less time away from work and greater career achievement (Forthofer, Markman, Stanley, Cox, & Kessler, 1996). On the other hand, separation and divorce are associated with substantial financial losses for both partners (Behrens & Smythe, 1999).

### Impact of strong couple relationships and marriage on children

Growing up in a home with two stable and happy parents is one of the strongest protective factors for children against a wide variety of mental, physical, educational, and peer-related problems (Coie et al. 1993; Emery, 1982; Sanders, NicholSEN & Floyd, 1997).

In contrast, parental conflict, distress and divorce are risk factors for a range of poor child outcomes including depression, withdrawal, conduct disorder, poor social competence, health problems, and academic under achievement (Amato, 1996; Cowan & Cowan, 1990; Cumming & Davies, 1994; Easterbrooks, 1987; Hetherington, 1988; Rutter, 1971). The negative effects of parental relationship problems and divorce impact upon offspring long term. Adult offspring of divorce have substantially higher rates of psychological disorder, and are much more likely themselves to divorce, than the rest of the population (Friedman, Tucker, Schwartz & Tomilson, 1995; Glenn & Kramer, 1985).

High levels of inter-parental conflict constitute a major risk factor for poor mental health both for the parents and for the children involved (Halford et. al., 1997). Parental conflict that is more overt, frequent and intense predicts externalizing as well as internalizing problems, including conduct-related problems, social incompetence, depression, health problems, and poor school performance (Fincham, 1998). Marital conflict also is associated with parents having more negative and less effective parenting strategies (Belsky, 1985; Emery, Fincham, & Cummings, 1992; Erel & Burman, 1995).

### The nature of strong couple relationships

There is no absolute definition of strong or successful couple relationships; the standards by which people judge relationships vary by culture and individual (Jones & Chao, 1997). Whilst there is no absolute criterion, there are a number of indices of positive couple relationships that are likely to have broad consensual validity with the majority of couples.

#### Relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction has been widely used as an index of relationship success (Halford, Kelly, & Markman, 1997). Relationship satisfaction can be defined as an individual partner's global sentiment about, or evaluation of, their relationship. An advantage of this construct is that it does not define an ideal relationship, but rather asks partners to rate the extent to which their relationship satisfies their individual expectations.

In research, relationship satisfaction usually is operationalized as the score on a standardized self-report measure. For example, the most widely used measures of relationship satisfaction are the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976). The Positive Feelings Questionnaire (O'Leary, 1977), the satisfaction sub-scale of the ENRICH measure (Olsen, Fournier, & Druckman, 1987), and the Positive and Negative Marital Qualities Scale (PANQMS) (Fincham & Linfield, 1997) are examples of other satisfaction scales. Each of these scales asks partners to rate the extent of their agreement with a variety of descriptors about their relationship. Derived scores reflect overall satisfaction with the relationship.

Almost all couples begin committed relationships reporting high relationship satisfaction (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Markman, 1991). However, the mean level of relationship satisfaction erodes over at least the first ten years of marriage, and many couples contemplate or enact separation (Glenn, 1998). A limitation of many of the measures of relationship satisfaction is that they originally were developed to assess relationship distress, and the content of some scales places heavy emphasis upon levels of conflict and unmet expectations (e.g. the DAS) (Fincham, Beach & Kemp-Finchem, 1997). As a consequence, the scales are useful when evaluating whether marriage and relationship education prevents the onset of relationship problems, but may be relatively insensitive to variations in degree of positivity of well functioning relationships.

#### Stability of relationships

As noted previously, most people entering committed relationships aspire for them to be life long, and stability of the relationship seems an important index of a strong and successful relationship (Halford et al. 1997). Hence, separation or divorce is the most obvious marker of lack of relationship stability. In addition, the Marital Status Inventory (MSI) is a 14-item self report measure of steps taken toward separation. In the MSI partners rate as true or false statements such as: "Thoughts of separation occur to me very frequently, as often as once a week or more", and "I have suggested to my partner that I wished to be separated, or rid of him or her". The Marital Status Inventory has been modified to a 12-item Relationship Status Inventory that assesses steps toward separation in unmarried couples, including couples in committed relationships who are planning to marry or cohabit, or who are cohabiting (e.g., Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999).

Separation should not always be seen as a relationship failure. In some relationships separation may be the best alternative available to partners. For example, if a relationship involves abuse or either partner is very unhappy with crucial aspects of the relationship, then continuing the relationship may not be a good outcome for anyone. A strong relationship is one that is stable because the relationship is satisfying for both partners, and because it is a relationship both partners choose to continue.

Steps toward separation and divorce usually, though not always, follow periods of deteriorating relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1993a). In that sense, a multi-step process of steps toward separation and divorce can be seen from a period of eroding relationship satisfaction, through sustained relationship distress, increasingly active contemplation of separation, and separation itself.

In addition to satisfaction and stability, a number of other global relationship characteristics have been proposed as indices of relationship success. Suggestions have included the psychological well being of the partners and any offspring (Halford et al. 1997), and the extent to which the relationship buffers the partners

against adverse effects of life stress (Burman & Margolin, 1992). Relationship satisfaction is strongly correlated with each of these other characteristics of relationship success (Halford et al. 1997). Thus, whilst these other indices may be valuable to assess in research on marriage and relationship education, routine evaluation focusing on relationship satisfaction may be of greater practical utility.

#### Couple interaction

Relationship success also has been defined in terms of specific characteristics of couple interaction within the relationship. For example, each of the following have been proposed as indices of relationship success: the presence of intimate and self-disclosing communication, effective conflict management, partner mutual support, positive day-to-day interactions, and shared positive activities (Weiss & Heyman, 1997). There is a strong association of each of these specific characteristics of couple interaction with global relationship satisfaction (Halford et al. 1997).

Good communication is strongly correlated with relationship satisfaction and stability, and problems in communication are the most frequently cited specific complaint by distressed couples (Bornstein & Bornstein, 1986). Both independent observers and spouses report positive communication is associated with relationship satisfaction (Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Satisfied couples with strong relationships discuss problem issues with low levels of hostility, or criticism (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman, 1994; Halford, Hahlweg & Dunne, 1990; Heavey, Christensen, & Malmuth, 1995; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Satisfied couples actively listen to their partner when discussing problems (Halford, et al. 1990; Jacobson, McDonald, Follette, & Berley, 1985; Weiss & Heyman, 1990), or when trying to support each other (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Satisfied couples remain engaged in conversations with their spouse and do not withdraw or avoid discussions of problem issues (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman, 1994; Heavey, Christensen, & Malmuth, 1995).

Satisfied couples often are calm in their emotional responses to their partners' negative behavior, whilst distressed couples are highly reactive at an emotional level to their partners' negative behavior, and show significantly higher rates of negative reciprocity during interaction than do satisfied couples (e.g., Gottman, Markman & Notarius, 1977; Schaap, 1984). In observational studies the conditional probabilities of distressed partners responding with intense negativity to their partner's negativity is much higher than the conditional probabilities for satisfied partners (e.g., Halford, et al. 1990). In addition to this negative reciprocity, relationship distress also is associated with high levels of psycho-physiological arousal during interaction (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1988). This arousal is assumed to be aversive, which may explain the higher rates of withdrawal during problem-focused discussions by distressed partners (Christensen & Shenk, 1991;

Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Both the extent of arousal, and the frequency of withdrawal, prospectively predicts deterioration in relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1993b; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Heavey, Christensen, & Malmuth, 1995).

Another common characteristic of satisfied couples is that they undertake a range of positive activities on a regular basis (Halford, in press). These positive activities need to be a balance of independent activities of the spouses, positive couple-only activities, and activities of the couple shared with family or friends. The exact balance that is desirable for particular couples is a function of partner preferences. However, having very high levels of any of the independent, couple, or shared activities, to the exclusion of the other types of activities, often is associated with relationship distress.

Over time the shared interests and activities of the partners need to change for both psychological and pragmatic reasons. At the psychological level, sharing new activities sustains partner interest in the relationship (Hill, 1988; Reissman, Aron, & Bergman, 1993), and seems to enhance mutual intimacy and passion (Baumeister & Bratlavsky, 1999). At the practical level, circumstances often require couples to modify their activities. As examples, having young children restricts some activities (e.g. going out at night), and ill health or aging may restrict some activities (e.g. very vigorous sporting activities). Couples need to develop new shared activities to replace those activities that become difficult to sustain. Thus, maintaining a healthy long-term relationship requires couples to evolve their shared activities across changing circumstances to provide novelty and mutual fun.

In an attempt to assess the usual way partners behave toward each other, researchers have had couples keep specially designed diaries of their day to day behaviours. There is a well-replicated finding that positivity of daily behaviors correlate with relationship satisfaction (Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Halford & Sanders, 1988; Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982; Johnson & O'Leary, 1996). More specifically, relative to satisfied couples, distressed couples report higher rates of negative, displeasing behaviors by their spouse and fewer positive, pleasing behaviors (Birchler, et al. 1975; Halford & Sanders, 1988; Jacobson et al. 1982; Johnson & O'Leary, 1996). Furthermore, satisfied couples' behavior is not contingent on the preceding partners' behaviors; satisfied couples tend to be positive irrespective of their partners' prior actions (Birchler et al. 1975; Jacobson et al. 1982). In contrast, distressed couples tend to reciprocate on a "quid pro quo" basis the behaviors of their spouse. In other words, in a distressed relationship partners tend only to be positive if their partner recently has been positive, and if one partner behaves negatively the other often responds negatively immediately (Birchler et al. 1975; Jacobson et al. 1982).

Thus, positive communication, strong mutual support, and effective conflict management characterize strong couple relationships. In addition, strong

relationships have partners trying new and interesting couple activities, and balancing those couple activities with positive independent activities and activities the couple share with other people. Positivity in day-to-day interaction and expressions of caring and affection also are important.

Couple communication can be assessed by direct observation, and this has been widely done in much research (see Weiss & Heyman, 1997 for a review). However, the conduct of such observational assessments requires sophisticated training of people in observational coding systems, and this is time consuming and expensive to administer. Such observational assessment is invaluable in basic research to understand the processes by which couples communicate, and manage conflict (Gottman, 1998). Observational assessment also can be invaluable in rigorous scientific evaluation of the effects of marriage and relationship education in research (see Halford & Behrens, 1996 or Dyer & Halford, 1998 for a review of this research). However observational research is not practical for routine evaluation of marriage and relationship education service delivery.

#### Thoughts and feelings

Satisfied couples have a number of characteristic cognitions about their relationships (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989). Satisfied couples selectively attend to their partner's positive behavior (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Floyd & Markman, 1983; Jacobson & Moore, 1981), and selectively recall such positive behavior (Osgarby & Halford, 1999). Satisfied couples tend to have a very positive view of their partners and relationships (Flowers, Applegate, Olsen, & Pomerantz, 1994). In contrast, distressed partners tend to overlook positive behaviors by their spouses (Gottman et al. 1977; Notarius, Benson, Sloane, Vanzetti, & Horyak, 1989), and to selectively recall negative aspects of relationship interaction (Osgarby & Halford, 1999).

Another characteristic of satisfied couples is holding realistic beliefs about relationships and partners. More specifically, happy couples tend to see disagreements between partners as part of a healthy relationship, that relationships and partners change over time, and that flexible gender roles are adaptive (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Baucom & Epstein, 1990). In contrast, distressed couples are more likely to believe that any form of disagreement is destructive, that change by partners is not possible, and that rigid adherence to traditional gender roles is desirable (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Distressed couples also report that their relationships often violate standards about how they think their relationship should be (Baucom, Epstein, Daiuto, Carels, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996). For example, distressed women report that their partners do not share power within the relationship in the manner the women believe they should, and distressed men believe their partners should invest more time and energy in the relationship than they do (Baucom et al. 1996).

Satisfied couples attribute the causes of relationship problems to a complex range of dynamic factors such as the circumstances each partner is dealing with, patterns of interaction and individual partner characteristics. Distressed couples attribute relationship difficulties to stable, internal, negative and blame-worthy characteristics of their partners (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). For example, a partner arriving home late from work may be attributed by a satisfied partner as the spouse “struggling to keep up with a heavy load at work, and being subject to lots of pressure from the boss”. The same behaviour may be attributed in a distressed relationship to the spouse being “a generally selfish person who doesn’t care about the family”. The process of attributing relationship concerns to a complex of dynamic factors is believed to lead satisfied partners to respond constructively to dissatisfaction in their relationship (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994). On the other hand, attributing relationship problems to static characteristics of the spouse leads most people with relationship distress feeling powerless to improve their relationship (Vanzetti, Notarius, & NeeSmith, 1992).

One additional cognitive characteristic of satisfied couples is that they expect positive outcomes from interaction with their partners. Satisfied couples report that prior to a discussion they expect to be able to resolve problem issues in their relationships, whilst distressed couples do not (Vanzetti et al. 1992). In anticipation of a problem solving discussion, distressed partners show high physiological arousal (Gottman, 1994), negative affect, and become primed to access negative evaluative judgements about their partner and the relationship (Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, & Osborne, 1995). It is believed that this arousal combined with negative expectations often leads distressed couples to avoid discussion of difficult issues, and these issues therefore do not get resolved (Halford, Gravestock, Lowe, & Scheldt, 1992).

The cognitive characteristics of distressed couples mediate their subsequent behavior toward their partners. For example, the occurrence of positive attributions is associated with subsequent positive behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). In unhappy couples negative thoughts about the partner predict future negative behaviors better than predictions from previous behavior (Halford & Sanders, 1990), suggesting these cognitions are more than just the consequences of negative behavior.

In summary, in strong relationships partners have realistic expectations about relationships. When there is conflict they see that as a normal part of a relationship, and actively seek to resolve problems. Satisfied partners avoid the trap of excessive blaming of their partner for difficulties in the relationship, and instead look to a complex of personal, environmental and interactional processes to understand where problems may arise.

Couple’s thoughts and feelings have been extensively researched in the couples literature (Fincham & Beach, 1999). This research does provide invaluable insights

into the basic processes that influence the development of satisfying couple relationships, but has not been used to evaluate the outcome of marriage and relationship education. Given the expense involved in these assessments, it seems unlikely that this will be used in routine service delivery, but greater attention to rigorous evaluation of changes in thoughts and feelings resulting from marriage and relationship education would be a useful basic research strategy to follow.

### Sexuality

As might be expected, there is a strong relationship between relationship satisfaction, and sexual activity and satisfaction (Schenk, Pfrang, & Raushe, 1983; Spence, 1997). This strong association probably reflects that similar factors influence both sexual and general relationship functioning. For example, communication between the partners predicts both relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (McCabe, 1994). Across at least the first 10 years of marriage expectations and satisfaction with sexuality is a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction and stability (Fowers & Olsen, 1986; Fowers & Olsen, 1989).

The frequency of sexual activity and satisfaction with sex tends to be highest in the earliest phases of a couple's relationship, and to decline over the first few years of marriage (Greenblatt, 1983). Many writers assume this is inevitable with a loss of novelty that is believed to induce high levels of sexual passion (Baumeister & Bratlavsky, 1999). The transition to parenthood is associated with a further significant decrease in sexual activity (Donnelly, 1993). Moreover, problems like anxiety, depression or fatigue can have a strong negative effect on sexual interest and enjoyment (Zimmer, 1987). For some couples adaptation to these changes is difficult, and conflict over sex is a common problem in couples with relationship distress (Zimmer, 1983).

There are gender differences in the desire for sex. On average women desire sex less often in committed relationships than men (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kotola, 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). It is a source of considerable controversy whether these gender differences are the result of socialization or are inherent biological differences. Whatever the source of these differences, a challenge within relationships is to meet the expectations and desires of each partner, and to accommodate to different desires in the frequency and type of sexual activity. Couples who lack communication and conflict management skills find these negotiations difficult, and this can be a source of significant relationship strain.

There are a number of common sexual problems such as very low sexual desire, painful intercourse, and anorgasmia in women; and erectile problems and premature ejaculation in men (Spence, 1997). Couples who lack knowledge about sexuality are more likely to develop these problems, and less likely to seek assistance when such problems develop (Zilbergeld, 1995). Ongoing sexual problems can substantially increase the risk of relationship distress, and may



contribute to relationship breakdown (Spence, 1997). Increasing sexual knowledge and enhancing couple communication about sexuality is a potentially important element of effective relationship education for couples.

#### Relationship aggression

Strong couple relationships do not include use of physical aggression or intimidation between partners. Unfortunately, aggression between partners in committed couple relationships occurs at high rates. Prevalence data on aggression in representative samples of Australian couples is lacking. In the United States up to a third of representative samples of young couples report engaging in less severe forms of physical aggression, such as throwing things, pushing, slapping or shoving one another (Pan, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994; O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994). Even these less severe forms of aggression can lead to injury, and significant physical injury occurs in about 10% of couples (Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). More severe aggression involving choking, strangling, beating up or attacking with a weapon occurs in about 4% of couples (O'Leary et al. 1994). As might be expected, high rates of injury are associated with severe aggression (Cantos, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994). At the extreme end of the spectrum relationship violence can be very severe; female homicide victims are murdered more often by their partners than any other class of assailant (Browne & Williams, 1993).

The prevalence of male-to-female versus female-to-male violence is approximately equal (Straus & Gelles, 1986). Furthermore, in the majority of couples in which there is physical aggression, both the man and the woman report being violent toward each other (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Smutzler & Vivian, 1994; O'Leary et al. 1994; O'Leary, Barling, et al. 1989, Straus & Gelles, 1986). However, relative to female-to-male physical aggression, male-to-female physical aggression typically is more severe, more likely to lead to physical injury, and more often associated with the victim feeling fearful of their partner (Cascardi, Langhinrichsen & Vivian, 1992).

Aggression in relationships often occurs early in the relationship, with engaged and newly married couples having the highest rates of aggression (O'Leary et al. 1989; McLaughlin, Leonard, & Senchak, 1992). In couples that report physical aggression during engagement or the first year of marriage, further episodes occur, and the average severity of aggression escalates (O'Leary et al. 1989). The occurrence of relationship aggression in the early years of marriage is a strong predictor of separation in the first three or four years of marriage (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Given its high prevalence and damaging effects, preventing the occurrence of violence in couple relationships should be a key strategy for promoting strong couple relationships. Moreover, the prevention of relationship aggression should be an outcome variable when assessing the success of relationship education.

### Defining strong couple relationships

Based upon the above discussion I define a strong, healthy long term couple relationship as: “A developing set of interactions between partners which promotes the individual well-being of each partner and their offspring, assists each partner to adapt to life stresses, engenders a conjoint sense of emotional and sexual intimacy, and which promotes the long term sustainment of a mutually satisfying relationship within the cultural context in which the partners live.”

The most fundamental measure of strong couple relationships that seems appropriate, and which is practical to use in routine service delivery, is relationship satisfaction. Attempting to promote mutually satisfying relationships that both partners wish to remain within, seems a very important goal for marriage and relationship education. It would be helpful if, as a routine part of marriage and relationship education service delivery, satisfaction measures of couples were taken at the beginning of programs, reassessed at the end of programs, and if some sort of follow-up assessment was routinely done. This would give a better indication of whether relationship education programs are achieving the objective of promoting mutually satisfying relationships.

Given that we can identify certain aspects of couple expectations and interaction that are associated with low relationship satisfaction and instability, evaluation of the effects of marriage and relationship education on couple expectations and interaction also is desirable. Observational measures of couple interaction are desirable for rigorous research, but are too expensive for routine program evaluation. The use of self-report measures of couple communication in program evaluation is needed. Such self-reports measures show if the education has achieved its short-term educational goals.

## 2. THE MAJOR DETERMINANTS OF STRONG COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

The major determinants of strong couple relationships can be thought of as falling into two broad categories: generic and specific determinants. Generic determinants refer to variables that influence relationship outcomes across a broad range of life stages and circumstances. For example, the capacity to negotiate conflict seems to impact upon the relationship satisfaction and stability of couples across a wide variety of ages and circumstances (Gottman, 1998). Specific relationship determinants are variables that exert particular influence under certain circumstances. For example, negotiating the parenting role of a stepparent is particularly difficult for stepfamilies during the process of family formation (Visher & Visher, 1982).

