



# Tip Sheet

## Providing Healthy Marriage Education to Clients with Lower Literacy Skills

**By: Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., Professor and Extension Specialist, School of Family Studies and Human Sciences, Kansas State University**

Clients with lower literacy skills may have difficulty reading anything more advanced than a children’s picture book. However, literacy is more than the ability to read. Literacy has been defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials within their intended context.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that literacy and intelligence are not directly related. Individuals and couples with lower literacy levels could have high intelligence levels. Because literacy is greatly valued in our society, most of the time, people will not admit to lower literacy skills. *Do not make any assumptions about an individual’s literacy level based on race, immigration status, nationality, culture, or economic situation.*<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, this tip sheet is for caseworkers who are delivering or considering teaching marriage and relationship skills to individuals with lower literacy abilities.

**Literacy has been defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials within their intended context.**

Source: Reyes, E. (2011). *Helping low-literacy marriage and relationship education participants.*

### Know More About Your Clients

Assessing clients’ literacy levels should be done carefully and thoughtfully as you plan your work. Unless you use some form of assessment, lower literacy characteristics can be mistaken for shyness or can pass unnoticed. Additionally, one partner may compensate or

cover for the other partner with lower literacy, making it difficult to detect. Watch for a partner consistently filling out the other’s forms and reading directions to the other person.<sup>3</sup>

**Lower literacy characteristics can be mistaken for shyness or pass unnoticed so use some form of assessment.**

Source: Reyes, E. (2011). *Helping low-literacy marriage and relationship education participants.*

Observing, listening, and asking questions are vital tools in getting to know your clients, understanding their literacy levels, and learning what they value. A quick and simple way to start is to ask “get to know you” questions such as name, family details, favorite pastimes, hobbies, and fond memories. This will allow you to evaluate the use of words per sentence, syllables per word, and difficulty with vocabulary. It is also important to listen for responses when clients are asked to complete forms including, “I didn’t bring my glasses,” or “I hurt my hand.”<sup>4</sup> However, if the client is not a native English speaker, this informal assessment would be more useful when completed in the person’s first language. It may require the assistance of a staff person or volunteer if the provider does not speak or understand the client’s preferred language.

Ask clients how they learn best, whether by watching, hearing or doing. Individuals with lower literacy may indicate auditory or tactile as their learning style; however, a lower literacy visual learner can depend on visual cues such as illustrations and pictures to interpret and clarify words.<sup>5</sup> It is also noteworthy to mention that members of certain cultures are auditory

learners as they learn through storytelling, regardless of their overall literacy skills.<sup>6</sup>

## Choosing Appropriate Educational Materials

When choosing marriage and relationship education curricula for lower literacy audiences, consider the cultural environment in which the clients live and the context in which they learn best. Key questions to ask are:

- What content would be most helpful to the clients based on their relationship history and current relationship situation? Should it be primarily: a) relational skills, b) knowledge and basic attitudes about marriage, and/or c) motivational reasons to have a committed relationship?<sup>7</sup>
- What should be the dosage or intensity in which the clients are taught? Low level would usually be public media messages; moderate level might be a half-day seminar with self-study follow-up; and high level would be more intense focus on a multitude of personal and couple issues over a period of time, regardless of the teaching method. Care must be taken to not scare away clients with the dosage or intensity of your program, which may be threatening to them.<sup>8</sup>
- Which teaching method is most likely to have the greatest impact on the client – self-directed, one-on-one, or in a group?

With self-directed learning, will the written materials have plenty of visuals and a fifth-grade reading level or less?<sup>9</sup> Will the client be motivated to study on their own? What follow-up will take place with the client after each self-study assignment?

With the one-on-one approach, how will the information and coaching be offered? How will the client's preferred

learning style be incorporated into the coaching sessions? Will the sessions be at regular intervals or will there only be one session? Will it be easy for the client to share personal information in this setting? How comfortable are you with the client?

With a group setting, how will the content be offered to address diverse learning styles? How comfortable are the clients with each other? Will they be reticent to share with each other for confidentiality reasons? How prepared are you in handling reluctant participants or volatile situations?

- When is the best time to offer this education, based on the decisions made regarding the above questions?<sup>10</sup> Where should the activities be located? Will they be in the office, in the client's home, or in a community setting that is comfortable for the clients? Also, think about whether the clients will feel more at ease if their children are on-site, especially during group sessions.<sup>11</sup>

### Possible Learning Styles

Visual – “I learn by watching.”

Auditory – “I learn by hearing.”

Tactile – “I learn by doing.”

Source: Reyes, E. (2011). *Helping low-literacy marriage and relationship education participants.*

These are tough, yet important, questions to consider when selecting, adapting, and implementing curricula that match the needs and situations of your clients. Having a thorough knowledge and understanding of the clients served will facilitate the development of informed decisions to ensure a successful educational experience.

