



## BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES: GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING PROGRAMS

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This document presents guidelines for the design and development of programs to help interested unwed parents acquire the skills and knowledge they need to form and sustain a healthy marriage. The guidelines may be revised based on further comments and consultations.

*Building Strong Families is a project sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under contract to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. For more information, visit [www.buildingstrongfamilies.info](http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info), or call Alan Hershey at (609) 275-2384.*

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Interest in addressing the prevalence and consequences of nonmarital child rearing has grown dramatically in recent years. Of particular concern is the fact that a third of all children in the United States are now born to unwed parents. Many children of unwed couples flourish, but research shows that on average they are at greater risk, compared with children growing up with their married biological parents, of living in poverty and developing social, behavioral, and academic problems.

Research suggests there may be opportunities to address this important policy concern. The 20-city Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study showed that most unwed parents are romantically involved around the time their child is born, and anticipate marrying each other. Most agree that it is better for children if their parents are married. Nevertheless, the Fragile Families study showed that only a small fraction of such couples are married a year later.

Existing resources (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], Social Services Block Grant, Medicaid, Safe and Stable Families) can be used to fund services to help unwed parents establish stable families and healthy marriages. The Bush Administration proposals for TANF reauthorization have included resources to support healthy marriage initiatives. Proposals for reauthorizing the TANF program include the provision of federal funding specifically for activities to support healthy marriages. Based on these proposals, funding would be available for a range of initiatives, including broad community-wide efforts to build coalitions to promote healthy marriage and change public attitudes and norms, as well as targeted programs specifically serving unwed parents—the focus of the Building Strong Families project.

### **THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROJECT**

The Building Strong Families (BSF) project is one of the centerpieces of a broad policy strategy to support healthy marriage. The project, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, will determine whether well-designed interventions can help interested unwed parents realize their hopes for a healthy marriage and thus enhance the well-being of their children.

The BSF project will demonstrate interventions with adult unwed couples who are interested in marriage, starting around the time of their child's birth (from pregnancy to three months of age). Most of these couples are likely to be low income. Program sponsors in various locations across the country who are interested in developing such programs and who meet specific criteria are eligible to receive technical assistance in designing and

implementing BSF programs. A smaller number of programs will be selected to be part of groundbreaking research to evaluate their impacts and point to lessons about how to run healthy marriage programs as effectively as possible. To be part of the BSF project, programs will be expected to include certain components, although the emphasis placed on them may vary. Four components will figure in the design of BSF programs:

1. ***Instruction in Skills Associated with Healthy Marriage.*** Instruction in the relationship skills found in research to be essential to a healthy marriage; information to enhance couples' understanding of marriage; and emotional support and guidance. This is the core, distinctive component of BSF programs.
2. ***Family Support Services.*** Services to address special issues that may be common among low-income parents and that are known to affect couple relationships and marriage. These services might, for example, help to improve parenting skills or provide linkages to address problems with employment, physical and mental health, or substance abuse, and thus make individuals more "marriageable."
3. ***Family Coordinators.*** Staff who can assess couples' circumstances and needs, make referrals to other services when appropriate, reinforce marriage skills over time, provide ongoing emotional support, and promote sustained participation in program activities.
4. ***Strategies for Reducing Marriage Disincentives.*** Current policies can in some cases make couples worse off financially if they marry. BSF programs may include approaches to enhance the effectiveness of the program by reducing such financial barriers.

Programs designed around the BSF model and implemented effectively will be considered for participation in the research component of the BSF project. Up to six program sites will become part of a collaboration with the BSF research team and its panel of national experts on marriage, marital skills education, and services to unwed parents. Sites will benefit from flexible technical assistance in refining their programs, a rigorous research design to determine program impacts, and the chance to share experiences and insights with other leading programs.

**PARTICIPATING IN THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES EVALUATION**

- ***Technical assistance:*** Get expert help with curriculum, planning operations, and program monitoring.
- ***Reliable research:*** Work with a nationally recognized research team to determine program impacts and operational lessons.

***For information on TA and the Research Plan, see contact information on back page.***

Agencies interested in developing BSF programs have many choices to make. They will have to decide what services to provide, what curriculum to use for the marital skills

component, how to organize and staff for service delivery, how to recruit and retain participants, and a host of other crucial implementation issues. Before programs are selected for the evaluation component of the BSF project, they will be given time and assistance to resolve issues like these, implement their programs fully, and iron out the kinks in their operation.

