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A Marriage Enrichment Program for Catholic Parents

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A Marriage Enrichment Program for Catholic Parents

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Given the connection the Church has emphasized between the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage, ministering to couples with regard to their parenting provides a good occasion to also minister to them in their vocation as spouses. However, ministry to spouses and to parents of young children is rarely coordinated. This project aims to fill this gap by designing a practical plan to link marriage enrichment to parenting education, attracting couples by addressing both of their vocations.

Under the promotional title, “Married...with Children: Wisdom and Grace for Parenting,” a series of four workshops provided formation for couples in the character qualities, life skills, respect for differences, and spirituality that nurture the two reciprocal ends of marriage. Short presentations, small group sharing, guided discussion, and prayer experiences were utilized to conduct the workshops.

The project was held at two Catholic parishes with two groups of couples. Participants completed a self-assessment of their competency in skills for successful marriage and parenting at the first and last workshop, and the results were compared to measure the couples’ perceived learning about how to be good parents and good spouses. At

the end of the program, participants reported improvement in relationship skills and new awareness of areas for improvement. By introducing married couples to their peers in the parish, the project introduced them to a community of support during the challenging parenting years.

This dissertation by Lauri Przybysz fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in pastoral ministry approved by William C. Mattison III, Ph.D., as Director, and by John Grabowski, Ph.D., and Stephen Rossetti, D.Min., Ph.D., as Readers.

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DEDICATION

To my husband, John,
our six children,
and seventeen grandchildren

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this project in ministry was to design and execute a marriage enrichment program for young parents that draws upon Catholic faith and teaching, evangelizes the participants, and teaches key skills for successful marriage and parenting. Given the connection the Church has emphasized between the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage, ministering to couples with regard to their parenting provides an opportunity to also minister to them in their vocations as spouses.

Young married couples would benefit from such ministry, but pastoral ministers who hope to reach married young adults know that this group has difficulty taking time for their own faith formation. Marriage enrichment programs that ask couples to “work on their marriages” are often poorly attended, but couples may feel more comfortable attending a program that addresses marriage in the context of parenting. However, ministry to spouses and to parents of young children is rarely coordinated, since not all parents are married and many spouses do not have children. When a parish’s resources for family and marriage programs are limited, this population of couples may be neglected.

This project aimed to overcome obstacles to marriage enrichment ministry by serving married parents of small children simultaneously in their vocations as spouses and parents—in other words, as the family system. In a series of four workshops held in two parishes, couples explored the wisdom of the Church, practiced relationship skills, and learned to recognize grace that is available to them through the sacraments for their domestic church.

Chapter 1 reviews the literature that supports marriage ministry which addresses the couple and parent relationships together, including the theology of Catholic teaching about marriage, children and the domestic church, as well as principles of the social sciences and pastoral ministry that recognize the interrelatedness of the marriage and parenting relationships.

Chapter 2 describes the changes in the understanding of marriage in the United States and describes the opportunities for ministry these challenges present, addressing the need of young parents for support from the Christian community. The chapter also reviews current programs for marriage and parenting, identifies content for the workshops, and examines obstacles to success.

Chapter 3 describes the design of the four workshops in the areas of communication, conflict resolution, respecting differences, and spirituality. This chapter describes the program goals: to address marriage and parenting together, to present topics that matter to couples, to connect young parents to their parish communities, and to help couples improve their competency in specific parenting and marriage skills. The chapter also describes the plans for marketing, presentation outlines, participant handouts, and the evaluation tool.

Chapter 4 reports the steps taken for making arrangements to run the project at two parishes, as well as the promotional efforts, registration methods, and events during the workshops.

Chapter 5 discusses how well the goals of the project were met, based on the couples' written and verbal responses, the researcher's observations, and on the data from the opening and closing surveys. The chapter also discusses lessons learned by the researcher during the program and suggests ways that the project could be improved.

CHAPTER 1

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter 1 reviews the literature that supports marriage ministry which addresses the couple and parent relationships together. The theology of Catholic teaching about marriage, children and the domestic church is outlined. Principles of the social sciences that recognize the importance of ministry to couples in both their marriage and parenting relationships are discussed. Then, literature from pastoral ministry that connects these principles with Christian discipleship in the joint vocation of marriage and parenting is explored.

Theological Foundations

The Church understands marriage as the beginning of a family that includes the begetting and education of children.¹ God blessed the first humans with the companionship of each other (Gen.1:18) and told them to “increase and multiply,” and share in his creative work (Gen. 1:28). Jesus recognized that this relationship for the formation of families was designed by God, "Who made man from the beginning male and female" (Matt. 19:4) with whom the Creator would work to “enlarge and enrich His own family day by day.”²

Catholic tradition offers a starting point for marriage enrichment based on the link between marriage and parenting, the ancient idea of the Christian family as “domestic church.” Although the Bible does not use the term, the families of baptized believers were

¹ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*, GS), no. 50, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). All subsequent citations of Vatican II documents refer to this edition.

² GS, no. 50.

thought of, from the earliest Christian times, as forming an ecclesial as well as social reality.³ In the domestic church, parents pass on the faith and foster vocations, while at the same time strengthening their marital bond.⁴

Jesus taught his disciples that they were forming a new kind of family based on faith rather than on kinship relationships, where “whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me” (Mark 3:31-35). Although this teaching is often interpreted as a renunciation of family, it also suggests that Christian families should understand themselves in a new way, as a communion of discipleship.⁵

St. Paul understood that the reciprocal love and sacrifice of baptized husbands and wives mysteriously images Christ’s love for the Church (Eph. 5:32). The early Christians experienced the reality of the Church in their own households, baptizing their children and other household members (Acts 11:13 ff.; 16:15; 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16) and worshipping together in their homes (Acts 2:46a; Acts 12:12; Acts 16:40; Rom. 16:3, 5; Philem. v.1-2).⁶

Among the Fathers of the Church, marriage and children were treated together in the context of the salvation of all the family members. St. Augustine defended marriage for the very reason that children are born through the husband and wife relationship. In *De bono conjugali*, St. Augustine teaches that procreation is the chief good of marriage (i.e., that to

³ Joseph C. Atkinson, “Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation,” *Theological Studies* 66, (2005):600.
<http://www.ts.mu.edu/content/66/66.3/66.3.4.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2011).

⁴ See Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium, LG)*, nos. 11-13.

⁵ Richard Gaillardetz, *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, expanded edition (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2007), 95.

⁶ Theresa Doyle-Nelson, “House Churches in the New Testament,” St. Anthony Messenger website.
<http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Jul2008/Feature2.asp>. (accessed August 14, 2011).

which it is ordered and by which it is made good), affirming the important connection between marriage and parenthood: “For they are joined, one to another, side by side...then follows the connection of fellowship in children...”⁷ Augustine spoke of the household church (*cum tota domestica vestra ecclesia*) in his letter to widows.⁸ He also recognized Christian heads of households as having an episcopal function similar to his own, urging them to “take care with all watchfulness for the salvation of the members of the household entrusted to you.”⁹

Although St. John Chrysostom did not use the term “domestic church,” he stressed that the family’s mission is to be a force in society to cultivate the kingdom of God. He expected that raising Christian children would be a priority for married parents who took their faith seriously. Chrysostom explained his expectations for the work of the Christian home: “When we teach our children to be gentle, to be forgiving, to be generous, and to love their fellow men...we instill virtue in their souls and reveal the image of God within them. This, then, is our task: to educate both ourselves and our children in godliness; otherwise what answer will we have before Christ’s judgment seat? ...How (else) can we be worthy of the kingdom of heaven?”¹⁰ Chrysostom taught parents to see child rearing in the context of

⁷ Augustine, *On the good of marriage (De bono conjugali)*, sec. 3. trans. C. L. Cornish, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Calvin College, 2005): 399. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.v.ii.html> (accessed August 12, 2011).

⁸ Augustine, *On the good of widowhood (De bono viduitatis)*, sec. 29, trans. C.L. Cornish in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Revised and edited for *New Advent* by Kevin Knight (2009). <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1311.htm> (accessed August 14, 2011).

⁹ Augustine, “Sermo 94,” cited in Florence C. Bourg, “Domestic Church: A Survey of the Literature,” *INTAMS Review* 7 (2001): 182-19. <http://www.intams.org/72bourg.pdf> (accessed August 15, 2011).

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, “Homily on Ephesians,” in *St. John Chrysostom, On Marriage and Family*, trans. Catherine Roth and David Anderson.(Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 71.

their marital vocation: “If we regulate our households (properly)...we will also see fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is a little church. Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives.”¹¹

The relationship between the unitive and procreative ends of marriage has been the subject of much discussion in the Church.¹² The Church has guarded the inseparability of the couple’s unity and their procreative powers, but there has been a reluctance to call them equal.¹³ There was a concern that treating the ends of marriage as equally important could destroy the essential relationship between marriage and children and leave the way open to acceptance of deliberately childless marriages.¹⁴ The Code of Canon Law of 1917 reflected a commonly accepted theological principle that procreation was primary, while the “mutual help and the allaying of concupiscence” were secondary ends of marriage.¹⁵ The Code does not speak of the love of the couple, but neither does it give mere biological generation as the principal end of marriage.¹⁶

The importance of love between husband and wife has found growing expression in Church teaching in the 20th century. Although the roots of this understanding are older, Pius XI defended the link between children and marriage in his 1930 encyclical, *Casti connubii*,

¹¹ Roth, 68.

¹² John Gallagher, “Magisterial Teaching from 1918 to the Present (1981)”. In *Readings in Moral Theology #13: Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching*, ed. Charles Curran (New York: Paulist, 2002): 71.

¹³ Gallagher, 76-79. For example, in his *Meaning of Marriage* (1935) Herbert Doms expressed the view that the two ends of marriage were equally primary, but his views were countered by a decree of the Roman Rota on April 1, 1944.

¹⁴ Gallagher, 79.

¹⁵ Gallagher, 72.

¹⁶ Ibid.

reacting to society's growing acceptance of divorce and contraception. Pius XI expanded the idea of mutual help of the spouses to explicitly encourage the cultivation of mutual love. At a crucial moment in social history, the Church spoke of a deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of the purposes of marriage, so that marriage is seen as "the blending of life as a whole and the mutual interchange and sharing thereof."¹⁷

Significantly, *Gaudium et spes* omits the old terminology of primary and secondary ends altogether, affirming marriage as an "intimate partnership of life and love" in which the spouses cooperate to establish a home that is a school of discipleship.¹⁸ When it encourages couples to embrace children, *Gaudium et spes* does not underestimate mutual love: "Hence, while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior. Who through them will enlarge and enrich His own family day by day."¹⁹

Gaudium et spes urges parents to see their dual role as a part of Christ's mission in the world, "fostering this community of love and perfecting its life, and by which the spouses and parents are assisted in their lofty calling."²⁰ Discussions during Vatican II on the theology of the family focused on familial life as a way of holiness in which parents are seen

¹⁷ Pius XI, Encyclical letter *Casti connubii* (CC). December 31, 1930, no. 24. Vatican website. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii_en.html (accessed August 12, 2011).

¹⁸ GS, no. 48.

¹⁹ GS, no. 50.

²⁰ GS, no. 47.

as “consecrated for their roles and thus live out their priesthood in a uniquely familial manner.”²¹

Paul VI’s subsequent encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, also responding to the cultural trend toward artificial population control, made an inseparable connection between marital unity and children a starting point for its teaching. The marital “union of two persons in which they perfect one another” bears fruit in “cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives.”²² The encyclical urged parents to “recognize fully their own duties toward God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society in a correct hierarchy of values.”²³ Among those duties is the nurturing of their relationship as a couple. Although its emphasis was on begetting children, *Humanae vitae* also spoke of parents’ ongoing responsibility to educate them. This education is not to be merely a doctrinal catechesis but also a formation in Christian living fostered by the loving cooperation of the mother and father in the home.

John Paul II not only secured a permanent place for the concept of the domestic church in the Church’s magisterium, but also established it as the dominant hermeneutic by which the family was to be understood.²⁴ His numerous audiences and apostolic exhortations have guided Catholic teaching in this area. In *Familiaris consortio*, he describes Christian

²¹ See Atkinson, 597. Interventions by Bishop Pietro Firodelli were instrumental in the dialogue that led to the Council accepting the idea of the domestic church, although the term is used explicitly only in *Lumen gentium* no. 11.

²² Paul VI, Encyclical letter *Humanae vitae* (HV) July 25, 1968, trans. *The Pope Speaks*, 13 (Fall 1969): 329-46, no. 8. Vatican website. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html (accessed October 18, 2011).

²³ HV, no. 10.

²⁴ Atkinson, 593.

marriage as “the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning.”²⁵ His 1994 *Letter to Families* describes Christian family life as a life of communion and mutuality: “The children born to them—and here is the challenge—should consolidate that covenant, enriching and deepening the conjugal communion of the father and mother.”²⁶ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* now features the concept of the domestic church as a way of thinking about the Christian family and its mission, an outgrowth of the reality of baptism and not from blood relationships alone.²⁷

John Paul II’s teaching on the Theology of the Body and the mutual self-gift of the spouses also emphasized the link between children and spousal love.²⁸ This teaching is repeated in the U.S. Bishops’ 2008 Pastoral Letter, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*: “The loving communion of the spouses is the primary context in which children are both conceived and brought up in love”²⁹ The pastoral describes Christ’s invitation to the

²⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (FC). November 22, 1981, no. 34. Vatican website. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html (accessed September 22, 2010).

²⁶ John Paul II, *Gratissimam sane* (Letter to Families). Vatican website. February 2, 1994, no. 7. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html (accessed October 20, 2011).

²⁷ Atkinson, 601. cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1655-1658, 2204.

²⁸ John Paul II, “Called to Be Imitators of God and to Walk in Love,” General Audience, August 4, 1982. *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition* in English, 9 August 1982, 1. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2tb87.htm> (accessed August 17, 2011).

²⁹ USCCB, Committee for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, *Leaders' Guide for Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (MLLDP) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2010), 54.

couple to participate in his spousal love for his Church through parenting their children and loving each other, becoming “a living symbol” of the union of Christ with his Church.³⁰

Psychological Foundations

The idea of caring for the family as a communion of persons, rather than only as individuals, is finding support in the social sciences. Although marital and family counseling are frequently treated as two unrelated fields, in recent years the link between good parenting and strong marriage has been documented in psychological research. A study of 2,000 parents determined which competencies are most important to bringing up healthy, happy and successful children. In his scientific analysis of these competencies, psychologist Robert Epstein found that “two of the best predictors of good outcomes with children are in fact indirect: maintaining a good relationship with the other parent and managing your own stress level. In other words, your children benefit not just from how you treat them but also from how you treat your partner and yourself.”³¹

Several of the competencies identified by Epstein’s study show that the tasks of marriage and parenting are linked in important ways that can be addressed holistically. Parents can discover that being a good parent is inseparably connected with being a good spouse. Epstein listed ten competencies that predict good parenting outcomes. The study listed religious practice as even more important than safety for effective parenting. The skills, all derived from published studies, were ranked in order of importance. The following is the list of competencies and their descriptions as listed by Epstein:

³⁰ USCCB, *Leaders’ Guide for Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 28.

³¹ Robert Epstein. “What Makes a Good Parent?” *Scientific American Mind*, Vol. 5 (November/December 2010), 46-51.

1. *Love and affection.* Giving support and acceptance, being physically affectionate and spending quality one-on-one time together
2. *Stress management.* Reducing stress in self and in the child, including practicing relaxation techniques and taking a positive attitude toward events
3. *Relationship skills.* Maintaining a healthy relationship with one's spouse and modeling effective relationship skills with others
4. *Autonomy and independence.* Treating the child with respect and encouraging self-sufficiency and self-reliance
5. *Education and learning.* Promoting and modeling learning and providing opportunities for learning to the child
6. *Life skills.* Providing for the child financially and planning for the future
7. *Behavior management.* Using positive reinforcement and using punishment only when other behavior management efforts have failed
8. *Health.* Modeling healthy lifestyle habits, such as proper nutrition and exercise
9. *Religion.* Supporting religious development and participating in religious activities
10. *Safety.* Protecting the child and maintaining awareness of the child's activities and friends³²

The effectiveness of recognizing the link between marriage and parenting is also reflected in the family systems approach to counseling couples. Although this project does not involve a counseling relationship with the participants, it benefits from the insights of family systems thinking to help couples be better spouses and better parents. Family systems counseling developed out of the work of Edwin Friedman, who focused on the family as a unit, rather than on the individual members. It differs from the individual model of therapy, where the focus is on the symptomatic member of the family, and reflects a new awareness of how

³² Epstein, *ibid.*

people function in relational systems.³³ The family systems approach is to build strength in all the family's relationships, rather than trying to "fix" just one member.³⁴ Counselors have recognized that each person in a family plays a role in the functioning of the other persons in the family. By addressing the family system they were better able to promote long-term benefits for all the family members. Relationship skills education that takes a systems approach helps people see the dynamics at work in their couple relationship and in their home life and helps them to use those energies in positive ways. This systems view of the family, which recognizes that each person's well-being and growth impacts the others,' supports the idea of this project to address the unitive and procreative dimensions of Christian marriage together.

Ministerial Implications

The systems approach to family ministry has implications for marriage enrichment ministry. Although ministry to individuals certainly has its place, ministering to the couple with attention to the dynamics of the whole family system can also benefit the children and the other systems of which they are a part—the parish and the wider society. Since Christian marriage is a public institution and not only a private relationship, the couple is part of a larger system that includes ever widening circles of relationships. It would be a mistake to fail to take advantage of this reciprocal energy of family life when ministering to couples.

Catholic teaching, which guards the connection between the spouses' love and children, includes the promise that God's grace will sustain parents in raising disciples and

³³ David Cox, "The Edwin Friedman Model of Family Systems Thinking." *Academic Leadership*, Vol. 4, no. 4 (2007): 58.

³⁴ Cox, 59.

continuing to grow in faith themselves. Having called the couple to such an important mission, the Church should provide marriage enrichment ministry that guides couples in maintaining this “loving communion.” The U.S. bishops document, *A Family Perspective in Church and Society*, expressed the Catholic understanding of the family as a living system that must be valued and supported with ministry.³⁵ This “family perspective” provides a “guiding vision” for planning, implementing, and evaluating diocesan and parish efforts for marriage enrichment. *A Family Perspective* recommends that ministers keep the whole family and its relationship dynamics in mind, even when ministering to its individual members.³⁶

The Catholic understanding of the family as a communion of persons provides direction for ministry that builds skills for communication, resolving conflict, and respecting each person’s human dignity. St. John Chrysostom’s homilies called on parents to develop these skills: “Because, if they are in harmony, the children will be brought up well, the household will be properly ordered, and neighbors and friends, and relatives will enjoy the sweet fragrance. But if the opposite happens, everything will be turned upside down and thrown into confusion.”³⁷ Guided by the wisdom of Christian tradition, ministry to married parents of young children should help them make the connection between their personal faith journeys and their roles as spouses and parents.

³⁵ USCCB, *A Family Perspective in Church and Society*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (Washington, DC.: USCCB, 1998), 8.

³⁶ USCCB Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, “*Summary on the Family Perspective*.” (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998). <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/family.shtml> (accessed May 10, 2011).

³⁷ John Chrysostom, “Homily on Marriage,” in *Marriage in the Early Church: Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), David G. Hunter, ed. and trans., 78.

