

**Bowling Green State University  
The Center for Family and Demographic Research**

<http://www.bgsu.edu/organizations/cfdr>

Phone: (419) 372-7279      [cfdr@bgsu.edu](mailto:cfdr@bgsu.edu)

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**HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTHY MARRIAGES:  
FINAL REPORT**

**Wendy D. Manning, Deanna Trella, Heidi Lyons,  
Angelika Gulbis, and Nola du Toit**

**Center for Family and Demographic Research  
Bowling Green State University  
112 Bromfield  
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403-0218  
419-372-2850  
[wmannin@bgsu.edu](mailto:wmannin@bgsu.edu)**

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## HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTHY MARRIAGES: FINAL REPORT

The aim of federal financial and political support for marriage is to help disadvantaged groups with their efforts to forge and sustain healthy marriages and relationships. As a result, a series of new education programs have been implemented to help low-income Americans--who are at risk for lower marriage rates and higher divorce rates--form and maintain healthy marriages and relationships.

Beginning in July 2006 and continuing through March 2007 we conducted a multi-method assessment of the Grand Rapids Healthy Marriages Healthy Relationships (HMHR) programs *Family Wellness* and *No Jerks*. This assessment involved two separate waves of in-depth interviews and survey data that addressed the views and experience of program participants. These qualitative, longitudinal data provided the unique opportunity to offer a nuanced assessment of participants' opinions and beliefs about relationships with an emphasis on how program lessons were implemented six months subsequent to completion of the program. The aim of this report is to showcase the complex lives of participants and highlight their views and experiences in

the program. These perspectives provide an important supplement to traditional programmatic evaluations and can help improve policies and programs aimed at supporting and sustaining healthy marriages and relationships.

## GRAND RAPIDS

The Grand Rapids HMHR is a community-based program administered by Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services. Grand Rapids HMHR draws on relationships with community partners to provide programs that best serve the specific needs of the community. There are at least 14 projects similar to these programs around the country. The Grand Rapids initiative administers a number of relationship-oriented programs that serve approximately 4,000. We focused on two specific programs: *Family Wellness* and *No Jerks (How Not to Marry a Jerk or Jerkette)*.

## DATA AND METHODS

Program staff contacted participants to request participation in the study. Our sample is drawn from a roster of recent program participants who completed a program just prior to the interview dates. An individual was considered to have finished the program if he or she attended 4 of 6 classes in *Family Wellness* or 3 of 4

classes in *No Jerks*. Sample participants were selected in an attempt to closely mirror the demographics of all participants.

Wave 1 interviews were conducted from July through September 2006 and included 57 participants. Wave 2 interviews took place in February and March 2007, 6 to 8 months subsequent to their completion of the class, and included 48 of the original 57 participants. The re-interview sub-sample represented a substantial 84% retention rate. We were unable to re-interview the complete wave 1 sample because of geographic movement, schedule conflicts, and inability to locate some participants.

All participants received \$25 for interviews. Interviews were tape-recorded and conducted confidentially at the program site by interviewers from BGSU. The interviews were semi-structured and relied on open-ended replies; this strategy allowed participants to use their own words to describe experiences. On average, wave 1 interviews lasted 90 minutes and included an average of 63 pages of single-spaced text, and wave 2 interviews were on average 30 minutes and 14 pages. Data were quite rich and allowed us to generate a code list that addressed common themes and concerns of participants. We used Atlas/ti to aid in analysis of the data.

We also drew on responses to the Brief Marriage Attitude Survey (BMAS), administered prior to classes. The instrument was developed to garner participants' attitudes on nine marriage and relationship issues.

#### **FAMILY WELLNESS OBJECTIVES:**

The program is targeted toward individuals and couples with children. Lessons emphasize cooperation, listening, and communication between parents and children, and adult relationships. Provides basic skills couples can use to improve their marriages and relationships: communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Lessons include active discussions, feedback from instructors, examples from participants' lives, and role-playing- where participants act out lessons or work through difficult situations.

#### **NO JERKS OBJECTIVES:**

Participants learn to value getting to "know" "trust" "rely" and "commit" to partners and if they feel it is appropriate move on to the "touch" stage in their romantic relationships. The Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) visually demonstrates this lesson and is distributed to participants to rank their relationship on the key dimensions, and measure relationship progression.

