



# Research to Practice Brief

Sarah Dolfin, Robert G. Wood, and Joanne Lee

OPRE report #2022-312

December 2022

## Participation Patterns in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs: Lessons from Three Programs

**For more information about the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) project, please visit [the project web page](#).**



**Mathematica**  
Progress Together



Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs aim to support the well-being of families by teaching them skills to improve communication and conflict management, recognize the characteristics of healthy romantic relationships, and strengthen existing relationships. HMRE programs might pair a relationship skills curriculum with other services, such as individualized job development or instruction on financial planning, that aim to promote economic stability or parenting skills. For such programs to be effective, it is critical that clients attend regularly. However, studies have found that HMRE program providers sometimes struggle to maintain high rates of participation (Dion et al. 2010; Miller Gaubert et al. 2012; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). Identifying and exploring typical participation patterns in HMRE programming can help us better understand this challenge and point to ways programs can promote and support regular participation.

In this brief, we summarize participation patterns from three HMRE programs for adults with low incomes: (1) **MotherWise**, which served pregnant and new mothers in Denver, Colorado; (2) **Career STREAMS**, which served young adults seeking job training and

employment services in St. Louis, Missouri; and (3) **Empowering Families**, which served couples with low incomes who were raising children together in Fort Worth, Texas. These programs represent a variety of HMRE program services and populations. They participated in the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation. The data analyzed here were collected as part of STREAMS. The rich data available on participation and client characteristics offer opportunities to develop deeper insights into participation patterns in HMRE programs.

This brief describes three groups of participants in each program—full engagers, moderate engagers, and low engagers—including their participation patterns and characteristics. The groups were identified using cluster analysis methods, described in more detail in the final section of this brief. Understanding these participation patterns and client profiles can help program providers focus their recruitment, identify clients who might be less likely to participate regularly and need additional support to fully engage, guide clients to services they are likely to find useful, and enhance services to promote regular participation.

### ABOUT THE STREAMS EVALUATION

Since the early 2000s, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has led a sustained effort to expand the available evidence on healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs. In 2015, ACF contracted with Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, to conduct the Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) evaluation to help identify strategies for improving the delivery and effectiveness of HMRE programs. The evaluation has a particular emphasis on understudied populations and program approaches not covered in ACF's prior federal evaluations. STREAMS includes in-depth process studies, random assignment impact studies, a rapid-cycle evaluation of text message reminders to improve attendance at HMRE group workshops, a formative evaluation of a facilitation training curriculum for HMRE programs for high school students, and predictive analytic modeling of attendance at HMRE group workshops. Learn more about STREAMS [here](#).

## MOTHERWISE

MotherWise served pregnant women and new mothers with low incomes in Denver, Colorado (Baumgartner and Paulsell 2019). Services were offered in English and Spanish. Four in 10 participants were Spanish speakers. MotherWise had three key components: (1) a core workshop, (2) case management, and (3) an optional couples' workshop (see box).

### KEY COMPONENTS OF MOTHERWISE



**Core workshop.** Using the Within My Reach curriculum, this workshop taught skills to help participants make healthy decisions about personal and romantic relationships. It also covered parenting and infant care. Workshops met weekly for six weeks and covered three hours of content each week.



**Case management.** Case managers helped women apply concepts from Within My Reach to their lives. The program encouraged women to meet with their case managers at least four times before the end of the six-week workshop.



**Couples' workshop.** This optional, one-day session was intended for women in committed relationships and their partners to work on their relationship skills. The workshop was offered as a seven-hour session on a weekend or four hours on a weekday evening.

Participation in the core workshop and case management was high, with more than 80 percent of participants receiving at least some of these services. Only 17 percent of participants chose to participate in the optional couples' workshop. These participation patterns varied across participants, as we describe below.

