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The Psychodynamics of Natural Family Planning and Instructor-Training

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THE CRITICAL variable in natural family planning (NFP) is the instructor. The designer of an instructor-training program should identify specific objectives and motivators so that those who want to provide such programs can recognize and use the psychodynamics of this educational system. A sound educational policy assures the development of high-quality NFP services. To replicate the efforts of preparing large numbers of NFP instructors, training should focus on developing the competent performance of certain critical tasks in the teaching of couples who are interested in using NFP.

Educational Approach to Fertility Management

Effective use of NFP requires education. Effective education, in turn, requires quality-controlled teaching. Competent instructors can provide systematic NFP education and followup instruction until couples become independent or autonomous in the use of NFP. NFP effectiveness clearly depends on the couple's ability to identify the fertile and infertile days of the cycle and decide to abstain from or engage in intercourse to either avoid or achieve pregnancy.

Couple Autonomy

The major task of teacher-training is to produce teachers who can help couples learn, practice, and eventually achieve autonomy in fertility management. Autonomy means that the couple can—

1. correctly chart daily fertility indicators;
2. identify the fertile and infertile days of the cycle;
3. adjust, with at least relative satisfaction, to the periodic abstinence required by a specific natural method;

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4. consistently (during six months of followup) demonstrate their ability to recognize fertile days and apply the method-specific rules pertaining to their family-planning intention;
5. demonstrate their ability to recognize any change in the basic cycle pattern that should alert them to seek additional instruction.

Task-Based Training Design

A task-based training design emphasizes the tasks that a person must be able to carry out in performing his job. This type of design enables one to tailor-make the training so that high-quality performance is its general outcome. NFP instructors perform two major tasks: (1) teaching couples the methods, and (2) monitoring their ability to use a specific method. Subtasks include interpreting a variety of fertility patterns, supporting the couple's decision to use a periodic-abstinence method, and recognizing a change in their fertility status.

TABLE 1
Task-Based Instructor-Training in NFP

<i>Major Tasks</i>	<i>Subtasks</i>
Teaching and learning NFP	Interpreting varied fertility patterns
Monitoring the couple's learning and use	Supporting periodic abstinence; recognizing changes in fertility status

Content of NFP Instructor-Training

The continuing question! How much do we teach? How much preparation is necessary for the NFP instructor? Can paraprofessionals teach NFP well?

A task-based curriculum design helps us answer some of the questions. We look at both the task and the entry level of the applicant. It then becomes

a matter of tailoring the training to the needs of the trainee.

Obviously, a teacher-training program should include content on "how to teach"—instructional strategies and learning techniques. Basic reproductive physiology, including all the physiological parameters of ovulation, should be taught, as well as charting, chart interpretation, and determination of fertility days. The prospective teacher, in order to support the couple's decision to use NFP, should learn communication skills and permissible chance-taking method variations appropriate to the couple's family-planning intention. Teacher-training should stress the recognition of couples' changing fertility status and the ability to emphasize one or another of the major fertility indicators in accordance with the needs of individual couples.

Table 2 lists some suggested content to help instructors accomplish the tasks related to teaching NFP.

TABLE 2
Suggested Task-Based Content
of NFP Instructor-Training

<i>Task</i>	<i>Content</i>
Teaching and learning NFP	Basic ovulatory physiology Charting techniques Chart interpretation Recognition of fertile days and peak fertility Teaching techniques
Monitoring the couple's learning and use	Listening and counseling (support skills) Peer-counseling approach Support of periodic abstinence Reduction of abstinence in relation to risk and family-planning intention Problem recognition and solving

The learning process builds on previously learned material; therefore, the examples, specific content, and language of the presentation should build on the learner's entry level. If, for instance, a nurse-midwife entered a teacher-training class, she might be provided with a more elaborate than usual neuro-endocrine physiological basis. Note that the tasks to be accomplished and skills to be developed remain the same, even though the type of instruction varies with the individual candidate. Each instructor finally will bring to the couple a personalized, unique educational system based on his own counseling, teaching, and experiential skills. Therein lies the rationale for using experienced, competent instructors who are also successful practitioners of NFP.

The cost of staffing should also be considered in planning training programs for large service-delivery systems. If a paraprofessional can do the job as effectively as a professional for a given group of tasks, then the cost-effective question becomes, "Why pay a professional several times as much for doing the same job?"

