

# EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

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Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

## Strong Couples program helps families build relationships that last

Sustaining a healthy and supportive relationship can be difficult for many couples. The [Strong Couples Project](#) started in Illinois in 2020 as an effort to assist couples by providing them with knowledge and skills related to communication, as well as techniques for changing the tone of escalating conflicts and arguments. [Judy Schmidt](#), 4-H youth development educator serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties serves as a program coach for this state-wide project.

Results from many decades of research indicate that long-term relationship distress can greatly impair the health and well-being of individuals, their families, and the broader community (Robles et al., 2014; Wilcox et al, 2015). The Strong Couples Project – led by researchers and educators with the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#) and Extension – is designed to provide couples with free, evidence-based relationship education programming.

The Strong Couples project engages couples in an online program (“ePREP”), which is one of the most scientifically based programs for strengthening relationships. Couples complete the six-session online ePREP program on their own, which includes psychoeducational presentations, video examples, and discussion questions. Sessions are supplemented with five video calls with a program coach (Extension educators), who work to reinforce online material, guide structured exercises, and provide encouragement to the couples.

The growing team of coaches have worked with over 200 couples so far. Schmidt joins other 4-H youth development and family life educators on this project. She holds degrees in psychology, social work, and marriage and family therapy and sees the value this program brings. [Allen Barton](#), U of I assistant professor and Extension specialist in [Human Development & Family Studies](#) is project lead.

“One of the things I find most rewarding about the Strong Couples program is that couples at every stage of their relationship can find something useful from the program,” says Schmidt. Couples of all types (and argument styles) have been found to benefit from the program. Analysis of data collected from project participants indicates significant post-program increases in relationship satisfaction, partner support, and relationship confidence; and decreases in relationship instability, concerns, negative communication, individual psychological distress, and individual perceived stress.

Some feedback from participants includes, “Great program. I would tell anyone I know to try it.” and “I wish I could have had [the program] earlier in our relationship.”

The project is designed to reach any couple looking to strengthen their relationship. To be eligible, couples must be age 18 years or older; and married, engaged, or in a cohabiting relationship for at least six months. Learn more at [publish.illinois.edu/strongcouples/](https://publish.illinois.edu/strongcouples/).

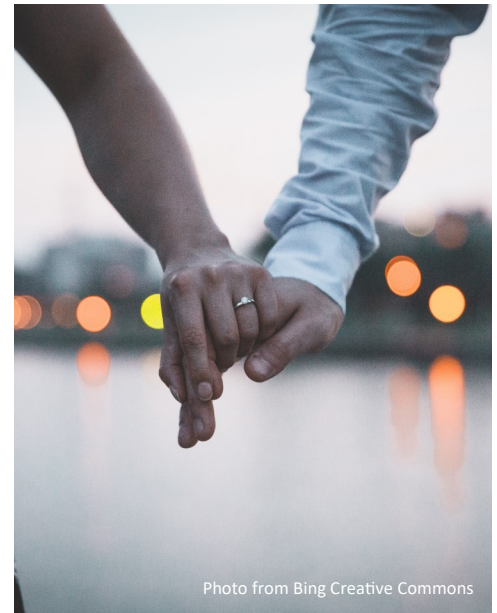


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*Couples from across the state are benefiting from the new Strong Couples Project launched in 2020. U of I department of Human Development & Human Studies and Illinois Extension are working together to provide education and one-on-one coaching to couples. Local 4-H Youth Educator Judy Schmidt serves as one of the coaches.*

### Judy Schmidt

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