Treating marriage and parenting together enlists unexpected allies for marriage enrichment: the children. In the domestic church, children can prompt their parents to develop virtues that will have good effects on their marital relationship, including patience, humility, and self-control. John Paul II makes this connection in *Familiaris consortio*:

Children call forth the best in the parents and in society in general: Acceptance, love, esteem, many-sided and united material, emotional, educational and spiritual concern for every child that comes into this world should always constitute a distinctive, essential characteristic of all Christians, in particular of the Christian family: thus children, while they are able to grow "in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man," offer their own precious contribution to building up the family community and even to the sanctification of their parents.³⁸

Although Catholic teaching contains this support for parents, many married couples do not realize the call they received at their baptism. The 2007 study on marriage in the Catholic Church by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) found only about 50% of married couples were familiar with the concept of marriage as a vocation to Christian action.³⁹ When they issued *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* in response to the National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage, the U.S. bishops hoped to inspire couples to look beyond the challenges and find God's grace at work: "[Children] bring joy even in the midst of heartaches; they give added direction to the lives of their parents. Children, the fruit of love and meaningful commitment, are a cause of love and meaning."⁴⁰ To be effective, programs must help Catholic parents recognize their life together as a true vocation, emphasizing their prophetic role in their homes, at work, and in the Church.

³⁸ FC, no. 26.

³⁹ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), "Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics." Washington, DC: Georgetown University, CARA (2007): 5. <http://cara.georgetown.edu/MarriageReport.pdf> (accessed August 4, 2009).

⁴⁰ USCCB, *Marriage, Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (MLLDP) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2009), 14.

Marriage enrichment programs should help couples to discover both the strength and evangelizing purpose that is inherent in their union. Healthy marriages become a witness of God's love to some people that the parish may never reach: their friends, families, and coworkers. A couple who demonstrate intimacy, teamwork, and community encourage others to see successful marriage as a possibility. If the marriage ends in divorce, then that too adds to the impression and formation others receive.⁴¹ Parishes that decide to become "marriage builders" should include marriage enrichment for parents, tapping into the strength to be found in Church teaching on the connection between the couple's two vocations. By supporting parents with an enrichment program, parishes can build up the whole community.

Summary

In Catholic teaching, marriage and children cannot be separated "without altering the couple's spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family."⁴² Because of their baptism, Christian married couples are leading a domestic church which needs the support of the wider Church. The wisdom of the Church about marriage is supported by a growing understanding in psychology of the importance of marriage in raising healthy and productive children. Ministry to couples needs to provide enrichment experiences that address marriage and parenting together by focusing on the meaning of the sacraments of marriage and baptism.

⁴¹ Cynthia Dobrynski and Leif Kehrwald, "Becoming a Marriage-Building Parish: Assessment Tool for Parish Ministry," (unpublished, 2008), 3.

⁴² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2363.

CHAPTER 2

NEED FOR PROJECT

This chapter will describe the changes in the understanding of marriage and their impact on married parents in the United States. Then, it describes the opportunities for ministry these challenges present to parishes. Next, it will address the need of young parents for the support of peers in the Christian community. The chapter reviews current programs for marriage and parenting and identifies content for the workshops. Finally, it examines obstacles to success of such programs and describes how addressing parenting along with marriage can attract couples to participate.

Lack of Support for Marriage

The Church needs to target ministry to this group because these parents are not finding much support for their dual vocations of marriage and parenting. Role models for successful marriage are in short supply because the very concepts of marriage and family are in flux in American society. Marriage has been in decline for over a generation, and some say its state is critical.⁴³ Young parents may not have many married friends, since marriage rates have been declining in recent decades.⁴⁴ In 2007, there were 6.8 marriages per 1,000 residents of the United States. By comparison, there were only 2.7 marriages celebrated in

⁴³ USCCB Committee on Marriage and Family, "A Select Snapshot of Marriage in the U.S. (May 2005)" <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/marrsnapshot.shtml> (accessed March 15, 2010).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the Church per 1,000 Catholics in that same year.⁴⁵ Since then, the rate of Catholic weddings compared to the general U.S. population has continued to decline, and the reasons for this are not clear. Inter-faith marriages, a factor that might account for this decline, have not increased.⁴⁶ It may be that the general decline in parish membership or the popularity of “destination” or outdoor weddings play a part in the steeper decline in the Catholic marriage rate, compared to the whole U.S. society.⁴⁷

Married couples who are parents may find themselves in the minority among their Catholic peers. Along with the decline in Catholic marriages, the rate of baptisms has gone down at about the same rate during this period. The baptism rate during the post-war baby boom in 1956 was 36.1, but it fell to only 12.7 infant baptisms per 1,000 Catholics in 2009.⁴⁸ While the 2007 CARA study on Catholic marriage found that 69.9% of couples surveyed acknowledged that they knew that “openness to children is essential to marriage,” this openness is not so widely practiced.⁴⁹ Catholic couples remain conflicted about Catholic teaching, as evidenced by a new report from the Guttmacher Institute. This nonprofit sexual health research organization claims that only 2 percent of Catholic women, even those who

⁴⁵ CARA, “There will likely be fewer Catholic baptisms and marriages next year... again.” *Nineteen Sixty-four research blog* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, CARA (August 31, 2010). <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2010/08/there-will-likely-be-fewer-catholic.html> (accessed July 2, 2011).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Yadera Betances, “Catholic Church sees steep decline in weddings,” *Eagle Tribune*, Andover, MA. August 15, 2010. <http://www.eagletribune.com/local/x1316176842/Catholic-Church-sees-steep-decline-in-weddings> (accessed August 12, 2011).

⁴⁸ CARA, *Nineteen Sixty-four research blog*, August 31, 2010.

⁴⁹ CARA, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics*, Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. CARA (October 2007): 136. <http://cara.georgetown.edu/MarriageReport.pdf> (accessed August 4, 2009).

regularly attend church, rely on natural methods for family planning. Some 68% of Catholic women use a highly effective contraceptive method, compared with 73% of Mainline Protestants and 74% of Evangelicals. These numbers have remained steady for 10 years.⁵⁰ Whether or not couples who are already parents will continue to remain open to children may, in part, depend on how much validation and support they receive from the Church.

The 2008 National Marriage Project report, *Life without Children*, concluded that American society has effectively disconnected marriage and children: “Legally, socially, and culturally, marriage is now defined primarily as a couple relationship dedicated to the fulfillment of each individual’s innermost needs and desires.”⁵¹ Children can bring significant challenges for couples who married with the hope of spending their lives enjoying a soul-mate connection. As measures of marital success, children ranked below other couple activities, such as sharing household chores, sexual fulfillment, and mutual interests, according to a recent Pew study that found a growing disconnection between marriage and parenting.⁵² The *Life without Children* study concluded, “Most Americans today don’t marry in order to have children. They marry in order to have an enduring relationship of love, friendship and emotional intimacy.”⁵³

⁵⁰Rachel K. Jones and Joereg Dreweke, “Countering Conventional Wisdom: New Evidence on Religion and Contraceptive Use” (New York: Guttmacher Institute, April 2011).
<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/Religion-and-Contraceptive-Use.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2011).

⁵¹ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Life without Children: The Social Retreat from Children and How It Is Changing America*. (University of Virginia, National Marriage Project, 2008), 8.
<http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/2008LifeWithoutChildren.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2010).

⁵² Pew Research Center, “As Marriage and Parenthood Drift Apart, Public Is Concerned about Social Impact: A Social and Demographic Trends Report,” (Pew Research Center, July 1, 2007), 2.
<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/526/marriage-parenthood> (accessed July 2, 2011).

Marriages under Stress

Couples face numerous challenges to their marital relationship as they make the transition into parenting, a time that can be an entry point for a deeper connection with their faith as they experience the challenges of new responsibilities. Barbara Whitehead explains in *Life without Children*: “Achieving this new marital ideal takes high levels of time, attention and vigilance. Like new babies, contemporary marriages have to be nurtured and coddled in order to thrive. The problem is that once a real baby comes along, the time, the effort and energy that goes into nurturing the relationship goes into nurturing the infant. As a result, marriages can become less happy and satisfying during the child-rearing years.”⁵⁴

Research from the social sciences confirms that parenthood can affect marriage negatively. According to research for the National Marriage Project, married persons today rate their marriages as less happy than married persons a generation ago.⁵⁵ A recent psychological study of over 500 couples revealed that most married couples experience a gradual but steady self-reported decline in marital quality over the four-year period after their wedding (Kurdek, 2000). Pairs with biological children had lower marital quality than childless couples or those living with stepchildren, as caring for children resulted in time taken away from the marriage. Kurdek showed that, though happiness stabilizes after four

⁵³ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Life without Children*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ David Popenoe and Barbara D. Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2007* (New Jersey: Rutgers University, National Marriage Project, 2007), 21.

years, it declines again around year seven. Kurdek thought that this dip may stem from the tendency to reexamine life as time goes on.⁵⁶

Another researcher called children “a barrier to intimacy and cause of conflict, thereby increasing disenchantment if not outright discord” (Belsky, 1990).⁵⁷ The birth of a child is one of the greatest challenges to a couple's marriage according to a seven-year study in human development that interviewed 250 couples entering the transition to parenthood, identified as the time from the third trimester of pregnancy to the child's third birthday (Belsky, 1994). These couples complained of new financial demands, decreased couple time, physical exhaustion, differing ideas about discipline, and changes in sexual desire and habits.⁵⁸

The USCCB pastoral handbook, *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes*, which suggests best practices for ministry to this group, acknowledges these challenges to marriage: “Creating a place for children means making emotional and relational shifts. Their relationships change with their own parents, who are shifting into grandparenting roles. They need to develop new patterns of family communication, traditions, and celebrations.”⁵⁹ As a group that is becoming a minority in society, married parents need the Church to affirm them and provide practical skills and knowledge to help them continue the work they have begun.

⁵⁶ Aaron Dalton, “Ties that Unbind.” *Psychology Today* (Blog entry, January 01, 2000, vol. 1). <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200001/the-ties-unbind> (accessed June 20, 2010).

⁵⁷ Jay Belsky, “Children and Marriage,” in *The Psychology of Marriage: Basic Issues and Applications*, eds. Frank D. Fincham and Thomas Bradley (New York: Guilford Press, 1990), 172.

⁵⁸ Jay Belsky, *Transition to Parenting* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, January 1994), 53.

⁵⁹ USCCB, *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2010), 206.

Standing with Married Parents

These social developments point toward the need for a dedicated and proactive marriage ministry response that holds out hope to couples. This project is needed for the pastoral care of couples at a critical time in their marital journey. Catholic married couples who have welcomed children from the Lord need the help of the faith community in living out their responsibilities.

Couples who get help from others in their parenting task can see their marriages thrive and prosper. When couples learn to approach their task as parents with a sense of common purpose and partnership with a vision for the future, the effects on their own relationship can be more satisfying. Although Belsky's study (1994) catalogued the negative effects of children, it also found evidence that having young children in the family had a stabilizing effect on the marriage.⁶⁰ When practical and emotional supports are available to assist stressed parents, the demands of parenting need not adversely affect the husband-wife bond, the study concluded.⁶¹

In order to continue to hold before young parents the faith vision that prompted them to welcome children into their lives, the parish needs to find ways to nourish these young adults in the trying parenting years. The U.S. bishops had these challenges in mind when they called for ministry to families in *Our Hearts Were Burning: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation*: "Parents look to the Church for guidance and help to grow closer as couples, stronger as families, and better able to prepare their children morally and spiritually for life in

⁶⁰ Belsky, "Children and Marriage," 194.

⁶¹ Ibid.

this complex and challenging society.”⁶² This project aims to seize the moment and respond to this request for marriage building programs.

Lack of Marriage Enrichment for Parents

Given the link between the marriage relationship and parenting in Catholic teaching and tradition, and supported as it is by the social sciences, it would seem that those who minister to marriage would take advantage of this connection. However, married couples with young children can find that their specific needs and concerns are not met by their parishes. Because young adults are an extremely diverse group that includes singles, dating, engaged, married with children, married without children, separated, divorced, and widowed, targeting ministry to married parents can seem to be more than stretched parish staffs can manage.

Inviting only married couples when addressing parenthood can be a pastoral problem. Not all married couples are parents, and pastoral ministers do not want to exclude couples who do not have children. Although he shared this concern, Richard Gaillardetz decided to include a section on parenthood in his book about married spirituality, recognizing that children and marriage are “interlocking commitments” that provide a “privileged context in which I am being molded by God’s grace into something new.”⁶³ His own life experience as husband and father taught him that his two roles had profound connections that impacted his

⁶² USCCB, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation* (OHWB) (Washington, DC: USCCB), 34.

⁶³ Gaillardetz, 100.

spiritual growth. Because both relationships demand spiritual formation, the needs of married parents should remain a ministerial priority.

Although the pastoral impulse is often to be as inclusive as possible when inviting people to participate in parish programs, it can be beneficial to occasionally offer programs with a more narrow focus on married couples who currently are connected to the church, either by parish membership or by being married Catholic. *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* speaks of the wisdom of creating programs aimed at young adults that are discrete from general adult programs. Since some activities are better accomplished within the peer group, focusing on married parents can also be valuable.⁶⁴ Parish ministers should be confident that targeting ministry to a select group with special needs, such as married parents, is acceptable and often necessary.

As a subset of young adults in general, young married parents have particular financial and time limitations that make it difficult to mix them with the singles in their age group. Typical parish ministry to young adults is aimed mainly at singles, whose interests and lifestyles differ from those of young parents.⁶⁵ Even when parishes offer parenting programs, they can fail to address the needs of married couples for marriage enrichment, since they want to include single parents. Although each of these other groups has pressing legitimate pastoral needs, married parents still deserve the attention of their pastoral leaders.

Diocesan-sponsored focus groups that participated in the National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage reported that couples lack time for each other and for their family as they

⁶⁴ USCCB, *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1996), 32-33.

⁶⁵ *Sons and Daughters of the Light*, 38-40.

struggle to balance home, work, and other responsibilities. Health, finances, aging parents, extended family, and communication are other challenges for this group. In general, participants did not see their parish as a source of direct support for marriage; however, they found that involvement in parish ministries often strengthened their marriage.⁶⁶

Couples who have a Catholic wedding generally continue to identify themselves as Catholic, but they can fall through the cracks in parish life. Regular attendance at Sunday Mass, even if it had been a habit before the children arrived, may have fallen off. The 2007 CARA report on marriage in the Catholic Church reported that 22% of Catholics attend Mass weekly or more often.⁶⁷ At least half of these marriages will be comprised of mixed religion or interfaith couples. Even if they attend Mass, this age group is less likely to register in the parish than older couples, so the parish may not know they are there. All these factors make married parents a difficult population to reach. However, a 2000 study of young adults said that 56% of Catholic young adults are registered in parishes.⁶⁸ Even with the decline in marriage rates, this indicates that there is still a significant population that could be invited to attend a parish program in marriage enrichment for parents.

Baptism preparation programs, the most common program offered to couples in this life-stage, serve all kinds of families, married or not married. Even if baptism preparation programs do address the vocation of married life, they may not help couples build a

⁶⁶ USCCB Committee Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, "NPIM Mission, Goals, Timeline." <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/mission.shtml> (accessed May 8, 2011).

⁶⁷ CARA, *Marriage in the Catholic Church*, 28.

⁶⁸ CARA, *Young Adult Catholics in the Context of Other Generations: Living with Diversity, Waiting to be Welcomed*, working paper no. 1 by Mary E. Bendyra and Paul Perl, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, CARA, 2000), 23. http://cara.georgetown.edu/Publications/workingpapers/Young_Adult.pdf (accessed August 12, 2011).

community that can sustain them and their domestic church. Many parishes spend the time of baptism preparation teaching about the theology of the sacrament and describing the symbols of the ritual—and too little time helping the young family make connections with other young adults in the community.

Need for Parish-based Ministry

Parishes have something to offer to parents that no skills-based or secular program can provide: the Good News of Jesus Christ in the context of a supportive community that lets them know they are not alone. The parish should endeavor to be a place where young families meet like-minded friends who are their peers in the vocations of both marriage and parenting.

Pastoral leaders need to offer married couples opportunities to spend time together to reflect on their vocation and engage in meaningful conversation about their faith. Since many parish activities and organizations separate the spouses into men's and women's groups, time in the parish calendar should be allotted for an occasional faith formation program for couples. In *Family Ethics*, Julie Hanlon Rubio recommends that parishes offer opportunities “to bring spouses or families together to deepen their personal communion or to live out their familial vocation to be disciples of Christ in the world.”⁶⁹

Rubio says churches must help their members reorder their values and remember the “virtues of home.”⁷⁰ Parishes can facilitate this reflection by gathering young couples together for meaningful reflection on their call to build the domestic church and live out their

⁶⁹ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 200.

⁷⁰ Rubio, 197.

baptismal call. A marriage program that helps couples with their parenting can counter the negative cultural trends, like materialism, individualism, and secularism, which are at odds with Christian values. “Parents need to be in conversation with other parents about how much extracurricular and social activity is too much....Churches have a responsibility to help their members let go of certain middle-class assumptions about what makes a good life and remember the virtues of home.”⁷¹

The National Pastoral Initiative focus groups also recommended that parishes offer more opportunities for adult faith formation, small groups and support groups, retreats and days of reflection for married couples, mentoring, and resources and referrals for couples with marital difficulties. Participants said that a greater effort should be made to publicize what is available. Others suggested that parishes and dioceses cooperate and coordinate their marriage enrichment offerings. The focus group couples specifically asked for parenting classes, recognizing the impact of parenting on the marriage relationship.⁷²

A parish setting for marriage programs also makes it possible to include the witness of other married couples in the parish, both as participants and as program leaders. The living witness of other married couples can strengthen parish-based ministry to marriage. With appropriate direction and resources, parish leaders can train experienced married couples to offer marriage enrichment. Veteran family life minister Winnie Honeywell describes how “friends who believe in marriage” can be “marriage-savers,” particularly seasoned couples

⁷¹ Rubio, 202.

⁷² USCCB Office of Media Relations. “Teaching On Marriage Permanence Aids Couples, Say Focus Groups.” (Washington, DC, June 12, 2006) <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2006/06-119.shtml> (accessed May 10, 2011).

who have lived through the parenting experience: “We are convinced that no couple can live their vows of lifelong love and fidelity all by themselves – nor should they even try.”⁷³

Continuing Marriage Preparation

More than 80% of couples seeking to be married in the Catholic Church participate in a marriage preparation program, but many have not attended a formal faith formation program since then.⁷⁴ The *National Directory for Catechesis* recommends marriage enrichment that integrates knowledge of the faith with the lived experience of the participants that helps them recall the symbols, rituals and prayers contained in the rites of the sacraments.⁷⁵ This program is needed because pre-wedding catechesis is insufficient to nourish marriages over the long haul.

The USCCB pastoral handbook, *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes*, recommends catechetical and enrichment programs that include opportunities for young parents to learn and explore the significance of the sacraments they have received. This should include reflection on how to apply the meaning of Scripture and Catholic tradition to daily life as disciples of Jesus Christ. This includes teaching young couples to celebrate rituals, to develop patterns of ritual celebrations at home and to experience a variety of prayer styles and practice them.⁷⁶

⁷³ Winnie Honeywell, “With a Little Help from Our Friends” on *For Your Marriage* website, USCCB Committee for Marriage and Family <http://foryourmarriage.org/with-a-little-help-from-our-friends> (accessed June 19, 2010).

⁷⁴ USCCB, Committee on Marriage and Family, “A Select Snapshot of Marriage in the U.S.” (May 2005) <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/marrsnapshot.shtml> (accessed March 15, 2010).

