



# Marriage Prep 101



*Helping Couples Create a Lifetime Together*

## **Location, Catering, Flowers...Marriage Prep?**

*by Drs. Patrick and Michelle Gannon*

You're in the home stretch leading up to your wedding day. Your checklist is nearly complete but you have a nagging sense that there is something you've forgotten. You have dreamed of this day your whole life and want nothing left to chance. You search your memory but can't locate the thought.

Then you recall a suggestion from your wedding officiant. Or was it your friend? They surprised you by commenting that all this planning was for only one day while the marriage was for a lifetime. Then they asked what you were doing to prepare for marriage? You stopped to think but came up with nothing. All of your attention has been focused on the wedding preparations. Before you could explain, they made a suggestion you would never have considered: take a marriage preparation class or schedule some pre-marital counseling sessions. Your initial response was, "Why us? We are SO in love, he is such a wonderful man." Later on, you asked yourself, "Do we really need this with all that we have going on?"

The short but emphatic answer is YES! If you think about it, marriage preparation just makes good sense--and it certainly can't hurt! Couples are surprised how much there is to learn about creating a lifelong marriage. Long-time married couples will tell you "strong marriages don't just happen, they are created!" The simple truth is that even with the best matches, all couples can benefit from learning how to build satisfying, committed marriages. But don't take it on faith, let the facts explain the reasoning.

### **The Case for Marriage Preparation**

You have probably read the statistics before and know they are not encouraging. Half of all marriages end in divorce. Divorce rates are even higher for second marriages. Half of those who do stay together report lowered marital satisfaction within a few years of marrying. The risk for divorce is greatest in the first five years. Having children often lowers relationship satisfaction. Spending enough time together, establishing a pleasurable sex life and managing shared finances are the major challenges newlywed couples must resolve in the first five years of marriage.

Studies show that getting married is a major life transition and how the marriage is established in the early years shape how the marriage will unfold over the long term. Research has also shown that certain types of marriage preparation programs are particularly effective at preventing divorce, lowering the risk by 30% when couples practice specific relationship skills. The lesson to be drawn from this research is crystal clear: investing in your marital relationship now during the "magic window"--the year before and after marriage--may be the best wedding gift you could ever receive!

But there is another reason to invest in marriage education that is not at all about divorce prevention. Everyone wants the best marriage possible. Today's couples have especially high



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expectations for what they want from a marriage. Contrary to popular myth, marrying your soulmate doesn't necessarily inoculate you against the inevitable pressures of modern life. You want a spouse who can build a shared vision of the future with you, collaborate on raising children, create an open, trusting and accepting partnership that takes into account personal and career goals while offering the nurturance, support and protection of a committed relationship. You also want great communication, great lovemaking and great times--now and forever! Of course, that's no easy task. Just ask anyone who's been married for thirty years!

## **Choosing the Right Program for You**

If you are open to doing some marriage preparation, how do you know which program is right for you? The answer has to do with who you are, what your religious practice is, where you are getting married and what is most convenient to your schedule. Fortunately, there are several options to consider. Here is an overview of what the field offers today.

The marriage preparation field is divided into three broad categories: faith-based church programs, private pre-marital counseling services and skill-based classes and workshops. Each have their own strengths and advantages based on their different approaches, the time commitments involved and their costs.

## **Faith-Based Programs**

Faith-based marriage preparation got its start back in the 19th Century when a group of Catholic Spanish wives wanted to help their future husbands prepare for the sacrament of marriage. Engaged Encounter as the Catholic program is called today, has rapidly proliferated around the world. It is presented by a lay husband and wife team who has volunteered to present a marriage curriculum with the help of a priest who may have training in pastoral counseling.

These programs are offered either as a weekend workshop located at a church retreat or over several weekly sessions in the community. Typically, the curriculum involves listening to presentations on various topics of married life, writing thoughts and reactions to sets of questions on selected topics and having discussions with one's partner to clarify your attitudes, beliefs and concerns about marriage. Anyone getting married in a Catholic Church should check with their priest to determine what they offer and if there is a requirement to attend the program.

