

## IN THEIR SHOES

**Purpose:** To identify the impact of obstacles faced by low-income couples with children when they have unplanned pregnancies.

**Materials:** Handout: *Planning for Children Questionnaire* and Facilitator Resources: *Couple Scenarios* and *Couple Station Cards*

**Time:** 50 minutes

**Facilitator Notes:**

1. This session is a component of the *Planning for Children Module*. The entire module is designed to be incorporated into a more comprehensive program on relationships. If you opted to conduct the session on sexuality (*Let's Talk about Sex*), then you've already done a good job of creating a comfortable environment for discussing these issues. If you did not opt to conduct that session, then you will need to create some ground rules. Your tone right from the outset will be invaluable in creating a warm and open learning environment.
2. The individuals and couples in your program are going to be in many different places when it comes to their beliefs about childbearing, the number of children they would ideally like to have, and their current desire to prevent or to seek pregnancy at this time. Some group members might be actively trying to get pregnant, some might be ambivalent, some might believe that this is not a good time to have another baby but they aren't doing anything consistent to prevent pregnancy, and still others might not want any more children. You have to create space in your group for people with any of these perspectives to feel safe and comfortable discussing the issues and for people to share their feelings when they may be the only one in the room who feels that way.
3. This activity is complex. Read it several times to fully digest the process. Decide in advance which two (of the four) scenarios you think are most relevant for your group. You will not have time for more than two scenarios.
4. Make large labels or posters with the following headings:
  - Housing
  - Health
  - Education & Finances
  - Employment & Finances
  - Child Support
  - Children's Well Being
  - Transportation
  - Partner/Extended Family Relationships
5. Set up three different stations in the room which will represent areas or components of the couples' lives that might be impacted by bringing another child into the family. You might use three small tables or desks for the stations. Or you could designate wall space to hang your posters or labels.
6. As participants walk into the session, ask them to complete the questionnaires individually. Provide clarification or assistance as necessary:

- Explain the questionnaires carefully and let people know in advance that they will be sharing their responses with their partners later in the session.
- Encourage participants to be as honest as possible, particularly about things like their current level of knowledge, because this information will help you evaluate the effectiveness of these sessions.
- Pay attention to any cues that might indicate that a woman (or man) is uncomfortable with her/his partner knowing about their current or past use of contraception.
- Collect the questionnaires and hold them until later in the session.

**Procedure:**

1. **Introduction and Group Contract (5 minutes):** Welcome participants and let them know that the next two sessions will focus on the issue of planning for pregnancy and children. Make the following points:
  - All of you are in this program because you want to become stronger as a couple. You're taking steps to get on your feet financially so you can provide a stable upbringing for your children.
  - Today we're going to talk about the ways that having another baby at this particular time can possibly impact your current efforts to become a more stable family.
  - When thinking about the possibility of having more children, many people have mixed feelings. Most people really value having children and being a mother or father can give a person's life a sense of meaning and purpose.
  - At the same time, children who come into the world have needs and it takes money, time, energy, and lots of love to raise them.
  - These two sessions are going to help you think about your attitudes and beliefs about children, your current situation as a couple, your thoughts about having more children in the future, and if you want more children, how you would ideally time and space future pregnancies.
  - We're going to do some interesting activities in the large group; you'll spend some time in a separate men's and women's group; and you'll sit together as a couple to talk, plan, and get on the same page about planning for more children.
2. Tell the group that you want to spend some time creating the right mood for talking about these issues. Go over the following information:
  - We believe that each individual has the right to determine how many children they want to have, when they want to have them, and with whom they want to have them.
  - Often couples wait until they find themselves pregnant to begin making plans to manage the financial and day-to-day arrangements of bringing a new child into the family.
  - Our goal is to help you decide *what you want*; to consider what your current and any future children need from you; and to get on the same page as a couple so you can have a shared vision and a plan for your family in advance of any surprises.
  - We're going to start where you are... so don't worry. If you want to have another child right away; if you're pregnant now; if you don't want another child right away but aren't doing much to prevent pregnancy; if you're ready for a permanent method of birth control... wherever you are, that's where we're going to meet you.