⁷⁵ USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), sec. 35 B.

⁷⁶ USCCB, *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes*, 4.

The grace of the Sacrament of Marriage needs cultivation if it is not to remain, as *Casti connubii* puts it, “an unused talent hidden in the field.”⁷⁷ As it continues the catechesis for marriage begun remotely in childhood and immediately in marriage preparation, Catholic marriage enrichment in the early parenting years has the potential to assist the couple in deepening their understanding of the nature of Christian marriage when children come, a time when they may seek support from the Church. Catholic ministry to young parents can continue the process of mystagogy, helping them build upon the sacramental foundations of their Christian family: their own baptism, their marriage and the baptisms of their children.⁷⁸

Family counselor Anthony Garascia says the marriage relationship must be re-imagined when children arrive if the marriage is to remain vital and successful. He counsels couples to “take the bull by the horns and solve your transitional crisis. As you do you will begin to understand that a strained friendship can be renewed, that you can have renewed passion for each other, that you can really be there for the other and that your partnership will be stronger.”⁷⁹ Even years after the wedding and into the parenting years, liturgical catechesis on the rites of marriage and baptism can give the couple a new way of imagining themselves.

Resources for Marriage Enrichment for Parents

Even when parishes are aware of the need, when they look for programs to use for this ministry they will find little from which to choose. A review of the currently available

⁷⁷ *Casti connubii*, no. 41.

⁷⁸ Kathleen Hughes, *Saying Amen: A Mystagogy of Sacrament* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 8.

⁷⁹ Anthony Garascia, *Rekindle the Passion While Raising Your Kids*. (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2000), 218.

programs, both religious and secular, revealed few examples that addressed both vocations of a married couple. Most programs currently available focus either on the couple relationship or on the parent-child relationship, but not on both simultaneously. However, valuable information for planning marriage enrichment can be gained by examining common features of such programs.

Many secular “marriage education” programs are really addressed to any couple, married or unmarried. Couples’ programs that are effective tend to be highly structured, focusing on teaching specific skills, including communication, problem solving, adaptability, and conflict resolution. They also teach the importance of commitment, love, forgiveness, and friendship.⁸⁰ Some examples of this type are *Active Marriage* (Simpson, 2003),⁸¹ *PAIRS Essentials* (Gordon, 1983),⁸² and *Couple Communication* (Miller, et al, 2007).⁸³

Most faith-based marriage programs mirror the couple-centered focus of the secular models. They work on the couple relationship, rather than on the whole family system. They often are held away from the parish site and fail to involve the couple in a supportive faith community. *Marriage Encounter* is the most prominent example of such a couple-focused program. The *Marriage Encounter* weekend retreats teach participants a communication

⁸⁰ School of Family Life, Brigham Young University. *Forever Families* website. <http://foreverfamilies.byu.edu/Article.aspx?a=60> (accessed May 10, 2011).

⁸¹ Active Marriage. (Dallas, TX: Active Relationships. Inc.) www.activerelationships.com (accessed May 10, 2011).

⁸² PAIRS. (Weston, FL: PAIRS Foundation) www.pairs.com (accessed May 6, 2011).

⁸³ Couple Communication. (Evergreen, CO: Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc.) www.couplecommunication.com (accessed May 6, 2011).

technique but do not have an explicit parish connection. Although these couples may join a circle of community support, most couples never reconnect with the other participants.⁸⁴

This project found only a few popular programs that contain elements that address both the marriage and parenting relationships. A marriage program that is parish-based and also pays attention to the parenting vocation is *Living in Love*, a Catholic retreat program. Besides teaching communication skills, decision making and the Theology of the Body, *Living in Love* addresses “formation of the family.” An 8-week follow-up series at the parish teaches practical life skills.⁸⁵ *Living in Love* reminds couples of the grace and responsibilities of the sacraments, especially Matrimony and Baptism, for strengthening the family.

A skill-based program that is the basis for both a parenting program and a Christian marriage education program is the *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* (PREP) (Markman and Stanley, 1984).⁸⁶ The PREP communication skills do not require special leader training or professional facilitation. PREP offers a faith-based, easy-to-teach communication skill that could be used in a parish workshop. The Christian version of PREP, *A Lasting Promise*, adds prayer and reflection on Scripture to the relationship skills of the

⁸⁴ *Worldwide Marriage Encounter*. (San Bernardino, CA: Worldwide Marriage Encounter, Inc.). www.wwme.org (accessed May 10, 2011).

⁸⁵ *Living in Love*. (Southeast PA: Pastoral and Matrimonial Renewal Center). www.livinginlove.org (accessed May 10, 2011).

⁸⁶ *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program*. (Greenwood Village, CO) www.prepinc.com (accessed May 10, 2011).

secular program.⁸⁷ *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows* also uses the same PREP Speaker-Listener Technique.⁸⁸

Similarly, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine recommends that parenting education support “close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, responsive interaction, and encouragement for exploration.”⁸⁹ Although the marital status of parents is not a factor for participation in these parenting programs, they promote stable home life for children’s well-being.⁹⁰

Two parenting programs that nurture the stability of the parent relationship also promote child welfare and recognize the interconnectedness of family relationships, echoing the Catholic vision for families. The first, *Parenting, the Early Years*, emphasizes parents’ personal growth in Christian virtues that may filter down to impact the children.⁹¹ Participants learn to cultivate “Ten Traits” that will strengthen their skills in parenting.⁹² The other program is *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, by John Gottman. Parents can best help their children, Gottman says, by minimizing their children’s exposure to destructive conflict: “High levels of parental conflict create emotional distress in children and decrease

⁸⁷ Scott Stanley, et al., *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

⁸⁸ Pamela Jordan, et al., *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), 21-39.

⁸⁹ University of Richmond, *Solutions for America: Healthy Families and Children* (2003) <http://www.solutionsforamerica.org/healthyfam/parent-education.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Les and Leslie Parrott, *Parenting the Early Years: Ten Biblical Traits Your Children Will Remember You For* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007). Video program provided by Bluefish TV, www.bluefishtv.com

⁹² Les and Leslie Parrott, *The Parent You Want to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 37.

effective parenting skills.”⁹³ Gottman’s marriage relationship books, including *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (1999) and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (1994), are good resources for building a marriage program that addresses the interconnected relationships of the spouses and their children.

All the relationship education programs investigated for this project incorporate training in skills for communication, conflict resolution, building intimacy and family values. Each enrichment program that was reviewed for this project included learning to listen to the other and to express one’s thoughts clearly. The reviewed programs use interactive education methods, and they typically promote respect for the human dignity of each person and the belief that skills to enhance relationships can be learned.

Obstacles to Marriage Ministry

Although the need for marriage enrichment is clear and couples speak of the need for it, many pastoral ministers who try to offer programs find participation “underwhelming.” In many dioceses, Marriage Encounter struggles to fill their weekends, and parish programs are regularly cancelled for lack of registrations. Marriage ministry for parents is needed, but it cannot reach couples if they will not attend. The failure of many programs to attract couples could be linked to the fact that they focus on the marriage relationship alone, rather than addressing the couples’ responsibilities as parents.

Research into the causes of low attendance in marriage enrichment has shown that marriage enrichment may be seen as a potential invasion of privacy or an admission that a

⁹³ John Gottman, “Emotional Keys for Successful Parenting” (Seattle, WA: Gottman Research Institute, 2011) <http://www.gottman.com/51164/Research-on-Parenting.html> (accessed June 3, 2011).

marriage is in trouble. Couples who participated in the National Pastoral Initiative focus groups agreed that some couples are reluctant to participate in such programs.⁹⁴

Programs also suffer from the perception that marriage enrichment programs are "feel good" experiences that might help briefly but do not help in the long run. According to *Forever Families*, a resource website for marriage and parenting programs, "Some people feel it is not proper to share their marital issues with anyone outside the marriage or to participate in an educational setting where others might see that they need help."⁹⁵

To investigate reasons for low attendance in marriage enrichment programs, Lisen C. Roberts and Michael Morris evaluated factors potentially associated with couples' decisions about attending. Their survey of 235 spouses regarding influences on their attendance decision (142 of whom participated in a marriage enrichment seminar, and 93 of whom did not) identified "time" was the most influential attendance constraint, followed closely by fear of invasion of privacy, discovery of problems, "lack of interest," and "lack of information about the seminar." The study found that marriage enrichment is sometimes misunderstood to be therapeutic rather than skill building.⁹⁶

Roberts and Morris discovered that couples were more likely to attend a program if they received clear information about the content and knew something about the presenter from the advertising and promotional materials: "In many ways, family life educators are 'the

⁹⁴ USCCB Committee for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, "Focus Groups with Middle Years Couples" (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005). <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/middle.shtml> (accessed May 9, 2011).

⁹⁵ School of Family Life, Brigham Young University. *Forever Families* website, <http://foreverfamilies.byu.edu/Article.aspx?a=60> (accessed May 10, 2011).

⁹⁶ Lisen Roberts and Michael Lane Morris, "An Evaluation of Marketing Factors in Marriage Enrichment Program," *Family Relations Journal*--vol. 47 (1998): 38. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/584849> (accessed May 15, 2011).

program itself” as they often are the ones primarily responsible for selecting and using resources and materials as well as designing, implementing, and interpreting the evaluation of outcomes from family life education programs.”⁹⁷

Key Elements for Success

Offering a marriage program that expressly engages married couples as parents can be an effective “hook” to catch these young adults and minister to their marriages. By moving the spotlight off of the couple’s relationship, this project offers guidance for parenting which has the potential to attract better participation than ordinary marriage programs that urge couples to “work on their relationship.”

To succeed, programs for marriage enrichment need to be as family-friendly and hospitable as possible, qualities that the parish setting can offer readily. Parishes have the facilities and volunteers to provide a comfortable setting for marriage enrichment. Guided by parish policies and supported by appropriate training, parish members can assist with child care for the participants.

Parishes need to offer ministry that addresses young parents’ felt needs, fits into their busy schedules, and teaches them ideas and skills they can put into practice in their daily lives. Programs and events should be part of a fabric of ministry that also includes good liturgy, preaching, and opportunities to serve others. Parishes need ideas and tools to help this group develop a network of support that will sustain their spiritual growth.

Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan identifies specific areas of growth that can be promoted in enrichment programs for married couples: “Maintaining the common

⁹⁷Roberts, 40.

courtesies—persevering in fidelity, kindness, communication, and mutual assistance—can become a deep expression of conjugal charity. It means growing in a love that is far deeper than a romantic feeling.”⁹⁸ Those same character qualities can improve the parent-child relationship.

An effective marriage enrichment program should teach spouses ways to practice cooperating with each other that can also help them relate more lovingly and effectively with their children. This project aimed to create an interactive, spiritually enriching program, in a comfortable setting with their peers, in which participants could experience the fruits of the connection between their marriage and their parenting that Catholic tradition has defended.

Summary

This project is needed as a resource for parishes to nourish the faith of young married parents whose culture has ceased to value marriage and parenting. Recognizing the normal stresses that children bring to a couple’s relationship, parishes need practical programs that demonstrate their support for these parents, to the benefit of the whole Church. Currently available marriage and parenting programs teach insights and skills that are valued by both Church and society. Although few address marriage and parenting at the same time, understanding strengths of these programs can guide program development. To attract parents to such programs, parish ministers need to understand the obstacles that cause low participation in such programs and address these challenges creatively.

⁹⁸ *Leaders’ Guide*, MLLDP, 68.

CHAPTER 3

PROJECT DESIGN

The project consisted of four workshops for young married couples that also addressed their vocation as parents. The key themes that became the content for workshop series were based on the research on marriage and parenting programs described in Chapter 2. Each workshop focused on a distinct topic aimed at engaging the participants in the life of faith rooted in baptism. This chapter describes the design of the plans for marketing, the leader directions, presentation outlines, participant handouts, and the evaluation tool for conducting the workshop series.

Guidance for the Design

The project took its cues from the pastoral letter on adult faith formation, *Our Hearts Were Burning*, which calls for integration of life experience in combination with “the study of Scripture, and the teaching of the Church's tradition” to create a “vibrant learning environment.”⁹⁹ Guided by *Our Hearts Were Burning*, this program aimed to help spouses to explore “the core elements of Catholic faith and practice” as they relate to married life with children. Rather than try to teach tricks to make children behave, the program invited parents into “a Catholic way of life” in a way that is accessible to

⁹⁹ OHWB, 66.

adults and relates to their life experiences, “helping them to form a Christian conscience and to live their lives in the world as faithful disciples of Jesus.”¹⁰⁰

Planning for Success

Collaboration with the pastoral staff members of the host parishes was essential for the program, since it is the parish community that will continue the care of the families who participate. Parish cooperation was also needed for arranging for appropriate facilities, child care, and publicity for the program.

Planning took into account insights from Roberts and Morris' research on participation in marriage programs (detailed in Chapter 2) in regard to the importance of the tone and message in the advance publicity the success of a marriage enrichment program.¹⁰¹ To allay fears that the program would be intrusive, disclosure of personal information was kept to a minimum. To maximize inclusion of as many couples as possible, couples did not need to be members of the parish, nor did both spouses need to be Catholics.

The researcher for this project, who also served as the leader for the workshops, took care to clearly communicate the characteristics of the target audience in the promotional materials and program title: *Married...with Children: Wisdom and Grace for Parenting*. The participants could decide for themselves if the program was aimed at them. Advertising for the program let participants know who was invited, what would be provided, and what participation would cost.

¹⁰⁰ OHWB, 65.


¹⁰¹ Roberts, 40.

Marketing

Publicity materials included email announcements, signs, and flyers to download and print. Staff at the host parishes helped to publicize the workshop series in parish publications, using these publicity materials. Staff members in the neighboring parishes were contacted and asked to invite more couples. Staff at host parishes also announced the program at parish events and weekend liturgies.

Since the target audience was young adult parents who are married and attend Mass, at least on some occasions, publicity was

limited to parish communications channels. Announcements and advertising for the program included the program flyer (Figure 1). The promotional flyer communicated the following information:



Married...with Children:
Wisdom and Grace
for Parenting

Four Lenten Sundays at St. John's
March 13, 20, April 3, 10, 2011

6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Four enriching sessions for couples with
 Mrs. Lauri Przybysz
COORDINATOR FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE, ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE
 CHILD CARE AVAILABLE BY THE PARISH!

Topics: Communication, Conflict Resolution, Respecting Differences, Spirituality

Pope John Paul II called children the "Cross and Crown" of their parents. Experienced parents know just what he means. Your children have a major impact on your marriage, and your marriage has a major impact on your children. Learn how your family can make that impact a blessing.

Cost: \$15/family for child care, if needed

Pre-registration required: Call 410-547-5420 or 410-544-6238

Figure 1. Promotional flyer for workshop series. Married parents could see that they were the target audience.

Audience. The promotional title for the program, “Married...with Children: Wisdom and Grace for Parenting,” let potential participants decide if this program was aimed at them.

Time Required. The time commitment was clearly defined, with dates for the four workshops and the starting and ending times.

Accommodations. Since workshops were located on the parish campus, couples knew they would be on familiar territory. Knowing that child care was available on-site for a nominal donation, helped the parents judge if the program was accessible to them. (Child care was provided by parish members who had received the appropriate certification and training.)

Content. Titles for the individual workshops – Communication, Conflict Resolution, Respecting Differences, and Spirituality-- emphasized the practical nature of the content and aimed to reassure couples that the sessions would not be overly personal or intrusive. Details of the workshop content and process, along with directions for the leader are found later in this chapter. By emphasizing what participants would gain from attending a session, the program aimed to attract busy people who have a limited amount of free time and are practical in their choices.

Vision. Promotional flyers gave more details about the theological concept behind the program. The flyer described the program this way:

Pope John Paul II called children the “Cross and Crown” of their parents. Experienced parents know just what he means. Your children have a major impact on your marriage, and your marriage has a major impact on your children. Learn how your family can make that impact a blessing.

This text on the promotional flyer addressed young adult interests on several points:

- Quoting Pope John Paul II appealed to his popularity among young adults today.
- “Experienced parents know...” showed that the program would relate to their daily lives.
- Connecting “learning” with “blessing” described the potential benefit of attending.

Introducing the Program Leader. The Catholic University researcher was the program leader. According to Roberts and Morris’ research, confidence in the presenter may influence a couple’s attendance decision.¹⁰² When they know that the presenter is qualified, couples are more willing to attend marriage programs. The name and qualifications of the researcher appeared in the publicity. This information told potential participants that they would be learning from a married woman and Catholic family life minister with archdiocesan-level experience in coordinating programs for marriage enrichment.

Format for Workshops

Each workshop began and ended with prayer, led participants to reflect on a passage of Scripture, presented Catholic teaching and information from literature in the social sciences, and prompted participants to put their faith into practice through serving one another in the family and in the community.

To facilitate these objectives, the program followed the Social Inquiry method of “Observe, Judge, and Act” that is used the Christian Family Movement (CFM) marriage and family action groups.¹⁰³ The CFM Social Inquiry method promotes

¹⁰² Roberts, 38

¹⁰³ Christian Family Movement-USA, “Outline of a CFM Meeting.” <http://www.cfm.org/aboutcfm.html#meeting> (accessed May 28, 2011).

theological reflection on life experiences. It teaches adults to look at their situation in the family and in society, and to judge what they need to learn and how to take action in the context of Christian faith. The Social Inquiry method can be easily followed by any group of participants, does not require extensive pre-workshop homework, and leads to action based on the participants' own discovered needs. Following this method, each workshop had the following structure:

1. *Gather and Pray*. Each workshop began with a prayer found on participants' handouts (Appendices II, III, IV, and V). The opening prayer expressed the goals for the session. A ritual action provided a tactile dimension to the prayer experiences.
2. *Opening Activity*. An interactive activity helped the couples get to know each other and set the stage for the discussion to come.
3. *Reconnect and Report*. In the second, third, and fourth workshops, participants shared how they applied their learning at home.
4. *Scripture Reflection*. Prayerful reflection followed, based on a passage of Scripture related to the workshop theme. One or two faith-sharing questions were provided.
5. *Social Inquiry*. This portion of the workshop had the following components:
 - Readings: Short quotations, drawn from Catholic teaching and the writings of selected relationship experts, were provided on participants' handouts. The readings gave perspective to the issues and concepts to be discussed.

- **Introductory Presentation.** The program leader gave a short presentation based on the readings on the participants' handout.
 - **Observations.** In dyads or triads of couples, the participants were asked to tell what they saw in their own experience, according to the prompts on the participants' handout, without expressing their opinions.
 - **Discussion.** Participants compared how things are with how things should be in accord with Christian values, using questions on the handouts.
 - **Activities and Action Ideas.** Activities for the workshop and action ideas for the couples' relationships and the parent-child relationships were on the handouts. The handouts listed three or four suggestions for conversation or activities to do at home, as couples and with the children. At the end of each session, participants decided to take one or more actions.
6. *Summary.* The workshop leader reviewed key ideas and gave a preview of the next workshop.
 7. *Closing Prayer.* The closing prayer, on the handout, reinforced the key points that were taught in the workshop.
 8. *Social Time.* Time was built into the schedule for the couples to chat and socialize informally after the meeting. Refreshments were available throughout the evening.

Designing for Hospitality and Confidentiality

Each workshop was designed for a two-hour time frame. The structured portion of the workshop was 1½ hours, with thirty more minutes available for gathering and

informal conversation before and after the workshop. The researcher worked with the parish staff to create a hospitable setting. Parish staff and volunteers provided child care in another room.

