ABSTRACT

BAKER, TARA MICHELLE CRANMER. Family Coaching: An Exploratory Study of Parental Perceptions. (Under the direction of Dr. Kimberly Allen, Dr. Nichole Huff, and Dr. Andrew Behnke.)

The discipline of family science is expanding; under its umbrella is family coaching, which merges concepts from family life education and coaching psychology. Family coaching is an emergent application used by family practitioners where family-identified goals are met through a process-driven relationship between the family and professional coach. The presented thesis explores parental perceptions of choosing family coaching as a way to help families deal with family issues across the life course. Findings from this study support established parental preferences of family life and parent education and further suggest that parents support the idea of hiring a family coach or parenting professional. More specifically, results from this study suggest that family coaching is applicable to areas of family practice.
Family Coaching: An Exploratory Study of Parental Perceptions

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Family Life and Youth Development

Raleigh, North Carolina

2014

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my amazing husband Derek, who has wholly supported my academic career. Your sacrifice and resolution toward family and purpose has been an example of loyalty and humble devotion never matched in my life before. You have guided me and cheered me on. You have supported my efforts, held my hand, and picked me up when I fell. You have provided a place for my work (the office) and an incomparable dedication toward marriage and family. Thank you, I love you more than words can say!

I also dedicate this thesis to my children, Ethan, Samuel, and Maxine. May you always strive to be your very best, reach for the stars, and climb every mountain; never give up, even when you think you can’t go on! May God provide others in your life to help you move forward. Learn from your challenges and remember to reflect, questioning all things. Be a seeker of knowledge and an advocate of truth. Always believe in yourself; have faith and courage. And always remember I love you
Tara Baker received her Bachelor of Arts in Human Services from Peace College, graduating Summa Cum Laude. Family Coaching and Parent Education is a passion that stemmed from her own childhood adversity and she has molded it into her life’s work. Currently she resides in eastern North Carolina with her husband and three children. In her spare time she enjoys spending time with her family, the great outdoors, and scouting.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over my past two years at North Carolina State University I have received support from many different individuals. I would like to thank my thesis committee of Dr. Kimberly Allen, Dr. Andrew Behnke, and Dr. Nichole Huff for their support on this academic journey. Dr. Kimberly Allen has been a mentor, coach, Advisor, boss, and friend. Her guidance and support has helped me to realize my own potential within. She is an example to me in both her professional and personal life, and one of the most influential professors of my lifetime. She has helped me learn how to juggle raising a large family and having a successful academic career at the same time. Thank you for pushing me so hard Kim. Dr. Andrew Behnke helped move me toward Dr. Kimberly Allen’s counsel after learning of my initial thesis idea. In addition, Dr. Nicole Huff provided valuable, statistical, and editing help.

I would like to extend a monstrous thank you to my mother, Jan Cranmer, for her unwavering support of my academic career, for pushing me four years ago to return to college, and for listening to all of my concerns. Mom, your proofreading skills are by far the best! Several times during my thesis Dr. Ashley Hampton listened to my concerns and encouraged me to move forward, providing me understanding when my own faculties were inaccessible. My dear friend Alice Simpson provided emotional support and proofreading skills in my struggles of carrying out my thesis. Additionally, thank you Jennifer Bass, who may not even realize she gave me the biggest push of all when she reminded me that I was reaping all I have worked for. And thank you dad, for your support and lending your ear; you are the best advisor of all. Finally, thank you Bishop Simpson for your support and wise words “finish strong”; words that will stay with me forever.
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FAMILY COACHING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS

Family Science

Family science is an in-depth discipline dedicated to understanding human behavior within the social context, and must continually develop in order to bridge the relationship between individuals, families, and communities. In a recent study, Hamon and Smith (2014) identified the evolution of family science through the past century, emphasizing its uniqueness on prevention and suggesting the continued need for innovation. Expanding the ways in which we serve families is a necessary component of improving family science.

Parenting education is a subarea of family life education, also housed within family sciences. Many U.S. parenting programs, however, are designed as reactive measures toward disruptive societal issues (e.g., incarcerated parents, fatherless children, child abuse; (National Center for Fathering, n.d.). Nonetheless, research shows that family science prevention strategies serve as protective factors for children, creating environments that set children up for success (Anderson et al., 1999; Eshel, Daelmans, Cabral de Mello, & Martines, 2006).

For the field of family science to continue to move forward in addressing life course development and family transitions, it is imperative to consider a variety of approaches to help families meet the challenges they face. Family Coaching is an innovative, family-centered, and strengths-based approach to helping families that is gaining momentum among family practitioners (Allen & Huff, 2014). Family coaching is an example of a promising practice that can help the field of family science move forward, however, there is a lack of
information and research about coaching families. More research and information is needed to determine if and how family coaching can serve as a method to helping families (Allen, 2013), and if families have an interest in receiving coaching services.

**Coaching**

The history of coaching began as a method for helping athletes, managers, and companies set goals and focus on strengths by promoting resilience and performance (Hudson, 1999). Today, many companies employ executive coaches to work with senior and middle management, and have found that coaching in an effective way to help increase profit and productivity (Theeboom, Beersma, & Van Vianen, 2013). Executive coaches help employees identify and coalesce individual strengths, ultimately fostering a more unified workforce resulting in an improved return on investment (Swart & Harcup, 2013). In fact, research shows as much as a 300% increase in businesses outputs with the use of coaching (Pagliarini, 2011). This trend not only shows the positive influence coaching has on business and industry, but begs the question, *what about families?* If investing in coaching has shown positive effect in business, what can coaching do for families?

