

Measuring the Effectiveness of Experiential Date Nights: A Qualitative Study

Naomi Brower

Extension

Utah State University

naomi.brower@usu.edu

Linda Skogrand

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development

Utah State University

linda.skogrand@usu.edu

Kay Bradford

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development

Utah State University

k.bradford@usu.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the experience of 13 couples who attended a relationship education date night in two metropolitan areas in a western state. The intent of these date nights was to reach audiences that may not attend traditional classroom relationship education. Reasons for, benefits of attending, and impacts were explored with participants. Findings indicate that the majority of participants had fun and enjoyed spending time together, learned qualities and skills of healthy relationships, and had positive learning experiences with other couples. Additionally, while most individuals' reason for attending was to have fun, the majority experienced a positive impact on their relationships after the event, such as improved communication, increase in affection and gratitude, or spending more time together. This finding may indicate that regardless of the reasons for attending, it is possible to create an environment for learning relationship skills that can, and most likely will, extend beyond the night of the event and could potentially lead to long-term positive impacts in relationships. Based on findings and existing research, activity-based relationship education, such as date nights, needs to be taken seriously as a model for couple education and considered as part of a well-rounded approach to relationship education.

Keywords:

Dating relationships; marriage; qualitative research; relationships

Introduction

Relationship education has increased dramatically in recent years because of increased funding that provided youth and adults with research-based information and skills to have healthy relationships and marriages (Hawkins & VanDenBerghe, 2014). Although many programs have focused on low-income couples (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012), other programs have focused on middle-class couples (Hawkins & VanDenBerghe, 2014). Typically the models used to provide couple education are face-to-face, intensive, and take place with multiple sessions in a classroom setting (Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009). Evaluation of these programs generally found the programs were effective in increasing relationship skills for couples (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), with increased communication skills which, in turn, increased relationship quality. Researchers with expertise in relationship education indicate there are a variety of settings and delivery modes which might be effective beyond the formal education which has traditionally been used for couple education (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). One of these emerging and less traditional ways of providing relationship education is using date nights to strengthen these couple relationships. Little research about their effectiveness has been documented. This qualitative study includes couples who participated in date nights and provides evaluation data to address this gap in the literature.

One of the issues which has been identified in relationship education is who attends this programming. It is generally observed that relationship education is under attended, with the question being, “how one gets more people to attend” (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). It is clear that different populations are going to respond to different forms and structure, as indicated by Ooms (2007). Ooms (2007) also suggests that using less traditional forms of

relationship education and using more interactive approaches to teach relationship skills would address this need.

Historically, relationship education has typically attracted more women than men. Carlson et al. (2012) found that although women seem to be more interested in attending all types of human service programs, targeting men in recruitment for some populations was more effective in getting couples to attend. These authors suggest that recruitment of men might include having a male-friendly environment for relationship education activities. The date nights, which were part of this study, were purposeful in that endeavor in that several activities required physical activity such as a ropes course, pickleball, fencing, and rock climbing.

There has been very little evaluation conducted about the effectiveness of date nights. One study which included both quantitative and qualitative findings was conducted with the same project as the current study with 293 participants who participated in 18 date nights (Brower, Darrington, & Bradford, 2011). The evaluation was conducted at the end of the date nights to determine the impact of the events. The quantitative findings of this study indicated that both men and women reported a significant increase in relationship knowledge from before the activity to after the activity. Participants also responded to an open-ended question asking about the most important things learned during the date night. Four major categories of responses resulted. These participants indicated that communication, cooperation and teamwork, time together, and finding joy in their relationships were the important benefits of the date night experience.

