

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in ACF supports research and evaluation focused on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of ACF programs. Its functions include developing evaluation and research studies and managing their conduct; reviewing and analyzing research and evaluation findings; disseminating data analyses and research and demonstration findings; and providing guidance and technical resources to ACF programs. Rigorous research and evaluation has played an integral role in the design and implementations of the Healthy Marriage Initiative since its inception.

Multi-site Evaluations

ACF has launched three large evaluations of approaches to providing healthy marriage education services. These evaluations study programs operated by ACF partners at the State and local level.

- **Building Strong Families-** The purpose of this project is to evaluate healthy marriage services for romantically involved low-income, unwed parents around the time of the birth of a child. The Building Strong Families (BSF) project entails three major components: providing technical assistance to program sites, analyzing whether well-designed programs and services can help couples fulfill their aspirations for a healthy marriage. Contractor: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. **Project Period: September 29, 2002 to December 31, 2011**
- **Supporting Healthy Marriage-** This study evaluates programs to help low-income married couples strengthen and maintain their marriages. The project involves working in partnership with State or local officials in selected sites, provided technical assistance in the design and implementation of marriage skills programs, and analyzing program implementation and impacts. Contract: MDRC.
- **Community Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation-** This project evaluates the implementation of healthy marriage demonstration waiver projects, funded through the Office of Child Support Enforcement Section 1115 authority, that aim to improve outcomes for children, adults, and the greater community. The evaluation examines outcomes related to marital quality and stability, parenting behaviors, and child support. In addition, some community healthy marriage grantees will be included in an impact evaluation using a matched comparison site design. Contractor: RTI International. **Project Period: September 30, 2003, to September 29, 2011.**

Other Research Sponsored by ACF

- **Financial Disincentives to Marriage-** This research examines the effect of tax provisions and policies within Federal and State programs, including the Earned Income Tax Credit and means tested benefit programs such as welfare or food stamps, on couple's income. This project features a "calculator" based on relevant Federal and State tax policies and social service program rules that illustrates financial benefits or penalties to

marriage or cohabitation under different earnings and family composition scenarios. Contractor: Urban Institute. **Project Period: September 22, 2003 to March 31, 2006.**

- **Supporting Healthy Marriage in Stepfamilies-** This project develops a conceptual framework for interventions to support healthy marriage and parental relationships within lower-income married stepfamilies based on research findings on the stresses/ challenges within such families and the factors associated with positive couple/family interactions. The framework also reflects lessons from current practice based on information gained from site visits and discussions with practitioners. Contract: Abt Associates, Inc. **Project Period: September 30, 2005, to September 30, 2006.**
- **Healthy Marriage Precursors: Relationship Development among Low-Income Youth and Young Adults-** This project documents theories about and research on trends and patterns of dating and relationship formation among youth. It includes development of a conceptual framework and review of examples of existing programs that address healthy relationships and dating among youth or young adults. Contractor: RAND. **Project Period: September 30, 2005, to July 31 2007.**
- **Marriage, Employment, and Family Functioning: Conceptual Framework for Interventions-** This exploratory study synthesizes research relevant to decision-making and behavior about marriage, family formation, employment and earnings and family time use with a focus on low-income populations. It also develops a conceptual framework for research on those interrelated aspects of family and work life. Contractor: The Urban Institute. **Project Period: September 30, 2005 to September 30, 2007.**
- **Options for Collecting Marriage and Divorce Statistics-** This project is jointly sponsored by ACF and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, with cooperation from the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The study analyzes options for improving the collection of marriage and divorce statistics at the Federal, State, and local levels. Contractor: The Lewin Group. **Project Period: September 30, 2003, to February 28, 2008.**
- **Discerning Pathways to Marital Stability-** This project identifies the extent to which demographic characteristics, interpersonal factors, and social support are related to the chances that a couple gets and stays married until their child reaches five years of age. The model uses a dataset of 500 low-income, racially diverse mothers and tests the robustness of the model on a second sample of comparable mothers. Grantee: **Orleans Hawks Puckett Institute** (Morgantown, N. C.) **Project Period: September 30, 2005, to September 29, 2006.**
- **Ethnographic and Survey Studies of the Determinants of Healthy Marriage-** This project identifies recruitment barriers of low-income

