

Monitoring program dosage

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Like the comparable definition in medicine, a participant’s “dosage” of a program refers to how much of a program they receive or participate in. Dosage helps Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) program staff and local evaluators understand and track how much of an intervention is delivered and to whom. Examining dosage can also reveal how well an intervention is being implemented and can help uncover key challenges programs faced while implementing it (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007; James Bell Associates 2008; James Bell Associates 2018; Loeb et al. 2017). Assessing dosage is important for both descriptive and impact evaluations, because participant outcomes can differ based on the amount or type of programming or services they receive (Zhai et al. 2010).

Dosage and program retention (that is, sustained participation in program services) are closely linked. For federal HMRE programs, dosage is typically captured by recording (1) the number of workshop sessions participants attend or (2) their level of participation in supplemental program components like financial literacy workshops or case management (Box 3.1). Although HMRE programs work to maximize the amount of the program content participants receive, which is one important factor in maintaining fidelity to the program curriculum, there is often a range in the amount of programming different participants receive. This brief contains four tips that HMRE program staff and evaluators can use to collect information about dosage and address program retention challenges that might affect dosage.

Box 3.1. Measuring dosage

The goal of measuring dosage is to create a quantitative metric that shows the amount of programming participants receive. Dosage can be measured in different ways. Common metrics include:

- The number of hours of a service participants received
- The percentage of workshop sessions participants attended
- A binary indicator of whether or not a participant “completed” the program

Note: Program completion can be defined in various ways. For HMRE programs funded by the Administration for Children and Families, participants who attended at least 90 percent of the program’s primary workshops are considered as having completed the program.



Tip 1: Collect and monitor data on dosage

HMRE programs are required to track clients’ participation in workshops in the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management system (nFORM 2.0). Evaluators can use nFORM 2.0 data to learn about program retention by identifying participants who complete the program and participants who exited the program early. These data can also help evaluators identify when in the program participants are most likely to exit. These retention metrics can give important insights into program dosage. For example, examining how much of the program participants are receiving throughout implementation can help program staff and evaluators discover and address retention challenges—such as when only one member of a couple attends most workshop sessions—and signal whether participants are regularly receiving enough of the intervention for the evaluation findings to show changes in participant outcomes.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provides grants to fund healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs to strengthen and improve the quality of relationships. The programs offer a range of services from relationship education for high school students to marriage and relationship skills building for adult couples. Grant recipients may be funded to also conduct descriptive or impact evaluations of their funded programs. Independent local evaluators support grant recipients in conducting their local evaluations. This brief is part of a larger evaluation technical assistance (TA) toolkit developed by Mathematica to help HMRE local evaluators understand key program evaluation concepts, common evaluation challenges, and strategies to prevent or overcome challenges. The briefs are standalone documents that can be read in any order. The TA toolkit was developed with HMRE program staff, their local evaluators, and other partners in mind, but it is also relevant to other program areas and organizations.

Table 3.1 illustrates how a program might track retention using a table or spreadsheet. In this example, the table is set up to track retention in the program's primary workshop—a key performance measure for ACF-funded HMRE programs—and it distinguishes between two study groups (those who receive the program in person and those who receive it virtually). The last row in the table shows that participants assigned to virtual program delivery attend workshop sessions at a higher rate than participants assigned to in person program delivery (73 versus 66 percent, respectively, attended at least 90 percent of workshop hours). It is possible that the difference in dosage might lead to higher post-test scores in the virtual group because they received a greater dose of program content. Collecting and analyzing these data can help evaluators identify when it might be necessary to work on boosting attendance in one of the study groups to ensure they limit bias in their effects estimates.

Table 3.1. Example of a table to track program retention

Program retention categories	Study group 1 (In-person delivery)		Study group 2 (Virtual delivery)	
	Number of participants	Percent	Number of participants	Percent
Workshop enrollment	200	100%	400	100%
Did not attend any workshop hours	25	13%	30	8%
Attended less than 50 percent of workshop hours	18	9%	27	7%
Attended more than 50 percent but less than 90 percent of workshop hours	25	12%	50	12%
Attended more than 90 percent of workshop hours	132	66%	293	73%

Source: Adapted from a hypothetical example in McInerney and Roemer (2017).



Tip 2: Engage participants and staff to explore underlying retention challenges and work together to solve them

Evaluators can consider asking participants and program staff questions to deepen their understanding of the program's retention challenges (Box 3.2). For example, during enrollment, program staff or local evaluators can ask participants if they expect anything to prevent them from completing the program and clearly describe everything the program does to support attendance (for example, making child care or travel vouchers available, providing options for participating virtually, or attending a make-up class for missed workshop sessions). Throughout implementation, program staff and evaluators can use both quantitative and qualitative data to deepen their understanding of retention challenges. For example, quantitative data can show things such as at which session participants are most likely to stop attending or the average number of sessions a participant completes. Other data sources, like interviews with participants who are often absent from workshop sessions, can help programs and evaluators identify common barriers to participation.

