

EVALUATION OF THE “CONNECTIONS: RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE” CURRICULUM

Scott P. Gardner, Ph.D.
South Dakota State University

“Connections: Relationships and Marriage” is one of a number of high school marriage education curricula designed to teach students to develop healthy relationships and marriages. This study evaluates the effectiveness of this curriculum with 375 students from rural Midwest high schools who were in either the Connections group or in another Family and Consumer Sciences course. Findings suggest that students taking the Connections curriculum improved in their conflict resolution skills, became less likely to see divorce as a good option for troubled marriages, and were more likely to take advantage of pre-marital and post-marital programs to build better marriages. Implications and recommendations for Family and Consumer Sciences Educators are discussed.

Marital distress (with or without divorce) negatively affects children, adults, and the community. Marital distress alone has been linked to manifestations of stress in children including: internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Buehler et al., 1998); conduct disorders (Coie et al., 1991); poor academic performance, low self-esteem (Goldberg, 1993); youth crimes including theft, robbery, violence, gambling, and sexual crimes (Hooper, 1985); social and emotional disturbance in school (Mattison, Morales, & Bauer, 1992); and teen suicide (McClure, 1988; Nelson, Farberow, & Litman, 1988). Marital distress also has been linked to adult manifestations of stress including: substance abuse, criminal activity, eating disorders (Goldberg); psychopathology (Bowlby; Brown), marital battering/domestic violence (Bowlby; Goldberg; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988); depression (Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996; Klerman & Weissman, 1990); and suicide (McClure; Nelson et al.). Further, marital distress is related to problems in the workplace such as decreased work productivity and increased absenteeism (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley & Kessler, 1996; Goldberg; O’leary & Smith, 1991; Thomas & Caverly, 1998). Gottman (1998) estimated that 30% of absenteeism is due to marital distress, costing \$8 billion per year in the United States.

Many intervention programs have attempted to change these trends by focusing their efforts on the community or on at-risk individuals. Gardner and Howlett (2000) have argued that given the high rate of marital distress and the vast amount of evidence linking marital distress to a wide range of social ills, more effort should be placed on teaching marriage and relationship skills to all youth while yet in school. Durlak (1995) states that up to one half of our nation’s young people are at risk for later adjustment problems, thus emphasizing the need for primary prevention (prevention aimed at everyone, not just those who are most at-risk).

Recently there has been a movement which some have termed the “marriage movement.” With the resurgence of interest in the well-being of marriage in general, many new and established enrichment programs are enjoying increased attention. Among the new programs are specialized curricula that target marriage and relationship education in the schools. Many of these programs are taught in Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) classes. Although energy, hope and enthusiasm exist for these new curricula, to date, they generally have not been studied empirically.

Currently seven programs are available nationally to teach school children marriage and relationship skills. These programs include: The Art of Loving Well; Building Relationships: Skills for a Lifetime; Connections: Relationships and Marriage; Free Teens Relationship Training; Pairs for Peers, Partners, and Social-Emotional Intelligence (Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education ([CMFCE], 2000). More detailed information about each curriculum is also available in a report by the National Marriage Project authored by Pearson (2000).

The “Connections: Relationships and Marriage” Curriculum

This study focuses on the evaluation of one of the most popular of these curricula, “Connections: Relationships and Marriage.” “Connections” is a curriculum that was written for use by teachers, counselors, and others who work with youth in grades 11-12 (CMFCE, 2000). It was developed by Charlene Kamper, a family life teacher in Redlands, California, and is published by The Dibble Fund. The curriculum consists of 15 one-hour lessons that comprise four units: personality, relationships, communication and conflict resolution, and marriage. The content of the curriculum aims to fulfill the needs of today’s youth for self-understanding and self-esteem, healthy dating relationships and values, effective communication and conflict resolution skills, and the awareness of skills needed to build a successful marriage. While “Connections” is currently being used in 35 states and 7 foreign countries, there has been little formal research done on the impact of the curriculum. However, one informal evaluation has found that the curriculum had a positive impact on the attitudes of adolescents (Kamper, 1998).

