

Connecting For Families Curriculum

A curriculum to help parents build healthy relationships with each other.

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This curriculum was created under the direction of Dr. Kim Allen with support from Dr. Carol Mertensmeyer. Ms. Christina Crawford and Ms. Kelly Warzinick were major contributors of this curriculum along with assistance of various colleagues and community partners. The curriculum is now hosted by North Carolina State University under the eye of Dr. Allen

The goal of this curriculum is creating healthy relationships, which help foster healthy children. See the following page for a list of contributors. The curriculum was first piloted by Connecting For Baby staff in July of 2007, and by Connecting for Children staff in June of 2008. Each lesson has been piloted and revised to best fit the needs of the target audience.

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Introduction

Target Audience

The Connecting Curriculum was written for low income parents. Although the original target audience was couples, we have expanded the lessons to include single parents as well. This curriculum is based on research that indicates that when parents have healthy relationship skills, it benefits all members of the family.

Lesson Plans

The Connecting Curriculum includes 12 lesson plans designed to teach relationship enhancement skills as well as parenting skills in an informative and enjoyable manner. The lessons are not designed to be offered in any particular order; you may use these lessons in the order that you feel is appropriate for your participants. However, skills learned in the Couple Communication lesson are reinforced in each lesson, so you are encouraged to begin with this lesson.

Curriculum Format

Each lesson plan begins with a list of objectives and a list of materials needed for each session. A session overview follows, with a brief description of discussions and activities included in the lesson and approximate time needed for each. Finally, notes to guide preparation for each session are included.

A step-by-step procedure is included with bulleted points highlighting important activities and points to cover in each lesson. A script is included to help guide the facilitator with words he or she may say and questions to ask, which are contained in text boxes. Handouts for each lesson plan are included, with the exception of a local resource list. Each facilitator is responsible for creating or providing a list of local resources relevant to each session.

Lesson Objectives

The lesson objectives are based around six objectives identified as important points to address throughout each lesson plan. These objectives are to:

1. Develop skills.
2. Talk together to practice communication skills.
3. Discuss effects on children.
4. Commit to using the skills to better relationships.
5. Access community resources.
6. Develop a vision and a plan.

Ground Rules

Ground rules should be reviewed at the beginning of each session. Allow participants to brainstorm additional ground rules they would like the group to follow. Basic ground rules:

1. Participants will not be under the influence of drugs or alcohol during sessions.
2. Participants will be respectful of one another and allow others to share openly, without criticism.
3. Information shared at each session is confidential and will not be repeated outside the session.

A Note about Speaking and Listening Skills

The curriculum uses a set of speaking and listening skills referred to as SPEAK/HEAR skills. The SPEAK/HEAR skills are explained in depth in the *Couple Communication* lesson. All other lessons include a review of the skills and time for participants to practice the skills together. SPEAK/HEAR cards are included with this curriculum for use during practice time during lessons.

Training Tools

Prior to each session, we suggest placing materials on participant tables that participants can play with during the each session. We suggest cans of play dough, pipe cleaners, paper and markers, etc. Let participants know that they may play with these materials freely during the session, if they would like. These materials help to make the atmosphere relaxed and fun for participants.

Lesson Plan Titles

1. Couple Communication
2. Family Ties
3. Fire Prevention: Managing Conflict in Couple Relationships
4. Getting to Know You
5. Healthy Minds
6. Healthy Relationships
7. Just Cool It! Managing Anger in Couple Relationships
8. Lighten Up! Love and Laughter
9. Money, Money, Money
10. Parenting with Love
11. Safety and Health
12. To Work

Lesson Plan Summaries:

Couple Communication

This lesson focuses on the importance of healthy communication in couple relationships and emphasizes that children learn better communication skills when their parent(s) model good communication skills. It includes an activity using the SPEAK/HEAR skills. Participants have time to create goals and an action plan for improving their communication.

Family Ties

This lesson focuses on complexities in families and how extended family relationships and ex-partners influence the immediate family. Participants create a family tree of support and identify relationships that are a source of support and those that may present challenges. The lesson helps participants identify family strengths and introduces the concept of “parenting teams.”

Fire Prevention: Managing Conflict in Couple Relationships

This lesson discusses things that can influence what one hears his or her partner saying, such as mood and expectations. It includes a discussion about how children learn to communicate by observing their parents. Steps to solving problems are discussed and practiced through a sample problem. A discussion of healthy and unhealthy conflict is included, as well as creating goals for managing conflict in relationships.

Getting to Know You

This lesson includes a personality inventory activity to get participants thinking about their personality and how that can affect their relationships. Collage and journaling activities are included.

Healthy Minds

This lesson identifies stress and common stressors for parents, the importance of seeking medical help for potential mental health problems, as well as symptoms of postpartum depression and the importance of seeking help. Fathers and depression, helping one’s partner with depression, and positive coping strategies, including stress relief techniques, are also discussed.

Healthy Relationships

This lesson focuses on what makes a healthy relationship and a healthy marriage as well as the benefits of both for adults and for children involved. Expectations about marriage, what makes a relationship unhealthy, and resources for maintaining healthy relationships are all discussed. Goals for developing and keeping healthy relationships and marriages are developed.

Just Cool It! Managing Anger in Couple Relationships

This lesson includes discussions of anger triggers, experiences with anger, children and anger, and strategies for dealing with anger. An activity to identify anger styles as well as to create goals for dealing with anger is included.

Lighten Up – Love and Laughter

This lesson includes a discussion of factors that cause stress for parents, gives participants an opportunity to talk about fun things they do together, and includes a discussion of activities to do in their area or throughout the state. The lesson provides time for participants to plan a together night and gives participants time to see how well they know one another.

