



Research Findings

Recruitment & Retention

- Effective recruitment and retention strategies were identified using qualitative interviews with 20 *Smart Steps* facilitators and 40 participants (Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010). Similar to studies with other curriculum, effective strategies included using incentives, reducing the cost of attendance, and addressing logistical barriers to participation (i.e., transportation, childcare). Unique to this study, additional useful strategies included cultivating participants' trust, using personal contacts, including a children's component and incentivizing their attendance, and drawing on participant interests and motivations for attendance. Advertisements focused on common stepfamily concerns along with a message of providing helpful solutions were most effective for recruitment.

Facilitation

- Following completion of 12-hours of the *Smart Steps* curriculum, both participants and facilitators reported that they found the program facilitation to be effective, materials were clearly explained, questions were addressed to their satisfaction, and facilitators cared about group members and utilized their own personal experiences (Sparks, 2010).
- Using data from 112 men and 155 women who had participated in an earlier 12-hour *Smart Steps* program and also participated in a booster session 4-6 weeks later (Vaterlaus, Allgood, & Higginbotham, 2012). Findings were that participants reported being satisfied with the session and had gained more knowledge about stepfamily dynamics. No demographic differences were found between those who did and did not attend the booster session. Also, no marital status or gender differences were found on perceived knowledge change, although higher knowledge gains were reported among Latino participants.
- Data from 48 *Smart Steps* facilitators and 598 participants were used to examine the relationships among facilitator characteristics, participant-facilitator match on characteristics, and participant reports of effective facilitation (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010). Participants reported facilitation quality to be more important than participant-facilitator match on characteristics. The most important facilitation skills included effective time management, incorporation of personal experiences, and the ability to explain material clearly.

- Data are from 14 Spanish-speaking facilitators (11 Latinos and 3 European Americans) who delivered 9 of 23 courses in Spanish of the 12-hour *Smart Steps* program (Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Davis, 2012). The intent of the study was to identify appropriate strategies for working with Latino stepfamilies. Two primary themes emerged from the interviews: classroom management and approach (encouraging class discussion and sharing to develop bonding among participants [all 14], applying cultural understanding [9 of 14; e.g., divorced fathers disappear], and recognizing the importance of the P-C relationship [7 of 14]) and modifications to the program (appreciated the flexibility of delivery, translation of English into Spanish [e.g., no Spanish word for stepfamily], need to have materials with Latino presented).
- Interviews with 13 Latina women who participated in a 6-week *Smart Steps* program were examined (Skogrand, Mendez, & Higginbotham, 2014). Participants reported improved functioning in the parenting and couple and family relationships. Improvements in communication were the most frequently cited benefit. Some participants addressed concerns with using “step” terms to identify their family.
- Using qualitative interview data from 14 *Smart Steps* facilitators, researchers examined effective strategies for program facilitation with Latino participants (Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Davis, 2012). The most useful strategies were identified as being culturally appropriate and included modifying the program to fit the Latino family culture (i.e., finding appropriate Spanish translations for Latino participants with various countries of origin, replace pictures and movies with those more relevant to Latino culture). Facilitators’ knowledge of common Latino family culture was important. For example many Latino biological fathers become mostly uninvolved with their families following separation or divorce, and Latinos may face greater stigma in their communities for belonging to a stepfamily. It was also important for facilitators to spend time creating a group dynamic that was perceived as comfortable and friendly to participants.
- Data from 858 adult participants who attended *Smart Steps* classes in a western state responded to 5 questions regarding facilitator effectiveness (Allgood & Higginbotham, 2013). The intent of the study was to understand the relationship between facilitator effectiveness ratings and facilitator characteristics (i.e., professional and personal experiences as well as demographics). Participants rated the program as more effective when the facilitator was female, had training in *Smart Steps* curriculum, and had stepchildren of their own.

Program effects for adults

- In a sample of over 2,800 ethnically diverse, low-income *Smart Steps* participants, modest increases were found for relationship quality. Results did not differ by gender, age, education level, marital status, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status of participants (Reck, 2013).

