

In June 2001, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in partnership with the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, secured the contract to conduct a survey of relationship education services across the country for the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

The purpose of the *Study of Australian Relationship Education Services* was to identify the nature and range of relationship education programs, identify gaps in service provision, and develop a classification system to distinguish among the various types of programs available.

Recommendations made on the basis of the study pertain to various areas of service provision, including program design and development, and the implementation of evaluation frameworks.

The Parliamentary Secretary for Family and Community Services, Ross Cameron, MP, released the report at the Marriage and Relationship Education National Conference in Brisbane in September 2002.

## Relationship education services



Couple relationships break down for a number of reasons: communication problems, physical and emotional abuse, financial/health/employment problems, infidelity (Wolcott and Hughes 1999), and disillusionment and disappointment (Kayser 1993).

Healthy marriages and relationships make an invaluable contribution to the wellbeing of individuals, children and communities. Successive governments, and in particular the current federal government, have significantly increased support for services aimed at providing formal opportunities for individuals and couples to learn about building healthy marriages and relationships that will strengthen families and decrease the prevalence of family breakdown and divorce. Successive policy developments, culminating in the Commonwealth government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy have resulted in government funding being allocated to an increasingly diverse range of services across the country.

This increased support has facilitated a substantial increase in the range of services available to the general public. In light of the growth in the number and type of programs it was considered timely to examine the types of relationship education service activities available.

The study aimed to clarify the kinds of activities that can be called "relationship education" and, via questionnaire, to obtain detailed information about as many programs as could be reasonably captured given the financial and time limitations attached to the study to use as the basis for a typology of programs. It also obtained a snapshot of the nature and extent of group- and inventory-based programs available across the country.

Over the period of the data collection (October–December 2001) 1,377 agencies or providers were contacted. Of the 228 agencies and organisations identified as conducting relationship education programs as defined for this project, 221 (97 per cent) agreed to participate. Of the 561 questionnaires issued, 250 were completed and returned. The final number of programs for which information was obtained was 220, an overall response rate of 39 per cent.

### Outcomes

Contrary to popular belief, relationship education programs are not restricted to couples preparing for marriage, nor are they only run by religious groups. They are not restricted to programs specifically designated as "relationship education", and indeed some programs may be more properly designated as lifeskills programs, designed to help any member of the community learn how to enhance their relationships with intimate partners, spouses, parents, children, siblings, colleagues or friends.

The wider field also encapsulates activities that are embedded within programs designed for other purposes such as parenting or rebuilding after separation or divorce, in which relationship issues are addressed and the same sort of information and skills is conveyed as occurs in a dedicated relationship education program. This phenomena of embedded programs highlights the potential for existing relationship education providers to expand their work by forming collaborative partnerships with organisations and groups working in related areas such as health and aged care.

Services are offered in a range of contexts. Any lifeskills or relationship education program, whether freestanding or embedded, can be offered as part of a range of social and welfare services offered by community-based health care facilities, hospitals, schools, adult and community education organisations, juvenile justice and corrections facilities, hospitals, youth services, religious and specific cultural groups. They are also available to the defence forces, in Employee Assistance Programs, maternal and child health centres, and neighbourhood and community centres.

Just as the contexts in which programs are offered vary widely, the range of relationship education service activities is extraordinarily diverse. Programs can be conceptualised as various forms of public education or primary health care, as a specific component of the school curriculum, a form of adult, liberal education or a form of education directed at social and moral development specifically within faith traditions or specific socio-cultural groups, and as one component of an integrated and holistic continuum of social services that extends from prevention and early intervention through to crisis intervention. Relationship education is available in the form of personal development or lifeskills programs that help individuals build self awareness and self-esteem and provide a safe environment for participants to learn to improve how they relate to and communicate with others. Other programs for individuals are designed to deal with specific issues such as managing anger, communicating assertively, or managing stress.

Couples who are thinking about marrying, preparing to marry, or who are contemplating living together can access information and undertake skills development to enable them to anticipate and be equipped to deal with potential relationship difficulties. For already-married or cohabiting couples programs also exist that are designed to support and enhance their relationship, including programs specifically designed for couples in particular circumstances such as those in, or planning to form, step-families or those where one partner has a chronic illness.

However, gaps in service provision do exist. There is evidence that these exist particularly in relation to services for: adolescents both outside and inside the school system who do not have the opportunity to benefit from existing opportunities to experience the school curriculum addressing relationship issues; older

Australians; individuals and couples being married in civil ceremonies; persons from culturally and linguistically diverse groups; individuals and couples from specific community groups; individuals and couples with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities; and indigenous Australians.

Just as the context, clients and content of relationship service activities vary widely, providers of programs are also a diverse group. Three primary types of providers can be identified: church-based (connected to a specific church or parish), church-affiliated (part of larger welfare organisations attached to mainstream faith traditions) and secular. The distinction between church-based and church-affiliated providers is significant as it highlights the range of approaches to service provision that exists in services connected with particular faith traditions. On the other hand, church-affiliated and secular programs share many similarities in relation to the structure, content and organisation of relationship education service activities, but these two groups of providers appear to have developed niche markets, servicing particular target groups and geographical locales. Gaps in the provision of service activities specifically for committed, pre-marriage and married individuals and couples by secular service providers were identified.

