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## Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programming for Youth and Individual Adults: Highlights from the Second FRAMING Research Healthy Marriage Technical Work Group

A stable, healthy family environment is central to the health and well-being of adults and children (Thomas et al. 2017). When both parents are present and sharing the responsibility of raising children, it can prevent or buffer against the negative effects of poverty, health problems, and other stressful life events (Amato 2005; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Waite and Gallagher 2000). In part for these reasons, the federal government has made a long-standing commitment to support healthy relationships and marriage. In the mid-1990s, Congress created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program, which allowed states to use part of their funding to promote two-parent families and marriage (U.S. Congress 1996). Since 2006, Congress has dedicated substantial funding each year for healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE)

and responsible fatherhood (RF) programming through competitive, multiyear grants administered by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) (U.S. Congress 2010; ACF 2020a; ACF 2020b). OFA also partners with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within ACF to build the evidence base to strengthen programming (OFA 2019). In 2018, ACF undertook the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage— Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project to systematically identify current gaps in the knowledge base for HMRE and RF programming (OPRE n.d.).

To date, most studies of HMRE programs have focused on programs for adult couples. However, many HMRE programs serve youth or individual adults instead of couples. For example,



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### About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the FRAMING Research project, sponsored by ACF in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. The project team collects and synthesizes information by conducting literature reviews, knowledge mapping, stakeholder meetings, expert consultations, and a series of technical work groups focused on HMRE or RF programming. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics related to HMRE and RF programming that emerge during the course of the project.

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in the 2015 HMRE grant funding cycle, over half of grantees operated a program for youth or individual adults (OFA 2020). Despite growing interest in these programs and the thousands of clients each year who are served by them, there is substantially less research on HMRE programs for youth and individual adults than there is on programs for adult couples. To address this gap in the evidence base, ACF convened a technical work group (TWG) as part of the FRAMING Research project focused on HMRE programs for youth and individual adults. This group represented the second in a series of technical work groups convened by the project to discuss issues related to research on HMRE programming. In this brief, we describe the meeting and highlight key themes and research priorities identified by the group.



## **THE SECOND FRAMING RESEARCH HMRE TECHNICAL WORK GROUP**

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The second RF technical work group for the FRAMING Research project met in September 2020. Due to travel restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting occurred remotely via video conference. The group included eight researchers and practitioners with expertise related to RF programming and/or fathers with criminal justice involvement (Figure 1). ACF convened the group to gather input on future research related to enhancing the economic stability and parenting skills of fathers who are reentering their communities, have been incarcerated, or have other criminal justice involvement, including arrests and convictions. These topics emerged as important gaps in our understanding of RF programs from the project team's review of relevant literature and discussions with ACF about agency priorities. The brief highlights key points from the meeting; it does not cover all comments made by members of the work group.



## **HMRE PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH**

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HMRE programs for youth are a growing focus of federal policy and research. In 2020, OFA allocated separate funding for youth HMRE programs for the first time (ACF 2020b), awarding more than \$24 million to 25 programs serving youth in high schools and community-based settings (ACF 2020c). (In prior grant years, OFA had a single grant competition for HMRE programs for adults and youth.) HMRE programs for youth aim to improve young people's understanding of healthy romantic relationships. Although many youth receive education on how to prevent teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in high school, few receive education on the social or emotional aspects of romantic relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015). HMRE programs for youth address this gap by covering topics such as the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships, intimate partner violence, and effective communication and conflict management skills (Scott et al. 2017; Simpson et al. 2018). Ultimately, these programs aim to help youth avoid negative relationship outcomes and form and maintain healthy relationships in both adolescence and adulthood (Kerpelman et al. 2007; Simpson et al. 2018).

The first part of the technical work group discussion focused on addressing the challenges of implementing HMRE programs for youth in schools and community-based settings and building the evidence base for the effectiveness of these programs. Before launching the discussion, the project team summarized key findings from the literature on implementation challenges facing HMRE programs, such as difficulty getting youth to engage in programming and determining the right topics for programs to address. The team also highlighted challenges associated with measuring the effects of these programs, such as identifying appropriate short- and long-term outcomes. Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