Grant (2011) helped to create a framework to test the validity of coaching. The author suggests that by framing coaching as a collective, solution-focused process—and by facilitating it in a client-centered environment—intrinsic motivation, personal growth, and goal attainment follows. While most literature on coaching is predominately about coaching and industry, coaching has surfaced in family science literature. (Allen, 2013; Allen & Huff, 2014; Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003). Evidence-based coaching research continues to reach the scope of disciplines by applying behavioral sciences and interweaving family systems
theory and family science concepts into the framework of coaching (McGoldrick & Carter, 2001; Rush et al., 2003; Stober & Grant, 2006). More recently, coaching has found a place in human services (Moran & Brady, 2010), clinical science (Timmer, Zebell, Culver, & Urquiza, 2009), therapy (Graham, Rodger, & Ziviani, 2009), and early education and parenting (Beyer, 2008; Rush et al., 2003).

Allen (2013) began to bridge the gap between coaching psychology and family science in an article that identified a model of family life coaching. Allen and Huff (in press) define family coaching as, “a process-driven relationship between a family system (as represented by an individual or familial group) and a family practitioner designed to foster achievement of family-identified goals” (p. 3). Moreover, the authors suggest that the time is right to embrace family coaching as a new and innovative approach to helping families. To date, however, there is a gap in the research on coaching families (Allen, 2013; Allen & Huff, 2014). In fact, a recent inquiry by the author using the search terms “parents,” “parent coaching,” and “parent attitudes of coaching” in Summons database and Google search yielded no results. To the author’s knowledge, this is the first study to capture parents’ perceptions of using coaching as an approach to helping families (as they would parenting, or family life education). Clearly, there is a major gap in understanding parenting perceptions and interest of employing family coaches to help with family life issues, yet the field of family science is looking to better understand the place of coaching families.

All families can benefit from family science programs aimed at improving family function and quality of familial relationship. Understanding families and examining how parent and family life education is disseminated is necessary to address the changing needs of
families. One of the main barriers preventing families from more readily seeking parent education is the stigma of “needing help” or “expert opinions” (Swick, 2004). There is a need for improved approaches that foster family and child development without perceived stigma.

To increase the prevalence of family coaching as an approach to helping families, researchers must first gauge parental perceptions of family coaching. This study is the first to explore parents’ attitudes and opinions toward family coaching, further identifying parents’ awareness of and interest in seeking family coaches to address specific familial needs (e.g., general parenting, relationship education, divorce, financial, etc.).

**Current Study**

The aim of this study is to explore parental knowledge and opinions of family coaching as a method for helping families. Using data collected from 168 parents, the study begins to answer the following questions:

1. Are parents interested in coaching?
2. For which areas of family life would parents most likely seek a coaching professional?
3. What qualities are important to parents when searching for a family coach?
4. What methods would parents use to find a family coach?
5. What are the opinions of parents about the use of family coaching to help with family issues?
Literature Review

Family Life and Parenting Education

Family life and parenting education are societal tools for supporting positive child and family development. Throughout the development of family science, researchers have documented key parenting practices evident in positive individual and family outcomes, such as secure attachment (Bowlby, 1977) and responsive parenting (Eschel, Daelmans, Cabral de Mello, Martines, 2006). Family life education is an outreach informing the public about positive parenting skills and positive family outcomes (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). Duncan and Goddard (2011) define family life education as “any educational activity occurring outside a traditional school classroom setting, usually involving adults, that is designed to strengthen relationships in the home and foster positive individual, couple, and family development” (p. 4). Parenting concepts are taught in family life education as both a prevention and reactive effort to increase overall positive family functioning.

Family Interventions Programs.

Currently parent education is disseminated from a variety of outlets ranging from grant-funded intervention programs designed to help specific audiences to private practice or self-learning programs that parents identify and seek out on their own. Grant-funded governmental intervention programs include court-mandated parent education classes and early childhood intervention programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start. They may also include specific programs targeted toward at-risk families in order to improve children’s psychosocial environment and prevent malnutrition or physical ailments (e.g., Women and Infants and Children, WIC; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Unfortunately, the
need for government intervention may leave recipients feeling stigmatized and inadequate, and may adversely affect mental health outcomes. Mejia, Calam, and Sanders (2012) explored challenges associated with government programs that may increase recipients’ behavioral and emotional disturbances. Some government programs struggle to provide evidence of program outcomes and have poor management; there is a lack of rigor between different programs, measurements are found to be inconsistent, and programs met with cultural unacceptability (Mejia et al., 2012).

Despite these challenges government programs can and often do achieve success in helping families improve wellbeing. One such program, Parenting Education for Incarcerated Mothers, found that imprisoned mothers receiving parent education experienced improvements in their parental self-esteem and their understanding that children need love to thrive (Kennon, Mackintosh, & Myers, 2009). Programs addressing fatherhood-related concerns demonstrate similar results, improving the overall strength of father-child relationships and increasing social awareness of the fatherhood role. Fitzgerald, Roy, Anderson, and Letiecq (2012) discovered that many fathers enrolled in government-mandated fatherhood programs suffer from depression or psychiatric distress. However, by implementing range-of-depression interventions to current programs by assessing fatherhood depression related issues (health-drug abuse, unemployment, more than one co-parenting partners), fathers’ well-being improves, subsequently increasing their competency as fathers (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Findings from research that addresses the role of fatherhood has helped identify the most important needs of fatherhood programs, including new social policies that promote responsible fatherhood (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth,
& Lamb, 2000). Fatherhood program combine workforce, parenting, and job skills with programs to prevent domestic abuse and ways to promote child support payments (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Hobler, 2001).