The Impact of Marriage Education in Schools

Some argue that marriage education does not impact later behavior. Laner and Russell (1995) found that a college courtship and marriage course did not reduce respondents’ unrealistic expectations for marriage. In a previous study, however, they found that taking a problem-focused courtship and marriage class did reduce unrealistic expectations slightly, but only for women (Laner & Russell, 1994). Clulow (1996) suggests that one of the problems with education-based interventions is the assumption of rationality, or that with proper information, people will make rational choices. A second problem with education is that people must reflect upon their own situations for the education to be most effective and some “may not wish to explore their experience other than in ways that will help them manage what preoccupies them most at the time” (p. 349). High school students seem particularly susceptible to both of these issues.

Yet others question, “Is high school early enough to make a difference?” Shure (1997) suggests that problem-solving skills, for example, are best learned in preschool, kindergarten or primary years. Shure does agree, however, that children can learn these skills in later years but with limited carry-over into the future. Additionally, other programs may be popular, yet ineffective. In a 10-year follow-up study, the DARE program was found not to be more effective than regular health classes for preventing drug abuse (Lynam et al., 1999). The authors suggest that the program’s ineffectiveness may be due to infrequent classes being taught to children at a young age.

Teaching Does Work

Despite such studies pointing out the problems with these programs, many other studies point to the successes of similar prevention programs. In the area of parent education programs,

Luster and Youatt (1989) found that high school students who took a parenting course were more knowledgeable than the control students. Additionally, they found that the students who took the course experienced attitudinal changes in key areas of parenting such as seeing increased affection as good, rather than “spoiling” a child.

Weissberg, Barton and Shriver (1997) found that a program promoting social competence for young adolescents produced long-term retention in problem-solving skills, prosocial values, teacher-rated peer relations and behavioral conduct. Danish (1997) found that participants in the “Goal” program learned the information the program taught, set attainable goals, increased their school attendance, and participated in fewer delinquent behaviors including violence. Compared with control groups, the experimental group improved significantly in self-control, interpersonal sensitivity, problem analysis, planning, and knowledge of problem solving skills. Students maintained these skills through middle school (Elias et al., 1986), and into high school by increasing prosocial behaviors and decreasing aggressive acts toward self and others (Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991).

Sayers, Kohn, and Heavey (1998) reviewed a number of marriage preparation programs and found that skills-based programs do help prevent marital dysfunctions. In reviewing a number of studies on skill retention, Cole and Cole (1999) conclude, “the data from outcome studies on skill retention has generally been very positive” (p. 274). These findings and others lead Durlak (1995) to conclude that primary prevention in the schools really does work.

Only one of the existing seven marriage education curricula has been formally tested to date. The Art of Loving Well is a literature-based relationships curriculum for middle school and high school students (CMFCE, 2000). Based on a textbook consisting of 41 ethnically diverse classic works and contemporary adolescent literary selections, The Art of Loving Well has been used with students in grades 7-12 in 47 states within schools, community groups, church groups, and homes. The textbook contains three sections that include exercises emphasizing social and emotional skills, effective communication, critical thinking, decision-making skills, conflict resolution, and sexual abstinence. The sections are titled Early Loves and Losses, Romance, and Commitment and Marriage. The values of social responsibility, responsible sex, committed faithful love, and friendship are promoted throughout the curriculum (CMFCE). Developed at Boston University, the curriculum was initially tested on 10,000 students in eighth- and ninth-grade English and health classes. The evaluations assessing the impact of the curriculum, which focused specifically on sexual risk-taking in relationships, have been positive. Among other findings, the results suggested that of the eighth-grade students who identified themselves as virgins at the beginning of the school year, only 8% of those taking this curriculum reported that they had sex during that year compared to 28% of the control group (Kreitzer, 1992).