Behavioral Model of Instruction

A task-based curriculum usually follows a behavioral model of instruction whose aim is the learner's mastery of the subject matter, successful performance, and development of the attitudes that support the tasks. The teacher presents the subject matter to the learner and then tests his comprehension and retention. If the learner's test score is inadequate, the teacher supplies corrective explanation until the learner can demonstrate competence in the subject. Each achievement motivates the learner to learn more. (See table 3.)

The training program should allow the candidate to begin practice-teaching as soon as he has completed the instruction phase, so that he can reinforce his newly acquired chart-interpretation skills and other knowledge. Obviously, the trainee's work with couples must be constantly and carefully supervised.

Examining the attitudes and discussing the issues relevant to both NFP and family planning in general should begin at the initial instruction and continue during the trainee's teaching practicum. This procedure gives the learner an opportunity to clarify his ideas, establish rapport with his colleagues, and understand the needs of couples using the method. The most critical requisite for good instruction is the teacher's positive attitudes about NFP. Attitudes cannot be taught but instead are usually the result of experiential learning and cherished values. It has been suggested that they are more often caught than taught in a good instructional program.

Influencing the Behavior of Couples Learning NFP

Teachers should be trained to help couples develop the behavior necessary for success in the use of NFP.

TABLE 3

Behavioral Model of Instruction

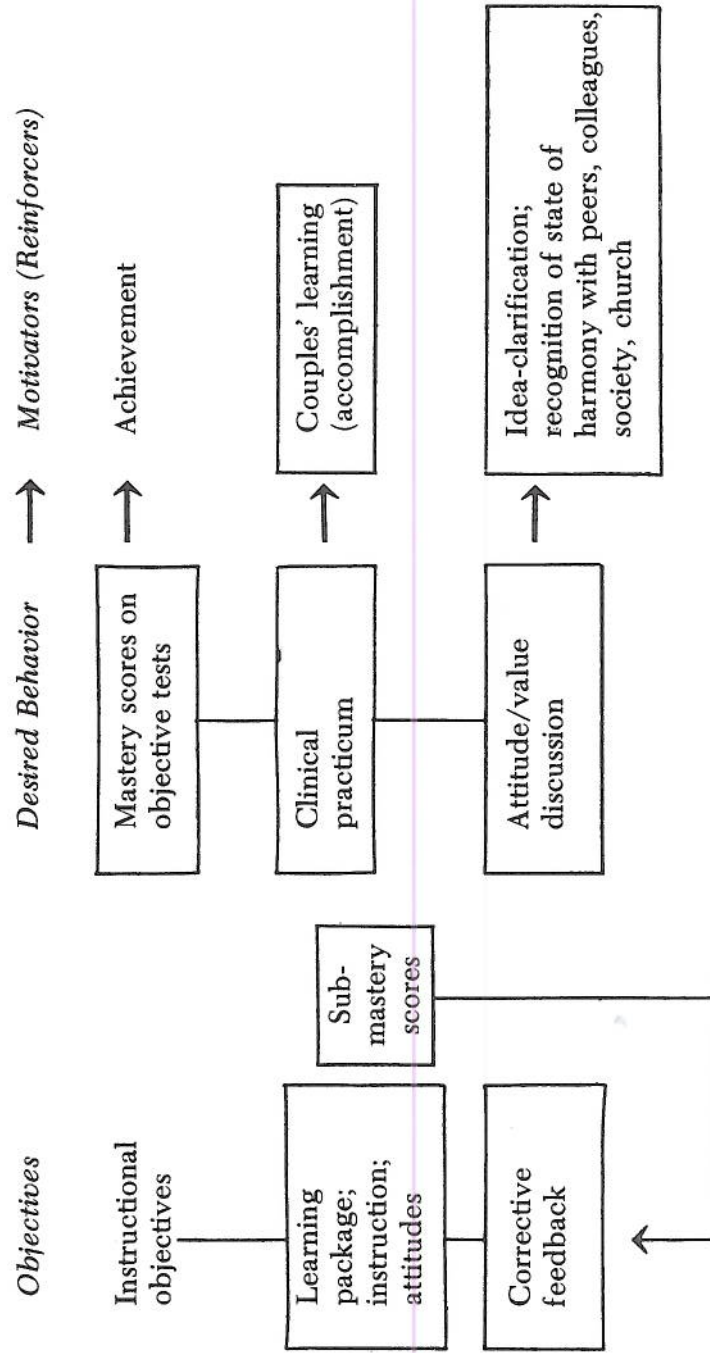
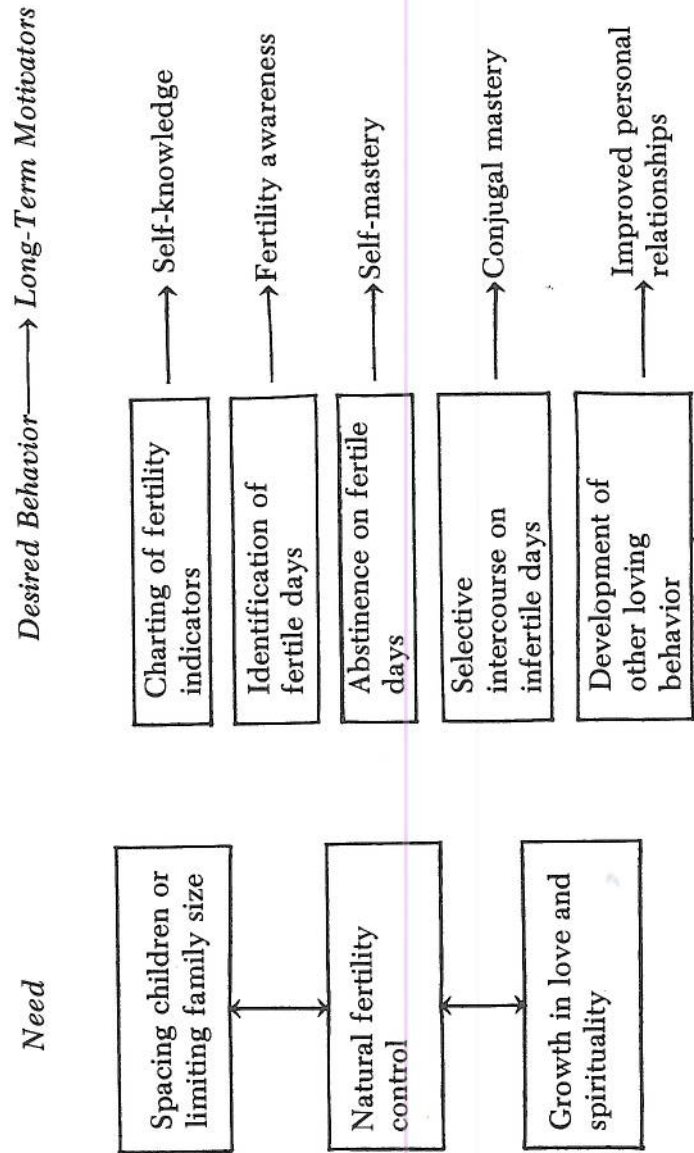