### Generic determinants of positive relationship outcomes

The most important information on the influences on relationship outcomes comes from longitudinal studies of the course of relationships. There are over 120 published studies assessing psychological variables and the longitudinal course of couple relationship satisfaction and stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). There also are a large number of studies that have examined sociodemographic variables and their relationship to the satisfaction and stability of couple relationships (Glenn, 1998; Larson & Holman, 1994). Bradbury (1995) adapted the stress-vulnerability-coping model to offer a heuristic model by which this comprehensive literature usefully can be summarized. He suggested that there are three broad classes of variables that impact upon the etiology of relationship problems: adaptive processes within the couple system, stressful events impinging upon the couple, and enduring individual vulnerabilities of the partners. I believe this model is very useful, but it does focus upon the determinants of relationship distress and divorce.

Three modifications make Bradbury's (1995) model even more useful when considering how to promote strong, mutually satisfying and stable couple relationships (Halford, in press). Bradbury's concept of individual vulnerabilities refers to individual differences that make relationship problems more likely. I prefer the term individual characteristics rather than individual vulnerabilities, as some individual characteristics have positive effects on relationships (e.g. gender role flexibility). Similarly, I prefer life events to stressful life events, as the latter refers only to presumed damage that negative events have on relationships. The reports of long-married satisfied couples (Scott, Halford, & Ward, 1999; Gagnon, Hersen, Kabacoff, & van Hasselt, 1999), highlight that shared history of positive events, and supporting each other through difficult times, contribute to couple relationship satisfaction and commitment. A third modification to Bradbury's model is that I add a fourth class of factors that influence relationship outcomes: contextual variables. Contextual variables refer to the cultural and social circumstances within which couple relationships exist.

### The context of couple relationships

Couple relationships occur within broader contexts that can serve to promote relationship satisfaction and stability, or can serve to undermine relationship functioning. Many approaches to relationship education do not include specific attention to these contextual variables, but understanding these factors may be crucial to helping couples sustain strong relationships.

### The socio-cultural context of marriage

Couple relationships occur within a cultural context that defines how marriage and other couple relationships are supposed to be. Whilst there are certain general assumptions shared across western cultures, there also are important variations between those cultures. For example, German couples without relationship problems engage in similar level of verbal negativity as Australian distressed couples (Halford et al. 1990), suggesting that greater levels of negativity are more acceptable and less dysfunctional in the German cultural context than in Australia. Even within one country there is great diversity in acceptable relationship behavior. Winkler and Doherty (1983) found that verbal conflict was reported as more common in New York couples who were born in Israel than in Anglo couples living in New York. However, verbal conflict was less often associated with physical aggression or relationship distress in the Israeli-born couples than the Anglo couples. Thus, the cultural appropriateness and functional impact of behavior varies considerably even within western cultures.

It can be important to assess the cultural context within which relationship standards develop and may be reinforced. Partners who differ in their ethnic, racial or cultural background often differ in their expectations and beliefs about relationships (Jones & Chao, 1997). This diversity in partner assumptions and beliefs can be a source of great strength for a relationship when the partners are able to draw on the wisdom and strengths of different cultural traditions. At the same time, substantial differences in expectations can be a significant source of conflict between the partners (Jones & Chao, 1997), and marriages in which partners have very different cultural backgrounds tend to break down at somewhat higher rates than other marriages (Birchnall & Kennard, 1984; Kurdek, 1991). The magnitude of effects of ethnic dissimilarity on relationship satisfaction and stability generally are small (White, 1990).

### Other relationships and roles

Whilst the partner role is central to most adults in couple relationships, this is not the only relationship or role that the partners have. Other relationships and roles of each partner are part of the context in which couple interaction occurs, and these other relationships and roles can impact in a positive or negative manner on the couple relationship. For example, work often provides extra stimulation and ideas to enrich the relationship, but work demands also can compete for time

with the partner (Thompson, 1997). Friends may provide support and shared activities that complement the relationship, and reduce the chance of excessive dependence upon the spouse. However, friendships also can take away time from the partner. Parenting, sports, hobbies, and community service activities all have the capacity to enrich or erode relationship quality.

There are consistent findings that approval of one's spouse and relationship by friends and extended family are predictive of better relationship satisfaction and stability (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Cate, Huston, & Nesselroade, 1986, Kurdek, 1991). At the same time there also is evidence that excessive intrusion by family on selection of dating partners and subsequent mate selection may predict relationship problems (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993).

#### Adaptive couple processes

Adaptive processes refer to the cognitive, behavioral and affective processes that occur during couple interaction. Certain deficits in these adaptive processes seem to predispose couples to relationship problems. More specifically, deficits in communication and conflict management behaviors observed in engaged couples prospectively predict divorce and relationship dissatisfaction over the first years of marriage (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Markman, 1981; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Dysfunctional communication in engaged couples also predicts the development of relationship verbal and physical aggression in the first few years of marriage (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al. 1989), at least for mild to moderate severity aggression. Relationship aggression often is established early in the relationship, and usually continues and escalates once established (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al. 1989).

It is noteworthy that the communication deficits observed in some engaged couples do not correlate with their reported relationship satisfaction at the time (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Sanders et al. 1999). It seems that these communication difficulties do not stop couples from forming committed relationships, but the difficulties may predispose couples to develop relationship problems later (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). In couples who have been married for some time, these same communication difficulties predict deterioration in relationship satisfaction, and decreased relationship stability (Gottman, 1993b; Gottman, 1994).

The beliefs and expectations individuals have when entering into relationships and marriage predict the risk of divorce in the first few years of marriage (Olsen & Fowers, 1986; Olsen & Larsen, 1989). Couples characterized by unrealistic expectations and beliefs in areas such as importance of communication, appropriate methods of conflict resolution, importance of family and friends, and gender roles, have higher rates of erosion in relationship satisfaction than couples not so characterized. Negative attributions, in which partners ascribe blame for

relationship problems to stable, negative characteristics of their spouse also prospectively predict deterioration in relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991).

Finally, certain patterns of emotional expression are predictive of relationship problems. Showing contempt, disgust, fear or emotional withdrawal toward partners during interaction is predictive of relationship deterioration and taking steps toward separation (Gottman, 1994). Thus, certain behavioral, cognitive and affective characteristics of the couple's adaptive processes predate, and prospectively predict, relationship problems.

#### Life events

Life events refer to the developmental transitions, and acute and chronic circumstances that impinge upon the couple or individual partners. Relationship problems often are argued to be more likely to develop during periods of high rates of change and stressful events (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, the transition to parenthood sometimes is associated with decline in couple relationship satisfaction (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). However, many couples report that the transition to parenthood enhances relationship satisfaction and commitment. Similarly, partners who successfully support each other through stressful events such as severe illness in one partner often report the experience brings them closer together (Halford, Scott, & Smythe, *in press*). Significant life events have the potential both to increase or decrease relationship satisfaction.

Couples with less robust adaptive processes are believed to be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of a range of stressful life events (Markman, Halford, & Cordova, 1997). In particular, couples who lack communication skills, or who have inflexible or unrealistic expectations of relationships, find it hard to negotiate the changes required to adapt to major life transitions. For example, couples in which the woman was recently diagnosed with breast or gynecological cancer and who display poor communication and ineffective mutual support, show deterioration in their relationships and poor individual coping with the cancer (Scott, Halford, & Ward, 1999). In contrast, couples with good communication and mutual support often report having been brought closer together emotionally, by the experience of supporting each other through adversity (Scott et al. 1999).

#### Individual characteristics

Individual characteristics refer to the stable historical, personal, and experiential factors which each partners brings to a relationship (Bradbury, 1995). High levels of education, high income, and high status occupation each are associated with increased chances of relationship satisfaction and stability (Glick, 1984; Kurdek, 1991, 1993; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Mott & Moore, 1979). The reasons for these effects are not entirely clear. The relationships of poor and less educated people

do have greater cumulative exposure to stress over the early years of marriage, such as financial and health problems, and this exposure may mediate greater relationship problems (Kurdek, 1993).

#### Relationship history variables

There are a number of aspects of relationship history that couples bring to their current relationships that are predictive of relationship satisfaction and stability. Relationship history includes family of origin experiences, prior relationships and the development of the current relationship, each of which predicts relationship satisfaction and stability (Larson & Holman, 1994).

Negative family-of-origin experiences increase the chance of relationship problems. In particular, parental divorce is associated with greater marital problems in the offspring when they become adults. In the United States and Europe there are substantially higher rates of divorce in adult offspring of divorce than for people with no family history of divorce (DeGraaf, 1991; Glen & Kramer, 1987; Glenn & Shelton, 1983; Pope & Mueller, 1976). Parental divorce seems to have a particularly strong impact upon women. Women experiencing parental divorce have a 60% higher divorce rate than women without such a history, while men with a history of parental divorce have a 35% higher divorce rate than men without such a history (Glenn & Shelton, 1983).

Another well established risk indicator for couple relationships is violence in the family of origin (e.g., Burgess, Hartman, & McCormack, 1987; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Stith & Farley, 1993; Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus et al. 1980; Widom, 1989). More specifically, men who report witnessing violence between their parents have a substantially higher risk of being violent themselves (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Riggs, O'Leary & Breslin, 1990; Stith & Farley, 1993; Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus et al. 1980; Widom, 1989). Parent-to-child violence sometimes has been found to increase the risk of men being violent (Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus et al. 1980), though several studies have not found this association (e.g., Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Separating the effects of parent-to-parent versus parent-to-child physical aggression is difficult, as there is substantial overlap in occurrence of inter-partner and parent-child violence. Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1981) reported 82% of men who reported witnessing violence between their parents also reported being victims of violence by their parents. In the study with the largest sample used to date, family of origin inter-parental violence was found to elevate risk of adult male relationship violence substantially more than parent-to-child violence (Kalmuss, 1984).

The mechanism by which exposure to parental divorce or aggression may impact upon subsequent adult relationships is becoming clearer. Exposure to parental divorce is associated with more negative expectations of marriage (Black & Sprenkle, 1991; Gibardi & Rosen, 1991), and with observable deficits in

communication and conflict management in couples prior to marriage (Sanders et al. 1999). Adult offspring of parents who were aggressive also show deficits in communication and conflict management skills in dating and marital relationships (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, in press; Skuja & Halford, 1999). Negative expectations and communication deficits may well be learned from the parents' relationship and subsequently this learned behavior impacts negatively upon the adult relationships of the offspring. The argument that communication difficulties may be acquired through observation and interaction with parents is supported by the finding that couple communication style assessed at the beginning of adult relationships predicts subsequent communication style when the partners become parents and are interacting with their children (Howes & Markman, 1989).

The longer and better couples know each other before marriage, the greater their reported relationship satisfaction after marriage (Birchnell & Kennard, 1984; Grover, Russel, Schumm, & Paff-Bergen, 1985; Kurdek, 1991, 1993). It has been speculated that shorter dating periods before entering commitment may not allow people to screen out potentially incompatible partners (Grover et al. 1985). Whilst this may be true, there are other variables operating that might explain this association. For example, those who choose to marry quickly may differ in attachment style from those who delay marriage. Perhaps the attachment style predicts both rapid marriage and high risk for relationship problems.

Cohabitation before marriage consistently is associated with increased risk of relationship distress and separation (Balakrishnan, Rao, Lapierre-Adamcyk, & Krotzki, 1987; Janus & Janus, 1993; Trussel, & Rao, 1987). Choosing to cohabit is associated with a variety of other factors, such as low religiosity, uncertainty about committing to the relationship, and negative perceptions of marriage. Any of these variables might account for the high risk of relationship breakdown of married couples who cohabited before marriage.

The association between personality variables and relationship problems has been widely studied. Most normal personality variations do not seem to contribute much variance to relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). One exception is poor negative affect regulation, (high neuroticism), which consistently has been found to predict higher risk for relationship problems and divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Poor negative affect regulation refers to an inability to respond constructively to negative feelings such as anger, sadness, or frustration.

A second personality characteristic related to relationship satisfaction and stability is attachment style (Feeney, 1998). Attachment style refers to a general way of thinking and responding emotionally in close relationships. It is believed that attachment style is learned early in life based upon early relationship experiences with parents. A general style is argued to develop of people having secure or insecure attachment styles. Insecure attachment styles are characterized by high discomfort with emotional closeness or anxiety over being abandoned. How



neuroticism or attachment impact upon the development of relationship problems is not yet well understood.

#### Psychological disorder

A major risk indicator for relationship distress and divorce is past or present history of psychological disorder. Higher rates of relationship problems and divorce consistently have been reported in populations with severe psychiatric disorder (Halford, 1995), and in people with depression, alcohol abuse and some anxiety disorders (Emmelkamp, De Haan & Hoogduin, 1990; Halford, Sanders & Behrens, 1999; Halford & Osgarby, 1993; O'Farrell & Birchler, 1987; Reich & Thompson, 1985; Ruscher & Gotlib, 1988; Weissman, 1987). As described earlier in this chapter, relationship problems and individual problems both can exacerbate each other (Halford et al. 1999). In addition certain personal vulnerabilities may dispose people to both psychological disorders and relationship problems. For example, deficits in interpersonal communication and negative affect regulation are risk factors that predict the onset of both alcohol abuse (Block, Block, & Keyes, 1988), and relationship problems (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). This common risk factor might be part of the explanation for the common co-occurrence of relationship and alcohol problems.

#### Gender

There are important differences between how men and women function within relationships. For example, relative to men, women are more likely to report dissatisfaction with a lack of emotional closeness in their marriages (Clements & Markman, 1996; Julien, Arellano & Tugeon, 1997); to be more emotionally expressive when discussing relationship issues (Weiss & Heyman, 1997); to report greater conflict between their work and family roles (Thompson, 1997); and to initiate divorce (Wolcott & Glazer, 1989). There also is evidence that men and women experience intimacy somewhat differently. Women are more likely to experience self disclosure of feelings as high in intimacy, whereas men are more likely to experience shared activity as intimacy (Markman & Kraft, 1989). Marriage and relationship education programs need to provide information to participants on gender differences, and to assist couples to develop ways to meet couple needs for both male and female partners.

#### Specific influences on relationships at major transition points

##### The establishment of a committed relationship

The first few years of marriage or cohabitation are associated with substantial change for couples. Most couples find that the initial overwhelming attraction to their spouse moderates, that new relationship roles and routines need to be developed, and means of negotiating conflict evolve (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). Across numerous studies the mean

quality of relationship satisfaction declines in an approximately linear fashion over the first few years of marriage (Huston et al. 1986; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kurdek, 1998; Veroff et al. 1995). It has been speculated that some decline in satisfaction is inevitable, given that many couples entering relationships have extreme, and probably unrealistic, positive views about their relationship and partner (Kudek, 1998). It is striking that separations in the first 4 years of marriage account for about one third of all divorces (Clark, 1995). Clearly many couples have a great struggle to adapt to cohabiting in ongoing committed relationships.

There are a number of well-replicated predictors of deterioration in relationship satisfaction across these early crucial years of the relationship. Most of them are the generic risk factors identified above. For example, couple communication and conflict management skills predict relationship satisfaction (Gottman et al. 1998; Markman, 1981). In addition, there are some factors that seem particularly important during the transition into a committed relationship. Relationship aggression is a predictor of deteriorating satisfaction and higher risk of separation that seems particularly important in the early years of marriage (O'Leary, Barling, et al. 1989; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). A significant minority of young couples need special assistance to resolve conflict without physical aggression, with estimates of 15 to 15% of young couple reporting physical aggression occurring in their relationship in the last year (O'Leary et al. 1989).

#### The transition to parenthood

Ninety percent of married couples have children (Houseknecht, 1987), and so along with moving in together, having children can be regarded as one of the most universal transitions couples experience. The transition to parenthood universally is reported to bring a wide range of changes in the partners' individual functioning, their relationship with each other, and their relationships with extended family (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cox, 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Palkovitz & Sussman, 1988).

It is well established that the transition to parenthood is associated with declines in mean marital satisfaction for couples, though the source of these mean changes is a source of some debate. There are over 20 studies that examine marital satisfaction and marital conflict from early pregnancy across the first months or years of parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). Almost all of these studies report declines in mean relationship satisfaction and increases in conflict across this time (e.g., Belsky, 1985; Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985; Cowan et al, 1985; Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1991; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990), which has been interpreted to mean the transition to parenthood itself has a negative impact upon relationship satisfaction. However, long term studies of relationship satisfaction show mean relationship satisfaction is highest pre-maritally, that it declines over time, and that couples with and without children show similar downward trajectories (Huston et al. 1986; McHale & Huston, 1985; Duncan & Markman,

1988; Markman, Clements, & Wright, 1991). Hence it may be more accurate to say that couples are experiencing mean declines in relationship satisfaction over time that continue across the transition to parenthood (Clements & Markman, 1996).

Perhaps even more important than the mean changes in satisfaction across the transition to parenthood is the variability between couples in the changes in their relationship as they become parents. In one series of studies 12% of all new parents showed a severe decline, 30% showed moderate decline, 30% showed no change, and about 20% showed definite improvement in their marital relationship satisfaction (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Belsky & Kelly, 1994). Thus, while the transition to parenthood is associated with a mean decline in relationship satisfaction across couples, for many couples becoming parents is associated with enhanced relationship and life satisfaction.

There are two broad classes of variables that predict changes in relationship functioning across the transition to parenthood: generic relationship risk factors, and parenthood specific factors. Variables such as negative family-of-origin experiences, marital problems before the birth of the child, pre-existing psychological disorders in either partner, and poor couple communication each predict poor individual and couple adjustment across the transition to parenthood (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989). As these same variables also predict deterioration in couple relationship satisfaction among all couples, they are generic relationship risk factors.

One parenthood specific factor predicting deteriorating couple relationship satisfaction and functioning is maternal depression (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Fleming, Ruble, Flett, & Shaul, 1988; Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cutrona, 1982). For women, the peak onset of depression is during the childbearing years, with the most widely accepted incidence rate being around 10% to 20% of childbearing women (Romito, 1989). Ten percent of postpartum women develop depression serious enough to interfere with their daily functioning (Campbell, Cohn, Flanagan, Proper, & Myers, 1992). For men, there also appears to be an increased risk of depression during the transition to fatherhood, but much less is known about psychological and psychiatric disorders in new fathers compared with new mothers. There are no epidemiological data documenting the incidence of depression in new fathers, but recent studies have documented higher rates of anxiety, depression and relationship problems in the postnatal period for partners of depressed women (Pope, Evans, McLean, & Michael, 1998).

Parenthood brings with it substantial changes in roles for couples (Sanders et al. 1997). For some couples additional roles that are involved in parenting provide extra sources of satisfaction and are associated with greater reported general life satisfaction (Luckey & Bain, 1970). However, role strain resulting from the build-up of competing demands associated with their parenting roles can add stress for

each of the spouses (Rollins & Galligan, 1978). This seems often to have most impact on women (Belsky, 1990). In particular, the extent to which male partners meet the women's expectations for support and sharing parenting responsibilities is a major predictor of the women's relationship satisfaction (Belsky & Rovine, 1990). Gender roles often become more traditional in couples after the birth of a child, and often remain that way until children reach adolescence (Cowan & Cowan, 1990; Belsky et al. 1985). If this gender traditionalism is not consistent with the women's expectations, this can be a major source of dissatisfaction, which may account for why decreases in marital satisfaction are more reliably found for women than for men (e.g. Belsky, 1990).

When children have medical and emotional problems, couples relationships are at increased risk for distress (Klaus & Kennell; 1976; Wikler, 1986). In the early stages of the transition to parenthood factors like prematurity of the child (Pope et al. 1998), and child problems with sleep, eating and other health problems all predict increased risk of stress in the parents, and increased risk of couple relationship problems (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Moreover, when marriages are distressed before the birth of the child, couples often cope more poorly with such child problems and may exacerbate the severity of these childhood problems (Fincham, Grych, & Osbourne, 1994, Cowan & Cowan, 1992; 1995). In other words, couple relationship problems and early childhood problems reciprocally influence each other.

#### Separation and re-partnering

Separation and divorce are reported by adults as extremely stressful (Bloom et al. 1978), and it is likely that all adults experiencing separation have at least some adjustment difficulties. For many adults the first six to 12 months after separation are the most difficult, and their psychological well being returns to normal ranges over a period of months to a year or two (Bloom et al. 1978). However, for some people maladjustment is severe and persists for many years after separation (Braver, Whitley, & Ng, 1993; Jordan, 1985; Kincaid & Calwell, 1995). The long term effects of separation can have major negative effects on individuals, the relationships they have with their children (Funder, 1991; Furstenburg, Morgan & Allison, 1987), and on the outcome of subsequent relationships they may enter (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Smith-Barnett, 1990).