Given the lack of research on most of the high school marriage education curricula, many have pointed to the need for more information on the effectiveness of such programs. Mack (2000), in a report summarizing these new curricula, points to the need for independent evaluations that measure specific outcomes. Laner and Russell (1995) suggest that future studies assess the pre-test to post-test differences in individual students and that studies assess changes in the respondents’ relationships over time. Other studies have emphasized the need to assess behavioral outcomes (Luster & Youatt, 1989). Based on the existing research and these recommendations, this study of the “Connections: Relationships and Marriage” curriculum looks for changes in student attitudes and behaviors from pre-test to post-test due to participation in the curriculum.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Three hundred seventy-five students from rural Midwest high schools participated in the study. Of these 375 students, only 213 were included in the final sample. Some were not included because they were in classes which did not complete both the pre-test and post-test and others were removed from the final sample because students had obviously guessed on large portions of the survey (e.g., answered all “A’s” no matter what the question). The remaining participants were on average 16.4 years old (Range 13 to 19 years), 88% Caucasian, 10% Native American, 2% other, 38% male, 62% female. One hundred thirty-two students took the “Connections” curriculum, while 81 students were in the control group. FCS teachers from 22 high schools agreed to participate in the study at a training session of the “Connections” curriculum. The teachers were asked to have both a class in which they taught the “Connections” curriculum and another class (to serve as a control group) participate in the study. Classes in which the “Connections” curriculum was taught were generally Marriage and Family Relationships courses. Classes for the control group were generally other FCS courses such as Housing and Advanced Foods. Before the curriculum was taught to the experimental group, participants in both classes were given a questionnaire. At the end of the curriculum (approximately 4 weeks) both classes were again given a questionnaire to assess changes over time.

Measures

The questionnaire assessed demographic variables, self-reported behaviors in relationships, and attitudes regarding relationships and marriage. Specific behaviors assessed included a self-report of the number of times during the past four months s/he had been in trouble at school and at home and reports of the frequency of various tactics used to resolve conflicts with a best friend. For this last portion, the Conflict Tactics Scale was utilized.

Conflict Tactics Scale. (Strauss, 1979) - A revision of Form - R was used in this study. Students indicated how often they had employed each of 18 tactics for resolving conflicts. Rather than asking about how often the student had done these things with a spouse, a “best friend” was used. Also the more violent tactics such as “Threatened him/her with a knife or gun” were not included so as to be more acceptable to the school administrators who sometimes felt the questions were too personal. The scale produces three sub-scale scores: Reasoning (how often reasoning was used such as “Discussed an issue calmly”), Verbal Aggression (such as “Yelled at him or her”), and Violence (such as “Slapped him or her”). Straus (1990) reports coefficient of reliability averages were: Reasoning $\alpha=.61$ (ranged from .50 to .76), Verbal Aggression $\alpha=.80$ (ranged from .77 to .88), and Violence $\alpha=.79$ (ranged from .62 to .88). Coefficient alphas for this study were Reasoning $\alpha=.65$ (ranged from .64 to .66), Verbal Aggression $\alpha=.85$ (ranged from .83 to .87), and Violence $\alpha=.91$ (ranged from .90 to .93).

To assess attitudes, a number of scales were generated from the questions in the questionnaire.

Divorce Attitudes. This scale consisted of eight questions answered on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Appendix A). A sample question is “It’s O.K. for a couple WITH NO children to divorce if one spouse cheats on the other.” Internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha=.82$ (ranged from .81 to .83).

Attitudes Toward Counseling. This scale assessed student attitudes toward premarital

counseling, post-marital counseling, and marriage enrichment programs. This scale consisted of four items answered on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Appendix B). A sample question is “I will go to premarital counseling with my fiancé before I get married.” Internal consistency on this scale for this study was $\alpha=.80$ (ranged from .803 to .798).

Hypotheses

The general premise of this study was that students taking the “Connections” curriculum would be positively affected by the curriculum and improve in key scores from pre-test to post-test. Additionally it was thought that when compared to a control group, the “Connections” students would improve to a greater degree than did the control group. Specifically it was hypothesized that:

1. Students would report engagement in less troublesome behavior at home and at school after taking the curriculum.
2. Students would improve in their report of conflict resolution behavior demonstrating more use of reasoning tactics, less use of verbally aggressive tactics and less use of violent tactics in resolving problems with close friends after taking the curriculum.
3. Students would have less positive attitudes toward divorce after taking the curriculum.
4. Students would have more positive attitudes toward counseling after taking the curriculum.
5. The “Connections” students would improve on the above indicators significantly more than would the comparison group students.

