



MARRIAGE EDUCATION IN THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH COMMUNITY *Perspectives from Marriage Transformation®*

Inviting Bahá'í communities to engage in relationship and marriage education and social action for building happy, lasting character-based marriages.

DEFINING MARRIAGE EDUCATION

Systematic Marriage Education Based on the Bahá'í Writings

It is important to note that there is no one system for Bahá'í marriage education that exists. The methods and focus for any marriage education effort will vary significantly across the planet depending on the needs of the population and available resources. Communities will make decisions about whether to use materials already developed by a variety of organizations and institutions, and those that develop over time, as well as utilize learning-in-action to discern what works.

What Marriage Education Is

Marriage education's focus is on taking action to strengthen knowledge and skills in individuals and couples, as well as prevent future problems. It is aimed at empowering people to create marriages that provide healthy and happy stability and unity for families and communities. Marriage education includes such activities as reading books, studying in groups, taking courses, participating in workshops, and mentoring. It provides important knowledge, skills, and attitudes about relationships, marriage, and re-marriage to foster a gradual and organic transformation process.

Marriage education helps with building capacity and strengths. Ideally, it equips people to be healthy individuals with many character strengths who can then be successful partners in a relationship and then as spouses. It includes preparation for relationships and marriage for individuals and couples of all ages and experience levels. Marriage education also provides marriage-strengthening tools for healthy married couples who want to continue learning, growing, and developing.

Marriage education is an excellent choice for:

- unmarried people interested in learning about relationships
- couples considering dating, courtship, and marriage
- unmarried people and couples considering re-marriage
- parents of individuals considering dating, courtship, consent, engagement, and marriage
- newly married couples
- couples experiencing the usual ups and downs of married life
- couples experiencing external tests that can affect the marriage
- couples in life-stage transitions; such as, becoming parents or their children leaving home
- couples with strong marriages who enjoy enriching their marriage further

What Marriage Education is Not

Marriage education is not counseling or therapy, but instead it focuses on building understanding and competence. It is not generally for couples in crisis. Although marriage education can provide skill building and assistance for deeply troubled couples considering separation or divorce, this education is usually best linked with help from a trained couples therapist and consultation with a Spiritual Assembly.

Marriage education may warn some couples who are experiencing difficulties of the need to address their problems. However, the *timing* of marriage education sometimes may not be appropriate when a marriage is in active crisis or decline. This could include:

- signs of estrangement or aversion
- daily conflict
- any type of abusive behavior
- infidelity
- significant diminishing in feelings of hope, joy, or commitment
- not experiencing the marriage as a haven and “fortress for well-being” (Bahá’u’lláh)

Seriously troubled couples may find marriage education in groups or workshops to be discouraging or difficult where other couples are having a much healthier experience in their relationships. They may also disrupt the experience for or discourage other couples who are not in crisis.

FOUNDATION STATEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

The following statements and quotations outline duties of Assemblies, describe marriage as the foundational element of society, underscore the significance of Bahá’í marriage and family unity as a model, emphasize the essential art of consultation and other knowledge and skills, and stress the importance of social action by Bahá’ís. Assemblies may wish to deepen on these statements and share them with their communities to assist the friends in expanding their awareness of the importance of working conscientiously to build strong marriages and families, for their own sakes and for the ultimate sake of the Bahá’í Faith and humanity.

• Assemblies have a responsibility to educate the community about marriage and to respond to requests for help

“The Spiritual Assembly should always be concerned that the believers in its community are being deepened in their understanding of the Bahá’í concept of marriage, especially the young people, so that the very thought of divorce will be abhorrent to them.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #1304)

“The House of Justice is distressed to learn that you and your husband are continuing to experience marital difficulties. It has frequently advised believers in such situations to turn to the Spiritual Assemblies for advice and counsel, and to follow this advice in their efforts to preserve the unity of their marital relationship. It has been found useful in many instances to also seek the assistance of competent professional marriage counselors, who can provide useful insights and guidance in the use of constructive measures to bring about a greater degree of unity.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, p. 459)

• Fostering obedience to the Bahá’í marriage laws is an important duty of Assemblies

“The carrying out of the Bahá’í marriage laws, as given to the friends throughout the world, is a vital obligation of every believer who wishes to marry, and it is an important duty of every Local Spiritual Assembly to ensure that these laws are known to, and obeyed by, the believers within their jurisdiction, whether or not the Bahá’í marriage ceremony is recognized by civil law. Each Assembly, therefore, must conscientiously carry out its responsibilities in connection with the holding of Bahá’í marriage ceremonies, the recording of Bahá’í marriages in a register kept for this purpose, and the issuing of Bahá’í marriage certificates.” (The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, pp. 488-489)