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- High quality facilitation could matter as much as program content when it comes to engaging youth. Programs can be facilitated by individuals who have been hired by an outside organization or classroom teachers who have received training on the curriculum. Some facilitators are better than others at connecting with participants and generating enthusiasm for the program. Facilitators' background characteristics, including their age, race, ethnicity, and life experiences, may also factor into their ability to connect with youth.
  - To get youth engaged in programming, the program content should be relevant to their lives. This can be challenging when a program is delivered to all students enrolled in a particular class or grade at school, a common model for HMRE programming for youth. If participation is mandatory, some youth might not want to participate in program activities if they do not think the program is relevant to them. Allowing youth to opt into participating in the program, even when it is offered in school, can help boost engagement.
  - HMRE programs may serve different populations of youth in terms of their age, parenting status, or other risk factors. Program developers and practitioners should tailor program goals to the needs of youth they intend to serve. For example, HMRE programs that serve youth early in high school might want to focus more on goals related to socioemotional learning, such as managing emotions, communicating effectively, and planning for the future. These goals may be more relevant to younger teens than information about healthy and unhealthy relationships because many youth in this age range have not yet had a romantic relationship. Older youth may find goals such as how to behave in romantic relationships and how to prevent dating violence more informative and relevant.
  - HMRE programs for youth should address contextual factors that matter for future romantic relationships. These factors include the presence of adults who model successful relationships in their family or community, and cultural norms related to education, gender, ethnicity, and race. Programs may be more effective if they explicitly address how contextual factors influence future relationships instead of focusing only on the impact of individual behaviors.
  - Program practitioners and researchers should identify ways for youth to contribute to program implementation and study design. One TWG member recommended convening youth focus groups before the start of programming to discuss issues youth are facing and would like to address in the program. This input would likely help facilitators connect with youth, which in turn should boost participants' engagement in the program. Focus groups could also be a way for researchers to gather youth input on appropriate program outcomes and how to measure these outcomes. For example, youth could review draft survey questions to ensure the questions make sense and capture the constructs they are intended to measure.



## HMRE PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUAL ADULTS

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Many HMRE programs for adults work with individuals instead of couples. These programs, which can serve both adults who are in a romantic relationship and those who are not, typically offer education on recognizing healthy and unhealthy relationships and making good relationship decisions for themselves and their families (Stanley et al. 2020). HMRE programs for individual adults can serve a broad range of populations, for example young adults who are unemployed, college students, and parents of children in Head Start. The second part of the technical work group discussion focused on addressing the challenges of implementing HMRE programs for individual adults and expanding the knowledge base for these programs. Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

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- When determining the population they will serve, it can be helpful for HMRE programs for individual adults to define eligibility around shared characteristics or experiences—such as being the same age or being parents—because this can help with group cohesion. However, it can also be helpful to serve a more diverse group so participants can learn from each other’s different life experiences. The challenge is to achieve a balance among groups that are similar enough to connect but different enough to learn from each other. Having a strong facilitator is crucial for helping a diverse group of participants to connect with and learn from each other.
  - To boost enrollment and participation, HMRE programs need to have a clear understanding of why people seek out their services. Programs can then use this information to develop an effective “hook” to keep people engaged. For some prospective participants, the connection between better relationship skills and better parenting may draw them to the program. Other potential participants may find it compelling that the program can help them process the dissolution of a previous romantic relationship or learn techniques to manage stress.
  - More information on what promotes engagement and retention is needed. To build the evidence base, researchers and practitioners should gather information from current and former participants to learn what they did and did not like about the program. These efforts should include both participants who had high attendance, to ask them why they kept coming, and those who dropped out, to ask them why they stopped participating and how the program could have better addressed their needs.
  - Evaluating the impact of HMRE programs for individual adults is challenging because the intended outcomes of the program may differ depending on participants’ circumstances. For example, staying in a relationship may not be a positive outcome for all participants. Some outcomes that could apply to all participants include understanding the features of healthy and unhealthy relationships, having a sense of control over one’s relationships, and socioemotional skills.



## **FUTURE HMRE RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

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The project team facilitated a brainstorming session with technical work group members about priority research questions and evaluation ideas related to HMRE programming for youth and individual adults. The technical work group members worked in two small groups to develop their ideas and then shared them with the full group to develop a set of top priorities. Five top priorities emerged from this discussion, as described below.