Results

In a series of repeated measure analyses of variance, behavioral changes were assessed. Hypothesis one was not supported as there was no change in the amount of trouble the “Connections” students got into at home or at school over the duration of the curriculum. For hypothesis two, the Conflict Tactics Scale sub-scales (Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, Violence) were used as the dependent variables. Those taking the “Connections” curriculum began using reasoning tactics significantly more after taking the curriculum $F(1,131) = 8.03, p=.005$. This indicates that students went from using reasoning tactics approximately 9 times to resolve conflicts with a close friend in the past 4 months, to using reasoning tactics 12 times over a similar time period in resolving conflicts with their close friend after taking the curriculum. This indicates a 33% increase over the course of the curriculum. The students did not show any significant change in Verbal Aggression or in Violence scores.

For the hypotheses regarding changes in student attitudes, both hypotheses three and four were upheld. Hypothesis four suggested that student attitudes toward divorce would change after taking the curriculum. The repeated measures analysis was significant $F(1,114) = 4.42, p = .038$. Students averaged 19.7 points before the curriculum and 20.4 points after the curriculum. This indicates that on the pre-tests, students were likely to “somewhat agree” that divorce was an important option for people to have and that it was okay to divorce under various conditions. After taking the curriculum, the students, on average, moved to “somewhat disagree” with statements that divorce was an important option for people to have and that it was okay to divorce under various conditions.

For hypothesis four, it was also found that students changed significantly in their attitudes toward counseling $F(1,116) = 5.19, p = .025$. The Attitudes toward Counseling scale asked students how likely they would be to participate in premarital counseling, post-marital

counseling in the case of a troubled marriage, and marriage enrichment programs. Before the curriculum was taught, students averaged 2.51 on a 4-point scale indicating that they were right in the middle of “somewhat agree” and “somewhat disagree” that they would participate in these services. After the curriculum, students moved to a 2.41 average indicating that they had moved to the “somewhat agree” side of the line.

For hypothesis five (assessing differences between “Connections” and control groups), before the analyses were performed, a series of analyses of variance (or Chi-square analyses in the cases of the nominal variables) were first conducted to assess if demographic variables differed among the two groups. Variables included: age, family income, gender, racial background, family type (two-parent, single parent), and parent’s marital status (divorced, intact). Of these, only age was significantly different between the two groups with the “Connections” group averaging 16.34 years of age and the control group averaging 16.66 years of age $F(1, 208) = 4.15, p = .043$. Age, however, did not significantly correlate with any of the dependent variables and thus was not included as a covariate in the repeated measures analyses.

In order to suggest that the “Connections” students made significantly more progress than the control students over time, in the repeated measures analysis we would expect the time by group interaction to be statistically significant. Only those variables in which the “Connections” group had statistically significant changes are reported here. In the area of conflict resolution tactics, in general, over the course of the semester, the control group maintained their high levels of violent and verbally aggressive tactics, and their same level of reasoning tactics. Students taking the “Connections” curriculum maintained low levels of violent and verbally aggressive tactics, but increased their use of reasoning tactics. However, the time by group interactions were not significant for any of these areas.

For the divorce attitudes, the “Connections” students became less likely to see divorce as a good option while the control students became more likely to see divorce as a good option. The time by group interaction for this analysis was statistically significant $F(1, 187) = 5.07, p = .026$. While the “Connections” students moved from “somewhat agree” that divorce is a good option to “somewhat disagree,” the control students moved from an average of “somewhat disagree” to midway between “somewhat disagree” to “somewhat agree.”