• **Marriage is a foundational element for all human society**

“The Bahá’í teachings on sexual morality center on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution. Bahá’í law thus restricts permissible sexual intercourse to that between a man and the woman to whom he is married.” (Note #134 appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)

• **Marital and family unity among the Bahá’ís builds credibility for their message to the world; seriously courting a partner and maintaining marriages are part of an individual’s and couple’s service to God**

“...[I]f the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 222)

“...[E]very aspect of a person’s life is an element of his or her service to Bahá’u’lláh: the love and respect one has for one’s parents; the pursuit of one’s education; the nurturing of good health; the acquiring of a trade or profession; one’s behavior towards others and the upholding of a high moral standard; one’s marriage and the bringing up of one’s children; one’s activities in teaching the Faith and the building up the strength of the Bahá’í community, whether this be in such simple matters as attending the Nineteen Day Feast or the observance of Bahá’í Holy Days, or in more demanding tasks required by service in the administration of the Faith; and, not least, to take time each day to read the Writings and say the Obligatory Prayer, which are the source of growing spiritual strength, understanding, and attachment to God.” (The Universal House of Justice, December 7, 1992, European Bahá’í Youth Council; www.bahairesearch.com)

• **Marriage preparation is a key element in preserving marriage**

“Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá’í marriage.” (World Centre Research Department in memorandum for *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages* compilation, item 3)

• **Building knowledge and skills with character/virtues supports relationships and marriages as well as all aspects of the core activities, each of which can include a focus on character; parents have a vital role in building strong characters in their children and in considering consent for marriage**

“Bahá’í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 118)

“Bahá’í law places the responsibility for ascertaining knowledge of the character of those entering into the marriage contract on the two parties involved, and on the parents, who must give consent to the marriage.” (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, #1231)

“No less pertinent [than rectitude of conduct] to the success of the Bahá’í enterprise today are the Guardian’s forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, ‘with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness’. He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied ‘by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters’. ... The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. ... May every one of them [the youth] come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.” (Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors, December 28, 2010)

• Consultation is a fundamental skill in marriages and families for maintaining harmony and unity and as a tool to seek help from others

[When asked about specific rules of conduct to govern the relationship between husbands and wives] “...for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgment they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.” (Universal House of Justice: *Preserving Bahá'í Marriages*, pp. 5-6)

• Social action outreach is a key part of the service Bahá'ís offer the world

“...[I]t seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010)

POTENTIAL ACTIONS TO PROMOTE UNIFIED, HAPPY, AND HEALTHY MARRIAGES

Below are potential actions that could contribute to creating strong marriages. They are categorized by how Bahá'ís conduct themselves individually and in couple relationships and marriages. They include educating the community about having healthy relationships and marriages. They also address how to become models and advocates who promote the importance of good relationships and marriages in the Bahá'í community and beyond.

Once individuals, couples, Assemblies, and their communities begin the process of transforming the quality of their marriages, it will be important to examine what ongoing marriage education can help. Each community will choose its own gradual and organic process and set its own goals. Ongoing education will help the development of knowledge and skills. Further development of the art of reflection, consultation, and learning-in-action in a community will also be helpful in this unfolding process.

INDIVIDUALS AND COUPLES

Enhancing Personal Conduct

- Engage in ongoing character development
- Be involved in ongoing service activities
- Regularly use prayer, reflection, and consultation for character discernment of potential partners, within our couple relationships that are moving towards marriage and within our marriages to maintain awareness of our strengths and growth areas, set goals, and take necessary actions to achieve improvement
- Seek help early from skilled and trustworthy sources for any needed courting-couple relationship strengthening and premarital education, or for addressing marital couple difficulties
- Maintain marital faithfulness and sustain family love and unity to the best of our ability
- Regard marriage as a sacred commitment

- Practice forgiveness of others and ourselves, seeking healing, reconciliation, and unity building to the best of our ability as promptly as possible in any upset or difficulty; and seek/be willing to seek confidential consultative assistance with this process as needed from skilled and trustworthy sources
- Eliminate gossip and backbiting about relationships and marriages of our own or others
- Pray on my/our own for relationships and marriages generally and my/our own in particular
- Be accepting of the choice some make not to be married

Participating in Study/Education

- Encourage children, youth, and adults to study, understand, and live their lives according to the Bahá'í Writings, guidance, and laws about character, relationships, marriage, and family
- Participate in relationship and marriage education opportunities provided by Spiritual Assemblies or other institutions, agencies, companies, or organizations; seek further education and skill building opportunities as needed
- Engage in the process of character education and transformation to empower practicing rectitude of conduct in relationships and marriages
- Periodically include prayers and readings focused on the strengthening of the well-being of marriages as part of community occasions such as the 19-Day Feast or devotional gatherings

