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Measuring Child Well-Being in Evaluations of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) and responsible fatherhood (RF) programs offer relationship, parenting, and economic supports with the long-term goal of improving children's well-being. When studying the effectiveness of these programs, it is important to examine their effects on children. However, measuring child well-being in evaluations of HMRE and RF programs can be challenging. This brief describes how HMRE and RF programs might influence child well-being and provides recommendations for evaluators who wish to measure child well-being in their studies. These recommendations are based on a review of how HMRE and RF evaluations measured child well-being. Additional details about this review can be found at the end of this brief and in a recent white paper (Cavadel et al. 2022).

How HMRE and RF programs influence child well-being

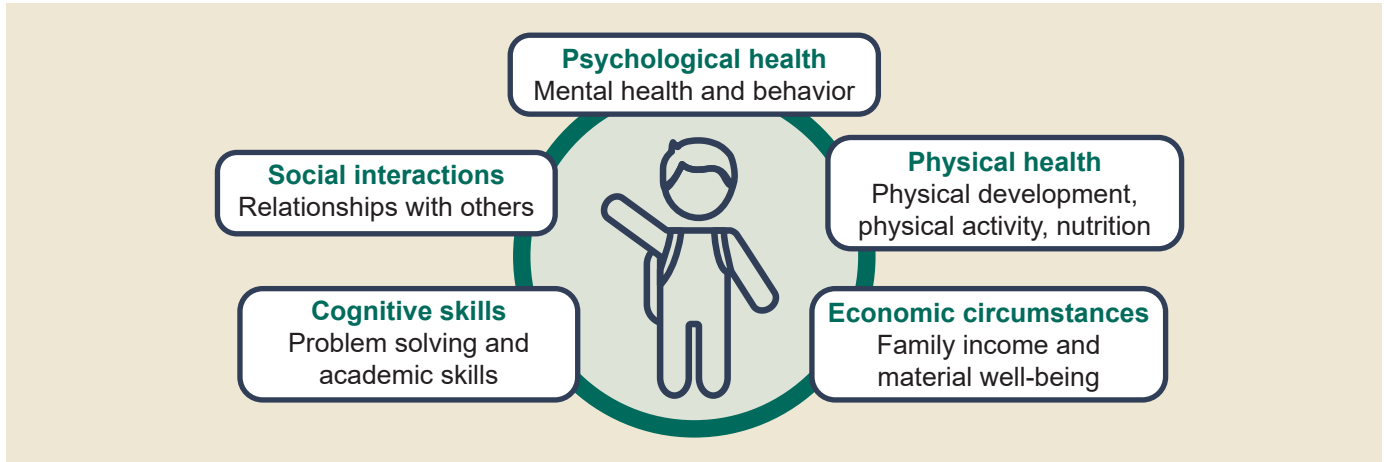
Child well-being includes multiple areas, or domains, of children's development. These domains are important for children across cultures, developmental stages, and family structures; however, the specific ways in which these domains of child well-being are expressed or supported may vary. Figure 1 shows the five main domains of child well-being.



About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research project. The project is focused on gathering and summarizing information on HMRE and RF programming and connected areas through literature reviews, knowledge maps, expert consultations, and technical work groups. This brief is based on a white paper produced for the project (Cavadel et al. 2022). More information about the FRAMING Research project and the associated papers is available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/fatherhood-relationships-and-marriage-illuminating-next-generation-research-framing>