Whilst defining what constitutes better adjustment to separation is a matter of some controversy, there are some responses that almost universally would be acknowledged as poor adjustment and coping. Some indicators of poor adjustment that are common are individuals becoming chronically socially withdrawn, depressed, or abusing alcohol and other drugs (Bruce and Kim, 1992; Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet, & Kitson, 1998; Stack & Banowski, 1994). Many separated people report thinking and being preoccupied about the ex-partner, and this preoccupation can range in severity from mild discomfort from unwanted

memories and thoughts, to extreme distress and obsessional rumination (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). For some people their distress is so severe that they contemplate, or attempt, or actually commit suicide (Cantor & Slater, 1994).

Parents' relationships with children can be severely affected by separation, particularly for parents who do not have primary contact with their children. Whilst most non-custodial parents initially declare a high level of interest in their children, over time the frequency of contact and the quality of the relationship often greatly diminish (Amato, 1997; Depner & Bray, 1993). An Australian Bureau of Statistics report (April, 1997) found 36% of children who most often reside with the primary care-giver are visited by their other parent from less than once a year to never. In a five-year longitudinal study, 23% of non-custodial fathers had no contact with their children during the previous five years (Furstenberg et al. 1987). The active involvement of both parents in children's lives after separation predicts better adjustment of the children (Hines, 1997), particularly when the non-custodial parent engages in what has been called authoritative parenting (Amato, 1997). Authoritative parenting refers to when the parent is actively involved in the setting of rules for children, discipline, and promoting engagement in schooling and peer social activities for the child.

#### Influences on adjustment of adults after separation

The stress-vulnerability-coping model adapted by Karney and Bradbury (1995) to explain relationship outcomes can also be adapted to explain the adjustment of ex-partners to separation. That is, one can see adjustment as a function of the life events occurring around the separation, individual partner characteristics, and interactions between the ex-partners.

There are a number of stressful life events associated with separation, and the more severe these stresses, the poorer adjustment people tend to make. Separation often follows a period of declining relationship satisfaction, and often increasing conflict (Gottman, 1994). In Australia, the most common reasons given by ex-partners for separation are communication problems (23% of women and 33% of men), incompatibility (20% of women and 23 % of men), an affair by either party (20% of both men and women), physical abuse in the relationship (10% of women and 3% of men), or alcohol or drug abuse (11% of women and 3% of men) (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). In all these reported reasons a common element is dissatisfaction with the partner, and such dissatisfaction usually is associated with anger and conflict with the ex-partner both before and after separation. The evidence that ongoing conflict erodes individual adjustment was reviewed earlier, and highlights that separation often follows a period of severe distress.

Up to 70% of separations are reported as being initiated by women (Braver et al. 1993; Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). Many men often report shock and surprise at the decision of their partner to separate from them, whilst the women are more likely

to report they have perceived relationship problems, and have contemplated separation for years before initiating the separation (Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995; Braver et al. 1993). These differences may explain the consistent finding that men exhibit more short term adjustment problems to separation than women (e.g. Helgeson, 1994).

There also are severe stresses after separation. Most ex-partners report a substantial decrease in their disposable income and standard of living after separation, and in people with low initial incomes separation can be associated with extreme financial hardship (Hanson, McLanahan & Thomson, 1998; Duncan, 1994). Involvement in current or impending legal proceedings often is viewed as very stressful, and the longer and more complex the legal proceedings the poorer people's adjustment (Funder, 1991). Many people who experience extended legal action through the Family Law system in Australia perceive the courts as unfair, and as adding to their problems after separation. For example, many men report a view that the system is biased against them (Funder, 1991). Whatever the merits of this opinion, it is clear that the perception of unfairness by the Family Law court is associated with poorer adjustment after separation.

Given that poor conflict management and communications skills predict increased risk for separation and divorce, and that separation often follows prolonged periods of conflict, it is not surprising that many separated couples report ongoing conflict with their ex-partner (Johnson, Gonzales & Campbell, 1987). Severe conflict has been reported to continue for five or more years after separation in 25% of separated couples (Johnson et al. 1988). Difficulties in sharing and co-ordination of child rearing are major problems for many separated couples (Barris & Garrity, 1997; Funder, 1991), and the extent of conflict between ex-partners has a major impact upon the partners themselves, and their children (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

The relationship with an ex-partner can impact on subsequent couple relationships, and may place them at risk (Lawton & Sanders, 1994). Either high levels of ongoing conflict with the ex-spouse, or ongoing close attachment to the ex-partner, are associated with lower relationship satisfaction in subsequent relationships (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999).

Individual characteristics of the ex-partners that are associated with adjustment to separation have not been extensively studied. Neuroticism, which can be seen as the ability to regulate and respond to negative feelings, is a relatively stable personality characteristic likely to effect adjustment. Individuals with a history of affect problems such as depression, anxiety and anger, seem most likely to have problems after separation. In addition, ex-partners who have an avoidant or anxious attachment style report more distress after separation than those with secure attachment style (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer & Florian, 1997).

The interpretations ex-partners make of the process and reasons for separation affect adjustment. People who attribute the causes of the break up entirely to their ex-partner often report anger, and this probably is unhelpful in the longer term (Smith-Barnett, 1990). In particular, a partner-blaming perspective is likely to prevent the person examining their own communication skills, ability to manage conflict and so forth. To the extent that these processes put future relationships at risk, the person is missing the chance to develop their ability to have a better relationship in the future. On the other hand, attributing the separation entirely to oneself often is unhelpful, particularly if this is associated with thoughts such as being unlovable, or having faults that one is unable to change.

### Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies are an increasing proportion of all families in Australia. The high divorce rate combined with the fact that the majority of separated people re-partner contributes to the high rate of step family formation (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987). Unfortunately stepfamilies break up at particularly high rates, substantially higher rates than for either first relationships (Fergusson, Horwood, & Dimond, 1985; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987), or second marriages without children from prior relationships (Messinger & Walker, 1981; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1982; White & Booth, 1985; Whitsett & Land, 1992). Furthermore, in stepfamilies where both partners have children from previous marriages (complex families) there is a lower level of marital satisfaction compared to stepfamilies with children from only one partner (Clingempeel, 1981; Clingempeel & Brand, 1985).

The high rates of break up of stepfamilies result in many children experiencing multiple breakdowns of families. About 50% of children whose parents divorce will experience a second relationship break up of one of their parents (Bumpass & Sweet, 1985). Repeated breakdowns of families is associated with substantial long-term adjustment problems for children (Amato, 1997).

A high percentage of remarried couples divorce within the first four years of remarriage (Booth & Edwards, 1992). The satisfaction with couple relationships (Booth & Edwards, 1992), stepparent-child relationships (Bray & Berger, 1993), parent-child relationships (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982), and family cohesion (Bray & Berger, 1993) often decline soon after remarriage. Those couples who remain together as stepfamilies for about seven years then show substantially higher levels of relationship stability (Papernow, 1984). Given the extremely high rates of early break down of stepfamilies, relationship education programs need to come very early in the stepfamily formation process.

The stepparent-stepchild relationship is often the most crucial to determining stepfamily outcomes (Brown, Green, & Druckman, 1990). The quality of this relationship strongly predicts the child's adjustment (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994), and whether couples remain together (Bray & Berger, 1993; Clingempeel,

Brand, & Ievoli, 1984; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Many writers and researchers in the field argue that the stepparent-stepchild relationship is problematic because society has not established a set of clear and realistic guidelines on how to fulfil the roles of step-family members (Cherlin, 1978). As a result, stepfamily members often start their life together unsure about the roles and boundaries within the new family. This is particularly hard for those stepparents who lack prior parenting experience (Sanders et al. 1997). Furthermore, adolescent stepchildren have the highest rates of difficulty in adjusting to stepfamily life (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988; Hughes & Schroeder, 1997). Given that the assertion of independence from family life is socially normative in adolescence, this process may be further complicated in step families by negotiating new family roles.

Couples in stepfamilies have substantially more conflict over parenting practices than other couples (Cissna, Cox & Bochner, 1990), and the role of the stepparent is often central to that conflict. In particular, developing a caring relationship with stepchildren can be problematic. It is often assumed that stepparents and stepchildren will quickly develop a loving relationship, but this is often not the case (Lawton & Sanders, 1994). Issues such as resentment of the new stepparent, unresolved hope for reconciliation between the biological parents, and lack of shared history together make the stepparent-stepchild relationship difficult to forge. When stepparents are rejected by their stepchildren, they may withdraw from the children and their relationship may become more and more negative over time (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), which in turn predicts increasing negativity in the couple relationship (Clingempeel et al. 1984). Negotiating a mutually acceptable level of intimacy, such as the role of a friend or housemate, early in stepfamily formation can reduce the negativity and conflict between stepparents and stepchildren (Visher & Visher, 1991).

The role of stepparents in disciplining children often is a source of conflict in families. Stepparents who assume a disciplinarian role for children too early in the family formation are often resented by children, and the biological parent often finds themselves torn between loyalty to a new partner and loyalty to the child (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1982). On the other hand, lack of child discipline, or inconsistent, irritable or coercive parenting predicts child behavior problems and maladjustment (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch 1996). These parenting problems often occur during transition from the first relationship to separation, and then into the new couple relationship (Hetherington, 1988).

The biological parent-child relationship also is important to the health of the new stepfamily. The bond between biological parent and child often is very strong and can interfere with the development of a stable couple bond and the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella 1998). Stepfamilies often have unhealthy biological parent-child coalitions and this may make it difficult for a stepparent to join with the family (Anderson & White, 1986). When stepfamilies first form, parent-child bonds are



likely to deteriorate as the parent spends time strengthening the couple relationship at the expense of the parent-child relationship (Bray, 1988). Children may resent the time and love given to their new stepparent and may feel abandoned by their parent (Visher & Visher, 1991). This may result in problem behaviours or withdrawal (Hetherington et al. 1998).

On average, stepfamilies are less competent at problem solving and communicating effectively than first marriage families (Bray, 1988). The source of these problems is unclear; it may be due to the fact that they are attempting to manage particularly difficult issues. There are a number of guidelines that have been offered for formation of stepfamilies that seem most likely to develop a strong stepfamily (Cissna et al. 1990). Couples first need to establish a strong couple relationship, as partners who cohabit soon after meeting are less likely to have stable stepfamily relationships than other stepfamilies. The biological parent needs to introduce the new partner gradually to children, and to affirm the importance of the new relationship to the children jointly with the new partner. The couple need to negotiate a clear and mutually acceptable means of asserting parental authority to resolve family conflicts, to communicate that understanding to the children, and the partners need to avoid conflict about parenting practices occurring in front of the children.

After problems coping with children, stepfamilies report finances as their second biggest problem area (Albrecht, Barr & Goodman, 1983; Hartin, 1990; Messinger, 1976; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1982). This includes paying and receiving child support, financial burdens incurred from a previous marriage, and management issues related to independence, security and control (Hetherington et al. 1998). There are a number other significant strains in stepfamily life that differentiate stepfamilies from other families. These issues include: loyalty issues with past and present family members, and children's difficulty in adjusting to their biological parent loving another person who is not their parent (Cherlin, 1978; Hartin, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1978; Visher & Visher, 1989). In addition the roles of grandparents, non-custodial parents, and long-time friends in the new stepfamily have to be negotiated.

#### Older couples

The relationship needs and satisfaction of older couples has received limited research attention (Gagnon et al. 1999). Australia, like most western countries has an aging population and the number and length of marriages continuing into older age is increasing (McDonald, 1995). The divorce rate in older couples is lower than for younger couples, though divorce rates in older couples are increasing internationally (Hammond & Muller, 1992).

The correlates of relationship satisfaction in older couples have many commonalties with the correlates of relationship satisfaction in younger couples,

but there also are some important distinctive factors in older couples. Like younger couples, older couples who are satisfied negotiate life transitions more successfully than dissatisfied couples (Gagnon et al. 1999). In particular, dissatisfied couples often report the onset of problems around developmental transitions, such as children leaving the parental home, and retirement (Booth & Johnson, 1994). Many couples respond to the reduced time spent in child rearing or employment by increasing shared positive activities, and this often is associated with reports of enhanced relationship satisfaction (Guilford & Bengston, 1979). However, developing a mutually satisfying balance of independent and couple activities can present challenges for some older couples. Effective communication and conflict management that help to negotiate transitions correlate with relationship satisfaction in older couples, as they do with younger couples, but there is substantially less overt conflict in distressed older couples than in distressed younger couples (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Sometimes the lack of obvious conflict might lead outsiders to assume the relationship is a mutually satisfying one. However, there is an important minority of older couples who report long-term relationship problems that are not recognized by others (Levenson et al. 1993), and these problems are predictive of relationship breakdown at times of transition.

Support for the spouse is a factor reported by older couples to be particularly important, and low levels of support during crises are a major source of relationship dissatisfaction in older couples (Cutrona, 1986). There is a reciprocal relationship between sustaining good health and relationship satisfaction in older couples. Declining health is associated with increased relationship problems, particularly amongst couples who provide each other with low levels of mutual support (Melton, Hersen, VanSickle, & Van Hasselt, 1995). Conversely, couples who offer high levels of support and have high satisfaction have better health (Melton et al. 1995). The role of mutually satisfying relationships in promoting the health and well being of older couples has great social significance. In severe health problems of the elderly, such as Alzheimer's disease, a strong couple relationship with good spouse support predict less deterioration in the sufferer, and enhanced ability to support the sufferer in the couple's home rather than in nursing home care (Sanders, 1995).

### Implications of evidence for relationship education

The variables that predict relationship satisfaction and stability usefully can be conceptualized as falling into two categories: risk indicators that are static, and risk factors that are dynamic. Static risk indicators allow identification of couples at high risk for relationship problems, but in isolation tells us little about what we can do to enhance their relationships. For example, parental divorce is a predictor of risk for relationship problems, but this historical variable cannot be changed. Dynamic risk factors can be changed, and often are the targets of relationship

education. For example, communication skills predict sustained relationship satisfaction (Markman, 1981), and these skills can be taught to couples who have low levels of such skills (Halford & Behrens, 1996).

Many static risk indicators are easily and reliably assessed, for example parental divorce, whether either partner is under 21 years of age at the time of marriage, and education level all are easily assessed. In contrast, some dynamic risk factors are more difficult to assess. For example, behavioral observation of communication skills detects subtle deficits that predict future relationship problems (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Sanders et al. 1999). However, couple self reports of communication are not as sensitive to these deficits. Thus, direct observation of couple communication can be very important in research to establish risk factors.

There is an association between some established static risk indicators and dynamic risk factors. For example, parental divorce and parental aggression in the family of origin is associated with couples having poor conflict management skills at the time of marriage (Halford et al. in press; Sanders et al. 1999). Most people learn intimate communication and conflict management skills within the family of origin (O'Leary, 1988), and having parents who divorced or who were violent is associated with a lesser chance of developing adequate skills. The easily measured risk indicator of parental divorce can be used to identify couples at high risk of relationship problems. Moreover, assessment of this easily assessed risk indicator may be a better means of detecting couples with communication problems than self-reports by the couple about their communication. In other words, the difficult-to-measure risk factor of poor communication can be the target of the relationship education program, but its detection might be through the easily-measured risk indicator of parental divorce status.

Table 1 is a summary of the research reviewed previously, presenting the generic predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability in categories of context, individual partner characteristics, life events, and couple interaction. It is clear that existing evidence provides a substantial ability to predict couples at high risk for relationship dissatisfaction and instability, particularly in the early years of marriage. Marriage and relationship education programs need to be developed and provided in such a manner that all couples, including high-risk couples, are attracted to participate in marriage and relationship education programs. Second, the identified dynamic factors that promote relationship satisfaction and stability should be the key educational goals of marriage and relationship education.

Table 1: Major predictors of relationship dissatisfaction continued

Category of risk	Subcategory	Examples of established specific risks <sup>(1)</sup>	Implications for relationship education
Couple interaction	Normal processes	Communication and conflict management	Make a key feature of relationship education programs, provide couples with active skills training if required.
		Mutual support	Make a key feature of relationship education programs, provide couples with active skills training if required.
		Relationship expectations and goals	Programs should help couples clarify and set relationship goals, and to develop realistic and adaptive expectations.
		Gender role flexibility	Couples should be encouraged to self-assess their gender role flexibility, and to develop more flexibility if required.
		Affections and intimacy	Make a key feature of relationship education programs, provide couples with active skills training if required.
	Abnormal processes	Aggression and violence	Assess for occurrence in couples, provide specific input on anger management, prevention of violence.

<sup>(1)</sup> The variables identified as risks are correlates of relationship satisfaction, in most cases the causal relationship(s) are unclear, the implications are educated guesses based on likely causal relationships.

Relationship education programs need to include teaching of skills that have been shown to be generic predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability across multiple life circumstances and developmental transitions. In addition, specific programs need to include the specific risk factors that have been shown to be relevant to particular life transitions. Hence, the development of appropriate expectations and conflict management skills seem to be particularly important for couples making the transition into committed relationships. The transition into parenthood will require greater attention to the likely impact of being a parent on the couple's communication, time together, and sexual relationship. In addition, skills would need to be developed which help couples to renegotiate gender roles, sharing of parenting and household responsibilities, and adapting to changing financial circumstances. In the case of step-parenting, particular attention needs to be provided to giving information on the stepparent/stepchild relationship, and helping the partners to negotiate mutually acceptable parenting arrangements. Thus, across a number of different examples relationship education programs need to incorporate some generic factors (e.g., communication skills would probably be an important component of nearly all programs), and some specific skills for coping with particular life transitions.

### 3. CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

In order to analyze the available evidence on the effects of marriage and relationship education in this chapter I first review the range of available approaches to relationship education. This is followed by an examination of the methodological challenges in evaluating the effects of relationship education. Then there is an analysis of the research evidence itself.

#### Range of approaches to relationship education

##### General approaches to relationship education

There is a huge diversity of approaches to marriage and relationship education. One dimension of this diversity is the degree of specificity and documentation provided for particular approaches. Some relationship education programs, such as the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program developed by Markman and colleagues (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1995), and the Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation Program (PREPARE) of Olsen and colleagues (Olsen, Fournier, & Druckman, 1996) have extensive documentation about their procedures, and there is a well developed training system for people who provide marriage and relationship education within these program structures. Most of these highly structured programs have been developed within research settings, and are based on psychological research on the influences and determinants of relationship satisfaction. At the other end of the continuum are a series of marriage and relationship education programs that have been developed by practitioners. These programs often have been developed locally, and the procedures that are followed often are not extensively documented, but rather depend upon the particular experiences of the educators concerned (Harris, Simons, Willis, & Barrie, 1992). Often the content of these programs reflects the feedback from participants in marriage and relationship education programs over a number of years, rather than being developed from concepts derived from psychological research.

A second dimension of marriage and relationship education programs is the mode of delivery. Many marriage and relationship education programs are delivered in groups, but others are delivered to individual couples, and some may be delivered to individual partners (Harris et al. 1992). Almost all programs as they are described in reviews of marriage and relationship education in Australia (Harris et al. 1992), focus on face-to-face interaction between marriage educators and participants. There are a small number of programs which involve telephone-based services, or self-directed materials. For example, a flexible relationship education program entitled the Relationship Education and EnhancEment program (REDEE) has been developed which involves self-directed learning, without face-to-face contact between participants and educators. The REDEE program consists of a video tape, guide book and telephone education service (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Burrows, & Farrugia, 1998).

A third dimension in the variety of relationship education programs is the intensity of those programs. Some programs are single sessions of one or two hours, whilst other programs involve 15 or even 20 hours of contact (To have and to hold, 1998). There are also variations in format. For example, some more intensive programs are run across a weekend in a single block, and other programs are run in multiple sessions over a number of weeks.

