People enter into relationships everyday, but many of them don’t have the knowledge or education or basic skills that are needed to make their relationships work.

It is because of these gaps regarding fundamental human interactions that USU faculty member Brian Higginbotham does the work that he does.

Higginbotham, a researcher in the department of family, consumer and human development in USU's Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, is a specialist on marriage and family relationships—a topic that has, for him, taken many incarnations as he works to educate residents of the state on strategies that support successful and healthy relationships. But the primary focus of his role is through Extension—he is responsible for collating research and distributing it to the citizens of Utah in user-friendly and easily accessible formats.

The nature of Higginbotham’s Extension work is transferable: it can benefit the citizens of Utah and citizens of other states. He provides resources for youth, pre-marital couples, cohabiting and married families, remarried couples and stepfamilies to provide them the skills they need in order to make their relationships successful.

By reaching out to at-risk groups, USU Extension and Higginbotham are able to make an impact—and not just on one person at a time. “You can’t measure the full value of the programs we are currently doing,” said Higginbotham. “They can have a lasting influence for future generations, throughout the state and beyond.”

**Stepfamily education**

One program currently underway is designed to give stepfamilies the education they need to successfully navigate the challenges of blending families. Utah is the only state in the nation with such a program. (See www.stepfamily.usu.edu.)

In addition to offering the free stepfamily education classes around the state, Higginbotham and colleagues study changes in participants’ marital happiness, relationship stability and child well-being. “We’ve served thousands of families so far and are publishing results that are influencing the entire field of stepfamily research,” said Higginbotham. “There are currently more people who want to take a course than classes are available, something we find humbling.”

**Marriage**

Higginbotham’s relationship research expands beyond the
education of stepfamilies. His book, *The Utah Marriage Handbook* has been distributed to over 30,000 Utahns via county clerks’ offices throughout the state. The handbook is reprinted each year due to high demand.

*The Utah Marriage Handbook* outlines core principles of a healthy relationship using interactive methods, like quizzes and activities, to tackle some of the toughest issues married folks encounter, including domestic violence, infidelity and substance abuse.

“The handbook gives people concrete tips,” said Higginbotham. “I’m a pragmatist—I realize that people may not know how to be the perfect spouse when they get married. Luckily, education provides a tool that can help.”

The handbook is available through Extension offices, county clerks’ offices—where Utahns go to apply for a marriage license—and is available on the web. Recently it has been included as a supplemental curriculum in “Adult Roles” classes taught to high school students. Other groups that use *The Utah Marriage Handbook* include the Utah Commission on Marriage, church groups and participants registered in Extension classes.

“The role of Extension is to get good information into the hands of the people who need it,” said Higginbotham—something the handbook has been successful in doing. “The handbook is a neutral, but extremely helpful, resource.”

### Youth and Families with Promise

Higginbotham is also a co-investigator and the evaluator of Extension’s 4-H Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise program, which targets youth and families with below-average school performance, poor social skills, and/or weak family bonds. The program consists of three components: one-on-one mentoring, 4-H activities and family nights out. This prevention program is designed to enhance the developmental assets of at-risk youth.

The goals of the program are to improve academic performance, increase interpersonal competence, strengthen family bonds and reduce and prevent youth delinquent behavior.

“We continue to be impressed with the quality of mentors in the program,” said Higginbotham. “The mentors help the youth develop new skills and work to integrate the participants into positive peer groups. The mentors provide for these youth ongoing associations with caring adults.”

Brian Higginbotham
Family, Consumer and Human Development

“I’m a pragmatist—I realize that people may not know how to be the perfect spouse when they get married.

Luckily, education provides a tool that can help.”
Divorce

Extension offers a wide range of resources, including tools for individuals weighing life-changing decisions. Higginbotham’s newest program, www.divorce.usu.edu, was recently launched to help individuals going through divorce.

Utahns are married and divorced at rates higher than the national average. In Utah, 4.3 divorces are granted for every 1,000 people—higher than the national figure of 4.1. “Utah Divorce Orientation helps people make educated decisions; our goal is to provide good research information and education about divorce,” said Higginbotham.

The online program provides information about the social and financial impacts of divorce on parents and children and is a resource for tips on parenting after a divorce. He explains, “We want people to get into and out of relationships with their eyes open.”

“People are just so appreciative of Extension and the useful tips and tools we provide,” said Higginbotham. “My job is to make people aware of healthy and productive ways of interacting. Once you do that, relationship satisfaction improves and people become increasingly more committed to making their relationship work because they are empowered by education.”

usu extension

Utah State University Cooperative Extension is a respected leader in the state and region for its quality non-credit education programs designed to provide research-based information and improve the lives of individuals, families and communities. USU Extension provides programs at more than 30 county offices and centers throughout Utah. Program topics include agriculture, natural resources, home and family issues, finance, consumer life, food, nutrition, health, business, economics, gardening, 4-H and youth programs. For more information go to extension.usu.edu.