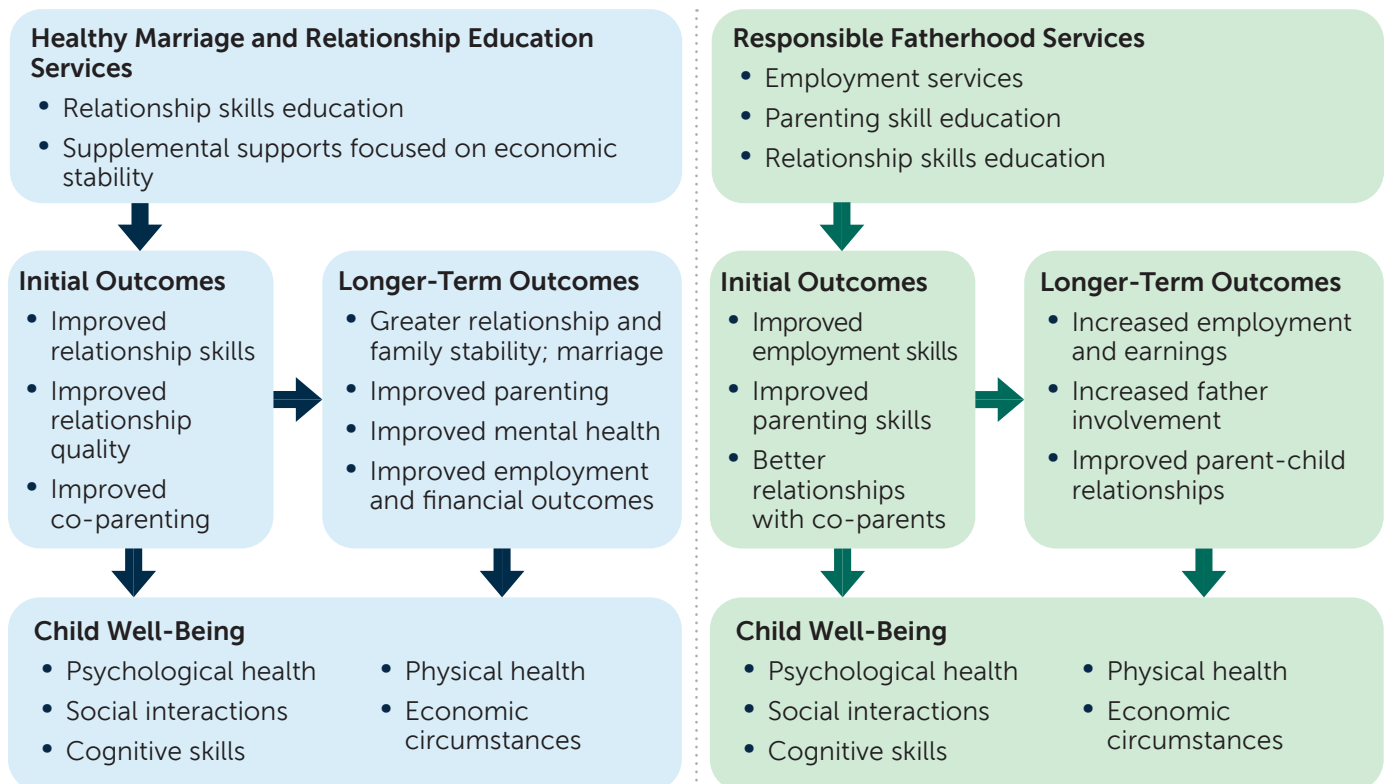
Figure 1. Domains of child well-being



Note: These domains are drawn from the literature on child well-being, including Pollard and Lee (2003) and Huston (2002)

HMRE and RF programs can affect child well-being through their initial and longer-term outcomes (Figure 2). For example, by supporting communication and other relationship skills, HMRE and RF programs help participants strengthen existing relationships and make future relationship decisions that will promote their own and their children’s well-being. Services to support parenting and relationship skills can lead to better co-parenting relationships and, in the case of RF programs, support fathers’ engagement in their children’s lives. By providing economic stability services, children’s economic status may improve. For RF programs, the goal of building stable employment and earnings among participants could also improve fathers’ ability to provide financial support for their children.

Figure 2. Potential pathways to child well-being in HMRE and RF programs



Recommendations for measuring child well-being

We provide three recommendations for evaluators interested in measuring child well-being, which are informed by our review of recent HMRE and RF evaluations. When implementing these recommendations, evaluators should keep in mind broad considerations of measurement, including identifying what domains of child well-being are most likely to be influenced by the program they are evaluating and consulting prior evaluations to determine whether their outcomes of interest are likely to change during the study period.

Measuring child well-being in HMRE and RF evaluations can be challenging

Challenges include:

- Improvements in child well-being can take substantial time to appear, potentially beyond the follow-up period for the study.
- HMRE and RF programs serve parents with children of different ages, but many child well-being measures are age specific.
- Nonresident fathers may have limited information about their children.
- It may be overly complex or costly to access children to conduct direct assessments.