Wilcox and Dew (2012) conducted a review of the literature about what strengthens couple relationships and how date nights might benefit couples for the National Marriage Project. These authors speculate that date nights may strengthen marriages and other couple

relationships because of what we know from existing literature. Their summary provides comprehensive information about the potential benefits of date nights, the potential effect of date nights on divorce, and what types of couples are likely to benefit from date nights. First, communication strengthens couple relationships and this communication can occur when they can focus on important couple issues without other distractions. Second, date nights can bring novelty to the relationship and new excitement about different opportunities to get to know each other. Third, date nights can bring elements of eros to the relationship because couples are focusing on them, which may rekindle romance. Fourth, date nights can foster commitment by taking their relationship seriously and by taking the step to participate in the activities. Finally, date nights give couples the opportunity to reduce stress because, for the time they are involved in the activity, they can enjoy each other rather than deal with the pressing concerns of life.

Given that date nights are consistent with what we know works for couples in strengthening their relationships, Wilcox and Dew (2012) examined the relationship between couple time and the quality of their relationship using two national data sets. Spending time together as a couple on the national surveys was viewed as comparable to date nights. They found that spending time together was associated with higher relationship quality and this was true for both married couples and cohabiting couples. Although the relationship quality was considerably higher for both men and women, women experienced even higher relationship quality by spending time together than men. Therefore, Wilcox and Dew (2012) conclude that couple time and marital happiness go together, which, according to these authors, is what we would expect. Couples who spend time together would have increased happiness.

With their national data, Wilcox and Dew (2012) go on to explore the relationship between time spent together and divorce. The data shows that the more time spent together, the

less likely couples are to divorce. They also found that the more time couples spent together, the more likely they were to have satisfying communication, high levels of sexual satisfaction, and high levels of commitment. Finally, these authors found that couple time was especially valuable for couples who were parents, because of the amount of time children require. They conclude that couple time is more valuable for parents because it is a valuable commodity.

Historically, experts in the area of relationship education have called for focusing on methods to deliver relationship education in a variety of ways that match the variety of learning styles of those who might benefit from such education (Hawkins et al., 2004). For example, these authors suggest that didactic methods may be more desirable for some participants and experiential methods may be more beneficial for others. In addition, researchers have suggested that a relationship component might be integrated into other programming to give couples an introduction to relationship education, which might lead to interest in more extensive traditional relationship education programming (Bradford, Higginbotham, & Skogrand, 2014; Doss et al., 2009; Futris, Adler-Baeder, Dean, & McFadyen, 2005).

Wilcox and Dew (2012) call for exploring the ways relationship education can be part of date nights. Although they suggest focusing on fun activities and staying away from particularly challenging topics, important relationship issues can be integrated into the date night activity. As these authors indicate, future evaluation research will need to determine whether relationship education as part of fun date night activities are effective ways to help couples strengthen their relationships. This study attempts to do just that. Couples were asked about their date night experiences and how they helped or hindered their relationship.

Methods

Date nights were held in two metropolitan locations in a western state. They were sponsored by Cooperative Extension faculty members. The sample is taken from three date nights at each location. Location one had pickleball (similar to tennis), a game night, and a ropes course as activities. The activities at location two included cooking, fencing, and rock climbing.

Each of the date nights occurred on a Friday evening, lasted two hours, and included refreshments or a light meal, depending on the activity. A small registration fee (\$5-\$15 per couple) covered the participant activity costs, and an Extension grant and residual funding provided educational tools, books and refreshments for participants. Partnerships with local businesses and organizations also helped to offset event costs and encourage participation. For example, some businesses were willing to offer a deep discount for participants or allow free use of their facilities. Additionally, some of the events may have been challenging to participate in without a group (such as the ropes course) and this may have served as an additional incentive for couples to participate in the group date nights.

The date nights were advertised through Extension newsletters, community flyers, and list serves. The date nights comprised of fun activities that also incorporated relationship skills and generally provided time for individual couple and group interaction. While each date night had a different relationship skill or topic they all followed the same format: providing at least a 10-15 minutes research-based relationship presentation and discussion and then an activity to apply, experience, and reinforce the topic. The facilitator also continued to integrate the topic throughout the date night activities.