**Parental Preference of Family Life and Parent Education.**

Parental preference of family life and parent education has an impact on whether or not parenting programs or interventions will be successful. Researchers have identified that the delivery format, such as group delivery, online delivery, workshop delivery, facilitator-led, and individual setting (Cotter, Bacallao, Smokowski, & Robertson, 2013) and parental preferences including client-centered, family-approach, strengths-based, multi-modality of educational material (Whittingham, Boyd, Sanders, & Colditz, 2014) are associated with positive familial outcomes. Studies engaging families during interventions with more family-centered activities, such as playing games together (e.g., playing a game of soccer) or completing chores together (e.g., washing the car or walking the dog), show lasting changes (Connel, Dishion, Yasui, & Kavanagh, 2007; Cotter et al., 2013). Moreover, researchers note the importance of having a relationship-focused approach to helping families. Kelly and Bernard (1999) believe parent education is best received through the sharing of knowledge between a professional and client, emphasizing the relationship as the venue for such knowledge. Furthermore, Swick (2004) exerts that establishing a meaningful relationship in which to work alongside families, as opposed to a hierarchical model, provides the respect, the validation, and the acceptance families prefer. Another study found that being young and unmarried increased the likelihood of using the Internet to gain parenting information (Radey & Randolph, 2009). Disseminating family life and parenting education in a manner that is
preferred by parents; meeting families where they are, such as working alongside families and building a strong relationship between professional and client, are concepts embedded within coaching families.

**Personally-Selected Family Interventions.**

Individuals seeking private family intervention or education may employ a variety of family professionals from fields such as family life education, parenting education, or family therapy. Family professionals vary in their techniques, methodology, population, and theory making it difficult for families to discern the type of professional to seek for particular issues (e.g., psychologist, family therapists, family life and parent educators, etc.). Families must rely on referrals, previous experience with or knowledge of family professionals and their respective fields, and/or the professional’s credentials in order to make an informed decision. A recent article defines the areas of three different family professionals and the distinction between serving families: Family Life Education, Family Therapy, and Family Case Management (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011). Family life educators use family and life span theory along with educational methods to reach families in an educational setting; Family therapists use family and relationship theories with counseling methods to help families recognize past pathology in order to apply treatment plans in private settings; Family case management uses management theories with methods involving social resources and community services to help families in crisis (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Professionals routinely sought by families experiencing distress may include psychologists, pediatricians, therapists, parent educators, and clergy depending on their particular situation. However, there is little research on parental preferences when choosing
among family professionals to address particular family issues (e.g., parenting advice, child development, improving health and well-being, divorce, special needs). The research available requires families to be well-informed about credentials as a measure of a professional’s knowledge base, supporting the literature on promoting qualifications of family life professionals (Allen & Huff, 2014; Goddard, Gilliland, & Goddard 2011). In order to promote the continued growth of coaching as a domain of family science, family coaches must also meet the rigor and credentialing demands required of other family practitioners (Allen & Huff, 2014).

**Framework for Coaching Families**

Although more empirical research is needed on family coaching, there are a variety of theories and models practitioners can and do use to apply coaching methods when working with families (Allen & Huff, 2014). Family systems theory, for example, recognizes families as whole systems comprised of individual subsystems of relationships, e.g., parent-child, sibling, parent (McGoldrick & Carter, 2001). Murray Bowen, a prominent researcher of Family Systems Theory, suggests that family members function in reciprocity; in other words, family members interact with one another in a mutual fashion such as reflecting each other’s actions and moods (McGoldrick & Carter, 2001). Bowen viewed the family as an interdependent emotional system. This idea is applicable when considering family coaching; it is important for coaches to consider how family members impact each other, when one person changes, it impacts the whole family dynamic. This is one reason the term “family coach” is utilized in the new literature of family coaching. A coach must understand the full family system when working with parents. The practice of exploring family dynamics
promotes individual development, as well as the development of the entire family system, by allowing members to forge new family relationship patterns and ideally increasing positive family functioning (McGoldrick & Carter, 2001; Walsh, 2012). Family coaches benefit from using systems theory to help family members in recognize interpersonal relationship patterns. A coach highlights perceived strengths within and among family members, including interactions and situations, and then guides the family toward improvement strategies utilizing the identified strengths (Allen, 2013).

Family coaching utilizes a client-centered approach in order to identify individual strengths that empower the client. American psychologist Carl Rogers (1948) is credited for creating a client-centered counseling approach. Rogers (1948) explains how in an environment that is supportive and unconditionally positive, people are able to understand and find answers to their own problems. The belief that clients have within themselves the ability and information necessary to find solutions to presenting problems fosters a dynamic partnership between the client and the coach (Wildflower & Brennen, 2011). The coach should actively listen to the client and restate the client’s feelings and situations, acting as a sounding board. Researchers have identified benefits of the collaborative client-coach partnership that include imparting knowledge, increasing self-efficacy and confidence, and improving family outcomes (Kelly & Barnard, 1999; Rush et al., 2003; Timer et al., 2009). Furthermore, Moran and Brady (2010) acknowledge that the coaching process positively affects individual self-efficacy, suggesting that improved individual self-efficacy reinforces positive familial support. The genuine empathy displayed in the coaching approach helps clients focus and address their problems on their own. With support from the coach, families
recognize their strengths and build action plans that align with their values and goals.

