

Overview of Within My Reach

Within My Reach (WMR) is a relationship skills and decision making program for helping individuals achieve their goals in relationships, family, and marriage. The curriculum is especially tailored for those who have struggled with economic disadvantage. It is based on the research-supported premise that virtually all people have aspirations for relationships that are happy, healthy, and stable—and that these aspirations are most often expressed in terms of a desire for success in marriage—and that children tend to fair best in the context of healthy marriages and fair worst in the context of dangerous adult relationships or repeated relationship transitions. WMR is a 15 hour program developed by PREP that is a non-couples based curriculum designed to help economically disadvantaged adults (most typically who are already parents, but not necessarily) who are at risk for poorer quality relationships and relationship instability. The fundamental premise of the curricula is that "the decisions one makes in romantic attachments will affect the possibility of success in every other aspect of life—especially in child rearing and employment." Specifically, the goals of WMR are to help "the economically disadvantaged to attain relationship success for themselves and their children by: (1) helping those in viable relationships to cultivate, protect, and stabilize their unions, and to marry if desired; (2) helping those in damaging relationships to leave safely; and/or (3) helping those desiring a romantic relationship to choose future partners wisely."

WMR is, therefore, a marriage and relationship education curriculum designed for improving the odds that participants will choose, remain, or develop healthy relationships, and where possible, develop those relationships into sustainable and healthy marriages that benefit the individual and her or his children. It presents a very strong model of risk in how relationships begin (especially in how constraints are often greatly increased before one has made a clear choice about a partner), empirically based information on healthy relationships (and marriage), models for how to think about expectations and values in partner choices, effects on children of various relationship patterns and choices, relationship skills for managing communication, problems, and conflicts, strategies for understanding and dealing with trust and distrust, commitment, forgiveness, basic advice for coping with children from prior relationships, and tools for thinking about and planning for overcoming barriers to healthy relationships and marriage in the near or longer term future.

The curriculum is organized in the following structure. There are 3 major themes to the curriculum—Building Relationships, Maintaining Relationships, and Making Relationship Decisions—with several units in each. There are 15 units total, each lasting 55 minutes. There are several sections within each unit. The first theme (Building Relationships) focuses on the state of relationships in our society, the importance of them, mate selection, self-awareness, compatibility, and means of evaluating relationships. The second theme (Maintaining Relationships) focuses on relationship skills taught in a way that would be applicable to all relationships, married or unmarried, romantic or non-romantic. Much of this material is based directly on PREP. Communication skills are emphasized, as well as safety. The third theme (Making Relationship Decisions) is future-oriented; it's where marriage as a concept emerges most strongly. We focus on how the importance of making decisions in relationships and how to do so. Here, much information is provided on the effects of parents' relationships on children, as well as information regarding relationship decisions such whether to cohabit, how to break-up, and when to marry (if desired). Lastly, the final unit encourages participants to tap community resources in terms of both social support and available community programs.

WMR was developed with substantial input of various experts on low income individuals such as Dr. Kathryn Edin. Additionally, it was developed with a great deal of input of relationship education providers working with the intended audience, has been piloted with TANF classes in Oklahoma, and includes very strong messages throughout on safety and domestic violence. Indeed, national domestic violence experts such as domestic violence advocate Anne Menard and researcher Michael Johnson have provided substantial input into the strategies for raising and advising participants about dangerous relationships.