For the attitudes toward counseling, although the “Connections” students became more favorable toward marriage preparation and counseling, the control students remained about the same (somewhat favorable). Therefore, the time by group interaction was not statistically significant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the “Connections: Relationships and Marriage” curriculum with high school students. Specifically it was thought that students would be impacted behaviorally and attitudinally as a result of the curriculum. A number of interesting results emerged that supported this thinking. Students began to use reasoning more in resolving conflicts. Student attitudes also changed as they became less favorable toward divorce and more favorable toward participating in marriage preparation, counseling for troubled marriages, and marriage enrichment to improve their marriage.

Behavior Changes

First, students taking the curriculum improved in their conflict resolution tactics by becoming more likely to utilize reasoning as a way of resolving conflicts with a close friend.

This is an important finding particularly in light of the various school shooting incidents in recent memory. If students can change their behavior and become more likely to use reasoning as a means of resolving conflicts, violence and verbally aggressive tactics will likely decrease as a result. Additionally, if these skills are maintained, students will be better able to develop satisfying and successful intimate relationships throughout their lives.

It was also thought that the curriculum would impact the other behavioral indicators of how often the student got into trouble at home and at school. This did not hold true for the study. It was originally assumed that as students learned more about conflict resolution and communication skills, they would engage in less troublesome behavior in these two environments. It may be that students are either not generalizing these communication skills to relationships outside close friends, or that it will take more time than a couple of months for the changes in skills to impact other behavioral areas. A longitudinal follow-up study could help answer this question.

Attitude Changes

Attitudes toward divorce was also another area hypothesized to be affected by the curriculum. This particular attitude is vital for future marital stability and quality. Amato and Rogers (1999) found that having a favorable attitude toward divorce tends to erode marital quality over time. Amato and Booth (1991) also found that those whose parents divorce or had unhappy marriages subsequently had a more favorable attitude toward divorce in their own marriage. Combining these two studies points to the necessity of teaching the realities of divorce to all students, but particularly to those whose parents have divorced or have poor marriages. The “Connections” curriculum seemed to be especially effective in this area. While the “Connections” students moved from “somewhat agree” that divorce is a good option to “somewhat disagree” after having taken the curriculum, the control students moved from an average of “somewhat disagree” to midway between “somewhat disagree” and “somewhat agree.” This would suggest that without intervention, high school students tend to become more favorable toward divorce over the course of their time in high school. It appears that both groups of students were teetering halfway between agreeing and disagreeing that divorce is a good option for people having problems in their marriage. The “Connections” curriculum, however, was able to give students a more realistic view of divorce, which led them to be less likely to see divorce as a good option for troubled marriages.

Attitudes toward attending pre- and post-marital classes, counseling, and programs also improved after the curriculum. Here again it appears that students are not really sure what they think about participating in these services. Before taking the curriculum, students were right in the middle between tending to agree and tending to disagree that they would participate in these services. After taking the “Connections” curriculum, students had moved to the “somewhat agree” side of the line. This move in attitudes is crucial because research tells us that these programs are effective if people will simply take advantage of them.

In summarizing 29 marital and premarital programs, Gurman and Kniskern (1977) found that these programs were effective in decreasing the likelihood of marital problems. Hof and Miller (1981) looked at 40 studies of such programs and suggested that these programs appear to be effective. Research on specific premarital education programs reports that programs improve global relationship adjustment; improve commitment to the couple relationship (Buckner & Salts, 1985); increase self-disclosure, increase acceptance of partner and use of positive solutions; improve problem-solving skills, decrease disagreements and negative emotions; and

thus promote marital quality and stability (Markman, & Hahlweg, 1993; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992). Additionally, such programs cut the divorce rate by half (Markman et al., 1988; Olsen 1983) and lead to happier, better functioning children (Markman et al., 1988). These programs really work if young people can be convinced to take advantage of them.

Comparisons with the Control Group

In comparing the “Connections” group to the control group, it was hypothesized that the “Connections” students would improve significantly more than did the control group. This was only the case with the attitudes toward divorce. Although the “Connections” students did improve significantly, and the control students did not improve significantly on measures such as use of reasoning tactics and attitudes toward counseling, the overall group differences were not significant. It is likely that this occurred for one of two reasons. First, the sample size may not have been large enough to produce a statistically significant difference in variables where small changes took place. A number of schools did not return their post-test questionnaires, while other students were disqualified due to guessing. These factors decreased the overall sample size.

