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SIMR Practice Brief

Strategies to Support Co-Facilitation in Classroom Sessions

Facilitating healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programming in a school-based setting presents unique challenges. Facilitators delivering services in school-based settings often have limited influence over classroom norms, behavior rules, and the length of class periods. One promising approach to supporting high quality sessions in a classroom setting is co-facilitation, which enables two facilitators to support each other. For example, while one facilitator is delivering lesson content, the other can focus on circulating the classroom to ensure that youth are paying attention and engaged. This approach also enables the facilitators to model effective communication and collaboration (Fall and Menendez 2002; Cohen and DeLois 2002).

Good facilitation requires facilitators to be on the same page about goals for each lesson, communicate nonverbally, and share control of a session despite potentially having different facilitation styles. To co-facilitate well requires trust and clear expectations (Fall and Menendez 2002). Co-facilitation can pose some challenges, however. Prior literature highlights potential pitfalls with co-facilitation stemming from poor communication, power imbalances, and inadequate preparation (Fall and Menendez 2002).

This brief provides tips for supporting strong co-facilitation to deliver engaging sessions in school-based settings. These tips emerged from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Services (SIMR) study, through work with Youth & Family Services (YFS), an HMRE grant recipient funded by the Office of Family Assistance and based in Rapid City, South Dakota.

Cocreating a co-facilitation approach

YFS delivers Relationship Smarts Plus 4.0, a 13-lesson healthy relationship curriculum for high-school-age youth. The team primarily delivers the curriculum during the school day in rural and urban high schools in western South Dakota. Through its participation in SIMR, YFS engaged in an iterative process called rapid cycle learning to enhance its approach to co-facilitating Relationship Smarts Plus 4.0 workshops.

The YFS team had focused on facilitation best practices as part of a prior round of rapid cycle learning work conducted during a federally sponsored study called [Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services \(STREAMS\)](#). The co-facilitation strategies that the SIMR team and YFS developed together built on and extended this earlier work.

About Youth & Family Services

Youth & Family Services (YFS), a READY4Life grant recipient in Rapid City, South Dakota, is a nonprofit youth and family development organization that provides a variety of services to families in western South Dakota. YFS offers healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services to youth in schools and community settings. YFS has been an HMRE grant recipient since 2015 and was a participant in a prior national evaluation involving HMRE grant recipients ([STREAMS](#)), through which it supported the development of a [youth facilitation curriculum](#).

Four tips to support co-facilitators in delivering engaging sessions

The four strategies in this brief are based on lessons learned from YFS's experiences testing strategies through iterative rapid cycle learning. It is worth noting that these strategies are promising but not proven. To fit these strategies to their contexts, grant recipients need to further test and refine any solutions through ongoing continuous quality improvement.



Lay out expectations in advance

Partnering to teach a lesson is not just about deciding who will speak to which topics but also how co-facilitators will partner to manage the group (Cook and Friend 1995). It can be easy to underestimate the extent to which small matters related to different teaching styles and expectations can hinder successful delivery. By getting on the same page about preferences and expectations before

What is SIMR?

Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Services (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](#).

beginning a workshop, facilitators can anticipate and navigate potential challenges with each other and the classroom teacher, such as how the team will address disruptive student behaviors (Roby et al. 2022). Through SIMR, YFS facilitators developed and tested strategies to set expectations with one another and with classroom teachers.

- ▶ **Take the time to understand the facilitation and personality styles of your co-facilitator.** Not all facilitators will have a similar facilitation approach. Having a conversation with a new co-facilitator before beginning to teach together can help co-facilitators learn about their teaching styles, expectations, and personalities. Understanding a co-facilitator’s personality traits can shed light on how they might react to various situations. For example, a personality test such as a color personality wheel¹ can enable members of facilitation teams to understand each other better and, in some cases, can support supervisors in being strategic about who they pair together as co-facilitators. In fact, several well-known HMRE curriculum developers and purveyors, including PREP Inc. and the Dibble Institute, encourage the use of a personality tool. Covering questions such as those included in the “Questions to Discuss with Your Co-Facilitator” tool can help co-facilitators clarify preferences, such as how often and when they tend to intervene to address disruptive behaviors. The questions in the tool were informed by the work of a master trainer with more than 20 years of experience facilitating HMRE workshops and coaching HMRE service providers. For the YFS team, which included a mix of new and existing facilitators, taking the time to understand one another paid off in the classroom: “[Planning] improved the flow,” said one facilitator, “because we know what to expect from our co-facilitator and how to support them.”

