

FEATURE

THE Good LIFE

MU LEADS PROGRAM
TO STRENGTHEN
FAMILIES
THROUGHOUT
MID-MISSOURI



SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES ACROSS MID-MISSOURI ARE GEARING UP TO LAUNCH A FIVE-YEAR EDUCATION PROGRAM ORGANIZED BY MU RESEARCHERS IN AN EFFORT TO HELP FAMILIES BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS.

While the program targets low-income families, organizers emphasize that everyone is welcome to participate in the free educational effort they've dubbed "ShowMe Healthy Relationships." Financed by a \$9.6 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, the program will offer relationship classes to both couples and single adults in 21 Missouri counties.

"The good life is built with good, healthy relationships," says program director David Schramm, an associate professor in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Science and an MU Extension family specialist. "And that kind of sets the foundation for the work we'll be doing."

Schramm aims to provide relationship and marriage education to at least 2,000 residents over the course of the five-year program.

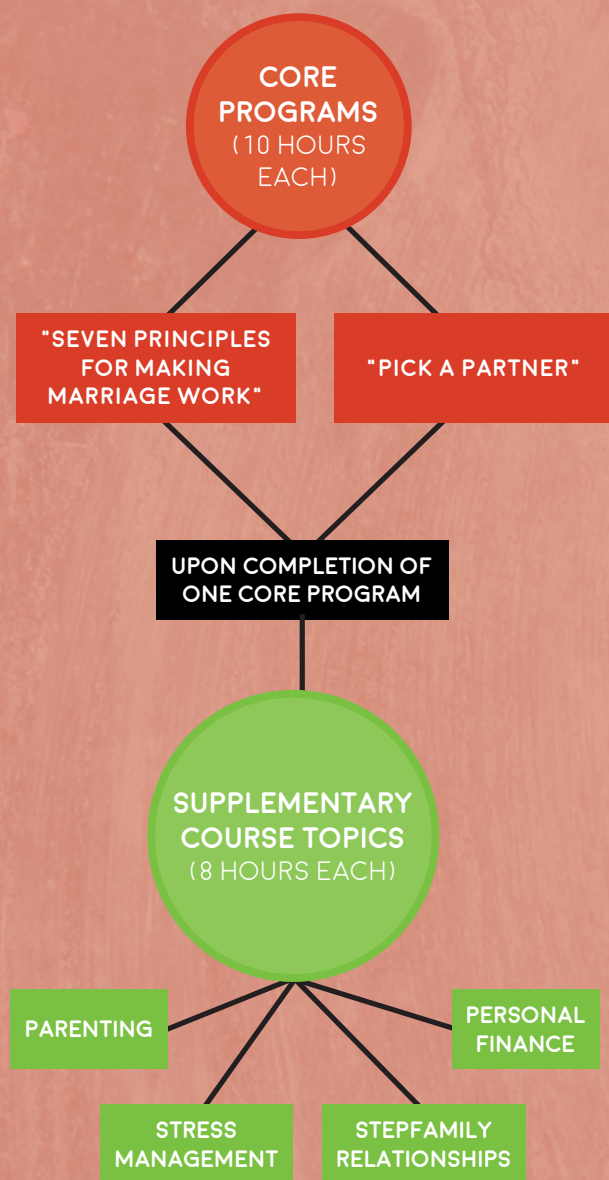
LAYING THE EDUCATIONAL GROUNDWORK

At the heart of ShowMe Healthy Relationships are two core programs, entitled "Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" and "PICK a Partner." Both will be 10-hour courses, held over five weeks. The marriage class aims to help participating couples learn how to build their friendship, manage conflict and work as a team, while the PICK a Partner class focuses on five key things single adults should look for as they seek a happy, stable relationship, the program website says.

