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SIMR Practice Brief

Tips for Providing Skill Coaching to Reinforce Workshop Content in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

Skill coaching is the process of helping participants use or apply a skill learned in a healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) workshop. It has shown promise, particularly in HMRE programs serving adult couples.¹ Through skill coaching, facilitators support participants as they try out the skill, with the goal of solidifying the skills taught during the workshop and empowering participants to use the skills in their own lives. Facilitators from some HMRE programs might be familiar with providing this type of coaching during workshop sessions, but research suggests that coaching might be more effective when delivered *outside* of the workshop in brief 15-minute sessions.²

This brief provides six tips for offering short skill-coaching sessions outside the core workshop to couples enrolled in an HMRE program. These sessions can be implemented in person or virtually. The tips are based on the experience of staff at Montefiore Medical Center as part of the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) project. Montefiore staff and the SIMR team created five, 15-minute skill-coaching sessions delivered in a virtual format. The Montefiore staff named these sessions “Little Love Bites.” Each session focused on one of the core skills the curriculum aims to teach.

The tips presented here were tested through a rapid cycle learning approach. These tips are based on best practices from the field, the SIMR team’s observations of recorded coaching sessions, and conversations with the PREP curriculum developer used in the core workshop. It is worth noting that these tips are promising but not proven. To fit these tips to their contexts, programs need to further test and refine any solutions through ongoing continuous quality improvement.



■ What is rapid cycle learning?

Grant recipients in SIMR tested strategies using a rapid cycle learning approach. Rapid cycle learning is a method for quickly and iteratively testing strategies to strengthen programming. It often involves successive cycles to pilot strategies, collect feedback from staff and program participants on how these strategies are working, and gather data to demonstrate whether the strategies are supporting improvement. Based on what grant recipients learn, staff can refine and test strategies again in a subsequent learning cycle.

■ About Montefiore Medical Center and the Supporting Healthy Relationships program

This HMRE grant recipient operates in the Bronx borough of New York City and offers the Supporting Healthy Relationships (SHR) program to couples who have low incomes and are raising children together. SHR offers a primary workshop that uses the Bringing Baby Home and PREP 8.0 curricula in 10 weekly, two-hour sessions. SHR also offers individualized case management and employment services. The program offers services in Spanish and English. SHR has been funded by the Administration for Children and Families since 2006. Because of the pandemic, the grant recipient was forced to transition its long-standing, evidence-based program from an in-person to virtual format. Montefiore now plans to offer SHR in both formats.

Tip 1. Identify core skills offered by the program and structure coaching sessions around them



An HMRE program planning to offer skill-coaching sessions should first identify the key concepts or lessons of its curriculum. These key concepts should be the focus of the skill-coaching sessions. This initial step is necessary to make the number of coaching sessions manageable. For example, if the curriculum covers 12 concepts, having 12 coaching sessions would likely be too burdensome to participants and could adversely influence retention. It would also likely require too much staff time to be feasible. Instead, programs can identify a few key concepts to cover in coaching sessions by consulting with the developer of the curriculum they use. One strategy to shorten the list of key concepts is to focus only on the communication skills covered by

¹ Doss et al. 2020; Hatch et al. 2021; Markman and Ritchie 2015; Roddy et al. 2021; Stanley et al. 2020

² Hatch et al. 2021⁹; Friend and Paulsell 2020

■ What is SIMR?

Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) is a national evaluation overseen by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation with funding from ACF's Office of Family Assistance. It aims to strengthen the capacity of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) grant recipients to improve their services by addressing implementation challenges in three core areas:

- 1. Recruitment.** Challenges related to identifying and communicating with potential participants, as well as enrolling them in services.
- 2. Retention.** Challenges with initial and sustained participation in services.
- 3. Content engagement.** Challenges related to sustaining participants' interest and attention during activities and services.

Through SIMR, Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, collaborated with 10 HMRE grant recipients (5 that serve adults and 5 that serve youth) to engage in iterative, rapid cycle learning aimed at strengthening their services. These organizations are funded by the Office of Family Assistance from 2020–2025. Through this work, the team cocreated, tested, and refined promising strategies to address recruitment, retention, and content engagement challenges. The study had two main goals: (1) to improve the service delivery of organizations in the study and (2) to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges.