“ [Planning] improved the flow because we know what to expect from our co-facilitator and how to support them.

YFS facilitator

- ▶ **Engage in ongoing planning and debriefing before and after every session.** Session planning provides an opportunity for co-facilitators to discuss an approach to a lesson, such as how to divide lead facilitation duties, when to use strategic energizers, and how to manage transitions between activities (Roby et al. 2022). At first, YFS facilitators completed a detailed session planning guide before each session. As they became more comfortable facilitating together, they used elements of the detailed guide as an agenda for quicker planning sessions. Through SIMR, intentional planning became a regular part of co-facilitators’ routine.

In addition to detailed planning, the team debriefed after every session to reflect on the efficacy of the plan and adjust, as necessary. Debriefing supports continuous improvement—when a team plans an approach for one class, the debrief session is an opportunity to reflect on how it worked and what needs to be refined next time. One YFS facilitator described the value of planning and debriefing: “Every facilitator has their strengths and their weaknesses, and I think that when we plan and

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 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.



Use this tool

“Questions to Discuss with Your Co-Facilitator” is available in Appendix A.



Use this tool

A sample planning guide is available in Appendix B.

The facilitator debriefing forms are available in Appendix C.

¹A color personality wheel is a type of personality test that asks questions about a person’s preferences for independence, pragmatism, organization, problem-solving, teamwork, and other traits. The results are presented as a set of personality colors, or categories of personality and temperament. People can use the results to learn about how they work and interact with others. A popular example is the True Colors test: <https://www.idrlabs.com/true-colors/test.php>.

we debrief, a lot of that gets fleshed out. We can talk about what went well in the class prior, what we're going to do differently in the class the next day, and keep that momentum going."

“ **Every facilitator has their strengths and their weaknesses, and I think that when we plan and we debrief, a lot of that gets fleshed out. We can talk about what went well in the class prior, what we're going to do differently in the class the next day, and keep that momentum going.**

YFS facilitator

- ▶ **Have a conversation with the classroom teacher to develop a shared approach to classroom management.** Having a conversation with the teacher to set expectations about managing the classroom environment can help a facilitation team avoid miscommunication and draw in the teacher as a partner in supporting the session. A form developed by a PREP master trainer addresses how the teacher prefers to partner with the facilitation team to handle issues such as disruptive behavior, low participation, and personal questions. Having a conversation with the classroom teacher before beginning an HMRE workshop is also an opportunity to understand the teacher's expectations for the classroom, such as whether cell phones or food are allowed. An expectation-setting conversation also clarifies how teachers can be a good partner to co-facilitation teams to support a successful session. These conversations can include reviewing curriculum content, particularly content that might lead to sensitive discussions about sexuality and dating. The YFS team and a classroom teacher shared that the conversations helped them get on the same page. One of the classroom teachers said that he appreciated the opportunity to discuss approaches and suggested he wanted to hear more about what YFS felt worked well: "I have my own rules and participation expectations. I want to know what would make it less stressful for them as presenters."

“ **I have my own rules and participation expectations. I want to know what would make it less stressful for them as presenters.**

What is an energizer?

Energizers are brief activities designed to help facilitators manage the energy of a room. Facilitators are encouraged to have go-to energizer activities ready to use when energy in the room begins to wane. They include activities like a standing Think-Pair-Share, which asks students to stand, find a partner, and discuss a point in the lesson. For more on energizers and specific activities, see Lesson 2 in [Strengthening Facilitation Skills with Youth: A Trainer's Guide](#) (Roby et al. 2022), a curriculum developed through a formative evaluation as part of the [STREAMS](#) project.



