



# Research to Practice Brief

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## Integrating Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) and Employment Services: Design Choices of Two HMRE Grantees

HMRE practitioners are increasingly interested in integrating relationship education workshops with economic stability services. In its most recent round of federal grant funding for HMRE services, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) has emphasized programs that offer both HMRE and economic stability services such as job and career advancement and financial literacy activities. Integrating programming on both topics, however, can be challenging. For example, curricula commonly used by grantees on relationship skills, job readiness, and financial literacy typically focus on only one of these topics. Grantee staff must therefore decide how to deliver services in each of these areas—either as separate workshops, integrated workshops, or a mix of the two.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) launched the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) project to identify and test strategies for improving the delivery and effectiveness of HMRE programs. STREAMS is a multi-site, random assignment evaluation of a subset of OFA's HMRE grantees. Consistent with OFA's emphasis on programs that offer both HMRE and economic stability services, two of the five STREAMS grantees operate programs in which the two types of services are integrated (see Box 1). **Family and Workforce Centers of America (FWCA)**, an employment services provider, offers a two-week pre-employment training program for young adults as individuals that integrates content on relationship skills education. **The Parenting Center**, an agency serving families, provides services focused on parenting and relationship skills, and offers integrated HMRE, financial literacy, and employment services to couples who are raising children together.

STREAMS' technical assistance team worked closely with both grantees to help refine and strengthen their original program designs by drawing on findings from prior research. In particular, the Parents and Children Together (PACT) study examined two federally funded HMRE programs that were among the first to offer job and career advancement services to enrolled couples (Zaveri and Dion 2015; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). These programs focused primarily on healthy marriage and relationship skills education, and offered supplemental services in job and career advancement and financial literacy services. One program offered approximately four hours of job and career advancement content as part of the HMRE workshop sessions; twice monthly two-hour employment workshops on a range of topics; and employment-focused case management. The other program offered a two-hour stand-alone job readiness workshop every other month, an occasional brief workshop on financial literacy, and case management services focused on job and career advancement (Zaveri and Dion 2015; Zaveri et al. 2016).

In working with FWCA and The Parenting Center, the STREAMS technical assistance team suggested several program design ideas to more fully integrate HMRE and economic stability services that build on three key findings from PACT (see Table 1).

This brief describes how FWCA and The Parenting Center are using these program design elements to integrate HMRE and economic stability services; the goal of this integration is to increase the participants' exposure to both types of services.

**For more information about the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation, visit the project's web page at <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/projects/streams>.**



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**Box 1. FWCA and The Parenting Center provide integrated HMRE and economic stability services.**

**Family and Workforce Centers of America (FWCA)**, located in St. Louis, Missouri, offers **Career STREAMS**, an integrated relationship education and pre-employment training program for low-income, young adult job seekers. FWCA operates Career Pathways Bridge, a pre-employment training program funded by the U.S. Department of Labor for low-income job seekers ages 18-30. The program includes an all-day, two-week job readiness workshop and case management services. Career STREAMS expands on this program by integrating 15 hours of content from the *Within My Reach* HMRE curriculum and 3 hours of content from the *Money Habitudes* financial literacy curriculum into the two-week workshop (Table 2). In addition, Career STREAMS offers five weekly, one-hour relationship education booster sessions. Three booster sessions cover material from *Within My Reach* and two use supplementary material from *Winning the Workplace Challenge*. Similar to Career Pathways Bridge, participants are assigned to an employment case worker who helps them develop an individualized employment plan. After completing the two-week workshop, participants maintain contact with their case worker while searching for employment and pursuing additional education or training programs identified in their individualized employment plan.

**The Parenting Center**, located in Fort Worth, Texas, offers **Empowering Families**, a program for low-income romantically involved couples raising children. The Parenting Center works with two partner agencies, the Community Learning Center (CLC) and Pathfinders, to deliver the economic stability services. The core workshop includes 8-weekly, 2.5-hour sessions (Table 3). Six of the lessons draw from the *Family Wellness* HMRE curriculum. One lesson, delivered in partnership with CLC, focuses on career planning and another, delivered with Pathfinders, focuses on financial literacy. Early in their participation, a case manager assesses participants' employment services needs and makes referrals to CLC for one-on-one services if appropriate. Couples are also eligible for four financial coaching sessions from a Pathfinders financial coach. The Parenting Center provides on-going case management to ensure service coordination for up to six months after enrollment.