For more information about SIMR, see the study's [project page on the OPRE website](#).

the curriculum and drop topics focused on improving general knowledge or attitudes concerning healthy relationships. Although important, such topics are not concrete enough for skills practice in a 15-minute coaching session. Montefiore ultimately identified five core skills from its HMRE program to use to structure its skill-coaching sessions (Box 1). For more information on how Montefiore identified these five core skills, see the SIMR brief on providing engaging virtual services.

■ **Box 1. Little Love Bites skill-coaching session structure**

In SIMR, Montefiore conducted five Little Love Bites coaching sessions virtually. Couples spent 15 minutes in a breakout room with a coach at the conclusion of each workshop session. Couples attended these sessions biweekly. The Little Love Bites sessions covered the following topics (in the same order as in the primary workshop):

- 1. Taking a break.** Couples completed a task that was somewhat stressful (for example, doing math while listening to loud music). Coaches then helped couples practice self-awareness of the body's responses to stress and emotion, as well as self-soothing techniques. The couples discussed with each other how they could be aware of their physical response during conflict and plan how they could take a break and self-soothe.
- 2. Softened start-up.** Couples identified a minor or "marble-sized" problem, or a recent experience that might require starting a difficult conversation. Coaches then helped couples discuss the problem with each other by identifying and expressing emotions, facts, and requests in a positive way.
- 3. Speaker-listener technique.** Couples selected an issue or topic that would require a discussion using good speaking and listening skills. Coaches then helped the partners take turns practicing active listening and paraphrasing while their partner was speaking.
- 4. Compromise.** Couples selected an issue or topic that would require compromise. Coaches then helped the couple understand their partner's perspective, focus on understanding the issue before problem-solving, find common ground, and brainstorm solutions in a judgment-free manner to reach a win-win conclusion.
- 5. Repair.** Couples identified a recent disagreement that triggered a sore spot for one or both partners. Coaches then helped the couple use previously introduced skills (for example, the speaker-listener technique) to share their perspectives with each other and develop emotional safety by validating, apologizing, and forgiving.

After identifying the core skills, HMRE programs should plan to cover a single skill in each coaching session. Because Montefiore identified five core skills, it held five skill-coaching sessions. Programs should then create a structure for each session that enables participants to practice the skill in 15 minutes, such as allocating half of the session time for each partner to practice. For example, in Montefiore's program, using the speaker-listener technique (see Box 1) was a core skill. Montefiore therefore structured the coaching session so both members of the couple could be speaker and listener (for example, spending six minutes speaking and six minutes listening to their partner). Another skill in Montefiore's workshop was softened start-up (Box 1), which guides partners to bring up minor issues in a way that promotes a positive discussion, such as avoiding coming across as critical. For this skill-coaching session, each partner had half of the session time to practice bringing up an issue in this manner.

Tip 2. Develop a clear plan for each couple and set expectations for the session



HMRE coaches should develop a clear approach for how to practice the skill within each coaching session. This approach might look different for each couple because each couple's circumstances and personalities are different. Coaches should first consider what they know about the couple from workshop sessions and identify likely barriers and points where the coach might need to pivot (see Tip 5). It might also be helpful to briefly (in less than two minutes) remind the couple of the goal of the session—to speak with each other and practice a skill—and how they will practice it in the session.

In addition, coaches should set the right expectations for the session. For coaching to be effective, the partners need to talk to each other during these sessions. Therefore, coaches should set the expectation that the couples should attend ready to practice. In the session, coaches should redirect individuals to speak to each other when one or both start speaking to the coach. For virtual coaching, coaches should make sure the couple knows they need to attend together in the same room, and that they will need to be on camera in a relatively quiet, distraction-free space for 15 minutes.

Tip 3. Focus on “quick win” issues



Coaching focuses on helping couples apply skills to challenges in their lives. However, participants should be able to make significant progress on these challenges in the allotted time, thereby empowering participants to use the skills outside the sessions to tackle bigger issues. Selecting issues that are too triggering or emotionally overwhelming for the couple will likely result in an unproductive coaching session. HMRE coaches should focus on “quick win” issues—that is, issues couples can make significant progress on in the 15-minute coaching session. To ensure couples focus on applying the skills to an appropriate issue during the coaching session, Montefiore coaches asked couples to select a minor or “marble-sized” problem or a recent experience. For example, a discussion of divvying up household chores or settling disagreements about how to spend time together might be an example of a marble-sized problem. Issues to avoid are those that would need lengthy discussion or that are emotionally triggering—for example, recovering from infidelity or identifying ways to find stable housing.