The recommendations in this brief take these challenges into account and offer ways for evaluators to measure child well-being despite challenges.



Recommendation 1: Measure multiple aspects of child well-being

Evaluations of HMRE and RF programs should include measures in more than one child well-being domain to capture a more complete picture of the program's impacts. Three domains are particularly likely to be influenced by the parent and relationship changes that HMRE and RF programs promote: (1) psychological health, (2) social interactions, and (3) economic circumstances.¹ The measures we describe are illustrative examples of ways to measure child well-being and do not represent specific recommendations. For more information on these example measures, see Tables A.1 and A.2 in the appendix.

Psychological health

This domain is typically measured with parent surveys about children's behavior. Some measures can be used across a broad range of children's ages, which can be very helpful in evaluating HMRE and RF programs that often serve parents with children of varying ages. One example is the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Rescorla 2001), which surveys parents about children's emotions and behavior and is appropriate for children as young as 18 months and as old as 18 years. To measure a child's behavior through parental report, the parent should be in regular contact with the child.

Social interactions

Social interactions include the closeness, quality, and stability of children's relationships with parents, other family members, and peers. In the context of HMRE and RF programs, the parent-child relationship is often the most relevant social interaction to measure. For instance, the parent-child closeness subscale of the Parental Assessment Scale includes 13 items about how close parents felt to their children (Young et al. 2021). However, a challenge with measuring parent-child relationships is that parents may feel social pressure to report highly positive relationships, regardless of the actual quality of the relationship. Measuring the overall family environment rather than the specific parent-child relationship may reduce this challenge. For example, some of the evaluations we reviewed included measures of family harmony or family strengths (Halberstadt et al. 1995).

¹ The domains of physical health and cognitive skills are further removed from the goals of HMRE and RF programs and, in some cases, more challenging to measure than the other domains. Nevertheless, they can provide a complete picture of children's well-being. Examples of measures in these domains are described in the child well-being white paper (Cavadel et al. 2022).

For evaluations of RF programs, measuring parent–child relationships can help evaluators move beyond examining the number of interactions fathers have with their children to focusing more on the quality of those interactions (Osborne et al. 2014). Even for fathers with irregular contact with their children, fathers’ responsiveness to their children’s emotional needs and their warmth and supportiveness are important aspects of the parent–child relationship (Dunn 2004). Recently, Fagan et al. (2019) developed a measure to assess nonresident fathers’ contact with their children, including both caregiving contact (such as face-to-face contact and nights spent with their children) and communication contact (such as telephone or social media contact and engagement items that did not require physical presence, such as praising their children).

Economic circumstances

Parental income or earnings can be difficult to measure accurately. When surveying resident parents, measuring material hardship the family faces—the family’s difficulty in obtaining essential goods—may be easier to capture reliably and offer a more holistic picture of family resources and household living conditions. For example, in an evaluation of a set of HMRE programs for unmarried parents (Wood et al. 2012), material hardship was measured by the composite of (1) inability to pay rent or mortgage, (2) utilities being cut off, and (3) being evicted.

Measuring this domain may need to be approached differently in RF evaluations because these programs often serve nonresident fathers. If the fathers in the study do not live with their children, the material hardship they experience may not reflect the experiences of their children. Instead of measuring material hardship, when examining children’s economic circumstances, RF evaluations typically examine fathers’ financial support for their children, usually based on self-reports. Some studies also used administrative data to track fathers’ child support payments and amounts owed (for examples, see Cancian et al. 2019 and Davis et al. 2010).



Recommendation 2: Measure parenting and parent well-being to gain a better understanding of how HMRE and RF programs may affect children

An important way HMRE and RF programs may influence child well-being is through their potential effects on parenting and parent well-being. Many HMRE and RF evaluations that we reviewed included measures of co-parenting, parenting behaviors, or parent well-being.

Co-parenting

Co-parenting measures focus on how parents define their roles and work together to support children. The evaluations we reviewed frequently used the Parental Alliance Inventory (Abidin and Brunner 1995), which assesses co-parenting respect and shared responsibility (see Sarfo 2014 for an example). Studies also measured co-parenting conflict. For example, the co-parenting conflict scale (Ahrns and Wallisch 1987) consists of three items that indicate the degree to which parents argue about child-rearing, the degree to which they argue about time spent with the children, and the degree to which the children hear negative comments about the co-parent (Adler-Baeder et al. 2013).