- Since we're going to talk about pregnancy planning, we'll end up discussing topics such as having sex and using birth control to prevent pregnancy. I want to make sure that everyone feels comfortable discussing these topics in this group.
  - Let's adopt the following rules to help create a space that feels comfortable for these kinds of topics.
    - No judging or putting down someone for their beliefs or values.
    - There are no dumb questions—there are a lot of myths about sex and birth control—so ask anything you're curious about.
    - If something is too personal or too private, you can pass.
    - What gets said here, stays here.
3. **Brainstorming (15 minutes):** Ask how many people in the room are pregnant or planning to have more children in the future. Ask participants to do a quick brainstorm about both the good and the hard stuff that can come along with having another child. Write “The Good Stuff” at the top of a chart and ask the group to tell you all of the positive things that might come along with a new child in the family. Do this for five minutes and write their responses on the chart. Now write “The Hard Stuff” on a different chart and ask how a new child might make life harder for them or the children they already have. List their responses on the chart. (Encourage them to think about things like specific financial expenses, demands on parents' time and energy, childcare needs, need for additional living space, changes in routines, effects on the couples relationship, and impact on any existing children in the family. Don't spend more than 5 minutes on this.)
  4. **Reality TV Show Activity (30 minutes):** Tell the group that they are going to participate in an activity called “In Their Shoes,” which is kind of like a reality TV show. Two couples in the room will volunteer to be participants on the show and walk in the shoes of a couple that has just found out they're about to have another baby. Recruit the first couple volunteers. Explain that there will be some role-playing involved so you need folks who don't mind doing a little acting. Once you have your volunteers, give these instructions:
    - I'm going to read a scenario that gives some background information on who you are and what's going on in your life.
    - You'll spend 1-2 minutes role-playing a conversation that you might have with your partner about your situation.
    - Finally, you'll go visit some stations to find out what happens to you in three areas of your life.
    - The rest of the group will be members of the studio audience and from time to time we'll ask you a few questions and give you a chance to make comments.
  5. (Note: Put your first set of posters up for the three stations: Health, Employment and Finances, and Child Support.) In an engaging style, tell the volunteers about their characters: Jasmine and Marcus. Ham it up a bit...don't just read. Once they've heard about their characters, ask them to role-play for a couple of minutes about how they are feeling. After a couple of minutes, say “freeze” and stop their conversation. Ask a few questions:
    - To the studio audience, how would you feel if you were in this couple's shoes?
    - To Jasmine and Marcus, what are some of the things that might happen in your life now that you're having another child?

6. Tell Jasmine and Marcus that they're going to find out what actually happens to them in three areas of their life. Have them get up and walk over to the first station (Health). Ask the studio audience, "What are some health issues that might come up with Jasmine's pregnancy?" Direct the couple to the Health Station and read the information from the facilitator resource. Have the couple (in their roles) tell the studio audience how they are feeling. After a minute or so, say, "freeze." Get reactions from the audience.
7. Move onto the second station (Employment and Finances) and read the information for that station. Get the couple to talk about how they are feeling and get reactions from the studio audience. Continue in this manner for the third station, Child Support. At the end of the discussion, thank Jasmine and Marcus, get them out of their roles, and send them back to their seats.
8. (Note: Change the posters on the stations to correspond with the stations to be visited by the next couple you've chosen for the activity.) Recruit your next set of volunteers and use the same process that you used earlier. When you're done, thank all of the actors and the studio audience and get people out of their roles. The reality show is over and now the group will discuss what happened and what they can learn from the activity.
9. Stress that the activity has highlighted the following message: For a couple that is struggling to get on their feet, unexpectedly bringing a new baby into the family can bring health issues, stress to the couple's relationship, financial pressures, and less time and attention for existing children.
10. Use the questions below to debrief the activity.

***Discussion Questions:***

1. How realistic were these scenarios?
2. What do you think it would really be like for you and the children you already have if you had another baby now? (Encourage participants to think about all the ways portrayed in this activity—health, finances, housing, partner relationship, children's well-being.)