



IN BRIEF

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BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES is an evaluation of programs designed to help interested unwed parents achieve their aspirations for healthy marriage and a stable family life. It is being conducted under a contract from the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Strengthening Relationships and Supporting Healthy Marriage Among Unwed Parents

by M. Robin Dion and Barbara Devaney

In recent years, strengthening marriages and relationships in low-income families has emerged as a national policy strategy to enhance child well-being. Mathematica recently conducted a study of how programs and services to strengthen relationships in unmarried parent families can be developed, implemented, and evaluated. The study culminated in a “conceptual framework” that identifies factors to consider in developing such programs, including the circumstances and needs of unwed parent families, program curricula, issues related to implementation and service delivery, and outcomes that should be affected. This brief focuses on the program design aspects of the conceptual framework.

As a result of dramatic changes in family formation over the past several decades, American children are less likely today to be raised by both their parents. Although the majority of Americans embrace marriage as an ideal, one-third of all births in this country are to unmarried women, up from less than seven percent in the mid-1960s. Many postpone marriage or never marry, and a high proportion of married couples divorce. Cohabitation has become increasingly common, but cohabiting unions are generally less stable than marriage, and the children of these relationships are often raised by single mothers.

The decline in marriage and the increase in nonmarital childbearing and childrearing have widespread and serious consequences for children, as well as for their parents, their communities, and society as a whole. There is substantial evidence that children in single-parent families are generally at greater risk for poor behavioral, health, and academic outcomes, unstable family structure, and poverty than are children raised by their married biological parents. On average, children who grow up with their married parents are less likely to drop out of high school, become teen parents, or be involved in drug and alcohol abuse or juvenile delinquency.

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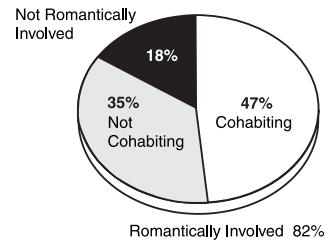
Why Focus on Unmarried Parents?

The risks of nonmarital birth and single parenting arise in a variety of circumstances, each with its own roots and possible remedies. Some unwed couples who bear children maintain a close ongoing involvement as a couple; in other cases they may have little involvement or only a casual connection to each other. Some unwed parents are teenagers, although most today are young adults. Other groups at risk of single parenting are married parents who divorce, and youth who are not yet parents but could be at risk of out-of-wedlock births. Efforts to address nonmarital childrearing must be informed by a clear understanding of each group's needs, how its members might be helped, and what it would likely take to engage their interest and make a difference in their lives.

The conceptual framework focuses on interventions with unmarried parents around the time of their child's birth. This approach may offer a good chance of success, especially if services are provided in the period leading up to and shortly after childbirth, when parents are likely to have positive feelings about their relationship and be hopeful about marriage.

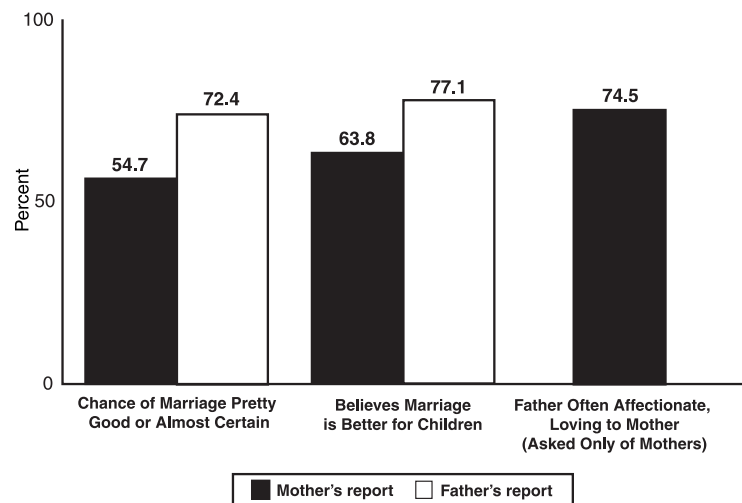
In fact, most unmarried parents with a new child have high hopes for their relationship. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (<http://crrw.Princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>), fielded in 20 urban areas, shows that at the time of their child's birth, 82 percent of low-income unmarried parents are romantically involved with each other, and about half are living together (Figure 1). As Figure 2 shows, more than half of the mothers think their chances of marrying the fathers are pretty good or almost certain, and more than 60 percent—even those

Figure 1. Relationship of Low-Income Unmarried Parents at Birth of Child



Source: Special analysis of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Carlson 2002.

