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# Building Healthy Relationships





# Premarital Counseling: Learning to Create a Lasting Commitment

Why engage in premarital counseling? If everything wasn't pretty great, you wouldn't be planning to marry in the first place. Right? Well, the truth is **getting** married is a whole lot easier than **staying** married! Premarital counseling can help ensure that you and your partner have a strong, healthy relationship—giving you a better chance for a lasting commitment.

Each person brings to the relationship a lifetime of experience—pre-conceived notions of what it means to be married, to be a “couple.” Each has a distinctive story that impacts how he/she enters and conducts a committed relationship. Each party has a unique perspective that defines how he/she acts and reacts to concepts such as family, wife, husband, parent, responsibility, home, etc.

It is important that the couple explore and understand each other's history, ideas, desires, and values. Questions often explored in premarital counseling include:

- ◆ What did we learn about roles and responsibilities from our family of origin?
- ◆ How do we keep the initial appeal of this relationship alive?
- ◆ How do we each feel about feelings and how do we express them?
- ◆ How do we typically demonstrate love?
- ◆ How do we each need and desire to be supported?
- ◆ How do we communicate, compromise, and manage conflict effectively?
- ◆ How do we feel about money and deal with finances?
- ◆ How do we each deal with stress?
- ◆ How do we each express and receive affection?
- ◆ What kind of life and family do we each desire to build?
- ◆ What are our long term goals both individually and as a couple?
- ◆ Can we be effective life partners to each other?

Ultimately, by exploring these issues together and gaining a greater understanding of each other, a couple can begin to develop a unique “culture” of their own. This culture will come to have its own norms, expectations, language, and traditions. By fostering an environment of respect, appreciation and effective communication, couples enter into the journey of marriage with their eyes open and prepared for the joys and challenges ahead.

- Emily Durham, LPC, CEAP



*“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success..”*

— Henry Ford

The AEAP offers a structured 6 session course of Premarital Counseling for couples considering a long-term commitment. This course is tailored to the individual couple's needs and goals.



# It's Reunion Season

This time of year plans are being made for all sorts of reunions. Whether it is the annual family reunion back at the “old home place,” a class reunion, or even one of those impromptu reunions such as showers, weddings, and funerals, we may find ourselves in the company of people we might—or might not—wish to see. While some folks obviously enjoy attending and planning these events, others may dread them and seek ways to avoid them. If you are one of the latter, it might be helpful to look closer at why you really do not wish to go.

**Is it a question of judging?** None of us want to feel judged, yet when we go to a class or family reunion, that is what we expect is going to happen. Those who used to know us will be evaluating our physical appearance, the appearance and behavior of those we bring with us, and our “success” in life, however that might be defined. Aunt Sue might define success as a houseful of children, while others might define it as a six figure income. Realistically, we all do it. We all note who has gained weight, lost their hair, lost weight, had plastic surgery, etc. Probably we make some type of value judgment about those things and it's logical to assume that those we meet are making assumptions about us.

**Is it the people we want to avoid?** Everyone has baggage and old hurts. Everyone has memories of slights, disrespects, bullying, etc. Reminders of those past painful events often create an intense feeling of shame or anger. Seeing people from our past can bring up those memories and suddenly we may be feeling those awful feelings again. We assume that those people are going to behave in the same way they did in past times, without thinking that they may have matured and changed for the better (or we may have changed).

**Is it that crowds in general are to be avoided?** About 12% of the population has diagnosable Social Anxiety Disorder. That does not account for those people who are just uncomfortable in social settings, especially those in which they know few people and feel they have nothing to talk to anyone about.



**Why go?** Given the above, why do people have reunions? Because it gives us an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends and introduce our family to extended family members in the hope they will connect, or because we want to prove to our old school friends that we have done okay. Maybe we just go to see one or two friends or family members and support them. Or, maybe we just go because it is expected of us. Whatever the reason, there are some things we can do to make it a more pleasant experience.

1. Remember you don't have to prove anything to anyone. If conversations start to sound like bragging sessions or someone is prying into your personal business, steer the conversa-

tion to other things. Don't take things personally. If unkind remarks are made, assume that the person making them has issues, not you.

2. If you take your children, plan ahead. Make sure you have plenty of available snacks, entertainments, and you have done your best to warn them about not mentioning certain things. If they do embarrass you, don't worry, it will be something to laugh about next year.
3. Be helpful. The planners of these events are often overwhelmed and need some assistance. Ask if you can bring something. Help with serving or cleanup. Helping mothers with their small children can even give you a chance to connect with the younger generation.
4. Do your homework before the event by updating yourself on current statuses. That way you can avoid the embarrassment of asking about an ex-spouse or a deceased parent.
5. Finally, **limit your alcohol consumption.** While a little alcohol can provide “social lubrication” a little too much can spell disaster. Drink plenty of water and make sure you eat enough that whatever liquor you consume won't go to your head. You don't want to be the reason everyone remembers that particular reunion, though not in a good way.

If your reunion brings up the past and you need to talk over the emotions that ambushed you, call the AEAP for an appointment. We can help.