The activities and related relationship education concepts included:

- Pickleball: couples learned and practiced a new game together, with the emphasis on the benefits of trying new things together and team work.
- Game Night: couples participated in couple and group activities and games exploring the importance of having fun together as a couple on a regular basis.
- Adventure Ropes Course: couples participated in rope challenges focusing on trust, reliance, communication, and teamwork.
- Cooking Class: couples learned and practiced food preparation skills while learning about important ingredients for a happy every day marriage.
- Fencing: couples applied concepts of communication and healthy conflict resolution while learning and practicing basic fencing skills.
- Rock Climbing: couples practiced basic rock climbing skills as a team at a local rock climbing gym. The focus of the activity was on trust, reliance, and communication.

In order to extend the knowledge and skills they learned beyond the event, at the conclusion of the evening participants also received a relationship enhancement tool such as a research-based book or other applicable learning aid and a challenge to implement what they had learned.

For example, as stated above, the game night activity included a presentation and discussion about the importance of playing together as a couple (Brower, 2011; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2010). The couples participated in activities and games that reinforced this theme such as worksheets to brainstorm activities they would enjoy as a couple, a planning guide for future dates together, and interactive couple and group games that reinforced the topic. Couples were then sent home with fact sheet information about the importance of play (Brower, 2011) and conversation starter cards that they could utilize as an easy date night or in conjunction with another activity.

On average, 14 couples attended each date night. From the total of 82 couples, three couples from each event were randomly selected from the date night attendance sheets and invited to be interviewed about their experience with the date nights. This allowed an equal representation from each geographical area where the date nights were being held and it was the maximum number that could be interviewed because of limited funding for the study. In total, 13 of these couples completed the interviews due to the other five couples being unable to return at the allocated time.

Interviews were conducted from one to two weeks following the date nights. Each person in the couple was interviewed individually and provided a \$20 cash incentive for their time. The university IRB approved questions focused on their experiences with the date night and included questions such as: What were the positive aspects of the date night experience? What were the negative aspects of the date night experience? What did you learn from other couples during the date night activity? What changes in behavior have you observed in your partner since you attended the date night? What did you learn about yourself from attending the date night? Can you give an example of anything that has changed in your relationship because of the date night? Demographic data was also collected. Graduate students who were not affiliated with the program contacted the couples to be interviewed and conducted the interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and conducted in the offices of the sponsoring programs.

The interview data was analyzed using the method suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and was performed by the authors. The researchers first immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcriptions of the 26 individuals to get a sense of the totality of the data. The researchers together then developed coding categories that were reflective of the themes described by the participants. The coding was done by both researchers and was shared

between the researchers. Throughout this process, coding categories were sometimes collapsed and refined. The final coding categories were then used to code the data. When the researchers identified differences in the coding categories, they went back to the data and developed a consensus about which categories best reflected the participants' responses. Quotes from the participants are identified in the findings section by number and gender.

The individuals in the study were primarily Caucasian (96%) and averaged 34 years of age (range = 22-57; $SD = 9.30$). Their average household yearly income as couples was \$53,547 (range = 0 - \$450,000, $SD = 45,823$). The majority (75%) had four-year or graduate degrees with the remaining having high school or technical degrees. All of the couples were married with 85% of the individuals being in a first marriage and the rest being in second marriages. The average length of marriage was 9.25 years (range 1-33 years; $SD = 10.54$) and, on average, the couples had 2.35 children (range = 0-10; $SD = 2.45$).

Results

Reasons for Attending

Couples attended date nights for a variety of reasons. The majority of participants said they attended the date night because it was an activity which they would enjoy as a couple and was inexpensive. A minority of individuals attended because they wanted to learn skills which would strengthen their marriages.

Most of the individuals in this study indicated the activity itself, such as rock climbing, fencing, and cooking, drew them into the date night event. They said things like, "I like the games. I like things like that. . . . That grabs my attention. It makes it fun for me" (M6); "We both like the outdoors. We're fairly active so it seemed like something we'd both enjoy" (M7); and, "I love ropes courses . . . seemed like something fun to do" (M8).