## How to Teach Marriage and Relationship Education to Clients with Lower Literacy Levels

Professionals who have extensive experience teaching clients with lower literacy levels consistently offer the following suggestions which, in reality, may be similar to tips for teaching audiences of diverse literacy levels.<sup>12,13</sup>

Present one idea or skill at a time in everyday language, using simple sentences and short words. For instance, rather than using the term “communication skills,” just say “Let’s work on talking to each other. We will start with listening.” Focus on one key point that you want the clients to remember and build your approach around that message.<sup>14</sup> This may be accomplished by using a self-study format in which “take home” materials include only a single idea at a time.

Use visuals that might include pictures, symbols, charts, and videos. Short vignettes from movies and YouTube® postings to which clients may relate can successfully illustrate a key message. Using symbols to represent an idea might be more helpful than writing it out in words. For instance, using cards with differing facial expressions might be effective when focusing on emotional management and non-verbal behaviors.<sup>15</sup>

Allow ample time for client participation after presenting the skill to be learned. Role plays work well to demonstrate the level of understanding, often in a playful manner that offers opportunities to coach if necessary. Have clients create magazine picture collages, skits, songs, and other creative activities to reinforce the lesson that is being taught.<sup>16</sup> In group settings, clients can also learn from each other, although this may depend on their comfort level.<sup>17</sup> Ice breakers and key questions can help generate group discussions that provide

insights to reinforce the principal message. When encouraging a client’s participation in group, one-on-one settings, or follow-ups to the self-study approach, it is important for the facilitator to display confidence regarding coaching skills and understanding of the curriculum being taught.<sup>18</sup>

### Tips for developing materials in a lower literacy format:

- Short words (1 or 2 syllables)
- Full words (no abbreviations or contractions)
- Short sentences (8-10 words)
- Short paragraphs (60 words)
- Consistent language
- Active voice
- A font size larger than 12 points
- Bold type in headings and subheadings
- Some blank space (whitespace) so the text does not overpower the page

Source: Reyes, E. (2011). *Helping low-literacy marriage and relationship education participants.*

Continuously evaluate learning by repeating and reviewing key points. It is also helpful to ask clients questions in non-threatening ways to evaluate their understanding of the information taught. For instance, a case study could be used to ask clients what they think of the situation and how they would handle it. Remain attuned to clients’ facial expressions and body language in order to recognize possible signs of confusion. If a client seems confused, take a different approach to explain the concept being discussed or ask help from other client(s).<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Regardless of the content, teaching method, and setting that you have chosen for providing healthy marriage education, maintain a level of respect toward the clients that honors and builds upon their strengths.<sup>20</sup> Clients can easily detect the opposite, which in turn, may sabotage a successful outcome. To be skilled in building upon a client's strengths, it may require that you examine your personal and cultural values to discover biases and prejudices and how they inadvertently impact your relationship with clients.<sup>21</sup> This personal awareness is important in discerning how to interpret the strengths of clients and can be the beginning of a long personal journey in overcoming such biases and prejudices. Furthermore, a similar journey might be necessary if you are ambivalent about teaching marriage education, based upon personal life course events and attitudes. The goal of marriage education is to help individuals obtain knowledge and skills for building and sustaining healthy marriages; thus, it is crucial that the provider believes in this work.

### Used our Product?

Please tell us how. Email:  
[info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org](mailto:info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org)

Reference Product #044

[www.healthymarriageandfamilies.org](http://www.healthymarriageandfamilies.org)

## Notes

- <sup>1-4</sup> Sections of this tip sheet were adapted from "Helping low-literacy marriage and relationship education participants" by Enid Reyes (2011), developed by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) under the Grant No. 90FH0001.
- <sup>5</sup> Skogrand, L., & Shirer, K. (2007). Working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 12(1). Retrieved from <http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2007/v12-n1-2007-spring/skogrand-shirer/fa-9-skogrand-shirer.php>
- <sup>6</sup> See note 1 above.
- <sup>7-8</sup> Hawkins, A. J., Carroll, J. S., Doherty, W. J., & Willoughby, B. (2004). A comprehensive framework for marriage education. *Family Relations*, 53(5), 547-558.
- <sup>9</sup> Gaston, N., & Daniels, P. (1988). *Guidelines: Writing for adults with limited reading skills*. Retrieved from Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network website: <http://www1.cyfernet.org/prog/comm/88-writeadult.html>
- <sup>10</sup> See note 7 above.
- <sup>11</sup> See note 5 above.
- <sup>12</sup> See note 9 above.
- <sup>13-16</sup> See note 1 above.
- <sup>17</sup> See note 5 above.
- <sup>18</sup> See note 7 above.
- <sup>19</sup> See note 1 above.
- <sup>20</sup> See note 5 above.
- <sup>21</sup> Deen, M., Huskey, M., & Parker, L. (2010). *A trainer's manual for navigating difference: cultural competency training*. Pullman: Washington State University Extension.

This product was produced by ICF International with funding provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant: 90FH0002. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.