- Glenda Davis, MSC, LPC, LMFT

# Blending Families Successfully

Blending families is a notoriously difficult process. The most common issue that seems to come up when two families come together is parenting. It can cause conflict if you discipline your partner's children, but no discipline can cause problems as well.

In order to make this transition easier, it is helpful for parents to look at it in a different way. The single most important parenting skill is praise. Praise not only increases positive behavior, it raises self-esteem. This doesn't require any planning, it just requires that you pay attention to anything and everything you like and say something about it.

Don't wait for perfection! The more you praise positive behavior, the more the negative behaviors decrease, and the more the children will feel accepted and loved in their new home.

Discipline is more difficult, but again it is possible to look at it through a different lens. Consequences can teach your children how to behave when delivered effectively, rather than punishing or shaming children for bad behavior. It is important to sit down with your partner and establish house rules. These rules need to be the same for all of the children, including the children who only visit on weekends or holidays. It is very important that the children are treat-

ed equally or hurt feelings and/or conflict can arise.

After the house rules have been established, a consequence for breaking each rule should be decided. Consequences should be short, normally no longer than one day. In fact, one hour normally works better because the child quickly has an opportunity to choose a better behavior. Again, you have to look at it



as a learning experience rather than a punishment. For example, taking a teenager's phone for an hour for breaking a house rule would be very appropriate, and most teenagers would quickly learn not to break another house rule. Another effective consequence is house chores. These are chores that go above and beyond regular chores. It can be helpful to write these on notecards, including every step. Then when a child breaks a rule, you pull out a notecard and they have to complete the chore before watching TV, using the computer, etc.

After setting the house rules and consequences, it is important to sit down with all of the children to go over them. When children know

what to expect it makes them feel safe. It is important that the consequences are given consistently when a rule is broken regardless of which parent is at home with the children.

Finally, let the children know that you understand the new living arrangement might be hard for them. When applicable, let the children know that you are not trying to replace their other parent. And do NOT talk badly about the parents who are living in another home. This can create resentment, and encourages the children to take sides, which is never helpful.

Blending families is a difficult process. If you need assistance in this matter, please schedule a session with a counselor at the Employee Assistance Program.

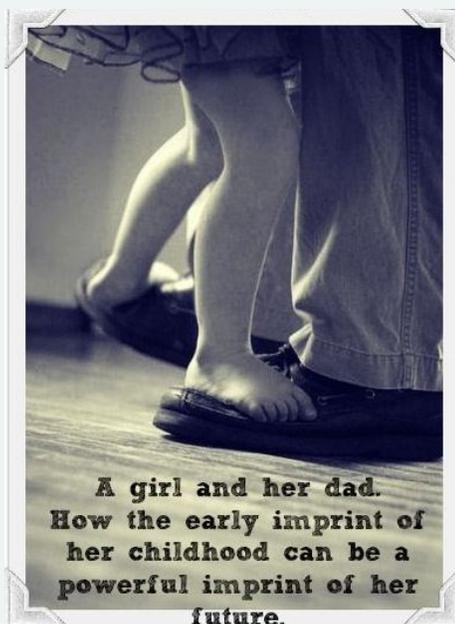
- Lee Ellis, LCSW

"We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have."

- Frederick Keonig

## She Thinks We're Just Fishin'

Fishing with my Dad is certainly one of the best things in the world. But the activity with him didn't really begin until my college days. There's another fishing song—"Don't take the Girl"—and this is what happened more times than not when I was a little girl... I was left behind. But since my college days, fishing with Dad has become a part of what I do when I go home. It's a ritual now. He believes that I'm a good fisherman and I believe it too, because he tells me so. And I'm sure that this is not a fisherman's lie!



There's no doubt that who we are and who we become is greatly affected by our relationship with our parents. But until recently, we've not really emphasized father-daughter relationships. We now know that

this relationship has a profound effect on girls' self-esteem, self-confidence and overall personality development.

Here are some tips for the dads:

1. **Show up** - Spend time with your daughter. Coach her ball team, **take her fishing**. Let her know that even with your busy schedule, you want to spend time with her.
2. **Be her role model** - Act like the kind of person that you want her to choose as a partner or spouse one day. You can bet that she is watching you!
3. **Listen to her** - Dads do a lot of directing. It's hard to listen and NOT tell her what to do. But if you try to solve all of her problems, you may teach her that she's not smart enough to solve problems herself.
4. **Hug her** - In the Book, *The Blessing*, the authors suggest that "meaningful touch" is a way to enhance physical and emotional health in our children. Even when children become teenagers, and affection is somewhat awkward, you can still demonstrate affection even if it's just hand holding and pats on the back.
5. **Respect her** - An anonymous author once said, "Daughters see their self-worth in their fathers' eyes." Let her know that you think she's a precious and valuable human being who can

*"And she thinks we're  
just fishin' on the riverside  
Throwin' back what we could fry  
Drownin' worms and killin' time  
Nothin' too ambitious  
She ain't even thinkin' 'bout  
What's really goin' on right now  
But I guarantee this memory's a big'un  
And she thinks we're just fishin'!"*

- "Just Fishin"  
by Trace Adkins



accomplish great things. She will believe you over anyone else. Her self-respect will help her establish healthy relationships in her life.

