

Recruitment and Retention of Stepfamilies in Family Life Education Classes



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Abstract

As part of the Federal Healthy Marriage Initiative, Utah State University is teaching healthy marriage and relationship skills to Latino and Caucasian low-income stepfamilies. In addition to normal marital challenges, remarried, dating, and cohabitating couples in stepfamilies face additional challenges when combining their families. In an effort to strengthen remarriages and stepfamilies, various strategies are being tried to recruit and retain participants in stepfamily education classes.

Historically, many barriers have prevented couples in ethnically diverse, low-income stepfamilies from participating in community marriage education classes. Traditional barriers include a cost to participate, transportation, lack of trust, childcare issues, time to attend, interest, language barriers, etc. (see Ooms & Wilson, 2004). This project was designed to overcome many of the traditional recruitment and retention barriers to participation. An evaluation was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the implemented recruitment and retention strategies.



Participant Quotes

"One of my daughter's instructors called me and told me about [the class] and I was like—oh yes, finally! Finally a class!"

"We got one of these flyers in the mail from the school district about a stepfamily strengthening class. My wife talked to me and I said, 'Absolutely, let's do it.'"

"I already have recommended [this class] to my ex-wife and her husband. . .anybody we come in contact with, if they're having a struggle we say, 'You've got to take this class. It will answer a lot of questions you're asking right now.'"

Methods

For the first year of this demonstration project, Utah State University partnered with seven established agencies in northern Utah who have a history of servicing the target population. Twenty-one classes were offered over the course of the first year, and 394 adult participants attended along with 348 children. The project used a research-based curriculum, *Smart Steps for Adults and Children in Stepfamilies*. This curriculum included a youth and childcare component that allows the entire family to attend.

The qualitative evaluation of the implementation process involved a sample of facilitators (n=20) and participants (n=40) who were interviewed after completing the *Smart Steps* class. Participants were asked to describe how they were recruited. Facilitators were asked about recruitment as well as how they retained participants.

Recruitment

Personal contacts. When interviewing participants, we found the most effective recruitment strategy was personal contact from program staff members and other professionals. This was especially true for Latino participants. Program staff invited current or previous clients from their respective agencies to attend the stepfamily class through phone calls, home visits, emails, or other means of personal communication.

Media. Public communication proved to be the second most cited means of recruitment from participants. Participants saw flyers posted in public places such as grocery stores, schools, and counseling centers or they received them in the mail from their children's school. Others read about the stepfamily course in the newspaper. Facilitators noted that some media worked better than others, depending upon the areas in which they advertised and the individuals they were targeting.

Family and friends. Another effective strategy for recruitment involved word-of-mouth from family and friends. Participants heard about the course through their ex-spouse, in-laws, neighbors, co-workers, and friends. Families and friends involved in the course may become an even stronger source of recruitment in the future. All of the 40 interviewed participants responded that they would recommend, or have already recommended the program, to others.

Retention Strategies

Meals. Every agency provided a meal to the participating adults and their children. Participants were later asked whether providing a meal influenced whether or not they attended the course. A majority replied no, though they generally commented that it was appreciated and made attending the class easier. Some facilitators noted that the type of food was important and they allowed for participants' preferences.

Monetary rewards. Other incentives included cash and gas cards. These rewards were generally given at each class, or at the end of the course. In one agency, children received a two-dollar bill each week for attending and appropriately participating in class. This proved to be a big motivator for them to return. Some incentives were publicized in advertising while others were unannounced.

Prizes and gifts. Some agencies reported positive results with the use of grocery gift certificates, movie passes and gift baskets.

Personal contact. In order to retain participants, staff members at several agencies contacted class members through phone calls or home visits to remind them of the next class. In addition, some facilitators sent out cards thanking participants for their continued participation.

Implications for Practice

Based upon the recruitment and retention findings in this qualitative study of low-income Latino and Caucasian participants in a stepfamily course, it appears that:

- Personal contacts are the most effective strategies for recruiting participants.
- A curriculum that addresses the unique needs of stepfamilies was a motivation for attendance.
- Tangible incentives such as meals, monetary rewards, and personal contacts appears to reinforce continued attendance at classes.
- Children's participation and their enthusiasm for attending positively affected retention.