TABLE 4
Behavioral Influences in NFP



The couple's need is dynamic and variable. During the learning stage their appropriate behavior is the daily charting of fertility indicators and the identification of days of fertility. In both of these activities, couples are motivated by their resultant knowledge of self and awareness of their fertility. Behavior essential to the development of autonomy in NFP includes abstinence on the days of the cycle that are defined as fertile by a particular natural method; the couple's restraint both depends on and reinforces the long-term motivators related to sexual mastery. Teachers should also encourage the couple's search for other means of expressing their mutual love during the time of abstinence. The obvious implication is not that the couple will be more loving toward each other only during the fertile phase of the cycle but rather that their overall loving relationship will improve; NFP couples frequently refer to this motivating phenomenon as "a way of life."

The long-term motivators—self-knowledge, self-mastery, and improved interpersonal relationships—belong to the world of human experience. NFP instructors should help clients experience and recognize these long-term benefits of NFP.

Negative Situations as Influences in Family-Planning Choice

Frequently a negative situation motivates couples to seek family-planning information.

Table 5 identifies some typical situations that influence couples to look for a family-planning method. The negative situation is relieved by the practice of some form of family planning. Generally, a couple will use the method only as long as the negative situation continues to hold meaning for them. Interestingly, for those who choose a natural method, the beneficial effects of self-knowledge, self-mastery, and improved interpersonal relationships soon take over as the primary motivation for their continued practice and use. To understand a new couple's interest in NFP, instructors should first understand the influences that will contribute to its successful use.