Using a strengths-based approach is another framework referenced in literature with regard to coaching families (Beyer, 2008; Early & GlennMaye, 2000; Seligman, 2007). Early interventionists who work with families and children under age five have recognized positive outcomes that arise as a result of identifying and working with individual and family using a strengths-based approach. For example, Rush et al. (2003) found that focusing on the learner’s perspective and centering practices in natural settings improves child-parent participation. Family-centered practitioners employ a strengths-based approach when helping clients set goals and build resources by identifying things that the family is doing right and recognizing family resilience (Moran & Brandy, 2010; Salisbury, Cambray-Engstrom, & Woods, 2012), including families in crisis (Walsh, 2002).

**Application of Family Coaching**

Although family coaching is a new field, it still reaches today’s families in many ways. Allen and Huff (in press) surveyed 180 family practitioners and of those, 85% where familiar with coaching and identified family coaching as an up-and-coming approach to family science. Furthermore, nearly half had received some training on coaching and 85% showed an interest in employing family coaching in their work with families. An area where coaching is reaching families is through home visits. Beyer (2008) suggest that by using the home environment to coach families and center practices on the entire family “visit coaches,” or in-home coaches, can replace parenting classes while build on client strengths, needs, goals, and action plans. Parents who received parent coaching in their homes, demonstrated improvements in parental stress levels and parenting skills (Timmer et al., 2010).
Another application of coaching found within family science literature is emotion coaching. Emotion coaching teaches families to recognize the feelings behind other’s actions and statements, and to validate those feelings instead of trying to “fix” the problem (Gottman, 2001). For example, instead of meeting the exclamation *I hate it when this happens!* with a solution, emotion coaching would suggest recognizing the frustration behind the statement. An appropriate reply may be *Wow, that looks really frustrating!* This type of response generally leads to the diffusion of the emotion behind the initial angry statement. Once emotions are validated, the frustrated individual is better able to identify methods and resources available to their problem, thereby fostering empowerment. This method of communication uses the same principles of empowerment from coaching psychology. Emotion coaching is often integrated into parenting programs, relationship education, family therapy, and corporate mindfulness programs, and has shown positive outcomes with regard to children and families (Gottman, 2001; Lukenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007).

A third example of applied family coaching is targeted towards underserved families and in special education efforts for families of children with disabilities and/or disease (Graham et al., 2009; Rush et al., 2003). As early interventionists working with at-risk families, Rush et al. (2003) explain the benefits of using a coaching approach and meeting clients “where-they-are” while working with at-risk families. Specifically, the authors suggest that the respect and empathy of the client-coach partnership may result in the client’s intrinsic motivation to make goals and stick with them. Moreover, hospitals and healthcare centers are using coaching with diabetes, asthma, and ADHD, as a method for helping families maintain diet or medical regimens by focusing on the strengths of a child and the
family (personal communication, Lisa Krause, 2014). Additionally, coaching that addresses auditory-verbal education and therapy (Meadan, Myer, Snodgrass, & Halle, 2013) and parenting support for children with Autism (Hamren & Quigley, 2012) are being incorporated into Internet and distant technologies. The above literature identified Internet as a parental preference of family life and parent education (Radey & Randolph, 2009).

**Purpose Statement**

Family coaching is a growing area of family science. In order to better understand coaching as an approach to helping families, more research is needed to better understand what parents want and what they perceive as helpful in terms of parenting professionals. The present study assesses parental attitudes and opinions of family coaching when compared to other like professionals including, psychologists, parent educators, therapists, family coaches, and clergy.

**Methodology**

The presented thesis used a mixed-method design to explore parental attitudes and opinions about the application of family coaching as a method for addressing family issues that may arise over the life course. After receiving university Institutional Review Board exemption approval (#3658), a 35-item online questionnaire was developed consisting of five sections: history, interest, attitudes, opinions of hiring family professionals, and demographics. The survey began with a clear definition of Family Coach using the following statement: *Coaches help parents by partnering with and offering support to families while helping them create and reach personal goals.* Subsequent questions asked participants to rate the likelihood of hiring a family professional (i.e., psychologist, therapist, parent
educator, coach, or clergy) for particular issues that arise in family life (i.e., general parenting, potty training, school success, adolescent related issues, health & well-being, risk behaviors, relationship education, special needs-ADHD, time management, divorce, unemployment, blending of families, extended families, financial).

Participants

A convenience sample of adult parents with children of any age was recruited using a snowball sampling technique via email, word of mouth, organizational-based listservs (e.g., North Carolina Parenting Education Network), and social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and Twitter). Interested parents were asked to voluntarily participate in a secure, online survey using Qualtrics Online Survey Software. This sampling technique was chosen because it would be the easiest way for the researchers to obtain a large sample of parents (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The survey was anonymous and participant consent was obtained at the onset of the survey (see Appendix A). Data collection occurred from December 2013 to March 2014. Recruitment efforts resulted in a sample size of \( N = 168 \) for qualitative data. Sample sizes for qualitative responses varied, with the lowest response rate for open-ended questions being \( N = 88 \).

The participant’s ages and subsequent percentages were: (18-26; 1%), (37-35; 19%), (36-44; 40%), (45-53; 25%), (54-62; 10%), and (63+; 6%) with the majority (40%) of participants in the middle adulthood (36-53) category. Participants were 16% male and 84% female. As this survey was administered to parents, their reported children’s ages ranged from infancy (0-5; 19%) through early adulthood (19+; 25%), with 56% in the 6-18 years old range. Additionally, participants’ reported family household income ranged from less than
$30,000 a year (5%), to the majority (75%) in the more than $60,000 a year income bracket. Furthermore, over 90% of participants reported receiving post-secondary education. Race was not collected as a demographic variable and should be noted as a limitation of this study.