Protestant and Jewish religions followed suit and also began offering their own individual programs tailored to the beliefs and traditions of their faiths. However, unlike Engaged Encounter, these offerings can be quite varied, community to community, and depend on the interests and resources of the particular church or religious personnel involved. Sometimes, the program may consist of one or more informal meetings with a pastor or simply reading a book and followed up by a discussion.

Some churches, especially among the Protestant faiths, have "marriage mentors" who volunteer their time to meet with engaged couples to answer questions and discuss issues. In many cases,



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these mentors will continue to be available to the married couple long after the wedding is over. Faith-based marriage preparation services also may be the right choice for couples on a limited budget since the costs are usually minimal, if not free of charge.

## **Pre-Marital Counseling**

Another option to consider is pre-marital counseling with a mental health professional. Many couples may have particular issues they want to work on and prefer a more customized approach that individual sessions can provide. With individualized therapy, couples can explore in more depth such issues as in-laws, finances, remarriage and differences in backgrounds.

Although many therapists provide pre-marital counseling, it is best to select one who is a specialist in couples therapy since they will have more expertise in helping couples. Typically, pre-marital counseling utilizes a three to five session format with one hour meetings scheduled weekly. Private counseling is the most expensive of the options described here. However, if your health insurance covers mental health services, you may even be able to get some reimbursement for the fees.

In some cases, therapists might suggest you and your partner take a relationship questionnaire or inventory to give you information about your relationship strengths and challenge areas. The three pre-marital inventories currently available on the market are Prepare/Enrich ([www.lifeinnovations.com](http://www.lifeinnovations.com)), Foccus (used in Engaged Encounter) and Relate ([www.relate-institute.org](http://www.relate-institute.org)). Prepare and Foccus are only offered through a licensed counselor whereas anyone can take the Relate questionnaire, which is available, online for only \$20 per couple. All questionnaires provide a detailed written report about the couple's communication styles, values, goals and relationship dynamics that can serve as a discussion guide to augment whatever program you decide to pursue.

## **Skill-based Programs**

Within the last ten years, a new breed of non-religious, skill-based marriage preparation classes have begun to be offered. These classes and workshops teach couples the lessons from the latest marriage research studies that emphasize the importance of using particular skills and strategies to promote marital longevity. These studies have yielded an impressive body of knowledge that can easily be taught and applied to couples.

In essence, by teaching couples how to protect their relationship by giving them tools to resolve conflicts that can undermine their love and commitment, couples can safeguard their relationship as they navigate through the challenging early years. Specifically, by listening and communicating better, dealing with personal differences and establishing a "we-ness" while learning how to decrease negative interactions, unreasonable expectations and challenges to marital commitment, couples can create a framework that promotes marital happiness. Having a foundation based on mutual understanding, agreed upon strategies and personal awareness is crucial to making the transition to married life, especially if having children is part of the plan.



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Skill-based programs are typically available in the community either in a weekend workshop format or over several weekly sessions. The cost varies depending on what is provided but the typical range is between \$300 - \$500 per couple. If you happen to reside in certain states like Maryland, Florida, Minnesota or Oklahoma, taking a marriage preparation class can also earn you a discount on your marriage license fee!

## **Making the Decision**

So what's the next step? Talk with your partner, your parents, your wedding planner or your clergy about whether marriage preparation makes sense for you. Visit the Smart Marriages website ([www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)) on the Internet to get more information and a listing of programs available in your area. And if you are too busy to do anything before the wedding, consider that half of the couples in many of the skill-based programs are newlyweds.

The important thing to remember is that if you want the best marriage possible, it takes some knowledge, effort and skill, like any of the truly important things in life. So start now, during your "magic window" and build the marriage of a lifetime!