The growth and diversity of relationship education service activities presents policy makers and other interested stakeholders with considerable challenges when they wish to group programs meaningfully for the purposes of comparing them on a range of characteristics including, most importantly, the outcomes they purport to deliver. A typology is a heuristic tool that enables groups of service activities of a like nature to be distinguished along a range of key characteristics. The characteristics that are most useful in distinguishing distinctive groups (or types) of relationship education

## Recommendations

### Study of Australian Relationship Education Services

#### RECOMMENDATION 1

Gaps identified in the availability of relationship education service activities to specific target groups suggest the need to encourage and support the design and delivery of dedicated programs for:

- adolescents both outside and inside the school system;
- older Australians;
- persons from culturally and linguistically diverse groups;
- individuals and couples from specific community groups;
- individuals and couples with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities; and
- indigenous Australians

with particular attention paid to providing these as resources for community organisations located in rural and regional areas that do not have the resources to set them up themselves.

#### RECOMMENDATION 2

Difficulties encountered by program providers in collating the information requested in the survey point to the need for systematic development and accurate and detailed documentation of services for accountability and research activities. It is recommended that best practice in relation to service development and documentation is promoted by:

- the development and wide dissemination of discussion papers outlining the processes used in the development and documentation of relationship education service activities;
- development of infrastructure to provide training and support in curriculum design, development and program evaluation; and
- examination of ways in which support for demonstration projects, action research or “good practice” projects in the implementation of comprehensive service delivery development and documentation processes (including the incorporation of client participating in program development processes) might be provided.

services are the types of participants addressed by the service activity (target groups), cost of provision, protective factors addressed in the service activity, content covered within the program, and number of teaching methods used in service delivery.

While a typology of services based on the above characteristics will provide significant assistance to those concerned with the evaluation of services, more rigorous evaluation practices will rest upon the promotion of systematic development and accurate and detailed documentation of services and focussed attention on the assessment of learning as an integral part of the overall evaluation of services.

While relationship education can be targeted at a wide range of clients, there are alternative ways to deliver relationship education services to couples. In addition to service activities based on the development and implementation of programs, there has also been a significant growth in the provision of relationship education services using inventories such as PREPARE (PRE marital Personal And Relationship Evaluation) and FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study). The use of inventories differs from structured programs largely in scale, and while at least two thirds of inventory users indicate that skills training is incorporated into sessions with couples, it would appear that the amount of skills training is rather limited in the majority of cases. This, along with issues relating to follow up and evaluation of inventory-based service activities, is an issue worthy of further attention.

Relationship education, as broadly defined here, has only become relatively well organised in the past decade or so. Programs have tended to develop in line with the orientation of providers, in environments that often lack the time and resources to allow for training in

curriculum development and program evaluation. While evaluation of relationship service activities is concerned with the nature and impact of the service activity as delivered and experienced by clients, including some indication of the learning that has taken place for clients, assessment focuses on the process of learning and is concerned with the collection of data that inform judgements made as to the progress that clients (learners) have made towards the program objectives. In a climate where there is an expectation that service providers should be able to objectively and scientifically “prove” the outcomes of their programs, objective, experimental designs (sometimes also referred to as randomised control trials) are often considered to be the preferred methodology to achieve these goals.

There are, however, a range of factors that make such types of evaluation problematic for service providers operating “in the real world”. It is therefore important that a variety of evaluation processes be considered. The development of frameworks for evaluation that contain a number of different levels or purposes, that collectively provide detailed descriptive data on service delivery and measures for determining success are a priority if “greater pluralism” in evaluation practices are to be encouraged (Tomison 2000: 15).

Based on the outcomes of the Relationship Education Services project, five recommendations were made. These are shown in the box below.

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A summary of the project presented by the authors of the report, **Dr Michele Simons** (Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia) and **Robyn Parker** (Australian Institute of Family Studies), was well received by members of the relationship education field attending the conference.

The full report is available at: [www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/family/resa.htm](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/family/resa.htm)

### RECOMMENDATION 3

In the light of the issues canvassed in this report in relation to the evaluation of relationship education service activities, it is recommended that active steps are taken to engage service providers in discussion and debate with key academics and stakeholders in relation to ways in which systematic, developmental evaluation frameworks (covering input, process and outcome evaluations) might be implemented in cost effective and realistic ways within current service activity contexts.

### RECOMMENDATION 4

Assessment and evaluation processes adopted by service providers are generally limited and occur only at the time of or immediately following the program. It is recommended that active steps be taken to build the capacity of service providers in these aspects of service provision using a range of strategies that could include:

- assessment of educators' current levels of competence in relation to assessment and evaluation practices to identify and prioritise gaps; and
- the development of training and support materials to promote up-skilling in these areas of educators' work.

### RECOMMENDATION 5

Inventories are an important mechanism for delivering relationship education specifically to couples, and are uniquely placed to make immediate and lasting changes to couple relationships – whether they are marrying, cohabiting or re-marrying. It is recommended that active steps be taken to:

- examine ways in which service providers who use inventories as part of their relationship education service activities can be encouraged to evaluate the extent to which their services embrace and use current understandings relating to systematic relationship skills development as part of the inventory process; and
- encourage service providers to incorporate systematic evaluation and follow-up procedures as part of their service provision and assist the organisations responsible for overseeing the administration of inventories to provide the necessary training.

The above recommendations are for consideration of the sector. In the long term, providing the infrastructure to facilitate the delivery of the recommended training in program design, development and evaluation, in combination with the typology of available programs, will lead to a degree of structure within the field that will support future systematic development of programs that fill identified gaps in service provision and facilitate the evaluation of the effectiveness of programs.