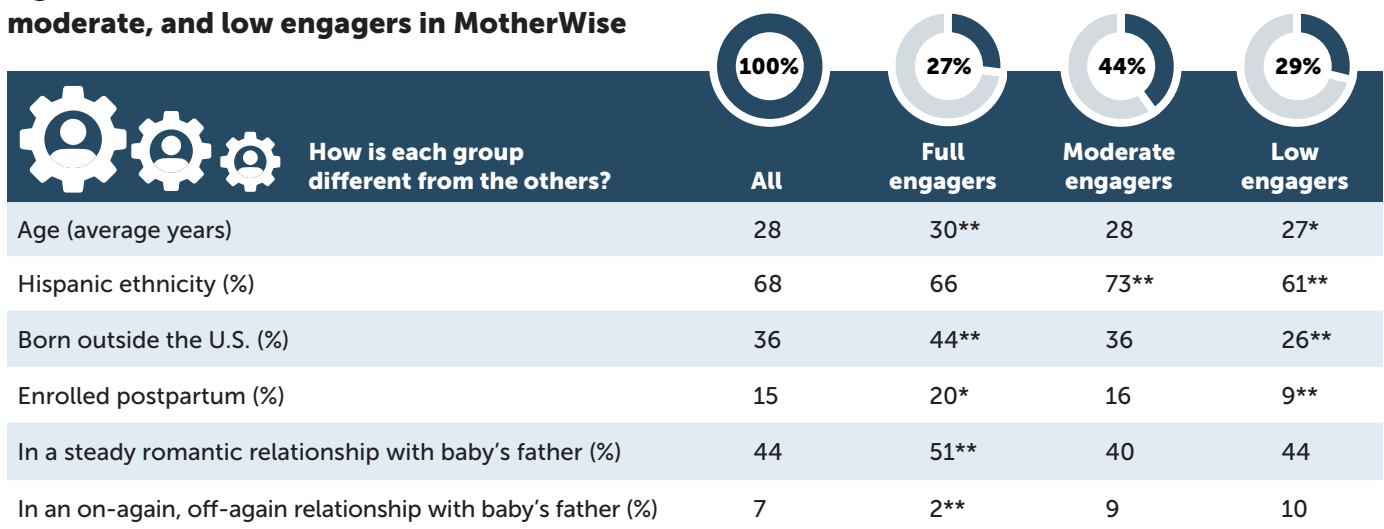
**Full engagers (27 percent of participants)** attended all six of the core workshop sessions offered. On average, they attended three to four case management meetings. Almost one-quarter of this group attended a couples' workshop. This group was older, on average, than other participants, more likely to be born outside the United States, and more likely to be in a steady romantic relationship with their baby's father, as Figure 1 shows.

### KEY TAKEAWAY FOR PRACTITIONERS

Clients who were older and those in steady romantic relationships with their baby's father were more engaged in the program than others. These clients might have faced fewer barriers to participation or might have found the curriculum more relevant because they were already in a relationship. Other HMRE programs serving new mothers might find these types of clients more receptive to participation. These programs might want to take additional steps to make services more enticing and accessible to younger mothers and mothers who are not in steady relationships.



**Figure 1. Differences in characteristics of full, moderate, and low engagers in MotherWise**



\*\* The value for the subgroup is different from the value for the rest of the sample at the 5% level of significance.

\* The value for the subgroup is different from the value for the rest of the sample at the 10% level of significance.

**Moderate engagers (44 percent of participants)** attended about five of the six core workshop sessions, on average. They attended just more than three case management meetings, on average, and 22 percent attended a couples' workshop. This group was more likely than other participants to identify as Hispanic.

**Low engagers (29 percent of participants)** had little to no participation in the program. Six in 10 did not attend any workshop sessions. On average, they attended fewer than one case management meeting. Almost none attended the optional couples' workshop. This group was younger, on average, than other participants, less likely to be born outside the United States, and less likely to have enrolled postpartum.

## CAREER STREAMS

Career STREAMS, based in St. Louis, Missouri, served young adults with low incomes who were interested in employment services and education and training opportunities (Friend et al. 2020). Participants were young (the average age was 23) and primarily identified as Black (94 percent) and female (62 percent). Career STREAMS had three key components: (1) a core workshop, (2) one-on-one case management and job development, and (3) booster sessions (see box).