- couples to marriage education both from couple and marriage education practitioner samples, synthesizes current recruitment practices of marriages education programs, and measures communication, problem solving abilities and stress levels among low-income and middle-income couples to test the hypothesis that low-income couples have few communication skills and this are less able to agree about marriage education participation. Grantee: **Oklahoma State University** (Stillwater, Okla.). **Project Period: September 30, 2005, to September 29, 2008**
- **Efficacy of Program for Strong African American Marriage-** This impact study will examine strength of Program for Strong African American Marriage (Pro SAAM), a marriage education program designed for poor, rural African American couples on such outcomes as marital satisfaction and stability, examining forgiveness, commitment and intentions as mediators of program effects. Grantee: **Florida State University** (Tallahassee, Fla.) **Project Period: September 30, 2005, to September 29, 2009.**
 - **A Longitudinal Study of the Impact of Marriage Education among Low-Income, Ethnically Diverse Youth.** This impact study examines the effects of a youth marriage and relationship educational course taught in high schools in Alabama on such outcomes as healthy dating patterns, knowledge about the importance of healthy marriage and dangers of unhealthy and abusive relationships, levels of self-efficacy, use of active identity processing style, increases in future orientation, lower levels of acceptance and prevalence of risky sexual behaviors, and lower rates of teen pregnancy. Grantee: **Auburn University** (Auburn, Ala.) **Project Period: September 30, 2005, to September 29, 2010.**

For more information on HMI research and completed reports, see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/project/projectIndex.jsp#strengthen>

HHS- wide Healthy Marriage Evaluations and Programs

ASPE

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services (ASPE) has posted sixteen research evaluations on healthy marriage. See http://aspe.hhs.gov/office_specific/topic2.cfm?sub_topic_id=112&sub_subtopic_name=Healthy%20Marriage&sub_id=3777&topic_name=Family%20and%20Marriage%20Issues

SAMHSA

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a National Repository of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP). NREPP is one way that SAMHSA is working to improve access to information on tested interventions and thereby reduce the lag time between the creation of scientific knowledge and its practical application in the field. The programs listed are rated by independent reviewers. The Prevention and Relationship

Enhancement Program (PREP) was reviewed in September 2006. The summary reads:

Outcomes: 1) Relationship satisfaction and stability, 2) Communication and conflict management, 3) Problem intensity

Abstract: The goal of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is to modify or enhance those dimensions of couples' relationships that research and theory have linked to effective marital functioning, such as communication, problem-solving skills, and protecting positive connections and expectations. Using techniques of cognitive behavioral marital therapy and communication-oriented marital enhancement programs, PREP aims to help couples maintain high levels of relationship functioning and prevent marital problems from developing. Topics covered include communication, conflict management, commitment, friendship, sensuality, problem-solving, and emotional supportiveness, among others. The program can be delivered in a variety of formats. Six two-hour sessions are typical; other formats include a weekday session followed by a weekend retreat. Homework assignments are completed between sessions that require couples to practice skills, read chapters, and complete exercises.

For the complete assessment, see

http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM_ID=86

Is Marriage and Relationship Education Effective? A Comprehensive Meta-Analysis

Commissioned by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

This meta-analytic study examines the effects of marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) on two common outcomes: relationship satisfaction/ quality and relationship communication. A thorough search produced 133 codable reports that yielded 197 studies and nearly 600 effect sizes. It included studies from 1975, when serious research on MRE increased in momentum, through 2006, when significant Federal funding for MRE was first targeted. Both published and unpublished studies were sought for inclusion so that the issue of publication bias could be directly addressed. Though reviewers did not conduct an exhaustive search for studies published in languages other than English, the search surfaced a handful in languages such as German, Dutch and Afrikaans.

Highlights of Moderator Analyses

Couples married six to ten years may benefit most from MRE compared to couples married shorter or longer periods. Premarital programs produce smaller effects for relationship satisfaction but not communication; possible ceiling effect for premarital couples. Communications programs produce larger effects. Programs lasting 9-20 hours produce larger effects than less intense programs, but longer programs do not produce stronger effects. There is little difference between programs in religious and university clinic settings. Overall finding: modest effects for marital satisfaction/ quality and communication. Studies should begin to assess stability, divorce and domestic violence.

For more information, see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/metaanalysis_07.pdf

Implementing Programs to Strengthen Unwed Parents' Relationships: Lessons from Family Connections in Alabama

Excerpts from Final Report May 2004

The new focus on the importance of fathers and a two-parent family evoked considerable discussion among program staff who were accustomed to primarily empowering mothers. Yet initial skepticism faded when staff saw the receptivity and favorable responses of participants.

