

The **BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROJECT**

**Strengthening
Unmarried Parents'
Relationships:
The Early Impacts of
Building Strong Families**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Robert G. Wood
Sheena McConnell
Quinn Moore
Andrew Clarkwest
JoAnn Hsueh**

May 2010

Contract Number:
233-02-0056

Mathematica Reference Number:
08935.155

Submitted to:
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
370 L'Enfant Promenade, SW, 7th Floor, West
Washington, DC 20447
Project Officers: Nancye Campbell
Seth Chamberlain

Submitted by:
Mathematica Policy Research
P.O. Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393
Telephone: (609) 799-3535
Facsimile: (609) 799-0005
Project Directors: Alan Hershey
Barbara Devaney

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed in significant ways to this report. First, we wish to acknowledge the support of the staff at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) at the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Special thanks go to our OPRE project officers, Nancye Campbell and Seth Chamberlain, who have provided excellent oversight and guidance throughout the project. We also wish to thank members of the Building Strong Families (BSF) technical workgroup and expert consultants who provided useful direction on the focus of the study. In particular, we would like to thank Paul Amato, Tom Bradbury, Mark Cummings, and John Gottman for their input on the development of relationship quality measures.

At Mathematica Policy Research, we thank our project directors, Alan Hershey and Barbara Devaney, who have managed this large-scale evaluation effort since it began in 2002. In addition, we thank the team of dedicated survey staff members that collected the data for the evaluation, led by Shawn Marsh, the survey director for the project. We also thank the team of information systems staff, led by Steven Lehrfield, for their hard work throughout the project. In addition, we thank Robert Whitaker, Kim Boller, and Sarah Avellar, as well as Charles Michalopoulos of MDRC, for their important contribution to selecting and refining measures for the analysis. Amy Johnson and Ken Fortson provided very helpful comments on earlier drafts of the report. Xiaofan Sun, Anna Comerford, Alexander Persaud, Ravaris Moore, and Tim Novak provided excellent programming assistance. Cindy George and John Kennedy carefully edited the report and Linda Heath did an excellent job in producing it.

Special Thanks

We would like to extend a special thanks to the dedicated staff members at each of the eight BSF programs. Without their creativity, energy, and willingness to subject their programs to rigorous evaluation, this study would not have been possible. We thank each of the program teams, led by Sue Bullard, Franka Cumberhatch-Hankton, Cassandra Codes-Johnson, Marianne Ehrlich, Akilah Ferrell, Mercedes Fonseca, Rebecca Pena Hines, Joe Jones, Phyllis Kikendall, David Kimmel, Heidy Lough, Carol McNally, Dena Morrison, Mary Myrick, Anita Odom, Jay Otero, Chris Parker, Becky Solis, Marty Temple, Stefanie Toombs, Anne Wilson, and Carolyn Wiseheart.

We also extend our gratitude to curriculum developers Julie and John Gottman; Pamela Jordan; Mary Ortwein and Bernard Guerney; and Pamela Wilson and their teams, for their important contribution to the project. We also thank Anne Menard for her useful input to our understanding of the results related to domestic violence. Finally, our deepest appreciation is reserved for the couples who agreed to participate in the BSF demonstration and evaluation. We gratefully acknowledge all of these contributions and accept sole responsibility for any omissions in the report.

The Authors

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the Administration for Children and Families or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although most children raised by single parents fare well, on average, they are at greater risk of living in poverty and experiencing health, academic, and behavioral problems than children growing up with married biological parents. If interventions can improve the quality of unmarried parents’ relationships and increase the likelihood that they remain together, these interventions might also improve the well-being of their children. One possible approach to improving child well-being is thus strengthening the relationships of low-income couples through relationship skills education.

The Building Strong Families (BSF) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has been evaluating this kind of approach. The project developed, implemented, and tested voluntary programs that offer relationship skills education and other support services to unwed couples who are expecting a child or who have just had a baby. Eight organizations volunteered to be part of a rigorous evaluation designed to test a new strategy to improve the lives of low-income families. These organizations implemented BSF programs around the country, complying with a set of research-based program guidelines.

Mathematica Policy Research conducted an experimental evaluation of the eight BSF programs. Over 5,000 interested couples were randomly assigned to either a BSF group that could participate in the program or a control group that could not. This report presents estimates of BSF’s impacts on couples about 15 months after they applied for the program, focusing on the key outcomes BSF was designed to affect—the stability and quality of the couples’ relationships. A later report will present findings on BSF impacts on outcomes about three years after the couples applied for BSF, including impacts on couples’ children.