Participants were not required to share personal information with the program leader or the participants. The opening and closing surveys of their self-assessed competency in marriage and parenting, as well as the program evaluations, were conducted anonymously. To facilitate this confidentiality, each couple received a folder at the first workshop with a unique Couple ID number pasted inside, and folders were distributed randomly. Each participant wrote his/her Couple ID number on both the opening and closing surveys in the spaces provided.

Designing the Skills Survey

The researcher designed a 45-item survey that asked participants to rate their competency as spouses and parents in ten categories. Directions for the survey read: “Current research on parenting skills has identified competencies that predict good parenting outcomes: a strong parent-child bond, a strong spousal relationship, and children’s happiness. How are you doing on the following tasks?” Couples rated their competency using the 5-1 Likert scale, with 5 being “strongly agree (that I practice this skill).” The surveys are Appendices I and VI.

The survey was based on the study of key parenting skills by psychologist Robert Epstein (described in Chapter 1).¹⁰⁴ For his study, Epstein used a 100-item

¹⁰⁴ Robert Epstein. “What Makes a Good Parent?” *Scientific American Mind* (November/December 2010): 46-51. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-makes-a-good-parent> (accessed November 10, 2010).

online quiz.¹⁰⁵ The survey statements for this project were modeled after some of Epstein's quiz questions, but they were modified to include statements about both the parent-child and the couple relationship in each category. This group of skills was used because the same competencies that parents need to raise their children also strengthen the parents' relationship with each other. Epstein's list of skills was also useful because they are similar to the Scripture-based traits identified by Christian parenting experts, Les and Leslie Parrot, in *The Parent You Want to Be*.¹⁰⁶

A program evaluation was included at the end of the closing survey. Participants were asked to evaluate the program by responding on a Likert scale of 5 to 1, with 5 being "strongly agree," to the following statements:

- I feel better prepared as a parent as a result of this program.
- I feel closer to my spouse because of our participation.
- This program would be valuable for other parents.

Spaces were provided for suggestions for program improvement and other comments.

The opening survey asked for each person's sex, years of marriage, ages of their boys, and ages of their girls. Also, each participant was asked to identify one thing that they hoped to learn from the program. By considering the skill statements and judging their competency, participants could become more aware of the many dimensions of family relationships and identify for themselves how they were already succeeding and how they could improve their performance. The opening survey also helped

¹⁰⁵ Robert Epstein, "Are You a Good Parent?" Epstein Parenting Competencies Inventory (EPCI), 2010. <http://myparentingskills.com/> (accessed November 10, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Les and Leslie Parrott, *The Parent You Want to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 31.

participants identify their own needs for learning and observe their present situation. On the closing survey, they were asked to mark which of the sessions they attended and to write down something new they had learned.

Couples took the survey anonymously, identified only by a Couple ID number, at the beginning of the program; then they took the same survey at the end of the program. The participants did not receive a “grade” as a result of the survey. As far as they were concerned, the survey was an exercise to help them reflect how well they practiced good parenting and marriage skills. However, the researcher compared each person’s beginning and ending self-assessments to determine whether or not participants experienced any change in their self perceptions, which she could interpret as evidence of learning. Results of the survey data analysis are found in Chapter 5, the Project Evaluation.

Tools for the Workshops

Participants’ handouts. Each couple received a two or three-page handout for each workshop. Handouts provided the prayers, short readings, questions for discussion, action steps, and resources for further reading for the session.

Leader’s directions. Detailed directions for conducting the workshops are included below. The leader’s directions give details for the materials, facilities, set up, and movement in each workshop. Notes for the short presentation are also included in the directions.

Leader's Directions: Workshop One—Communication

Workshop One presents a foundational catechesis on marriage and parenting. As such, it focuses on “communication” of the basics of Catholic teaching about relationships, both in marriage and in parenting. The program opens with reflection on the message to be communicated, then moves to practicing how to best communicate in the family. Participants discuss the “Ten Traits” that promote virtue and build character in children, from Les and Leslie Parrott’s early childhood parenting program.¹⁰⁷ Then, they discuss how their couple relationship can be strengthened when they grow in personal virtue.

Goals for Participants:

- to understand the inseparable link between marriage and children
- to identify personal strengths and goals for parenting and apply these insights to the marriage relationship
- to understand “communication” as both method and message
- to improve communication between parent and child and between spouses

Opening prayer. The “Prayer of St. Francis” introduces the concepts of Christian action in relationships.

Opening exercises. Make introductions and give housekeeping details. If they have not already done so, ask participants to complete the permission form for doctoral research. Have all take the opening survey. Explain that in this session, “Communication,” they will reflect on how God has communicated his love and direction to them, and consider how they can follow this example for themselves. In the second workshop, they will learn skills for communicating more effectively with each other and with their children.

¹⁰⁷ Parrot, p. 37.

Scripture reflection. Proclaim 1 John 4: 7-12 (If God so loved us, we must love one another). The couples share on the following questions:

1. What are the parenting traits God exhibits?
2. What insights about marriage do you hear in the reading?
3. Name a way you have experienced God's love through your spouse and through your children.

Readings. Have a volunteer read these short excerpts from the following from the handout, Appendix II.

1. *Familiaris consortio*, no.14. (Parents' love is a visible sign of God's love.)¹⁰⁸
2. *Familiaris consortio*, no. 36. (Family is the school of virtues.)¹⁰⁹
3. Les and Leslie Parrott, *The Parent You Want to Be*, "Ten Traits," p. 37. (Good parenting starts with who you are, not just what you do. Be the kind of person you want your child to become.)

Process. After reading the "Ten Traits," lead the large group in comparing these traits with the parenting skills on which they evaluated themselves in the opening survey.

Presentation notes. Christian marriage holds the unitive and procreative ends of marriage to be intimately connected. What is connected is also strong, and that strength can help both your marriage and parenting. Christian couples should reflect the Biblical character qualities that St. Paul called "the fruits of the spirit:" love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5: 22-23). These are qualities they want to have in their couple relationship, but they are also the basis for a parenting program by Christian marriage and family educators, Les and

¹⁰⁸ FC , no. 14.

¹⁰⁹ FC, no. 36.

Leslie Parrott. In *The Parent You Want to Be*, the Parrotts advise parents to grow in Christian virtue themselves in order to raise children well.¹¹⁰

Marriage education programs, whether secular or faith-based, help adults learn and practice these qualities in their couple relationship. In *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, Christian family educator Blaine Fowers describes how embracing the virtues of loyalty, generosity, justice and courage can strengthen a marriage relationship. Fowers claims that marriage education based on improving communication and increasing emotional satisfaction is not adequate. Instead, he believes that the best marriages are partnerships in which spouses are devoted to creating a shared life based on shared values.¹¹¹

Marriage educator John Gottman identified friendship as “a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other’s company.”¹¹² Based on more than thirty years of marriage research done with couples at the University of Washington in Seattle, Gottman found that the benefits of building friendship through the joint project of parenting includes a deepening knowledge between the spouses: “These couples tend to know each other intimately—they are well versed in each other’s like, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes and dreams. They have an abiding regard for each other and express this fondness not just in the big ways but in little ways day in and day out.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Parrott, 12.

¹¹¹ Blaine J. Fowers, *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), 5-6.

¹¹² John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 19.

¹¹³ Gottman and Silver, 19-20.

This kind of friendship is a trait that couples will want to build in their marriage. In building friendship, people of faith will be imitating Jesus, who calls us friends: “This I command you: love one another” (John 15: 13-17). If a married couple approaches their parenting task as a joint endeavor, they will have the opportunity to deepen and develop their marriage as a bond of friendship. As they care for and guide their children they will share the joys and support each other through difficulties.

For those who want to read more on the topic, the resources used for the presentation are cited on the participants’ handout.

Observations. Participants move into small groups and consider these questions privately.

1. What are two traits that you believe comes more easily to you.
2. What two traits come most easily to your spouse?
3. Identify two traits that you believe would make you a better parent.
4. Identify two traits that you believe make you a better spouse.

Discussion. The following questions are discussed in the small group and call for value judgments based on Christian values:

1. What could make it difficult to embody one or more of these traits?
2. What could help a parent grow in one or more of these traits?
3. How would mastery of these traits benefit one’s marriage?
4. Where do you find strength for your marriage?

Action ideas. Read aloud the following ideas for putting the session’s learning into practice with one’s children and spouse:

1. Schedule a date with your children at home to play a game together that involves conversation and imagination.
2. Go for a walk with your spouse. Share a personal dream. Share a dream you have for your child.
3. As a family, collect photos of family members, friends, or teachers (living or dead) who have communicated love to you or from whom you have learned valuable lessons about marriage and parenting. Tell the stories of

- those memories. Save the photos in an album or create a “wall of fame” display.
4. Is there another action idea you would like to try? Share with the group.

Leader’s Directions: Workshop Two--Conflict Resolution

Recognizing that their vocations as spouses and parents can be challenging, the participants explore sources of conflict and ways to address them. The theme of communication continues in the second workshop, moving into learning skills for communicating well. The workshop opens with a ritual that recalls how baptism reconciles us with God. Couples learn the PREP “Speaker-Listener Technique” for building understanding and connections with their children, and then practice the technique for dealing with conflict in their own relationship.¹¹⁴ This technique develops communication skills that promote respect, understanding, and self-expression.

Goals for Participants:

- to identify sources of conflict in families, in both marriage and parenting
- to recognize that conflict is not failure
- to practice the “Speaker Listener Technique” from the PREP relationship skills programs with the spouse
- To learn communication skills to practice at home with children and spouse

Opening prayer and ritual: In the context of the opening prayer, a bowl of holy water is passed from person to person, with each person holding the bowl for his or her neighbor. Each person makes the Sign of the Cross on his or her spouse with holy

¹¹⁴Stanley, et al., *A Lasting Promise*, 59-69.

water. The leader directs participants to recall how baptism reconciles human beings with God.

Scripture reflection. Phil. 2: 1-8 (Have the same attitude among yourselves as Christ, who humbled himself.) Lead a discussion using these questions:

1. What is the risk of practicing humility when there is a conflict in a relationship?
2. What difference does it make when the disagreeable party is your child? What is non-negotiable for you?

Readings. A short excerpt is provided on the handout (Appendix III) from each of the following sources:

1. *Follow the Way of Love.* (Your family is holy because God is at work in it.)¹¹⁵
2. John Gottman, *The Heart of Parents*, pp. 16-24. (Practicing and teaching empathy; helping children by resolving conflict in the home.)¹¹⁶

Presentation notes. The reading from *Follow the Way of Love* reminds us that God does not expect us to be perfect. We learn from the Church that families are a “domestic church,” a home where God dwells. Families have always had to deal with conflicts at home and in society, so does the Church. Sometimes we do feel overwhelmed by the challenges of living together. No family is too “broken” to be used for the Lord’s purposes.

Parents can help children deal with conflict. Relationship researcher John Gottman found that parents who helped their children manage their negative emotions

¹¹⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Follow the Way of Love: Pastoral Message to Families* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994) USCCB Web site. <http://www.usccb.org/laity/follow.shtml> (accessed July 1, 2011).

¹¹⁶ John Gottman and Joan DeClaire, *The Heart of Parents: How to Raise an Emotionally Intelligent Child* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 25.

had more successful parent-child interactions. These “emotion coaching” parents recognize when a child is upset; see the conflict as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching; listen empathetically; validate the child’s feelings; help the child find words to label the emotion he is having; and set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem at hand. According to Gottman, children who receive this response from their parents learn to calm themselves, focus their attention, and manage stress better: “When parents offer their children empathy and help them to cope with negative feelings like anger, sadness, and fear, parents build bridges of loyalty and affection.”¹¹⁷

With the help of the Christian community and appropriate pastoral care and catechesis, the “cross” of raising children can be a redemptive one. Pope John Paul acknowledged the challenges that married couples face that can lead to division in the family when he said, “There is no family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion.”¹¹⁸

Catholic marriage experts James and Evelyn Whitehead recognize that parenting is hard work, but counsel that spouses are not destined to decline into unsatisfying relationships when children are in the picture: “Being parents can call out in each of us qualities of generosity and inventiveness that make us even more loveable to one another.”¹¹⁹ Parents can choose how they will respond to the challenge. In the

¹¹⁷ Gottman and DeClaire, 16-24.

¹¹⁸ FC, no. 21.

¹¹⁹ James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Stages on the Journey of Christian Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 154.

process, each person can gain maturity and each can grow in appreciation of the other's developing abilities.

Observations. Small groups share on the following questions:

1. What are some sources of conflict you experience with your children?
2. What are some sources of conflict that married couples may encounter?
What similarities and differences do you notice?
3. What helps you calm down and focus your attention?
4. What are some non-verbal ways to show empathy?

Discussion. Small groups discuss the following, from their own experiences:

1. What could be the outcome if one dismisses another's feelings or fails to listen?
2. How far should a parent go in accommodating a child's point of view?
3. What steps can adults take to communicate more safely with each other?

Activity. Teach the group the "Speaker Listener Technique." This technique offers a way to communicate when issues are hot or sensitive or likely to get that way.

- Any conversation in which you want clarity and safety can benefit from this technique. Most couples do not have good skills or techniques for protecting all the wonderful aspects of marriage from the conflicts and disagreements that will inevitably arise as they become parents.
- This is a practical skill you can use as your family grows: "One of the most important things you can do to be a great parent is to work to make your relationship with your partner the best it can be. A healthy marriage goes a long way to creating healthy adults and healthy children."¹²⁰

¹²⁰Jordan, et al., 1.

Directions for Teaching the Speaker-Listener Technique:

Rules for Both of You

- The speaker has the floor. Use a real object as the floor.
- Share the floor. Take turns being Speaker and Listener.
- Don't engage in problem solving

Rules for the Speaker

- Speak for yourself. Use "I" statements.
- Don't go on and on. Limit yourself to just a sentence or two.
- Stop and let the Listener paraphrase.

Rules for the Listener

- Paraphrase what you hear. Briefly repeat what you heard, using your own words. If the paraphrase is not right, the Speaker should gently clarify. You may ask for clarification, but not about other aspects of the issue unless you have the floor.
- Don't rebut. Focus on the Speaker's message. You may not offer your opinions (including gestures or making faces) until you have the floor. Your task is to understand.

Figure 2: Rules for the Speaker-Listener Technique found in participant handout for Workshop Two

1. Have couples find space in the room to talk comfortably one-on-one with their spouse.
2. Describe the "Floor" (any ordinary object that the participants will pass back and forth as they take turns in the roles of Speaker and Listener). The researcher chose to use refrigerator magnets for the "Floor."
3. Instruct everyone to look at the rules for the "Speaker Listener Technique" in their participant handout, Figure 2, above.
4. Each pair chooses a speaker to go first.
5. Assign a topic that is not controversial, i.e., your favorite vacation ever.
6. Practice, with each person getting one turn as Speaker.
7. Assign another topic and practice with each person getting at least one turn.¹²¹
8. For those who want to learn more about conflict resolution and communication, the reference for *Becoming Parents* is on the participant handout.

¹²¹ Jordan, et al., 39.

Actions to do at home:

1. Invite your child to practice the Speaker-Listener technique with you. Choose a non-confrontational topic of interest to either of you, i.e., an interesting thing that happened today; his/her idea for a great vacation, sports, a story in the news, etc.
2. Practice the speaker-listener technique as a couple.
3. Do an act of kindness for your child and spouse that does not involve words.

Leader's Directions: Workshop Three - Respecting Differences

In the context of their vocation as married parents, the participants reflect on appreciating the unique qualities of each individual and how differences are sometimes culturally conditioned and sometimes innate. They focus on a difference that they experience as spouses and as the parents of children: gender difference. They view and discuss the USCCB video, *Made for Each Other*, on gender complementarity.

Discussion after the video leads parents to identify unique gifts and qualities of men and women, both in their children and in themselves, while respecting equality and mutuality in marriage.

Goals for Participants:

- to recognize and value each person's unique gifts
- to reflect on the importance of gender in each person's unique identity
- to identify cultural attitudes that impact respect for others
- to choose an action to do at home that celebrates unique qualities of family members

Activity. Instruct participants to follow directions on the handout and create a container, or "earthen vessel," out of modeling clay or compound that is provided. Each person will create their vessel differently, and each vessel will be unique. The presentation will

point this out, and the image of a potter appears in the video presentation. Participants personalize the container in some way and give it to their spouse.

Scripture reflection. Proclaim 1 Cor. 12: 6-11. (God gives diverse gifts, all for the benefit of the individual and the community.) Share on these questions:

1. In your child, what have you observed as a special gift or personal quality?
2. In your spouse, what personal quality do you admire?

Introduce the workshop theme: Each person has been given different gifts by God for the benefit of others. In our children, we recognize these differences. We recognize the differences between our spouse and ourselves. In this session, we will focus on a basic, observable difference between persons: gender.

Readings. Have volunteers read the short excerpts of the following resources on their handout, Appendix IV:

1. *Familiaris consortio*, no. 22. (Equality of the sexes)¹²²
2. *Familiaris consortio*, no. 65. (on Gal. 5: In Christ, no differences that diminish human dignity)¹²³
3. James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Wisdom of the Body*, p. 119. (Gender is an obvious and valuable difference.)¹²⁴

Presentation notes. The clay vessels we made and gave to each other remind us of God, the potter who has shaped each of us as his perfect creation, made for a purpose.

Although we are all different, each person is a good and beautiful creation of God.

While people may hold different views about the roles of men and women, Catholic

¹²² FC, no. 22.

¹²³ FC, no. 65.

¹²⁴ James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Wisdom of the Body: Making Sense of Our Sexuality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 119.

tradition describes male-female difference as a mystery, similar to the way God is a mystery. We are not called to figure God out, but to live in relationship with God, and this can be a model for how we live with our differences—gender and otherwise.

According to David Cloutier, a Catholic ethicist, “Loving human relationships are alive in a certain way, growing and developing, allowing us to enter into the unanticipated and unknown.”¹²⁵ He recommends caution about viewing all gender differences as culturally conditioned and distinguishes between creative and destructive differences. This caution can be extended to how we respect one another’s unique qualities.¹²⁶

Observations. With the large group, provide the following information:

1. What is the essential difference between the sexes that is not shaped by culture?
2. Name some commonly held attributes of masculinity and femininity.
3. Name qualities that men and women share in their humanity.
4. Name a way that you “compliment” your spouse.

Introduce the Video Reflection: “In your marriage, you demonstrate the complimentary natures of male and female. Understanding the dignity of each person, male or female, can help parents appreciate the unique gifts and talents of each of their children.

Reflect on the Church’s teaching by viewing the video, *Made for Each Other*.¹²⁷ As you watch, consider how this applies to your boys and girls as they grow up.” (12 min.)

Discussion. After the video, discuss in small groups:

¹²⁵ David Cloutier, *Love, Reason and God’s Story: An Introduction to Catholic Sexual Ethics* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008), 93.

¹²⁶ Cloutier, 95.

¹²⁷ USCCB, *Made for Each Other* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2009). DVD.

1. How closely do you or your children fit the common image of femininity and masculinity?
2. Could there be a problem with focusing on gender differences?
3. If your child gets married one day, what qualities would you hope for in a daughter or son-in-law?

Action ideas for the home:

1. Take time to compliment your child on a good quality you see in him or her.
2. As a family, watch a movie with a strong male or female character. Discuss how the character is a good role model.
3. Create a simple symbol of appreciation for each of your children. This could be a family activity using modeling compound, paper, or any other media you choose.