Benefits to Children:

Important in Program Recruitment

Once engaged in the Family Connections in Alabama (FCA) program, couples and single parents told staff members and us that they enjoyed the class sessions and felt that they benefited from the opportunity to focus on their relationships and personal needs. Staff felt, however, that the most effective way to bring couples or single parents into the program initially was to emphasize the potential benefits to their child.

Staff Skepticism Faded with Favorable Client Reviews

To the initial surprise of some staff, clients who enrolled in the program generally responded favorably to the information and activities presented during class sessions. Participants we interviewed during our site visits reported that the program had helped them communicate with their partners, deal with anger and conflict, and build their parenting skills. Participants welcomed the opportunity to talk about relationships, and many found the sessions to be interesting and fun. As one couple put it, "Other classes at the center fill us in about the baby, but that's not really about the mother and father. This program is about us."

A recently married participant said that the program was helping her "get better acquainted" with her new husband. She thought the program would help their baby know that "my father and mother love me." Couples found it "kind of exciting to have the mom and the dad in the same classes," and participants attending without a partner enjoyed their involvement in a "coed" program that allowed men and women to interact with each other and discuss relationship issues. Participants appreciated learning from other class members. One said, "it gives us a chance to see what others are dealing with." Some class groups were sorry to see the classes come to an end. Those who received services through home visits appreciated the connection with staff and to services. One home visiting participant who was involved in an abusive relationship said, "This program probably saved my life."

Facilitators credited the program with numerous benefits. They felt that participants had improved their ability to communicate with each other. They said that some participants changed their attitudes about their relationships and about co-parenting their children. Staff found that participants did not react negatively when the classes addressed marriage- in fact, many participants welcomed such discussions. Facilitators thus became more comfortable with the program's content. One facilitator said that the FCA program had become the most

rewarding class she has taught. Several providers were exploring the possibility of integrating relationship and marriage skills into ongoing agency services.

Implications

Organizations planning to implement Building Strong Families (BSF) programs may need to build in significant up-front training and opportunities for staff to process and develop the understanding that viable relationships among unwed parents often exist, have the potential to be strengthened, and that healthy marriage is desired by and may be possible for many of them.

As program staff gained experience discussing relationship issues with participants through FCA, they found that many were indeed in active relationships with their child's other parent and were open and receptive to learning and talking about relationship issues and marriage. Thus, with experience and time, most FCA program staff came to view couples and marriage as legitimate focus with low-income families. Program facilitators became more confident that they would not offend or stigmatize non-coupled unwed parents and realized that the majority of participants valued, and many aspired to, marriage. Thus, the positive response of participants encouraged and affected the attitudes of FCA facilitators.

One program director acknowledged reluctance in the initial stages of preparing to offer the classes, but over the course of program operations came to believe that it was the most important program she had ever provided.

For overview and the full report, see
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/eval_prog/index.html

The Determinants of marriage and Cohabitation among Disadvantaged Americans: Research Findings and Needs

Marriage and Family Formation Data Analysis Project, 2003

Ten Key Influences on Marriage and Cohabitation

- Teen and Non Marital Childbearing
- Transitions to Parenthood
- Effects of Cohabitation on Marriage
- The Surge of Low-Income Women into Jobs
- Men's Economic Status
- THE Meaning of Marriage and Cohabitation
- Gender Role Expectations
- Interaction Processes
- Intrapersonal Influences on Interaction
- Contextual Influences on Interaction

For full report, see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/marr_family/index.html

Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Unmarried Couples with Children:

Early Lessons from the Building Strong Families Project

Excerpts, Final Report, July 2006

It doesn't feel like we're in a class. We've all gotten to know each other...It feels like home.

Regardless of group or site, nearly every participant spoken to by the research team indicated that they would recommend the program to others (some already had done so). This comment by a mother in Houston illustrates the general tone of most participants' feelings:

Of course, I would recommend this program, because it is a very good program that helps you with everything, they (program staff) help you with the children...how to be a better couple and parents.

Overview

As nonmarital childbearing has increased, so has concern for the attendant consequences. One-third of all children in the United States are now born to unwed parents, a rate that is even higher among some population groups. Although many children of unwed couples flourish, research shows that, on average, compared with children growing up with their married biological parents, they are at greater risk of living in poverty and developing social, behavioral, and academic problems (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Amato 2001).