In addition to the draw of the activity itself, the date night provided a way where the participants could have fun as a couple. One man said, “It was a very fun way of doing something together. It was very inexpensive and it was just a fun time” (M4). Others said they knew their partner would like the activity, and that is why they attended. For example, one woman said, “My husband loves rock climbing and so that was a good fit. . . . It was good for him that he got to do something that he enjoyed” (F11). Another female concluded, “[We] learned new ways to have fun together” (F6).

Others stated clearly that they did not attend the date nights to improve their marriages, but they came because it was a fun activity that they could do together. One woman said, “We just thought it would be a good activity and we already have a good marriage, but we figured we’d go anyway” (F9). Another woman said, “We didn’t really understand that there was going to be a marriage relationship talk. We went because of the fencing” (F13). Additionally, some individuals stated explicitly that they attended this type of activity because it was not like other marriage education classes where you sat in a classroom. For example, one man said, “Rather than just sitting there listening to someone talk to me saying, ‘do this, do that,’ it was fun how they incorporate that [marriage education] in there. I think it was a great tool” (M6).

Many couples also expressed that the date nights provided an opportunity to spend time together away from everyday stresses. For some, it was an opportunity to spend time together away from their children. As one woman said, “We’ve been trying to find different activities to do together. . . . I thought it would be a great idea to go and spend time [together]” (F6). Another female added, “It’s been a stressful year. . . . I think that regular dating is important” (F11).

Benefits of Attending

Couples who attended the date nights reported many benefits of being at the event. In order of prevalence, the benefits of attending included: having fun, learning the qualities of and skills necessary for a healthy relationship, being able to spend quality time with their partner, interacting with other couples, learning about their spouse, and having positive opportunities to work together with their significant other.

Having fun. Because many of the participants indicated that the reason they attended was to do something fun as a couple, it was no surprise that almost all of respondents indicated that one of the benefits of attending the date night was having fun together. Many individuals made comments like the following:

[It was a] fun experience going back to something we used to do when we were dating.

(F5)

* * *

It's fun just to have date nights once in a while that are different than dinner out or just a night on the town. It was fun and creative. I think we both really enjoyed it. (F7)

* * *

[It was] fun to go through the activities and do different challenges, and [it was] fun to see my spouse in a different arena--things that he would do there that just doesn't happen in everyday activities. (F7)

Learning qualities and skills of healthy relationships. As stated previously, the majority of couples attended the date nights in order to have fun or spend time together; however, a majority of the participants indicated that they learned qualities or skills of healthy relationships while attending the date night. One female participant seemed surprised by how

much she learned and shared, “I didn’t know that we were going to learn as much as we did” (F4).

Learning took place in many ways during the date nights, sometimes in conjunction with the activity itself, such as, “They kind of related all the climbing aspects that we did that night to how you can strengthen your relationship and I thought that was really cool. It helped to put it in a perspective that I hadn’t seen before” (M11). Others indicated that the date night helped them reflect on things in new ways and encouraged helpful conversations. For example:

It was a nice atmosphere where we could sit back and they gave us time to reflect upon our own relationship or look at another relationship we thought was positive, and what we could do to be positive. . . . I don't think that we, as a married couple, sit and talk about that kind of thing; so it was an opportunity to do that. It was casual but also to the point. It was a nice conversation to have. (F2)

* * *

I think probably the most positive impact is that it forced us to reevaluate our relationship and made us talk about some issues. . . . It gave us a chance to say “okay these are things that are important to us now” and look at those things. It gave us a chance to sort of step back from the things that we normally do and to look at them again. (F5)

Others also indicated that the events helped them to learn about relationship skills in general and how to incorporate these skills into their lives. For example, one male participant shared, “It was good to learn a little bit more about relationships in general and to think about how [to] go about increasing our understanding of each other and improving our relationship that way” (M13).