Leader's Directions: Workshop Four—Spirituality

To explore the value of approaching their marriage and their parenting role as a unified vocation, the couples reflect on the effects of the sacraments in their lives, beginning with a birthday ritual that illustrates the connection between the domestic church and the larger Church. They recall the rituals and prayers of the liturgies of the Sacraments of Baptism and Marriage, identifying common themes and continuity between the two sacraments. They will apply these insights to teaching their children to pray and to growing in their prayer life.

Goals for Participants:

- to appreciate that God is encountered in the home, especially in one's spouse and one's children, as well as in church
- to reflect on the prayers and rituals of the baptism and marriage liturgies
- to relate the themes of the liturgical prayers to moments in everyday family life
- to pray for one's spouse and family

Opening prayer. All read the short prayer from the handouts that recalls the celebration of sacraments throughout family life.

Opening activity. Give a small cupcake with a birthday candle in it to each person. The candles are lighted as the opening prayer begins. Describe how the home ritual of birthday candles recalls the baptismal candle and the celebration of new life in Christ. Explain that the domestic church has its own rituals.

Scripture reflection. Proclaim Luke 11: 1-13. (Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them to pray. He instructs them to confidently call upon God, a loving Father who will not fail to provide for their needs.) Share on the following questions:

1. According to the example Jesus gives, what is happening when someone prays?
2. In what ways can prayer be difficult?

Presentation notes. Richard Gaillardetz, a married theologian and father, defines spirituality as “the particular contour and texture of our encounter with God’s saving grace in our daily lives.”¹²⁸ As parents, we have encountered God’s grace in the Sacraments of Baptism, our own and that of our children, and Marriage. This sacramental grace is God’s help for parents. The U. S. bishops describe the spiritual responsibilities of parents this way:

While all members of the family are called to live out the foundational Christian virtues, fathers and mothers have a special responsibility for fostering these virtues within their children. They are the first to proclaim the faith to their children. They are responsible for nurturing the vocation of each child, showing by example how to live the married life, and taking special care if a child might be called to priesthood or consecrated life.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Gaillardetz, 17.

¹²⁹ MLLDP, 39.

Reflecting on the prayers of the baptismal rite reassures spouses they are not alone in their parenting task. In the rite, when the parents present the child for baptism,¹³⁰ they are charged “to make it their constant care” to pass on the faith to them.¹³¹ They trace the Sign of the Cross on their child’s forehead and are reminded that they “have been called by the Lord to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he has acquired for himself.”¹³² Seeds of faith are planted in the parents’ hearts at the time of infant baptism that can grow in the care of a loving and responsible community.

Readings. From the handout (Appendix V), participants read the prayer that is prayed when the children’s candles are lighted:

Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. These children of yours have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts. When the Lord comes, may they go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.¹³³

Direct the participants to reread the prayer to themselves as a prayer for their child today. They recall that, because of baptism, the spouses are also “children of the light.” The Church calls the parents to be grateful for the gift God has given them. From the handout, participants read the blessing that the priest or deacon prays for the parents.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Rite of Baptism for Several Children, in *Catholic Rites Today*, ed. Allan Bouley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), no. 64, 146.

¹³¹ Rite of Baptism for Several Children, no. 56, in Bouley, 154.

¹³² Rite of Baptism for Several Children, no. 47, in Bouley, 148-149.

¹³³ Rite of Baptism for Several Children, no. 64, in Bouley, 158.

¹³⁴ Rite of Baptism for Several Children, no. 70., in Bouley, 159.

Direct the parents to consider how they can draw upon these blessing throughout the parenting years.

Next, discuss the reading on the handout from the Introduction to the Rite of Marriage that calls brides and grooms to take seriously their responsibility to welcome children and bring them up in the Lord. The couple and all assembled for the wedding are reminded that the covenant of the couple is not private, but oriented toward the whole human community, beginning with their children. The Church prays in the Nuptial Blessing:

Lord, may they both praise you when they are happy and turn to you in their sorrows. May they be glad that you help them in their work and know that you are with them in their need. May they praise to you in the community of the Church, and be your witnesses in the world. May they reach old age in the company of their friends, and come at last to the kingdom of heaven. We ask this through Christ, our Lord.¹³⁵

In daily life, the prayers of our sacramental celebrations find expression in the everyday events and celebrations of the home, as we recalled with the birthday candles and cake in our opening activity. Faith formation for children has its deepest roots in these prayers that link the human and the divine in the child's experience.

Parents can grow spiritually by teaching their children to pray, says pastoral minister and pediatrician Patricia Fosarelli:

Hearing his prayers and beliefs at each age will encourage you to think about your own prayer life. Praying with him will encourage you to move beyond prayers which are most comfortable for you and to communicate with God differently....Just being a parent—experiencing the joys, concerns and sorrows of each of your child's stages—will change you in

¹³⁵ Rite of Marriage, no. 121, in Bouley, 441.

a profound way. In your effort to be the best parent you can be, you can move closer to God, the Parent of us all.¹³⁶

Reading. Have a volunteer read the excerpt from *Families Nurturing Faith* (describing occasions for prayer in the family, beginning with openness to God's presence).¹³⁷

Observations: Gather responses on the following from the large group:

1. What are all baptized people committed to do, as described in the prayers above?
2. What are some other occasions for family prayer in your home?
3. A faith practice I learned from my own parent(s) that I try to do in our home is ____.

Discussion. Small groups discuss the following:

1. As we continue to build our homes into “domestic churches,” what obstacles can we encounter?
2. What can parents do to teach their child to pray?

Activity. Spouses work together to list things for which they are thankful. Then they use a *Prayer Card Template* handout, Figure 3, to create a prayer from their list.

¹³⁶ Patricia Fosarelli, *Praying with Your Children: A Guide for Families* (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, Inc., 2003), 45.

¹³⁷ John and Nancy Trokan, *Families Nurturing Faith* (New York: Don Bosco Media, 1992), 37.

Dear God, you are the heart of our family.

I believe in your faithfulness and love.

I am thankful for all your gifts to us in our family.

I am especially thankful today for _____

Holy Spirit, with your help, I resolve to do better
with_____ Amen

Figure 3. Prayer Card Template for Couple Prayer Activity in Workshop Four. Spouses consulted privately to prepare a prayer of thanksgiving to share with their children at home.

Action ideas:

1. Teach the prayer you created to your children. Ask them to add to the list. Recite the new prayer as a family. Print and post your prayer in a place of honor in your home.
2. Tell your children the story of their baptism day.
3. As a couple, recall your wedding day. Visit a place that is special to you (i.e., where you met, where you got engaged) and make your vows again, just the two of you.
4. Invite the godparents of your child and/or your own godparents to join you for a party celebrating your special relationship.

Leader's Remarks: Inform the participants about other marriage and family enrichment opportunities the host parish has to offer. Have handouts about upcoming programs.

Invite leaders of parish family enrichment organizations to meet the parents and describe how the families can participate.

Closing survey and program evaluation: Before the final blessing, the participants take the closing survey, Appendix VI. In the closing survey, participants revisit the marriage and parenting skills from the opening survey and evaluate themselves again, after experiencing the “Married...with Children” program, on a scale of 5 to 1. The Program

Evaluation at the bottom of the closing survey asks participants to evaluate the program on a scale of 5 to 1, to name one new insight they gained, and to write comments.

Summary

This chapter described the planning and preparations for the workshops, as well as explaining the design of the survey of skills for good parenting and good marriage relationships which couples took at the start and end of the program. Leader's directions and presentation notes were supplied for each workshop, in which couples engaged in theological reflection, prayed together and as a group, practiced communication skills, and discussed in small groups how their life experiences are informed by their faith.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT EXECUTION

Chapter 4 reports the steps taken for making arrangements to run the project at two parishes, as well as the promotional efforts, registration methods, and events during the workshops. This chapter shows that married couples explored good practices and competencies for parents and spouses in four areas: communication, conflict resolution, respecting differences, and spirituality. To execute the program, the researcher assessed interest, arranged for the parish sites, publicized the program, registered participants, prepared handouts, set up meeting space and hospitality, and conducted each workshop.

Assessing interest

The researcher polled the parish faith formation leaders in the Archdiocese of Baltimore by email and in person, to determine interest in a parenting program aimed at married couples. Parish staff members asked questions about the exclusion of single parents, but they responded favorably once they understood the goals of the project. Four parish leaders expressed interest in hosting or publicizing the workshops.

Arranging for the parish sites

Two parishes decided to host the series. Parish staff scheduled the meeting spaces on the parish calendars. At Site #1, the staff person was the director of children's and family catechesis. At Site #2, the staff person was the director of adult faith formation. At both sites, the parish staff supplied refreshments for the participants and arranged for volunteers to

provide child care. All volunteers had previously received safe environment certification required by the archdiocese. The researcher collected a donation from each couple and reimbursed the parishes for their expenses. Parish leaders agreed to extend the invitation to couples from neighboring parishes.

Site #1 was a large Catholic parish in a semi-rural region of the archdiocese. Site #2 was a large Catholic parish in a suburban region of the archdiocese. The program was scheduled according to calendar considerations at each of the host parishes and the availability of the parish hosts. Site #1 decided on four sessions on Sunday evenings during Lent 2011 and ending before Easter (skipping one week due to the parish schedule). Site #2 chose four monthly sessions on Friday evenings, beginning in January 2011 and ending in May 2011 (skipping March because of the parish schedule).

Publicizing the program

The program was advertised by the parish staff members at each site. The promotional flyer described and pictured in Chapter 3 was distributed by the parish leaders at religious education classes, baptism preparation classes, and in the parish bulletin. The parish staff members and the researcher promoted the program to the parishes near the host parish.

A total of 17 couples registered, of which 10 would complete the program. Two couples said they would attend, but failed to register. Six other people called to inquire about the program. A few parents inquired about attending the program alone, rather than as a couple. The researcher explained that the program was intended to address the couple's marriage as well as their parenting. The callers were disappointed that the program was not open to all.

Registering participants

The researcher received the registrations from the couples and made follow-up phone calls to personally encourage them to attend. The researcher answered questions about the content of the program, the parish facilities, and the childcare arrangements during the phone calls. Catholic University of America Research Consent Forms were mailed by the researcher to each couple to sign and return at the first workshop.

The researcher made a point of learning participants' names. She had a personal phone conversation with one of the spouses in each couple, thanking them and making sure that all directions for the start of the program were clear. The researcher made reminder calls before each of the workshops, and she called those who missed a session to invite them back.

A profile of the couples who registered for the program is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Registered Couples

Couple #	Site #	Years Married	Ages of Boys	Ages of Girls
104	1	12	9, 6, 2	4
106	1	11	7, 9, 11, 19	
108	1	7	7, 4, 3, 1	11
110	1	10 ½	7, 5, 1	3
00	2	11 ½	10	8 ½
02	2	5		3
03	2	11	4, 2	4
04	2	7	3, 17 months	
05	2	9	15 months	5
06	2	9	8, 3	6
07	2	7	5, 4 months	
09	2	8		6
10	2	7	16 months	3 ½
11	2	14	12, 2	6
13	2	14		5
15	2	4	2	
17	2	6	Twins, 4 months	3

All the participants at Site #1 were white. At Site #2, most participants were white, except for one African American spouse and one Asian spouse. While both parishes are also have members of other races and cultures, the couples who registered for the program were not representative of the parishes' demographic makeup.

Preparing handouts

Folders for each couple contained two copies of the opening survey and one copy of the handout for Workshop One. A Couple ID Number was pasted inside the each folder. Handouts for Workshops Two, Three, and Four were distributed at their respective meetings.

Meeting space and hospitality

The researcher arrived at the parish site early enough to set up light refreshments and to finalize the room arrangement. Arrangement of the space varied according to the activities planned for each workshop.

Objects were displayed near the speaker's table as a setting for prayer. The display included photographs of couples, children, and the Holy Family, with plants and/or flowers. The prayer environment was changed for each workshop. The researcher and a volunteer helper welcomed each person as they signed in for each workshop. Name tags were supplied so that couples could meet one another, and so that the researcher could get to know them and respond to them by name during the sessions. Snacks were available.

Workshop One Outcomes -- Communication

Participants arrived at the parish site and were greeted by the researcher, the parish staff member and a volunteer helper. The parish staff member directed the participants who

had arranged for child care to deliver children to the designated room provided by the parish and to register the children according to parish policies.

Table 2: Attendance at Workshop One	
Site #1	4 couples
Site #2	13 couples

The researcher and her helper checked the couples in on the attendance sheet. Each couple received a folder. Site #2 had several walk-in participants that had not pre-registered. The helper assisted them in completing the registration form and program release forms.

Everyone was given a name tag.

As couples arrived, those who already knew each other chatted. Some couples attended because another couple had invited them, and they were introduced as they arrived and joined the group. After all were settled at the tables, the researcher introduced herself, told about her qualifications, and thanked the parish helpers. She called the group to prayer, and all read the opening prayer aloud from the handout. The prayer described the goal for the evening and asked God's blessing on the work.

After the prayer, the researcher explained that the Couple ID number inside their folders was to be written on the opening and closing survey to allow the survey responses to be compared without identifying them by name. The couples were assured that they would not be asked to disclose personal information or be judged for their questions or comments, since both surveys would be submitted anonymously. Then, all completed and returned the opening survey.

Opening survey. Couples took the survey of parenting and marriage skills. A report on the responses of all the couples who started the program and took the opening survey is

provided in Chapter 5 as part of the Project Evaluation. After the opening surveys were collected, a kick-off discussion allowed the researcher to differentiate this program from a secular program or therapeutic session. The first workshop focused on *what* parents want to communicate; they learned more about *how* to communicate in the second workshop.

Scripture reflection. After 1 John 4: 7-12 was proclaimed, the participants reflected on how we must love one another because God loved us first. The reflection questions helped the group to identify God's "parenting style"-- unconditional love that guides humankind toward maturity. This reading offered insights for the marriage relationship, which also calls the spouses to love unconditionally. When the couples were asked to name a sign of God's love to them, they spoke of their children, their mates and their own parents.

Readings. The readings from *Familiaris consortio*¹³⁸ and *The Parent You Want to Be*¹³⁹ opened the conversation about what kind of person they want their child to be. Participants said they desired to learn how to build better relationships between parent and child, and how to raise happier, healthier, better functioning children. Some expressed concerns about discipline for young children. They spoke of wanting their children to grow up to practice their faith actively. When asked to describe what "active faith" looks like, the parents spoke of kindness, gentleness, self-control, which they recognized as fruits of the Holy Spirit. When asked *what kind of spouse they want to be*, the participants named some of the same desirable traits, including attentiveness, commitment, and understanding.

After reading the "Ten Traits" on their handout, the group worked to comparing these traits with Epstein's "Parenting Skills" which had been used to design the opening survey.

¹³⁸ FC, nos. 14 and 36.

¹³⁹ Parrott, 37.

Then, they discussed how these same skills/traits are expressed between spouses. By matching the traits based on Christian virtues with the skills based on scientific research, the participants learned how elements of faith can be expressed in life experiences. Table 3 shows the two lists.

Table 3: Parenting skills related to effective marriage relationships. Epstein's list (left) is based on scientific research on parenting, and Parrott's list (right) is based on Christian character qualities.	
Epstein: "Skills"	Parrott: "Traits"
Love and affection	Building a Better Bond: Connected
Stress management	Counting to Ten: Patient
Relationship skills	Giving Praise They Crave: Affirming
Autonomy and independence	Seeing a Picture of their Future: Visionary
Education and learning	Instilling Wisdom: Insightful
Life skills	Commemorating Milestones: Celebratory
Behavior management	Keeping Your Word: Authentic
Health	Hearing What They Don't Say: Attentive
Religion	Practicing the Presence of God: Prayerful
Safety	Creating a Safe Place: Comforting

Presentation. A 10-minute presentation followed the presentation notes in the design, Chapter 3. The key themes were the strength to be found in Catholic teaching about marriage and the domestic church, the importance of growing in virtue, and the benefit of faith to both the marriage and parenting relationships.

Observations. Participants reflected silently on their own character traits and those of their spouses. They identified traits that help them to be good spouses and good parents.

Discussion. Small groups discussed and shared with the large group how these traits can be difficult to embody. They considered how one could grow in good traits, and how this growth could help both their parenting and their marriage.

Action ideas. Participants read and considered an action to do after the workshop. They could choose an activity to do with their child or with their spouse or as a whole family.

Leader's remarks and closing prayer. The researcher summarized the main points of the session. The closing prayer reinforced the message that we seek to imitate God's life-giving, patient love for children and spouse.

Social time. Time was provided for couples to connect and talk casually before departing. At both sites, couples stayed about 10 minutes to chat.

Workshop Two Outcomes-- Conflict Resolution

Table 4: Attendance at Workshop Two	
Site #1	4 couples
Site #2	9 couples

Report on actions. Two participants told the group that they had made a date with their child. One person said that she viewed their family photos with new appreciation.

Opening prayer and ritual. As part of the prayer, the participants passed a bowl of holy water from person to person, with one person holding the bowl for their neighbor. Each person made the Sign of the Cross with the holy water on his or her spouse. At both Site #1

and Site #2, the couples readily engaged in the ritual. Some participants got a little wetter than others, but everyone was prayerful.

Scripture reflection. After hearing Phil. 2:1-8 proclaimed, participants discussed what it meant to them to consider their spouse as “better than themselves.” They shared in small groups about the risks of practicing humility between themselves and their spouses. Those risks were identified as losing face, being a doormat, not standing up for one’s self, not communicating what one really means.

When considering parent/child conflict, the parents wrestled with the dilemma of respecting the child’s views while maintaining the kind of authority they felt they needed to guide the child responsibly. One father told the story of finding the words to apologize to his daughter when he had misjudged her. On the question of what was non-negotiable with children, matters of safety and the child’s well-being were key issues. The parents said they wanted their child to recognize that they, the adults, loved them even when they had conflict. The couples recognized that this unconditional love is also what they need in their marriage.

Readings from Follow the Way of Love and John Gottman’s *Heart of Parenting* spoke of the challenging side of relationships in the domestic church. Guidance on resolving conflict and remaining calm in emotional situations were suggested in the readings.

Observations and discussion. Couples shared in small groups about sources of conflict they experienced with their children. Some responses included conflict about cooperation, different styles of thinking and working, following directions, and respecting their parents and siblings. When they considered their couple relationships, the adults identified how their sources of conflict were similar to those they experienced as parents. The

small groups and the researcher traded tips for remaining calm in stormy conversations and ways to show empathy non-verbally.

Participants learned and practiced the “Speaker-Listener Technique.” The spouses moved their chairs and chose a location in the room where they could sit facing one another, with a little distance between the pairs. They received a refrigerator magnet, “the Floor,” and followed the leader’s directions for taking turns speaking (sharing the Floor), reflecting, listening, and clarifying. Two rounds of speaking and listening were practiced, each with a different topic.

Action ideas for home. Couples were encouraged to practice the “Speaker-Listener Technique” with their mate and with their children. They were asked to notice how practicing the technique with the spouse helped them practice it with the child. They were also encouraged to practice non-verbal ways of communicating discussed in the session.

The *Closing prayer* summarized the workshop’s main points about respecting one another with an attitude of humility as we grow into Christ in our homes.

Social time. About half of the couples stayed in the workshop room and visited after they had collected their children from the parish volunteers.

Workshop Three - Respecting Differences

Table 5: Attendance at Workshop Three	
Site #1	4 couples
Site #2	7 couples

Opening activity. People had fun creating the “earthen vessel” using clay-colored modeling compound provided. The researcher explained that the idea of the activity was to

demonstrate how each person approaches a task differently but with results of equal value.