Note: It's never too late to repair a relationship. Daughters, you can build bridges back to your father. And dads, you can do the same. Authors Julianna and Dr. Sidney B. Simon state in *The Ally Theory for Fathers and Daughters*, that, "Sometimes the smallest adjustments have the ability to hugely impact the way we love each other."

- Rebecca Vercher, LCSW, CEAP

## Second Time Around: Grandparents Raising Their Children's Children

Isn't grandparenting supposed to be the part of your life when you get to spoil your grandchildren and then send them back to their parents? If you are raising your children's children then you may be missing out on this fun and unique experience and this "last alternative" has become your life. And if this "unplanned

*"Becoming a parent  
again is not a first choice.  
It's a last alternative."  
- Barbara Kirkland*

parenthood" is your role, then you know that it can be an emotional roller coaster. Guilt, anger, resentment and a sense of losing your dreams of "retirement days" may all be part of your experience along with the satisfaction of knowing that your grandchildren benefit from the love and sense of security you provide for them.

- Mike Huddleston, MA, LPC, CADC,  
CEAP

Studies show that grandparents who cope well with the added stress of raising grandchildren are those who seek out others for support.

- **Find someone you can talk to about what you're going through.** This will give you a chance to work through your feelings and come to an acceptance of the situation. If you deny or ignore these feelings, they will come out in other ways and may affect your relationship with your grandkids.
- **Look for support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren.** Support groups or even phone support can be very helpful in this journey, and it's a good start for making friends in similar situations. Hearing from people who have been there can help both uplift your spirits and give you concrete suggestions for your situation.
- **Reach out in your community for childcare help.** If you are a member of a church, synagogue or other religious organization, you may be able to ask around for available babysitters. Try library story time hours, chatting up other parents at the playground, or seeing if your neighbors have a reliable teen available to babysit or if any parents are interested in a babysitting swap.
- **Connect with parents with children.** Even if you feel like you are from a different generation, the joys and tribulations of raising children can quickly form common bonds. It may take time, but forging friendships with parents with similar aged children can offer camaraderie and help on navigating the maze of issues facing children today.

(HelpGuide.org, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren)

# How to Build a RELATIONSHIP



Here are some tips for getting your relationships off the ground. Some of these ideas we learned in the first grade but, as adults, we sometimes forget.

1. **Build relationships one at a time.** Fortunately or unfortunately, there are no short cuts. Sending out a newsletter helps you keep in touch with lots of folks, but it's no substitute for getting to know a real person.
2. **Be friendly and make a connection.** This may seem self-evident, but a friendly word or smile can make someone's day. Try to find something in common: all of us want to have close connections with our fellow humans.
3. **Ask people questions.** People love to talk about themselves and about what they think. If you ask people about themselves and then take the time to listen attentively, they can become your fast friend.
4. **Tell people about yourself.** People won't trust you unless you are willing to trust them. Tell them what you genuinely care about and what you think.
5. **Go places and do things.** When asked why he robbed banks, the robber replied, "Because that's where the money is." If you want to make friends, you have to go where the people are: picnics, conferences, events, fundraisers, parties, playgrounds, bowling alleys, little league games, bake sales, etc.
6. **Accept people the way they are.** You don't have to agree with them all the time in order to form a relationship with them. No one likes to be judged.
7. **Assume other people want to form relationships, too.** Underneath the crabbiest looking person is often a lonely soul hoping someone will make a crack in their shell.
8. **Overcome your fear of rejection.** Most of us suffer from a fear of rejection, and there's only one thing to do about that: get over it. If you want to form relationships, plan on being rejected some of the time. You will be richly rewarded the rest of the time with the new relationships you have made.
9. **Be persistent.** People are often shy and suspicious. It takes a while to win trust. You can almost always form a relationship if you stick with it.
10. **Invite people to get involved.** People want to become part of something bigger than themselves. Many people are looking for an opportunity to meet other people who share common goals. At the worst, people will be flattered that you invited them to join.
11. **Enjoy people.** If you genuinely enjoy people, others will be attracted to your attitude. People will more likely want to be around you.



## EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Arkansas Employee Assistance Program (AEAP) is a benefit provided by your employer. Your employer contracts with AEAP as a result of a commitment to the well-being of valued employees.

The EAP provides counseling, information, and referrals (if indicated) for employees and their immediate family members. EAP's are ideal for individuals and families experiencing personal distress, or simply seeking to improve health and well-being.

- ◇ Short-term, solution focused counseling
- ◇ Free
- ◇ Confidential

AEAP has offices in Little Rock, Hot Springs, Ft. Smith, and Fayetteville as well as affiliate providers throughout the State of Arkansas.

**Please feel free to contact us if you wish to make an appointment with any one of our counselors.**

**501-686-2588  
800-542-6021**

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For more information about the EAP and our counselors,  
visit our website at [www.uams.edu/eap](http://www.uams.edu/eap)  
OR scan our barcode with your smartphone!



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