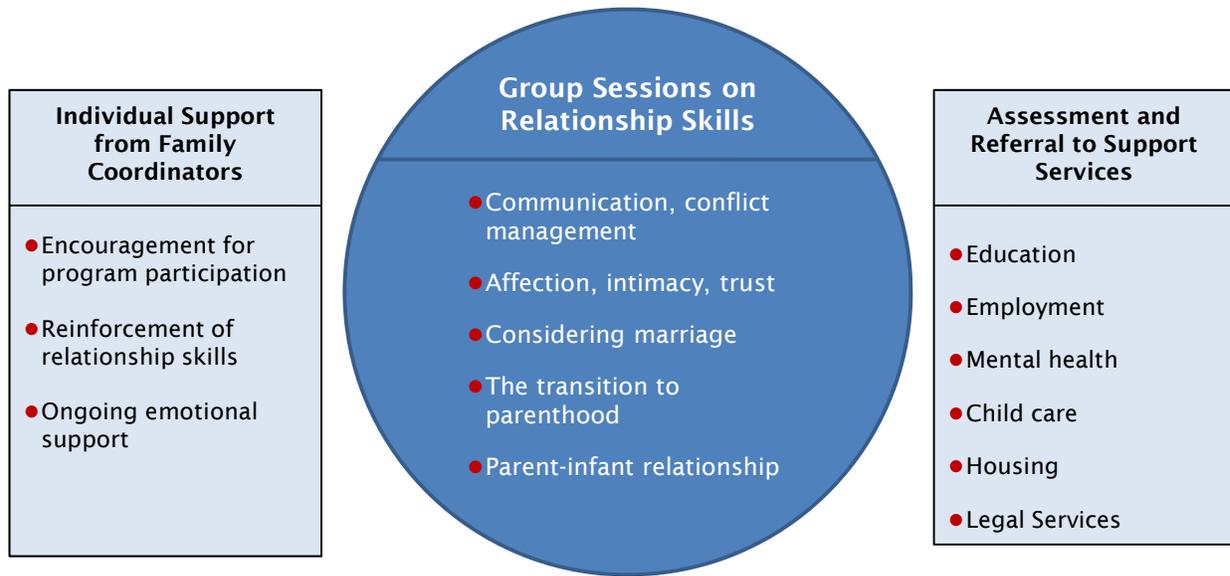
Location	Sponsor Organization	Number of Study Couples
Atlanta, Georgia	Georgia State University, Latin American Association	930
Baltimore, Maryland	Center for Urban Families	602
Baton Rouge, Louisiana	Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge	652
Florida: Orange and Broward counties	Healthy Families Florida	695
Houston, Texas	Healthy Family Initiatives	405
Indiana: Allen, Marion, and Lake counties	Healthy Families Indiana	466
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	Public Strategies, Inc.	1,010
San Angelo, Texas	Healthy Families San Angelo	342
All Programs		5,102

The BSF Program: Three Key Components

The BSF program was designed to serve unmarried, romantically-involved couples who were expecting or had recently had a baby. Before determining eligibility for BSF, program staff screened couples for intimate partner violence; if there was evidence of violence that could be aggravated by BSF participation, the couple was ineligible for BSF and was referred to other services.

BSF programs had three components: (1) group sessions on relationship skills, (2) individual support from family coordinators, and (3) assessment and referral to support services (Figure ES.1). The BSF model did not require a specific curriculum, but required programs to use a curriculum that covered key topics such as communication, conflict management, and marriage. The eight BSF programs chose one of three curricula developed for the study by experts who tailored their

Figure ES.1. The BSF Program Model



existing curricula for married couples to the needs of unmarried parents. The relationship skills education was designed to be intensive—involving 30 to 42 hours of group sessions. Under the program model, a family coordinator assigned to each couple was to reinforce relationship skills, provide emotional support, and encourage participation in the group sessions. The family coordinator also assessed family members’ needs and referred them for appropriate support services.