She mentioned that the image of the potter would be echoed in the video later in the session.

Opening prayer. As a preamble for the workshop theme on valuing the unique qualities of each person, the group prayed Ps. 139:1-14, which speaks of God's love and care for each individual, whom God has known intimately since before birth.

Report on actions. In the Site #1 group, which was smaller, couples were able to continue to work on the activity while reporting to the group. One couple shared how they had practiced the "Speaker Listener Technique" with their nine-year-old. Three of the four couples had put the "Floor" magnet on their refrigerators. At Site #2, the larger group did not report on actions until the researcher asked a second time, after the opening prayer. Three couples said that they had tried the "Speaker Listener Technique" at home.

Scripture reflection. After 1 Cor. 12:6-11 was proclaimed, the group reflected on the gifts that they observed in their children and in their spouses. The leader directed them to notice that each person has unique personal characteristics that build up the Body of Christ.

Observations. The participants named positive personality qualities they admire in people, which the researcher recorded on a newsprint chart. The participants practiced affirming one another verbally and intentionally. They were invited to lean close to their spouse and privately tell them one quality that they had noticed and admired in him or her. Two blank pages were posted on the wall next to the list of personal characteristics. The leader introduced the topic of "gender" as the difference that would be the focus of the video they would see in the workshop.

The group was asked to list qualities that society labels as "masculine" and "feminine." While all participants recognized that men and women have real differences, a

comparison of these lists with the original character qualities list yielded the conclusion that that gifts and good qualities spanned the gender differences.

Readings. Three short readings illustrated Catholic teaching about gender complementarity. *Familiaris consortio* (no. 22) specifically affirms the equality of the sexes. *Familiaris consortio* (no. 65) reflects on Gal. 5 and reminds us that Christian discipleship transcends gender, class, or race. An excerpt from *The Wisdom of the Body* spoke of gender, an obvious difference, affirming that this difference is important and valuable.

Presentation. The researcher explained that freedom comes from following Catholic teaching on sexuality, based on notes from *Love, Reason and God's Story*.¹⁴⁰ The participants then viewed the DVD, *Made for Each Other*, which uses the recurring image of a potter creating a beautiful jar.¹⁴¹ The video includes a recurring theme of a potter forming a pot into a beautiful object with a purpose. Participants were asked to consider, as they watched the video, how gender complementarity applies to their children.

Discussion. After the video, the group discussed culturally conditioned attitudes regarding femininity and masculinity. They recognized that there are real differences between boys and girls that seem to be innate, differences they appreciate in their spouses. The discussion question, "How closely do your children fit the common image of femininity and masculinity?" made a few participants a bit anxious, since it raised the issue of gender identity. Couples wanted to talk about helping their children achieve a clear gender identity in an age that often says gender differences are only culturally conditioned. The group

¹⁴⁰ Cloutier, 93.

¹⁴¹ *Made for Each Other*, 2009.

wanted to avoid stereotyping boys and girls and limiting girls, especially, to only certain roles. However, they wanted to guide their boys and girls toward healthy sexual maturity. The last discussion question, “What qualities do you hope for in a son- or daughter-in-law one day?” lightened the mood. Both groups were animated in naming the qualities of their children’s future spouses.

Actions to do at home. The couples were instructed to give affirmation to their children. They were encouraged to watch a movie with a strong male or female character and discuss how the character is a good role model. The participants suggested movie titles, including the Disney movie, *Mulan*.¹⁴² Additional modeling compound was offered to each couple to take home and make an “earthen vessel” with their children. Every couple took some home.

Closing prayer and social time. The themes of the workshop--that each individual is shaped by God for a purpose and that an important task of parents is to make the family a safe place to become who we are—were echoed in the prayer. At Site #1, couples did not stay afterward, due to the winter weather. At Site #2, couples stayed about 10 minutes to visit with each other.

Workshop Four – Spirituality

Table 6: Attendance at Workshop Four	
Site #1	5 couples (one walk-in)
Site #2	6 couples

¹⁴² Walt Disney Feature Animation, *Mulan*, Burbank, CA, 1998.

Opening prayer and ritual. The candles on the cupcakes were lighted while the leader invited the couples to recall the candle they received at their child's baptism and the Easter candle. The researcher explained the concept of the Christian family as the domestic church.

Scripture reflection. The group continued in a prayerful mode, listening to the proclamation of Luke 11:1-13, in which Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them to pray. The groups wanted to talk about what to say to children when prayer seems to go unanswered. They recognized ways in which God does answer prayer. They also discussed ways to pray as a couple.

Report on actions. No one had watched a movie with a male or female role model between the sessions. However, a mother spoke of intentionally affirming good behavior in her challenging four-year-old. She remarked that she was prompted to do this because of the previous workshop.

Presentation. The 15-minute presentation included group participation in reflecting on the ritual prayers from the sacraments of baptism and marriage and applying the prayers in everyday circumstances.

Readings. The group was asked to silently consider the short reading from *Families Nurturing Faith*, which describes occasions for prayer in the family. Then they shared about their own experiences of prayer in the home.¹⁴³

Observations. When asked to name a prayer practice they learned from their own parents, participants spoke of Christmas and Easter holiday customs, praying the Rosary on

¹⁴³ John and Nancy Trokan, *Families Nurturing Faith: A Parent's Guide to the Grade School Years* (New York: Don Bosco Media, 1992), 37.

family car trips, and bedtime and meal prayers. This question also led the group at Site #2 to speak of how they had learned from their children how to pray in simple ways. One young mother taught the group a prayer she learned from her six-year-old that uses finger motions to illustrate how we pray for ourselves and others.

Discussion. The groups were asked to identify obstacles they have encountered in being “domestic churches.” They named negative messages from media and neighbors or family members with values that do not support theirs. Several people said that they wanted to try the examples of family prayer they had heard in the groups.

Couple prayer activity. After the discussion, spouses worked privately to list of things for which they are thankful. They used the *Prayer Template* described in Chapter Three to create prayers from the lists. They took the completed prayer home to pray with their children. This activity proved to be very popular. Couples took longer than the researcher expected them to take, enjoying the intimacy of the private sharing.

Leader’s remarks. The researcher reminded participants of upcoming marriage and family enrichment opportunities each host parish had planned. At Site #1, the parish staff member announced a monthly family enrichment group that was being organized. At Site #2, some of the participants already belong to a monthly family-centered couples’ group. They announced their next meeting and invited the other participants to consider joining them.

Closing survey. The couples took the skills survey again and completed the program evaluation. The activity was somewhat rushed at both sites. This was probably due to the length of the presentation (five minutes more than in the other workshops) and the extra time the researcher allowed for the prayer activity, since the couples enjoyed it so much. An

analysis of the responses of couples who attended the fourth workshop is found in Chapter 5, the Project Evaluation.

Closing prayer. The prayer, a blessing adapted from the marriage rite, was well received by the couples.

Social time. Even though the workshop ran a little long, couples still stayed and visited with each other and with the researcher. They offered suggestions and comments on the program, described in the next chapter, the Program Evaluation.

Summary

The series of four workshops was run two parish sites following the program design. At Site #1, all the couples who began the program attended all the workshops and completed the closing survey. Site #2 registered more couples than Site #1 but saw a drop off in attendance over the course of the program. Couples participated energetically in the small group discussions and were attentive and engaged during the prayer and presentation.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Chapter 5 discusses how well the goals of the project were met. Those goals include providing enrichment workshops based on Catholic teaching that addressed marriage and parenting together, presenting topics that mattered to couples, attracting participants, connecting young married parents to their parish communities, and helping these couples improve their competency in specific parenting and marriage skills. The effectiveness of the program was evaluated based on a comparison of the results of the opening and closing survey, couples' written and verbal responses, and on the researcher's observations. This chapter also suggests ways that the project could be improved.

Providing Enrichment through Catholic Teaching

Evangelization specialists Frank DiSiano and Ken Boyack suggest that pastoral ministers evaluate evangelization programs in three areas: “(1) fidelity to the command of Jesus, (2) fidelity to the implementation process, and (3) through obtaining and analyzing measurable results.”¹⁴⁴ This project can be evaluated in these areas.

First, in concert with the message and mission of Jesus, this project presented the Church's vision for marriage to inspire, encourage, and educate the participating couples. The project showcased the strengths for family life that the couples could draw upon from the Church's teaching of the importance of the unitive and procreative ends of marriage.

¹⁴⁴ Frank DiSiano and Ken Boyack, *Commentary and Planning Guide for Personal, Parish, and Diocesan Planning for Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, DC: Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association, 1993). 87.

Couples reflected on key sections of Church documents, including *Familiaris consortio*, *Follow the Way of Love*, and *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*. They also reflected on Baptism and Marriage, the sacraments at the heart of the domestic church. Based on the participants' discussions during the sessions, the researcher observed that the selected readings from these documents did help the participants understand how Catholic teaching supported them in their vocation.

The project followed the framework recommended in *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes* for creating parish programs for young families, described in Chapter 2.¹⁴⁵ Each workshop provided opportunities for the couples to learn and explore the Scriptures and Catholic tradition and apply Catholic faith to daily life. In each workshop, participants celebrated rituals that they could repeat at home. They experienced a variety of prayer styles and practiced them. The gatherings allowed the spouses to enrich their own relationships and to share faith with their peers. Social time was built into the schedule to facilitate this interaction. Because parish leaders helped in welcoming and hosting the couples, participants were introduced to opportunities for involvement in parish life with their new companions.

Engaging Parents in a Learning Process

The project also followed the plans for promotion and implementation that were designed. At the first workshop, all the couples took the opening survey, in which they assessed how well they practiced skills related to good parents and good spouses. The opening survey raised the couples' awareness of what skills are valuable for parenting and marriage and created a "felt need" for learning during the program. Responses to the first

¹⁴⁵ *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes*, 4.

question on the opening survey, “What do you hope to gain from the program?” indicated that couples had come to the program with both marriage and parenting issues in mind. The participants understood that they would be working on their marriage skills at the same time as they learned about parenting.

Participants wrote that they wanted to learn how to communicate better with spouses and children, how to resolve conflict, how to understand the child who was different from them, and how to pray as a family and as a couple. Other hopes that participants listed for the program included stress management, collaboration, self-management, and life skills, each of which were competencies assessed in the skill survey. These responses, given at the very start of the first workshop, affirmed the choices the researcher had made for the content of the workshops.

Before the second workshop, the researcher reviewed these expectations to see if adjustments were needed in the original plan. On the whole, responses affirmed the original workshop design. There was interest in how to deal with defiance from their children and how to remain calm. These insights helped the researcher address these topics when she gave examples of family conflict during Workshop Two, which taught a communication skill.

Parish leaders who hosted the program were invaluable to the success of the program, providing volunteers during the session to greet couples and supervise their children at the parish facilities. The collaboration between the researcher and the parish staff members and volunteers was successful and effective. This collaboration was necessary in order to secure appropriate facilities, to offer child care, and to facilitate on-going marriage enrichment efforts in the parish. It was also helpful for the researcher to make personal phone calls to each participant before each session, reminding them and getting to know them by name. The

short scripts for presentations helped with time management and facilitated clarity in the message.

The small group discussion model allowed participants to collaborate, to teach one another from their own experiences, and to learn from their peers' strategies for living their marriage and raising their children. The Observe-Judge-Act format of the workshops made active service to spouse and children a consistent element of the program. Couples collaborated in learning by sharing their experiences, listening to the concerns of their peers, and praying for the intentions of the group.

The flexibility built into the small-group method made it possible to welcome any number of couples. This worked when only four couples came to Site #1, and it worked when a larger number of couples attended Site #2, even when some dropped out. The whole group was easily divided into smaller units for discussions.

The best part of the small group process was that the couples had the chance to tell their own stories. The other participants listened with sincere attention and empathy to each person's sharing. When someone expressed a concern or told about a challenging issue with his child, the others offered both advice and affirmation. By beginning with the parenting issues, the program created a safe environment to also talk about married life.

Connecting Couples to Parish Support

Success of the researcher's goal of connecting the young couples to their peers in the parish for future support was harder to evaluate within the scope of this doctoral project. With only four sessions, the opportunity to form a community of support for future connection was limited. However, she observed that the Site #1 couples bonded as a group.

Three of the four couples said that they had connected with each other between sessions, and they asked each other's advice about local events. The Site #2 couples were less likely to begin to form a cohesive community since they met only monthly, at best.

It will be the task of the parish leaders in the two program sites to continue the work of marriage enrichment. This researcher hoped that the parish ministers' collaboration on the project would also renew their interest in offering marriage programs, and that the participants will request more ministry from their parishes. The plans and materials designed for this project could be used and adapted by other parish ministers to build a community of peer support among the young families and other members of the parish community.

Evaluating the Project Based on Attendance

The first area that provides data for measuring results was how many people came to the program. The workshop series was successfully conducted at the two parish sites. Seventeen couples attended at least one workshop, with a total of 10 couples completing at least three of the four workshops. At Site #1, four couples attended all four workshops and completed the closing survey which included the program evaluation. One couple attended only the final workshop, invited by one of the other couples, and did not take a survey.

At Site #2, 13 couples attended at least one workshop, of which six couples attended the last session and completed the closing survey. Several explanations for this attrition should be considered. The non-finishers may have experienced less interest in the program after the first session, or their lives got too busy. Not all couples who attended the fourth workshop and completed the closing survey had attended all four workshops, but they had at least attended three of the four sessions. In any case, the design of the program allowed

couples who could attend only one of the workshops to have an enriching experience. Table 7 shows the number of Site #2 workshops each of the 13 starting couples attended.

Scheduling may have been the key factor for maintaining participation. Both sites skipped a week because of parish scheduling needs, but this lag was more of a problem for Site #2, causing a two-month gap between meetings. For the Site #2 group, the final session was held in May, after the last session of the parish religious education program. Baseball and soccer practice had begun.

Table 7. Attendance summary at Site #2. All couples at Site #1 attended all 4 workshops.

# Workshops attended	# Couples
4	4
3	2
2	3
1	4

Site #1 was offered weekly, while Site #2 was offered monthly. The weekly program was held during Lent, while the monthly program was held over the course of the winter and into the spring. The site that held the workshops closer together and avoided the springtime months (Site #1) experienced better retention of the participants. Offering the workshops closer together, during Lent, and before the weather got warm, was the more successful plan.

Measuring Self-assessment of Skills for Parenting and Marriage

The second measurable element for evaluation was the results of the survey that couples took at the start and end of the program. The survey invited participants to reflect on their lives and their vocation in concrete ways without expecting them to explain themselves to the researcher or anyone else. Participants judged themselves on how they were doing as parents and spouses. They could then decide what action to take if they saw room for improvement. By allowing participants to respond anonymously, the survey gave participants

the opportunity to rethink their opinion of their skills and consider adopting practices and attitudes proposed to them in the workshops. At the same time, the survey yielded data that the researcher could use to evaluate the effectiveness of the project.

Table 8 shows the average scores that each person who completed the program gave himself or herself at the start and at the end of the program.

Site #1	Couple #	Wife start	Wife end	Husband start	Husband end
	104	3.82	3.87	4.36	4.07
	106	3.64	3.76	3.93	3.96
	108	3.69	3.62	3.49	3.93
	110	4.18	4.62	4.16	3.71
Site #2	Couple #	Wife start	Wife end	Husband start	Husband end
	00	4.51	4.24	3.84	3.91
	02	4.07	4.51	4.11	4.20
	05	4.31	4.02	4.07	4.09
	06	4.13	4.56	4.11	4.09
	010	4.36	4.44	3.51	3.71
	011	4.49	4.27	4.29	4.27
Table 8. Average of self-assessment scores each participant gave himself or herself on the skills survey at the start and end of the program.					

Interestingly, those couples that only took the survey once (because they did not finish the workshop series) demonstrated lower self-assessment of competency in the opening survey (across all skill categories) than did the couples who completed the program. Table 9 shows how the starting scores of those who completed the program (wives averaged 4.11 and husbands averaged 3.99) compared with the scores of couples who did not finish (wives averaged 3.51 and husbands averaged 3.46).

Table 9. Comparison of starting self-assessments for all couples who registered (participants who finished the workshop series and those who did not finish the program).

Couple #	Wife start	Husband start
104	3.82	4.36
106	3.60	3.93
108	3.69	3.49
110	4.18	4.16
00	4.51	3.84
02	4.07	4.11
05	4.31	4.07
06	4.13	4.11
010	4.36	3.51
011	4.40	4.29
Average for finishers	4.11	3.99
03	3.67	3.31
04	3.18	3.20
07	3.42	3.36
09	3.73	4.16
013	3.71	3.89
017	3.09	3.20
015	3.76	3.13
Average for non-finishers	3.51	3.46

Did the couples who finished the program have stronger skills than the non-finishing group, skills that included determination to continue to improve their relationships? There was no way to tell. Not enough data exists to statistically analyze the differences between the finishers and non-finishers. It would have been helpful to include a plan for following up with couples who dropped out of the program before taking the closing survey.

Statistical Significance of Changes in Self-Assessment

Using data from the survey responses, the researcher examined changes in participants' self-assessment after attending the program to evaluate the effectiveness of the project. After consulting a statistician, the researcher decided to use a "t-test for dependent samples" to compare self-evaluation scores at the start and at the end of the program. This type of statistical test, available as a function of Microsoft Excel, is

designed to analyze the kind of data provided by the survey results. The t -test is described this way in a statistics textbook:

Specifically, if two groups of observations (that are to be compared) are based on the same sample of subjects who were tested twice (e.g., before and after a treatment), then a considerable part of the within-group variation in both groups of scores can be attributed to the initial individual differences between subjects.

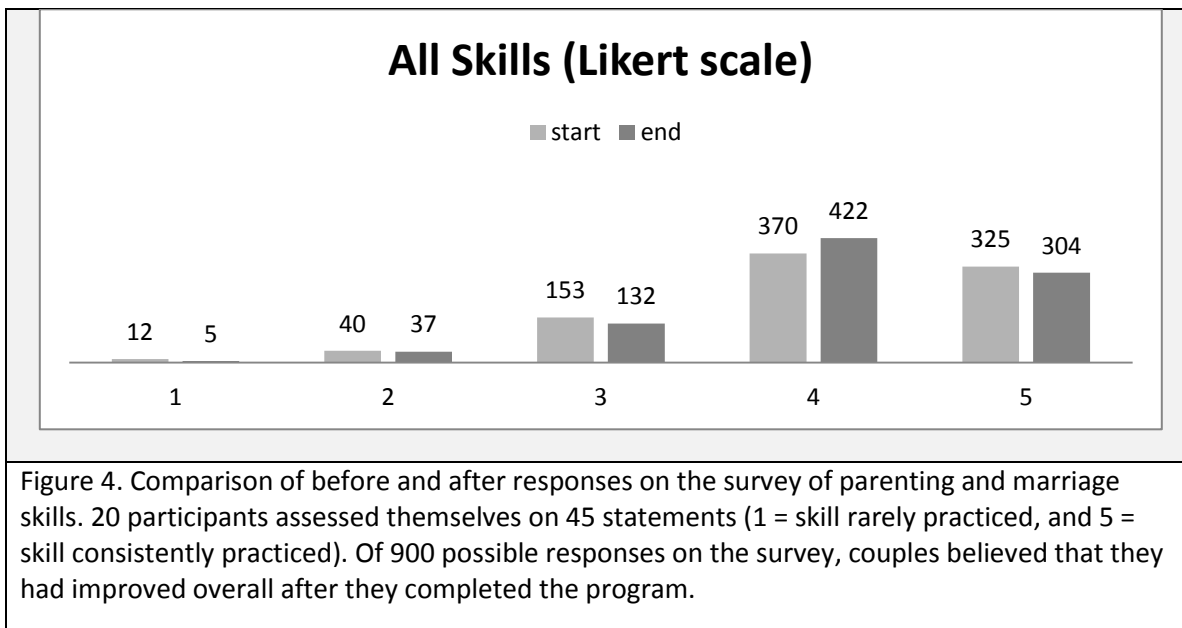
Specifically, instead of treating each group separately, and analyzing raw scores, we can look only at the differences between the two measures (e.g., "pre-test" and "post-test") in each subject. By subtracting the first score from the second for each subject and then analyzing only those "pure (paired) differences," we will exclude the entire part of the variation in our data set that results from unequal base levels of individual subjects.¹⁴⁶

In other words, the t -test assesses the probability (p) that the changes in the scores people gave themselves at the start and at the end of the program was a statistical fluctuation rather than a result of their participation in the workshops. A low value of $p < 0.05$ indicates that the changes are statistically significant, i.e., that the workshop effected changes.