Use this tool

A form for setting teacher expectations, with guiding questions, is available in Appendix D.

Classroom teacher



Adopt a cohesive team approach to co-facilitation through training and ongoing team check-ins

Most service providers provide training on curriculum content, but far fewer promote knowledge on strong facilitation, which might lead to uneven delivery across facilitators and inconsistent experiences for youth (Asheer 2022). For the YFS team, which shifted co-facilitation pairs regularly, sharing a common understanding and approach for how to function as part of a co-facilitation pair ensured existing facilitators knew how to support one another and new facilitators were able to be quickly oriented.

- ▶ **Invest in training to promote a common co-facilitation approach.** It is not necessary that all facilitators use the same strategies and techniques in the same way to deliver the curriculum; in fact, literature supports that one benefit of co-facilitation is that individuals are able to play to their strengths (Cohen and DeLois 2002). However, teams can ensure a more consistent class experience

when they work from a common foundation that is informed by best practices for facilitation. For YFS, that common foundation was established by an initial co-facilitation training that introduced YFS's approach to regular planning and debriefing. Before the training, staff shared that they engaged in planning about "50 percent of the time." After the training, it became a built-in part of their approach to delivery. Staff also shared that debriefing after each session helped normalize the process of providing constructive feedback to one another. Beyond these practices, they learned about and discussed the roles of co-facilitators, the importance of getting on the same page and strategies for onboarding new co-facilitators, the importance of modeling positive relationships, and common energizers to pull from when working together to manage energy. This common approach helped ensure that facilitators had similar expectations about what good co-facilitation looks like and that students received a high quality lesson, regardless of who was teaching it. A YFS facilitator said, "When you have an established team with experienced facilitators, and you add new staff, there are going to be a few bumps in the road ... [What this] did was allow us to step back and really intentionally look at what we were doing, how we were doing it, and then bring it forward to the classroom."

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YFS facilitator

- ▶ **Ongoing team check-ins can support a cohesive approach.** Although teams can establish a common approach through a training, as YFS did, ongoing team check-ins provide an opportunity to maintain and improve upon the approach by sharing successes and common struggles and working together as a team to brainstorm ideas. During SIMR, the YFS facilitators and project director met every Friday to discuss the week's sessions. This gave the team an opportunity to reflect on how to use facilitation tools to improve delivery. For example, one facilitator recalled a meeting when the group brainstormed different approaches to leading a discussion about a topic that youth found challenging: "When you bring together a bunch of different people, you're going to get a lot of different solutions." The team used a structured agenda for these conversations.



Use this tool

The team debriefing agenda, with guiding questions, is available in Appendix E.



Develop processes to support and encourage intentionality.

Many co-facilitation practices are simple and straightforward. The key to using them successfully is practicing them with regularity and intention. Many of the practices that YFS tested are easy to overlook in the process of delivering sessions every week.

When adopting new co-facilitation strategies, ask facilitators to set goals for using the strategies and then follow up about how the strategies worked. Developing a co-facilitation approach requires time, reflection, and refinement. When building or enhancing a co-facilitation approach with new strategies, it is important to put accountability structures in place to ensure these strategies become second nature. For example, in its final learning cycle, the YFS team learned co-regulation strategies to foster stronger relationships, cultivate welcoming environments, and promote self-regulation skills through their lessons. The team supported

What are co-regulation strategies?

Co-regulation refers to the interactions between youth and adults that support warm relationships and positive environments, with the goal of modeling for youth how to express their own thoughts and feelings.

