

## Reaching Young Homemakers

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*"Young families are interested in adult education programs," the authors say. However, effectively reaching young homemakers has long been a concern and problem to Extension educators. Today's dilemma of involving young homemakers in educational programs at a time when their family living problems are paramount is discussed. The authors present a West Virginia county study aimed at finding out more about the needs and interests of young homemakers in home economics adult education programs, how they'd like to receive this education, and why they don't take advantage of existing programs. Are their findings similar to the situation in your county or state?*

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Responsibilities of the family are greater now than ever before in an increasingly complex world. One of our national concerns reveals the need for human development and recognition of the interrelationship and interdependency of economic, human, and social development. Smith says that:

. . . family life education is needed by everyone. It seems evident that neither their personal well being, nor social welfare, can be achieved until individual, family and community become more closely coordinated.<sup>1</sup>

Goble states that applying family living knowledge especially in young families, has been of particular concern to Extension professionals for a number of reasons. First, be-

cause of the rapid changes that require movement of labor forces, many young families no longer continue to live in the same geographical areas as their root family. Thus, there has been an increased responsibility on young homemakers since they can't rely on emergency help and advice from relatives.

Secondly, there's a concern about applying family living knowledge. It can be related to how the family can contribute more usefully to the development of individuals who have the flexibility, self-reliance, and the responsibility to live in a world that changes so drastically even within one's lifetime. Thirdly, research has found that the family's influence on the individual is forever.<sup>2</sup>

Knowledge is for decision mak-

ing. If a homemaker is to make wise decisions based on facts, she must continue her education. And, in a highly technological society, facts are always changing.

### **Evaluation Needed**

On the national basis, about half of our population is under 25 years old. However, if you look at the many Extension adult education programs in West Virginia, you'll see that the majority of people enrolled are 50 or older. Therefore, the Extension program should be evaluated to see if young families' needs are being considered.

Young families are interested in adult education programs. Recent research by the University of Iowa on independent study showed that the largest number of enrollees are from the age group 20-35.<sup>3</sup> An Indiana survey of young homemakers noted that their greatest obstacle to group learning was not knowing what programs were available.<sup>4</sup>

Many times adult educators have been guilty of setting up programs on what they felt were the needs of adults. Then the object was to find an audience for the planned programs. However, if a program for adults is to be more meaningful, it should be planned by coordinating the ideas of adult educators and the expressed needs of the expected audience.

With the expansion of young adult programs on the national, state, and county levels in the past few years, West Virginia University has become concerned about how Extension

could reach more young homemakers. Before 1964, the emphasis for involving young homemakers in educational programs was through homemaker clubs. However, not all women are club oriented. Therefore, the challenge went out for Extension personnel to find new ways of involving young homemakers in educational programs at a time when their family living problems are paramount.

### **West Virginia Study**

Recognizing this situation, we felt that specific information was needed to plan educational programs for young homemakers. As a result, we conducted a study with the following purposes: (1) to obtain information about the needs and interests of young homemakers toward the subject of home economics adult education programs, (2) to find out what way they'd like to receive this education, and (3) to learn why they don't take advantage of existing home economics adult education programs.

Because time was important and we wanted to reach as many young families as possible, we selected a questionnaire as the way to collect data for this study. Questionnaires were mailed to a random selection of 535 young homemakers who were registered voters in Marshall County, West Virginia. Of the returned questionnaires, fourteen percent or 86 were usable. Fifty percent of those returning questionnaires were personally interviewed to get detailed information about their interests.

The respondents in this survey were evenly distributed among rural, urban, and suburban. A comparison was also made on their different backgrounds. However, from a general survey of the data, a great contrast didn't appear. Their ages were evenly distributed between 21 and 35 years. Ninety-four percent were married. A majority of the husbands were industrial plant employees. One-fourth of the homemakers with children were employed.

Ninety-four percent of the young homemakers indicated they'd attend home economics programs if they were interested in them. As a group, their first three preferences for the subject areas were: food shopping, interior decorating, and elementary clothing construction. Some other areas of interest were: rearing children, money management and buying tips, advanced clothing construction, healthful low-calorie meals, understanding people, and creative crafts for the home.

Homemakers in suburban areas, and those who were employed or single, were most interested in the subject of interior decorating. Possibly these homemakers have less of a budgeting problem than their counterparts. Suburban residents, in most cases, were families whose household head was either a professional or an industrial plant employee. Generally, these families drew a higher salary than rural and urban ones. Single homemakers in all cases were employed and wouldn't be as concerned with balancing their budgets to cover food costs. Spending patterns of the

low income show that their biggest expenditure was for food.

During the follow-up interviews, homemakers also suggested the following interest areas in addition to those listed on the questionnaire: home remodeling, building and buying a home, how to buy basic wardrobes and accessories, hat construction, reupholstery, making slipcovers, meal planning, refinishing furniture, feeding children, indoor activities for children, flower arranging, helping with a child's education, places for family vacations, and many others.

Comparing these subject-interest findings with a study done in Colorado in 1965, showed the Colorado homemakers were interested in similar subject areas: home and home surroundings, financial and legal matters, physical and emotional health, food and nutrition, and desires and wants for children.<sup>5</sup> You can see similarity, but the emphasis is different.