### KEY COMPONENTS OF CAREER STREAMS



**Core workshop.** This workshop met daily for two weeks and offered 6 hours of content each day. It focused mainly on job search skills (résumé writing, job search strategies, and interview skills). This content was supplemented with relationship education content drawn from the Within My Reach curriculum, which comprised about one-quarter of the 60 hours of content offered.



**Case management and job development.** An employment case manager worked with clients to develop an individualized employment plan, and a separate job developer provided soft skills training, résumé assistance, and job placement and retention services.



**Booster sessions.** These sessions reinforced workshop lessons and introduced additional healthy relationship content after the core workshop was completed. Clients could drop into one-hour booster sessions weekly for five weeks.

Participation in the workshop and one-on-one services was high, with 81 percent of clients attending at least one of the workshop sessions and all clients attending at least one case management or job development meeting. In contrast, attendance at the booster sessions was relatively low; 34 percent of clients did not attend any booster sessions. These participation patterns varied across participants, as we describe below.

**Full engagers (32 percent of participants)** were likely to complete nearly all the two-week workshop sessions and booster sessions and met with an employment case manager or job developer more than four times, on average. This group was more attached to the labor force than other participants and faced fewer employment barriers, on average, as Figure 2 shows. They had fewer children, on average, and were less likely than other participants to have symptoms of depression.

**Moderate engagers (42 percent of participants)** completed nearly all the workshop sessions and met with an employment case manager or job developer more than three times, on average. The most substantial way in which their participation differed from that of full engagers was that they attended fewer booster sessions (44 percent of sessions, on average). Compared with other participants, clients in this group were more likely to be female and to have a vocational or technical certification. They were also less likely than other participants to have ever been convicted of a crime.

**Low engagers (27 percent of participants)** attended only 1 of the 10 workshop sessions, on average, and none attended any booster sessions. They received some one-on-one services, although fewer than the other groups. Specifically, they met with employment case managers and job developers about twice, on average, and 77 percent received one-on-one job and career advancement services. Low engagers were less likely than other groups to have