Parenting behaviors

Measures of parenting behaviors capture the activities parents do with children to support their development and the ways they react to children’s needs. Some of the HMRE evaluations we reviewed measured parental responsiveness or used measures of parental monitoring, which include questions about parents’ rules, supervision, and knowledge of RF programs included measures of nurturing behaviors and nonviolent discipline (Avellar et al. 2018; Covington et al. 2020a; RF programs included measures of nurturing behaviors and nonviolent discipline (Avellar et al. 2018; Covington et al. 2020a; Covington et al. 2020b). Other HMRE

and RF evaluations also measured discipline. These measures included the Positive Discipline Scale (Adler-Baeder et al. 2013), which includes three items about the frequency with which a parent praises or explains consequences to a child, and the Harsh Parenting Scale, an adapted version of the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (Frick 1991), which includes six items about harsh parenting behaviors, such as yelling.

Parental psychological well-being

Parental psychological well-being refers to the mental and emotional health of parents, including stress and depression. Many studies included measures of depressive symptoms, often measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff 1977). Other studies measured parenting stress using the Parenting Stress Index, Short Form (Loyd and Abidin 1985), which assesses parents' level of distress related to parenting.



Recommendation 3: Consider the cultural validity and relevance of the measures

It is important for HMRE and RF evaluators to consider whether the child well-being measures they select are appropriate for the people served by the programs they are evaluating. While the broad domains of child well-being (psychological health, social interactions, physical health, economic circumstances, and cognitive skills) span cultures, the specific parenting and family practices that support positive outcomes for children can vary by culture (Bornstein 2012; Kotchick and Forehand 2002).

An initial step is to determine whether the measures have been used with populations similar to those who will be included in the study. As a starting point, evaluators can use the descriptions of the populations included in the HMRE and RF studies we reviewed as part of the white paper on measuring child well-being (Cavadel et al. 2022). Many child well-being measures have been developed with White, two-parent, middle-class, English-speaking families (Cho and Yu 2020). When a measure has not been used with a particular population, it is important to pre-test the measure with people similar to those who will be included in the study. This pre-testing should involve using focus groups or cognitive interviewing to learn whether the questions are relevant to the practices of the cultural group and are being interpreted as intended.

Seek to capture positive behaviors (and not just negative behaviors)

Often, measures of children's psychological well-being focus on behavior problems. This was the case in the evaluations we reviewed as part of the FRAMING project; and it is especially true in studies with underrepresented or historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Fadus et al. 2020). To ensure that child well-being measures are culturally inclusive and strength-based, evaluators should select measures that include a wide range of children's behaviors, to capture strength and resilience in addition to challenges.



Results from a review of HMRE and RF evaluations

The recommendations in this brief are informed by a review of recent HMRE and RF evaluations. We reviewed 32 HMRE evaluations and 23 RF evaluations conducted since 2000 to determine whether and how they measured child well-being. For HMRE, we focused on evaluations of programs offering relationship education services and primarily serving adult parents. For RF, we focused on evaluations of programs offering parenting, relationship, and employment services to fathers.

For more information about the review and the findings, see the full white paper: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/measuring-child-well-being-evaluations-healthy-marriage-and-responsible-fatherhood>.

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Appendix A: Examples of child well-being measures used in HMRE and RF evaluation

Table A.1. Illustrative examples of child well-being measures from HMRE evaluations