The first comparison is the overall average score of the group as a whole before and after the workshops. Since 20 participants responded to 45 statements (45 in the opening and 45 in the closing survey) there were a total of 900 possible responses at the start and at the end. On the whole, the group scored themselves higher at the end than at the beginning. The distribution of scores from 1 (= weak, or rarely practiced) to 5 (= excellent, or consistently practiced) is shown in Figure 4, at the start and end of the workshop series. The average score increased from 4.06 to 4.09 (Table 10). A t -test of significance gave a p -value of 0.141,

¹⁴⁶ StatSoft, Inc., *Electronic Statistics Textbook* (Tulsa, OK: StatSoft, 2011) <http://www.statsoft.com/textbook/basic-statistics/#t-test%20for%20dependent%20samples> (accessed Nov. 13, 2011).

so it is not possible to demonstrate statistical significance of the increase at the 0.05 level without more data.



Group	Start	End	Change	p-value
Average	4.06	4.09	0.03	0.141

Table 10. Average score of all participants at the start and end of the program, with t-test analysis.

Figure 4 shows that participants generally scored their competency as very high, mostly 5 or 4, which seems to indicate that most came to the workshop series already holding a high opinion of their parenting and marital skills. The range of the self-evaluations included fewer scores of 3 or below than in an average distribution. This could be because these couples were a special sub-set of all married couples, those who go to church programs and also have children. It could be expected that they already have considerable skills. The fact that they attended the workshops, however, indicated that they believed they could improve and would be open to learning ways to do so.

Exploring Individuals' Self-Assessment

A second analysis of the survey data examined the average score of each individual participant before and after the workshops. *T*-test analyses showed that nine of 20 people had a statistically significant change in his or her overall average score.

Table 11 shows the individual averages at the start and end of the program with p-values and identifications of changes that were statistically significant.

Site #	Couple	Spouse	Start	End	Change	p-value	Significant change
1	104	Wife	3.82	3.87	0.04	0.344	
1	104	Husband	4.36	4.07	-0.29	0.001	Yes
1	106	Wife	3.64	3.76	0.12	0.188	
1	106	Husband	3.93	3.96	0.02	0.422	
1	108	Wife	3.69	3.62	-0.07	0.345	
1	108	Husband	3.49	3.93	0.44	0.000	Yes
1	110	Wife	4.18	4.62	0.44	0.000	Yes
1	110	Husband	4.16	3.71	-0.44	0.000	Yes
2	00	Wife	4.51	4.24	-0.27	0.016	Yes
2	00	Husband	3.84	3.91	0.07	0.337	
2	02	Wife	4.07	4.51	0.44	0.000	Yes
2	02	Husband	4.11	4.20	0.09	0.145	
2	05	Wife	4.31	4.02	-0.29	0.018	Yes
2	05	Husband	4.07	4.09	0.02	0.439	
2	06	Wife	4.13	4.56	0.42	0.000	Yes
2	06	Husband	4.11	4.09	-0.02	0.400	
2	10	Wife	4.36	4.44	0.09	0.236	
2	10	Husband	3.51	3.71	0.20	0.086	
2	11	Wife	4.49	4.27	-0.22	0.048	Yes
2	11	Husband	4.29	4.27	-0.02	0.430	

Table 11. Individuals' average self-assessment scores at the start and end of the program. A p-value of less than 0.05 indicates that the change was a statistically significant result of their participation in the workshop series.

The results of the *t*-tests of the survey data indicate that nine of 20 participants had a statistically significant change in self-assessment after their participation in the workshops.

Identifying Significant Changes in Skills

The third analysis of the survey explored how participants viewed themselves in the 45 specific skill statements. It would not be statistically significant to evaluate each person's responses to each statement, but 20 responses to each statement from the group as a whole provide enough data to test individual skill statements.

Each of the statements in the survey represented a particular skill for parenting and marriage relationships, in the areas of Affection, Stress Management, Relationship Skills, Autonomy, Education, Life Skills, Behavior Management, Health, Religion, and Safety, as identified in the research for the project. The skill statements in the survey fit into one or more of these categories. Table 12 shows the average scores for the group in each of the 45 skill items. A *t*-test was performed for each skill, comparing 20 start and 20 end responses. The group average changed significantly ($p < 0.05$) for six of the 45 skills.

Table 12. Average scores of the group for each of the 45 skill statements, at the start, end, and changes. *T*-test *p* values indicated statistically significant changes for six skill items.

Survey Skill Statement	start	end	change	p-value	significant
My food choices are healthy.	3.40	3.90	0.50	0.007	Yes
I plan ahead to avoid last-minute stress.	3.10	3.45	0.35	0.065	
I provide opportunities for my child to exercise regularly.	4.15	4.50	0.35	0.025	Yes
I always treat my child with respect.	4.05	4.40	0.35	0.025	Yes
I do not argue with my spouse in front of my child.	3.40	3.70	0.30	0.115	
I occasionally take time away from my family to recharge.	3.25	3.55	0.30	0.055	
I make sure I spend quality time alone with my spouse.	3.70	4.00	0.30	0.134	
I'm good at putting a positive spin on things	3.70	3.95	0.25	0.131	
Our family has favorite customs we celebrate year after year.	4.35	4.55	0.20	0.107	
I reward my child more often than I punish him/her.	3.70	3.85	0.15	0.210	

Survey Skill Statement	start	end	change	p-value	significant
I coordinate my parenting decisions with my spouse.	3.75	3.90	0.15	0.241	
I'm always available when my child needs to talk.	4.20	4.35	0.15	0.134	
We worship together as a family.	4.05	4.15	0.10	0.315	
I teach my child how to solve problems on his or her own.	4.10	4.20	0.10	0.315	
I always show my child that I'm listening carefully by expressing interest in what he or she is saying.	3.90	4.00	0.10	0.303	
I try to reward my child's good behavior immediately so my child can associate the reward with the good behavior.	4.00	4.10	0.10	0.289	
I always encourage my child to be positive and caring toward other people.	4.45	4.55	0.10	0.270	
I often reassure my child that when he or she does something wrong, I still love him or her	4.30	4.40	0.10	0.325	
I know who my child's friends are.	4.40	4.50	0.10	0.289	
I always try to be aware of and to fulfill my spouse's needs.	3.85	3.90	0.05	0.395	
I reward my child for following my instructions.	4.40	4.45	0.05	0.374	
I model healthy lifestyle and good habits.	3.70	3.70	0.00	0.500	
I never put down or insult my child.	4.25	4.25	0.00	0.500	
I continually try to lead by positive example so my child can imitate my good behavior.	4.20	4.20	0.00	0.500	
I encourage my spouse to express his or her individuality and uniqueness.	4.15	4.15	0.00	0.500	
I teach my child constructive ways of reducing and managing stress.	3.70	3.70	0.00	0.500	
I take precautions to protect my child.	4.55	4.55	0.00	0.500	
I always show my spouse that I'm listening carefully by expressing interest in what he or she is saying.	3.85	3.85	0.00	0.500	
I'm always available to answer my child's spiritual questions.	4.10	4.05	-0.05	0.386	
I read and try to learn new things in order to serve as a good role model for my child.	4.20	4.15	-0.05	0.386	
I am physically affectionate with my child in ways suited to his or her age and needs.	4.65	4.60	-0.05	0.374	
I appreciate unique personal qualities in my spouse.	4.60	4.55	-0.05	0.358	
I pray with my child.	4.05	4.00	-0.05	0.386	
I always try to be aware of my child's hopes and dreams.	4.15	4.05	-0.10	0.315	
No matter how busy I am, I try to spend quality time with my child.	4.10	4.00	-0.10	0.325	
I encourage my child to make his or her own choices.	3.95	3.85	-0.10	0.315	

Survey Skill Statement	start	end	change	p-value	significant
I encourage my child to always respect the religious beliefs of others.	4.25	4.10	-0.15	0.226	
I express interest in my spouse's work and activities.	4.25	4.10	-0.15	0.210	
I always try to be aware of my spouse's hopes and dreams.	4.20	4.00	-0.20	0.129	
With my spouse, I am always ready to apologize and forgive.	3.95	3.75	-0.20	0.148	
I regularly give my child chores to do in order to teach him or her how to handle responsibility.	3.90	3.65	-0.25	0.028	Yes
My child sees me express affection for my spouse.	4.55	4.30	-0.25	0.068	
My child sees me pray at home.	4.05	3.80	-0.25	0.086	
I do nice things for my child just because I love him or her.	4.80	4.50	-0.30	0.015	Yes
I do nice things for my spouse just because I love him or her.	4.45	3.95	-0.50	0.014	Yes

The data show that the group as a whole changed positively in 21 skills, and that three of those changes are statistically significant. A positive change indicates that people grew in their confidence that they were practicing that skill effectively. Participants felt they had improved in family nutrition ($p = .007$), fitness ($p = .025$), and treating their children with respect ($p = .025$). Planning ahead to avoid stress (.065), refraining from arguing in front of the children (.115), and taking time to care for self (.055) also improved, although not with statistical significance, (identified as $p < 0.05$).

Self-assessment scores declined in 17 skills, meaning that participants went down in the self-estimated competency. The decline was significant in three of the 45 skill statements. This change shows that people recognized an area for improvement. Another way of expressing this is to say that the participants judged themselves with more humility after participating in the program. According to the survey, parents recognized that they were not expecting enough help from their children at home ($p = .028$) and did not show as much appreciation for their children ($p = .015$) or spouse ($p = .014$) as they thought they did.

Participants also may have realized that their family's prayer life was not as active as they thought it was ($p = .086$).

Program Evaluations and Feedback

The survey was not the sole method for evaluating the project. Written responses on the program evaluation showed that all 20 participants who completed the workshop series gave the program a score of 4 or higher. The evaluation portion of the closing survey was rather short, which seemed necessary considering the length of the survey portion of the tool. A few participants wrote about what they learned that was new for them. One man wrote, "I recognized changes I want to make to better raise spiritual, faithful children." A mother wrote, "I can apply my relationship strengths to be a better parent."

The program evaluation had space for comments and suggestions. One person said he would have appreciated some form of communication between meetings, "perhaps a blog to share our thoughts on or an email to read, even a small homework assignment we were held accountable for." Another person commented, "I enjoyed the spirituality session the most. I hope we will expand our traditions within our family life." Workshop Three got some negative feedback, with two people suggesting that the researcher use a different video with the Respecting Differences workshop: "It was a bit corny and didn't add value for me." Another person suggested, "Consider exploring a different "difference" for the third workshop."

The lack of extended comments may have been partly caused by lack of time at the end of Workshop Four. After the last session, people were generally eager to visit with one another or to go home. Also, this workshop's plans were particularly ambitious, attempting to include catechesis on two sacraments plus a prayer activity. Rather than shorten the couple

prayer activity which was so successful, it would have been preferable to shorten the presentation to leave more time. It would also have helped to explicitly ask for these written reflections and extend the workshop time even more. However, since children were waiting to go home, that would not have been possible.

Additional Sources for Evaluation

In addition to the survey data and written responses, one-on-one conversations between the researcher and the participants provided feedback on the project. One father expressed how much he enjoyed just spending time with his wife and having an adult conversation. A mother told about recommending the workshops to her friends and her hopes that the series would be offered again, since she had missed two meetings. Another woman said she appreciated the family photos that the researcher displayed on the prayer table, because they gave her the idea to display her own pictures more prominently.

The design of the project did not include following the families after the concluding workshop, so it was not possible to measure behavior or attitude change. However, couples did spend time in prayer together, hear the same affirming message from the teaching of the Church, and meet other couples like themselves who valued their marriages enough to attend. These effects can be viewed as evidence of successful ministry.

Lessons for Improvement

It was a challenge to consistently link marriage with parenthood, so that education about one relationship would inform and illuminate the other. Workshops One, Two, and Four seemed to succeed in this, based on the evaluations and the researcher's observations in the sessions. Workshop Three, Respecting Differences, was less successful, according to the

participants' feedback and in the researcher's own estimation. Connections between the couple relationship and parenting were not made as well in Workshop Three.

Workshop Three had the weakest presentation. The Catholic principle of complementarity of the spouses, illustrated in the video, *Made for Each Other*, did not apply clearly to the parent-child relationship. "Complementarity" was probably not the best concept to use in this discussion. Instead, it would have been better to focus on equality and difference in both spousal and parental relationships. Also, the format did not provide enough time and resources to go into more depth about Catholic teaching on this topic. A more precise presentation would have featured the mutuality in the spouse-to-spouse and parent-to-child relationships, in communion with God. A good resource would have been Pope John Paul's *Letter to Families*.¹⁴⁷ Because of these problems, it would have been better to simply explore personal differences, and then to encourage appreciation of the spouse's and the children's unique qualities. Sexuality could be treated as a very significant difference.

Some other adjustments to the design could also improve the workshops. The suggestion of creating a blog that could connect the participants between sessions is worth exploring, particularly by a minister who will have ongoing opportunities to engage the couples in future events and activities. It would have been good to provide participants an opportunity to submit one question and one comment after each workshop, rather than waiting until the end to solicit feedback. Such mini-evaluations would reinforce learning, and

¹⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Gratissimam sane* (Letter to Families), sec. 8: "Man's need for truth and love opens him both to God and to creatures: it opens him to other people, to life in communion, and in particular to marriage and to the family. In the words of the council, the communion of persons is drawn in a certain sense from the mystery of the Trinitarian 'we,' and therefore conjugal communion also refers to this mystery."

the leader could make necessary clarifications in the next workshop. Also, having evaluations for each session would allow those who attend only a few workshops to provide feedback.

Summary

All four workshops invited the couples to appreciate the gift of their marriage in its full meaning by addressing both their spousal relationship and their parenting task. The program was faithful to Catholic teaching, effective in implementing its plans to involve married parents in a parish-based program in cooperation with parish leaders, and measured responses in ways that could be statistically analyzed. The participants' self-assessment of parenting and marriage skills showed that they thought they had improved their competency overall and even identified areas for improvement. In addition to the survey data, written and conversational responses indicated that couples who attended at least three of the four workshops found the program valuable.

In Conclusion

This project created a resource parish leaders could use to help married parents discover the strength that is to be found in their vocation to build up the "domestic church." The couples gained spiritual resources for their dual vocations as spouses and parents, in combination with education in communication, conflict resolution, and respect for each individual. These lessons were supported by practical skills and resources from the social sciences, and introduced couples to a peer group in their parish community.

Designing and implementing the plans for marriage enrichment program for Catholic parents was a challenging problem in ministry. Parenting puts stress on the couple's relationship, and society is providing fewer and fewer role models and moral support.

Married parents may not know other couples that share values and concerns. This population has difficulty making time for enrichment experiences, and may even be reluctant to attend such programs. Yet, pastoral ministers consistently recommend programs to help couples nurture their marriage, and couples in focus groups specifically ask for parenting programs when they are asked what the Church can do for them.

Having guarded marriage against those who say it is not important or that it need not include children, the Church must not leave parents to fend for themselves. Marriage enrichment programs, like the workshop series designed for this project, are needed to teach couples how to nurture relationships with one another and with their children. Pastoral ministers must provide spiritual formation opportunities for married couples that will help them “to survive the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also to grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ HV, no. 9.

APPENDIX

Married...with Children: Wisdom and Grace for Parenting

Opening Survey

_____Male _____Female Years married _____ Participant Number _____

My Boys' Ages _____My Girls' Ages _____

Current research on parenting skills has identified competencies that predict good parenting outcomes: a strong parent-child bond, a strong spousal relationship, and children's happiness. How are you doing on the following tasks?

1. I do nice things for my child just because I love him or her.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

2. I'm always available to answer my child's spiritual questions.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

3. I plan ahead to avoid last-minute stress.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

4. I always try to be aware of my child's hopes and dreams.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

5. I do nice things for my spouse just because I love him or her.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

6. I model healthy lifestyle and good habits.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

7. I reward my child more often than I punish him/her.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

8. I read and try to learn new things in order to serve as a good role model for my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

9. I always try to be aware of and to fulfill my spouse's needs.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

10. I'm good at putting a positive spin on things

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

11. I regularly give my child chores to do in order to teach him or her how to handle responsibility.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

12. My food choices are healthy.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

13. I never put down or insult my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

14. I am physically affectionate with my child in ways suited to his or her age and needs.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

15. I always try to be aware of my spouse's hopes and dreams.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

16. We worship together as a family.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

17. I encourage my child to always respect the religious beliefs of others.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

18. I do not argue with my spouse in front of my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

19. I continually try to lead by positive example so my child can imitate my good behavior.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

20. I express interest in my spouse's work and activities.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

21. I teach my child how to solve problems on his or her own.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

22. I encourage my spouse to express his or her individuality and uniqueness.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

23. I coordinate my parenting decisions with my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

24. My child sees me express affection for my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

25. I'm always available when my child needs to talk.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

26. I provide opportunities for my child to exercise regularly.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

27. With my spouse, I am always ready to apologize and forgive.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

28. I teach my child constructive ways of reducing and managing stress.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

29. I always treat my child with respect.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

30. I reward my child for following my instructions.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

31. My child sees me pray at home.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

32. I occasionally take time away from my family to recharge.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

33. I take precautions to protect my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

34. I appreciate unique personal qualities in my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

35. I always show my child that I'm listening carefully by expressing interest in what he or she is saying.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

36. No matter how busy I am, I try to spend quality time with my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

37. I always show my spouse that I'm listening carefully by expressing interest in what he or she is saying.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

38. I try to reward my child's good behavior immediately so my child can associate the reward with the good behavior.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

39. I make sure I spend quality time alone with my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

40. I encourage my child to make his or her own choices.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

41. I always encourage my child to be positive and caring toward other people.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

42. I often reassure my child that when he or she does something wrong, I still love him or her

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

43. I know who my child's friends are.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

44. I pray with my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

45. Our family has favorite customs we celebrate year after year.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

Something I hope to learn more about in these workshops:

Survey based on the research of Robert Epstein, Ph.D., reported in "What Makes a Good Parent?" *Scientific American Mind*, vol. 5 (November/December 2010): 46-51.

(This survey has been reformatted to allow for the margins required for the dissertation. The original survey fit on two pages, front and back.)

1 – COMMUNICATION

APPENDIX II

Participant Handout

GATHER

OPENING PRAYER

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

OPENING EXERCISES

Where have you gotten most of your information about marriage and parenting, so far?

You are here because you are married and parenting young children, and you want some help with that important task. You come equipped with powerful tools already, gifts that God gives in your faith, the sacraments, and this community of faith to support you.

