

## **Relationship Education: Encouraging Participation through Experiential Date Nights**

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Experiential date nights encouraged increased participation in relationship education by providing a low-cost, nonthreatening, and fun opportunity for couples to develop and enhance their relationship skills. Date nights consisted of relationship education and activities that appealed to both men and women. Outcomes from 18 date nights (N = 293) offered in two western, urban communities indicated that date night activities significantly improved knowledge of relationship skills. Formative results demonstrated that both men and women found the activities to be highly valuable. This article provides descriptive information for other Extension professionals wishing to design and evaluate experiential relationship education.

It is estimated that divorce costs taxpayers in the United States over 33.3 billion dollars every year (Schramm, 2006). The erosion of marriage has also created many struggles for individuals, children, parents, and society (Fagan, Patterson & Rector, 2002). On the other hand, strong and healthy marriages have been associated with more positive outcomes for children (Adam & Sawhill, 2002; Amato, 2001; Institute for American Values, 2005; Marks & Lambert, 1998).

Based on this data, over the last decade many marital and relationship education programs have been developed to help couples build and maintain healthy relationships. While these programs vary in structure and content, recent metaanalyses suggest that relationship education enhances participants' communication skills, relationship quality, and marital strength (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin & Fawcett, 2009; Fagan et al., 2002; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin & Fawcett, 2008).

In addition to relationship education, research suggests that couples' relationships can be strengthened by taking time to play together. Playing together increases bonding, communication, conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction in relationships (Aune & Wong, 2002; Baxter, 1992; Kopecky, 1996; Vanderbleek, 2005). Play can also promote spontaneity when life seems routine, and serves as a reminder of positive relationship history and intimacy (Baxter, 1992).

While research suggests that couples benefit from relationship enhancement classes and taking time for play, most relationship education programs use a more traditional delivery, emphasizing face-face, intensive, multi-session instruction in a classroom (Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009). This method may not be ideal for all learning styles and does not generally include opportunities for play (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). Research also suggests that women are more likely to "attend" to relationships, and, therefore, may be more likely to initiate relationship enhancement efforts (Walker, 1999). Because women often seek out healthy relationship events, communities sometimes offer events that appeal more to women in order to encourage the couples' attendance and men may be less likely to want to attend. Couples can significantly benefit from relationship education that encourages men to participate through play

and fun-filled interaction, rather than a traditional method of education which appeals mainly to women.

Relationship date nights were created to encourage attendance by couples who might not attend traditional marital relationship enhancement activities. Date nights were purposefully planned to provide hands-on experiential activities where couples could learn and apply principles of happy relationships in a fun setting, and . Efforts were also made to specifically target men with activities that they and their partners would find enjoyable.

### **Objective**

The goal of this paper is to provide a program model by documenting methods and initial findings from relationship date nights in two communities, so that this program can be replicated by Extension agents in similar settings.

### **Method**

The intent of relationship date nights was to provide inexpensive and fun activities designed to appeal to couples. Additionally, the experiential learning atmosphere encouraged couples who may not normally have attended relationship education to participate, and it provided opportunities to introduce them to marriage education in a nonthreatening way.

Participants were recruited or self-selected to participate through advertisements placed in and around various communities.

### **Participants**

Since its inception in Spring 2009, 18 date nights have been held with 293 individuals in attendance, including 118 total participants in one county (5 events) and 175 in another county (11 events). Participants were mostly couples (49% men, 51% women) and most were married (93%), with length of marriage ranging from 5 months to 45 years (78% were in their first marriage). There were also a few dating and engaged couples. About 40% of couples indicated they had no previous relationship education. Most participants were caucasian (95%). The mean age was 36 years, with a median of 3 children, and mean income of \$53,500.