Example measures	Measure description	Mode of data collection	Age of focal child in the evaluation	Population served in the program evaluated	Reviewed evaluation that used the measure
Psychological health					
Behavior Problems Index	30 items asking about the frequency of children's internalizing and externalizing behavior. See Zill (1985) for original measure source.	Survey of mothers and fathers	36 months	Couples	<i>Building Strong Families</i> Wood et al. 2012
Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation	10 items asking about the frequency of children's social competence behaviors. See LaFreniere and Dumas (1996) for original measure source.	Teacher surveys	3–5 years	Individual adults	<i>Together We Can</i> Adler-Baeder et al. 2018
Social interactions					
Paternal Assessment Scale ^a Closeness	13 items asking about how close the respondent felt to their child. See Kingsley (2007) for original measure source.	Survey of others and/or fathers; average score reported for couples	Wide range of ages	Individual adults and couples	<i>Healthy Families/Healthy Children Delivered by The Jewish Family and Children's Service of the Suncoast</i> Young et al. 2021
Family Harmony	3 items asking about harmony in the household, such as feelings of contentment and happiness in the house. See Halberstadt et al. (1995) for original measure source.	Survey of mothers and fathers	Wide range of ages	Couples	<i>Basic Training for Black Marriages, Mastering the Mysteries of Love, Together We Can, and Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey</i> McGill et al. 2016
Family Environment Scale	9 items asking about the ability to work out conflicts and fighting in the household or family. See Moos and Moos (2009) for original measure source.	Survey of others and/or fathers; average score reported for couples	Wide range of ages	Individual adults and couples	<i>Healthy Families/Healthy Children Delivered by The Jewish Family and Children's Service of the Suncoast</i> Young et al. 2021
Economic circumstances					
Parent-reported financial support for child	5 items asking about financial support for the baby, including court-ordered child support and informal financial support paid by the father.	Surveys of mothers and fathers	3 months	Individual adults	<i>Strong Start- Stable Families</i> Pearson and Davis 2009
Economic Hardship Questionnaire	11 items asking about the degree of financial worry experienced in the last six months. See Lempers et al. (1989) for original measure source.	Survey of mothers and fathers	Wide range of ages	Couples	<i>Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Education</i> Wadsworth et al. 2011

^aAlthough the name of the measure is the Paternal Assessment Scale, this evaluation asked both mothers and fathers to report on the parent-child relationship using this measure.

Table A.2. Illustrative examples of child well-being measures from RF evaluations

Example measures	Measure description	Mode of data collection	Age of focal child in the evaluation	Population served in the program evaluated	Reviewed evaluation that used the measure
Psychological health					
Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory	54 items asking about four dimensions of child behavior, including aggression, hyperactivity, shy/withdrawn, and anxiety/depression. See Cowan et al. (1995) for original measure source.	Survey of fathers	Birth to 12 years	Resident	<i>TRUE Dads</i> Cowan et al. 2020
Brief Infant Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment	23 items assessing the frequency of children’s social and emotional behavior problems in children from 12 to 36 months. See Briggs-Gowan et al. (2004) for original measure source.	Survey of fathers	Birth to 12 years	Nonresident and resident	<i>DAD MAP</i> Sarfo 2017
Child Behavior Check List–Aggressive Behavior Subscale	20 items assessing the degree to which each item describes children’s behavioral and emotional problems on a three-point scale. They used the age- and gender-specific scores (and standardized z-scores) to compare across child ages and genders. See Achenbach and Rescorla (2000) for original measure source.	Survey of fathers	Birth to 16 years	Nonresident and resident	<i>New Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Family Formation Program</i> King et al. 2020
Social interactions					
Parent-Child Communication Scale	8 items asking fathers and sons about their perceived ability to communicate well with each other. See Barnes and Olson (1985) for original measure source.	Survey of fathers and sons	8 to 12 years	Nonresident	<i>Fathers and Sons Program</i> Caldwell et al. 2014
Economic circumstances					
Father report of in-kind support	9 items asking about the degree to which fathers contributed various resources toward the care of their child.	Survey of fathers	Birth to 12 years	Nonresident and resident	<i>Developing all Dads for Manhood (DAD MAP)</i> Sarfo 2017; <i>Parents Fair Share</i> Knox and Redcross 2000
Father report of monthly child support payments	1 item asking fathers about the average dollar amount of monthly child support payments	Survey of fathers	Birth to 18 years	Nonresident and resident	<i>Parents and Children Together–Responsible Fatherhood</i> Avellar et al. 2019; <i>Fathers Advancing Community Together Program</i> Cramer et al. 2020
State database records of child support payments	Evaluators extracted information from the state automated child support system to gather information on open child support cases, monthly support order, monthly arrears payment, balances, and any employer-related information.	State records	Birth to 18 years	Nonresident	<i>Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED)</i> Cancian et al. 2019; <i>Tennessee Parenting Project</i> Davis et al. 2010