- Complete a permission form for doctoral research.
- Complete a survey on parenting.¹⁴⁹

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

- *What kind of person do you want your child to be?*
- *What kind of spouse do you want to be?*

The teachings and traditions of our Church and Sacred Scripture are sources to consult. In this series of workshops we will mine that wisdom and claim that grace. This workshop focuses on Communication. Reflect on how God has communicated his love and direction to us.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION: 1 John 4: 7-12 (New American Bible)

¹⁴⁹ Based on the research Epstein, Robert. "What Makes a Good Parent?" *Scientific American Mind*, vol. 5. (November / December 2010): 46-51. www.ScientificAmerican.com/Mind. (accessed November 10, 2010).

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.

1. What are the parenting traits God exhibits?
2. How do these divine traits make you think of marriage?
3. Name a way have you experienced God's love. What persons were involved?

READINGS:

From Church teaching:

1. When they become parents, spouses receive from God the gift of a new responsibility. Their parental love is called to become for the children the visible sign of the very love of God, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." (Pope John Paul II, *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 14)
2. For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and others that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among the children. Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs. ...

In addition to these characteristics, it cannot be forgotten that the most basic element, so basic that it qualifies the educational role of parents, is parental love, which finds fulfillment in the task of education as it completes and perfects its service of life: as well as being a source, the parents' love is also the animating principle and therefore the norm inspiring and guiding all concrete educational activity, enriching it with the values of kindness, constancy, goodness, service, disinterestedness and self-sacrifice that are the most precious fruit of love (*Familiaris consortio*, no. 36)

From family life experts:

3. Your child aspires to be like you. Children are always watching us, and who you are matters more than what you say, and even more than what you do. You can choose to be the kind of parent you want your child to grow up to be like. Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott are authors of the program, *Parenting: The Early Years*.

They remind us that parenting starts with who you are. “If you develop positive qualities in your own life, your children will see them and copy them. Rather than seeking ways to manipulate your kids to behave better, look for ways to improve your own character—and that may filter down through your family.” From their experience, the Parrotts identified ten traits for parents to aim for. (Les and Leslie Parrot, *The Parent You Want to Be*, p. 17)

Ten Traits Worth Considering –Les and Leslie Parrott

1. Giving the Praise They Crave: Being an Affirming Parent
2. Counting to Ten: Being a Patient Parent
3. Hearing What They Don’t Say: Being an Attentive Parent
4. Seeing a Picture of their Future: Being a Visionary Parent
5. Building a Better Bond: Being a Connected Parent
6. Commemorating Milestones: Being a Celebratory Parent
7. Keeping your word: Being an Authentic Parent
8. Creating the Safest Place in the World: Being a Comforting Parent
9. Instilling Wisdom: Being an Insightful Parent
10. Practicing the Presence of God: Being a Prayerful Parent

OBSERVE:

1. What are two traits that you believe comes more easily to you.
2. What two traits come most easily to your spouse?
3. Identify two traits that you believe would make you a better parent.
4. Identify two traits that you believe make you a better spouse.

DISCUSSION:

1. What could make it difficult to embody one or more of these traits?
2. What could help a parent grow in one or more of these traits?
3. How would mastery of these traits benefit one’s marriage?

ACT:

1. Schedule a date with your children to play a game together that involves conversation and imagination.
2. Go for a walk with your spouse.

3. Share a personal dream. Share a dream you have for your child.
4. With your children, collect photos of family members, friends, or teachers (living or dead) who have communicated love to you or from whom you have learned valuable lessons about marriage and parenting. Tell the stories of those memories. Save the photos in an album or create “wall of fame” display.
5. Is there another action idea you would like to try? Share with the group.

LEADER’S REMARKS

ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR THE NEXT SESSION

CLOSING PRAYER

God and Father, we rejoice that you have communicated your love to us in your Word and through the Christian community. May we imitate your life-giving message and patient method in communicating your love to our children and to our spouse. We pray through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING:

Parrott, Les and Leslie. *The Parent You Want to Be*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

John Paul II. *Familiaris consortio* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World). Vatican, 1981.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html

2 - CONFLICT RESOLUTION

APPENDIX III

Participant Handout

GATHER

REPORT ON ACTIONS

OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, your mercy is without limit. As we seek to imitate Jesus in our relationships at home, be with us and teach us how to understand one another better. May we become more open and compassionate with one another and a good example for our children. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Each person makes the Sign of the Cross with holy water provided.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION: Philippians 2: 1-8 (New American Bible)

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but (also) everyone for those of others. Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

1. What is the risk of practicing humility when there is a conflict in a relationship?
2. What difference does it make when the disagreeable party is your child? What is non-negotiable for you?

READINGS

From Church teaching

We need to enable families to recognize that they are a domestic church. There may be families who do not understand or believe they are a domestic church. Maybe they feel overwhelmed by this calling or unable to carry out its responsibilities.

Perhaps they consider their family too "broken" to be used for the Lord's purposes. But remember, a family is holy not because it is perfect but because God's grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew everyday on the way of love. (U. S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter to Families, *Follow the Way of Love*. 1994)

From parenting experts

Relationship researcher John Gottman found that parents who helped their children manage their negative emotions had more successful parent-child interactions. These "emotion coaching" parents recognize when a child is upset; see the conflict as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching; listen empathetically; validate the child's feelings; help the child find words to label the emotion he is having; and set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem at hand.

According to Gottman, children who receive this response from their parents learn to calm themselves, focus their attention, and manage stress better: "When parents offer their children empathy and help them to cope with negative feelings like anger, sadness, and fear, parents build bridges of loyalty and affection." (John Gottman, *The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, pp.16-24)

OBSERVE

1. What are some sources of conflict you experience with your children?
2. What are some sources of conflict that married couples may encounter? What similarities and differences do you notice?
3. What helps you calm down and focus your attention?
4. What are some non-verbal ways to show empathy?

DISCUSSION

1. What could be the outcome if one dismisses another's feelings or fails to listen?
2. How far should a parent go in accommodating a child's point of view?
3. What steps can adults take to communicate more safely with each other?

ACT

In the session:

Learn and practice the Speaker-Listener Technique. This technique offers people a way to communicate when issues are hot or sensitive or likely to get that way. Any conversation in which you want clarity and safety can benefit from this technique.

Rules for Both of You

- The speaker has the floor. Use a real object as the floor.
- Share the floor. Take turns being Speaker and Listener.
- Don't engage in problem solving

Rules for the Speaker

- Speak for yourself. Use “I” statements.
- Don’t go on and on. Limit yourself to just a sentence or two.
- Stop and let the Listener paraphrase.

Rules for the Listener

- Paraphrase what you hear. Briefly repeat what you heard, using your own words. If the paraphrase is not right, the Speaker should gently clarify. You may ask for clarification, but not about other aspects of the issue unless you have the floor.
- Don’t rebut. Focus on the Speaker’s message. You may not offer your opinions (including gestures or making faces) until you have the floor. Your task is to understand.

ACT at home:

1. Invite your child to practice the speaker-listener technique with you. Choose a non-confrontational topic of interest to either of you, i.e., an interesting thing that happened today; his/her idea for a great vacation, sports, a story in the news, etc.).
2. Practice the speaker-listener technique as a couple.
3. Do an act of kindness for your child and spouse that does not involve words.

LEADER’S REMARKS

ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR NEXT SESSION

CLOSING PRAYER

God our Father, teach us to respect one another and have an attitude of humility in our relations with our children and one another. May we grow in every way into him who is our head, Christ, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part of the body of Christ, beginning with our own families. Amen.

RESOURCES

Jordan, Pamela, et al. *Becoming Parents: How to Strengthen Your Marriage as Your Family Grows*. New York: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love: Pastoral Message to Families*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994. <http://www.usccb.org/laity/follow.shtml>

Gottman, John. *The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

3 - RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

APPENDIX IV

Participant Handout

GATHER

REPORT ON ACTIONS

OPENING PRAYER: Psalm 139: 1-14 (New American Bible)

O LORD, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar. My travels and my rest you mark; with all my ways you are familiar.

Even before a word is on my tongue, LORD, you know it all. Behind and before you encircle me and rest your hand upon me. Such knowledge is beyond me, far too lofty for me to reach.

Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too. If I fly with the wings of dawn and alight beyond the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light," darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as the day. Darkness and light are but one. You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb.

I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works!

Amen.

OPENING EXERCISE – Using modeling clay or compound, participants create a small container or dish. Personalize the dish in some way, so that it can be identified as yours. Partners tell their spouse about the dish they have personalized. Give your creation to your spouse. Take 10 minutes for this activity.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION – 1 Corinthians 12: 6-11 (New American Bible)

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.

To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.

- In your child, what have you observed as a special gift or personal quality?
- In your spouse, what personal quality do you admire?

Each person has been given different gifts by God for the benefit of others. In our children, we recognize these differences. We recognize the differences between our spouse and ourselves. In this session, we will focus on a basic, observable difference between persons: Gender.

READINGS

From Church teaching

Above all it is important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men. This equality is realized in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each one to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family. What human reason intuitively perceives and acknowledges is fully revealed by the word of God: the history of salvation, in fact, is a continuous and luminous testimony of the dignity of women. (Pope John Paul II, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 22)

In creating the human race "male and female," God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with the inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person. God then manifests the dignity of women in the highest form possible, by assuming human flesh from the Virgin Mary, whom the Church honors as the Mother of God, calling her the new Eve and presenting her as the model of redeemed woman....The Apostle Paul will say: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (*Familiaris consortio*, no. 65)

From marriage and family experts

A man. A woman. What could be simpler, more natural? Two obviously different yet complementary versions of humanity. But why, then, the confusion and conflict between men and women today? Why feminism? Why a men's movement? Why such discord and disagreement about the role of women in

society and in the church? Science tells us that women and men differ in only three percent of our common DNA inheritance as *Homo sapiens*, but this scant variation appears in every cell. Under the lens of human culture, this minimal—and critical—difference magnifies into the realm of gender. (James and Evelyn Whitehead, *The Wisdom of the Body: Making Sense of Our Sexuality*, p. 119)

Video Reflection

In your marriage, you demonstrate the complimentary natures of male and female. Understanding the dignity of each person, male or female, can help parents appreciate the unique gifts and talents of each of their children. Reflect on the Church's teaching by viewing the video, *Made for Each Other* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009).

OBSERVE

1. What is the essential difference between the sexes that is not shaped by culture?
2. Name some commonly held attributes of masculinity and femininity.
3. Name qualities that men and women share in their humanity.
4. Name a way that you “compliment” your spouse?

DISCUSSION

1. How closely do your children fit the common image of femininity and masculinity?
2. Could there be a problem with focusing on gender differences?
3. If your child gets married one day, what qualities would you hope for in a daughter or son-in-law?

AT HOME

1. Take time to compliment your child on a good quality you see in him or her.
2. As a family, watch a movie with a strong male or female character. Discuss how the character is a good role model.
3. Create a simple symbol of appreciation for each of their children. This could be a family activity using modeling compound, paper, or any other media you choose. Display your creations together in your home.

LEADER'S REMARKS

The personalized gifts we made and gave to each other remind us of God, the potter who has shaped each of us as his perfect creation.

ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR NEXT MEETING

CLOSING PRAYER – Creator God, from before I was born you knew me and shaped me for your purpose. May our family be a safe place for each member to grow into the unique person you intend him or her to be. Prosper the work of your hands, O Lord. Prosper the works of your hands.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING:

Cloutier, David. *Love, Reason and God's Story: An Introduction to Catholic Sexual Ethics* Anselm Academic, 2008.

Garascia, Anthony. *Rekindle the Passion While Raising Your Kids*. New York: Sorin Books, 2000.

Whitehead, James and Evelyn. *Wisdom of the Body: Making Sense of Our Sexuality*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001.

4 – SPIRITUALITY

APPENDIX V

Participant Handout

GATHER

REPORT ON ACTIONS

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, we praise you for your goodness to us in our marriage. You have made our love fruitful in our children. By your sacraments we have been called and empowered to be your witnesses to our children and to others. Continue to bless us with your wisdom and grace, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our brother and redeemer. Amen.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION – Luke 11: 1-13 (New American Bible)

He was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us, and do not subject us to the final test."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend to whom he goes at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey and I have nothing to offer him,' and he says in reply from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked and my children and I are already in bed. I cannot get up to give you anything.' I tell you, if he does not get up to give him the loaves because of their friendship, he will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence. "

"And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

- According to the example Jesus gives, what is happening when someone prays?
- In what ways can prayer be difficult?

READINGS

From the teaching of the church

While all members of the family are called to live out the foundational Christian virtues, fathers and mothers have a special responsibility for fostering these virtues within their children. They are the first to proclaim the faith to their children. They are responsible for nurturing the vocation of each child, showing by example how to live the married life, and taking special care if a child might be called to priesthood or consecrated life. (U. S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 39)

Not only do parents present their children for Baptism, but, having done so, they become the first evangelizers and teachers of the faith. They evangelize by teaching their children to pray and by praying with them. They bring their children to Mass and teach them biblical stories. They show them how to obey God's commandments and to live a Christian life of holiness. (*Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, p. 40)

From parenting experts

In family life, prayer can take many forms: table and bedtime prayers are probably the most common. But brief acknowledgements of God's presence during the day: songs of praise and thanksgiving, saying "I'm sorry" after an argument, silent wonder and adoration at new experiences, shared intercession for an ill grandparent, spoken gratitude for our daily blessings and being totally present to each other in times of pain, crisis or change are also ways of praying. The first step is to open ourselves to God's presence. (John and Nancy Trokan, *Families Sharing Faith: A Parents' Guide to the Grade-School Years*, p. 37)

PRESENTATION.

Richard Gaillardetz, a married theologian and father of three boys, defines spirituality as "the particular contour and texture of our encounter with God's saving grace in our daily lives." As parents, we have encountered God's grace in the sacraments of Baptism, our own and that of our children, and Marriage.

From the Rite of Baptism for Several Children

1. Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. These children of yours have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts. When the Lord

comes, may they go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.
(Lighted Candle, no.64)

2. May almighty God, who gives life on earth and in heaven, bless the parents of these children. They thank him now for the gift he has given them. May they always show that gratitude in action by loving and caring for their children. (Blessing and Dismissal, no. 70)

From the Rite of Marriage

Lord, may they both praise you when they are happy and turn to you in their sorrows. May they be glad that you help them in their work and know that you are with them in their need. May they praise to you in the community of the Church, and be your witnesses in the world. May they reach old age in the company of their friends, and come at last to the kingdom of heaven. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. (Nuptial Blessing, no. 121)

OBSERVATIONS

1. What are all baptized people committed to do, as described in the prayers above?
2. What are some other occasions for family prayer in your home?
3. A faith practice I learned from my own parent(s) that I try to do in our home is _____.

JUDGE

1. As we continue to build our homes into “domestic churches,” what obstacles can we encounter?
2. What can parents do to teach their child to pray?

ACTIONS

In the workshop:

1. Complete the Follow-up Survey for the program.
2. Identify one parenting quality from the Survey and ask God to help to develop it .
3. Work together to make a list of thanksgiving. Add the parenting quality from Action #2, and turn the list into a prayer.

At home:

1. Teach the prayer you created to your child. Ask them to add to the list. Recite the new prayer as a family. Print and post your prayer in a place of honor in your home.
2. Tell your children the story of their baptism day.
3. As a couple, recall your wedding day. Visit a place that is special to you (i.e., where you met, where you got engaged) and make your vows again, just the two of you.

4. Invite the godparents of your child and/or your own godparents to join you for a party celebrating your special relationship.

LEADER'S REMARKS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

CLOSING PRAYER (adapted from Rite of Marriage, Solemn Blessing, no. 125)

Leader: God the eternal Father keep you in love with each other, so that the peace of Christ may stay with you and always be in your home.

Response: Amen.

May your children bless you, your friends console you and all men live in peace with you.

Response: Amen.

May you always bear witness to the love of God in this world so that the afflicted and needy will find in you generous friends and welcome you into the joys of heaven.

Response: Amen.

And may almighty God bless us all, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Response: Amen.

RESOURCES:

Fossarelli, Pat. *Praying with Your Children: A Guide for Families*. San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, 2003.

Gaillardetz, Richard. *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, expanded edition. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007.

Trokan, John and Nancy. *Families Nurturing Faith*. New Rochelle, NY: Don Bosco Media, 1992.

APPENDIX VI

Married...with Children: Wisdom and Grace for Parenting

Closing Survey

Male___ Female___ Participant Number _____

Workshops Attended (Check all that apply)

___Communication ___Conflict Resolution ___Respecting Differences ___Spirituality

A new learning from this class _____

Revisit the survey of marriage and parenting skills:

1. I do nice things for my child just because I love him or her.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

2. I'm always available to answer my child's spiritual questions.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

3. I plan ahead to avoid last-minute stress.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

4. I always try to be aware of my child's hopes and dreams.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

5. I do nice things for my spouse just because I love him or her.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

6. I model healthy lifestyle and good habits.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

7. I reward my child more often than I punish him/her.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

8. I read and try to learn new things in order to serve as a good role model for my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

9. I always try to be aware of and to fulfill my spouse's needs.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree
10. I'm good at putting a positive spin on things

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

11. I regularly give my child chores to do in order to teach him or her how to handle responsibility.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

12. My food choices are healthy.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

13. I never put down or insult my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

14. I am physically affectionate with my child in ways suited to his or her age and needs.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

15. I always try to be aware of my spouse's hopes and dreams.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

16. We worship together as a family.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

17. I encourage my child to always respect the religious beliefs of others.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

18. I do not argue with my spouse in front of my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

19. I continually try to lead by positive example so my child can imitate my good behavior.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

20. I express interest in my spouse's work and activities.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

21. I teach my child how to solve problems on his or her own.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

22. I encourage my spouse to express his or her individuality and uniqueness.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

23. I coordinate my parenting decisions with my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

24. My child sees me express affection for my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

25. I'm always available when my child needs to talk.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

26. I provide opportunities for my child to exercise regularly.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

27. With my spouse, I am always ready to apologize and forgive.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

28. I teach my child constructive ways of reducing and managing stress.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

29. I always treat my child with respect.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

30. I reward my child for following my instructions.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

31. My child sees me pray at home.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

32. I occasionally take time away from my family to recharge.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

33. I take precautions to protect my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

34. I appreciate unique personal qualities in my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

35. I always show my child that I'm listening carefully by expressing interest in what he or she is saying.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

36. No matter how busy I am, I try to spend quality time with my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

37. I always show my spouse that I'm listening carefully by expressing interest in what he or she is saying.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

38. I try to reward my child's good behavior immediately so my child can associate the reward with the good behavior.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

39. I make sure I spend quality time alone with my spouse.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

40. I encourage my child to make his or her own choices.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

41. I always encourage my child to be positive and caring toward other people.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

42. I often reassure my child that when he or she does something wrong, I still love him or her

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

43. I know who my child's friends are.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

44. I pray with my child.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

45. Our family has favorite customs we celebrate year after year.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

Based on the research of Robert Epstein, Ph.D., reported in "What Makes a Good Parent?" *Scientific American Mind*, vol. 5 (November/December 2010): 46-51.

(This survey has been reformatted to allow for the margins required for the dissertation. The original survey fit on two pages, front and back.)

Workshop Evaluation

I feel better prepared as a parent as a result of this program.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

I feel closer to my spouse because of our participation.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

This program would be valuable for other parents.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Disagree

I would suggest _____

Additional comments: _____

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