A fourth dimension in marriage and relationship education programs is the educational goal(s) of the program. Some programs focus primarily on the transmission of information, the clarification of expectations about relationships, and raising of awareness. Typical formats of such programs involve some didactic information presentation, plus discussion between the partners or within a group context. A somewhat different focus for relationship education places emphasis upon the acquisition of skills. For example, within the PREP program of Markman et al. (1994) they emphasize development of positive communication skills and a reduction of negative communication and negative conflict management as core educational goals for the program.

#### Information and awareness approaches

One useful way to conceptualize and organize the great diversity of marriage and relationship education programs is that they can be seen as falling into three broad categories. These categories, and representative examples of programs of each type, are presented in Table 2. The first general category could be described as information and awareness approaches. In this approach the emphasis is upon transmission of information, clarification of expectations, and increasing awareness of key relationship processes that influence relationship outcomes. Some programs include demonstration of relevant relationship skills such as communication, but there generally is not active training in these skills. From the available surveys of marriage and relationship education, it would seem that the majority of couples who receive marriage and relationship education in Australia receive this form of education (Harris et al. 1992; To Have and to Hold, 1998).

A limitation of the information and awareness programs is that many have been developed locally by practitioners and the exact content and process of the programs often is not well documented. The approaches often have grown from practical experience of delivering marriage and relationship education, and do not draw upon conceptual models or research available in the relevant literature. The lack of standardization of these programs means that they cannot readily be evaluated in scientific research.

Table 2: Major approaches to marriage and relationship education

Major approach	Major exemplars	Key publications describing the approach	Content of intervention
Information and awareness	A wide diversity of programs, most of which are not fully documented but reflect practice built upon experience.	Harris, Simons, Willis, & Barrie (1992)	Discussion of topics like relationship expectations, clarification of religious and relationship values, demonstrations and discussion of communication and conflict management, financial planning and sexuality.
Inventory Assessment and Feedback	PREmarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation (PREPARE)  Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS)	Olsen, Fournier, & Druckman, 1989, 1996  Markey , Micheletto, & Becker, 1985	Assessment of partners on standardized inventory that encompasses many domains known to predict relationship outcomes. Feedback to the partners of the results of their assessment by a relationship educator. There may be additional input clarifying individual and relationship development goals and even skills training.
Skills training	Relationship Enhancement Couple communication Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)	Guernsey (1977) Wampler (1990) Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 1994)	Structured face-to face group or couple sessions involving didactic input, demonstrations, structured practice and feedback on relationship skills.



### Inventory approaches

A second category of marriage and relationship education programs is inventory-based programs. There are numerous inventories available. The most widely used in Australia are PREPARE (Olsen et al. 1996) and the Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS) (Larsen & Holman, 1994; Williams & Jurich, 1995). In these programs each partner completes an inventory which assesses a broad range of couple functioning dimensions, and the couple are provided with systematic feedback about the results of that assessment. The use of these inventories varies significantly between educators. Personal reports by educators with substantive experience with these programs indicates that many educators present the results of the feedback, and facilitate couples' discussion of their responses to that feedback. The goal seems to be to provide awareness and facilitate goal setting for positive change. Other marriage educators report that they use the inventories to diagnose couples' needs, negotiate with the couple to define particular learning goals that they want to achieve, and may supplement completion of the inventory with a variety of experiential exercises to achieve the negotiated goals. For example, a series of structured exercises have been developed that can be used with PREPARE (Olsen, Dyer & Dyer, 1997). However, the structured exercises still focus largely on promotion of awareness, and do not involve specific skills training.

The most extensively researched inventory is PREPARE, and this instrument has been through a number of revisions. The latest version is PREPARE 2000, which can be scored by computer. There also are variants of PREPARE such as ENRICH, which is designed for couples who have been living together in a committed relationship, and MATE which is for couples who have been together for extended periods of time. PREPARE was developed from a conceptual base of systems theory, and derives many of its components from psychological research. PREPARE involves comprehensive assessment across a wide range of relationship areas including couple communication, conflict resolution, parenting, religion, closeness, and flexibility. In two studies scores on PREPARE were shown to predict relationship satisfaction, and separation in couples across the first four to five years of marriage (Larson & Olsen, 1989; Fowers & Olsen, 1986).

FOCCUS is a 156-item instrument which assesses couples functioning across a wide range of areas including lifestyle expectations, friends and interests, personality, communication, religion and values, sexuality, readiness to marry, beliefs about the marriage covenant, and identification of key problem areas. FOCCUS was originally developed by Markey, Micheletto and Becker in 1985, and the latest revision is described in a publication by Markey and Micheletto (1997). The original FOCCUS program was developed for use by couples within the Catholic church, and the content has significantly more focus on spirituality and religious aspects of marriage than many other programs. Parallel versions have

been developed for couples who are entering inter-faith marriages, second marriages, or couples who are cohabiting. In one study FOCCUS scores were shown to predict couples' relationship satisfaction across the early years of marriage (Williams & Jurich, 1995).

The inventory programs like PREPARE and FOCCUS have the advantage of being clearly structured, and hence amenable to scientific evaluation. Furthermore their development from psychological research and theory means that they seem likely to have positive benefits for couples, as they do target factors shown to predict relationship outcomes. However, a presumption underlying these approaches is that awareness will promote better couple coping. As Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan (in press) point out, identification of partner differences or relationship weaknesses may be counterproductive unless couples are helped to deal effectively with the differences or issues identified. For example, feedback on divergent expectations may lead to profitable discussion, but couples lacking conflict management skills may be unable to resolve these differences.

Skills training programs.

The third broad category of relationship education programs is skills training programs. There are a number of examples of such programs including Guerney and colleagues' (Guerney, 1977, 1987, Guerney & Maxson, 1990) Relationship Enhancement program, Markman and colleagues' (Markman et al. 1994; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, in press) PREP program, and the Couples Communication program (Miller, Wackman, & Nunally, 1976). In each of these programs couples receive instruction on use of key relationship skills, which can be a mixture of lectures, demonstrations, and audio-visual presentations. Couples also receive opportunities to practice these new skills, and receive feedback from educators about their use of skills. Moreover, most programs involve some structured assignments couples are asked to undertake between sessions to practice applying skills within their own relationship.

The content of the various skills training programs has a number of common elements. For example, positive communication, conflict management, and positive expressions of affection are included in Relationship Education, PREP and Couple Communication (Guerney, 1977; Markman et al. 1994; Miller et al. 1976). There also are significant variations. For example, PREP places the most emphasis in content on the prevention of negative conflict, as this is argued to be central to the prevention of relationship problems (Markman et al. 1994). In Relationship Education the development of partner empathy for each other receives very strong emphasis (Guerney, 1977), whilst this has less emphasis in PREP.

The differences in skills focused on in skills training programs reflects, at least in part, a lack of consensus about which relationship skills are central to relationship satisfaction and stability. For example, recently Gottman et al. (1998) argued that

active listening skills, which often are taught as part of communication skills within relationship education programs, really are not predictive of relationship satisfaction in the early years of marriage. Gottman argued that husbands' responsiveness to their wives attempts to influence the relationship was a better predictor of relationship satisfaction, and this responsiveness should be a focus of skills training in relationship education. However, Stanley, Bradbury, and Markman (in press) argued the presented data did not support Gottman et al.'s view, and that current communication skills training practices should not be abandoned. Examining the measures used by Gottman et al. (1998) it is not at all clear that they really measured influence responsiveness. Moreover, the previous longitudinal research showing communication predicts relationship satisfaction was ignored by Gottman in reaching his conclusions. Whilst I feel Gottman et al. (1998) were not justified in reaching the conclusions they drew, the specific communication skills that enhance relationship satisfaction need further research.

A variant on the skills training programs is the SELF-PREP program (Halford & Behrens, 1996; Halford et al. 1999). Like the original PREP program, this program is an active skills training program that targets a wide range of relationship skills such as communication, conflict management, intimacy enhancement, and sexuality. In contrast to the original PREP, rather than just focusing on the teaching of specific skills, a specific objective of the SELF-PREP program is to teach self-directed learning skills, or meta competencies. In this approach couples are taught to evaluate their own skills within particular relationship domains, to set goals for self-directed change, are assisted to develop self-change plans, and their skills in evaluating the effectiveness of self-change efforts are also developed. An advantage of this approach is that it does not presuppose specific skills will be universally helpful to couple relationships. Rather, in SELF-PREP couples are taught to evaluate the effects of particular behaviors within their relationship and to self-direct change to enhance their relationship.

The assessment of relationship meta competencies has been a subject of recent research. Wilson, Halford, Lizzio, and Kimlin (1999) have developed a self-report measure of relationship meta competencies. Respondents rate the extent to which they agree with a series of items such as "I can identify things that I do which strengthen our relationship", "I am clear about the type of relationship I want to have with my partner", and "I have lots of good intentions about improving my behaviour in our relationship, but I don't seem to follow these changes through". Whilst research on this construct is limited there is evidence that it can be reliably measured, and that it might be an important construct that influences long term relationship satisfaction.

Given that there is not broad agreement about exactly which skills may be adaptive for particular couples, and that the adaptive skills may vary by culture and the particular challenges that couples are confronting, the idea of self-regulation of

relationship meta competencies is something that warrants further investigation. Already one program which utilised this construct has been the subject of a controlled trial, and positive long-term effects of a marriage education program using SELF-PREP were reported at four year follow-up (Halford et al. 1999).

#### Additional Approaches to Relationship Education

In addition to the widely used approaches to relationship and marriage education described above, there are a number of new directions and possible innovations for providing relationship education. There is a huge diversity of self-help books and other materials available to couples providing advice on relationship education. Sayers, Colombo, Pirolli, Brigidi & Kohn (1996) identified 98 books currently available for the lay public on marriage and couple relationships. Little to nothing is known about the extent to which couples apply ideas gained from such reading, or the effectiveness of such materials. Christensen and Jacobson (1994) reviewed the use of self-help books in self-directed learning for a variety of personal growth areas. They concluded that while there was limited research on the effectiveness of self-help books or other self-directed learning resources, self-help books that taught skills that were not too complex could be quite effective. They did not make specific conclusions about the effectiveness of advice on marriage and relationships in printed or audio-visual form, as there was insufficient evidence to reach conclusions on this. However, they did conclude at the end of their extensive and scholarly review that the possible benefits of self-directed change through provision of brief advice, written and audiovisual materials had not been taken sufficiently seriously by professionals. They argued that the available evidence suggested that often programs were effective, and that there was a preference by many people in the community to access information in these alternative ways.

There are a number of developed audio-visual programs that can be offered in self-directed learning mode. For example, PREP Educational Videos Incorporated have produced a series of videotapes entitled "Fighting for Your Marriage" used quite widely in the United States. Whilst there is no research currently evaluating the effectiveness of watching these videotapes, the content of the tapes is based on extensive psychological research and it is possible that some couples do benefit considerably from exposure to such materials.

Several web sites exist which provide couples with access to a variety of educational materials about marriage and relationships. For example the Relate web site set up by the Department of Family and Community Services has a series of tips on it about how to enhance the quality of relationships. It is unclear whether simple guidance in this form, or more elaborate information that might be made available in a similar form, is helpful in the relationship education area. However, there is extensive research that has been done on providing a variety of health education materials via web sites. In a recent review conducted for the

United States Department of Health and Human Services, Eng and Gustafson (1999) concluded that many health education programs can be delivered effectively via the web. They reported on numerous web sites that had been subjected to rigorous evaluation, and where the access of potential consumers of information and ideas was much greater than could be expected by offering face to face programs. Moreover, they found that people who had accessed such web sites often reported them as being extremely helpful, and as allowing people to then select what sort of further information they might find most useful or helpful.

Elliot (1999) reviewed web based education programs on family life. Relatively few of these web sites focused on relationship education for couples. Moreover, Elliot noted that few sites provided the opportunity for interaction, thus limiting the chance of skills acquisition. The opportunities for use of new technology to allow people to access information on couple relationships has not been explored sufficiently.

A potential advantage of self-directed learning materials is that they may engage people who would otherwise be resistant to marriage and relationship education. Such engagement might produce significant positive relationship benefits. Even if there are no immediate benefits from using such materials alone, they might encourage people to present for more traditional face-to-face forms of marriage and relationship education.

## Methodological issues in evaluation of relationship education

### Outcome measures

Satisfaction with the content and process of relationship education should be, and often is assessed routinely in relationship education course delivery. However, ratings of satisfaction with course content are influenced by a wide range of factors such as the price paid for the program, the marketing of the program, and the quality and comfort of the venue (Morris, Cooper & Gross, 1999). Reported satisfaction with courses can guide relationship educators as to aspects of the program that were not well received by participants, and this is helpful. However, reported satisfaction does not necessarily reflect the value of course content, and it probably does not reflect the long-term benefit participants may gain from course participation. In other words, reported course satisfaction is important as part of evaluation of relationship education. But rated satisfaction alone is inadequate to evaluate programs.

As distinct from satisfaction with the relationship education course, it is important to assess partners' satisfaction with their relationship. Relationship satisfaction has the highest face validity of possible measures of relationship education outcomes. However, there are methodological problems with measuring the construct of relationship satisfaction. Reports of relationship satisfaction seem to reflect a broad general sentiment about the relationship, regardless of the specific

questions posed (Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994). For example, whether partners are asked about satisfaction with resolving conflict, sharing time together, or sense of intimacy, partners tend to give either uniformly positive or negative responses across items. This has led most researchers to operationalize relationship satisfaction as a single score. While the collapsing of seemingly different dimensions of relationship satisfaction into a single satisfaction score may seem conceptually unsound, evaluation of reports of relationship satisfaction consistently show partners often make uni-dimensional, global evaluations of their relationships (Eddy, Heyman & Weiss, 1991; Heyman et al. 1994).

Partners who are satisfied with their relationships have a positive bias in their reports about their relationships (Fowers et al. 1996) and tend to report that just about anything that could be positive about their relationship, is positive. Sometimes this bias seems very unrealistic. For example, some satisfied couples endorse descriptions of their relationship such as “My partner meets my every need” or “I have never ever thought about the possibility of not being married to my partner” (Fowers et al. 1996). Moreover, most satisfied married couples estimate the chance of them ever divorcing their partner as extremely low, despite the well-documented high rates of relationship break up. Fowers labels the phenomenon of making seemingly unrealistically positive reports on a relationship as idealistic distortion. Idealistic distortion is correlated with relationship satisfaction and it has been suggested that such a distortion may help maintain relationship satisfaction (Fowers et al. 1996).

Idealistic distortion in reports of relationship satisfaction may make such reports insensitive to positive effects of marriage or relationship education. Two approaches to measurement of relationship satisfaction may overcome these problems. First, Fowers et al. (1996) utilize a measure of idealistic distortion and correct self-reported relationship satisfaction for the effects of idealistic distortion. In other words, very high relationship satisfaction scores that result from idealistic distortion can be corrected to a more realistic satisfaction score. It is possible that this method may allow detection of real increases on relationship satisfaction.

Fincham et al. (1997) developed a two dimensional scale of relationship satisfaction called the Positive and Negative Marital Qualities Scales (PNMQS). This scale separates partner rating of satisfaction with positive aspects of the relationship from ratings of dissatisfaction with negative aspects of the relationship. Fincham et al. showed that the ratings of positive and negative aspects of the relationship are relatively independent, and this structure may overcome the idealistic distortion effect.

The recent developments in measurement of relationship satisfaction may overcome the limitations of previous scales, and could allow better assessment of the immediate effects of marriage and relationship education on relationship satisfaction. However, it still is likely that many couples presenting for marriage

and relationship education will have high levels of initial relationship satisfaction, and this may impose ceiling effects on changes in relationship satisfaction. However, given that relationship satisfaction often erodes over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), if relationship education prevents that erosion, then the effects of relationship education on relationship satisfaction may be evident some years after relationship education.

Couple interaction is an important index of relationship education outcome. As noted in the chapter on the nature of strong couple relationships, particular characteristics of couple interaction can define strong relationships. Couple interaction often is assessed by observation in research, but this is very time consuming and unrealistic for routine program evaluation. Self-report measures of communication, conflict management, affection, and other important aspects of couple interaction can be administered at the beginning and end of programs to establish if couples have achieved gains in this crucial area. Moreover, such evaluation can be an important part of the educational experience. Pre-program administration of assessment measures can be used to assess couples' educational needs, as is routinely done in the use of standardized inventories. Post-program evaluations can be used to identify areas that have been strengthened across the program, and to help couples identify future learning needs. Greater routine evaluation of programs in this form should be encouraged.

#### Research design challenges

There are significant methodological problems associated with evaluating the effects of relationship education programs. First, it is important to know how couples would have gone without the intervention of relationship education. This can only be done in the context of having some sort of comparison or control group. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure that the couples who are receiving the relationship education program are comparable to the couples who are in the comparison condition. The only real way to be certain that there is comparability is to randomly assign couples to receive the relationship education program or be in the comparison condition. However, if couples are randomly assigned to receive no relationship education when they desire relationship education, they may seek education outside the study. This obviously violates the research integrity of the study.

Different researchers have come up with different responses to this challenge. Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988 and Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley & Clements, 1993 initially recruited engaged couples and then randomly assigned them to be either offered relationship education or not. Unfortunately only a third of the couples who were offered relationship education agreed to participate. These agreeing couples were then compared with couples who had not been offered relationship education. A difficulty with this approach is that the self-selection into relationship education confounds the actual delivery of relationship education. In other words, any observed effects may be due to couples who are

keen to do relationship education being the ones who would have done better anyway. Hahlweg and colleagues (1998) invited couples who were being married in the Catholic church in Germany to participate in either a skills based relationship education program, or a standard program provided by their local priest. Couples could choose which of the programs they preferred. Again, the difficulty is that couples who were choosing a skills based program might, by this very act of self-selection, be couples who were going to do better than the other couples. Halford and colleagues (1999) randomly assigned couples to receive either their SELF-PREP program or a minimal information and awareness program. The advantage of this strategy was that it ensured that the couples were comparable prior to receiving relationship education, and all couples who expressed interest in relationship education received a program. Moreover, the results of their research showed that couples were satisfied with both programs and rated them highly. Thus couples were receiving something which they had positive expectations about, and it was possible to establish if the relationship education program had specific beneficial effects.

A second serious flaw with most existing research concerns the lack of adequate follow-up. Most studies have evaluated only immediate or short-term effects of relationship education programs. A survey of 85 couple and family prevention and enrichment studies found that only 40% included follow-up measures at some point after post-test (mean = 12 weeks), with the longest follow-up assessment occurring at 12 months (Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985). There is a need to carry out long-term controlled trials and to randomly assign participants to relationship education or alternative conditions in order to establish if marriage and relationship education does have a beneficial effect.

Retention of couples within the study for long-term follow-up can be problematic. In much clinical and relationship education research there are substantial attrition rates from couples sampled, which seriously compromises the conclusions that can be drawn about long-term effects. Strategies such as keeping regular contact with couples, ensuring that couples provide a series of contact names and addresses so that they can be recontacted if they move, and paying couples for follow-up assessments in long-term research, are all important possibilities to enhance retention in studies.

## Empirical evidence on the effects of relationship education

### General findings

There are a very large number of research studies evaluating marriage education and enrichment, and there have been numerous reviews and meta-analyses of that evidence (Bagarozzi & Rauen 1981; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Christensen & Heavey, 1999; Dyer & Halford, 1998; Giblin et al. 1985; Guerney & Maxson 1990; Hahlweg & Markman, 1988; Sayers, Kohn & Heavey, 1998; Van Widenfelt, Markman, Guerney, Behrens, & Hosman, 1997). The conclusions drawn by



reviewers of research on the effects of marriage and relationship education diverge quite markedly, even when examining the same evidence. For example, Guerney & Maxson (1990) commenting on the meta-analysis of outcome studies undertaken by Giblen et al. (1985) concluded “there is no doubt that, on the whole, enrichment programs work and the field is an entirely legitimate one” (p. 1133). In contrast, Bradbury & Fincham, (1990) concluded from the results of the same meta-analyses: “prevention programs have not yet been shown to produce lasting changes in relationships” (p.397).

Given the diversity of conclusions drawn by previous reviewers of the evidence, it is important to analyze very carefully the available evidence, in order to establish exactly what effects have been demonstrated with which programs for which couples. I begin by looking at generic marriage and relationship education programs that target all couples, and then focus on programs for couples during the transition to parenthood, after divorce, and entering step families.