For more information on specific co-regulation strategies and suggestions for how to implement them, see [Co-Regulation in Practice](#), a toolkit developed through a [federal project](#) with HMRE grant recipients.

intentional use of the strategies by having facilitators write down goals or action steps and followed up on them as a group. Facilitators committed to implement a specific strategy—for example, two-part praise—in a given week and then followed up with one another in group meetings. Having staff set goals and follow up is an adult learning principle that can help internalize use of co-regulation strategies (Alamillo et al. 2021). As one facilitator noted, “It goes from something you have to do, to, as you start to see the benefit of it, something more automatic.” Coaching and follow-up helped facilitators keep these strategies in the front of their minds as they planned their facilitation approach together. For YFS, having coaching calls through SIMR every other week helped them remember to practice the strategies and pay attention to how students reacted to them. Practitioners without regular access to technical assistance providers might consider setting up regular check-ins using supervisors or other organization leaders to encourage accountability and reflection.

“ It goes from something you have to do, to, as you start to see the benefit of it, something more automatic.

YFS facilitator



Engage youth as partners in shaping a strong co-facilitation approach

Youth feedback can be valuable in tailoring an approach that works for unique groups rather than offering a one-size-fits-all experience to every school and classroom. Although the YFS team benefitted from having a cohesive approach to co-facilitation, it acknowledged that the specific practices or activities facilitators drew on depended on the group of students they worked with. To remain flexible and responsive, the team used post-session exit tickets to access direct insights from youth about what they did and did not like and how they were feeling about a given session. Prior literature on co-teaching has emphasized the importance of formative evaluation for learning about and shaping an approach, especially if using two facilitators is a new approach for the service provider (Cook and Friend 1995). The YFS team discovered unexpected insights from its exit tickets that otherwise might have gone unnoticed: “We got a lot of feedback about being more inclusive with words that we were using, because today, there’s so many different kinds of relationships.... When we use language that isn’t inclusive, we completely lose that kid. I don’t think that’s something I would have been able to pick up on my own without them telling me in the exit ticket.” The exit tickets asked for feedback on the session overall, as well as the dynamic between facilitators (for example, “Both facilitators were engaged in class at all times”). The exit tickets provided YFS with a tool to support continuous quality improvement to ensure the team’s facilitation approach was responsive to different environments. Asking youth for feedback has benefits beyond the individual insights gained from the feedback itself. The practice of asking for feedback can be empowering and an acknowledgement that the students have a say in the way the curriculum is delivered.

What is an exit ticket?

Exit tickets are short, two- to three-question surveys that facilitators administer at the end of a session to gather feedback on the session or assess students’ understanding of the lesson. For an adaptable sample exit ticket, see [a version developed for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood \(HMRF\) grant recipients](#) on HMRF Resources, a public website for 2020 HMRF grant recipients.

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YFS facilitator

Considerations

This brief provides lessons learned from YFS's experiences testing research- and practice-based strategies to support stronger co-facilitation. This work was conducted as part of the SIMR rapid cycle learning study. Grant recipients are encouraged to apply strategies from this brief and other SIMR products and refine them to work in their contexts. Through testing and evaluation, grant recipients can continue to contribute insights that benefit the HMRE field.

Grant recipients can find more information about the SIMR study and findings from other SIMR sites in the full reports for the study, additional practice guides, and a digital essay. These resources are available on the [Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation SIMR web page](#).

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Tools

- A. Questions to Discuss with Your Co-Facilitator
- B. Session Planning Template
- C. Session Debriefing Tool
- D. Teacher Expectation-Setting Form
- E. Team Debrief Agenda

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Appendix A

Questions to Discuss with Your Co-Facilitator

Co-facilitation ground rules

- How important is it to start and end exactly on time?
- How should we handle it if one of us gets off schedule?
- How could we signal each other to move on or wrap up?
- How should I handle it if I want to add something while you are the lead facilitator?
- How should we handle it if or when we have different opinions about curriculum content or research?
- The most comfortable way to raise this disagreement with me is . . . ?
- What is your general philosophy about self-disclosure as a facilitator?
- When students ask me questions about my personal behavior/relationships or life, I usually . . . ?
- When starting a group, I usually . . . ?