Research suggests that there may be opportunities to address this concern. The 20-city Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study showed that most unwed parents are romantically involved during the time that their children are born, and many anticipate marrying each other. Most agree that it is better for children if their parents are married. Nevertheless, the Fragile Families study showed that only a small fraction of such couples are married a year after their children are born (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004).

The Building Strong Families (BSF) project originated from these bodies of research, and is one of the centerpieces of a broader policy strategy to support healthy marriage. BSF is a multi-year, multi-site project sponsored by ACF. Its goal is to learn whether well-designed interventions can help interested, romantically involved, unwed parents to build stronger relationships and fulfill their aspirations for a healthy marriage if they choose to wed. The BSF program is entirely voluntary- participation is neither a condition for receiving public benefits nor is it mandated by any government authority. BSF targets parents at around the time of their children's birth and provides instruction and support to help couples develop the relationship skills that research has shown are associated with a healthy marriage. Ultimately, healthy marriage between biological parents is expected to enhance child well-being.

The programs are intensive. The core component of BSF-the group instruction in marriage and relationship skills education- requires up to 44 hours and typically is provided over a sustained period of time (up to five or six months). Program sites differ in how long the couples meet with the family coordinators, but it may be as long as three years.

Participants' Concerns

One mother from Orlando, Florida, described her initial feelings about attending the group sessions. Her comments are illustrative of some participants' initial fears about attending the group sessions, but they also illustrate how her feelings changed after attending:

I was kind of scared...at first... [I thought] they were gonna be telling me what to do...but it really wasn't like that; they have really been helping me with my relationship...my relationship was a little rocky before I joined the group...I got back together with him [the father of her baby], since I have been coming to group, we have started talking about stuff now, stuff that we wasn't comfortable talking to each other about...

A mother in Orlando, who told us she "has a problem with authority figures," made this comment:

I guess I thought it would be like really forceful...like you have to do it a certain way. I thought...it would be more like therapy...I hate...people that think they know more than me, and think they know all about me and can tell me what's wrong with me and stuff like that. So that's what I thought, I was afraid it was going to be like that, but it really wasn't.

A mother in Indianapolis was concerned about fitting in to the group and being accepted. She described how staff made a personal visit to talk over her concerns and reassure her that the group was a place where she could be herself and talk about her own feelings and experiences:

When they [the facilitators] came to the house, they made you feel like you would be welcome at the group and you wouldn't need to be closed about how you were really feeling. And if things are bothering you, when you come here, you could talk about them.

Participant Engagement in Group Activities

One father reported that the group sessions were a positive experience that allowed him to learn more about himself and his partner:

It's a relief actually, talking out things. You get here and you talk about things you never talk about at home. And you're like, I didn't know you felt like that, and you learn something new about your partner. And that's exciting.

One father in a *Loving Couples, Loving Children* (LCLC) group described an exercise focused on the skill of compromise:

We did a little game where you fill in the information on the inside of a circle to show that you are not willing to compromise on, and things on the outside of the circle are things you are willing to compromise. So basically you learn a lot more about your partner and about yourself... I learned that some of the things I thought would be able to compromise on, I couldn't

but some things that I thought I would not be able to compromise on, I could.

Learning in a Group Format

One father in Indianapolis remarked that, by attending groups:

...you learn how much like other people you are and how much other people's problem coincide with yours. You learn different perspectives on how to deal with problems.

Another father in a different LCLC group explained it this way:

Basically we learn from other people's experiences, and I think it's great the group has a lot of people in it. In your relationship, it's just two people trying to go at it together and when you talk with other couples you realize there are other ways of doing things.

This view was shared by the female participants as well. For example, this mother in Indianapolis described how she enjoyed the developing friendships in her group, and how they enriched the discussions:

I was glad when the group got bigger. Initially it was just the four of us and I thought, I hope it's going to get bigger. And as it got bigger, it got more fun. Now it feels like we're all friends, in a sense, and the more people you have the more situations you hear about.

Another benefit of participating with other couples in a group format was observed by participants in both the *Love's Cradle* and the LCLC groups. Parents in both kinds of groups indicated that being with other couples allowed them to see firsthand that relationship struggles, especially when a new baby is present, are normal and not necessarily a reason to break up. The group provided a powerful message to couples that they are not alone, and that relationship ups and downs are to be expected. This lesson is likely to be important because many young couples lack exposure to models of good relationships and marriage and may mistakenly believe that good relationships are trouble-free. One mother in Fort Lauderdale put it succinctly:

I always thought our relationship was bad because we would argue. We just had a really messed up relationship. Then we came here and we realized, oh, we're normal.

