

Do Couples at High Risk of Relationship Problems Attend Premarriage Education?

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Introduction

Although studies suggest that most couples benefit from premarital education, the research literature suggests that couples who are at risk for marital problems are the ones who benefit most from premarital education. However, are those who are at higher risk for marital problems likely to obtain premarital education? This study examined whether factors associated with higher risk for divorce had an impact on whether or not couples obtained premarital education.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Australia. In order to recruit participants, all newly married couples within an Australian state were contacted 6 weeks after marriage if they were married within 3 randomly selected months over the course of about a year and a half. A total of 6,656 couples were married during that time frame, and were contacted regarding the study. Of those couples, only 447 couples volunteered to participate in the study.

A total of 384 couples completed all study procedures. Income and education of this sample were slightly higher than for the general population of Australia, but slightly lower than would be expected for a United States population. Participants completed a battery of measures that asked about demographic information, whether or not any type of premarital education was received, and specific measures of relationship adjustment and aggression.

Main Ideas

The two variables that consistently predicted attendance at marriage education were religious service attendance and not living together prior to marriage. Living together before marriage has been associated with poorer marital outcome, and religious

attendance has been associated with better marital outcome. Level of education, age, history of parental divorce, having a prior marriage, aggression in the relationship, and stability of the relationship did not predict attendance at premarital education. Overall, the data suggests that those couples with higher risk factors for divorce were less likely to attend premarital education than those with lower risk factors. It is important to keep in mind that this study was conducted in a different country (Australia), and that those couples who volunteered to participate in this study (only about 6% of the total number eligible) might be somewhat different from the general population. However, it is notable that, similar to the US, Australia does not provide free, easy access to premarital education. Therefore, it is understandable that many of those who received premarital education likely did so through their religious institution, and may have been required to do so in order to get married by their religious institution. Interestingly, the researchers did not comment on the types of premarital education used, nor do they describe the length or type of education available.

Implications for Extension Programs

The State of Florida provides an incentive for premarital education by providing a discount in the cost of the marriage license to those Florida couples who receive premarital education. However, this does not mean that premarital education is widely available at a low cost. Cooperative Extension within the state of Florida provides the Before You Tie the Knot premarital education program at low or no cost, but this program is only available in a few select counties. Furthermore, it is unclear whether those most at risk would participate in such a program, even when offered at free or reduced cost. Although it would be helpful to increase the availability of the Before You Tie the Knot program to other counties, perhaps efforts should be made to increase the availability of the program information via multiple formats (in person, virtual, self-taught via written materials or video) so that those who can't easily attend a premarital program in person, or who would feel uncomfortable doing so, could receive premarital education through alternative methods. Finally, tailoring the materials to meet the need of various types of couples, including those from other cultures and with various levels of literacy, would help reach a wider audience (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Conclusion

Quality premarital education has been associated with improved marital satisfaction (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner & Miller, 2004). However, those couples who may benefit most from premarital education may be less likely to receive premarital education. Attempts to increase availability through traditional as well as alternative methods would be beneficial.

Additional References

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