Becoming Exemplars

- Demonstrate through our words and actions respect and love for the sacred institution of marriage as the foundation for family, neighborhood, community, and global unity and prosperity and as a “fortress for well-being and salvation” (Bahá'u'lláh)
- Share encouragement and hope, as well as a vision and model of marital success with others
- Model purity and chastity for our families, neighbors, friends, and coworkers; these complex concepts include maintaining uplifting and chaste thoughts, positive words, honest motivations, a loving heart, and a spiritually focused soul and keeping sexual intimacy as a God-given gift to occur only within marriage for building unity between marriage partners and as a sacred act that brings children into the marriage to create a family
- To regard the health and happiness of marriages as a major contributor to the well-being of children
- Be sensitive, moderate, and wise about agreeing to requests for service or volunteering for service beyond the family to avoid being involved in activities that significantly reduce time with a spouse or family

ASSEMBLY

Gaining Skills and Knowledge

- Use prayer, consultation, and reflection to gain understanding about the general health of the relationships and marriages in our community
- Track statistical data and trends for marriages and divorces in our jurisdiction to be able to set clear goals for improving trends, such as reducing the divorce rate
- Strengthen the ability of the Assembly and its representatives to skillfully meet with individuals and couples before marriage, those who are troubled about their relationships or marriages, and those who are applying for divorce
- Strengthen the ability of the Assembly and its representatives to skillfully guide couples who apply for divorce to achieve reconciliation before or after the granting of a year of waiting (alt: year of patience)

- Be sensitive, moderate, and wise about overly stressing marriages and families through requests for service that significantly reduce an individual's time with a spouse or family

Providing Education

- Provide regular, proactive opportunities for spiritually-based relationship education, both knowledge and skill building, to unmarried members such that they have excellent characters and character discernment and are well prepared for being in a friendship, relationship, courtship, and marriage and positioned to prevent divorce; provide referrals for stepfamily education prior to marriage where applicable
- Provide education to parents on how to assist their children to practice chastity and how to be thorough in the parental consent for marriage process, especially with skillfully knowing the character of the individuals
- Provide regular, proactive opportunities for spiritually-based marriage education, both knowledge and skill building, to married members such that they are maintaining strong, happy, and faithful marriages that are of service to their families and community as well as examples to their children and others
- Provide education about Bahá'í marriage laws and the teachings about divorce and its harm
- Provide opportunities as appropriate and timely as part of the organic growth of the community for social action marriage educational outreach beyond the Bahá'í community members
- Discourage cohabitation and adultery with a balance of love, forbearance, and understanding along with firmness on laws and principles

CONSIDERING POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION

Through the process of consultation, learning-in-action, and reflection over time, Assemblies and their community members may find that they begin to develop their own purposes and lines of action that are unique to the experience and developing knowledge of the community. These will reflect the creative and diverse ideas of individuals, institutions, communities, and others as the transformation process takes shape and evolves. Some possibilities are to:

- Track and celebrate wedding anniversaries as part of honoring the institution of marriage and the perseverance of couples in their marriages
- Consider and provide opportunities for single Bahá'ís, both youth and adults, to meet and spend time with each other in a safe, supportive atmosphere, including service opportunities whenever possible (Behavior to avoid could be embarrassing comments, teasing, and gossip)
- Provide thorough marriage preparation for each seriously courting or engaged couple over a period of months, preferably along with some time with a skilled or trained married mentor couple
- Set-up follow-up meetings (at least two) between a mentor couple and a married couple during the first year of marriage
- Provide ongoing facilitated relationship and marriage strengthening groups with trained individuals or couples leading them*
- Offer relationship and marriage education and skill building workshops periodically

* The concept of ongoing groups guided by non-professional individuals and couples who have gone through facilitator training and are also participants willing to gain ongoing growth in their own relationship or marriage (similar principle to the Ruhi study circle tutoring process) is just emerging as a possibility to help the relationships and marriages of Bahá'ís. This model holds possibility for also providing a vehicle for social action outreach over time. Challenges to address include the identification within a community of those appropriate and willing to be trained and carry out this service, as well as a practical method and funds

to accomplish the facilitator training. This model of marriage enrichment has been successful for almost 40 years through Better Marriages (formerly Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment; www.bettermarriages.org). By collaborating with experienced organizations, this model could benefit the Bahá'í community.