**Quantitative Methods**

Quantitative data consisted of yes/no and Likert-scale questions. The yes/no questions asked about parental knowledge and experience of coaching with family issues such as: “Have you ever sought help from a family life or parenting professional?” and “Would you consider hiring a coaching professional if you saw a need in your family?” Additionally, participants were asked questions about particular issues that arise within families (i.e., general parenting issues, potty training, school success, adolescence-related issues, risk behaviors, special needs, relationship education, and divorce) and asked their likelihood to which type of family practitioner they would seek (this question was asking participants to gauge the likeliness of choosing a specific practitioner for a particular issue, not exclusively): therapist, psychologist, parent educator, clergy, and coach. A Likert-scale was used for this measure and choices were: not likely, somewhat likely, and very likely.

Also included were questions about family coaching credentials in an effort to further establish a baseline for the future direction of family coaching as an established discipline (see Allen & Huff, 2014). These questions used a Likert-scale measurement: very much, somewhat, a bit, very little, and not at all. The specific questions asked were: “Is it important for the family coach you hire to be credentialed as a family coach?”; “If you hire a family coach, would you know what kind of credential to look for?”; and “Does health insurance coverage affect your choice to use a family coach?”
Qualitative Methods

The qualitative portion of the survey included open-ended questions asking participants to elaborate on their thoughts about family coaching. Questions were: “If you decide to hire a family coach, what method would you use to find one?”; “What benefits do you see from hiring a family coach?”; “What drawbacks do you see from hiring a family life coach?”; and “What else would you like us to know about your opinion of family life coaching?” To determine themes for each question, two researchers used open and axial coding to analyze aggregate responses. Once themes were identified, they were categorized into similar groups.

Results

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data was analyzed through Qualtrics online survey software and SPSS statistical software. Frequency tables were generated in order to compare parental choices of family practitioners (i.e., psychologist, therapist, parent educator, coach, and clergy) for the particular family issues general parenting, potty training, school success, adolescent related issues, health and well-being, risk behaviors, relationship education, special needs, time management, divorce, unemployment, blending of families, extended families, and financial management. Note: these responses are not exclusive, meaning participants were not asked to choose between professionals, but rather were asked to rate their likelihood of choosing each type of family professional based on the type of issue presented.

Frequency tables were tabulated to capture descriptive statistics; additionally a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was statistical significance of participants
who had previously hired a coach to compare which family professional(s) they would likely hire for a particular family issue. The reported likelihood of using a family coach for general parenting issues was 19% as compared to 15% of participants who said they would likely to seek a therapist for the same issue. For issues related to school success, 23% of participants reported being likely to seek a family coach; similarly, 26% said they were likely to seek a parent educator. For relationship education, 19% of participants reported that they would likely seek a family coach; this is similar to the 21% who said they would likely seek a parent educator or therapist. The percentages of participants reporting their likeliness to seek a family coach are presented in Table 2, ranked in descending order by family issues.

Furthermore, 88% of the sample indicated that they would be willing to hire a family life or parenting professional if they saw a need in their family; 85% reported that they would consider hiring a professional family coach if they saw a need in their family.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess statistical significance ($p < .05$) among responses from participants who indicated they had previously hired a coach. Those who had previously hired a coach were analyzed to explore which family professional(s) (psychologist, clergy, therapist, coach, and parent educator) they would likely hire for each family issue listed. Participants who had previously hired a coach indicated a significant likeliness to hire a coach for general parenting ($p = .030$) and divorce/separation ($p = .017$) issues. Participants who had previously hired a coach also indicated a significant likeliness to hire a psychologist for general parenting ($p = .007$) and school success ($p = .017$); and a therapist for school success ($p = .025$).
Table 1 (N=168)

*Likelihood of Seeking Different Family Practitioners for Intervention on Family Issues*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Issues</th>
<th>Type of Family Practitioner (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Parenting</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potty Training</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Success</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent-Related Issues</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Behaviors</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Education</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs (e.g., ADHD)</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blending of Families</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Families</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (N=168)  
*Participants Likely to Seek Coaching for Particular Family Issues*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Issue</th>
<th>% Reported Likely to Seek Family Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>31.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blending of Families</td>
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<td>Divorce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extended Families</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Success</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Related Issues</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Parenting</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Education</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Behaviors</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potty Training</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Data

A thematic content analysis was conducted on open-ended responses to assess for information related to methods used to find a coach and benefits of hiring a coach. Thematic categories were based on reoccurring phrases, common words, and verbiage found in the
various responses. After the responses were corroborated by another researcher through open and axial coding, triangulation of the data identified different themes for each individual open-ended question. The identified themes were then placed in frequency tables, showing the percentages of variability within participants’ responses for each question below.

**What Method Would Someone Use to Hire a Coach?**

Eight themes were identified to denote the methods participants could use to hire a coach: (1) Internet, (2) professional (e.g., doctor, therapist, counselor, etc.), (3) employment, (4) insurance company, (5) word of mouth, (6) friends, (7) referral, and (8) other (see Table 3). The method referenced most often by participants was the Internet (45 responses; 35%). Responses varied from short replies, such as “Internet” and “Google search,” to those more elaborate: “Check the web for certifications and cross check with professional psychologists, therapists”; “Google and look for reviews online”; and “Internet search within 20 miles of my home.” Other responses commented, “friend referral,” “word of mouth,” referral from our pediatrician.” While a few responses were related to work and insurance, “Maybe through my employment,” and “I would start by calling my insurance company and see who or if they were covered then start an online search based on customer referrals.”
Table 3 (N=128)

**Percentage of Sample Showing What Method Used to Find a Family Coach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional (e.g., family practitioner)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of Mouth</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance Company</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>128</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What Benefits are perceived from Hiring a Family Coach?**

Qualitative data from the following question identified five themes: (1) help/assistance/support, (2) education, (3) outsider/third party/objective perspective, (4) approach, and (5) cost, while several were unsure (see Table 4).