**Table 1. Key take-aways from PACT informed STREAMS design elements.**

Key take-aways from PACT s process study	STREAMS design elements
Participants enrolled primarily to improve their romantic relationships, and many were already employed, which likely contributed to relatively low uptake of the stand-alone employment services.	Recruitment strategies focus on identifying potential participants interested in both HMRE and economic stability services.
Programs offered stand-alone job readiness workshops and one-on-one help with job and career advancement, but uptake was low. One program also offered some job and career advancement services during several sessions of the HMRE workshop.	The core HMRE workshop more fully incorporates economic stability topics to increase exposure to these services.
Uptake of job and career advancement services, particularly services outside of the HMRE workshop, was fairly low overall even though many employed participants had low earnings and may have benefited from these services.	Frequent connections to and reminders about one-on-one job and career advancement services encourage uptake.

Source: Zaveri, Heather, and Scott Baumgartner. "Parents and Children Together: Design and Implementation of Two Healthy Marriage Programs." OPRE Report Number 2016-63. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2016.

**USING RECRUITING STRATEGIES TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS INTERESTED IN BOTH HMRE AND ECONOMIC STABILITY SERVICES**

Integrating HMRE and economic stability services begins during recruitment and enrollment. The PACT researchers found that programs marketed themselves primarily as HMRE service providers, so their recruitment materials promoted the benefits of HMRE services for couples' relationships. As a result, most participants enrolled to improve their romantic relationships, and uptake of job and career advancement services was low. FWCA and The Parenting Center use the strategies described below to identify and engage potential participants who are likely to be interested in both HMRE and economic stability services.

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## **Box 2. Examples of referral partners identified by FWCA**

Community-based economic stability programs:  
Other work readiness programs (such as Job Corp and the Summer Jobs program)

Programs offering other services for low-income populations: Nutrition assistance programs and housing centers

**Develop referral partners that can identify potential participants likely to benefit from both HMRE and economic stability services.** One way to identify these potential participants is to develop partnerships with community organizations serving individuals who are likely to be interested in both types of services. Once a partnership is in place, program staff can identify potential participants through face-to-face recruitment activities and by distributing flyers and brochures. For example, The Parenting Center targets several types of organizations to identify low-income couples with children who are likely to benefit from both HMRE and economic stability services. FWCA has developed a referral relationship with a summer jobs program for youth and young adults that focuses on positive youth development and employment (see Box 2). FWCA's integrated HMRE and economic stability

services dovetail with the program's mission because they focus on helping participants develop a range of communication, conflict management, financial management, and job readiness skills.

**Create recruitment messages that emphasize the program's dual focus on HMRE and economic stability services.** In addition to printed and online materials, such as brochures, flyers, and social media ads, marketing messages delivered by program staff to potential participants are key. These messages, often called "elevator speeches" or "pitches," quickly convey the value of both HMRE and economic stability services (see Box 3).

**Emphasize the program's dual focus during enrollment and intake.** Intake staff explain to potential participants that they will receive both HMRE and economic stability services. For example, FWCA staff who conduct intake for Career Pathways describe Career STREAMS to potential participants as an opportunity to learn about how workplace and other relationships can influence employment and career advancement. The Parenting Center uses a screening tool at intake to gauge potential participants' needs for and interest in employment services. If the screening indicates that a potential participant is unemployed or under-employed, intake staff describe the specifics of how the program's employment services can help the applicant find a better job or advance in his or her current one.

## **Box 3. Sample elevator speech: The Parenting Center**

We all want to do right by our kids. One of the best things we can do for them is to have the best possible relationship with our partners. Raising kids in a home where they see that relationships between adults are warm and loving and where conflicts don't get out of hand can help create an environment where kids can grow and thrive. Empowering Families can help you create that kind of environment for your family.

Another way we try to do right by our kids is to have the financial resources to create the best home life and opportunities for them that we can. Empowering Families can help you advance your career and manage your finances and help you achieve the economic goals you have for yourself and your family.