How long couples had been married did not seem to effect whether or not they learned something at the event. As indicated by one of the female participants, “It does bring up questions that, even after 33 years, we hadn’t really thought about” (F13).

Interacting with other couples. Many couples indicated that they enjoyed interacting with other couples at the event. The two most important benefits that many shared were that it helped them to realize that other couples were dealing with similar challenges and, even more prevalent, that it allowed them to get new perspectives, insights, and ideas from other couples. For example:

It was good to get out and be away and be with couples that had similar values, beliefs, [and] thoughts about things. I don't know if I'll ever see any of those people again, but [it helps] just to know that other couples are dealing with similar issues and experiences that you are as well. (M7)

* * *

“[It] was fun to work with another couple and discuss relationships with [them] because they were at a very different point in their relationship than we were and it was fun to find out how they viewed things in ways that we hadn't considered before. Other people have different experiences and different ideas. I learned . . . that there's other ways of doing things” (F5).

Spending quality time together. Many participants shared that spending time with their spouse was usually a challenge because of other life demands; and, therefore, another benefit of attending the date nights was being able to spend quality time together. One female participant shared, “I think it’s always good when couples can be together as friends, with no pressure, and just love each other. I think it is really bonding when you have an opportunity to just be with

each other” (F12). This appeared to be especially true for those who had children. For example, one male participant shared, “[We were able] to spend some time together. We have kids so that's never an easy thing. But we got some alone time and time to just talk together” (M8).

There were several things that couples said they enjoyed about their time together. For example, some indicated that they enjoyed being able to do something new or out of their routine. For example, one female participant shared, “It was cool to be able to learn something new that we'd never done” (F9). Additionally, a male participant shared:

It was good to just be with my wife and to be with her for a good amount of time where we weren't worried about kids and work and making dinner and cleaning up, the regular routine things, so we could spend some time thinking about how we can grow our relationship together. (M2)

Other participants described how nice it was to have time to talk as a couple. Many shared comments such as, “I was able to spend time with my husband alone without kids and spend time to converse” (F11).

While some enjoyed just having time to talk in general, others enjoyed more guided conversations about their relationships as part of the date night:

It was a nice atmosphere where we could sit back and they gave us time to reflect upon our own relationship or look at another relationship we thought was positive, and what we could do to be positive, or why we thought that relationship was positive. . . . I don't think that we, as a married couple, sit and talk about that kind of thing, so it was an opportunity to do that. . . . It was a nice conversation to have. (F2)

Learning about their spouse. Many couples reported that the date nights gave them opportunities to see their spouse in new situations, which often brought out aspects of their partner that they had never or very rarely saw. As one male participant shared, “I was like ‘wow, that’s kind of interesting’ . . . I hadn’t seen that side of my wife [before]” (M6). As a result, participants indicated renewed appreciation or increased respect for their partner. One male participant shared, “I gained a lot more respect for her. . . . I just saw a whole other side of her, which I really like. She was . . . more outgoing. I liked seeing her in that situation” (M12). Another male participant said, “It helped reinforce why I married her in the first place. It helped me realize that she’s still got the strengths that I saw before we were married” (M7).

Seeing their spouses in new situations also helped some couples to learn “new ideas . . . to help make [their] relationship more healthy” (F4) and helped couples to bond in new ways. As one female participant shared, “When you are in a new situation. . . . You learn more about your spouse and you’re able to bond in a new way trying something new” (F10).

Positive opportunities to work with spouse. Lastly, several participants indicated that a benefit of the date night was having positive opportunities to work together with their spouse, either as a couple team or in acting as a support to their spouse. As one female participant shared, “There were opportunities to work together as a team, which was a positive aspect” (F6). This appeared to be especially appreciated by participants when teamwork was not always prevalent in their relationship. For example:

It benefitted our relationship because there are times when . . . [there] is not much compassion . . . [and] there is not as much understanding on his part just because that is something he struggles with. . . . So it was nice that he was compassionate and understanding [and] he was very kind to me. (F10)