## **DEFINING EXPECTATIONS FOR BSF PROGRAMS**

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance concerning the kinds of programs on which the BSF project will focus. The specifications that follow are intended to help sponsors implement programs that focus on couples and their relationships and to impart information and skills that research indicates are associated with healthy marriage. The guidelines can be useful to program sponsors who have already decided that they want to help interested unwed parents achieve better relationships and healthy marriages, but who are looking for guidance on how to design and deliver program services. For program sponsors interested in becoming part of the BSF evaluation, the guidelines give a sense of what requirements will have to be met to become an evaluation site. Regardless of whether programs are selected for the BSF evaluation, however, these guidelines can contribute to well-grounded program development decisions.

These guidelines emerged from an extensive review of research on unmarried parents and factors that contribute to healthy and sustained marriage. It draws on reviews of existing marriage education, observation of such programs in action, consultation with researchers, case studies, and discussions and observations of programs that provide a variety of services to low-income unwed-parent populations.<sup>1</sup> This updated version of the model guidelines incorporates feedback from more than a dozen expert researchers, policy experts, program operators, and family life advocates from a range of backgrounds, who reviewed and commented on a preliminary document. It has also been informed by three other efforts: case studies of similar programs, continuing work providing technical assistance to potential program sponsors, and the ongoing development and testing of BSF-appropriate curricula.

The guidelines presented here may continue to evolve, however, and be updated with greater detail and more extensive information and advice. Further refinement is expected because the BSF model is pioneering work. In some cases, the research and experience drawn on for the guidelines clearly suggest program content and delivery approaches. In other cases, however, it is necessary to extrapolate from earlier research and experience to formulate a program specifically geared to unwed couples expecting or recently delivering a child. Existing marriage education programs have so far mostly served married or engaged middle-class couples. Serving the BSF target population is likely to pose new and different challenges for agencies that would like to adopt an existing curriculum, and for the authors of these curricula as they consider how to revise them to suit different population groups.

With support from the Administration for Children and Families, the BSF project team led by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and other experts working with the BSF

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team, are helping agencies plan targeted healthy marriage initiatives for unwed parents. The BSF team can help agencies choose a curriculum and plan how it will be used, decide on operational issues, and chart a strategy for overseeing and monitoring service delivery. In addition, a series of technical assistance communications is being issued through the project Web site ([www.buildingstrongfamilies.info](http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info)).

## THE CONTEXT AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF UNMARRIED PARENTS

Understanding the context and circumstances of unmarried parents is an essential ingredient in developing programs that can positively affect their relationships and support healthy marriage. Program design and service delivery must capitalize on the strengths and hopes of unmarried parents, address factors that impede healthy parental and family relationships, and take into account their community's social, economic, and cultural environment.

### STRENGTHS AND HOPES OF UNMARRIED PARENTS

At the time of their child's birth, unmarried parents typically have personal and family strengths, and high hopes for their children and often for marriage. Like their married counterparts, new unmarried parents place a high value on their children's well-being and want what is best for them. They have generally positive attitudes about marriage, are hopeful about their future together, and are supportive of each other.

- ***Most low-income unmarried parents are romantically involved and have high hopes for their future together at the time of delivery.***<sup>2</sup> Among low-income unmarried parents, most (82 percent) are romantically involved, about half are living together, and more than half think their chances of marrying each other are “pretty good” or “almost certain” at the time of their child's birth.
- ***Most unmarried parents report low levels of conflict with and high levels of emotional support from their partners at the time of their child's birth.***<sup>3</sup> The majority of unmarried mothers (75 percent) report that the father of their child often expresses affection or love, and 70 percent say the fathers often encourage them. Data show that the level of supportiveness and encouragement in unmarried couples' relationships strongly predicts whether they are still together or married one year after their child's birth.
- ***Unmarried parents place a high value on children and their well-being.***<sup>4</sup> Having children is important to low-income unmarried parents. Many view marriage as beneficial for children, and more than 60 percent of low-income unmarried mothers think “it is better for children if their parents are married.”

Even unmarried parents who are not cohabiting or are not romantically involved tend to agree that marriage is better for children.

- ***Marriage is viewed as an ideal.***<sup>5</sup> Unmarried parents are often “pro-marriage” and consider marriage something to strive for. Many wish to be married to each other and discuss marriage together.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY UNMARRIED PARENTS

Despite high hopes around the time of their child’s birth, most unmarried parents’ expectations of marriage do not materialize. Fewer than 10 percent of low-income unmarried parents marry within a year after their child’s birth.<sup>6</sup> About 60 percent of those cohabiting at the time of their child’s birth are still cohabiting a year later, but only 16 percent of them have married. Couples who were “visiting”—romantically involved but not living together—when their child was born are most likely to change the status of their relationship. Within a year, almost one-third begin living together, but more than one-quarter, although still friends, are no longer romantically involved.