Figure 2. Marital Attitudes and Quality of Relationship Among Low-Income Unmarried Parents at Birth of Child



Source: Special analysis of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Carlson 2002.

Note: Only 75 percent of fathers were interviewed.

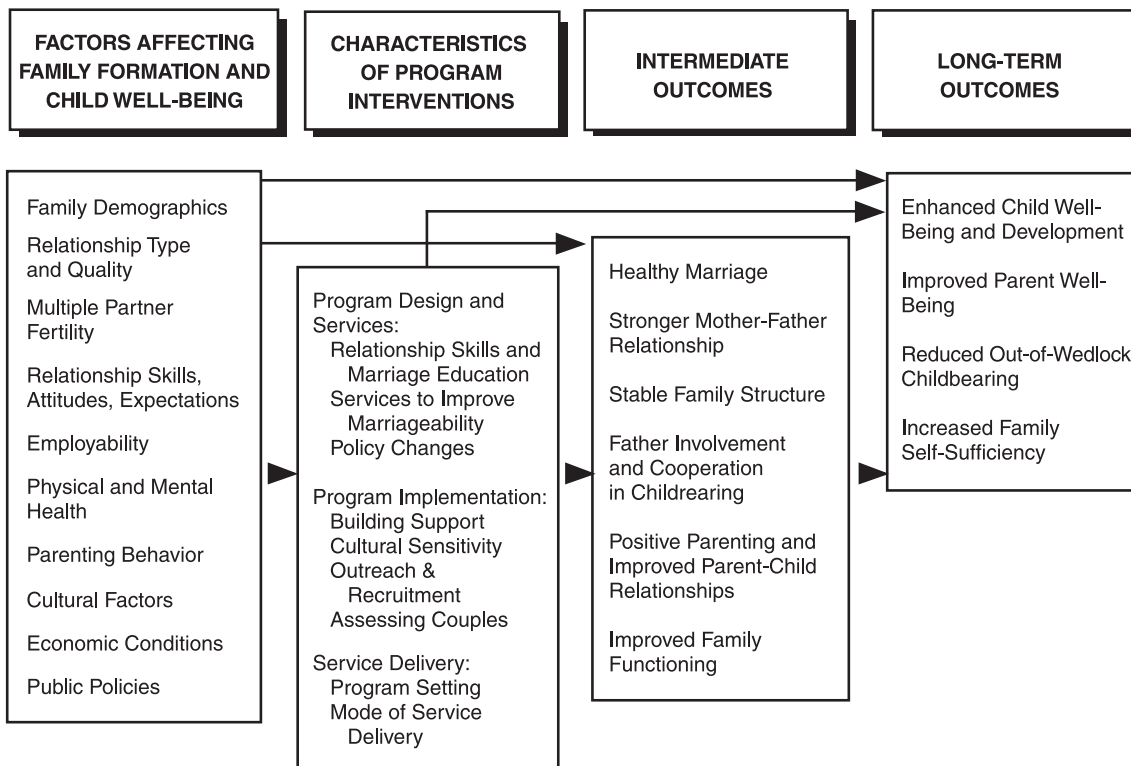
who are not romantically involved and not cohabiting—agree that it is better for children if their parents are married. Similar results are found among unwed low-income fathers. Nearly three-quarters of the mothers also report that their child’s father is often affectionate and loving toward them.

Despite these positive feelings toward each other and about marriage, few of these couples marry. Follow-up surveys conducted one year later show that, even including those cohabiting when their child was born, fewer than 10 percent had married.

A Conceptual Framework for Program Services

In light of these findings, policymakers and researchers have begun to ask how programs and services might be designed to strengthen unwed couples’ fragile bonds and support healthy marital relationships for parents who are interested in following that path. The Strengthening Families conceptual framework presents a structured way to think about what programs might look like (Figure 3). It shows the linkages between the factors affecting families and their circumstances (column 1), the characteristics of program interventions

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework: Strengthening Families



to strengthen families with children born out of wedlock (column 2), intermediate changes in family and parent relationships (column 3), and longer-term behaviors and related outcomes potentially affected by program interventions (column 4).

