FRAMING research

PRACTICE Brief

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Using the principles of adult learning to enhance Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programming

Many healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood (HMRF) programs that serve adults find it challenging to keep participants engaged in voluntary workshop sessions and help them achieve their desired outcomes. "Adult learning theory" identifies key principles that matter most for adults to learn successfully.[1] In this way, adult learning theory might help HMRF practitioners strengthen adults' engagement in learning experiences and mastery of program content.

This brief highlights five strategies based on adult learning theory that HMRF program developers and facilitators can use to support participants' engagement and learning. It also explores specific ways programs can implement these strategies, along with concrete tips and examples.

About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage— Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. This work is derived from a white paper produced for the project (Alamillo et al. 2020). The project is focused on gathering and summarizing information on HMRF programming and connected areas through literature reviews, knowledge maps, stakeholder meetings, expert consultations, and technical work groups. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics that emerge during the project.

[1] See Alamillo et al. 2020 for a more detailed discussion of adult learning theory and how it can be applied to healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs.

STRATEGY 1. Help participants discover how program content may be relevant to them

Adults learn best when they understand the immediate value of program content to their lives. When HMRF facilitators help participants see the connections between the material they cover and their own needs, this stimulates adults' personal motivation, which in turn enhances program participation, engagement, and learning.

How can programs show the relevance of program content?

**Tap into adults' social roles when designing and delivering program content**

- Use stories or videos to show how concepts like effective listening or mindfulness can help in romantic or parenting relationships.
- Offer frequent opportunities for participants to share how they would use or have used new skills in their relationships.

Encourage participants to generate their own goals and evaluate their progress

- Have participants write down their goals related to relationships or parenting early in the program. Make time for them to check their progress mid-way through and at the end of the program.
- Individuals or groups can use the evidence-based approach known as "WOOP" (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan) to guide goal-setting (see Box 1 for more information on WOOP).

Obtain participants' feedback to assess the relevance of program content

- At the beginning of the program, use short surveys or introductory conversations to ask participants what they hope to learn in the program and tailor content accordingly.
- At the end of the program, use course evaluations and exit interviews to assess which sessions and activities participants found most relevant. Use this information to tailor future programming.
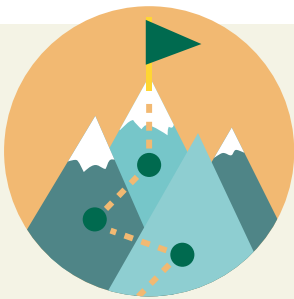
Box 1: Setting goals with WOOP (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan)

WOOP is an intervention that has been shown to help people set and attain goals in many areas of life (Cavadel et al. 2017). Available in a free app, WOOP helps users set goals that are attainable rather than just desirable, develop a clear plan for achieving them—including how to address potential obstacles—and monitor progress along the way.

STRATEGY 2. Leverage program format to support self-direction

Adults like to be in control of the learning process. Online and blended learning (which combines online and in-person instruction) and case management are formats that can support adults' need for self-direction. However, not all adults are prepared to seek out learning on their own. Program developers and practitioners should think carefully about their participants' readiness for independent learning and how they can help participants learn skills independently.

How can programs support self-direction?

Where possible, offer online and blended programming to customize content and address structural barriers

- Online platforms enable participants to select content that is most interesting to them and access it at their convenience.
- To support the quality of the online experience, make sure program staff and participants have access to appropriate technology and good technical support.

Leverage case management or needs assessments to give participants more control over learning

- Case management or one-on-one coaching with a participant or couple can effectively address specific needs and challenges, like parenting or financial issues.
- If one-on-one coaching is not feasible, using surveys to assess participants' needs and making referrals to additional services can also promote self-direction.

STRATEGY 3. Build opportunities for participants to practice new skills, both during the program and on their own

Practice and application are critical for comprehension. Adults are unlikely to master a new skill if concepts are discussed only in the abstract and never applied in the real world. Not only is it important for facilitators to allow sufficient time for participants to practice new skills, but how this practice is structured also matters for learning.

How can programs help participants practice new skills?