## **COMPLEX LIVES OF RESPONDENTS**

The lives of respondents were complex and characterized by high levels of disadvantage and instability. Three-quarters were not raised by married biological parents, indicating a lack of married role models in the immediate family. Most were single at the time of interview, and only 1/5 was married. The vast majority of the sample was living with children – notably some were adult children, extended family, or unrelated minors. Among respondents with biological children, 44% had children by two or more partners which presented difficult and complex parenting relationships. Some respondents or their partners had been incarcerated, and a significant minority had experience with abusive relationships. The respondents had quite limited economic resources; 70% were unemployed and most were receiving public assistance.

Data were collected over a six-month time period and showed a large majority (77%) experienced some type of change in their lives (e.g., household, education, employment, and relationship), and some experienced more than one type of change. The most common type of change was “household instability.” More than half of the respondents either moved in with others

or had people living with them. Household instability can be disruptive because it is unplanned and often longer than expected. Respondents noted that turmoil and transitions impinged on their abilities to attend classes, implement class lessons with others, or sustain new healthy relationship habits over time.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE**

Even prior to taking classes respondents were in favor of marriage with 82% agreeing that “people should get married”. Among those not already married, most expected to marry at some point. Still, many participants were reluctant to marry before they and their partners had stable incomes, symbolized by a desire to own a home, be financially secure, and develop a trusting relationship based on a mutual commitment. As parents, slightly more than half (57%) of participants agreed that it is better when children are raised by two biological married parents. Disapproval of divorce was high and most feel it is unacceptable to divorce even when couples do not get along. Respondents witnessed divorce and its implications in their own lives or in those around them. Some respondents were leery of marriage because they were raised in single parent and divorced homes. Few actually witness stable marriages or

relationships and they lacked positive role models.

### **CLASS EXPERIENCES**

Participants heard about the classes from newspapers, pamphlets, churches, friends who had participated in the class, and other community resources. Classes included a mix of married, single, cohabiting, and dating individuals, a mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and adults of all ages. Few male participants were enrolled in the classes sampled which resulted in our sample being largely female. Class sizes varied from between 10 to 25 individuals.

Incentives were one way to encourage participation in classes. Incentives were often a reason to initially attend classes; however, classes had their own intrinsic value. Another reason respondents returned to classes was the positive atmosphere created by instructors who made everyone feel welcome and remained uncritical. The instructors were a key reason for the success of classes. Carol explained, “They’re caring people. And when you are appreciated, it makes you feel good. You know there’s somebody there to actually lend me a helping hand. There’s somebody I can actually rely on.” Instructors were often referred to as friends and role models by respondents, and were praised for their

willingness to divulge personal issues that many of the respondents were also coping with. Married instructors sometimes provided the only example of a positive romantic relationship.

Among respondents whose partners were aware of their class participation, all noted positive responses. Participants were generally eager to share valuable class information with partners who did not attend. Many discussed topics from class and shared distributed written materials with partners. Partners might have been more likely to attend when they agreed that there was a relationship problem that can benefit from outside counseling. When respondents were asked why their partners did not attend the program with them, there were a variety of responses, ranging from the practical, “he had to work,” to the more complex “he says it’s a white thing.” Still, some respondents did not want their partners to attend with them in part because of poor relationships, lack of interest, and partners’ poor social skills.

### **CLASS RECOMMENDATIONS**

Respondents overwhelmingly claimed to recommend both the *No Jerks* and *Family Wellness* classes to family, friends, and peers. They liked the classes, instructors, and the opportunity to talk and network with

other participants. Participants were eager for new perspectives and new techniques to apply in their relationships, and sought a forum to practice them via role-playing. When respondents were asked why they had not taken another class, quite often they were not aware that other classes were offered, though they were willing to take another class when it became available.

There were a number of challenges to create a program that satisfied the needs of a diverse population. First, respondents requested more classes at varied times in different languages. Second, the majority of participants were parents, and many recommended a separate course that was tailored to address specific parenting issues. Some parents recommended a course be developed to target teenagers. "They need to teach this stuff to teenagers, young kids, instead of adults only." Third, respondents wanted classes divided according to marital status. Single participants tended to want more classes aimed at dating difficulties or single parenting issues, while married couples sought classes focusing on familial concerns. Fourth, a number of respondents repeated classes and felt there should be beginner, intermediate, and advanced sections to avoid reiterating the same issues, and to acknowledge the progression of

respondents.