Participants may take additional classes once they have completed one of the core courses. Case managers working with each class will help core course graduates select from a roster of supplementary courses, which includes eight-hour classes focusing on topics such as parenting, stepfamily relationships, stress management and personal finance. Together

Class Structure

SHOWME HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



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— PROGRAM DIRECTOR **DAVID SCHRAMM**



the classes—which aim to improve the well-being of children by improving the lives of participating adults—are designed to help low-income families handle the environmental stressors they often face, says Chelsea Garneau-Rosner, an assistant professor in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Science who serves as co-director of the project. They also focus more on stability than marriage compared to similar programs in the past, Garneau-Rosner notes.

"We're focusing so much more on the idea of a healthy relationship," Garneau-Rosner says. "It's about stability, and the quality of relationships among everyone in the family."

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MU Extension and MU graduate students will work alongside three social service agencies to teach the classes. Joining forces with MU to offer ShowMe Healthy Relationship classes throughout the 21-county program area are Central Missouri Community Action (CMCA), based in Columbia; Douglass Community Services Inc., in Hannibal; and Cornerstones of Care—Healthy Families Program, headquartered in

Kansas City. The MU team began training social workers from the partner agencies in April, so that all will be ready to start offering the relationship courses in July.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGHOUT MID-MISSOURI

Already, ShowMe Healthy Relationships is garnering support from those who provide support services for area families. Schramm and Garneau-Rosner introduced ShowMe Healthy Relationships to about 90 family service agency employees during the program's official kickoff in April on the MU campus, encouraging attendees to support and refer families to the program.

Will Arnett, a Columbia Housing Authority (CHA) family support specialist, responded enthusiastically to the MU team's kickoff appeal. Arnett considers the ShowMe Healthy Relationships program a potential tool for improving relationships within the households served by the CHA, which helps provide housing for more than 1,900 families in Columbia and Boone County.

"I think the program is a great fit for our clients," Arnett says. "I feel it really is needed."

It's a sentiment echoed by all of the MU team's partners, each of which has previously offered a different version of the program. Though ShowMe Healthy Relationships will differ to some extent from those earlier programs, agency representa-



tives embrace it as a proven technique for improving family well-being.

Indeed, Linda Bleything, the Douglass Community Services Head Start director who is leading that agency's participation in ShowMe Healthy Relationships, points to changes wrought by the earlier program to explain support for the current partnership. Area families who participated in the Douglass Community Services relationship program that ended in 2013 started communicating better with each other and became more likely to work together as a team, Bleything recalls. "It's something that's really good for the community," Bleything says.

Three case managers have been hired to teach ShowMe Healthy Relationships classes and work with participating families in the Douglass Community Services area, Bleything says. Douglass Community Services will offer classes serving Lewis, Macon, Marion, Monroe, Pike, Ralls, Randolph

and Shelby counties.

Amy Sielaff, Cornerstones of Care director of youth and family support services, says the Kansas City organization has hired nine people to offer classes in Cass, Clay, Jackson, Johnson and Platte counties. Since the Cornerstones relationship program ended about five years ago when a federal grant funding expired, the ShowMe Healthy Relationship program will provide a service unique to the area, Sielaff notes.

"There are no relationship classes offered for free in our community, at all," Sielaff says.

For CMCA, the ShowMe Healthy Relationships partnership offers an opportunity to both reinstate and extend the reach of a similar program that ended in 2013. Nolanda Dodd, CMCA's ShowMe Healthy Relationships program manager, says offenders at a women's prison in Vandalia, Mo. will for the first time be among the residents to whom program classes will be offered.

CMCA has hired an employee and is contracting with community trainers to offer the classes, which will be held in low-cost locations convenient to the families who enroll, Dodd says. CMCA's program area includes Audrain, Boone, Callaway, Cole, Cooper, Howard, Moniteau and Osage counties.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

An important component of the program is an ongoing evaluation of its effectiveness, Garneau-Rosner says. Even as participant surveys are tabulated, Garneau-Rosner plans to review daily diaries written by participants and observe couples as they discuss conflict in an effort to identify what aspects of the relationship classes may need to be changed. Findings will be reported to the federal funding agency, she says.

"We feel very well-poised to make important contributions with this program," says Garneau-Rosner.