When teaching a new skill, have facilitators model the right and wrong way to use it

- To teach a skill like effective listening, facilitators should model right and wrong ways to be a good listener before asking participants to role-play or practice the skill themselves.
- After modeling the skill, ask participants to identify the elements of the behavior that were right and wrong and articulate the right way to use the skill.

Have participants rehearse mentally before trying a new skill

- Devote time in class for participants to visualize how they will use new skills, including those related to healthy romantic relationships and parenting.
- Visualization is more effective for cognitive tasks (such as learning to control one's emotions during an argument) than physical tasks (such as learning how to change a diaper).

Provide ample opportunities for participants to practice and give feedback to each other

- Have participants role-play to practice new skills, such as a new technique for disciplining children.
- Have participants start with simpler scenarios and work their way up to demonstrating the skill in more difficult situations.
- Once participants are comfortable using a skill in the classroom setting, encourage them to apply it in the outside world.
- Encourage others in the class to offer feedback on participants' use of the skill so they can learn from each other's experiences.

STRATEGY 4. Create opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences and beliefs as part of the learning process

Reflection is a skill that can help adults better understand previous experiences and beliefs and generate new understanding as part of the learning process. In HMRF programs, participants can reflect on their experiences to facilitate deeper engagement with curriculum concepts.

How can programs help participants reflect on their experiences and beliefs?

Incorporate participants' experiences into the learning process

- Allocate time to group discussions so participants can hear and learn from each other's relevant experiences.
- Journaling can help participants reflect on experiences they might not feel comfortable sharing in class or document their daily experiences (see Box 2).

Help participants reflect on past experiences and underlying beliefs and learn from them

- Encourage participants to engage in critical reflection. Facilitators can encourage participants to think about past beliefs and behaviors and consider the extent to which these have led to desired outcomes or if adjustments might be helpful.
- Use group discussions to allow participants to share their past behaviors with the group. Facilitators and participants can provide feedback and help others reflect on their actions.
- Be prepared to respectfully redirect the conversation if participants overshare, are too critical, or disclose information that is inappropriate in a group setting.

Box 2: Encouraging reflection through journaling

Journaling can offer HMRF participants a safe space for critical and timely reflection on their daily experiences. Whatever the format for journaling (for example, electronic or handwritten), facilitators can support learning by providing prompts that link to program content and encourage critical reflection. For example, participants might be asked to list the characteristics of a supportive partner, explain why they view these as important, and consider the extent to which their own behavior has or has not aligned with these qualities. Under some circumstances, facilitators could ask participants to share from their journals during group discussions. Participants could also share during case management to support deeper reflection.

STRATEGY 5. Create a positive emotional climate

Adults are more likely to remember information if it resonates with them on an emotional level. They are also more likely to be motivated to attend and complete learning activities if they feel the experience is emotionally positive. Program facilitators should find ways to create a climate where participants feel welcome and want to return, session after session.

How can programs help participants reflect on their experiences and beliefs?

Encourage connections among participants

- Build discussion breaks into the program to allow participants to informally engage in conversations with each other.
- Schedule shared meals or other social events as part of the program.
- Arrange the physical space in a way that encourages discussion, such as by placing chairs in a circle or semi-circle, rather than in rows.
- Use an introductory "connector question" or "icebreaker" activity to build camaraderie among participants in online sessions.

Leverage personal experiences to foster an emotional connection to program content

- Have facilitators share personal stories to capture the attention of program participants, rather than lecturing for long periods.
- Bring in outside speakers with compelling personal stories to more vividly illustrate curriculum topics.

Train facilitators to address program objectives and sensitive topics in a positive and constructive manner

- Use a strengths-based approach to frame program objectives. For example, advertise the program as a place where adults can build healthy relationships or improve parenting skills, which are lifelong pursuits toward which everyone is working.
- Avoid advertising the program as a place where adults can fix their relationship problems or improve bad parenting, which can lead to feelings of shame or embarrassment.
- To avoid negative reactions from participants, train facilitators on how to adopt a trauma-informed care approach when addressing sensitive topics such as domestic abuse or custody issues.

Establish group norms for sharing and listening

- At the beginning of the program, have participants create a group contract to help everyone understand norms and expectations for program participation. These norms could include one person speaking at a time or being respectful of different opinions.
- Display the contract somewhere everyone can see it and gently remind participants if they violate group norms.

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