Programs and policies to strengthen families with unmarried parents and to encourage healthy marriage are the primary focus of this conceptual framework. Yet programs to strengthen unmarried parents' relationships, if they are to have a chance of succeeding, must take into account the direct and indirect factors that affect couples and their children. Moreover, efforts to encourage a healthy marriage will not be appropriate for all new unmarried parents, so assessment of a couple's interest in marriage, relationship quality, strengths, and problems is a logical first step. In some cases, assessment could point out the need for referral to other kinds of appropriate help. A special case in point is domestic violence. When it comes to abusive relationships, the highest priority is to help individuals achieve safety.

The first program design challenge is to identify in broad terms the major components of an initiative to support healthy marriage. The

Strengthening Families study suggests three potential components: (1) services to strengthen a couple's marriage and relationship skills, (2) services to help couples deal with personal problems and circumstances that stand in their way and make them less "marriageable," and (3) changes in public policy to remove economic disincentives to marriage.

Relationship Skills and Marriage Education

Recent years have seen a burgeoning of programs to help couples avoid interpersonal behaviors that undermine their relationship and develop positive behaviors that nurture it. These programs are based on the assumption—tested and demonstrated to some extent—that couples can be taught skills shown by research to be associated with lasting, healthy marriage. Marriage and relationship skills programs have been used with engaged or married couples, couples in distressed relationships, new parents, and middle and high school students. Table 1 lists a selection of programs that focus on relationships. These programs

How the Conceptual Framework Was Developed

Mathematica's research team studied the needs and characteristics of unmarried parents and the theories and evidence related to strengthening marriage and couple relationships. We examined programs that serve low-income families, programs that focus on marriage and relationship skills and the transition to parenthood, and newly forming programs focused on encouraging healthy marriage among unwed parents, and we consulted with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers from diverse backgrounds. We then considered how various approaches and program components might be integrated to build programs for low-income unwed parents beginning around the time of their child's birth.

A copy of the conceptual framework report, "Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions," can be downloaded at www.mathematica-mpr.com.

target a variety of groups, and sometimes include faith-based elements and/or emotional support services. Several have been widely disseminated through multiple providers. Approaches such as these could form a key component of program interventions.

Table 1. Characteristics of Some Private Marriage Education Programs

PROGRAM	TARGET POPULATION					Faith-Based Elements	Component for Emotional Support	Disseminated/ Multiple Providers
	Engaged Couples	Married Couples	Distressed Married Couples	Expectant or New Parents	Single Students/ Youth			

Skills-Based Classes, Workshops, Lectures

African American Family Life Education	✓	✓						
Art and Science of Love	✓	✓						
Baby Makes Three		✓		✓			✓	
Becoming a Family		✓		✓			✓	
Becoming Parents		✓		✓				✓
Connections					✓			✓
Couple Communication		✓						✓
IMAGO	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Marriage Encounter	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
PAIRS		✓	✓					✓
PARTNERS					✓			✓
PREP	✓	✓						✓
Relationship Enhancement	✓	✓	✓					✓
Survival Skills for Healthy Families		✓	✓				✓	✓

Couple Mentoring

Caring Couples Network	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
Marriage Savers	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Retrouvaille		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓

Inventory-Based

FOCCUS and REFOCCUS	✓	✓				✓		✓
PREPARE/ENRICH	✓	✓						✓

The period when couples become parents can be particularly crucial. Researchers have found that although the period around a child's birth is typically joyful, the ensuing weeks and months are often stressful and can give rise to behavior that erodes the new parents' relationship. Programs to strengthen relationships among expectant and new parents take one of two general approaches, or sometimes combine them.

- ***An instructional approach*** uses classroom techniques to teach couples the relationship skills needed for positive relationships, help them navigate the stressful period after childbirth, and prevent the development of serious problems. This approach builds on standard marriage education curricula but adds instruction on self-care and on the care and development of infants. Classes usually consist of a lecture and participant exercises. Most courses as they are now taught range from 8 to 16 hours in duration, with instruction occurring mostly during pregnancy.
- ***An emotionally supportive approach*** provides a context in which couples who are becoming parents can process their feelings and learn from other couples as they pass through the transition. Small support groups held over a period of several months before and after the birth provide a safe place for couples to share their concerns about emerging family issues and learn from other couples and/or instructors about effective methods to deal with them. Although the sessions are not group psychotherapy, they are therapeutic in the sense that couples receive emotional support in confronting real and present issues and in adjusting to their changing circumstances in a positive way.