When playing a supportive role, many participants expressed an appreciation for the encouragement and support from their spouse. For example, one female participant shared:

I was very encouraged of how supportive . . . and patient [he was] with something [that was] new for me that he had done before. . . . He was able to help me do it in baby steps and not be frustrated if I was going slower than he would have. (F10)

Impacts on Relationships

While it is clear that most couples attended the event to have fun and spend time together as a couple, the majority of individuals that attended also shared at least one impact or put into practice something in their relationship as a result of attending the date night event. The most prevalent impact identified was an increase in communication, including communication about difficult subjects. For example, couples made comments such as:

I actually speak up [now]. . . . We talk more about hard things, which is good. (F1)

* * *

I feel like we're trying to communicate better. I think that both of us have been living most of our lives together going our separate ways and just being individuals instead of more of a team. I've noticed that there's been more communication [now]. (M1)

* * *

Things like communication, trust, and showing affection and gratitude . . . came up as principles during the classes, so we're able to talk about them outside of the class. It puts them in the forefront so that we're not forgetful and let life allow us to become passive and not actively work on our marriage. It brings them into center stage. (M5)

In addition, a few of the couples indicated that they had made an effort to spend more time together and try new things:

[I've been] spending time with her doing new things. Not just doing the same things over and over. I'm an old guy, [and] I'm kind of set in my ways, and [so] it's been really nice to branch out and try new things. (M6)

There were also several other impacts unique to only a couple of individuals. Being more mindful about their relationship was one of these unique impacts:

[We] serve each other a little bit more, show affection to each other a little bit more. [We] make a point of doing those things and are more conscience of doing those things rather than just doing it subconsciously. (M3)

Another individual identified the impact of being more appreciative of their spouse. "It kind of opened my eyes to realize just how much I do lean on him, either in hard times or just throughout our marriage. It . . . opened my eyes to really appreciate him more" (F12). Making more effort to work as a team and help each other was also an identified impact, "I think he tries to help out more with house cleaning. I think he tries to help more" (F3).

Discussion

The majority of the participants attended the date nights because they were drawn to the activity itself. They expected it to be an inexpensive way to spend time together as a couple away from every day stresses. Only a minority attended because they wanted to improve their marriages or couple relationships. In fact, some attended this activity because it was not like a traditional marriage education course. Almost all of the participants said that one of the benefits of attending the date night was that they had fun together as a couple. The majority of participants also said, however, that they learned skills to improve their relationships and it gave them time to reflect on their relationships. They also appreciated learning from others as they participated in discussions. They also learned new things about their spouse and they had opportunities to work together as a team as they participated in the activities. Finally, they said it

improved their relationships because it increased communication, especially communication about difficult topics.

According Ooms (2007), using less traditional forms of relationship education and more interactive approaches may reach audiences that would otherwise not attend classroom-type venues. The findings of this study seem to indicate that may be true for some couples. Many of these participants attended the date nights because of the activity, not the education. One might speculate that many of these participants would not ever benefit from couple education if these date nights had not been provided. It was clear from participants that it was difficult for them to carve out time as a couple to plan a date night and they appreciated having a structured event to attend. Furthermore, we might assume that couples that plan their own date nights might not include a structured learning experience as part of their time together. As Stanley et al. (2006) indicates, relationship education is under attended, and a wide range of dosages and formats might encourage more people to attend.

Hawkins et al. (2004), addressing the issue of dosage, suggests that there are low, moderate, and high levels of dosage. Low level may be media messages or pamphlets. Date nights might be included in what these authors describe as moderate level dosage, which may include shorter time periods such as half day sessions or self-guided offerings, which might be on the web. It is suggested that moderate dosage avoids psychologically intensive activities which may scare away some participants. Finally, high level dosage involves more intensive exploration of a full range of topics.