A Systematic Approach to Instructor-Training

The effective education of NFP teachers requires a clear statement of goals and objectives, an assessment of the learners' entry level, and continuing evaluation. Once the learning needs have been established, the instruction is provided, the learning evaluated by means of tests, and any necessary correction or additional information supplied. The trainee should be given the opportunity to teach couples under supervision and leave the training as a competent NFP instructor. The advantage of a systematic approach is the ability to replicate the training model for large numbers of trainees. With the establishment of clear objectives, criteria evaluation, and standards of acceptable learning performance, instruction can be focused more sharply and its outcome predicted.

TABLE 5
 Negative Situations Affecting Family-Planning Choices

<i>Negative Situation</i>	<i>Desired Behavior</i>
Children: Too many Too soon Too costly	Use of a family-planning method
Fear of complications: Pill Devices Surgery	Use of an NFP method
Distrust of methods (barriers, for instance)	
Fear of spiritual loss and sanctions	

Instructional objectives are the essential guideline, letting both trainer and learner know what they must achieve. Objectives should also govern the selection and design of the media or visuals used in the teaching program and should define the evaluation system.

Evaluation tools are used to demonstrate to both trainer and learner the latter's progress toward mastery of the required subject matter. Objective, valid, and reliable tests are a very efficient way to measure knowledge. Rating scales are useful check lists for evaluation of the trainee's ability to teach NFP and monitor new couples. Attitude scales are primarily useful as a basis for surfacing, discussing, and clarifying attitudes, not for predicting behavior.

The NFP educational system is implemented in three phases. The first

phase is assessment of the learner's level, sometimes informally. For example, when a group of instructors who have been trained only in the ovulation method are entering a system of more formal NFP education, one could readily expect them to need full training in basal body temperature and symptothermal methods. One could more accurately assess their exact learning deficit by administering a pretest. The second phase is the actual instruction. After the candidate has demonstrated his mastery or understanding of the material, he begins the final phase of training, practice-teaching. (See table 6.)

Content Description

With the use of a task-based analysis, a curriculum should be developed to form the "ideal" NFP instructor, that is, a person who has a strong basis in fertility awareness and who is familiar with all the parameters of ovulation and capable of teaching all current natural methods. It is expected that training will start with fertility awareness and the ovulation method and proceed to the symptothermal method, thus insuring a progression of the knowledge and skills necessary to begin the teaching practicum. The most important objective is that a trainee, under supervision, teach couples and follow them for six cycles. Criteria for successful teaching are to be found primarily in the rating scale that measures the couple's ability to chart, interpret charts, and observe periodic abstinence. The attitudinal component should specifically address the needs of the trainees, determine problem areas, and initiate appropriate discussion.

The program's educational philosophy determines the overall thrust of the curriculum. NFP content for instructor-training should focus on how to monitor cycle information, including all the observable signs of ovulation. The developmental history of grass-roots NFP programs reveals that instructor-training was usually method-specific, because trainees were recruited from motivated couples practicing a particular method. As the NFP movement becomes more formalized in its effort to meet the need for more teachers and services, it seems to require a broader-based instructional system.

NFP instructor-training should address the subject matter and critical concepts identified in table 7.

Developing Positive Attitudes

One of the most critical components of successful training is the development of positive attitudes in the learners. The use of attitude scales and other techniques can surface the critical areas for group discussion. The trainer must realize that no attitude is necessarily "right or wrong" but, in a supportive learning environment, may become a positive attitude in the task of teaching and counseling couples in the use of NFP.