#### **APPLICATION OF CLASS LESSONS: SIX MONTHS LATER**

This longitudinal study allowed assessment of long-term effectiveness of *Family Wellness* and *No Jerks*. Participants learned a great deal in their classes about forming and maintaining healthy relationships with partners and children, and we found they continue to implement techniques learned in the class six months after completion.

#### **Lessons Learned in *Family Wellness* and *No Jerks***

We asked participants what they learned in *Family Wellness*, and several broad themes emerged: 1) how to communicate effectively with children, partners, family, and others; 2) how to establish family time, use new discipline techniques, and set routines for children; 3) how to compromise with partners and take time together as a couple; and 4) how to communicate with ex-partners (and *their* new partners) for the benefit of the children. In the *No Jerks* program, broad themes included: 1) setting rules and boundaries for current or future partners; 2) raising relationship standards with current partners or for future relationships; 3) keeping "jerks" at a distance; 4) taking time to get to know a potential partner's background

characteristics before moving on to sexual relations or commitment; and 5) being a good romantic relationship role model for children and others in the community.

### **Implementing Class Lessons**

Classes were primarily geared to help participants with their romantic relationships and relations with children, though participants applied lessons in several domains —with children, partners and co-parents, friends, family, and co-workers — and the results were generally satisfactory. Although some participants encountered problems implementing class lessons due to unresponsive others, most were successful and almost all were willing to try something new.

#### ***Children***

Parents who took *Family Wellness* classes implemented new communication techniques with their children. For example, Mae tried to praise to her daughter more often, “[Instead of] say[ing] you’re a bad kid...I told her...that she’s a good girl, she’s smart...You know, positive words.” Another popular *Family Wellness* technique was establishing family time to facilitate household togetherness. Participants learned how to gather children on a regular basis to discuss family issues, divide household labor with chore lists, and plan

schedules for the week. Tanisha appreciated the new family time: “I tried...family gatherings with ’em. I learned that out of *Family Wellness*...it worked really good.” *Family Wellness* curriculum emphasized the importance of including children in family decisions and facilitating family togetherness by giving everyone a voice. Latisha implemented a chore chart with her children: “We would take pieces of paper and...write down what [chores] you want to do. And whoever pick it out of the hat, we’ll do it that day...They liked it. They actually had fun.”

Positive discipline techniques were an important component of *Family Wellness*. Participants learned to deescalate tensions by talking with children rather than engaging them through screaming and corporal punishment. Vicky had success with this technique, “[Now] there’s no temper tantrums or fits...and, and he just understands more, because...he’s listening to you and not just hearing you yell at him.” Parents were also taught to stay firm with children, follow through with discipline, and not allow children to manipulate them and their co-parent. Jill said, “That’s helped a lot...standing firm with him...He, he knows when grandma says no, it’s no; and, when mommy says no, it’s no.”



## *Partners and Co-Parents*

*Family Wellness* reminded participants to take time during the day for “couple time” and “alone time” to help maintain healthy relationships. Sasha said the class taught us “to have time to oursel[ves] at night. Put the kids in the bed at a decent hour...just make time for oursel[ves].” Participants also learned the importance of compromising and communicating with their partners for the sake of children. Debby said, “It gave us the tools we need [to] step back and be able to communicate. You know, we knew when things were getting too heated or off-track.” Some participants learned how to interact more positively with ex-partners. Jackie contended, “I tried to...build our relationship where me and him can communicate...about the children and not have to blow up at each other.”

Participants contended that *No Jerks* helped to form and sustain healthy relationships while offering tools to break off unhealthy relationships. Before taking *No Jerks*, participants often had difficulties in their relationships because they chose the wrong partner and progressed through the relationship too quickly. After taking the class, participants felt prepared to avoid the same relationship mistakes by identifying and avoiding “jerks”. Helen said that she

rushed through relationships and had had her heart broken, but *No Jerks* taught her to “really get...to know his background and really, really get to know him a little bit more before I commit.”

Participants applied class lessons by raising their standards for suitable partners. Participants learned how to scrutinize their romantic partners and relationships with a new-found understanding of what they need and want from others. Laurie contended that the class makes her more selective because, “I know what I’ve had in the past, and it wasn’t good. And I want something better...I have higher standards maybe.” Some coped with the fear that there may not be a suitable partner in their dating pool. Ida said, “I’ve kinda almost accepted the fact that I’m gonna be by myself... ‘cause there’s nobody meeting the list...Not even close.” Several participants sought to avoid coupling with a “jerk” to be good role models for their children and shield them from potential harm. Jackie said, “I don’t want to have my kids go through being around another jerk.” Finally, in learning how to recognize a jerk, some participants realized they can use a little self-improvement. Mary said, “I probably was a jerkette too.” Respondents often claimed that their new-found communication skills



allowed them to be better partners in their current or future relationships.