Although we cannot generalize from this small, somewhat homogeneous sample, we can speculate that for some couples date nights are one way to provide a moderate dose of relationship education when they would not attend a high dosage event. Although our data does

not address this issue, we might also suggest that after this small dose of couple education, they might be inclined to participate in higher level dosages (i.e. Hawkins et al., 2004), considering the benefits they cited. In terms of implications for relationship education, it might be useful to have a wide array of relationship education with different dosages to meet the needs of the wide range of potential participants who might benefit from relationship education programming.

What is new in this research regarding date nights is the value of *fun* in the date night activities. Couples attended the date night activities because they thought they would have fun as a couple. In addition, almost all participants cited having fun as one of the benefits of attending the activities. Having fun was important to these couples because it potentially reminded them of the fun they had when they were dating and they were able to see each other in a new light. Research suggests that having fun as a couple increases bonding and intimacy (Baxter 1992; Vanderbleek, 2005) and also helps couples feel positive emotions which, in turn, increases relationship satisfaction (Aune & Wong, 2002). These benefits, among others, support Wilcox and Dew's (2012) suggestion that date nights focus on fun rather than challenging relationship issues. An implication from this research suggests that while this may not be the best approach for all couples, providing fun activities may help to strengthen couple relationships, leading to increased collaboration to resolve deeper relationship issues at a later time.

The majority also learned skills that enhanced their relationships. There may be skeptics who think that date nights are not useful in teaching couples about relationship skills because they come just for the activity. According to one person, "I didn't know that we were going to learn as much as we did." It seemed surprising that they could have fun and learn relationship skills. This was the goal of the date nights, and it was a positive result from the perspective of the

facilitators. An implication of this finding might be that having fun *and* learning skills might be an important combination for any couple education event, no matter what the dosage.

Participants also appreciated the interactions with other couples. Hearing about issues other couples experience helped them realize that other couples had similar challenges and it helped couples get a perspective on their own relationships. This is evident in existing literature. For example, Skogrand, Torres, and Higginbotham (2010) found that one of the benefits of the relationship education cited by most participants in stepfamily classes was learning from others and realizing their experiences were normal. Other researchers suggest that group formats, therefore, are more helpful to couples than self-directed formats because of this added benefit of learning from the experiences of others (Nicholson, Phillips, Whitton, Halford, & Sanders, 2007). The benefits of the group format, therefore, provides added benefit for couples even when the dosage of content is relatively low and might be integral when providing any type of couple education.

The other benefits these couples cited include spending time as a couple, learning about their spouse, and positive opportunities to work with their spouse. These findings are consistent with the findings of the Brower et al. (2011) study which found that cooperation, teamwork and time together were important benefits of date nights. According to Wilcox and Dew (2012), time spent together as a couple has a variety of positive results for couples. Couples that had couple time at least once a week had higher rates of satisfaction in communication, sexual satisfaction, and commitment when compared to couples that did not (Wilcox & Dew, 2012). This was especially true for certain groups of couples such as new parents. While it may be unrealistic for most relationship education providers to plan and implement weekly date nights, providers may

be able to plan monthly date nights and/or provide resources of additional date night ideas for participants to encourage couples to begin dating on a more regular basis.

While it is clear that most individuals that attended date nights did not specifically attend for the relationship education aspect of the evening, the majority of individuals still shared a positive impact on their relationship after the event, specifically implementation of relationship skills that they had learned from attending the date night. The amount of impact on the couple relationship varied by couple, such as improved communication, an increase in affection and gratitude, or just spending more time together. Implementing relationship education skills could in many respects be considered the one of the most compelling outcomes of the date nights, especially in light of the fact that many couples did not anticipate learning any relationship skills at the event. This may indicate that regardless of the reasons the couples attend events, it is possible to still create an environment for learning relationship skills that can, and most likely will, extend beyond the night of the event and could potentially lead to long-term positive impacts in relationships.

Based on findings and existing research, we conclude that activity-based relationship education, such as the date nights in this study, needs to be taken seriously as a model for couple education that can be useful for many. We also further speculate, based on participant responses, that for many couples this may be the only form of relationship education they receive, and we would, therefore, encourage the activity-based approach as a part of a well-rounded approach to relationship education.