### **Procedures**

Activities for date nights were selected based on participant and community suggestions and previous community support. While activities varied at each event, each date night consisted of a hands-on activity where couples could discover, experience, and/or apply relationship educational principles. At the beginning of the 58 Relationship Education date night, the event facilitator conducted a 10 to 15 minute presentation and participant discussion about a relationship concept connected with the hands-on activity. Some of the activities and correlating relationship education concepts included:

- Adventure Ropes Course: couples participated in rope challenges focusing on trust, reliance, team work, and communication.
- Cooking Classes: couples learned and practiced food preparation skills while rediscovering the value of spending quality time together on a regular basis.

- Couples Massage: couples learned how to increase their intimacy and reduce their stress through hands-on instruction from a local massage therapist in a comfortable environment.
- Games Night: couples participated in couple and group games intended to increase communication, problem solving, and/or financial harmony.
- Gardening: couples gained practical knowledge about basic gardening techniques while learning how to grow and nourish their relationship strengths.
- Rock Climbing: couples practiced basic rock climbing skills as a team at a local rock climbing gym.

The focus of the activity was on trust, reliance, and communication. The facilitator encouraged the application and integration of relationship concepts throughout each activity and at the end of each event, couples were provided with relationship enhancement tools such as research-based books relating to the evening's topic, to encourage further discussion and application of relationship principles. Food was another incentive for participation and refreshments ranged from light snacks, such as cheese and crackers or granola bars, to a full meal, depending upon the activity. Couples also completed an evaluation at the end of each event.

Date nights were generally scheduled on Friday evenings for approximately two hours, between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m., and were held monthly, except for busy months, such as December, when it was anticipated that there would be lower attendance. While couples generally paid for their own activity costs, partnerships with local businesses allowed for activities to be offered at reduced rates. For example, some local businesses offered "two-for-one" deals, or free/reduced fees, for the use of their facilities for date nights. Additionally, various activities would have been too expensive for some couples to participate in without the date night group rate, which provided another incentive for couples to participate in organized date nights.

## **Evaluation**

An evaluation, approved through Utah State University's Institutional Review Board, was given at the end of each date night to identify the impact of each event. This pen-and-paper evaluation tool included demographic information, a posttest-then retrospective-pretest questionnaire, a formative evaluation, and open-ended questions (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007). The demographic information collected included information such as gender, marital status, household income, racial or ethnic heritage, age, number of children, and number of times divorced. The posttest-thenretrospective-pretest questionnaire asked participants to rate six levels of relationship knowledge before and after the program (e.g., "knowledge of how to listen effectively to a spouse/partner," and "understanding of how to settle disagreements well") on a rating scale from poor (1) to excellent (4). These items reliably measured knowledge of relationship skills ( $\alpha = .84$  pre and  $.83$  post for men, and  $.87$  pre and  $.86$  post for women). For the formative evaluation, participants rated their perceptions of how valuable the program was using five questions (e.g., "what I learned will help me strengthen my relationship," and "I'd like to take this class in the future"). The rating scale ranged from very low (1) to very high (5). These questions reliably measured program value ( $\alpha = .91$  for men, and  $.90$  for women). Finally, the last section consisted of an open-ended question. Couples were asked to describe the most important things they learned at the date night activity.

## **Findings**

## Summative Evaluation

Mean scores were calculated separately for men and women. This was done because husbands' and wives' responses were correlated, and separating them accounted statistically for that correlation. As reported in Table 1, men reported a significant increase in relationship knowledge (2.83 pre and 3.18 post,  $p < .001$ ). Women also reported a significant increase in relationship knowledge (3.00 pre and 3.26 post,  $p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference in the levels of knowledge between counties.