### ***Extended Family***

Implementing curriculum with family members was sometimes difficult because many participants had tenuous relationships with extended family, had unreceptive family members, or did not have extended family. Some participants, however, cited improvements in communication and being able to stand-up to their family after taking the classes. For example, *Family Wellness* taught Ida to stand up to her brother who was living in her household without paying rent: “I just told him pretty much, if you can’t help me then you need to leave... And he wasn’t used to that.” Perhaps most importantly, classes gave participants the skills to bring families closer together.

### ***Friends and Co-Workers***

One unanticipated outcome was the spillover from classes, and the development of healthy relationship skills, into other spheres of life. For example, participants utilized curriculum with friends and acquaintances. Although *No Jerks* focused on avoiding “jerks” in romantic relationships, participants intuited the importance of recognizing “jerks” in friendships, family relationships, and work-related relationships. Many of the skills that

emphasized communication, better listening, and consideration of others’ feelings were helpful in friendships as well as romantic relationships.

Many participants worked in the service industry where communication is an important tool. Classes taught methods for improving communication, handling difficult situations with others, and learning to view situations from multiple perspectives; these skills easily translated into employment settings and interactions with customers, employees, and authority figures. Participants learned to be more assertive at work, deescalate tension with coworkers, and listen attentively to customers and fellow employees. Candace learned to speak up for what she wanted at work, which she claimed improved her income. Mimi said that cooperating, listening, and speaking up helped her improve customer service skills, “out of ten customers nine of them be satisfied.”

### **Teaching Others**

Acquiring a sense of expertise in romantic relationships, parenting, and communication, gave participants confidence to teach others in their lives about class curriculum. After taking the classes some participants felt they are communication, relationship, and parenting

“experts” with much to teach others. Participants generally did not attend classes with those whom they sought to implement these lessons, therefore, they felt compelled to share their knowledge after-the-fact.

Although participants generally did not attend classes with their partners, they did share information with partners after classes. Jill said, “We actually reviewed a lot of the material that I had left. And he likes it.” Participants not only employed curriculum at home, they shared relationship advice and class techniques throughout their communities. Participants who experienced great success implementing the curriculum with their children felt compelled to share this knowledge with others. Sasha taught her sister to disengage from her children during tense interactions: “She had a problem with wanting to holler all the time...so, I told her...go into one of the rooms and have your own self time...It worked.” Similarly, participants in *No Jerks* shared their new romantic relationship expertise and knowledge with friends and family. Dahlia tried to help her brother and his wife: “They’re in the stage where they want to break up. So I [said]...You have to try to work things out. You have to go with your feelings...You have to express yourself.” Thus, program lessons spread

beyond classrooms to the broader community.

## DISCUSSION

HMHR program participants were generally supportive of marriage and anticipated marrying in the future. Although desire for marriage was strong, there remained constraints to marriage. The daily circumstances of respondents’ lives were difficult to navigate, which made it especially difficult to form and maintain healthy relationships. A key finding was that social context of marriage matters-- many respondents were raised in communities with relatively few positive relationship role models.

Respondents were generally pleased with the program, and six months after the class there remained demand for additional classes and ‘refresher’ classes. Participants often reported recommending the classes to others. Participants were able to recall and implement class lessons with children, partners, friends, fellow employees, and extended family members. Those who experienced challenges were, at times, overwhelmed with family responsibilities and/or encounter resistance from others. Many respondents considered themselves “experts” at romantic relationships, communication, and parenting. This was a

particularly important finding because it illustrated the important ways that HMHR classes were distributed throughout the community.

These findings may not generalize to all marriage initiative program participants because they are based on in-depth interviews with 57 respondents who participated in two particular programs. Certainly, there is some potential selection bias among those who are willing to be interviewed. Nonetheless, these findings showcase many potential benefits of the programs, and emphasize that disadvantaged individuals gain much from relationship-oriented programs, and helps us to better understand some of the barriers to healthy relationships and marriages.

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