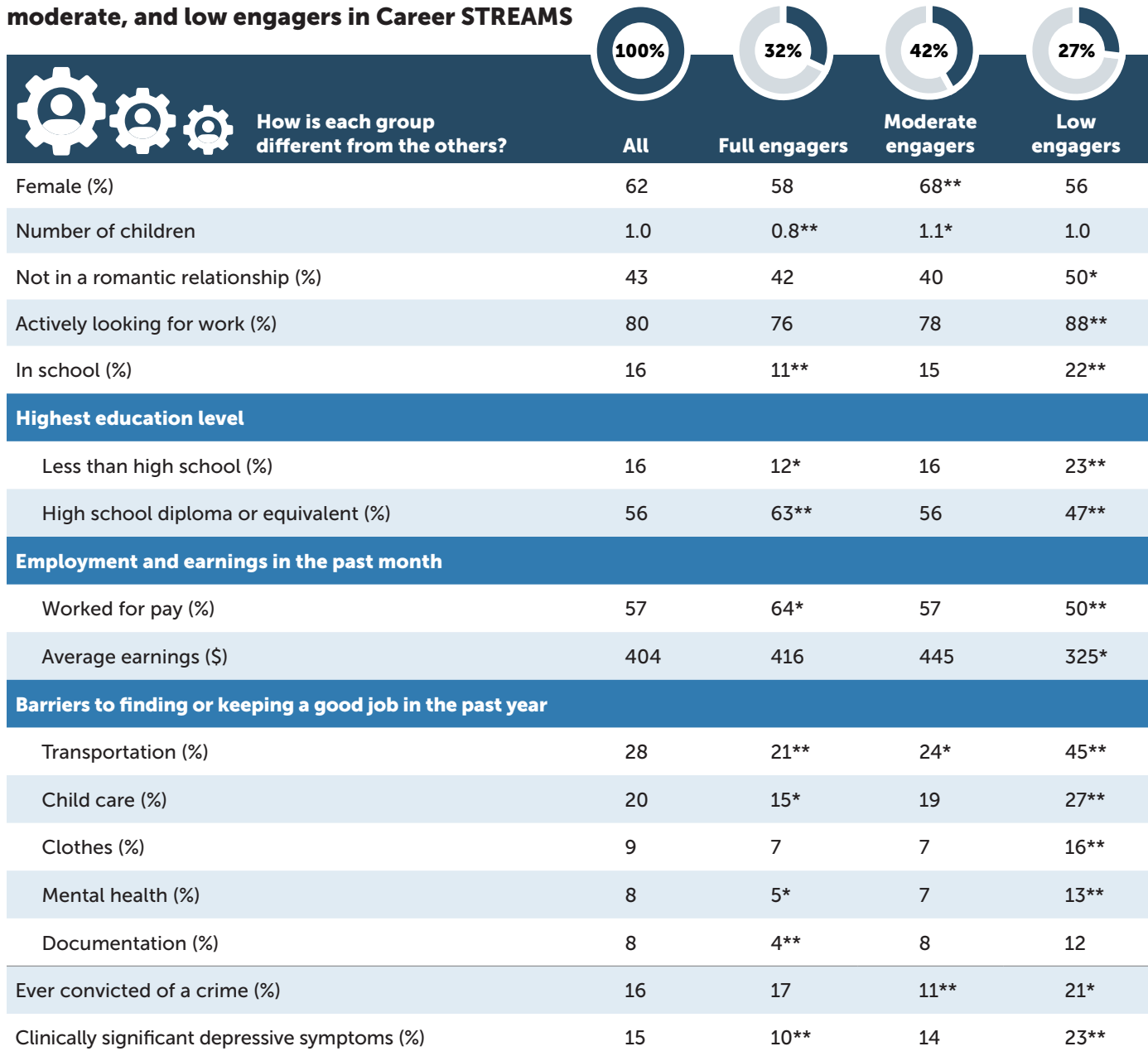
### KEY TAKEAWAY FOR PRACTITIONERS

Low engagers received the fewest program services and tended to be clients who were most in need of employment support. These clients faced barriers to work that might also have made it difficult for them to attend program meetings. Programs might need to provide more intensive or flexible supports to encourage regular participation for clients like these. For example, these clients might need more case management to identify referrals to outside resources, more transportation and child care assistance, and more options for program participation (such as added flexibility in workshop schedules or makeup sessions).



worked in the month before enrolling in the program and were less likely to have completed high school. They were also more likely to face employment challenges, including barriers related to transportation, child care, and mental health.

**Figure 2. Differences in characteristics of full, moderate, and low engagers in Career STREAMS**



\*\* The value for the subgroup is different from the value for the rest of the sample at the 5% level of significance.

\* The value for the subgroup is different from the value for the rest of the sample at the 10% level of significance.

---

## EMPOWERING FAMILIES

---

Empowering Families served economically disadvantaged couples who were raising children together (D'Angelo and Bodenlos 2020). About half the couples served identified as Hispanic, and more than 40 percent of these couples were Spanish speaking. Program services were offered in English and Spanish. Empowering Families had four key components: (1) a core workshop, (2) case management, (3) one-on-one employment services, and (4) financial counseling (see box).

---

### KEY COMPONENTS OF EMPOWERING FAMILIES



**Core workshop.** Integrating the Family Wellness curriculum with information about employment and financial literacy, the workshop was designed to strengthen couples' relationships and address employment or financial difficulties that could affect them. The workshop offered 20 hours of content over eight weekday evenings or four Saturdays.



**Case management.** Case managers aimed to meet one-on-one with each couple monthly for six months to help them apply concepts from Family Wellness to their lives and connect them to employment services and financial counseling.



**Employment services.** Employment counselors helped clients set employment goals and connected them to job services, including work readiness services, résumé preparation, interview skills training, soft skills training, job skills training, and job placement.



**Financial counseling.** Financial coaches taught couples skills about the basics of budgeting, saving, and credit. Couples who participated in four coaching sessions within 18 months could receive a savings match of up to \$100.