There were 23 responses (19%) related to the identified theme of help/assistance/support as a benefit from hiring a family coach. Participant responses were, “assist in coming up with a solution to problems,” “individualized attention to multiple family issues,” and “someone to help me talk out my problems and help me figure out what I want to do.” Additionally, “Becoming closer as a family, building solution focused perspectives as a family, being more positive and energized as a family” was another response.

There were seventeen responses related to the education theme, in fact one was,
“Education, education, education!” Moreover sixteen responses related to the outsider/third party theme and included: “The benefit of an outside opinion, with an insight maybe the average person doesn’t know,” and “Outside perspective on attitudes and actions that each may not be aware of.”

Less common responses were related to the themes approach and cost. Participants response to the theme approach were, “Someone to partner with you and help you discover the answers, not just tell you want to do” and “Working together to solve common problems, increasing communication.” Other participants addressed cost as a benefit from hiring a family coach. Responses were, “Cost pragmatic,” “Cheaper than therapist,” and “Less costly than other professionals.”

Many responses were “N/A” or “none.” These responses were identified under the theme no benefit. The identified theme, other, had a variety of different responses that could not be categorized; responses such as, “This is hypothetical,” and “I am not familiar with family coaching so I am not aware of the benefits,” were a few too ambiguous to classify. See Table 4.
Table 4 (N=124)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help/Assistance/Support</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective Perspective</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Benefit</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total                | 124| 100 |

What Drawbacks are perceived from Hiring a Family Coach?

Five themes were identified of the question regarding drawbacks toward hiring a coach: (1) time, (2) money, (3) lack of training/credentials, (4) insurance coverage, and (5) none (see Table 5). The sample of participants who completed this question was N=122.

There were 30 responses, 25%, related to the identified theme lack of training/credentials as a drawback to hiring a family coach. Participant responses were, “Not familiar with what training and background they have,” “Are they qualified to help? Without proper training, advancements in therapy could be curtailed with improper advice and coaching,” and “Unsure of the credentialing and licensing process; is it rigorous?” Similar responses were, “Credentialing would be an issue for me; my family coach should have more knowledge/education that I do or it defeats the purpose of seeking professional help,” and “Vague credentials and training.”

There were 29 responses, 23%, related to the theme money as a drawback of hiring a
family coach. Many responses were simply, “Money,” “Cost,” “Expense,” and “Affordability,” while other responses noted the need for insurance coverage to help pay for the cost: “Not covered by insurance” and “Not reimbursed by insurance, costs.”

Under the identified theme, no drawbacks, many responses were “not sure,” and “none.” These responses account for 15% of the total responses implying a positive feeling about the attitudes of parents. Additionally ten responses were related to the identified theme, time. Two comments were, “Time investment,” and “Take time away from family.” See Table 5.

Table 5 (N=122)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Training/Credentials</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Drawbacks</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is Your Parental Opinion of Family Coaching?

The analysis of the final open-ended question identified three overall themes: (1) need definition and credentials (2) like to know more, and (3) new idea (see Table 6). Participant responses about the identified theme licensure and credentialing were equally prevalent as
responses regarding the identified theme like to know more. The sample of participants who completed this question was N=88.

Responses regarding the theme licensure and credentialing were, “I am wondering about the process for their licensure or credentialing” and “I do not know much about life coaching. Does it even require a degree? When looking for help in my own family I would want to know the credentials of the person that I hired and because I am not familiar with life coaches, I do not know the education they have to have in order to earn that title.” Additional comments regarding credentials were, “It would be beneficial if there were clear descriptions of what they do, criteria for excellence, how to find qualified ones, financial assistance to cover the cost of their services” and “As it is described in this survey, I think many professionals do coaching but don’t have coaching credentials.” These responses imply the earnest need for universal credentials.

There were seventeen responses regarding the theme like to know more, revealing a high interest. Some of the responses were, “I would simply like to know more about it,” “Need more awareness,” and “I don’t think I know enough to be able to give you an opinion. I’m wide open to learning more” This high percent of respondents who would like to more, showed an open and positive attitude about family coaching.

Participant responses for the theme new idea were, “I think it is an awesome idea” and “New concept for me, may be of benefit if one doesn’t have good family back up.” Similar responses were, “I think this is a relatively new idea and I think people need to better understand exactly what a coach does vs using other professionals,” “Great concept, wish there some around,” and “I see it as another potential resource for families.” While another
commented on a possible drawback, “I think it is a good idea but could be unavailable to middle class or low income families.” See Table 6. Exploring the results to these questions can help us further understand the coaching field’s application toward particular family issues.

Table 6 (N=88)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like to Know More</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions &amp;</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credentials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Idea</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other or N/A</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore parental perceptions of family coaching as a method for assisting families. The findings from this study provide useful information about parental opinions and attitudes toward family coaching, as well as present a starting point for future research in the field of family coaching with parents. Results show, overall, that there is an interest in and a desire by parents to learn more about family coaching. Some parenting topics generated more interest than others. Specifically, family coaches were identified by the sample as a likely professional to seek in dealing with general parenting issues and divorce. This finding is considered a major strength in this study because family coaching is an
emerging field with a markedly different approach. Interestingly, Table 2 shows its strongest percentages where coaching first made its debut (financial, time management, and unemployment), then quickly moves toward families. The difference between percentage of unemployment (31%) and blending of families (29%) is very small.