Table 1. Retrospective Pre-Post Change in Knowledge of Relationship Skills

**Table 1.** Retrospective Pre-Post Change in Knowledge of Relationship Skills

Group	Pre-Program Mean	Post-Program Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Men	2.83 (SD = .50)	3.18 (SD = .49)	-11.20***	134
Women	3.00 (SD = .53)	3.26 (SD = .47)	-8.36***	144

\*\*\* $p < .001$

## Formative Evaluation

As mentioned previously, the formative portion of the evaluation requested participants to indicate how valuable the date night was by answering a series of five questions. On a scale of 1 to 5, men's mean rating was 4.23 (SD = .62), and women's mean rating was 4.50 (SD = .57). Thus, both men and women rated the program to be high in value. There was no significant difference in the ratings between counties.

## Qualitative Data Analysis

Approximately 200 open-ended responses to the question, "What are the most important things you learned?" were compiled and analyzed for this study using a combination of quasi-statistics and content analysis methods. During analysis, categories began to emerge which highlighted specific topics individuals felt they had gained from the interaction of the evening. As analysis continued, topics were combined to create categories and subcategories, and researchers used common prompt words or phrases from statements to help categorize topics, such as focus on each other, to listen, and working together. In some cases, one response contained multiple topics and was included in more than one category. When a participant provided a new topic, it was often combined within one of the previously created categories, or it highlighted the need to create a new category of topics. After topics were collapsed and expanded and categories created, researchers tallied the total number of responses in each category to understand the most important items participants felt they had learned. In the end, four major categories emerged, which included communication, cooperation/teamwork, time together, and finding joy.

### Communication.

Approximately 40% (n = 79) indicated that “communication is key.” Responses were divided into several sub-categories including (1) learning to listen and be more effective listeners (e.g., “listen; don’t fix things”); (2) learning to understand their partner’s communication style (e.g., “how to help each other understand”); and 3) learning to be open-minded while discussing issues (e.g., “develop new ideas for resolving issues”). One respondent indicated that he had gained knowledge on “how to communicate effectively and how to resolve concerns.”

### **Cooperation and teamwork.**

Twenty percent (n = 40) of respondents indicated that cooperation and teamwork were important concepts learned during relationship activities. For example, one participant said they learned “to be patient and work as a team.” After a dance class activity, another participant shared, “I learned that I need to let him lead and learn to trust and relax more, while still pulling my own weight.” At the end of a couples’ cooking class, one participant wrote, “Relationships take work, but it is SO worth it in the end.”

### **Time together.**

A third major construct included spending time together (n = 38). This included taking time to connect with their partner (e.g., “spending time together as a couple without children helps us to become close”); spending time focusing on their spouse (e.g., “appreciate her beautiful face when she smiles”); and spending quality time together (e.g., “dates do not have to consist only of the movies”).

### **Finding joy.**

Finally, responses indicated that participants had a strong desire to find “joy in the journey” during their date night experience (n = 34). Many responded about how much fun they had at the activities with their spouse. For example, one participant stated, “I enjoy spending time ‘playing’ with my sweetheart. Silliness and laughing is a good thing.” Other respondents described learned skills, such as massage or cooking techniques, without specifically connecting the new knowledge to a relationship concept. Some responses did not fit in any of the four major categories, but included topics such as gaining awareness of their attitudes or behaviors and how those attitudes affected their partner; learning to try new things; and recognizing that it is okay to ask for assistance. Summary of Findings Experiential date nights encouraged increased participation in relationship education by providing a low-cost, nonthreatening, and fun opportunity for couples to develop and enhance their relationship skills. Date nights consisted of interactive workshops designed to appeal to men and their partners, and also provided relationship education on topics such as communication, spending quality time together, and working together to solve problems. Date nights provided opportunities for couples to strengthen their couple relationship through positive communication, spending time together, having fun together, and working together to accomplish similar goals. Participants were able to significantly increase their knowledge of positive relationship behaviors and how to build stronger and healthier relationships in the future.

Beyond the evaluation results, impacts for this program were measured in a variety of other ways. For example, many couples, after first attending an experiential date night, repeated attendance at second, third, or fourth events. In addition, couples recruited other couples to attend with them. Many couples also began making date plans every Friday night, regardless of whether there was an organized activity or not. Lastly, couples who attended experiential date

nights found companionship and camaraderie with other couples in similar situations, which reinforced participation and led to the development of a network for support and friendship.