The reasons that unmarried parents do not marry, despite their hopes and expectations, are undoubtedly complex. Unmarried parents often face challenges that can interfere with their potential for entering and sustaining healthy marriages. They may have limited economic opportunities, and attitudes and behaviors that make them unattractive choices as partners and spouses. Some have unrealistic beliefs and expectations that make marriage appear unattainable.

- ***Unmarried parents, on average, have lower education and earnings.***<sup>7</sup> Individuals with low education and low earnings are not as likely to marry. About 45 percent of low-income unmarried mothers and 38 percent of unmarried fathers have not finished high school. About 40 percent of unmarried mothers and 19 percent of unmarried fathers earn less than \$5,000 per year.
- ***Unwed parents often distrust one another, and have lower levels of commitment.***<sup>8</sup> Some unwed mothers are suspicious of their partner’s exposure to and possible involvement with other women. Distrust is sometimes fueled by the reality of male or female infidelity, although a fear of intimacy may also arise as a result of past experiences with sexual abuse. In either case, a basic lack of trust reduces the probability of cohabitation and marriage and increases the likelihood that the couple will break up. Therefore, commitments between unwed parents are sometimes weak and the couple relationship a work in progress.
- ***Problems managing and communicating about money are common.***<sup>9</sup> Although unwed parents may share expenses, they do not usually pool

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resources, instead maintaining separate control over their individual incomes. Mothers may resent fathers who contribute some but not enough. Such friction is common among noncohabiting couples, perhaps because the father is not directly confronted with all of the costs of child rearing.

- ***Multiple partner fertility is common and a substantial issue in low-income couple relationships.***<sup>10</sup> Like married mothers, unmarried mothers have about two children, on average. Yet only 15 percent of married mothers have children with different fathers, compared to 43 percent of unmarried women. Multiple partner fertility can affect relationships and prospects for marriage, particularly when it involves the father's children by another mother. Multiple partner fertility can exacerbate distrust, triggered by the man's visits to and support of his children by other women.
- ***Domestic violence is a complex problem.*** Physical and emotional abuse is a serious obstacle to stable and healthy relationships and marriage. Although abuse cuts across income levels and relationship status, it is more common among low-income couples.<sup>11</sup> While physical abuse can be dangerous, emotional abuse and controlling behavior can be equally damaging. Some couples stay in abusive relationships for long periods, and some individuals cycle in and out of a series of such relationships.
- ***Mental health problems, substance abuse, and experiences of childhood abuse may impinge on the quality of adult relationships and prospects for healthy marriage.*** Some data suggest that substance abuse problems, mental health conditions, and histories of childhood abuse are more common among economically stressed adults than the general population. Moreover, new mothers, whether unwed or not, are at risk for post-partum depression.
- ***Marriage is viewed as hard to attain, and sometimes even costly.***<sup>12</sup> Some evidence suggests that unmarried parents tend to set a high economic bar they must clear before marrying. Some feel they must achieve the trappings of the "middle-class dream"—a house, solid jobs, a car or even two—before they can get married, rather than viewing marriage as a partnership in which they can strive to achieve economic goals together. For some couples, getting married may lead to negative financial consequences under the tax law or the rules of various benefit programs, and some couples may assume such consequences even when they might not apply to their circumstances.
- ***Fear of divorce.*** Some research suggests that unwed parents are anxious about marrying because they fear their marriage would fail and end in divorce. This fear may be understandable in a population that has experienced failure in other important life achievements such as education or employment, and who may have had little exposure to models of healthy and stable marriage.

## **THE BROADER SOCIAL CONTEXT OF UNMARRIED PARENTS**

If programs are to strengthen couple relationships and support healthy marriage, they must respond in their design and delivery to the social, cultural, and economic backdrop of participants' lives. Programs for unmarried parents will most likely operate in communities that are largely low income. In the neighborhoods where programs operate, extended families may be common, with grandmothers and other relatives closely involved in child rearing. The target population will be diverse with a variety of cultural norms and attitudes about marriage and nonmarital childbearing. Communities may vary in their degree of religiosity, and in the messages that local religious institutions convey about marriage and nonmarital childbearing. Low wages and limited economic opportunities may lead to a shortage of "marriageable" partners.

