



Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families is a research-informed, strengths-based approach to increase family stability, enhance child development and reduce child abuse and neglect. Five *protective factors*¹ are the foundation of this approach:

- **Parental resilience.** The pressures that parents face can be overwhelming at times. Parents who have the skills to manage stress and function well when faced with stressors, challenges, or adversity are more likely to respond consistently, warmly, and sensitively to their child's needs.
- **Social connections.** All parents need people—family members (including a spouse or a partner), friends, neighbors, co-workers, and community members—who care about them and their children; who can be non-judgmental listeners; who they can turn to for well-informed advice; who they can call on for help with different tasks and in solving problems; who help fulfill their need for affiliation and social stimulation; who can provide encouragement and hope when they need it; and who can affirm their healthy parenting efforts.
- **Knowledge of parenting and child development.** Children's early environments and experiences shape the processes that influence brain development, learning, executive functioning, self-regulation, socialization, and behavior control. In addition to proper health (nutrition, sleep, physical activity), developing brains also need attuned, emotionally available and responsive parents who recognize and consistently attend to their needs, and interact with them in an affectionate, sensitive, responsive, and nurturing manner. Early brain development can be compromised when a child is exposed to hostile, neglectful, or non-responsive parenting.
- **Concrete support in times of need.** All parents need help sometimes to address needs and manage stress caused by challenges and adversity. Accessing concrete informal or formal sources of support in times of need requires positive help-seeking behavior (i.e., self-advocacy), the availability and accessibility of resources and services, and high-quality service delivery.
- **Social and emotional competence of children.** Self-regulation, executive functioning, and social cognition and self-awareness are the essential components of social and emotional competence. These competencies lay the foundation for learning and problem solving, identity development, communication skills, and effective interpersonal relationships. The development of social and emotional competence is directly related to consistently nurturing and responsive care from parents and other adult caregivers who social and emotional competence is also well developed.

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help programs working with children and families build protective factors with families. Many states also use the Strengthening Families approach to inform state prevention strategies, strengthen families in the child welfare system and engage parents and communities in building protective factors.

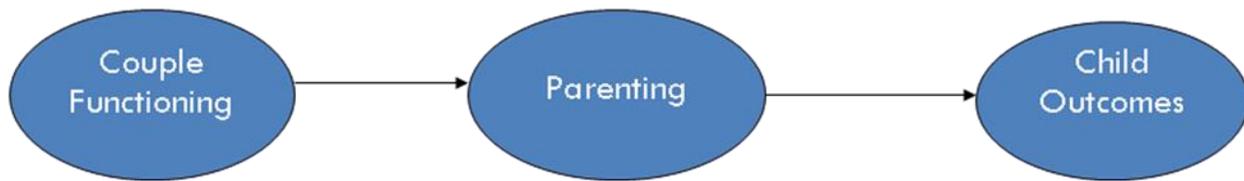
Why Healthy Couple and Co-Parenting Relationships Matter

Children are safer, healthier, and thrive when the adults in their lives have healthy relationships – whether their parents are married or unmarried and currently in a romantic relationship or not. In fact, evidence of the link between relationship quality and parenting from the last decade of research is overwhelming, and the findings are quite robust.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, healthy couple relationships *spill over* into healthy parent-child relationships. In other words, elements of the couple relationship impact parenting practices, which in turn, impact child outcomes. This has been found among studies of married and non-married couples, post-divorce couples, low-income and higher income couples, and ethnic majority and minority couples. The impact is found on mothers' *and* fathers' parenting, and on outcomes for young children, school-age children, and adolescents.

¹ Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families.

Figure 1
The Influence of Couple Relationship Quality on Parenting and Children



“Co-parenting” is a distinct dimension or part of the couple relationship that also has received the attention of researchers. Co-parenting refers to the level of support and cooperation between parents in regard to their parenting. There is growing evidence that the quality of the couple relationship impacts the co-parenting relationship in married and non-married families alike, and, in turn, the co-parenting relationship impacts parenting behaviors and the parent-child relationship.

What is Relationship and Marriage Education?

Research on couple and marital relationships has significantly informed our understanding of what makes relationships “work.” While couples can interact in a variety of ways and consider themselves in healthy relationships, there emerges from research overarching patterns of interactions that seem to be fundamental to forging healthy relationships over the long term. As couples seek to share their lives with each other, understanding these recommended practices can help them build and maintain healthy and satisfying relationships.

Simply put, relationship and marriage education (RME) involves teaching principles, practices, and skills with the intent of helping individuals develop and maintain happy and healthy couple, co-parenting, and/or marital relationships. Based on decades of research, the *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model*² (NERMEM) outlines seven core principles or concepts that promote healthy relationship development and stability.

These core components of a healthy relationship, summarized in **Figure 2**, are grounded in similar principles that guide the Strengthening Families Approach:

- **It is research-informed.** Research confirms key patterns of thinking and behaviors associated with healthy couple relationships. Also, research reinforces that RME program do make a difference.
- **It is strengths-based.** All individuals and couples exhibit unique strengths, capabilities, and potential to form and maintain healthy relationships. This model reinforces the importance of identifying, acknowledging, and building upon the strengths of individuals and couples, and empowering them to take responsibility in the care and quality of their relationships.
- **It is process-oriented.** Healthy couple relationships develop over time. The practices that support healthy couple functioning are dynamic, not static, and evolve as the relationship adapts to the changing needs of the individual partners, couple, and growing family over time. This model reinforces skills that couples can use to manage and adapt to their evolving needs.
- **It is sensitive to diversity.** The model respects the various types of relationships individuals develop and emphasizes process (i.e., how couples interact) over structure (i.e., marital status). Also, there is diversity in how couples from various socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups interact within relationships and marriages.