### **Implications for Extension**

Offering date nights through Cooperative Extension expands awareness of Extension programming in the community. Through partnerships and organizations were encouraged to promote Extension events and many participants and organizations requested additional information about Extension offerings through signing up for e-mail updates or newsletters, when these resources were available. This expanded 62 Relationship Education awareness has led many class participants and additional community members to attend a variety of Extension offerings.

#### **Programming Considerations**

The following key considerations may be helpful to consider when planning and implementing similar programming:

**Funding.** In Utah where this project took place, a portion of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) funds was allocated for relationship education, specifically to help individuals and couples develop and sustain healthy relationships. A TANF grant supported date night activities and provided some funding for light refreshments and a relationship enhancement tool for participants, both of which were incentives for participation. Extension professionals desiring to organize date night activities without additional funding could easily do so. For example, depending on the activity, couples could pay as much as \$25 to \$30 per couple to attend an event. With community and local business partnerships, the activity registration or supplies generally cost \$10 to \$15 per couple and the remainder would be ample for refreshments, and a relationship book or activity enhancement tool, such as a game or other resource that could be used by the couple to reinforce the relationship concept taught during the date night. Any remaining registration money could also be utilized to offer scholarships for couples who could not afford the registration cost. In this way, the program could sustain itself.

**Business Partnerships.** Because date nights promote and provide business to local facilities, businesses are often willing to provide reduced costs and/or free facility use for date night participants, such as a two-for-one admission price with a free use of the party room for a group meeting area. Collaborations are generally initiated through contacting managers of companies and explaining the educational nature and goal of the date nights. While not all businesses are willing to provide a discount, facilitating date nights may still allow couples to participate in events that may be challenging to participate in without a group rate.

**Child Care.** Many couples with children found it challenging to attend marriage enhancement events. Unfortunately, providing child care can be a great cost and liability for those planning events. Due to this challenge, it would be helpful to provide contact information for a local child care resource and referral agency in the area for those who do not have a friend or family member who could provide child care. Depending on the age of the child, some child care facilities will watch children on an hourly basis, and some include evenings. For couples who cannot afford child care, it may be helpful to suggest creating a babysitting co-op within their neighborhood, or trading child care with friends or family members. Another possibility may be coordinating efforts with county 4-H leaders and volunteers to provide youth-focused education and activities on site, while parents are participating in a date nights. Additionally, the time frame

of the date nights can be crucial to supporting couples with children. It is helpful to have date nights encapsulated within a two-hour time frame, starting late enough that couples have time to make dinner and child care arrangements before arriving at the event, and ending early enough to not inconvenience those providing child care.

**Size of Event.** Because of the experiential nature of date nights, these events often tend to be smaller in size than other traditional relationship educational activities. The ideal size of a date night event depends on the activity itself, and is often limited based on venue capacity. When venues can accommodate larger groups, breaking the group into smaller sub-groups may allow for all couples to more fully participate. Experiential date nights allow couples in various stages of their relationship to participate in strengthening their relationships through inexpensive and fun activities. Couples attending traditional marriage education may feel like they are admitting they need help in their relationship, which can be viewed negatively. Men, especially, are less likely to participate in traditional marriage education (Walker, 1999). On the other hand, experiential date nights allow relationship education to be absorbed in an enjoyable, nonthreatening environment. Many couples begin valuable conversations with each other during date night activities, which they can later revisit using skills they have learned. Successful partnerships with local businesses and organizations allow this program to sustain itself. Finally, evaluations indicate that participants found the experiences to be highly valuable and suggest a significant change in the knowledge of relationship skills before and after date nights. Information and skills taught during classes left an impression on participants immediately following the event and introduced new skills to develop long term changes and strengthen relationships.

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