First, there is a general finding that most couples who complete competently run pre-marriage education programs generally report high satisfaction with the programs (Harris et al. 1992). This high satisfaction is evident across information and awareness programs, inventories and skills training programs (Halford & Behrens, 1996). Reported satisfaction generally is lower amongst couples who are younger, who have fewer years of formal education, who have to travel further to attend sessions, and who perceive the programs as intrusive into their privacy (Russell & Lyster, 1992). Couples who complete relationship education within a month or two of their marriage also tend to report less satisfaction than couples who had more time between doing the program and marriage (Russell & Lyster, 1992). Whilst high consumer satisfaction is desirable, this does not address the effects of education on relationship outcomes.

A 1986 meta-analysis of 85 relationship education and enhancement programs found an average effect size of .44 across all education programs and relationship outcome measures (Giblin et al. 1985). In meta-analyses of outcome studies an effect size of 0.3 is usually seen as small, 0.5 as moderate and 0.8 as large (Cohen, 1997). Thus an effect of 0.44 is close to moderate effect size, which is potentially an important effect if it occurs across all programs. However, the length and content of programs included in the meta-analyses was highly variable, most studies lacked any sort of control group, and only a very small number of the studies included any follow-up results. Moreover, the Giblin et al. meta-analysis included all locatable studies, whether or not they were published, and no studies were excluded on methodological grounds. Taken together, these results suggest that most studies included in this meta-analysis failed to meet usual scientific standards of evaluation.

Hahlweg & Markman (1988) also conducted a meta-analysis, and they included only seven studies, all of which were published studies that were controlled trials.

Moreover, they focused their review on programs that included relationship skills training. They found a mean effect size of 0.79 for education programs relative to controls. This large effect size was found in the highest quality studies.

Both the Giblin et al. (1985) and Hahlweg and Markman (1988) meta-analyses found differences in effect sizes as a function of type of measure used to assess change. Observational measures of relationship skills showed substantially larger differences between groups than self-report measures of relationship satisfaction [0.76 versus 0.35 in Giblin et al. (1985) and 1.51 versus 0.52 in Hahlweg & Markman (1988)]. Furthermore, Giblin et al. (1985) found greater effect sizes for self-report measures classified as assessing relationship skills (0.63) than for measures classified as assessing relationship satisfaction (0.34). Thus, since the mid- to late 1980s it has been well established that relationship education produces large improvements in relationship skills in the short term, and that there are small short-term increases in relationship satisfaction.

Giblin et al. (1985) found a larger effect size on relationship satisfaction for studies which included more distressed couples (0.51) than for studies with fewer distressed couples (0.27). The short-term effects of relationship education on relationship satisfaction are likely to be small when participating couples are mostly satisfied at the beginning of the program. Given that marriage and relationship education is supposed to prevent relationship problems developing, it is important to focus on studies that evaluate the effects of education on relationship satisfaction and stability over periods of years, focusing particularly on the effects on couples who initially are satisfied in their relationships.

There are only seven controlled trials evaluating marriage or relationship education programs for currently satisfied couples entering committed relationships that include follow-up assessments of six months or more. These studies are summarized in Table 3. All these programs have targeted engaged, dating, or recently married couples, and have consisted of between four to eight face-to-face group sessions of two to three hours duration. All of these evaluations were of skills based programs, with almost all of them focusing upon PREP or a variant of PREP.

Across studies there is a consistent finding that, relative to no intervention or minimal intervention controls, couples acquire the targeted skills (Avery, Ridley, Leslie, & Milholland, 1980; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Markman et al. 1988; Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1975; Wampler & Sprenkle, 1980). Long term follow-up of the maintenance of acquired skills is less well investigated, but three recent findings show maintenance of acquired skills over a period of some years (Hahlweg, Thurmair, Eckert, & Engel, 1996; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1996, 1999; Markman et al. 1993). However, attenuation of training effects was reported to occur over a five to ten year period in the only study to have follow-up over that period of time (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995)

Table 3: Prevention of relationship distress - Summary of controlled trials

Author	Subjects	Intervention	Measures	Key Findings
Miller, Nunnally & Wackman, 1975	32 couples	Minnesota Couples Communication Project (MCCCP)	Audiotape of couple interaction over planning task	Compared to controls, MCCCP couples significantly improved in communication skills.
Wampler & Sprenkle, 1980	52 couples	MCCP	Self-report of relationship quality Audiotape of couple problem-solving interaction	MCCP couples improved in communication skills significantly more than attention-only and control couples and increased in perceived relationship quality. Increases in perceived relationship quality maintained at 6-month follow-up, but improvements in communication skills were not maintained.
Avery, Ridley, Leslie, & Milholland, 1980; Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982	54 couples	Guernsey Relationship Enhancement Program (RE)	Self-report of relationship satisfaction & quality Audiotape of couple "request for change" interaction. (For 37 couples only.)	Compared to attention-only couples, RE couples improved in communication skills and perceived relationship adjustment from pre to post test. Increases in communication skills maintained at 6-month follow-up. No follow-up data reported on perceived relationship adjustment.
Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992 <sup>1</sup>	24 couples	Premarital and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)	Self-report of relationship satisfaction Videotape of couple problem solving interaction	Compared to Engaged Encounter controls, PREP couples increased in communication skills from pre to post. PREP couples showed trend towards increase in relationship satisfaction at 2-month follow-up.
Markman & Hahlweg, 1993	81 couples	EPL ("German" PREP) plus segment on Christian marriage	Self-report of relationship satisfaction Videotape of couple problem solving interaction	Compared to no treatment and information only controls, EPL couples improved in communication skills and non-verbal positivity from pre to post, and maintained gains at 1-, & 3-year follow-ups. No differences between groups on relationship satisfaction at post, but EPL couples demonstrate significantly higher relationship satisfaction by 3-year follow-up.

Table 3: Prevention of relationship distress - Summary of controlled trials continued

Author	Subjects	Intervention	Measures	Key Findings
Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd & Clements, 1993	114 couples	PREP	Self-report of relationship satisfaction Videotape of couple problem solving interaction	Compared to controls, PREP couples showed significant gains in communication skills at post. Gains in communication skills maintained to 1- and 3-year follow-ups, with males maintaining gains to 4-and 5-year follow-ups.  No differences between groups on relationship satisfaction at post. PREP couples relationship satisfaction greater at 1-year follow-up, and 3-year follow-up. Males maintain higher relationship satisfaction through 4- and 5-year follow-ups.  PREP couples show significantly lower rates of relationship dissolution at all follow-up times to the 5-year follow-up
Van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap & van der Staak, 1996	67 couples	"Dutch" PREP, plus Family of Origin session.	Self-report of relationship satisfaction	No immediate posttest assessment. At 9 month and 2-yr follow-up (from Time 1) no positive effects evident for the intervention. Couples with family of origin divorce (FOD) reported increase in problem intensity, and trend towards decreased problem solving intensity and relational efficacy.

<sup>1</sup>Not from original source. Most detailed published report.

PREP = Premarital Relationship Enhancement Program

The long-term effects of relationship education on relationship satisfaction and risk of divorce are not well documented. Short-term increases in satisfaction from relationship education are modest in some studies (Renick et al. 1992; Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982) and not evident at all in many studies (e.g., Markman et al. 1988; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, & Van der Staak, 1996). This lack of effect on relationship satisfaction in the short term may be a function of the fact that relationship satisfaction is already high in the targeted populations. In addition, there may be a ceiling effect operating in the measures currently used to measure relationship satisfaction.

The most meaningful index of the efficacy of relationship education is its long-term effects; unfortunately only four studies have follow-ups of more than 12 months. Markman and colleagues have found in two studies that skills based relationship education was associated with enhanced relationship satisfaction or functioning 2 and 5 years after marriage (Hahlweg et al. 1996; Markman et al. 1993). The Markman et al. study also found that across the 3, 4, and 5-year follow-ups, the intervention couples reported significantly fewer instances of spousal physical violence than control couples. A third study using an almost identical education program did not replicate these results (van Widenfelt et al. 1996). The van Widenfelt et al. study differed from the Markman studies in that high risk couples were targeted. This finding may indicate limitations in developing relationship education programs solely through research at the level of universal populations.

The fourth study was a randomized controlled trial of a skills based relationship education program, with collection of relationship satisfaction and stability data at four year follow-up (Halford et al. 1999). A unique aspect of this study was that couples were stratified into high and low risk for relationship problems on the basis of negative family-of-origin experiences (parental divorce or inter-parental violence). Couples completing PREP were found to have significantly higher relationship satisfaction at 4-year follow-up than couples in a control condition, but this effect was only evident for couples at high risk of relationship problems. The possibility that marriage and relationship education may have differential effects for different couples needs replication, but does suggest that some couples may benefit more from relationship education than other couples.

In summary, the effects of skills based marriage and relationship education programs on relationships skill is well established: the programs produce increases in skills that are sustained for at least the first few years of a committed relationship. There is some evidence that PREP and its variants prevent the erosion of relationship satisfaction over time, but these effects may be limited to couples at high risk for relationship distress. Replication of the long-term effects of PREP in a randomized controlled trial is highly desirable.

### Relationship education Across the Transition to Parenthood

There are a number of well-documented programs assisting with the transition to parenthood. Antenatal childbirth classes are extremely common, but tend to focus predominantly on childbirth itself, with some lesser coverage of early parenting experiences. There are some programs that extend into the period after childbirth, though most often these programs are targeted at mothers seen as being at high risk for problems. For example, there are several programs for single mothers, mothers with social disadvantage, premature birth children, or for mothers suffering from post-natal depression (e.g., Barnard, Booth, Mitchell, & Telzrow, 1988; Barnard, Morisset, & Spieker, 1993; Egeland & Erickson, 1993; Erickson, Korfmacher, & Egeland, 1994; Lieberman & Pawl, 1993; Heinicke, 1995; Olds & Kitzman, 1993; Olds, Kitzman, & Cole, 1986; Meisels, Dichtelmillar, & Liaw, 1993; Pope et al. 1997). Almost all of these programs focus on the parent-child relationship, and on changes that often involve mothers but not fathers. A number of these programs have been shown to reduce stress in mothers and problems in children (Cowan & Cowan, 1995). However, couple relationship functioning has not been a primary focus of most programs, and the impact on supporting couples relationships has not been assessed.

Table 4 is a summary of reports on couple relationship education programs for the transition to parenthood that have been developed and evaluated. The *Becoming a Family Project* (Cowan & Cowan, 1992) is the only randomized clinical trial of a couple-focused transition to parenthood program. The intervention was quite intensive, consisting of 24 weekly small group meetings. The content of the program included leader input and group discussion on the transition to parenthood, effects on the couple relationship, and how particular couples were coping. The results were striking: declines in marital satisfaction were less severe in intervention than control couples, and 18 months postpartum none of the 24 couples from the intervention group had divorced while 10 couples from the control groups had separated or divorced.

Two additional pilot studies of structured couple-based primary prevention transition to parenthood interventions have recently been completed. Heavey (1995; cited in Silliman et al. in press) and Jordan (1995; cited in Silliman et al. in press). In both these studies modified versions of the Premarital Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP, Markman et al. 1994) were used to provide relationship skills training to married couples expecting their first child. Recruitment, attendance, retention, and evaluation data support the fact that couples expecting the birth of a first child are very open to such programs, found them useful, and evaluated them positively. Given these results and the Cowan and Cowan (1995) findings further research on couples-based interventions to assist couples with the transition to parenthood are needed.

Table 4: Couple relationship education across the transition to parenthood

Author & Intervention	Subjects & Design	Measures	Key Findings
Clulow, 1982; First Baby Program	Intervention group only, no pre-intervention, baseline assessment, facilitated by trained leader couples	no measures taken facilitator impression only	no detectable differences reported by facilitators, poor retention of couples in program; unstructured program format with resulting lack of focus for discussion
Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Becoming a Family Program	Randomized Controlled Clinical Trial with 24 intervention couples, 48 pregnant control couples, 24 non-pregnant control couples, 24 weekly small group meetings (last 3 months pregnancy through the first 3 months of parenthood), facilitated by trained leader couples	Interview & self-report measures of parent sense of self, feelings of vulnerability, symptoms of distress, self-esteem, relationship functioning, division of labor taken at pre- & post-intervention, 6 & 18 months post birth, & child at age 3.5 & 5.5 years	declines in marital satisfaction were less severe in intervention couples; at 18 months postpartum, none of the 24 couples from the intervention group had divorced, 10 of the control couples had separated or divorced
Heavey, 1995; Modified PREP	Pilot study with small number of couples	self-report measures of individual well being, couple communication, and marital satisfaction	few differences between intervention and control couples due to methodological limitations
Jordan, 1995; Modified PREP	Pilot study with small number of couples	self-report measures of individual well being, couple communication, and marital satisfaction	few differences between intervention and control couples due to methodological limitations

### Adjustment to separation and re-partnering

Despite the number of relationships that break down and the severe consequences that can result, there are few controlled outcome studies of relationship education for adults adjusting to relationship breakdown. In a recent meta-analysis only 7 studies were found that included both a treatment and a control group (Lee, Picard & Blain, 1994). Of these seven studies only three had a written program manual, and only three reported any follow-up assessment. The reported length of programs varied widely from Woody, Colley, Schlegelmilch & Maginin (1985) who conducted a week-end workshop of about 10 hours of face-to-face contact to Lee and Hett (1990) and Salts and Zongker (1983) who provided approximately 24 hours. All the programs reported including content such as individual adjustment, communication skills, financial planning, parenting issues, social support, and dating. All the programs can best be described as information and awareness programs, rather than skills training programs.

Three studies found that treatment helped to reduce depressive symptoms (Bloom, Hodges & Caldwell, 1982; Lee & Hett, 1990 and Malouff, Lanyon & Schutte, 1988) while only one study found improvements in anxiety (Lee & Hett, 1990). In terms of overall distress, Bloom et al. (1982) found significant improvements for the treatment group. In terms of divorce-specific variables only one study (Thiessen, Avery & Harvey, 1980) reported improvements after the program. No evidence was found that treatment reduced single parenting problems, influenced attitudes towards the ex-spouse, or improved communication or type of contact with the ex-spouse.

Lee et al. (1994) concluded from their meta-analysis that existing relationship education programs for divorced adults have only moderate beneficial effects. The programs do help participants reduce depression and distress. Unfortunately it has not yet been demonstrated whether divorce interventions are useful with regard to divorce-related issues including single-parenting, relationship with the former partner, social support and everyday practical issues such as finances, employment and homemaking. No examination has been made of the effects of such programs in reducing relationship problems in subsequent relationships. Future research would benefit from greater attention to teaching skills that will help people adjust to separation, and to prepare them better for re-partnering successfully.

### Stepfamilies

There have been a large number of relationship and family education programs described for stepfamilies. Of 23 programs described by Hughes & Schroeder (1997) 17 were for adult partners only, 2 for children only, and 4 for whole stepfamilies. Many of these programs address issues particularly relevant for stepfamilies. For example, many describe content focused on good relationships



between stepparent-stepchild, biological parent-child, the couple, sibling-stepsibling, non-residential parent - parent/stepparent, development of family roles, rules, boundaries and hierarchies, resolving grief over various kinds of losses by stepfamily members, and education about differences between first marriage families and stepfamilies. More than half of the stepfamily programs included at least some elements of what would typically be included in couple relationship education programs, such as communication skills, problem solving and conflict resolution. However, almost no attention was paid in any of the programs to the effects of the non-residential parents on stepfamilies, sibling/step-sibling rivalry, or legal and financial issues (Hughes & Schroeder, 1997). This reflects a significant gap between the research on influences on stepfamily functioning and the content of education programs for stepfamilies.

There have been three controlled trials of the effectiveness of relationship education programs for stepfamilies (Brady & Ambler, 1982; Nelson & Levant, 1991; Nichol森, Halford, & Sanders, 1996). Brady and Ambler (1982) randomly assigned 33 couples to either an education group program or a wait list control. In the stepfamily relationship education program the primary focus was on parent/stepparent - child relationships, discipline, communication skills, problem solving and increasing knowledge about stepfamily life. Participants completed the Family Environment Scale and Belief About Step-parenting Role questionnaire (designed by the researchers), at pre- and post-intervention. There was no significant difference between the conditions on parent's perception of the family environment on 9 of the 10 Family Environment Scales, and no change was found for either stepparent or parent on the Belief About Step-parenting Role measure.

Nelson and Levant (1991) randomly assigned parents in stepfamilies to either a family education program or a wait-list control condition. The topics covered in the program were similar to Brady and Ambler's (1982) program: parent/stepparent - child relationships, discipline, communication skills and problem solving. Unlike Brady and Ambler's (1982) program their course was run with either the parent or the stepparent alone. Pre- and post-intervention participants completed a battery of self-report measures on communication, family environment, and couple relationship satisfaction. The program produced modest improvements in parents self-reported communication skill, but no change was found for parents' perceptions of stepfamily adaptability, cohesion or relationship satisfaction.

A third program developed by Nichol森 et al. (1996) randomly assigned 43 couples to either a group stepfamily intervention or a minimal intervention, self-help control group. Couples in the self-help condition worked through Ruth Webber's "Living in a Stepfamily" book covering issues such as understanding couples, relationships with children, developing a positive stepfamily, ghosts from the past, and the role of the stepparent. In the group program couples covered

the topics of stepfamily relationships, enhancing relationships with children, discipline and partner support, conflict management, communication skills, problem solving and family activities. Active relationship skills training was incorporated into this program. All participants were assessed at pre- and post-intervention, and at 12-month follow-up on behavioural measures of communication between a child and the partners, and between the partners. Participants also completed a battery of self-report measures on child and couple adjustment, parenting practices and confidence, and couple relationship satisfaction. Post intervention across both conditions the number of issues causing conflict between couples had significantly decreased, children reported lower levels of depression, and parents reported fewer negative life events. Ongoing analyses will provide evidence of the longer term effects of the program, but the initial results look promising.

#### Other programs

There are a number of descriptions of programs that target couples in other transitions. For example, there have been a number of descriptions in the literature of programs to help people cope with major life crises such as unemployment, retirement, and other major transitions. However, there are no reported controlled trials on any of these programs. There is a major need for further research to look at ways in which couples can be supported and helped to sustain mutually satisfying relationships across different life challenges.

One exception is the recent work by Halford, Scott, et al. (in press) who targeted couples in which the woman had been recently diagnosed with breast or gynaecological cancer. These couples were recruited at the time of diagnosis and were provided with a couples-based coping program. The coping program included training in communication and mutual support skills, as well as education about the nature of cancer and its treatment. The program was developed collaboratively with medical specialists, and a key focus was to assist the couple to support each other through the difficult processes of diagnosis and treatment. In a controlled trial outcome it was found that this program was significantly better than standard care in that women who received the program were substantially less depressed, and reported higher relationship satisfaction, than couples who were in the control group. Importantly, the women's husbands also reported significantly less psychological adjustment difficulties, and better coping as a result of taking part in the couple coping program.

#### Summary and Conclusions

The vast majority of available research on marriage and relationship education has been completed on pre-marriage programs. There is a well replicated finding that most couples who complete competently run pre-marriage relationship education programs report high satisfaction with the program.

The effects of information and awareness approaches to relationship education have not been adequately evaluated. At this time there is no scientific evidence that this general approach enhances couple relationships. Moreover, given that many programs offered have been developed at a local level and the content is not clearly documented, it is hard to imagine conducting systematic evaluation of such programs. Moreover, many information and awareness programs have been developed with limited attention to existing knowledge on the nature and influences on strong couple relationships.

Inventory based programs such as PREPARE and FOCCUS also lack adequate evaluation of their effects. These programs are well documented, do have a coherent theoretical base, and do derive much of their content from established knowledge about relationship influences. However, there is a need to evaluate the long-term effects of such programs. In particular the presumption that identifying and discussing areas of relationship strength and weakness in itself allows couples to enhance their relationship needs to be evaluated.

There is evidence that skills based training programs produce significant increases in both observed and self-reported couple communication and conflict management skills, and that these increases are of moderate to high effect sizes. Positive effects of skills training programs have been observed with several skills based programs. In the short term there are modest increases in relationship satisfaction, but these tend only to occur in couples with mild relationship problems. The long-term effects of skills based relationship education on relationship satisfaction and stability are not as well established. There is some evidence that the PREP skills training program enhances relationship satisfaction maintenance across the first 4 to 5 years of marriage, and may reduce rates of relationship break up and relationship aggression. However, the methodological problems with existing studies limit the confidence that can be placed in these conclusions. The benefits of programs may be restricted to couples at high risk for relationship problems.