---

Most couples attended at least one workshop session (82 percent) and met with their case manager (76 percent). Fewer participated in individual employment coaching (38 percent of mothers and 31 percent of fathers attended at least one meeting) and financial counseling (53 percent of couples attended at least one meeting). These participation patterns varied across participants, as we describe below.

**Full engagers (70 percent of participants)** attended 95 percent of their workshop sessions and participated in three case management meetings, on average. They averaged two to three meetings with their financial coach. Mothers attended an average of nearly five meetings with an employment coach, and fathers attended an average of two meetings. Couples in this group tended to be less disadvantaged than other participants, having more stable relationships and employment, higher incomes, and fewer barriers to employment, as Figure 3 shows. Couples were more likely to be married and to have no children with other partners. They were also more likely to be Spanish speaking.

**Moderate engagers (12 percent of participants)** attended 29 percent of their workshop sessions, met between one and two times with their case manager, and met less than once with financial counselors and employment coaches, on average. These couples were less likely than other groups to be Spanish speaking and less likely to be married. They tended to be disadvantaged in terms of education and earnings, and many were actively seeking employment.

**Low engagers (18 percent of participants)** did not participate in any workshop sessions, attended one case management meeting, on average, and attended almost no employment coaching or financial counseling meetings. Couples in this group were the most likely to receive government benefits. This group was also the most likely to report employment barriers, including those related to criminal records and transportation.

---

### KEY TAKEAWAY FOR PRACTITIONERS



Couples with more stable relationship and economic circumstances were more likely to participate fully in Empowering Families services. Couples who were married, had children with no other partners, and had higher earnings had higher participation rates. These couples might have faced fewer barriers to participation or might have viewed the services as more beneficial to them. Other HMRE programs for couples with low incomes might find these types of clients more receptive to participation. Programs might need to make additional efforts to engage couples with less stable relationships and economic situations.

---

**Figure 3. Differences in characteristics of full, moderate, and low engagers in Empowering Families**

How is each group different from the others?	100%	70%	12%	18%
	All	Full engagers	Moderate engagers	Low engagers
Couple is Hispanic (%)	53	62**	32**	34**
Couple is Black, non-Hispanic (%)	28	20**	46**	48**
Mother speaks Spanish at home (%)	42	51**	18**	23**
Mother was born outside the U.S. (%)	44	53**	18**	24**
Couple is married (%)	55	63**	34**	42**
Couple only has children together (%)	43	50**	27**	28**
Mother is actively looking for work (%)	34	27**	57**	49**
Mother's criminal record is an employment barrier (%)	11	9**	14	19**
Mother's lack of transportation is an employment barrier (%)	28	24**	39*	38**
Father is actively looking for work (%)	40	34**	57**	55**
Father's criminal record is an employment barrier (%)	21	18**	27	31**
Father's lack of transportation is an employment barrier (%)	20	16**	29	33**
Father has education beyond a high school diploma or GED (%)	25	29**	14**	20
Father's average monthly earnings, including fathers with no earnings (\$)	1,795	1,961**	1,250**	1,499*
Couple receives government benefits (%)	66	62**	73	80**
Couple receives income from SNAP (%)	50	43**	63**	67**

\*\* The value for the subgroup is different from the value for the rest of the sample at the 5% level of significance.

\* The value for the subgroup is different from the value for the rest of the sample at the 10% level of significance.

GED=general equivalency diploma; SNAP=Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.



---

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR HMRE PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH

---

This brief examined patterns of participation in three HMRE programs—MotherWise, Career STREAMS, and Empowering Families—that were part of the STREAMS evaluation. Patterns and profiles varied across programs, but two crosscutting findings emerged.