To serve low-income unmarried parents, existing marriage and relationship education programs may need some adaptation. Many of the widely available marriage education programs were designed and tested primarily with middle-income, college-educated white couples who were already married or engaged. In addition, existing programs typically do not assess for or address issues such as unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, or mental health problems, which can place considerable stress on couple relationships. Nevertheless, these programs and the research on which some of them are based provide a good starting point for designing interventions for low-income unmarried parents.

Improving Marriageability

Many unmarried parents face a range of personal and family challenges that may impede their ability to form stable families and healthy marriages—sometimes referred to as “marriageability.” Poverty, limited education, poor health, weak financial or personal management skills, and difficulties in being an effective parent, for example, can stand in the way. Some unmarried parents may benefit from services to help them become more capable and attractive as marriage partners, such as services to (1) enhance their employability and earnings, and thus their ability to help provide for a family; and (2) develop personal resources and skills. Program offerings in this area could focus on:

- **Employment and education**, including assistance with job search, on-the-job training, job development and networking, and classes in resume writing and interviewing
- **Assessment and follow-up services for health, mental health, and domestic violence** to help address problems or, for individuals in abusive relationships, help them to leave and recover from unhealthy situations
- **Life skills, parenting, and child development education** to help parents understand the stages of child development, set appropriate household rules, effectively discipline their children, and perform activities needed to maintain a household and remain financially stable
- **Co-parenting and responsible fatherhood** services to help mothers and fathers work cooperatively and effectively as a team to raise their children, if they do not choose to marry

Policy Options to Remove Disincentives for Marriage

In most government programs that provide benefits on the basis of family income, eligibility and benefit rules may discourage marriage. The income of an additional adult often increases the likelihood that the family will be ineligible for benefits or decreases benefit levels for eligible households.

Policy changes could reduce disincentives. For example, the TANF program could disregard some or all of a spouse's income in benefit computation and enhance support for welfare recipients as they move into the labor force. In child support enforcement, it would be possible to align payment obligations with a father's ability to pay and forgive some arrearages, reduce the amount of child support retained by the government, and require paternity establishment and determination of child support obligations for cohabiting fathers.

Looking Ahead: Implementation and Technical Assistance

Agencies interested in strengthening relationships and supporting healthy marriage for low-income unwed parents will have to answer several design and implementation questions:

- What existing programs could be used as a foundation for developing an initiative to support healthy marriage?
- How can agencies overcome the initial reluctance that staff may feel about encouraging or even discussing the benefits of marriage with their clients?
- What approach will succeed in recruiting and engaging couples?
- How can an intensive, sustained, and effective intervention fit into couples' busy lives?
- How can professional, well-trained staff be recruited?

Future briefs from the Building Strong Families project will address these issues. The next brief will describe technical assistance services available to states, agencies, and organizations that are interested in

establishing or exploring programs and services that could strengthen relationships and support healthy marriage among unwed parents. To learn more about available assistance right away, call Robin Dion at (202) 484-5262.

Building Strong Families

The Building Strong Families project is evaluating programs that are designed to improve child well-being by helping unwed parents interested in marriage to enter and sustain healthy marriages, and by helping couples not interested in marriage to maintain positive relationships that benefit their children. The programs aim to improve couples' relationship skills and offer services dealing with child and family issues, such as parenting, budgeting, or employment. Under contract from the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the evaluation is being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and its subcontractors the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, Public Strategies, Inc., the Urban Institute, and Decision Information Resources, Inc. For information about the project and technical assistance available to programs that might participate, go to www.buildingstrongfamilies.info, or contact Mathematica Policy Research.

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To Find Out More:
Contact: Alan M. Hershey
Phone: (609) 275-2384
Fax: (609) 799-0005

Princeton Office
PO Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393
Phone: (609) 799-3535
Fax: (609) 799-0005

Washington Office
600 Maryland Ave., SW, Suite 550
Washington, DC 20024-2512
Phone: (202) 484-9220
Fax: (202) 863-1763

Cambridge Office
50 Church St., 4th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138-3726
Phone: (617) 491-7900
Fax: (617) 491-8044