Box 3.2. Ask questions to understand why participants leave the program early

Consider asking participants—both those who actively participate and those who do not—the following questions to further understand what keeps some participants from attending sessions.

1. Are workshops or services offered at times that are convenient for you? How about make-up options? If not, what times would work better?
2. What, if anything (such as a job, transportation, or child care), is getting in the way of your attending workshops or participating in evaluation activities? If nothing gets in your way, what helps you attend workshops regularly?
3. Do the workshops cover topics that interest you? Why or why not?
4. How is the workshop content relevant to your cultural practices, beliefs, and values? If it isn't, how could it be changed?
5. How do facilitators or other staff actively encourage or motivate you to participate during workshop sessions? How could they improve?
6. What do you think of the incentives the program offers for attending workshops? How would you change them to encourage more people to attend?

Source: Ooms and Wilson 2004; Baumgartner et al. 2022.

In addition to engaging program staff and participants to understand challenges, evaluators can converse with these groups to find and develop promising strategies. For example, evaluators can engage participants and staff in interactive activities designed to help them brainstorm solutions (Baumgartner et al. 2022). If an HMRE program realizes attendance is particularly challenging for adult couples who have different work schedules or do not have child care during workshop sessions, the program could bring staff and participants together to ask if offering longer classes on the weekends instead of several shorter classes throughout the week would be helpful, and/or if they would utilize on-site child care during workshops.¹

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy that will solve every dosage-related challenge faced by HMRE programs. To devise a strategy that could boost attendance, in addition to talking with participants and program staff, evaluators can consult the research literature. ACF has published several resources to help HMRE programs address common implementation challenges (for example, see this [guide](#)²). After conducting background research, evaluators can go back to staff and participants to see which solutions might best promote workshop attendance within the particular community or program. Addressing retention-related challenges early may help increase dosage for future participants who will not face the same barriers to participation.



Tip 3: Offer flexibility to encourage attendance

A common challenge for HMRE programs is that participants cannot attend every scheduled session (Baumgartner et al. 2022). For adults, work schedules can get in the way; for programs serving youth in schools, disruptions like assemblies or drills, changing class schedules, or youth transferring schools can lead to missed workshop sessions. HMRE programs may consider the following strategies to overcome scheduling conflicts. Box 3.3 offers additional strategies, specifically for programs offering workshops to youth in schools.

¹ Note that HMRE programs should discuss any programmatic changes with their FPS to make sure they comply with the federal guidelines before implementing changes.

² Friend, Daniel, Lauren Mattox, Annie Buonaspina, Avery Hennigar, Scott Baumgartner, and Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo (2022). Strategies for addressing common implementation challenges in healthy marriage and relationship education programs: A guide for supporting design and improvement efforts, OPRE Report #2022-314, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- Offer a make-up session (Bodenlos et al. 2021)
- Provide virtual workshops or services to participants who face significant barriers, such as having no transportation or child care (Friend et al. 2023)
- Offer programming in multiple locations close to the population served (Friend et al. 2023)
- Consider hiring a mix of full-time and hourly staff to increase the program’s ability to offer services on a flexible schedule outside of regular business hours (Friend et al. 2023)

■ **Box 3.3. Strategies to address dosage-related challenges for programs serving in-school youth**

For HMRE programs serving youth in schools, a lack of strong partnerships with schools or districts and parental buy-in can make it harder to keep youth participating in a program (Baumgartner et al. 2022; Friend et al. 2022). The following strategies may help address participation challenges in school settings:

- Strengthen partnerships with schools and parents to encourage youth to participate in services (McCallum and Adamek 2020).
- Engage parents in services by sharing program content before the program starts (for example, by sending supplemental materials home with youth or sharing content via text messages to parents) (McCallum and Adamek 2020).
- Ensure the class setting is comfortable, and classes give students enough opportunities to engage (for example, by allowing them to choose where they sit, and allowing youth to opt out of certain activities or discussions if they are uncomfortable) (Logan et al. 2022).
- Every youth in the program might not currently be in a romantic relationship. Focus on making the content relevant for all youth by emphasizing that the skills being taught can apply to non-romantic relationships, need to be practiced, and can help make a future romantic relationship live up to their expectations (Goesling and Alamillo 2018).