Tip 4. Listen to the couple and give quick coaching guidance



Coaching is different from clinical work or facilitation. The role of a coach in these brief sessions is to help participants apply the skill in real time, rather than to help the couple work through a challenging issue. Facilitators might struggle with this distinction and view these sessions as an opportunity to emotionally process with the couple or reteach content. The coach's role is mostly to listen and observe a couple talking to each other and practicing a skill—watching for moments that need correction. If the coach identifies a point of correction or clarification, they should interject quickly to remind the couple how to apply the skill and get them back on track. Interjections should be brief, yet helpful. If facilitators find themselves doing more talking than the couple, they have likely turned coaching into something else.

■ Examples of quick coaching interjections

1. **“Wait now, you are the listener here.** So, don't interrupt. Just focus on what is being said and get ready to paraphrase.”
2. **“Hold on, remember that's what we talked about today—negative mind reading.** Let's try that again using softened start-up.

Tip 5. If distractions or problems arise, lean in or pivot



Many things can take a couple off track during a skill coaching session. For example, the partners might display hostility toward one another or bring up past hurts and unresolved issues (often referred to as hidden agendas) that may derail a coaching session.³ In addition, when using a virtual format for the coaching sessions, the couple might lack privacy or a quiet space, or have children disrupting the session. If these things happen, coaches have two options: lean in or pivot.

To lean in, coaches can use the issue as a springboard to practice a skill. For example, participants might be tired from work and distracted by the chores they need to do. A coach could modify the coaching session slightly so the couple practices using a core skill to plan tackling the chores together, so they are then able to sleep in on the weekend.

Pivoting means stopping the coaching session and turning instead to calm and soothe the couple. Coaches will likely need to pivot when one of the partners is too overwhelmed or triggered. In this case, the coaching session is unlikely to be productive, no matter what the coach does. When pivoting, a coach could schedule a longer session later so the couple can return to coaching when they are in a better mindset.

Lean in	Pivot
Use with low-stakes issues that relate to the skill the coach is teaching, or a minor issue interfering with the coaching session.	Use when couples are too emotional, have technology issues, or are unable to attend together. In these instances, coaching on any communication skills is likely to be unhelpful or inappropriate.
Example: If the couple lacks a private space for the session or children are present, focus the coaching session on using communication skills that enable the couple to discuss making time to be alone together or finding time for a dinner date.	Example: If the couple is hostile or triggered, switch to a de-escalation or calming technique. It is okay to end the coaching session or, if feasible, schedule a longer session later in which the coach can do more to ensure the couple is in a better place emotionally.

Tip 6. Empower participants to use the skill again



The goal of skill-coaching sessions is to give the couple an opportunity to practice a skill in a way that empowers them to use the skill in their day-to-day lives. For this reason, it is important that the couple feels good about their coaching session experience. When the session ends, coaches should offer a positive summary statement about the session and remind the couple that they can use these skills to tackle bigger issues when they arise.

Example of empowering closing statement?

"You two are so perseverant and strong. Even though speaker-listener felt a little weird, you didn't give up, and you got so much better at it—in just 15 minutes! I'm really looking forward to hearing how you've practiced speaker-listener together at home the next time we meet. Remember you can use this to tackle both small and big issues!"

³Gottman 2008

Findings from SIMR rapid cycle learning

SIMR examined the implementation of the coaching sessions at Montefiore through observations of recorded virtual sessions, interviews with participants, and interactive debrief sessions with Montefiore staff. Across the two learning cycles with Montefiore that focused on skills coaching, the SIMR team observed participants eager to practice the skills and facilitators who were glad to have the opportunity to give more personalized attention to each couple. During interviews, participants reported finding the coaching sessions useful, as they provided a private, safe space to receive support directly from facilitators and work on their relationships. Facilitators echoed this sentiment in the debrief sessions. For more information on the cycles and specific findings, see the final report⁴ on [study's project page on the OPRE website](#).

Considerations

This brief provides tips that HMRE or other practitioners might consider using when implementing skill coaching to reinforce content taught in workshops. These tips are evidence informed, but they were developed for the specific context of the grant recipients in SIMR. To use these tips, HMRE practitioners should think carefully about the needs and challenges of their service populations and staff, and adapt these approaches as necessary. Involving staff in developing skill-coaching strategies is important for getting them on board and invested in the strategies.

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⁴Friend et al., 2023

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