Relationship education at time points other than at pre-marriage has received little research attention. Available programs for the transition to parenthood, formation of step- families and coping with severe illness all show promise and warrant further development and evaluation. Programs on coping with separation do have some benefits in reducing severe distress, but their effects on relationship satisfaction after re-partnering has not been investigated. The most promising programs all seem to utilize skills training, and this approach may be the best general approach to pursue.

## 4. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN MAKING MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION MORE EFFECTIVE

Marriage and relationship education developed originally from the work of religious marriage celebrants such as priests and ministers who offered brief counsel to marrying couples (Hunt, Hof & Demaria, 1998). Religious organizations, and in particular the Catholic Church, began to offer structured group programs for marrying couples in the early 1950s. By the mid-1950s in the United States (Hunt et al. 1998) and in Australia (Harris et al. 1992) secular organizations also began to offer programs. Originally these programs focused largely on didactic input, but over time there was a transition toward more interactive learning processes (Harris et al. 1992).

In the 1970s there was increasing professionalization of the field of relationship education. In 1973 a seminar on pre-marriage education was held as part of the 40th International Eucharist Congress which led to the formation of an organization called the National Society of Pre-Marriage Education Organizations, which was the forerunner of the Catholic Society for Marriage Education. In 1979 the Australian Association for Marriage Education was formed, an equivalent organization for educators who were not necessarily Catholic. These organizations have actively promoted the value of marriage education, and provide continuing education opportunities through their conferences, workshops and newsletters.

Current approaches to marriage and relationship education reflect the history of the field, and are somewhat limited in the options they offer couples. The majority of programs are focused on couples planning marriage, involve face-to-face sessions with an educator, and occur at fixed times and places. Many of the couples who attend relationship education are required to attend by the religious celebrant performing their marriage. Most couples not required to attend choose not to do so. This chapter is an attempt to grapple with the limitations of current approaches and to suggest new directions for research and development of the field.

### Limitations of current approaches

#### Accessibility to couples

Several studies in Australia (e.g., Halford, Wilson, & Lizzio, 1999; Keys Young, 1997; Simons, Harris & Willis, 1994) and overseas (e.g., Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997) have identified that relationship education is not attended by the majority of couples in committed relationships. For example, in Australia, about one third of all marrying couples attend some form of pre-marriage relationship education (Halford et al. 1999; Harris et al. 1992). Low rates of accessing of relationship education tend to occur by couples who are young, less well educated, from non-English speaking backgrounds, and who live in rural and remote areas (Halford et al. 1999; Simons et al. 1994). Couples who are married in churches are more

likely to be referred to, and to attend, relationship education, whilst those who are not married or who are married by a civil celebrant are less likely to attend relationship education (Keys Young, 1997; Simons et al. 1994).

The barriers to couples attending relationship education are many and varied. In surveys couples often report they do not perceive a personal need for relationship education, seeing relationship education as being for couples with problems, and some couples even express concern that relationship education might raise problems in their relationships where none currently exist (Keys Young, 1997; Simons et al. 1994). A view that relationships are private, and that relationship education groups are too intrusive is often reported by those who do not attend relationship education (Simons et al. 1994).

Marriage celebrants also vary widely in their views of relationship education. Many civil celebrants report skepticism about the value of marriage and relationship education, and believe couples would respond negatively to suggestions that they attend such education (Simons et al. 1994). Some celebrants working in registry offices report similar views (Telephone conference 6). Low rates of referral from non-religious celebrants are widely reported by providers of marriage and relationship education (Telephone conferences 1, 2, 4, and 8).

Is marketing the answer?

In consultations with the field (Telephone conferences 1, 2, 8) there were repeated requests to encourage larger expenditure on marketing of relationship education. In particular, relationship educators emphasized the perceived need to normalize attendance at marriage and relationship education programs. Many relationship educators expressed the view that the federal government should expend significant sums on a mass media marketing campaign.

Support was expressed for the Relate campaign, a multi-faceted media campaign funded and run by the Family Relationships Branch of the Department of Family and Community Services in February and March 1999 (Francas & Zappelli, 1999). Relate involved a series of 5 print media advertisements, established a telephone hotline, provided an information booklet, established a web site, and information kits were sent to key stakeholders. Relationship educators reported that they believed the campaign was too brief, and needed to include television advertising to a greater extent. The evaluation of the Relate campaign showed it had little impact upon the general public; there was very little awareness or recognition of the program or its key messages by the general public (Francas & Zappelli, 1999). Civil celebrants and Centrelink social workers were two key stakeholders who were targeted in the campaign, and these groups did show significant recall of the program and its contents. However, there was little reported use of the hotline, web site or handing out of provided kits to couples. The evaluation consultants concluded that the program needed much longer exposure and greater use of

television advertising to be effective. Such a campaign is likely to be very expensive. At this point there is no evidence that such a campaign would produce large increases in attendance at marriage or relationship education programs.

#### Targeting marriage and relationship education

The targeting of relationship education can be undertaken in a variety of ways. Three possibilities often described in the prevention research area are referred to as universal, selective, and indicated programs. Universal refers to any program that targets all members of the population in an effort to promote positive functioning or reduce the overall prevalence of a problem within a defined community (Muñoz, Mrazek & Hogarth, 1996). In the context of relationship education, this consists of any attempt to target all people entering or in committed relationships, and to promote relationship satisfaction across the whole population. Selective prevention refers to attempts to specifically target individuals who are defined as being at high risk for problems, and to reduce the prevalence of problems in that high risk group. Selective programs target people who do not differ from the rest of the population in their current relationship functioning, but who are at high risk for future difficulties. For example, relationship education might be targeted particularly towards couples who had experienced parental divorce or violence in the family of origin, or couples who were marrying at a young age. Indicated prevention refers to early intervention that targets individuals with emerging relationship problems that have not yet developed into severe relationship distress. The goal in indicated prevention is to reduce both the chance of severe relationship problems developing now, and the chance of future relationship problems. For example, education might be targeted at couples who were engaging in relationship aggression, but who were not severely distressed, to try to prevent the development of severe problems.

Marriage and relationship education programs offered in Australia all are offered universally. That is, there is little evidence of assessment of couple needs, or selective or indicated targeting of couples. The universal targeting of relationship education has its positive aspects. Most educators presume that all couples may benefit from relationship education. However, as noted previously, the available evidence is that high risk couples and couples with mild relationship distress seem to benefit most from relationship education. Given that high risk couples probably are under-represented in couples presenting to marriage and relationship education, offering relationship education in a way that maximizes participation by high risk and mildly distressed couples is needed.

#### Format of relationship education

Almost all reported marriage and relationship education programs in Australia are delivered in a face-to-face format, either in groups or individual couples meeting with a relationship educator. Whilst this is an entirely legitimate format, it should

not be the only format available to couples. Many people prefer the convenience and privacy afforded by self-directed learning resources. The development of videotape, audiotape, Compact Disc, Digital Video Disc, World Wide Web site, written and telephone based relationship education programs is needed, as well as evaluation of such options. Given the established effectiveness of skills based programs in promoting satisfying relationships, at least some of these alternative media programs should be focused on skills training as their approach.

Almost all marriage and relationship education occurs as a single course. Some education courses consist of a single session of an hour or two. Programs that attempt to teach relationship skills most often consist of five or six sessions of 1 \_ to 2 hours duration per session, though such program also can be offered in block (e.g., a weekend workshop of 10 to 15 hours duration). The vast majority of relationship education is offered at the transition into the relationship. Whilst skills based programs of this format have positive effects for some four or five years into the relationship, the effects are known to attenuate over a 5 to 10 year period (Stanley & Markman, 1996). It seems unlikely that any single program by itself could alter life-long relationship satisfaction. An appropriate analogy would be tetanus injections: they protect against problems for quite a long time, but booster intervention is required eventually. Similarly, the transitions couples face years later, such as becoming parents, or supporting each other through severe illness in old age, might need to be addressed at the times of those transition. Offering a range of relationship education programs across the life span, and encouraging couples to perceive relationship education as part of life-long learning, seems desirable. Relationship education is like professional education: new knowledge and skills need to be developed over time as new challenges and opportunities develop.

One such example of relationship educators developing innovative means of engaging couples over sustained periods of time is the couples newsletters developed by Andrews and Andrews (1998). These educators mail out regular newsletters to couples who complete marriage preparation programs with them, and include a follow-up session six months after marriage in their programs. The newsletters include information and tips for couples to promote continuing attention to relationship development, and the follow-up session reviews couple progress and helps couples resolve any newly developed issues.

### Innovations needed in marriage and relationship education

In order to explicate a way of developing innovations in marriage and relationship education to enhance its effectiveness, a series of general principles are set out below. These principles are based on the available empirical research, plus some assumptions made in the marriage and relationship education area. In the chapter that follows I make recommendations about specific projects that should be prioritized within these general principles.

### Using empirically supported approaches

Relationship education content and process should reflect empirically supported approaches as far as possible. The current practice of marriage and relationship education in Australia is not sufficiently influenced by the available research evidence. In particular, the under-utilization of skills training approaches to marriage and relationship education is regrettable. Such skills training approaches have the strongest empirical evidence for their effectiveness, and yet these approaches are the least widely used within the field.

In order to promote the adoption of empirically supported approaches to relationship education, there is a need to develop better resource materials for educators, and to provide better training. More specifically, the Commonwealth Government could play a major role in funding the development of audio visual and printed materials to assist educators to implement empirically supported skills training approaches to relationship education. For example, in the delivery of the Positive Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) significant emphasis is placed on communication skills and conflict management training. Videotaped materials which demonstrate the skills taught to couples within this program would be helpful to many educators, as would printed handouts which provide structured exercises couples could go through to acquire these skills. Providing training opportunities for relationship educators in skills training approaches would further enhance the effectiveness of these sorts of resource materials.

The Department of Family and Community Services can play an important role in the dissemination of information on empirically supported approaches to relationship education. The funding of newsletters and journals, and the subsidizing of costs of professional development conferences could enhance access of relationship educators to training in empirically supported approaches. For example, the Department might want to liaise with existing organizations that run national training conferences to encourage, and financially support, the provision of keynote speakers and workshop leaders. People active in the development and dissemination of empirically supported approaches to relationship education could be targeted for presentations.

Research to develop and evaluate new approaches to relationship education should be encouraged. Funding should promote active collaboration between researchers and service providers. The current state of knowledge has substantial gaps in it, and the Department of Family and Community Services could set aside money to fund large scale research and evaluation of relationship education programs. Priority in the development of relationship education research should be determined on the basis of the scientific merit of the research to be undertaken, and its likely impact on the quality of marriage and relationship education service provision.



### Universal accessibility

Relationship education should be universally accessible to couples currently in, or planning to enter, committed relationships. Universal access can be enhanced by more active outreach to couples currently less likely to access relationship education. Particular attention needs to be paid to promoting access of relationship education by couples at high risk of relationship problems by virtue of their family-of-origin experiences, particularly offspring of divorce and violent relationships. Couples in which at least one partner has a psychological disorder or substance abuse problem also need to be provided for in services, and active outreach to such couples should be encouraged.

Couples from ethnic minority groups, particularly indigenous Australians and people with English as a second language, should be encouraged to attend relationship education programs. There are some good examples of effective collaboration between a number of indigenous and ethnic communities with relationship education providers at the moment. However few of these collaborative programs have led to the development of skills based relationship education programs. The possibility of collaborative development of materials which would be culturally sensitive and appropriate, and which would promote active skills training approaches to relationship education, should be explored.

Universal access can be further promoted by offering relationship education in a more varied range of formats, settings, and means of delivery so that couples can choose formats that suit their culture, lifestyles and individual circumstances. Particular attention needs to be paid to the development of relationship education programs that provide self-directed learning opportunities through written, videotape, audiotape, Internet, and telephone based services. Face-to-face programs need to be offered in a wide range of physical settings (e.g. community centres, work places, childcare centres and health services) to enhance the point of entry to services. Face-to-face programs also need to be offered in a variety of formats to enhance participant choice (e.g. multiple sessions over a period of weeks, or a single day or multiple day weekend workshop). Also, couples need to be offered the choice of group versus individual couple sessions, as there seem to be considerable differences in the preferences of many couples for these formats. While some relationship education agencies have developed a wide range of services available to couples, many other agencies offer very restricted choices, and this limits the accessibility to programs for couples.

### Funding

Universal access also can be promoted by limiting the costs of relationship education to couples. The costs of relationship education should continue to be subsidized by the Federal Government as part of its family policy. The current focus of most of this funding is on couples who are getting married. (For example, the

Department of Family and Community Services is examining a pilot voucher scheme, in which couples getting married are offered a voucher they can exchange toward the cost of pre-marriage education.) An predominant focus on couples at the time of getting married may be inadvisable in the long run. There are a diversity of life transition points at which couples might choose to seek access to relationship education, and restricting them to just the point of marriage may decrease the chance of couples accessing education programs. Broadening the relationship education programs that are subsidized so that couples can access relationship education at the times that suit them may enhance universal accessibility.

Existing relationship education providers should be assisted to develop strategic partnerships with potential sponsors of relationship education. Such funding could provide significant non-government subsidies to reduce the cost of relationship education to couples. For example, employers might offer relationship education as part of their employee assistance programs. This could be done in partnership with relationship education service providers. Health service providers might fund couples-based support programs for assisting patients with severe illness. Financial planners and advisers who target couples for retirement and other financial planning matters may be interested in co-sponsorship of relationship education programs that address relationship issues around retirement. There are a few examples around the country of such strategic partnerships, but they are relatively rare. The Department of Family and Community Services might play a crucial role in promoting such active collaboration.

#### Relevant content

Relationship education programs need to assess more systematically the learning needs of couples, and to individualize program content to meet specific needs. In particular, greater attention needs to be paid to assessing for psychological disorder or substance abuse in partners presenting for relationship education, and the detection of aggression in couples. The current practice of marriage and relationship education seems largely not to do such assessments, and the specific needs of couples may be overlooked.

Relationship education also needs to assist couples with major normative life transitions that are known to impact upon couple relationships. In particular, programs need to be developed that better address the transition to parenthood, physical relocation of the couple, unemployment, retirement, care giving to an ill spouse, care giving of offspring with special needs, and change of work. The possibility of the development of key resource materials to assist relationship educators in providing effective programs for each of these life transitions should to be encouraged.

There is a strong reciprocal influence between relationship satisfaction and effective parenting (Sanders et al. 1997). Greater attention to relationship

education to enhance the couple relationship for parents can improve the effectiveness of parenting programs. Conversely, attention to providing empirically supported approaches to enhancing effective parenting in couples can enhance couples' relationship satisfaction (Sanders, 1995).

Couples forming stepfamilies have been the focus of a number of relationship education programs around the country. There has been a general report that recruiting couples into these programs has often proved problematic. The development of self-directed learning materials for couples who often have significant numbers of dependant children, and limited financial resources, should be a priority. Programs that can be done in couples' homes, and in their own time, might well enhance the responsiveness of education content and process to the special needs of step-families. Step-family programs that are developed need to address issues known to be particularly important in reconstituted families, in particular the step-parent/child relationship and co-parenting with ex-partners.

#### Evaluation

Relationship education programs should routinely be evaluated, and evaluation should guide further program development. The provision of relationship education programs that are funded by the Department of Family and Community Services currently is contingent on assessment of the satisfaction of couples with the relationship education programs delivered. In addition, it would be helpful to assess the acquisition of key relationship skills across the course of the program, and to evaluate the global relationship satisfaction of couples before and after programs. Self-report measures of acquisition of relationship skills could be developed that are brief, and there is some evidence that such measures can be reliable and valid.

#### Continuity of contact with couples

Continuity of contact between relationship education providers and couples is likely to be important in the long-term promotion of satisfying couple relationships. The most effective referral systems to relationship education are those that involve referrals from people who have continuous contact with the couples. More specifically, religious celebrants who have ongoing contact with couples are particularly likely to refer couples to relationship education, and often these ministers, priests, and other religious celebrants have ongoing contact with the couples. This ongoing contact has a number of advantages. Couples can be referred for other forms of relationship education when major life transitions present, such as the transition into parenthood. In addition, should relationship problems emerge couples can be referred early for relationship counseling. There is very strong evidence that the earlier couples present in the development of relationship problems the more likely that relationship counseling and therapy will be successful (Halford, in press).

Relationship education providers could enhance their continuity of contact with couples in a number of ways. First, provision of relationship education for secondary school students would enable initial contact with most young people. Relationship education programs for young people have been shown to enhance the quality of dating relationships, and to reduce the frequency of undesired dating behaviours such as relationship aggression (K. D. O'Leary, personal communication, April, 1999). Moreover, it is believed that skills learned at this time enhances the chance of entering later committed relationships with good skills in communication and conflict management. The provision of relationship education programs for people as they enter cohabiting relationships, and this being complemented by follow-up contact with couples, might ensure greater continuity of contact with couples. If a wide variety of relationship education services are available, comprising self-directed learning, telephone-based services, and face-to-face programs, this might enhance the chance of couples remaining in contact with the relationship education service provider. Currently most secular relationship education providers have short-term contact with couples, and this represents a significant disadvantage in their ability to engage couples in other services.

#### Research

There is a paucity of quality research on the effectiveness of relationship education. In particular, there is little research that has evaluated the effects of relationship education for couples going through major transitions other than the entry to relationships. Given that these other transitions are associated with increased risk for relationship problems, such research is needed. Research on the effects of flexible delivery of relationship education also is needed. In addition, research on the effects of relationship education in enhancing the relationships of couples across diverse cultures is needed. A strong research program in relationship education can benefit the field greatly.

## 5. – SPECIFIC RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

In this chapter there are four specific action research projects recommended. The projects cover the span of the general principles and recommendations enunciated in the previous chapter. More specifically, the proposals have four broad aims. The first aim is to promote the use of empirically supported approaches to marriage and relationship education through the development of resource materials and training opportunities for educators. Second, it is proposed to develop forms of the resource materials that can be used as flexible delivery, self-directed learning programs to enhance accessibility of education. The third aim is to promote accessibility of relationship education by diversifying the points of entry to relationship education, and promoting access by couples who currently under utilize relationship education. The final aim is to conduct rigorous scientific evaluation of the long-term effects of relationship education.

Project 1: Promoting empirically supported skills training approaches to relationship education.

Skills based relationship education programs have the strongest empirical support for their effectiveness, and yet are not widely used by marriage and relationship educators in Australia. Two likely barriers to adoption of skills based relationship education programs are: a lack of resource materials to assist educators to deliver such programs, and lack of training opportunities to develop adequate skills in the delivery of such programs. In this project it is proposed that tenders be called for people who have experience in delivery of skills based relationship education programs to develop resource materials that can be used by educators in the delivery of skills based education programs. In particular, the use of videotaped materials which demonstrate key skills would be useful, as well as the preparation of written materials that could serve as leaders' manuals, and written materials that could serve as handouts to promote structured learning activities amongst couples.

The development of such materials should be complemented by additional training opportunities for marriage and relationship educators who wish to avail themselves of the opportunity to deliver skills based education programs. It would be best if the training programs were integrated with the development of resource materials, so that an integrated package of resource materials and training could be available to marriage and relationship educators.

Suggested content of resource materials

Currently the provision of marriage and relationship education is focused largely on pre-marriage and the transition into a committed relationship. This is a very appropriate point at which to offer relationship education, and many couples currently seek relationship education at this point. Hence one focus of resource material development should be to provide resources for programs for couples at around the time of marriage

or cohabitation. Based on the content of empirically supported programs such as PREP (Markman et al. 1994) and SELF-PREP (Halford et al. 1999) it is suggested that the content of such resource materials should cover the topics identified in Table 5.