How will we intervene?

- When someone talks too much or dominates the conversation, I usually . . . ?
- When a student directly challenges the content, I usually . . . ?
- When the group is silent, I usually . . . ? An individual?
- When there is conflict within the group, I usually . . . ?
- When the group attacks one individual, I usually . . . ?
- My typical rhythm to intervene (fast, slow) is . . . ?

Checking in with your co-facilitator

During the workshop (during a break or when students are involved in an activity)

- On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not good, 10 = great), how do you think the session is going thus far?
- How do you think the group is responding to or receiving the content?
- On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not good, 10 = great), how do you think we are working together?
- How are we doing on managing the time? Do we need to adjust? How should we adjust?
- Are there any problem behaviors in the group that need to be addressed?

Appendix C

Session Debriefing Tool

Discussing the session that you have just conducted is critical to high quality co-facilitation. This form is a quick guide to effectively debriefing your session. The questions are simply a starting point to your conversation together to identify what went well, what needs improvement, and how you will continue to work together as a team.

Instructions: *We ask that you fill out your form separately from your co-facilitator. Don't overthink and keep your answers brief. Once you have completed the questions, share and discuss your answers together and document your insights and modifications.*

Date: _____ Location: _____

Curriculum: _____ Lesson: _____

Questions	Insights and modifications
What did we do as co-facilitators today that was particularly effective or ineffective?	
When did it feel smooth to me?	
When did it feel rough to me?	
What could we do to prevent those rough spots in the future?	
One thing I noticed my co-facilitator do today that I really liked was . . . ?	
One new insight I gained from co-facilitating this session was . . . ?	

Appendix D

Teacher Expectation-Setting Form

These questions are designed to guide a proactive discussion to clarify the roles and expectations for the HMRE facilitator and classroom teacher during the HMRE sessions.

Basic ground rules

- If or when we (facilitator and teacher) have different opinions about curriculum content or research, what is the most effective way to handle our difference of opinion? _____
- The most comfortable way to raise this disagreement with the facilitator is to _____
- When students ask the facilitator questions about personal behavior, relationships, or life, I usually _____
- When starting a group, who will explain the ground rules to the class? _____
- With what frequency will the facilitator and teacher meet to reflect on how things are going? (for example, after each session, end of the day, end of each week, and so on) _____

Managing group behavior

- When someone talks too much or dominates the conversation...
 - Who will intervene? _____
 - How will we intervene? _____
- When a student directly challenges the curriculum content...
 - Who will intervene? _____
 - How will we intervene? _____
- When the group is silent after the facilitator asks a question...
 - Who will intervene? _____
 - How will we intervene? _____
- When there are behaviors that disrupt the group (for example, off-topic side conversations, people on their phones, and so on)...
 - Who will intervene? _____
 - How will we intervene? _____
- When there is a conflict between two members of the group...
 - Who will intervene? _____
 - How will we intervene? _____
- When the group verbally attacks or demeans one individual...
 - Who will intervene? _____
 - How will we intervene? _____
- My typical rhythm to intervene in conflict is . . .? **Facilitator** (fast, slow) and **teacher** (fast, slow)
- Are there any ongoing problem behaviors or conflicts within the group that the facilitators need to be aware of? _____
- If the facilitator would like to enlist the teacher's help, what is a subtle signal to alert the teacher for assistance? _____

Appendix E

Team Debrief Agenda

Instructions: Use this agenda as a guide to debrief your week. Share and discuss your answers together and document your observations and modifications.

Week of : _____ through _____ School: _____

Discussion points	Observations	Topic	Modifications
In which class(es) was our co-facilitation especially effective this week?			
What stands out as a major contributing factor(s) to our success with this/these class(es)?			
How will we ensure we include these strategies in future classes?			
In which class(es) was our co-facilitation less effective this week?			
What stands out as a major contributing factor(s) to our challenge with this/these class(es)?			
How could we modify or adjust strategies to be more effective with future classes?			