Further, qualitative data analysis suggested findings that are consistent with existing literature. Recall that Cotter et al. (2013) found delivery format and parental preference of receiving family life and parent education is associated with positive family outcomes. Themes found from analyzing the open-ended response questions were consistent with the literature on delivery format: (1) Internet use, (2) strong relationships between coach and client, (3) a client-centered approach, (4) focusing on family goals and strengths, and (5) meeting families where they are by aligning with families (Connel et al., 2007; Kelly & Bernard, 1999; Radey & Randolph, 2009; Swick, 2004). Coaching methods eliminate the expert approach that carries the stigma of “needing help,” which research demonstrates is consequently detrimental to parent education involvement (Swick, 2004).

For the question, What method would someone use to hire a coach?, 35% reported they would likely use the Internet as a method for hiring a family coach. This finding is extremely helpful for programs using coaching approach and is consistent with the literature of disseminating parent education through distant technologies (Hamren & Quigley, 2012; Meadan et al., 2013). Moreover, this finding implies the Internet as an avenue for awareness and education about family coaching.

Regarding the question, What drawbacks are perceived from hiring a family coach?, participant responses suggest a need for the field to be wholly defined and credentialed. The
results of this question show that 25% of participants define lack of training/credentials is a drawback and 23% of participants define that money/cost is a drawback. This finding implies that the field of family coaching needs to grow by implementing coach competencies, training standards, educational requirements, and credentialing (Allen & Huff, 2014; Goddard et al., 2011; Hamon & Smith, 2014). Likewise, the question, *What is your opinion of family coaching?*, yielded similar results involving credentialing revealing 19% of participants reported a need for defining the field of family coaching and implementing a credential.

Additionally, family coaching was identified by the sample as a likely professional to seek in dealing with general parent education and divorce/separation. Results from the analysis of variance showed statistical significance for parents who had previously hired a coach to hire a coach for general parenting issues and divorce. This finding suggests that future research is needed exploring these specific areas (general parenting and relationship education) to apply family coaching.

Finally, the study helped to identify where families might go to find parenting professionals. Participant responses from the question, *What method would someone use to hire a coach?* suggest that information about family coaches on the Internet would be helpful for both parents in locating family coaches and for family coaches in advertising services. In order to increase awareness and reach the diversity of families, Internet use is both supported in the literature (Radey & Randolph, 2009) and in this study as an effective means for seeking family life and parent education information. Additionally, the field of family coaching can increase its awareness with more Internet exposure.
Implications

Participant responses yield information that is useful for future studies of family coaching and suggest actions that may be of benefit to currently practicing coaches. Participants reported an interest in seeking family coaches to address family needs and expressed a desire to learn more about family coaching. The interest in family coaching among this sample presents a possible opportunity for family coaches to differentiate from other family practitioners as a method for helping families. The participant base was predominately more educated, perhaps implying a more open mind to family coaching or more access to information about up-and-coming approaches to family science. Additionally, the participants may be able to afford a family coach because current family coaches are not yet covered under insurance plans.

Research suggests that there is an overwhelming need for familial support to meet families where they are and to treat them with respect, empowering individuals and families toward positive change without stigmatizing them (Swick, 2004). Family coaching is an approach that partners with its client, fostering an atmosphere of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Moran & Brady, 2013), recognizing the client is best equipped to provide answers to their own problems by highlighting positive familial patterns and strengths (Allen, 2013). Applying further application of studies implementing coaching strategies through clinical science and human services (Moran & Brady, 2010; Timmer et al., 2009) and parenting and parent education (Beyer, 2008; Rush et al., 2003) begin the process of reducing stigma and parental barriers and help develop the field of family coaching, by increasing socially acceptable forms of family intervention. Furthermore, the mere act of studying
parental perceptions of family coaching helps to broaden the understanding of parental preferences in family life education and parenting skills (Radey & Randolph, 2009). This study creates a starting point for further research in the field of family coaching and implementing coaching strategies in already existing family life education and parenting programs by supporting the literature on parental preference of family life and parent education.

**Limitations**

While the presented research shows an interest and desire to learn more about family coaching there are noted limitations of this study with the first being survey design. Many participants did not complete or answer all survey questions, most likely due to the length of the survey. This points to the need to run a pilot survey as a means for developing an effective research survey (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Restructuring the survey design would allow for more inferential analysis of the data and would likely lessen respondent fatigue.

Another limitation is that the survey was only accessible by the Internet, thereby limiting the number of participants to only those who could either access the Internet or have access to a computer. In addition, a snowball sample may result in researcher bias because the selected sample may already have a good understanding of what the researcher is studying (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Disseminating the survey in other forms such as mailings, pamphlets, or phone calls, and broadening the participant base to include a more diverse sample would likely improve the generalizability of the results. Moreover, the survey did not include comprehensive demographics (e.g., race was not assessed).
Conclusion

Family science has continually moved forward by employing innovative and effective practices for families. Family coaching is one such innovative approach that has been identified in the family science literature as an area of interest for more research and application. More information is needed to determine how family coaching research can be used to grow the field of family science. This study suggests that family coaching is viable option for families when seeking help of a family practitioner.