The flowing two comments by mothers in the *Love's Cradle* group in San Angelo underscore this normalizing influence of being with other couples, and how getting to know and trust the other participants provides a sense of safety:

*I always questioned, do other people really go through all this? Meeting other couples at the group shows they do.
It doesn't feel like we're in a class. We've all gotten to know each other...It feels like home.*

Communication, Problem Solving, and Conflict Management

We used to bicker a lot, and now we don't let small stuff get in the way anymore. Just coming here every week has made our relationship stronger than it has been, and we learn and get ideas from others that we put into play. So that's why we're here every Saturday.

The reduced level of escalated conflict was a particular benefit frequently cited by participants. One father mentioned:

It helps us control our emotions better. Where before there were screams and insults, now we know how to control ourselves...that helped us more than anything.

In Houston, a father participating in a *Love's Cradle* group conducted entirely in Spanish voiced a very similar view:

More than anything, they teach you how to handle a situation in your house, whereas before there were fights and shouts. I say that it has helped us a lot on how to handle a situation like this. We handle it with more responsibility and respect.

In the same group, another father focused on how he found the role-playing by group facilitators to be especially helpful in learning how to solve problems:

Here in the sessions, they give us examples on how the problem needs to be solved, how we need to talk and it make us reflect on how one needs to act. It has helped us because they give us examples. Depending on the solution to the problem, they act out an argument and then they show us how solve it. We see how we should act, with the examples they provide. ...helped us get closer and get to be more open with each other about things...

Participants in another discussion described an increased sense of commitment to their partners after several group sessions. These participants noted that the group sessions encouraged them to focus on the relationship and that the act of doing this caused participants to realize just how much they really wanted their relationships to work. The following quote from a father in Indianapolis summarizes the benefits he saw from participating in the group sessions. He remarked that he and his partner often leave a group session with:

...a better feeling, a better understanding of each other, of our relationship and how to go about in our relationship.

Some couples noted that the group session had helped to clarify where they wanted to go in terms of their relationships. For instance, a couple in Fort Wayne said that being in the group had resulted in their fighting less and talking more, and he had helped them to *"know the direction we want to move in."*

For the full report, see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/build_fam/index.html

Office of Refugee Resettlement

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funds programs to help refugees, Cuban Haitian entrants, asylees, and others establish a new life that is founded on self-support and full-participation in the United States. ORR has awarded over \$15.6 million in grants to organizations that work with refugees to provide healthy marriage activities. The culturally sensitive services provided by grantees include premarital education, marriage education, and healthy dating programs for teens, parenting programs, and training for marriage mentoring. These programs, which are based on mainstream models, have been adapted to suit the various languages, cultures and religions of the refugee populations they serve. The legislative authority for these grants comes from the Refugee Act of 1980.

Grantee, '06	ORR Goal	Number Served
Hebrew Immigrant Society (HIAS)	450	1,467
Boat People, S.O.S.	450	640
Jewish Family and Community Services	150	525
ORR has funded 21 grantees since 2003		

Number Served From January 1, 2004 to Date		
Received Education	Individuals	Couples
Marriage education as couples	7,438	3,719
Marriage education training, not as couples	13, 256	
Receiving parent, teen training	7,174	
Total	27,868	

FINDINGS

- 1) Integrating marriage education into other social services is often the most effective way to recruit and retain participants. Russians, for example, are motivated when English as a Second language (ESL) or English-speaking services are also offered. Arriving refugees often do not see the necessity of marriage education; thus, within the first three months of orientation services, marriage education is presented as another means of strengthening the family in a new nation.
- 2) Youth classes are taught during summer months as “relationship skills/healthy dating/ marriage courses” when young people have ample free time. Also, parents are apt to attend a marriage course packaged as a course to teach relationship skills that improve home life.
- 3) Programs partner with small businesses that are the life blood of the ethnic community. Many refugee populations are also reticent to attend marriage programs, seeing it as a sign of weakness. Training three or four strong couples who then do the recruiting proved valuable. Also ethnic barber shops and beauty parlors, community centers, and groceries were excellent venues to distribute flyers and train potential recruiters.
- 4) Training curricula includes not only marriage education, but specific effects of immigration and pre-immigration stress on the family system, parenting, refugee family and American laws, and adjustment to the American social system.

After four years, ORR compiled *Lessons Learned*. See

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/lessons.pdf>

For more information on ORR, go to: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr>