

Assuring the Future: Family Life Education

THE PROFESSION OF FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

Family life education (FLE) is any organized effort to provide people with information, skills, experiences or resources intended to strengthen, improve, or enrich their family experience. The objective of family life education is to enrich and improve the quality of individual and family life.

FLE does not impose any arbitrary definition of what constitutes a family. It emphasizes processes that help people develop into healthy adults and work together in close relationships, and processes that help people bring out the best in others.

THE WORK OF FAMILY LIFE EDUCATORS

Family life educators use many methods and settings to provide training to people who want to be more effective family members. Here are a few examples of how family life educators work to strengthen diverse American families:

- In Houston, Texas, local judges direct offenders and divorcing couples with minor children to attend Edward Stasney's anger management and co-parenting workshops.
- In Chattanooga, Tennessee, Julie Baumgardner, CFLE, works with "First Things First" to promote family-friendly workplace policies and increase community awareness of the importance of strong marriages and families through public service campaigns.
- In Columbia, Missouri, David Schramm, CFLE, is an Extension Family Life Specialist with the University of Missouri Cooperative Extension. He develops programs and trains regional extension specialists in the areas of parenting and couple and family relationships.
- In Springboro, Ohio, Jody Johnston-Pawel, CFLE, hosts a Parents Tool Talk™ radio show providing family life information to listeners. She also develops written materials and teaches classes for parents.

THE NEED FOR FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

We can prepare our citizens for the challenges of family life or we can pay a large and enduring social cost. Families face substantial challenges. Stresses come from many directions and impose great burdens on families. There was a time when most young people got family life training in informal apprenticeships with their parents.

Today, with greater challenges than ever before, we provide less training and preparation for family roles than we have in the past. It is no wonder that families feel overwhelmed by the challenges they face.

Many people feel that they know a lot about families because they grew up in one. Yet there are recent discoveries in family process that may surprise many people. Many of the processes that people assume to be helpful in families are not. Research continues to show new and better ways to become vibrant individuals, strengthen couple relationships, and raise healthy, balanced children. Examples of a few of the intriguing discoveries people should know include the following . . .

PURPOSE

Families are the foundation of our society. They protect, connect, and educate family members. There may be no arena of life in which education may be as valuable as in family life.

However, many of the great discoveries about family life are not getting to the people who need them. Only a small percentage of Americans are ever reached by family life education.

While there are various professions that help families in many ways such as clergy, social workers, and health care professionals, it is family life educators who incorporate a preventative and educational approach to individual and family issues. Family life educators provide the tools and experiences to enrich individual and family life.

When considering legislation to strengthen families, policymakers should support family life education and the families it serves. Strong families make for a strong society.

- Over the years many family professionals assumed that there was one best kind of relationship. Contrary to expectation, research by John Gottman shows that it doesn't matter which of three primary kinds of couple relationship one has—volatile, avoidant or validating—all can be satisfying and enduring. But it does matter that we give five positives for each negative. Positivity is the key to closeness.
- Kindness may be more important in family relationships than communication skills.
- Children's character and moral development may depend more on the cultivation of empathy than anything else.
- One characteristic of resilient children—those who flourish in spite of challenges—is that they have someone in their lives who is crazy about them.
- Teens that focus on serving others are less likely to get in trouble or drop out of school.
- The healthiest people are not the most realistic. Research shows that the healthiest people tend to be unrealistically optimistic.
- Emphasis on self-esteem may have created more problems than it solved.
- New discoveries in positive psychology provide better ways to thrive.
- We instinctively hope to solve problems by studying them, yet those who focus on problems in their relationships may create greater problems. Those who focus on strengths tend to transcend many problems.
- Controlling stress is not done by avoiding it, as much as using the resources we have and managing the way we think about it.

QUALIFICATIONS OF FAMILY LIFE EDUCATORS

Many groups have felt a pressing need to provide family life education for their members or patrons. Yet many of those groups were not clear who qualified to be a family life educator. Sometimes in the past they resorted to using physicians and nurses—people with professional training—but no specific training in family life education. Specific training and certification for family life educators was badly needed.

Since 1985, the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) has sponsored the only national program to certify family life educators. Certified Family Life Educators (CFLE) have training and experience in ten vital areas of family life education:

Families and Individuals in Societal Contexts
 Internal Dynamics of Families
 Human Growth and Lifespan Development across the Life Span
 Human Sexuality
 Interpersonal Relationships
 Family Resource Management
 Parent Education and Guidance
 Family Law and Public Policy
 Professional Ethics and Practice
 Family Life Education Methodology

There are now more than 1500 active CFLEs and more than 120 university programs approved by NCFR as providing coursework relevant to the CFLE standards. The Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) has become a designation that is widely recognized and valued. CFLEs are prepared to teach and strengthen the next generation of families.

FAMILY POLICY

Knowledge is power. If we hope for family members to have satisfying and growth-promoting relationships, they need the best knowledge and skills available.

Working harder while using inaccurate information will not improve families. Research suggests several ways policymakers could strengthen families:

- Promote education regarding relationships, emotional intelligence, and problem solving at all levels of public education.
- Foster the development of research-based, family-strengthening programs that may be delivered by schools, agencies, businesses, and faith communities.
- Support web and media, radio, and television dissemination of current, high-quality information about families.
- Strengthen community mental health organizations.
- Encourage businesses to support family life education in the workplace.
- View policy decisions through a family impact lens and consult with family professionals on the impact of policies on families.
- Encourage all organizations to help prevent family problems through the teaching and support of relationship-strengthening programs.

AUTHORS

NCFR wishes to thank the following authors for the development of this fact sheet and for their commitment to family life education:

H. Wallace Goddard, Ph.D., CFLE, University of Arkansas, Cooperative Extension Service

Tamara Gilliland, CFLE, Family Life Education Institute

Natalie C. Goddard, CFLE, Family Life Education Institute

ABOUT NCFR

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) is the only professional organization focused solely on family research, policy, and practice. NCFR provides a forum for family researchers, educators, and practitioners to share in the development and dissemination of knowledge about families and family relationships, establishes professional standards, and works to promote family well-being. It is the oldest multidisciplinary family organization in the United States and is highly regarded as an authority for information on a broad range of family concerns. To receive additional copies of this fact sheet, contact NCFR, 1201 West River Parkway, Suite 200, Minneapolis, MN 55454; 888-781-9331; info@ncfr.org; www.ncfr.org.