A second reason for the lack of difference between the groups on some variables could be the beginning differences between the groups. As the relationships class was an elective class, students self-selected into the course. The control group consisted primarily of non-elective classes such as health or other more popular electives such as foods and nutrition. This resulted in the control group starting off much “worse” than the “Connections” group on many variables. For example, the control group scored much higher on their use of violent and verbally aggressive tactics on the pre-test. In essence, the control group had lots of room for improvement, while the “Connections” students started off with better conflict resolution skills and did not have as much room to improve.

Limitations and Recommendations for Family and Consumer Sciences Researchers

One limitation of this study is generalizability. Given that the study was limited to students in Upper Midwest high schools which were mainly rural, caution should be taken in generalizing the results to other populations. This was a highly Caucasian sample as is characteristic of the Upper Midwest and again the results may not generalize to urban and ethnically diverse populations. Future studies should include urban and ethnically diverse samples.

Another limitation lies in the dissimilarities between the “Connections” and the control students. As the students were not randomly assigned to groups, the “rougher” students did not choose to take a relationships class. Future studies should attempt to either randomly assign participants to courses, or to select control groups that are more similar to the experimental group.

Laner and Russell (1995) call for a longitudinal study to assess the impact of marriage and family classes on students. Although this study assessed the students both before and after taking the curriculum, a much longer time period is needed between testing in order to see the long-term impact of such curricula.

Lastly, after the various marriage education curricula have been empirically validated and the studies replicated, Durlak (1995) suggests additional steps in prevention research. The next step should be to “identify active program components” (p. 85). For example, at this next stage

one could determine what parts of the “Connections” curriculum were most responsible for bringing about the positive changes in attitudes related to divorce and counseling services. In this way, curricula can be improved, refined and calibrated for maximum impact in the lives of students.

Implications for Family and Consumer Sciences Educators

Morris and Carter (1999) point to the need to take a “more proactive approach to premarital education . . . including the implementation of premarital education programs offered in Family and Consumer Sciences classes in schools” (p. 13). This study adds “hard evidence” of the effectiveness of one such marriage education curriculum. The results of the study demonstrate that high school students taking a relationships and marriage curriculum can significantly improve their conflict resolution skills. Students can also gain a more realistic view of divorce and become open to better solutions to problem marriages such as pre-marital and post-marital counseling. Such courses have promise for decreasing violence and improving marriages and thus improving the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities.

A second implication of this study is hidden in the differences between the control and experimental group students. In this study, the “Connections” curriculum was only taught in optional FCS courses. One striking feature was that students who choose to take these courses are quite different from those who do not. Those who chose not to take the “Connections” courses were much more likely to use violent and verbally aggressive tactics at the beginning of the school year and were more likely to get in trouble at home. In short, those who most needed to take a marriage education course were least likely to do so when such a course is an elective. As part of being proactive, as Morris and Carter (1999) suggest, these authors suggest a more asserted effort to establish marriage and family FCS courses as required courses for all students.

Lastly, with a growing number of new marriage education curricula on the market, FCS educators should be cautious in their selection of a curriculum. Choosing a curriculum that has been empirically shown to be effective should be a major criterion in the selection process.

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Appendix B
Attitudes Toward Counseling Scale

Using the following scale as a guide, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. Circle only one response for each statement. Answer as honestly as you can.

YES!	yes	no	NO!
Strongly Agree (SA)	Somewhat Agree (sa)	Somewhat Disagree (sd)	Strongly Disagree (SD)

1. I will take a marriage preparation course with my fiancé before I get married
2. I will go to premarital counseling with my fiancé before I get married
3. After I'm married, I will attend a marriage enrichment class with my spouse
4. After I'm married, if we are having trouble in our marriage, we will go to counseling

About the Author

Scott Gardner, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Human Development in the Department of Consumer and Family Sciences at South Dakota State University.

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