- **Clients with the most stable relationship and employment histories engaged most fully with HMRE program services.** A consistent pattern across the three programs is that clients in more stable circumstances were more likely to engage fully with program services. For example, women who fully engaged with MotherWise services were more likely than other clients to be in a stable relationship with their baby’s father at enrollment, and couples who fully engaged with Empowering Families services were more likely than other couples to be married to each other. Full engagers in Career STREAMS and Empowering Families reported fewer barriers to employment than other clients in those programs. Conversely, clients potentially most in need of the supports the programs offered were least likely to fully engage in program services. Programs might need to make special efforts to engage clients in less stable circumstances.
- **Spanish-speaking clients might be particularly receptive to HMRE services.** In the two programs we examined that served substantial proportions of both English- and Spanish-speaking clients—MotherWise and Empowering Families—Spanish-speaking clients had higher rates of participation in all program components. These programs had bilingual staff and offered all services in English and Spanish. Their intensive efforts to offer a full set of program services in Spanish likely contributed to their success in engaging Spanish speakers. Moreover, many Spanish-speaking clients in these programs were born outside the United States and might have especially valued the sense of community the workshops provided, as well as the programs’ assistance in accessing resources such as English classes, GED programs, and financial services. These findings suggest that, with appropriate investments, programs can successfully engage Spanish speakers in HMRE services.

The three programs we examined are not necessarily representative of all HMRE programs. Future work should examine data from a larger set of HMRE programs to determine whether these patterns apply more broadly.

## ABOUT THE DATA AND ANALYSIS

---

Data on measures of participation and client characteristics came from two sources: (1) the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) information system used by federal HMRE grantees and (2) a baseline survey collected before program participation as part of the STREAMS evaluation. Our analysis includes 505 women who enrolled in MotherWise from September 2016 to December 2018, 455 clients who enrolled in Career STREAMS from August 2016 to December 2018, and 475 couples who enrolled in Empowering Families from September 2016 to December 2018.

To understand typical patterns of participation and who participates in these ways, we used a statistical method called cluster analysis to identify groups of clients with similar patterns of participation across the key components of each program. We included multiple measures of participation for each key program component to capture different dimensions of engagement. For each program, the cluster analysis procedure identified sets of common patterns across all the participation measures. The procedure also assigned each client to the group that best matched their participation measures. We examined the groupings that resulted from specifying that the analysis produce from two to five groups of clients, and selected the grouping for which we found the most meaningful differences in clients’ average background characteristics across the groups. The figures in this brief show the participant characteristics that were statistically significantly different for at least one group compared with the other two groups. See [Dolfin et al. \(2022\)](#) for more details.

## REFERENCES

---

- Baumgartner, Scott, and Diane Paulsell. “MotherWise: Implementation of a Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Program for Pregnant and New Mothers.” OPRE Report 2019-42. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019.
- D’Angelo, Angela Valdovinos, and Katie Bodenlos. “Empowering Families: Implementation of an Integrated HMRE, Employment, and Financial Literacy Program for Low-Income Couples.” OPRE Report 2020-61. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

---

Dion, M. Robin, Sarah Avellar, and Elizabeth Clary. “The Building Strong Families Project: Implementation of Eight Programs to Strengthen Unmarried Parent Families.” Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010.

Dolfin, Sarah, Joanne Lee, Robert G. Wood, and Mia Monkovic. “Participation Patterns in Three Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Adults with Low Incomes: Lessons for the Field.” OPRE Report 2022-117. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

Friend, Daniel, Heather Zaveri, and Kathleen Feeney. “Implementation of Career STREAMS: An Integrated Employment and Healthy Relationship Program for Young Adults.” OPRE Report 2020-80. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

Miller Gaubert, Jennifer, Daniel Gubits, Desiree Principe Alderson, and Virginia Knox. “The Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation: Final Implementation Findings.” OPRE Report 2012-12. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

Zaveri, Heather, and Scott Baumgartner. “Parents and Children Together: Design and Implementation of Two Healthy Marriage Programs.” OPRE Report 2016-63. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016.

This brief was written by Sarah Dolfin, Robert G. Wood, and Joanne Lee of Mathematica, under contract with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (#GS-10F-0050L). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation project officer: Samantha Illangasekare. Project director: Brian Goesling of Mathematica, 600 Alexander Park, Suite 100, Princeton, NJ 08543-2393.

This brief is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: Dolfin, Sarah, Robert G. Wood, and Joanne Lee. “Participation Patterns in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs: Lessons from Three Programs.” OPRE Report 2022-312. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

### Connect with OPRE



---

Follow us on    

Mathematica.org