This study sought to better understand the perceptions and interest of parents in employing family coaches to help with family life issues. Results show that parents have an interest and willingness to use family coaches to address family-related issues, and that participants would like to know more about the field of family coaching, specifically as related to better managing family issues such as general parenting and divorce.

The research on what families need is congruent with the theoretical ideation of what family coaching entails. Family coaches are able to provide familial support and parent education through a strong client-coach relationship (Rush et al., 2003), and through social work by home visits (Beyer, 2008; Hamren & Quigley, 2012). Families are already being helped through distance technology platforms (Internet) for special needs (early intervention, ADHD and Autism) by recognizing parental preferences toward family life and parent education.

While the field of parent and family life education is wide, there is still need for growth. Ultimately, family coaching has several different niches and applications and will benefit from further exploration to establish the evidence-base it needs to grow. Delivering
family life and parent education within the parental preferences noted above provides the respect and empowerment needed for families to be successful at change. Family coaching is unique in that it bridges the education of family life with the support, encouragement, reverence, engagement, and family-centered activities for which families are asking. Future studies need to address content themes found in current practicing family coaches (e.g. methodology, theory, practices), rigor of training programs for budding family life coaches, and case studies of family coaching practices including divorce, relationship and parent education.
REFERENCES


Family Studies, 23, 1050-1061.

APPENDIX
Appendix

Dear Parents,

We would like to first thank you for participating in this study. We are interested to learn about your experiences and opinions of Family Life Coaching. Coaches differ from therapists or parent educators; *coaches help parents by partnering with and offering support to families while helping them create and reach personal goals*. Coaches guide decision-making by asking questions and providing motivation for the action steps necessary to reach goals.

For this study, we would like to survey your opinions about the choices you have as a parent when seeking help or direction with problems that arise within the family. By completing this survey you will help us better understand the current needs of families for the field of family life education.

This survey should take approximately 5 minutes of your time. By moving forward with this survey, you consent to the use of your feedback to help us better understand your opinions about coaching. I will not collect any personal data therefore I will not share any individual information. All answers will be compiled, and only results from the group data will be shared. The information you share will help us have a better understanding of coaching as an approach to helping families improve.

Thank you for your time in completing this survey.

Tara Baker, MS Student
North Carolina State University
tmbaker2@ncsu.edu
Survey

For this study a coach is defined as someone who helps parents by partnering with and offering support to families while helping them create and reach personal goals. Coaches guide decision-making by asking questions and providing motivation for the action steps necessary to reach goals.

Please answer the following questions using YES or NO.

1. Have you ever sought help from a family life or parenting professional (i.e. parent educator, counselor, psychologist, therapist)?

2. Would you be willing to hire a family life or parenting professional if you saw a need in your family?

3. Have you ever hired a coach to help with family problems or issues?

4. Have you considered hiring a coach previously?

5. Would you consider hiring a professional coach if you saw a need in your family?

6. Do you know someone that has hired a coach to help with family issues?
Please answer the following questions using the following scale: very much, somewhat, a bit, very little, not at all.

1. How familiar are you with the field of coaching (as in life coaching or executive coaching)?

2. Would you have an interest in seeking out and using a coach to help address family issues?

3. How interested are you in receiving coaching to help address your family problems?

4. Is it important for the coach you hire to be credentialed as a professional coach?

5. If you hire a coach, would you know what kind of credential to look for?

6. Does health insurance coverage affect your choice to use a coach?

Below is a list of common family problems. Please mark which intervention method you would most likely pick for the problem and rate it (1-not likely; 2-somewhat likely; 3-very likely). Pick all that apply to you.

**General parenting questions (all ages)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychologist</th>
<th>Therapist</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Parent Educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Potty training**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychologist</th>
<th>Therapist</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Parent Educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School Success**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychologist</th>
<th>Therapist</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Parent Educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adolescence related issues

Health and well-being

Risk behaviors (e.g. sexuality, drug and alcohol addiction, Internet addiction)

Special needs such as ADHD or learning disorders

Time management

Unemployment or job loss

Relationship education

Divorce or separation
Psychologist 1 2 3  Therapist 1 2 3  Clergy 1 2 3  Coach 1 2 3  Parent Educator 1

2 3

Blending of families

Psychologist 1 2 3  Therapist 1 2 3  Clergy 1 2 3  Coach 1 2 3  Parent Educator 1

2 3

Extended families (e.g. in-laws)

Psychologist 1 2 3  Therapist 1 2 3  Clergy 1 2 3  Coach 1 2 3  Parent Educator 1

2 3

Financial (credit card debt, financial planning)

Psychologist 1 2 3  Therapist 1 2 3  Clergy 1 2 3  Coach 1 2 3  Parent Educator 1

2 3

Please complete the following questions by filling in the blanks.

1. If you decide to hire a coach, what method would you use to find one?
   
   ______________________________________________________________________
   
   ______________________________________________________________________
   
   ____

2. What benefits do you see from hiring a family life coach?
   
   ______________________________________________________________________
   
   ______________________________________________________________________
   
   ____

3. What drawbacks do you see from hiring a coach?
4. What else would you like us to know about your opinion of family life coaching?

[Your comments here]

Demographics: Please circle one.

Gender:

Male          Female

Your Age:

18-26          27-35          36-44          45-53          54-62          63-71

Your Child(ren)’s Age:

0-5             5-18           19 and older

Your Education Level (if college, please denote completion level):

High school diploma or GED

Some college:    No degree          Certificate          Associates

College Degree:  Bachelor          Master             Doctoral

Family Household Income:

0-$30,000       $30,000-$60,000    $60,000-above

Please list your profession:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________