### **Include participant perspectives in the program development and research process**

The group discussed the importance of seeking out the perspectives of youth and individual adults when designing services for them. This can help ensure that program services match participants’ needs, which should strengthen program impacts. The group also recommended including members of the communities that programs aim to serve in the research process. This could involve gathering input from potential participants on issues such as which program outcomes matter to them or how to phrase survey items to ensure items are easy to understand and culturally appropriate. These steps should improve buy-in for the study and improve the quality of data collected. HMRE research could also be strengthened by making

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sure research teams are diverse and that they reflect the diversity of the communities being studied. TWG members noted that many HMRE programs for youth and individual adults work with underserved communities, yet relatively few HMRE researchers identify as members of these communities. Diversifying research teams could enhance HMRE research by helping the field formulate new research questions, identify contextual factors that may influence program outcomes, and interpret data from a different perspective.

### **Study the importance of culturally responsive programming**

Programs should employ a diverse group of facilitators who can relate to the needs and experiences of youth and adults in the program. In addition, facilitators should be trained on how to deliver services in a culturally responsive and sensitive manner. TWG members indicated that there is evidence to support the effectiveness of these sorts of culturally responsive practices in the context of K–12 education and youth development programs. HMRE practitioners should review this literature to identify practices that could be applied to their program setting. In addition, evaluators should collect data on facilitators' background characteristics and training in order to understand how culturally responsive programming influences program satisfaction and impacts.

### **Increase the diversity of HMRE researchers**

HMRE research could be strengthened by making sure research teams reflect the diversity of the programs being studied. TWG members noted that many HMRE programs for youth and individual adults work with members of underserved communities, including racial and ethnic minorities, people with low socioeconomic status, young parents, and others. However, relatively few HMRE researchers identify as members of these communities. Ensuring that study teams include people who share these lived experiences could enhance HMRE research by helping the field formulate new research questions, identify contextual factors that may influence program outcomes, and interpret data from a different perspective.

### **Identify realistic, short-term outcomes for youth HMRE programs**

HMRE programs for youth often emphasize their anticipated long-term impacts—such as helping youth achieve healthy relationships and avoid unhealthy relationships in adulthood—but are less clear on how these impacts are expected to occur. Improving short-term outcomes for youth may be more realistic than improving long-term outcomes in adulthood, given all of the other contextual factors that are likely to play a role in youths' relationships later in life. Moreover, measuring program impacts on short-term outcomes is more feasible, because it does not require collecting data years after participants enter the study. To help identify realistic, short-term outcomes, researchers and program developers should work together to develop logic models and do additional thinking about what would need to happen in the short term before long-term changes can take place.

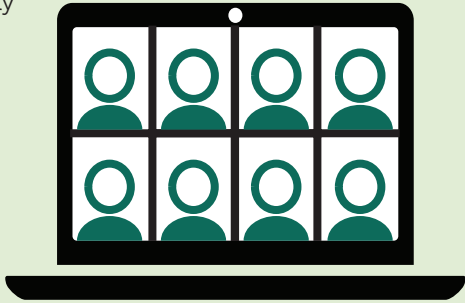
### **Use rigorous studies to determine how service delivery influences program retention and impacts**

The group identified several program features that may influence participants' willingness and ability to continue to engage in services and, ultimately, whether they achieve the program's intended outcomes. One

feature that may be important is program dosage. Every participant cannot come to every session, and it may be more feasible for participants to complete a shorter program. However, participants may need to receive a minimum dosage of a program for it to be effective. Rigorous studies, such as randomized controlled trials where participants are randomly assigned to receive different amounts of programming, are needed to address these questions.

Another feature that may influence participant retention and outcomes is whether HMRE programs are co-located with other related services. Physical proximity between service providers can help reduce barriers to engaging in supplemental services and increase the efficacy of referrals. Many individual adults who participate in HMRE programs have other pressing needs that are beyond the scope of the program, such as food or housing insecurity, mental health issues, and needs related to their children. Strengthening partnerships between HMRE programs and other services in the community by co-locating services in a single building or area could be an effective strategy for meeting these needs. Researchers should examine whether co-location matters for participants' decision to keep attending the program and their outcomes.

**Figure 1. FRAMING Research HMRE technical work group members**



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### **Additional FRAMING Research Technical Work Group Meetings**

In September 2020, the FRAMING Research project convened another technical work group focused on research priorities concerning RF programming for fathers with criminal justice involvement. A separate brief summarizes the themes from that meeting (Alamillo and Ouellette 2021). The FRAMING Research project also hosted HMRE and RF technical work groups in 2019. Two additional briefs summarize the themes from those meetings (Avellar et al. 2020; Wood 2020).

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