In another informal survey on West Virginia homemakers, done in 1969, there were also similar results.<sup>6</sup> In this survey homemakers were most interested in child development information, homemaking skills, physical fitness, and their appearance.

### **Disseminating Information**

Young homemakers have a definite opinion on how and when they'd like to receive this educational information. They preferred to receive their adult education programs by newsletters, magazines, or pamphlets. This would permit them to learn at their own convenience. This would

solve the travel and baby-sitting problems. Some wanted to take correspondence courses for credit, others were interested in television programs on home economics. For those who wanted to get their information through groups, their preferences were: belonging to a club, enrolling in an adult education class, or attending a conference and/or workshop.

It's to an educator's advantage when the audience prefers to receive their educational information by mass media. If educational programs in home economics are to be conducted for the ever-increasing urban population, meetings and personal visits alone won't do the job effectively. Rogers found that impersonal contacts through mass media reached twice as many Ohio homemakers as personal contacts.<sup>7</sup>

Mass media can bring current knowledge to young families who often don't search for it unless a paramount need exists. Mass media such as newsletters make young families aware of new ideas and often suggest further references. Research in the diffusion process has shown that mass media are most effective in the awareness and interest stages of the process. More people become aware of new ideas from mass media than by any other source.

### **Enrollment Factors**

Certain factors besides interest in a program affect whether young families will enroll in adult education programs in home economics. Many variables determine whether they'll

attend informal programs that can't be presented through mass media.

First of all, they prefer to have these programs in their community, and preferably in the evening in the spring or fall seasons. Most of these families have preschool children and are one-income families. Finding and affording baby-sitters is a problem. If programs are held in the evening, most husbands are available for baby-sitting. Also, the family car is available. This is also more economical.

Spring and fall are the preferred seasons because the weather is better for traveling and the vacation period is over. Another variable that sometimes keeps young homemakers from attending programs is family sickness. And, often young homemakers won't attend these programs if they don't have a friend going.

In general, the respondents were enthusiastic to the possibility of a program planned especially for them. One homemaker wrote on the bottom of her questionnaire:

I think adult education programs would be very helpful. It would give every mother a better understanding of her family and home. Sincerest congratulations on planning this program. It's just what I've been hoping for. Can't wait to begin.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty percent wrote unsolicited comments on the end of their questionnaires. When the young homemakers selected for interviews were contacted, they were enthusiastic and many asked the interviewers how soon some programs would be planned.

### Implementing the Program

Immediately after the study was completed, a program was started for the young families that had taken part in this research study. A monthly young families newsletter, based on the subject areas they were interested in, was begun. After interviewing a number of young homemakers, it was decided the newsletter would cover one subject in depth each month. It contained concise, up-to-date information that was easy to read. For interest, there were some "Did You Know" comments about unusual but interesting facts about the monthly subject. To break the monotony, some cartoon-like pictures or scenes were used—again in tune with the chosen subject. Then for those who wished to delve into the subject even more, a section labeled "For Further Information" appeared at the end of the newsletter. Also, in most cases, a USDA or WVU bulletin was enclosed. The newsletter was only two sheets, with information on the front and back of both sheets. It was bright yellow—an easy color to read from and one that's easily spotted among other papers.

A formal means of evaluating this newsletter and its effectiveness is planned for the future. However, some brief responses from the young families indicate they enjoy and appreciate it. They've said: "I read mine and then file it away for future information"; "I really enjoy reading your newsletter"; "Can my friend receive the same newsletter?"

Because of this contact with young families, we've been able to

tell them about other adult education programs. Some have enrolled in eight-week, noncredit extension classes, and as a result two new homemaker clubs have been formed. Plans for the future include more definite activities, basically for young homemakers.

Doing this research has brought us many personal rewards. It's gratifying to work with a new audience that's interested in learning. Also, this has opened up a whole new channel for leadership in community development programs.

This study has given us insight into Extension programming for young homemakers. Extension is trying to deal with an increasing range of problems. We're trying to reach new audiences and employ up-to-date teaching methods. This means that we must be willing to continually evaluate what we're doing, ask our intended audiences what their needs are, and adjust the ways in which our education programs will be executed. We need more facts and fewer assumptions.

### Footnotes

1. William Smith, "Family Life Education: Who Needs It?" *The Family Coordinator*, XVII (January, 1968), 55-62.
2. Eva L. Goble, "Young Homemakers and Extension," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Fall, 1964), 135-36.
3. *Aspects of Independent Study* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa, Division of Extension and University Services, 1970), p. 3.

4. Goble, "Young Homemakers and Extension," p. 140.
5. Manual Alters-Montalvo, Charles A. Ibsen, and Coleen Brown, *Educational Needs and Program Building in the Cooperative Extension Service: A Preliminary Report on a Survey of Three Counties in Colorado* (Fort Collins, Colorado: Colorado State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1965), p. 132.
6. John Photiadis, unpublished data from informal questionnaire of West Virginia Young Homemakers, Morgantown, 1969.
7. Everett M. Rogers and Eugene Havens, *Extension Contact of Ohio Farm Housewives*, Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 890 (Wooster, Ohio: Ohio State University, 1961).
8. Sue Riggs, "Attitudes of Young Homemakers Toward Adult Education in the Area of Home Economics" (Master's thesis, West Virginia University, Morgantown, 1970), p. 66.