The BSF program was expected to increase exposure of couples to relationship skills services. All couples in the BSF group were offered BSF services, although they were not required to participate. Couples in the control group could seek relationship skills education from sources other than BSF. Among BSF couples, 61 percent reported attending a group session on relationship skills during the follow-up period. Among control group couples, only 17 percent reported attending a relationship skills group session. When asked about the number of hours they attended the groups, BSF couples reported attending 14 hours, on average, compared with an average of two hours of group relationship skills education for control group couples

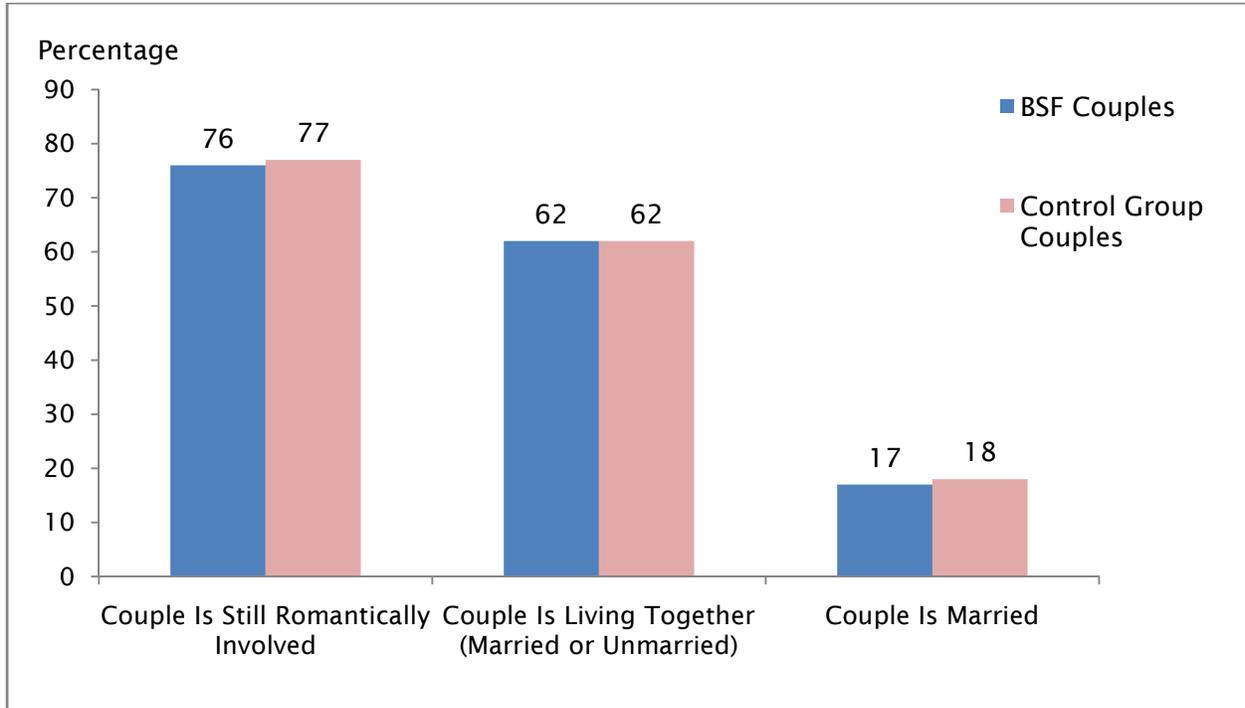
The Short-Term Impacts of BSF

The BSF 15-month impact analysis includes three kinds of estimates: (1) those that combine data from all eight BSF programs, (2) those that present impacts of each BSF program separately, and (3) those that examine effects on subgroups of participants. Results are summarized below.

When results are averaged across all programs, BSF did not make couples more likely to stay together or get married. In addition, it did not improve couples’ relationship quality.

BSF had no effect on whether couples were still together 15 months after they had applied for the program, when data from the eight BSF programs are combined. At this point, 76 percent of BSF couples were still romantically involved, compared with 77 percent of control group couples (Figure ES.2). Similarly, BSF and control group couples were equally likely to be married to each other at that time (17 and 18 percent respectively) and to be living together, whether married or unmarried (62 percent for both research groups).

Figure ES.2. Impact of BSF on Couples' Relationship Status at 15 Months



Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Note: None of the differences between the research groups are statistically significant at the .10 level.

Fifteen months after they applied for the program, BSF and control group couples reported being equally happy in their romantic relationships, with average ratings of 8.4 and 8.3 respectively on a 0-to-10 relationship happiness scale. Similarly, BSF and control group couples gave very similar ratings of supportiveness and affection in their relationships, with average support and affection scale values of 3.5 on a 1-to-4 scale for couples in both research groups. In addition, BSF had no overall effect on how faithful couples were to each other.