If you're like me, you've argued with your partner about money, work, parenting, in-laws, romance, and had troubles with your job or making ends meet! Empowering Families is a program that will help you deal with all of this!

Empowering Families helps you by:

- Improving communication skills
- Improving positive parenting strategies
- Finding better jobs and job training
- Improving budgeting and finances
- Helping you and your partner build warmth and affection in your relationship

The program offers:

- Free meals and child care during sessions
- Free gift-cards for attendance (up to \$250 per person!)
- Help with transportation (taxi/bus passes)

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## ADAPTING CURRICULA TO INTEGRATE HMRE AND ECONOMIC STABILITY TOPICS

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Group workshops are typically the core component of an HMRE program. In PACT, both programs offered stand-alone workshops in job and career advancement, but uptake was low. One program also incorporated some job and career advancement content into the HMRE workshop. FWCA and The Parenting Center are modifying this approach by delivering integrated HMRE and economic stability content in one core workshop series to increase exposure to these economic stability services. Staff from both grantees worked closely with the STREAMS technical assistance team and the curriculum developers to integrate content from multiple curricula into a seamless set of workshop sessions. The end result is an integrated curriculum in which each workshop session focuses on both topics and teaches participants how HMRE skills can benefit many other types of relationships. This approach promotes the participants' exposure to both topics and encourages uptake of supplemental services such as HMRE booster sessions at FWCA and one-on-one economic stability services at The Parenting Center.

FWCA and The Parenting Center approached curriculum integration from different perspectives. As an employment service provider, FWCA had to integrate HMRE content into an existing job readiness program. The Parenting Center, a family services agency, had to integrate economic stability content into programming for parenting couples. The grantees' early experience with delivering programming suggests that both approaches are feasible. With support from STREAMS, the two programs have used several strategies to design and deliver the integrated workshops: (1) emphasizing the broad utility of relationship skills, (2) front-loading lessons on the most broadly applicable skills, and (3) integrating financial literacy topics into the core workshop.

### Box 4. Communication skills are important to relationships with:

- Romantic partners
- Family members
- Supervisors
- Co-workers
- Friends

**Facilitators emphasize the importance of communication and relationship skills in many types of relationships.** The communication and conflict management skills taught in HMRE curricula apply to a wide range of romantic, workplace, and family relationships (see Box 4). At FWCA, educators emphasize the importance of relationship skills for productive interactions and to handle disagreements in the workplace. In addition, healthy relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners can create a stable foundation for staying employed. Similarly, facilitators at The Parenting Center discuss the application of lessons from the *Family Wellness* curricula to workplace relationships, including general problem solving and conflict management skills.

**Workshops front-load content that is broadly applicable across relationship types.** Early in the workshop, FWCA covers several topics from *Within My Reach*: decision making (“sliding versus deciding”), danger signs of poor communication, and the “speaker-listener” and “time out” techniques. The Parenting Center presents topics from *Family Wellness* in the same timeframe: building a strong partnership (knowing and saying what you want to get what you want), problem solving, active listening, and rules for handling conflict. Both programs also consistently apply the HMRE content in various employment contexts such as solving workplace disagreements. After focusing on skills that have a broad application, facilitators move on to romantic and family relationship topics that address more specific relationship issues, such as step families, infidelity, and mistrust.

**Integrate financial planning topics into the core workshop.** In addition to employment topics, FWCA and The Parenting Center integrate financial planning topics into the core HMRE workshop. FWCA includes three hours of financial literacy content from *Money Habitudes*. The Parenting Center invites its partner agency, Pathfinders, to co-lead a session on financial goal setting and budgeting. During the session, the *Family Wellness* facilitator introduces financial literacy and links it to the overall goal of building and maintaining healthy relationships.

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## CONNECTING PARTICIPANTS TO ONE-ON-ONE JOB AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT SERVICES

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Using strategies developed by PACT grantees, FWCA and The Parenting Center take several steps to ensure that participants take advantage of one-on-one job and career advancement services: (1) making frequent connections to and reminders about employment services, (2) co-location of service providers, and (3) case management support.

**Frequent connections to and reminders about employment services.** At FWCA, participants meet with an employment case worker within the first several days of the workshop to develop an individual employment plan that includes short-term and longer-term employment and career goals. Depending on the latter, the plan may include a referral to other education or skills-based training programs in addition to Career STREAMS. Staff inform participants that the program will provide tuition assistance for vocational training or other educational needs to those who complete the HMRE workshop. In addition, HMRE facilitators continually remind participants about the availability of employment services to help them meet their career goals and refer them to these services as needed.

**Table 2. Sample agenda for FWCA’s Career STREAMS daily workshops**

Time	Activity
9:00 – 9:10 am	Welcome Activity
9:10 – 10:40 am	Money Habitudes Part 1
10:40 – 11:45 am	Speaker Listener Technique ( <i>Within My Reach, Unit 10</i> )
11:45 – 12:00 pm	Problem Solving
12:00 – 12:30 pm	Lunch
12:30 – 1:30 pm	Job Descriptions
1:30 – 2:00 pm	Videotaped Practice-Three-Minute Speech Activity
2:00 – 2:15 pm	Break
2:15 – 3:50 pm	Guest Speaker from Local Bank: Understanding Savings and Credit
3:50 – 4:00 pm	Key Takeaways and Preview of Tomorrow’s Session

When employment needs are identified at intake, The Parenting Center connects participants to CLC employment case workers quickly. In addition, CLC staff are introduced to participants when they co-lead a workshop session and let participants know they are available to begin providing individual services. CLC staff also return for the last session to remind participants that they will be contacting them soon to begin individualized services.

**Co-location of HMRE and economic stability services.** Co-locating services facilitates information sharing between organizations and makes it easier for participants to receive multiple services in one visit. FWCA offers Career STREAMS workshops at the Metropolitan Employment Center (MET) in St. Louis, which also houses the FWCA’s employment case workers and many other education and skills-based training programs. Participants can meet with their employment case worker when they attend one of the booster sessions that follow the core workshop. Staff from The Parenting Center’s employment and financial literacy partners provide services at The Parenting Center for couples enrolled in Empowering Families; the staff also participate in regular case management meetings.

**Provide case management support.** Case managers at FWCA and The Parenting Center ensure that each participant has an individualized plan and receives the appropriate economic stability services. At the Parenting Center, couples who have immediate needs are connected to partner services as soon as possible after enrollment. When participants complete a workshop at The Parenting Center, case managers ensure that every participant has a contact at the center’s financial literacy and employment partners. Case managers are trained to motivate clients—especially if they are employed—to engage in job and career advancement services (see Box 5).

**Box 5. Example of The Parenting Center’s case manager script for motivating employed participants to engage in job and career advancement services**

**Participant:** I am already employed.

**Case manager:** Many of our clients are. The great thing about our services is that we can help you find a better job (the job you want) or provide you with training and skills to get that promotion you are after. Also, we have other services like resume and cover letter building that can help you regardless of your situation. When was the last time you updated your resume? What if your circumstances change and there is a promotion available or your employer cuts back hours? Our services will help you be ready to achieve the goal you currently have or help prepare for changes that might happen in the future. That kind of preparedness is also a great life skill you can teach your kids!

**Table 3. The eight workshop sessions for The Parenting Center’s Empowering Families**

Week	Topic	Lead presenter s organization
1	Getting started: being a strong team	The Parenting Center
2	Two worlds, one relationship	The Parenting Center
3	Building a strong team	The Parenting Center
4	Vision for your career	CLC/The Parenting Center
5	Parents as leaders/Parents as models/Parents in healthy families	The Parenting Center
6	Financial literacy: Money matters and goal setting & budgeting	Pathfinders/The Parenting Center
7	As children grow	The Parenting Center
8	Keeping the fire alive	The Parenting Center

CLC = Community Learning Center, Inc.

## NEXT STEPS

STREAMS will document how well these HMRE designs work in practice. The impact and process studies of FWCA and The Parenting Center will produce rich information that can be used to improve the delivery and effectiveness of HMRE programming. The findings can also be used to further refine strategies for how best to integrate HMRE and economic stability services.

## REFERENCES

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