## **THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROGRAM MODEL**

The BSF model can help guide agencies in their efforts to create programs to strengthen and support unwed expectant couples and their aspirations for marriage. Although the model will continue to be refined, the broad components specified here, and some particular features of those components, will be essential to the integrity of the model. It is quite possible, of course, that local circumstances may make it appropriate for some agencies to define additional features of their programs or to tailor specifications presented here—for example, to their target population, constellation of service providers, or the existing structure in which they deliver services. However, the guidelines presented in this section outline the content, elements, and structure that would be expected of programs included in the BSF evaluation.

Each component of the BSF model has its role in the overall design. The core is instruction in the skills associated with healthy marriage, distinctive in large part because it has not been widely offered to the target population. This component will be tailored to address the needs of unmarried parents. The second component—services to enhance marriageability—is essential support for BSF's focus on strong and stable marriage, addressing issues that can impinge on relationships and on individuals' ability to be effective as parents and responsible and loving as spouses. The third component—"family coordinators" to maintain contact with couples, identify their needs, and support their participation—is a response to the fragility of new unwed parents' relationships and the importance of close and sustained attention. The fourth component—reducing disincentives to marriage—can lower financial barriers that might get in the way of decisions to marry.

These components are described in the next four sections. We then discuss how these components might apply to couples going through the ups and downs of a relationship, and how agencies might use existing resources as a starting point for developing their programs.



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## THE PROGRAM CORE: INSTRUCTION IN THE SKILLS ASSOCIATED WITH HEALTHY MARRIAGE

The centerpiece of BSF programs will be an educational component focused on equipping couples with the skills and information they need for a strong healthy marital relationship. This component would most likely be delivered in an intensive series of group workshops or classes over a period of several months or more. During that same period and beyond, they would be benefiting from other BSF components—the support of a family coordinator and access to family support services (see following sections). In the BSF model, the centerpiece component is envisioned as a primarily educational activity, not a therapeutic intervention, although it may reveal issues that merit therapeutic attention through other means.

### AN OVERVIEW OF BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROGRAM COMPONENTS

***Core Educational Component: Skills, Information, and Knowledge to Support Healthy Couple Relationships and Marriage.*** Research-based curricula adapted specifically for the target population will be used to teach skills associated with healthy and stable marriage and to support interested couples thinking about the prospect of marriage.

***Family Support Services to Enhance Marriageability.*** Depending on each family's needs, services will be provided for employment issues, parenting education, mental health conditions, substance abuse, or other personal and family challenges that can impede the formation and maintenance of strong relationships and marriage.

***Family Coordinators to Assess Needs and Provide Ongoing Support.*** Specially trained coordinators will assess families' needs and match them to appropriate services, encourage ongoing program participation and completion, provide sustained emotional support, and reinforce skills they are learning in the core educational sessions.

***Reducing Disincentives to Marriage.*** Some sites may choose to address this by reducing or offsetting, for program participants, the marriage disincentives in means-tested programs such as TANF, Medicaid, and child care and housing programs or EITC. Changes in child support enforcement policies may also be considered.

This core educational component of BSF programs can be developed using existing program curricula and methods as a foundation. Numerous programs have been developed to help couples avoid interpersonal behaviors that undermine their relationships and develop positive behaviors that nurture it. The most promising of these programs provide instruction in skills shown by research to be associated with lasting, healthy marriages.

The BSF target population, however, will differ from the married and engaged population typically served by these existing curricula. BSF couples will not be married<sup>13</sup> and

will thus tend to be somewhat younger (although all BSF participants will be adult parents over 18). On average, they will have lower incomes and educational levels. They will be expecting a baby or be the biological parents of an infant 3 months of age or younger. They will be more likely to be members of minority groups. Experts believe that many of the basic concepts and skills taught in existing programs (such as effective communication techniques) are likely to be applicable to unmarried parents, but they also agree that adjustments will be needed as these curricula are used with unwed parents, and the curricula will need to be supplemented with new content.

Adjustments are likely to entail modifying the way existing material is presented to make it more accessible to BSF program participants. For example, material may be presented with language and examples suitable for a less educated population—without changing the core skills and concepts on which the curriculum is based. Program sponsors could also modify the level of language fluency and literacy required of participants, using examples that are more “on target” and culturally relevant for the target population, and relying less on written exercises, reading, and homework. The BSF team is currently sponsoring the expert adaptation of three foundational curricula especially for use with low-income unwed couples having a child together. Adaptations are expected to become available November 1, 2004.

Curriculum supplementation is also necessary. New content is being developed to address issues known to be common among BSF target populations, but that have been less salient among the more committed couples served in existing marriage education programs. For example, research suggests that unmarried couples have a lower level of mutual trust and commitment, which leads to a greater potential for instability and breakup. Adding a strong focus on trust and trustworthiness is thus likely to be important. The BSF team has engaged multiple panels of experts to develop curriculum material and guidance resources on such supplementary topics. The resulting material can be integrated into the curriculum adaptations described above.