What RME is Not!

- RME is distinct from couples counseling or therapy. Whereas therapy is more specific to the individual or couple and focuses on improving particular problems that are often serious, RME is a type of family life education that focuses on increasing individual and couple understanding of relationship principles and skills by sharing information, tools, and strategies.
- The focus of RME is not advocating that people ‘get married’ or remain in unhealthy relationships. RME is not about withdrawing supports from single parents or diminishing the important work of single parents. RME does not stigmatize or limit access to divorce.
- RME skills can prevent and reduce household stress levels. But it’s not a panacea, particularly for families experiencing physical abuse, intimate partner violence, or chronic neglect. These cases may require the intervention of trained domestic violence or family safety experts. Couples who experience a pattern of ongoing relationship distress or are exposed to intimate partner violence should be referred to a trained clinician.

² Futris, T.G., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2013). *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Linking Research to Relationship and Marriage Education*. P. In T.G. Futris & F. Adler-Baeder (Eds), *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Core Teaching Concepts for Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Programming*. (Publication No. HDFS-E-157). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Available at www.nermen.org.

Figure 2
The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model



How Relationship and Marriage Education Links to the Strengthening Families Framework

Like the Strengthening Families approach, RME is a strength-based and evidence-informed approach focused on reinforcing and developing the skills and attributes that lead to strong families and the healthy development and well-being of children. Importantly, RME is prevention-oriented – helping relationships go *RIGHT* rather than stepping in when things go wrong – and can, thus, help to reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect from occurring, or reoccurring. RME also focuses on increasing protective factors, and not singularly on decreasing risk factors, that promote healthy family and child outcomes.

At the root of both RME and Strengthening Families is the common belief that all families have strengths and all families benefit from the development of healthy relational skills among family members that will sustain positive family functioning. The primary goals for Strengthening Families are optimal child development, reduced child abuse and neglect and strengthened families. The primary RME goals of improving overall family stability by enhancing the couple and/or co-parent relationship go hand-in-hand with these goals. When practiced together, RME and Strengthening Families provide a comprehensive approach to child and family well-being.

RME develops parental resilience. RME seeks to empower parents to assume responsibility and control over their actions. Parents' poor management of stress and emotions in the couple relationship can create an unhealthy environment for children. As they choose to avoid actions that put their child at harm and choose to engage in

behaviors that positively promote their child’s well-being, it is important that they also consider how their relationship choices may also impact their own and their children’s lives. When parents are intentional in their actions, they can make decisions that ultimately benefit their children and teach children how to make good choices themselves.

RME reinforces the value of healthy social connections. In addition to teaching couples and co-parents strategies for fostering positive interactions with each other, RME reinforces that varying connections with others are highly influential to the health and vitality of their relationships. Parents who make a point to connect with other friends, family members, and people in the community are exposing those same connections to their children. Getting families involved with the greater community also offers children opportunities to independently engage in activities outside of the home and build supportive relationships with others.

RME promotes knowledge of parenting and child development: RME emphasizes to parents the importance of healthy self-care (eating, exercise, sleep, stress management) behaviors in relationships. When parents are able to care for themselves, they are also more likely to properly care for their children and model these behaviors to them. In RME, parents also learn to manage conflict and stress. When high amounts of stress are present in couple and co-parenting relationships, parents are more likely to be overly punitive, harsh, or hostile toward their children. RME promotes a more respectful, positive family environment – one in which children feel comfortable and safe to express their needs and share their thoughts and beliefs. When parents become comfortable with demonstrating care to each other, they are more likely to do so toward their children.

RME encourages concrete support in times of need: RME highlights the importance of connecting with others as a source of relational and family support. Meaningful social connections can provide a support system for couples when they encounter challenges and stressful experiences. Children may feel (and be) safer knowing that they have other adults to turn to in times of need.

RME cultivates the social and emotional competence of children. Parents serve as role models for children’s interpersonal relationships. When children see their parents expressing care for one another or for a new partner, they learn how to do so themselves. In contrast, children whose parents engage in frequent conflict and have poor coping techniques may never have the chance to see what healthy relationships look like. If children are unable to envision a healthy relationship, they may have greater difficulty navigating their own relationships with friends, family members, and future romantic partners.

Implementing RME Within a Strengthening Families Framework

States, communities and organizations will find that RME and Strengthening Families are mutually supportive; that is, implementing one framework will strengthen and support the implementation of the other. Implementing RME and Strengthening Families together will enrich ongoing work to improve conditions for children and families.

Healthy relationships and positive parenting practices go hand-in-hand. The promotion of a safe and supportive home environment for a child is inextricably linked to creating a safe and supportive couple and co-parenting relationship between parents, and RME offers a direct means for creating this safe and supportive family environment. When adults have more supportive and less conflicted couple and co-parenting relationships, the entire family system is equipped to better handle stressors in their lives. In turn, children experience greater family stability, are at less risk for abuse, and fare better on a broad range of child outcomes.

¹ This brief was prepared by Ted G. Futris, PhD, CFLE and Jacquelyn Mallette, MS., in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at the University of Georgia, and David G. Schramm, PhD., CFLE, in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri. To learn more about why relationship and marriage education matters to child welfare, and to access training resources, visit www.hrmet.org.