- Forty low-income *Smart Steps* participants were interviewed regarding their perceived benefits of the group-formatted intervention (Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010). Reported benefits included the normalization of common stepfamily challenges, group social support, and the opportunity to exchange information regarding effective solutions to stepfamily issues.
- Researchers examined changes in relationship quality for stepcouples following participation in a 6-week *Smart Steps* course and again 1-month later (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). The sample included 356 adults who were married, unmarried and cohabiting, or in a serious dating relationship where at least one adult had children from a previous relationship. Couples saw improvement in relationship quality over time regardless of race and marital status. Improvement was also found for white and Latino participants in relationship commitment and level of agreement on parenting, ex-partners, and finances.
- Researchers used qualitative interviews with 40 participants to examine improvements in stepfamily functioning one year following completion of the *Smart Steps* curriculum (Skogrand, Dansie, Higginbotham, Davis, & Barrios-Bell, 2011). Overall, improvement was maintained in the couple relationship (i.e., communication, unity, commitment), family relationships (i.e., family unity, communication), and relationships with children (i.e., empathy, co-parenting, time spent together, communication). Participants reported continued improvement in communication skills, which they believed improved other areas of stepfamily functioning (e.g., children's open communication, couples' communication skills, and reduced negative communication). Participants' relationships with ex-partners also showed improvement at the 1-year follow-up.
- Researchers used a single –case study design to examine the perspective, feelings, and reports from one stepfamily and to outline the sequence of experiences (Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011). Prior to marriage, the cohabitating couple had engaged in stepfamily education because they did not want to have the poor experiences observed in others. However, about 1 year prior to participating in *Smart Steps* they experienced problems. Their participation in *Smart Steps* fostered feeling of not being alone (others shared their experiences and provided support); improved their communication which enhanced their coparenting; strengthened the family through shared family activities and time; and improved their interactions with former spouses.
- Qualitative interviews with 14 stepfathers who participated in *Smart Steps* were examined (Higginbotham, Davis, et al., 2012). Most stepfathers (10 of 14) reported reluctance to attend initially, but agreed after being encouraged by spouses. Of the 14 participants, 12 reported improved family bonding and 11 reported improvements in parenting skills. The majority felt the course helped them communicate more openly within their stepfamilies, and they had increased empathy for their stepchildren and partners.

- In a sample of 97 *Smart Steps* participants and 54 non-participant adults in stepfamilies, researchers examined program effects following program completion (Lucier-Greer, Adler-Baeder, Harcourt, & Gregson, 2014). The sample was racially and economically diverse. Compared to the non-participants, those who completed the program reported improvements in individual empowerment, couple relationship quality, family harmony, and parenting efficacy.
- A case study was presented for two lesbian couples who completed the *Smart Steps* course (Skogrand, Mendez, & Higginbotham, 2013). Interviews with the couples four months following the course revealed several benefits from taking the course, including a better understanding of stepfamily relationships, improved communication, improved parent-child relationships, improved co-parenting, and lastly, a sense of normalcy and shared community.
- Qualitative data for 62 participants were examined one year after completion of *Smart Steps* stepfamily education courses to identify whether or not practices regarding finances had changed stemming from what was taught about finances in the course (Higginbotham, Tulane, & Skogrand, 2012). Approximately half reported either learning or changing something about their financial practices, such as how to use a budget and/or save (i.e., greater awareness of what they were spending money on, more aware of saving money, etc.) and how to work together (i.e., better communication about finances and greater collaboration regarding financial management) as a result of the course. The primary reason given for those individuals who did not report change was that they already had efficient financial practices prior to participation in the course.
- Data from a sample of 195 racially and economically-diverse adults were examined to evaluate improvement in knowledge healthy stepfamily relationships (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2010). Both male and female participants report significant increases in the following knowledge areas: awareness of stepfamily financial issues, knowledge of stepparents' legal status, knowledge of child/adolescent development, understanding of parenting styles, awareness of stepparenting strategies, understanding of healthy communication patterns, knowledge of strategies that buffer the negative effects of divorce, healthy co-parenting strategies, and strategies to handle stress.
- Following completion of the *Smart Steps* curriculum, 16 Latino men completed qualitative interviews (Reck, Skogrand, Higginbotham, & Davis, 2013). Most participants were recruited through personal invitation and referrals. Reasons for attendance included a desire to learn how to deal with stepchildren and resolve stepfamily issues. Each of the 16 men reported improved family relationships, including better relationships with (step)children, improved parenting skills, and more positive couple relationships. Several participants felt the stepfamily term was not appropriate for describing their family in the Latino culture. Rather, some men felt stepparents were to be considered regular parents.

Program effects for children

- Using qualitative interviews with 40 *Smart Steps* parent participants and 20 facilitators, researchers examined the perceived benefits of program participation for children (Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2009). Parents reported that following participation, their children had improved empathy, engagement during family time, and better relationship skills. The use of normalizing and social support within the group environment was reported to be particularly beneficial, in addition to the opportunity for children to express their feelings and practice relationship skills.

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