Money, Money, Money

This lesson addresses the importance of communicating about spending, how to use a spending plan, as well as resources each person possesses (time, skills, people they know, etc.). Participants create goals for managing money.

Parenting with Love

This lesson focuses primarily on using positive discipline and distinguishes between punishment and discipline. Lesson includes a discussion about spanking and the importance of using positive discipline techniques (including a list of other discipline strategies). Includes separate discussions for use with different audiences (expecting and new parents as well as parents with older children). Discussions for expecting and new parents address reasons newborns cry and how to cope with crying babies. Discussions for parents with older children address reasons children misbehave and teaching expectations.

Safety and Health

This lesson addresses the importance of childproofing as well as strategies and goal setting for keeping children safe and healthy. Includes separate discussions for use with different audiences (expecting and new parents as well as parents with older children). Discussions for expecting and new parents address safety during pregnancy, safety and newborns (especially sleep safety), and food safety for babies. Discussions for parents with older children address talking to your child about being safe (including car safety, bike safety, water safety, walking safety, stranger safety, and fire safety).

To Work

This lesson discusses advantages and disadvantages of working, how work affects family and how family affects work, as well as steps to take to get the job you want. Participants identify skills and strengths they bring to the workplace, learn about resources (such as local career centers) to assist in finding jobs, and create goals and a plan for working. A sample list of job advertisements, a sample job application, and sample interview questions are included.

Fact Sheets and Checklists

A series of fact sheets and checklists based on each lesson topic are included. These informational sheets are designed to give brief, quick information on each topic, and can be used independently of the lesson plans.

If you would like more information about this curriculum, please contact:

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Facilitation Tips

The smallest things you do can have a significant impact on participants. Participants will keep a close eye on you from the moment they meet you, so be aware of your behaviors and, if you facilitate with your partner, be aware of your interaction with your partner.

- Dress comfortably, but neat; casual to business casual is appropriate
- Give participants a warm welcome when they arrive
- Interact with participants during breaks and meals
- Show enthusiasm and be energetic
- Use humor to keep the sessions as light and engaging as possible
- Use appropriate language and encourage participants to do the same
- Read participant cues such as body language and facial expressions
- Allow participants time to share but remember that silence is okay
- Match the mood
- Use personal examples when introducing topics to make participants feel comfortable sharing
- Show understanding when participants share their examples
- Model healthy relationships for participants
- Give participants a lot of encouragement
- Remember that the lesson plan is intended as a guide—feel free to make adjustments and fit in breaks for participants as needed

If participants seem like they need a break during the session, we suggest doing a quick activity to get participants up and moving, such as doing stretching exercises. A diagram of some exercises you may wish to try during the sessions, from University of Missouri Extension's Stay Strong, Stay Healthy campaign, can be found online at http://missourifamilies.org/sssh/sssh_mini_poster.pdf

Here are some other suggested stretching exercises, which can be found online at <http://missourifamilies.org/features/nutritionarticles/nut41.htm>

Ankle Stretch

Stretches front ankle muscles. Remove your shoes. Sit toward the front edge of a chair and lean back, using pillows to support your back. Slide your feet away from the chair, in front of you, so your legs are outstretched. With your heels still on the floor, point your toes away from you until you feel a stretch in the front part of your ankles. If you don't feel a stretch, lift your heels slightly off the floor while doing this exercise. Hold the position briefly. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Summary:

- Sit in chair.
- Stretch legs out in front of you, feet off of floor.
- Bend ankles to point feet toward you.
- Bend ankles to point feet away from you.
- If you don't feel the stretch, repeat with your feet slightly off the floor.

Triceps Stretch

Stretches muscles in back of upper arm. Hold one end of a towel in your right hand. Raise your right arm; then bend your right elbow so that the towel drapes down your back. Keep your right arm in this position, and continue holding onto the towel. With your left hand, reach behind your lower back and grasp the bottom end of the towel. Gradually grasp higher and higher up the towel with your left hand, as high as you can. As you do this, you will find that it also pulls your right arm down. Continue until your hands touch, or as close to that as you can comfortably go. Reverse positions.

Summary:

- Hold towel in right hand.
- Raise and bend right arm to drape towel down back.
- Grasp bottom end of towel with left hand.
- Climb left hand progressively higher up towel, which also pulls your right arm down.
- Reverse positions.

Wrist Stretch

Press your hands together, elbows down. Raise your elbows as nearly parallel to the floor as possible, while keeping your hands together. Hold for 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Summary:

- Place hands together, in praying position.
- Slowly raise elbows so arms are parallel to ground, keeping hands flat against each other.
- Hold position for 10 to 30 seconds.
- Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Evaluation Tools

For your convenience, we have included two session evaluation forms that you may use to evaluate your program. One form is for participants to fill out after each session, and the other is for the facilitator to fill out after facilitating each session. You are welcome to use these forms as needed, or any other evaluation tool you wish to use.

Facilitator Evaluation

Facilitator: _____

Title of session: _____ Date: _____

Total number of participants: _____

Number of couples: _____ Number participating without a partner: _____

Number of singles (not currently in a relationship): _____

1. What did you like about this lesson plan?
2. What could be improved?
3. What activities or discussions did you feel went particularly well with your participants?
4. What activities or discussions did not work particularly well with your participants? What suggestions do you have as to how it could be improved?
5. Other comments?

Thank you for your feedback!

Participant Evaluation

Please answer a few questions about the session you participated in today. Your participation is voluntary.

Title of session: _____ Date: _____

Session leader/facilitator: _____

1. Has your knowledge increased after attending this session? If so, what did you learn from attending this session?
2. After attending this session, what changes will you make as a result of this session?
3. What was most helpful about this session?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving this session?

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