Given the small, somewhat homogeneous nature of this group of date night participants, more research needs to be done about why people attend and the extent of the benefits. This

study, however, adds to the literature about the date night experiences of some couples, which may be an impetus for other researchers to explore these issues in more depth.

References

- Aune, K. S., Wong, N. C. H. (2002). Antecedents and consequences of adult play in romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships* 9, 279-286.
- Baxter, L. A. (1992). Forms and functions of intimate play in personal relationships. *Human Communications Research*. 18,336-363.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Bradford, K., Higginbotham, B., & Skogrand, L. (2014). Healthy relationship education: A statewide initiative case study and outcome evaluation. *Marriage & Family Review*, 50, 93-106.
- Brower, N. (2011). Have fun! The importance of play in couple relationship. Utah State University Fact Sheet. Retrieved from http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/FC_Relationships_2011-04pr.pdf
- Brower, N., Darrington, J., & Bradford, K. (2011). Relationship education: Encouraging participation through experiential date nights. *Journal of National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 6, 57-66.
- Carlson, R. G., Daire, A. P., Munyon, M. D., Soto, D., Bennett, A., Marshall, D., & McKinzie, C. (2012). Examining recruitment follow-up phone calls and their influence on attendance for husbands and wives in a marriage and relationship education program. *Marriage & Family Review*, 48, 82-95.
- Doss, B., Rhoades, G., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). Marital therapy, retreats, and

- books: The who, what, when, and why of relationship help-seeking. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 35, 18-29.
- Duncan, S. F., Steed, A., & Needham, C. M. (2009). A comparison evaluation study of web-based and traditional marriage and relationship education. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 8, 162-180.
- Futris, T. G., Adler-Baeder, F., Dean, K., & McFadyen, J. M. (2005). Best practices for couples education: Summary of a dialogue between researchers and educators. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 10. Retrieved from <http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2005/v10-n1-2005-may/fa-2-practices.php>
- Hawkins, A. J., & VanDenBerghe, B. (2014). Facilitating forever: A feasible public policy agenda to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages. *National Marriage Project*. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA. Retrieved from http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/FacilitatingForeverFINAL_Web031114.pdf
- Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., Baldwin, S. A., & Fawcett, E. B. (2008). Does marriage and relationship education work? A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76, 723-734.
- Hawkins, A. J., Carroll, J. S., Doherty, W. J., & Willoughby, B. (2004). A comprehensive framework for marriage education. *Family Relations*, 53, 547-558.
- Hawkins, A. J. & Ooms, T. (2012). Can marriage and relationship education be an effective policy tool to help low-income couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships? *Marriage & Family Review*, 48, 524-554.

Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M., & Blumberg, S. L. (2010). *Fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Nicholson, J. M., Phillips, M., Whitton, S., Halford, W. K., & Sanders, M. R. (2007). Promoting healthy stepfamilies: Couples' reasons for seeking help and perceived benefits from intervention. *Family Matters*, 77, 48-56.

Ooms, T. (2007). Adapting healthy marriage programs for disadvantaged and culturally diverse populations: What are the issues? *CLASP Policy Brief, No. 10, Center for Law and Social Policy, Couples and Marriages Series*.

On line publication: <http://research.policyarchive.org/13787.pdf>

Skogrand, L., Torres, E., & Higginbotham, B. J. (2010). Stepfamily education: Benefits of a group-formatted intervention. *The Family Journal*, 18, 234-240.

Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 117-126.

Vanderbleek, L. (2005). Couple play as predictor of couple bonding, physical health and emotional health. *Electronic Thesis and Dissertations*. Paper 409. Retrieved from <http://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1408&context=etd>

Wilcox, W. B., & Dew, J. (2012). The date night opportunity: What does couple time tell us about the potential value of date nights. *The National Marriage Project*. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA. Retrieved from <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/NMP-DateNight.pdf>