Attitudes, of course, reflect an individual's entire life background, know-

TABLE 6
NFP Instructor-Training System

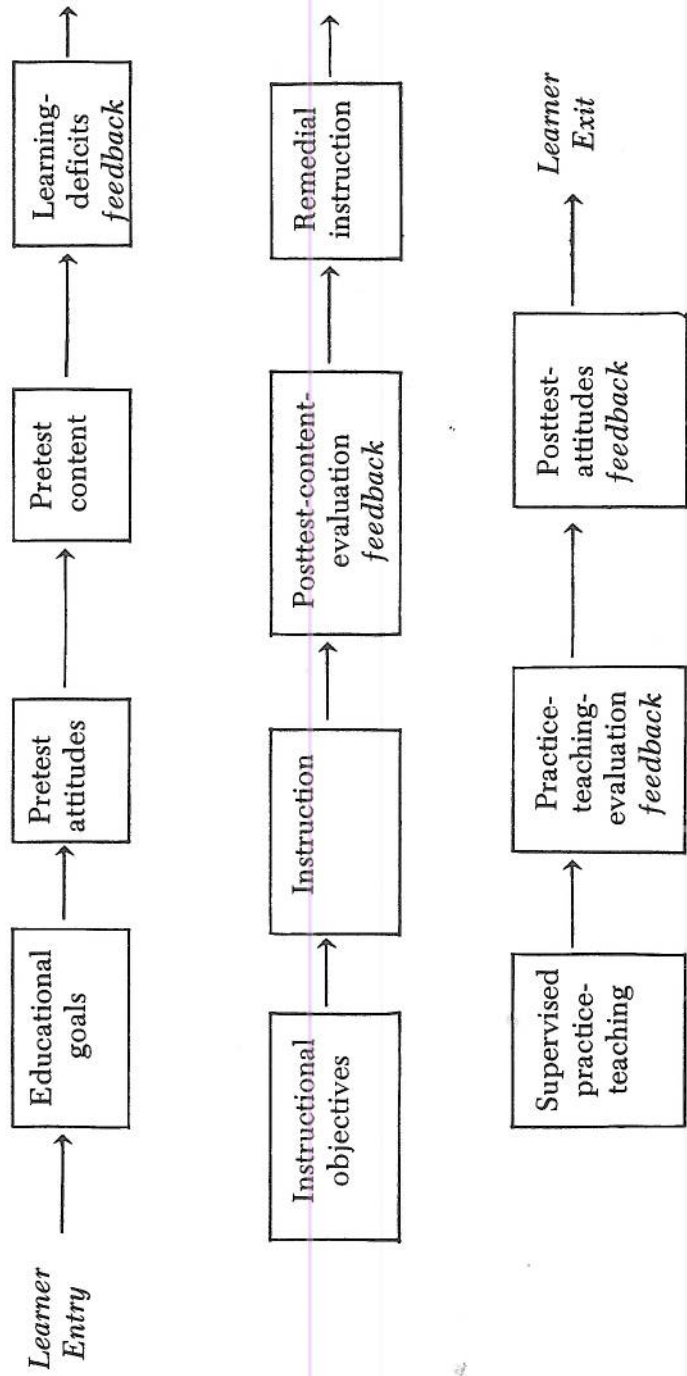


TABLE 7

NFP Content and Critical-Concept Areas

<i>Content</i>	<i>Critical-Concept Areas</i>
Fertility awareness	Couple's fertility potential Reproductive anatomy and physiology Cyclic fertility Interpretation of charted fertility indicators
Basal body temperature methods	Definition Use of thermometer Charting procedure Chart interpretation
Ovulation method	Mucus characteristics Method definition Method application
Sympto-thermal methods	Cycle characteristics Methodology Counseling skills

ledge, and experience. A learning environment should provide the opportunity for students to think and talk about their attitudes dispassionately, without experiencing the pressure of real-life anxieties. Trainers should design small group sessions to encourage the discussion of both positive and negative views. The trainer should avoid making judgmental or opinionated comments, leaving the issue open for further reflection. Prematurely closing a discussion may strengthen or even create inappropriate biases.

Some areas for initiating such discussions are (1) teaching-learning attitudes, (2) NFP and the integration of positive family-life practices, (3) respect-life attitudes and the acceptance of personal fertility generated by the use of natural methods, (4) the instructor's duty to respect the privacy and integrity of others, and (5) beliefs and values related to the promotion of health in fertility-management practices.

There is no question that attitudes are the key factor in making the difference between a happy, successful person and one who is neither. Training can offer the learners time for thinking about and discussing critical attitudes so that they can clarify indistinct areas about issues related to the successful use of NFP.

Summary

The education and training of competent instructors is perhaps the single most important element in the development of a successful NFP program. Agencies concerned with the effective delivery of NFP services should devise a sound educational policy and guidelines for quality-control of teacher-training. This paper has emphasized the need for thorough training toward task-oriented NFP instruction and for objective evaluation of candidates' knowledge and teaching ability.