Table 5: Overview of possible content in a six-module set of resource materials for a skill based premarital relationship education program

Module	Detail of content
1	Introduction of leader(s) and couple(s); overview of program; rationale for skills training focused program; identification of key behavioural domains promoting relationship intimacy; intimacy enhancement through self-directed goal setting; review of relationship expectations, development of relationship goals.
2	Review of key communication skills; guided self-evaluation of current communication skills; self-directed selection of communication enhancement goals and practice of implementation of those skills; self-directed goal setting and definition of homework task to enhance communication.
3	Review of communication homework tasks, and self-directed further goal selection and definition of further homework task; review of factors promoting intimacy; assessing partner support, expressions of caring, reviewing individual and joint activities; self-directed change plan.
4	Review intimacy enhancement tasks; introduction to the concept of the patterns of conflict and effective conflict management; negotiation with partner about relationship rules for managing conflict; self-directed goal setting for effective management of conflict; introduction to the concept of flexible gender roles, couple review of current gender roles, self-directed goal setting for future gender role flexibility.
5	Review of communication homework task; review of the role of sexuality in relationship intimacy; couple discussion and goal setting to enhance sexual intimacy; introduction to the concept of partner support, self directed goal setting to enhance partner support; self-directed definition of homework tasks to implement selected goals in areas of sexuality or partner support.
6	Review of homework tasks; self-directed selection of any further goals to enhance relationship functioning; introduction of issue of maintenance of relationship functioning; self-directed identification of future life events impacting upon relationship; planning to promote relationship adaptation to predictable life events. Closure.

Additional transition points at which couples are likely to be responsive to marriage and relationship education include the transition to parenthood, formation of step-families, providing mutual support during times of severe illness, relocation, and retirement. The development of a series of resource materials for each of these transitions should be encouraged. The resource materials should focus on skills based approaches to relationship education, and should include a combination of videotape and written materials. These resource materials could utilize some of the materials developed for programs for couples entering committed relationships. For example, materials on couple communication skills and conflict management would be relevant for programs for couples at a variety of points in their relationship. Resource materials could then be developed that would complement these general materials and provide specific content for particular life transitions. In Table 6 a number of key life transitions are identified, with suggestions of possible resource material content. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but an indicative list of possible skill domains for different key transitions.

Table 6: Suggested content of specialized relationship education resource materials

Target group	Special content
Step families	Parenting skills, negotiating parental responsibilities, co-parenting with an ex-partner, the stepparent-child relationship.
Transition to parenthood	Effects of pregnancy and childbirth on couples relationship, effects on sexuality, infant care, renegotiating relationship roles after childbirth, financial changes with child rearing.
Unemployment	Support skills, financial management, renegotiating relationship roles.
Retirement	Preparation and planning for retirement, financial planning, renegotiating relationship roles, managing change in activities.
Coping with a severe illness such as cancer	Cancer education, support skills, communication at times of crises, effective coping skills.

As noted previously, continuing contact between educators and couples seems likely to enhance the long-term effects of relationship education. In the development of resource materials attention needs to be paid to promoting such ongoing contact. It is suggested that the resource materials be developed in such a manner so that couples can take away resources at the end of education programs. This provides the opportunity for self-directed review of materials at a later stage. In addition, the resource materials can provide for follow-up reviews between the educator and the couple; for example, follow-up letters could be included in the resource materials. These letters could review key concepts in the relationship education program, and provide advice of further opportunities for relationship enhancement. Follow-up sessions or telephone calls also could be used to maintain contact with couples, and promote long-term engagement with relationship enhancement.

Suggested people to develop the materials.

In order for the development of resource materials to produce optimal products, collaboration would be needed across a team with diverse expertise. The team would need to include collaboration between experienced relationship educators operating across different agencies, who would provide input as the potential end users of resources. Experts in skills based approaches to relationship education would be needed to work with these educators to develop the content details for the resource materials. In addition these experts could provide the training for educators in running skills based programs. Audiovisual production experts would be needed to develop professional quality materials. People with adult learning design expertise would also be needed to ensure the materials followed good educational design principles such as promoting self-directed learning. Finally, researchers would be needed to design and carry out evaluation of the materials developed.

## Timeline and evaluation of project

The development of resource materials can make a significant contribution to the development of empirically supported approaches to relationship education. The process of consultation and collaboration between a large team with diverse skills, and the actual process of production of materials will require a significant investment of time and money. It is recommended that a period of at least two years be allowed for production and evaluation of the resource materials. A possible timeline is provided below.

Year 1: Development of material outlines and production of materials.

Months 1-3: Appointment of staff, consultation between team members and relationship educators on the brief, development of detailed concept for resource materials including videotaped materials outline and written material content.

Months 4-8: Audiovisual production of materials, and writing of draft printed materials. Development of detailed evaluation protocol.

Months 9-12: Use of focus groups to assess materials, and modification as required. Consultation with relationship educators for further feedback on materials, modifications as required. Negotiation with educators to engage them in the pilot testing and evaluation phase.

Year 2: Training of relationship educators, implementation and evaluation of materials.

Months 1-2: Training of relationship educators, dissemination of training materials.

Months 3-8: Running of programs by trained educators using resource materials

Months 9-12: Collation and analysis of evaluation data, preparation of final report.

The project should include an evaluation of the effectiveness of the dissemination of the skills training programs, as well as the short-term effects of the materials and programs delivered. More specifically, it is suggested that the delivery of programs by the educators should be evaluated in terms of the appropriate use of the resource materials, and skilled of use of appropriate learning strategies with participants. Educators who have been trained also should be asked to report on their perceptions of running the program. The effects of the programs should be assessed in terms of consumer satisfaction with the programs, as well as the acquisition of targeted relationship knowledge and skills.



## Project 2: Development and preliminary evaluation of Flexible Delivery Relationship Education Program

The heavy reliance on face-to-face contact between relationship educators and couples is a significant limitation to the accessibility of relationship education in Australia. There is ample evidence that flexible delivery education programs can be effective in a range of areas, and there is some preliminary evidence that it may be effective in marriage and relationship education. A pilot program should be initiated to develop at least one flexible delivery relationship education program. Such a program could consist of a mixture of audio-visual and written materials, possibly supplemented by telephone-based educator services. Halford et al. (1998) developed a similar program called Relationship Education and Enhancement (REDEE). That program consists of a video, a workbook and a telephone educator service. Preliminary evaluation of pre- to post-program changes with this program show high satisfaction with the program by participants.

In the development of such a program it is desirable that collaboration occur between established researchers who could assist in evaluating the program, relationship education service providers who would collaborate in the development and delivery of the program, and people with expertise in the development of adult learning materials and audio visual production. The materials developed need to be subjected to a preliminary evaluation looking at the retention of couples in such a program, levels of consumer satisfaction, and the extent to which key targeted relationship skills change across the course of the program. It is recommended that the core content of the flexible delivery program be secular in nature, so that it can appeal to the broadest range of couples possible. An additional module on spiritual and religious aspects of marriage can be added for couples who wish to address that aspect of their relationship. The materials should have a skills training focus. Should such a program prove successful, it has the potential to greatly enhance the accessibility of marriage and relationship education to couples.

Videotape and written materials developed for a flexible delivery program could be adapted to other media such as CD Rom or a web site. Given that video players currently are more widely accessible to Australians than computers or web access, video materials should be the first priority in development of self-directed skills based learning materials. However, the rapid expansion of computer ownership in Australia means the expansion to computer-based delivery needs to be considered in the design of materials.

It would be most cost effective if the developments in this project and Project 1 were integrated. Many of the audiovisual materials developed for face-to-face delivery of skills based relationship education could be adapted to flexible delivery mode. For example, videotaped demonstration of couple communication skills might be used both by a leader in a group skills training program and by a

couple in a flexible delivery self-directed learning mode. There would need to be different explanations and somewhat different footage around the communication skill demonstrations for these different modes of delivery of relationship education, but there would be considerable cost saving if there was maximum use of material developed. (The approximate cost of professional production of videotaped materials is between \$1500 and \$2000 per finished minute, so reusing high quality materials across multiple delivery formats should be explored.)

Year 1: Development of material outlines and production of materials.

Months 1-3: Appointment of staff, consultation between team members and relationship educators on the brief, development of detailed concept for resource materials including videotaped materials outline and written material content. Educational design of self-directed learning program.

Months 4-8: Audiovisual production of materials, and writing of draft printed materials. Development of detailed evaluation protocol.

Months 9-12: Use of focus groups to assess materials, and modification as required. Consultation with relationship educators for further feedback on materials, modifications as required. Negotiation with educators to engage them in the pilot testing and evaluation phase.

Year 2: Training of relationship educators, implementation and evaluation of materials.

Months 1-2: Training of relationship educators, dissemination of training materials.

Months 3-8: Running of programs by trained educators using resource materials in flexible delivery mode.

Months 9-12: Collation and analysis of evaluation data, preparation of final report.

### Project 3: Enhancing access to relationship education by high risk and low referral couples

The accessibility of relationship education can be enhanced in a number of ways. I recommend that three approaches to enhance access be given priority. First, couples at high risk for relationship problems probably do not access relationship education at rates that seem desirable. Assessment of the risk profiles of couples who do access programs would quantify the representation of high-risk couples in current relationship education users. Developing outreach strategies to attract high-risk couples to education programs would be the logical next step. Second, rates of referrals by civil celebrants to relationship and marriage educators are low. Development of strategies to enhance rates of referral could significantly enhance access to relationship education by couples. Third, Indigenous Australians and people from non-English speaking backgrounds are under-represented in users of

current relationship education services. Relationship education services need to be developed that are effective and are attractive to those groups of Australians.

#### Assessment and enhancement of access of relationship education by high risk couples

Given that couples at high risk of relationship problems are most likely to benefit from relationship education, it is important that such couples do have ready access to relationship education. Currently little is known about the extent to which high-risk couples do present for relationship education, and the focus of the proposed action research project is to evaluate rates of presentation. The second proposed step is to develop strategies to enhance engagement of high-risk couples in relationship education collaboratively with relationship education providers.

It is proposed that one aspect of this project would involve the development of a self-report assessment for couples of relationship risk profile. This self-report assessment should target risk indicators and risk factors known to put couples at high risk for relationship problems, and which the couple can reliably assess. Example of items that might be included are: exposure to parental divorce, exposure to parental aggression, young age at the time of marrying or cohabiting, low religiosity, disapproval of the spouse by extended family and friends, the presence of hazardous drinking in either partner, or the presence of relationship aggression in the current relationship. Without wishing to be restrictive in what might be developed, Table 7 is a listing of some possible items for a self-report measure of relationship risk profile.

In the conduct of this proposal it is suggested that a series of relationship education providers plus a researcher in the marriage and relationship education area be selected to conduct research in developing the relationship risk profile self-assessment. These same agencies would administer the measure to couples attending relationship education across a wide range of agencies. This would establish an initial base line rate of the risk profile of couples presenting to relationship education agencies. The rates of presentation to agencies of people with particular risk indicators could be compared with the known level of risks across the whole population. This would enable the researchers and service providers to identify whether high-risk couples currently were well represented in the couples presenting to the various agencies.

It is assumed that the rates of presentation by high-risk couples are likely to be low, as that is what the available research suggests. The relationship agencies would then work with the researchers to develop strategies to enhance presentation of high-risk couples to relationship education agencies. For example, media articles might be used to help couples self-assess their current relationship risks, and to promote the presentation for relationship education by those with higher risk profiles. This strategy has been used in research by Halford and colleagues (Halford et al. 1999) and did result in a high proportion of high-risk couples presenting for relationship education.

Table 7: Possible items in a self-assessment of relationship risk profile

Relationship experiences and influences

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The aim in this form is to help review your past close relationships and other factors that may effect your current relationship. Please place a tick beside the answer that best describes what you have experienced.

1. Were your parents married?

If yes, did they separate or divorce before you turned 18?

2. Did you ever witness your parents do any of the following?

- Calmly discuss an issue they disagreed about?
- Shout loudly at one another?
- Call each other names or insult each other?
- Hit, push or slap the other?

3. Have you previously lived with or married another partner?

- If yes, have you been married before?
- If you have been married before, how long were you married?

4. Are either you or your partner 21 years of age or less?

5. In the last six months have you attended a religious service?

6. Do you have any children from a past relationship?

- If yes, do your children live with you one or more days per week?
- If yes, how many days per week do your children usually live in your home?

7. Have you ever received help from a doctor or psychologist for any of the following problems?

- Depression
- Stress or anxiety

8. Do you ever drink alcohol?

- If yes, on about how many days per week do you drink?
- About how many standard drinks would you drink on those days?
- What is the maximum number of drinks you ever drink on any given day?
- How often do you drink this amount?

9. In your current relationship have any of the following ever happened?

- Calmly discuss an issue you disagreed about?
- Shouted loudly at one another?
- Called each other names or insulted each other?
- Hit, pushed or slapped your partner?
- Been hit, pushed or slapped by your partner?

The likely benefits of this project are several. First, it will provide information on rates of presentation of high-risk couples. Second, the collaborative project between relationship educators and researchers is likely to foster greater attention to the individual learning needs of couples, and this might result in the adaptation of programs to meet particular needs. For example, if significant numbers of couples were presenting in which hazardous drinking was evident in one or both partners, then programs might be developed specifically to meet the needs of those couples. Third, the project would enhance the chance of couples most likely to benefit from relationship education programs accessing programs.

#### Timeline and evaluation

The initial development of a pool of items for a self-report measure of relationship risk could be done relatively quickly. The research reviewed in this report could serve as the basis for identification of items. Some pilot testing with couples would be advisable at that point to evaluate that items were easy to understand. Ideally, the scale should be easily read and understood by someone with Grade 6 reading level. The development of a psychometrically sound measure then needs to follow some well recognized steps including collection of normative data, establishment of the construct validity, reliability, and convergent and divergent validity of the scale.

The engagement of relationship education providers is needed early in the project. This would ensure the content of the scale is acceptable to educators who would be asked to give the scale to partners. A baseline assessment of risk profiles of couples presenting for relationship education would be undertaken. This descriptive data would be collated and presented to agencies. That data may well indicate that there are unmet learning needs of particular couples presenting to agencies. For example, if a substantial proportion of presenting couples were reporting drinking alcohol at hazardous levels, then brief interventions designed to promote safe drinking might be incorporated into programs for couples with hazardous drinking. (Bouma, Halford and Young, 1999 reported on significant levels of hazardous drinking in newly married couples, and how this can be reduced by brief relationship- and alcohol-focused education).

The baseline data would also indicate if there were categories of high-risk couples who were not accessing services. For example, it might be found that the proportion of couples attending relationship education who report parental divorce in the family of origin is lower than might be expected in a representative sample of couples. Outreach strategies could then be devised to attract couples to education programs. Continuing monitoring of the rates of presentation of high-risk couples could be used to evaluate whether the outreach strategies were effective. A possible timeline for this project would be as follows.

Months 1 and 2: Appointment of staff, engagement of relationship education providers into project, development of preliminary pool of items for risk assessment measure.

Months 3-5: Preliminary collection of baseline data, psychometric development of scale.

Month 6: Analysis of baseline data, and development of report on risk profiles of presenting couples.

Months 7-10: Development and implementation of outreach strategies for high-risk couples.

Months 8-11: Continuing assessment of risk profiles of presenting couples.

Month 12: Analysis of risk profiles of presenting couples after outreach strategy.

Months 13-15: Preparation of final report and recommendations for future engagement of high risk couples in relationship education.

The primary evaluation of the success of the trial would be to ascertain if access of relationship education by high-risk couples were increased in the agencies involved with the project. It would be good to randomly assign agencies to begin the outreach to high- risk couples at different times. In this way a controlled trial design could be used to establish if the outreach strategies caused an increase in rates of accessing education by high-risk couples.

Enhancing rates of referral to relationship education by civil celebrants

One concern expressed by many civil celebrants was the lack of quality information and materials about relationship education that they could provide to couples (Telephone conference 6, 7). Whilst it is clear that some relationship education service providers have gone to significant trouble to develop materials to provide to civil celebrants, in other areas of Australia civil celebrants report relatively little information and materials are available. It is recommended that an action research project be developed to look at ways in which civil celebrants might be provided with better materials, and assisted in the process of referring couples to marriage and relationship education providers.

A useful strategy would be to select two areas in which there are significant numbers of civil celebrants, and where those two areas are geographically widely separated. In one area a project would be developed collaboratively between relationship education providers and civil celebrants to develop materials to provide to couples, and to civil celebrants, informing them about the range of relationship services available to the couples.

A series of strategies would be developed by the service providers to enhance rates of referral. For example, individual telephone calls to selected celebrants could be used to discuss the availability of services, and discuss barriers to referral. When referrals occurred, the agencies would be encouraged to write acknowledgement letters back to the referring celebrants, advising them of the attendance at the programs by couples, and providing brief informative feedback. (Issues of confidentiality of information for couples need to be respected here, but it is a common professional courtesy in many professional areas to give feedback to referring agents about the outcome of their referrals.) Encouraging couples to present for relationship education at any time in the first few years of their marriage might enhance presentation. (Many celebrants report couples are preoccupied with wedding plans when they present to celebrants to arrange marriage (Telephone conference 6, 7). Providing access to self-directed learning materials, or even brief introductions to such materials as samplers might encourage couples to access relationship education.

Baseline rates of referrals to marriage and relationship education by civil celebrants would be monitored prior to the development of the program designed to enhance referral, and would continue to be monitored across the course of the program. The specific hypothesis to be tested is that the intervention program would increase rates of referral.

The likely benefits of the program include interaction between civil celebrants and marriage and relationship educators to enhance the responsiveness of education programs to the needs of couples. Second, this process of collaboration is likely to enhance rates of referral to marriage and relationship education, and should improve the quality of information available to couples about the services that are open to them.

#### Timeline and evaluation of project

Months 1 and 2: Appointment of staff, consultations with relationship education agencies in target areas, development of measures of rates of referral to relationship education by civil celebrants.

Months 3-5: Monitoring of rates of referral by civil celebrants, consultation with relationship educators on strategies to enhance referrals.

Months 6-8: Consultations with civil celebrants about means of enhancing referrals, production of materials to promote referrals.

Months 9-12: Implementation of strategies to enhance referrals, monitoring of rates of referral.

Months 13-15: Analysis of data and preparation of report.

## Enhancing access to relationship education by indigenous and culturally diverse non-English speaking background Australians

Cultural diversity is one of Australia's great strengths as a nation. In an area like relationship education, it is crucial to attend to the cultural dimensions of what are desirable forms of couple relationships and how to support strong couple relationships. Indigenous Australians and ethnic minority groups from non-English speaking backgrounds do not access programs at the same rate as other Australians, and attempts should be made to enhance access to relationship education for these groups of people.

Both the process and content of relationship education need to be culturally appropriate. For example, in many cultures marriage and relationships are seen as private, and attending group programs is quite an alien concept. In some cultures, the extended family would expect to be involved in the education process for young couples. In terms of content, the communication that is culturally appropriate between partners varies greatly by culture. For example, eye contact that is seen as active attending in one culture can be felt as rude and aggressive in another culture.

Many Australians do not view attending relationship education as socially normative, but the notion of attending relationship education programs is particularly alien within many indigenous and culturally diverse ethnic groups. Attempts to recruit Indigenous or ethnic minority groups into existing programs are likely to have very limited success. Instead, relationship education program content and process need to be developed within particular cultural traditions, and delivered by people seen as appropriate within the culture.

There are a number of programs offered around Australia that attempt to provide relationship education to Indigenous Australians and ethnic communities from non-English speaking backgrounds (Telephone conference 3, 5). Some of these programs report they have developed content and process of delivery of relationship education programs specific to the needs of Indigenous communities, and ethnic minority groups. However, none of the programs has been evaluated for their effectiveness. Given that few, if any, of the programs offer culturally sensitive skills training approaches to relationship education, it has to be questioned if programs that are developed are truly effective.

A frequent concern expressed by workers who had developed marriage and relationship education programs for Indigenous communities, and for ethnic minority groups, was that it took considerable time and expenditure to develop such programs (Telephone conference 3, 5). The need for community development work to engage the community in the active development of the program, building up sources of referral to programs, and developing the skills of Indigenous Australians and ethnic minority workers to deliver programs, all were



reported to be very time consuming. Many of the current pilot programs were seen as being funded on too short a time scale to allow all this work to occur.

Another difficulty with many existing programs is that they have not lead to the development of resource materials that can be more widely used. Every community is different, and there will need to be tailoring of programs to meet local needs. However, there seems to be a process whereby every time a program is offered to a new community the development process begins all over again, with limited access of cumulative wisdom from prior attempts.