When results are averaged across all eight programs, BSF did not improve couples' ability to manage their conflict. Couples in both research groups reported similar levels of use of constructive conflict behaviors, such as keeping a sense of humor and listening to the other partner's perspective during disagreements. Similarly, there was no difference between the research groups in the avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors, such as withdrawing when there is a disagreement or allowing small disagreements to escalate. In addition, when results are averaged across all programs, BSF had no effect on how likely couples were to experience intimate partner violence.

Similarly, when results are averaged across all programs, BSF did not improve co-parenting or increase father involvement. BSF and control group couples reported that their co-parenting relationships were of equally high quality. In addition, at the 15-month follow-up, couples in both research groups were equally likely to report that fathers were living with their children, spending substantial time with them, and providing them with substantial financial support.

Most BSF programs had little or no effect on relationships; however, there were two notable exceptions. The Oklahoma City program had a consistent pattern of positive effects, while the Baltimore program had a number of negative effects.

The Oklahoma City BSF program had numerous positive effects on couples. It was the only program to have a positive impact on whether couples were still romantically involved at the 15-month follow-up (Table ES.1). In Oklahoma, 81 percent of BSF couples were still in a romantic relationship, compared with 76 percent of control group couples. The Oklahoma City program also improved relationship quality. At follow-up, Oklahoma BSF couples reported higher levels of relationship happiness, support and affection, and fidelity than control group couples did. BSF couples in Oklahoma City also reported better conflict management and higher quality co-parenting relationships than control group couples did. The Oklahoma BSF program also improved father involvement: BSF fathers were more likely than control group fathers to live with their children and provide substantial financial support. The program in Oklahoma did not, however, affect marriage rates. At the 15-month follow-up, 25 percent of both research groups were married.

Table ES.1. Significant Impacts of BSF at 15 Months, by Local BSF Program

	Atlanta	Baltimore	Baton Rouge	Florida Counties	Houston	Indiana Counties	Oklahoma City	San Angelo
Relationship Status								
Still Romantically Involved Living Together (Married or Unmarried)	o	---	o	o	o	o	+	o
Married	o	o	o	o	o	-	o	o
Relationship Quality								
Relationship happiness ^a	o	n/a	o	n/a	o	o	+++	o
Support and affection	o	--	o	o	o	o	++	o
Use of constructive conflict behaviors	++	o	o	o	o	o	+++	o
Avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors	o	o	o	o	o	o	++	o
Fidelity	o	o	o	o	o	o	+	o
Avoidance of Intimate Partner Violence								
Mother reports no severe physical assaults	o	-	o	o	o	o	o	o
Father reports no severe physical assaults	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Co-Parenting								
Quality of co-parenting relationship	o	-	o	o	o	o	+	o
Father Involvement								
Lives with child	o	-	o	o	o	o	+	o
Spends substantial time with child daily	o	-	o	o	o	o	o	o
Provides substantial financial support	o	--	o	o	o	o	+++	o
Sample Size	805	525	568	590	355	414	877	291

Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

^aRelationship happiness is measured only for couples who were still romantically involved. In most cases, the initial characteristics of these couples in the two research groups were similar and comparing their outcomes was a valid measure of program impacts. "n/a" indicates that this analysis could not be conducted for this program because BSF and control group couples who were still romantically involved did not have similar characteristics at baseline.

- o No statistically significant impact.
- +++/++/+ Statistically significant positive impact at the .01/.05/.10 level.
- /-/-- Statistically significant negative impact at the .01/.05/.10 level.

The Baltimore BSF program had negative effects on couples' relationships. BSF couples were less likely than control group couples to remain romantically involved, 59 percent versus 70 percent. Baltimore BSF couples reported being less supportive and affectionate toward each other than control group couples did. In addition, women in the Baltimore BSF program were more likely than women in the control group to report having been severely physically assaulted by a romantic partner in the past year, 15 percent compared with 9 percent. Baltimore BSF couples also rated the quality of their co-parenting relationship lower than control group couples did and reported that BSF fathers spent less time with their children and were less likely to provide them financial support than control group fathers were.

BSF improved the relationship quality of African American couples.

BSF served a racially and ethnically diverse population. Across all the programs, just over half the couples were African American; 20 percent were Hispanic; and 12 percent were white. An additional 16 percent were couples in which the parents were from different racial or ethnic groups or in which both parents considered themselves neither white, African American, nor Hispanic.