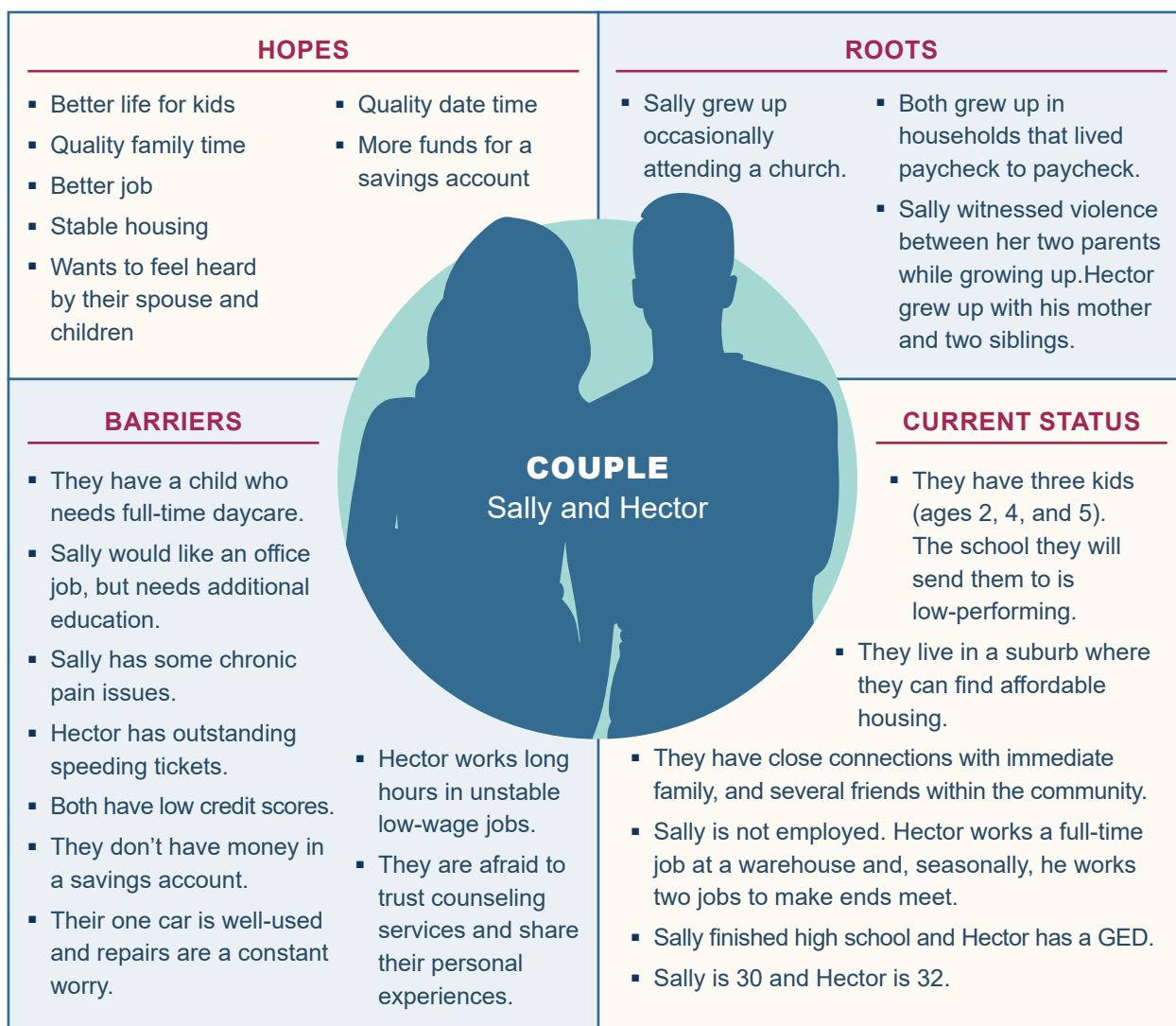
Tip 4: Offer incentives that are relevant to participants

Another strategy for encouraging attendance is to offer incentives for participating in workshops (Friend et al. 2022). Effective incentives include cash or gift cards, food (for example, providing a meal at workshop sessions), recognition (for example, holding a program graduation), or goods and services (for example, providing free child care). Offering incentives at various points throughout the program can help maintain high attendance, but only if participants are interested in or motivated by them. For example, gas cards would not be motivating if most participants take the bus.

To identify incentives that align with participants’ interests, programs should consider asking participants which incentives would be motivating to them or using a [persona profile](#)³ (that is, a summary of a typical participant’s characteristics, to understand their key characteristics, behaviors, goals, or needs). Persona profiles help programs think through the characteristics of their target population (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Creating a profile of a typical participant may help programs to develop tailored incentive strategies. Figure 3.1 is an example of a persona profile of an HMRE program that serves couples. In this example, this activity reveals that couples with children may enjoy incentives for activities they can do as a family or during a date night—as opposed to incentives they can use individually—since the couple noted that they hoped for more quality time.

³ Luma Institute. “Persona Profile.” n.d. <https://www.luma-institute.com/persona-profile/>.

Figure 3.1. Example persona activity for an HMRE program that serves couples



Program staff or local evaluators should keep track of the incentives offered to see if they are working.⁴ Tracking the types of incentives used, their value, and participants' engagement in workshops can help programs determine whether the incentives offered—and when they were offered—are effective (Greene et al. 2012).

⁴ Note that HMRE programs should discuss any changes to incentives with their FPS to make sure they comply with the federal guidance.

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