It is recommended that the development of resource materials which are culturally sensitive, but which include a skills training focus, be a major emphasis in program development for Indigenous Australians and ethnic minority groups. The content of such programs should be developed in collaboration with members of the target Indigenous or ethnic communities. The focus should be on resource materials that could be used for self-directed learning or individual couple or group programs so these materials could be adapted for use as seen as appropriate. For example, videotaped materials that discuss culturally appropriate communication could be viewed privately by a couple or individual partner. The same resources could be adapted for use in group programs, or for private use by extended families.

Engagement with Indigenous Australian communities and ethnically diverse community groups who have interest in developing resource materials to support couples relationship education would be the first step. Collaboration also is needed with people who have expertise in adult learning, delivery of skills based relationship education, audiovisual production, and evaluation of relationship education programs. Such collaborative initiatives can be completed successfully by the right team. Recently, a collaborative project successfully developed written and audiovisual resource materials on the challenges of parenting adolescents. This programs was based on a program offered to all Australians, but the content and process of the program was re-developed by and for Indigenous Australians (Clarke, Harnett and Shochet, 1999). The program was delivered by members of the Indigenous communities in which it was made available, with the assistance of psychologists and researchers who developed the original prototype program.

#### Timeline and evaluation

Year 1: Consultation with community groups, development of material outlines and production of materials.

Months 1-6: Appointment of staff, consultation between team members, Indigenous and ethnic groups and relationship educators on the brief, development of detailed concept for resource materials including videotaped materials outline and written material content. Educational design of self-directed learning program.

Months 7-12: Audiovisual production of materials, and writing of draft printed materials. Development of detailed evaluation protocol.

Months 9-14: Use of focus groups to assess materials, and modification as required. Consultation with relationship educators for further feedback on materials, modifications as required. Negotiation with educators from Indigenous or ethnic groups to engage them in the pilot testing and evaluation phase.

Year 2: Training of relationship educators, implementation and evaluation of materials.

Months 1-2: Training of relationship educators, dissemination of training materials.

Months 3-8: Running of programs by trained educators using resource materials in flexible delivery or other appropriate mode.

Months 9-12: Collation and analysis of evaluation data, preparation of final report.

Project 4: Randomized controlled trials of the medium and long-term effects of best practice approaches to relationship education.

As noted previously, skills training approaches are the best researched approaches to marriage and relationship education and have the strongest evidence of their long-term effectiveness. However, the existing studies do have some significant methodological problems. One key limitation of existing evidence is that the effectiveness of skills training programs in routine practice of relationship education has not been evaluated. (Though an ongoing study by Stanley, Markman and colleagues is evaluating the effects of PREP in a study in religious organizations in the United States.) A large scale randomized controlled trial of this approach conducted in Australia is highly desirable. It is recommended that a group of relationship education agencies and experienced researchers familiar with the skills training approach be commissioned to conduct the trial.

The inventory programs of PREPARE and FOCCUSS are widely used in Australia, and the programs are based on known predictors of relationship satisfaction and stability. Whilst the provision of ideas and feedback via inventories may be of assistance to couples, it also is possible that these programs do not accrue substantial long-term benefits to couples. Given the plausibility of the interventions, and their widespread use, it is highly desirable that a randomized controlled trial of either PREPARE, FOCCUSS or both should be conducted.

Each of the two proposed randomized controlled trials should involve a large number of agencies that agree to participate. In both trials careful training of educators in the best practice approaches should occur before the trial begins, and

monitoring of the quality of education service provision should be included in the research protocol. Assessment of the effects of the programs should be evaluated with a range of self-report and observational measures. Each trial would need to include sufficient numbers of couples to allow adequate statistical power to detect moderate effect sizes of the programs. (Statistically a moderate effect size is usually defined as an effect of 0.5 standard deviations on a key measure such as a standardized index of relationship satisfaction. Having sufficient numbers of couples in the trial to allow adequate power to detect such an effect is important.) Evaluation should continue for at least a four-year follow up of couples after the completion of the relationship education program.

The measures to evaluate programs should include assessment of relationship satisfaction, communication skills, individual partner well being, relationship aggression, and relationship stability. A list of possible measures to evaluate the programs is included in Table 8. The inclusion of direct videotaping of couple communication is costly and adds to logistic difficulties in conducting the study. However, all the available research suggests that the direct observation of couples is the most sensitive index we have of the short-term effects of relationship education that impact upon long-term relationship outcomes (Dyer & Halford, 1998; Silliman et al. in press). Hence, it is strongly recommended the trials include these observational measures.

#### Controlled trial of skills training relationship education

A randomized controlled trial provides the opportunity to test if skills based relationship education increases the chance of long-term maintenance of couples' relationship satisfaction and stability, and partner well being. Agencies that agreed to participate would be randomly assigned to receive either immediate or delayed training of their educators in skills based relationship education. Those agencies that received immediate training would provide the skills training approach to presenting couples. Those agencies assigned to delayed training would continue their current information and awareness type programs. This design provides for all agencies to have their educators trained in the skills training approach, and also provides a true randomized controlled trial design.

The skills training program should be PREP, or an adaptation of PREP, since that is the most strongly empirically supported approach to relationship education. The PREP should be provided by relationship educators who have received extensive training in the delivery of the approach. This would necessitate access to resource materials to ensure high quality delivery of the program. The materials developed in proposed Project 1 could be used in the controlled trial. The sessions that are offered in the PREP condition should be monitored for quality control over delivery. In order to retain couples in the long-term outcome study, it is recommended that couples receive newsletters on a regular basis informing them about relationship issues and the progress of the project.

Table 8: Suggested measures to evaluate the effects of relationship education

Domain	Measure	Explanation
Relationship satisfaction	<p>Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976)</p> <p>Positive and Negative Marital Qualities Scale (Fincham &amp; Linfield, 1997)</p>	<p>A widely used 32-item self-report measure of general relationship satisfaction with good reliability and validity (Carey, Spector, Lantinga, &amp; Krauss, 1993)</p> <p>A brief 6-item rating scale assessing satisfaction with positive and negative aspects of the relationship. This measure is included as it may be a more sensitive measure of changes in marital quality for currently satisfied couples, since it avoids the focus on conflict characteristic of other marital quality measures which have come out of the couple therapy research literature.</p>
Relationship stability	<p>Relationship Status Inventory (RSI; adapted from Weiss &amp; Cerreto, 1980),</p>	<p>A 12-item True/False questionnaire assessing steps taken towards separation or divorce; this is a more sensitive index of stability than simply asking if the couples are still together and can detect early signs of steps toward separation.</p>
Relationship aggression	<p>Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS II) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, &amp; Sugarman, 1996).</p>	<p>A 30-item self-report measure of the occurrence of relationship aggression and other coercive relationship behaviours over the previous 12 months. The revised scale adds items on sexual coercion, restriction of freedom, and additional acts of aggression to the items in the original CTS.</p>
Individual partner well being	<p>Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS; Lovibond &amp; Lovibond, 1995)</p>	<p>A 21-item self-report measure of depression, anxiety and stress.</p>
Couple communication	<p>Videotaped couple problem solving discussion (Weiss &amp; Heyman, 1997)</p> <p>Videotaped couples support discussion (Bradbury &amp; Pasch, 1994)</p>	<p>Couple discusses a difficult issue in their relationship for 10 minutes. Interaction is coded using the Brief Interactional Coding System (BICS) or similar standardized system. The BICS is reliable and sensitive to change as the result of interventions (Behrens, Sanders, &amp; Halford, 1990; Halford et al. 1993; Halford, Sanders, &amp; Behrens, 1999; Sanders et al. 1999).</p> <p>Couple discuss issue(s) unrelated to the relationship but which are of concern to individual partners. This task assesses ability to effectively support each other. The interaction is coded using the Social Support Coding system (Bradbury &amp; Pasch, 1999), or similar standardized system. Social support has been shown to predict relationship satisfaction beyond the variance accounted for by conflict management communication.</p>

### Controlled trial of inventory programs

The PREPARE and FOCCUSS programs should be compared to information and awareness type programs. A randomized controlled trial is needed to evaluate whether programs do enhance maintenance of relationship satisfaction and stability. To date there is no research evaluating whether completion of inventories and feedback do impact upon relationship outcomes. If couples were to select which approach they receive then self-selection factors might account for any observed effects. If different educators offer the information and awareness programs versus the inventories, then educator skills might be confounded with the type of relationship education being offered.

It is proposed that educators be recruited who would be willing to recruit couples into the study. Couples would be randomly assigned to either the inventory or information and awareness programs. A written protocol for the delivery of the inventory programs would need to be developed. This in itself would be useful to do, as there is great variation in how the PREPARE and FOCCUSS inventories are used by educators. Developing some consensus about best practice in the use of inventories would be useful to the field. It is also likely that there would be some differences in best practice of how FOCCUSS and PREPARE are used. Having two separate protocols for the two inventories would accommodate that.

### Timeline and evaluation

In order to do a world class, best practice evaluation it is necessary to recruit large numbers of couples into the controlled trials to provide the power to detect effects. A minimum of 60 couples completing programs in each condition in each trial is needed. (That is 120 couples for each of the two randomized controlled trials, or 240 couples in total). It is assumed that 15 to 20% of the couples would drop out from the study by the time of the 4-year follow-up assessment, (this a reasonable estimate based on the few existing long-term trials), approximately 50 couples per condition would be available at follow-up assessments. That number provides the statistical power referred to earlier to detect moderate effect sizes. The approximate time frame for this considerable undertaking would be as follows:

Year 1: Appointment and training of staff, engagement of relationship education providers in controlled trials process, negotiation of logistics of agency involvement, preparation and dissemination of materials and assessment procedures, training of relationship educators in the specific protocols.

Year 2-3: Recruitment of participants, delivery of relationship education programs, assessment of couples at pre- and post-program times, establishment of central data base for results, analysis of pre- and post-program results. Production of short-term effects report and publications.

Year 4-7: Conduct of 1, 2, 3 and 4-year follow ups of couples, production of report on 2-year follow-up results.

Year 8: Data analysis and write up of final results.

The benefits of the trials

The benefits of controlled trials of skills training programs, and inventory based programs would be considerable. If these studies were well done they would provide benchmarks of excellence in service delivery. The conduct of these controlled trials would require extensive documentation about the programs being delivered, and this documentation would be a significant advantage in disseminating those programs found to be effective.

Summary and conclusions

The above set of projects has the possibility of important synergies. The focus on development of resource materials across multiple projects seeks to promote the use of empirically supported approaches. The development of a broad range of resource materials attempts to diversify the content of programs so that the needs of a wide range of couples can be addressed. The attention to utilizing variations of these materials in different delivery formats, including flexible delivery of self-directed learning, maximizes accessibility and cost-effectiveness of relationship education.

The suggested randomized clinical trials would add substantially to existing knowledge on the effectiveness of relationship education. In addition, the very process of conducting research will promote collaboration between educators and researchers in the development and evaluation of programs. The training of educators involved in the research is intended to enhance continuing education opportunities for educators, and enhance the quality of routine program delivery. Commitment to the program of research and development suggested in this project would significantly enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of relationship education in Australia.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Marriage and relationship education in Australia has the potential to make a major contribution to the health and well being of the nation's people. To realize this potential the field needs to evolve the range and quality of services it provides.

Historically, the field of marriage and relationship education began from advice offered by religious marriage celebrants to marrying couples. Over time the services offered by relationship educators have broadened and evolved, and continue to evolve, in many important ways. One aspect of this evolution is that different approaches to marriage and relationship education have developed, and there has been systematic research evaluating some of these approaches. The field needs to place increasing emphasis upon providing empirically supported approaches to relationship education. This means expanding the availability of skills training approaches to relationship education, which have been found to be effective. It also means conducting more research to evaluate promising methods of relationship education, such as the use of inventories. Should this research show these other approaches are effective than dissemination of those approaches should be encouraged.

A second aspect of the evolution of the field has been the broadening of opportunities of when in a couple's life span they might access relationship education. Pre-marriage courses remain the most common time when couples access relationship education, but education to support couples across life transitions and times of crisis have been developing. There is some research evaluating programs for transitions such as becoming parents, coping with unemployment, and health crises. The field needs to develop and evaluate programs that support couples right across the life span.

Related to the diversification of the timing of entry to relationship education is the development of notions of continuity of contact with couples. Traditionally relationship education has been a brief contact of a session or series of sessions with an educator. (Though many religious marriage celebrants provide ongoing pastoral care to couples). The possibility of couples returning for relationship education across time as the need arises has not been adequately explored by the field, and is a likely trend in the future evolution of relationship education.

A third aspect of the field's evolution is diversification of the modes of relationship education provision. Relationship education is still predominantly delivered in face-to-face programs for either a single couple, or a group of couples. Computerized scoring of relationship assessment inventories and provision of computer-generated reports for couples were the beginning of the application of information technology to relationship education. Recent developments of video and web based relationship education resource materials are expanding the opportunities for couples to access relationship education. However, the field is

only just beginning to recognize the potential utility of flexible delivery of self-directed learning materials. This is likely to be a major area of growth in the field of relationship education.

Another aspect of the field's evolution is the increasing professionalism and raising of standards in provision of relationship education. Professional associations are promoting the accessing and use of research to guide practice. Greater access to training, continuing education and the definition of professional competence standards by marriage and relationship educators all hold the possibility of enhancing the quality of service provision. The increased funding for relationship education provided by the federal government has been accompanied by increased requirements of accountability for the quality of services delivered. Again, in the long term this should lead to better relationship education services.

The field of marriage and relationship education also is evolving to be more responsive to the diversity and multi-cultural nature of Australian society. Relationship education is responding to the diversity of pathways by which couples enter committed relationships. Attempts are being made to adapt the content and the process of providing relationship education so that education is culturally sensitive and appropriate. There is considerable challenge to providing relationship education that recognizes diversity, is culturally appropriate, and is an empirically supported effective form of relationship education. However, there are examples of programs that successfully have combined community involvement in the development of programs with utilization of empirically supported approaches to family skills education.

The funding of relationship education also is evolving. Originally most education was provided on a voluntary basis, and many religious organizations still provide services through clergy and unpaid lay volunteers. Professional relationship educators fund their services both through payment by couples, and by government funding. A few more entrepreneurial relationship educators have forged partnerships with other services to fund relationship education, and keep down costs to couples. Breaking down the barriers between relationship education and other services such as parenting programs, employee assistance, preparation for retirement, and health services is likely to expand the range of sources of funding for relationship education. Diversification of the sources of funding for relationship education is just beginning.

Relationship education in Australia at the beginning of the third millennium is an exciting field. The rate of evolution of the field is accelerating. The range and quality of services available to couples are likely to continue to expand. There is much work to do to realize the potential of the field of relationship education, but Australia is well placed to develop the best relationship education services in the world. The projects suggested in this report are intended to be steps in the evolution of diverse, accessible and excellent relationship education services.



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## CONSULTATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the course of this consultancy I consulted with a wide range of relationship educators, researchers, marriage celebrants, representatives of different ethnic and community groups, and other stakeholders. I am very grateful to all the people who shared their expertise with me in the two months I was conducting this project. I hope that my final report reflects some of the wisdom they shared with me.

The consultations took a variety of forms including a series of teleconferences, face-to-face meetings, e-mail discussions and submissions, and fax and written submissions. Below I list the people who assisted me. If I inadvertently have omitted anyone, I apologize.

Teleconference 1 – Wednesday, 22 September 1999 at 9.30am

Elizabeth Alvey	Anglicare South Australia
Helen Lockwood	Lutheran Community Care
Anne Matuszek	Centacare Family Services
Tony Molyneux	Anglican Counselling Centre

Teleconference 2 - Thursday, 23 September 1999 at 9.30am

Lynley Giles	Saint John's Toorak
Gillian Mickan	Marriage Educators Association
Michele Simons	University of South Australia

Teleconference 3 – Thursday, 7 October 1999 at 9.30am

Sermin Baycan	Geelong Migrant Resource Centre
Mercedes Espulveda	Kinections
Estrella Herzog	Kinections
Salvador Nunez	Orana Family Services

Teleconference 4 – Thursday, 7 October 1999 at 11.00am

Christina Graves	Centacare Family Services
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Teleconference 5 – Thursday, 7 October 1999 at 1.00pm

Bruce Allsopp	Interrelate – Family Life Movement of Australia
Dianne Hand	Warlga Ngurra Aboriginal Women's Refuge
Bev Henwood	Warlga Ngurra Aboriginal Women's Refuge
William Montague-Elliott	Interrelate – Family Life Movement of Australia
Jean Packham	Kununurra Crisis Accommodation Centre
Norma Roberts	Interrelate – Family Life Movement of Australia
Judy Taylor	University of South Australia

Teleconference 6 – Thursday, 7 October 1999 at 2.30pm

Georgina Taylor	Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages
Warren Handcock	Registrar-General's Office
Val Edyvean	Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages

Teleconference 7 – Thursday, 7 October 1999 at 4.00pm

Carol Astbury	Civil Celebrant
Peta Callahan	Civil Celebrant
Gavin Cotterell	Registrar-General's Office
Beryl Eissens	Civil Celebrant
Cyril Fenn	Civil Celebrant
Dee Potter	Civil Celebrant

Teleconference 8 – Friday, 8 October 1999 at 4.00pm

Frank Giggins	Bethany Family Support
Meredith Hodgson	Relationships Australia
Steve Martin	Stepfamily Association of Victoria
Janet Muirhead	Relationships Australia
Jenna Schoer	Relationships Australia

The Australian Institute of Family Studies hosted a full day Marriage Education Research Round Table meeting on September 9, 1999 at the Collins Street, Melbourne headquarters of the Institute. I attended the meeting and was fortunate to have the chance to discuss and hear others' views on research priorities in marriage and relationship education with the following people.

Kevin Andrews	Member of Parliament
Fiona Carberry	Department of Family and Community Services
Megan Cook	Department of Family and Community Services
Dr Moira Eastman	Australian Catholic University
Bruce Findlay	Swinburne University
Helen Glezer	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Susan Gribbens	Relationships Australia
Denise Lacey	Catholic Society for Marriage Education
Robyn Parker	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Peter Saunders	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Beth Seddon	Relationships Australia
David Stanton	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Ruth Webber	Australian Catholic University
Debra Wheare	Department of Family and Community Services

I attended the National Conference on Marriage Education conjointly run by the Catholic Marriage Educators Association and the Australian Marriage Educators Association of Australia. During the conference approximately 40 people attended a meeting and offered their suggestions to me. The meeting was held at 1:00 on Thursday, 30 September 1999. A complete list of attendees was not taken, but among the people who made contributions were:

John Collins  
Maria Gigla  
Jenni James  
David Jansen  
Tony Kerin  
Penny Kerr  
Simon Margisson  
Brian Morgan  
Robin Mulholland  
Victor Vella

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Professor Alan Hudson, Department of Psychology, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Professor Drew Nesdale, School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University

Professor Patricia Noller, Department of Psychology, University of Queensland.

Mr. John Robson, National Administrator of PREPARE/ENRICH.

Associate Professor Matthew Sanders, Department of Psychology, University of Queensland.

Ms. Michelle Simons, University of South Australia.

The Couples Interest Group of the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy has an international e-mail discussion group with approximately 200 members. Many of the members are highly distinguished, internationally recognized researchers on couple relationships. I posted a series of questions to that group, and received many very helpful suggestions. I would like to specifically acknowledge submissions received from the following.

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Professor Howard Markman, Department of Psychology, University of Denver, USA.

Associate Professor Matthew Sanders, Department of Psychology, University of Queensland, Australia.

Professor Steven Sayers, Department of Psychiatry, Allegheny University of health Sciences, USA.

Professor Tamara Sher, Department of Psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology, USA.

Dr. Scott Stanley, Department of Psychology, University of Denver, USA.

Professor Bob Weiss, Department of Psychology, University of Oregon.

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Diane Sadler	MEAA Executive Committee member
An Van Vu	Catholic Vietnamese Community, Sydney
Tony Wright	Registrar-General, Tasmania
Michelle Simons	University of South Australia

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Mr. John Collins who as co-convenor of the National Conference on Marriage Education assisted me to meet with many dedicated and helpful relationship educators during the national conference.