Couples in which both members were African American were positively affected by BSF. For these couples, BSF led to an increase in the support and affection partners felt toward each other. It improved their ability to use constructive conflict management techniques and avoid the use of destructive conflict behaviors. In addition, BSF increased fidelity among African American couples and reduced the frequency with which the men experienced intimate partner violence. BSF also improved the quality of the co-parenting relationship among African American couples. BSF did not have an effect on the relationship status of African American couples, however. At the time of the 15-month follow-up survey, African American couples in both research groups had similar rates of romantic involvement, co-residence, and marriage.

BSF had no positive effects on relationship quality or status for couples in which at least one member was not African American. Among these couples, those offered BSF services and control group members reported similar levels of relationship happiness, support and affection, quality of conflict management, fidelity, and intimate partner violence. In addition, BSF reduced the likelihood that these couples remained romantically involved at the 15-month follow-up, from 82 percent to 77 percent.

Discussion

These short-term results indicate that, when all the BSF programs are combined, BSF did not succeed in its primary objectives of improving relationship quality or making couples more likely to remain romantically involved or get married. Fifteen months after entering the program, the relationship outcomes of BSF couples were, on average, almost identical to those of couples in the control group.

The impacts of BSF varied substantially across the eight programs included in the evaluation. The BSF program in Oklahoma City had a consistent pattern of positive effects on relationship outcomes, while the Baltimore program had a number of negative effects. The other BSF programs generally had little or no effect on relationships. The BSF impact evaluation is not designed to provide a rigorous explanation of why one program was more successful than another. Nonetheless, given the wide variation in BSF program effects, it is useful to consider what is distinctive about the two programs with the strongest patterns of effects—Oklahoma City and Baltimore.

The Oklahoma City program delivered its relationship skills curriculum in a distinctive way. It was the only BSF program to use the *Becoming Parents* curriculum, which covered a mix of topics similar to those addressed in the other curricula, but prescribed groups twice as large as those recommended in the other two BSF curricula and covered the material in less time (30 rather than 42 hours). The Oklahoma program offered weekly group sessions in two formats, three or five hours long, while other BSF programs typically offered only two-hour weekly sessions. This difference, combined with Oklahoma's use of the shorter *Becoming Parents* curriculum, allowed couples to complete the curriculum in six or ten weeks, while couples in other programs needed about five months to finish. In addition, the Oklahoma program offered more financial incentives to encourage group attendance than other programs did. These factors may have played a role in Oklahoma's greater success at getting couples to complete the curriculum. In Oklahoma, 45 percent of BSF couples received at least 80 percent of the curriculum. In contrast, only 9 percent of couples in other BSF programs received at least 80 percent of the curriculum. Finally, although only unmarried parents were eligible for the BSF research sample, the Oklahoma City program also served low-income married parents and included both married and unmarried parents in the same group sessions. No other BSF program served parents who were married before their child was conceived. The presence of married couples may have influenced how the group sessions in Oklahoma City functioned, as well as how effective they were in improving the outcomes of the couples in the BSF research sample.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Baltimore BSF program is the population it served. In particular, Baltimore served couples with less committed and more tenuous relationships than other programs did. Only 38 percent of Baltimore couples consisted of two individuals who both considered marriage to their current partner likely, the lowest proportion of any BSF program, and considerably lower than the 61 percent of couples who considered marriage likely across all programs. The population served in Baltimore was more economically disadvantaged—particularly the men. Only 58 percent of Baltimore fathers were employed when they applied for the program, compared with 76 percent of fathers in other BSF programs. The fact that Baltimore groups consisted of a higher proportion of very disadvantaged couples in more tenuous relationships may have influenced how effective the sessions were. However, one can only hypothesize about which program or population characteristics contributed to the pattern of effects observed in Oklahoma City and Baltimore. The study design does not support definitive conclusions concerning the reasons for variation in impacts across the programs included in the evaluation.

BSF's effects also differed across racial groups. It improved the relationship quality of couples in which both members were African American, leading to more support and affection, better conflict management, increased fidelity, and reductions in intimate partner violence. In contrast, BSF did not affect the relationship quality of couples who were not African American and actually increased the rate at which these couples broke up.

This variation in impacts across the local BSF programs and across populations suggests that programs like BSF can have positive effects. However, the results also indicate that these programs can have negative effects on relationships in certain circumstances, including increasing the rate at which couples break up and experience intimate partner violence.

These are interim results. Results may be different at the time of the final follow-up, which will be conducted when the "focal child"—the child that made the couple eligible for BSF—is about three years old. In addition to the outcomes examined in this report, the final follow-up will examine effects on child well-being. Since improving child well-being was a major goal of the BSF initiative, the picture of its full effects remains to be completed.

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