**Program Content for Which Existing Curricula Are Available.** Marriage education programs cover a wide variety of topics. The list below shows content areas that in varying degrees appear in three well-regarded existing programs: Relationship Enhancement, Bringing Baby Home, and the Becoming Parents Program. These existing curricula are particularly relevant because they come close to meeting the requirements of the BSF program model, and are being adapted especially for BSF couples. They also have a strong research base, focus on expectant or new parents, or have been used with diverse population groups. Taken together, they cover the content areas below, although the weight given to each topic varies across curricula.<sup>14</sup> Other curricula could also be considered as foundations for BSF programs, depending on how well they meet the requirements of the BSF model.

- ***Developing Empathy, Communication and Conflict Management Skills.*** A significant body of research literature documents the importance of effective communication and empathy in interpersonal relationships. Many programs teach structured communication techniques to facilitate mutual understanding and encourage the positive resolution of conflict.<sup>15</sup>

- ***Building Fondness, Affection, and Emotional Intimacy.*** Healthy relationships and marriage are about more than resolving conflicts; they are about deep friendship, honoring each other's dreams, creating shared meaning, and looking to the future together. Some programs use exercises to help couples enhance these important protective aspects of intimate relationships.<sup>16</sup>
- ***Identifying Signs of Relationship and Marital Meltdown.*** Decades of research have identified behaviors that sabotage constructive communication, including criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Recognizing these warning signs can help couples use tools to regain a positive balance.<sup>17</sup>
- ***Managing How Parenthood Affects Couple Relationships and Marriage.*** Research consistently finds that because even positive changes are stressful, marital and sexual satisfaction typically decrease while conflict increases following childbirth. In turn, parents' relationship quality affects early child development. A few programs help families work through issues related to the transition from couplehood to parenthood.<sup>18</sup> These adjustments can range from learning techniques for helping their child sleep (and thus gain respite for themselves) to re-negotiating who will be responsible for specific household tasks.
- ***Enhancing Parent-Infant Relationships (Especially the Influence of Fathers).*** Programs for new parents teach couples how to create a "warm nest" for their baby, provide appropriate stimulation that contributes to infants' emotional development, and coordinate their interactions with the baby. They encourage both mothers and fathers to recognize the equal importance of their roles in parenting and in a child's development, and to avoid subtle or inadvertent marginalization of the father that can lead him to withdraw from his role.<sup>19</sup> Helping parents develop realistic expectations of babies and dealing with differences between mother's and father's expectations is often central in the successful transition to parenthood.

**Additional Program Content.** Other topics will be important in a program for unwed parents, but are not covered in even the high-quality marriage skills curricula referred to above. For these topics, development of relevant curriculum materials and guidance documents is an essential part of the BSF team's efforts to create curriculum modules that respond to issues that research suggests are central in the development of unwed-parent relationships and movement toward marriage. Development of these new curriculum materials for unwed couples is being completed at this time, and they are expected to become available near the end of 2004.

- ***Considering Marriage.*** Research suggests several possible reasons why unwed couples aspire to marriage but fail to achieve it: lack of exposure to models of healthy marriage, fear of divorce, unrealistic expectations about the prerequisites for marriage, and lack of awareness of the advantages of marriage for themselves and their children. Information on these topics may be helpful to unwed parents as they contemplate the future of their relationship and the possibility of marriage. Helping young couples understand the importance of putting the relationship first, before friendships that can pull one partner away from the other, is also likely to be important.
- ***Managing Complex Family Relationships.*** Many unmarried parents have children by multiple partners, making for complicated family relationships. BSF participants may benefit from learning how to deal constructively with parents of children from their own and their partner's previous unions.<sup>20</sup> Helping BSF couples build positive step-parenting relationships is also likely to be important for many families. Research indicates that extended family relationships (such as the couple's own parents or other relatives) can also have an important influence on the development of the fragile family, especially among certain cultural groups. Helping couples deal with these external influences may be helpful.
- ***Building Mutual Trust and Commitment.*** Unmarried parents are more likely than married couples to be wavering in their mutual commitment, be distrustful of each other, and be inconsistent in their sexual fidelity. Unresolved other relationships can undermine their chances as a couple. Addressing these concerns without "preachiness" will be important.<sup>21</sup> For example, programs could focus on helping couples engage in discussions in which they negotiate the criteria needed to have a more committed relationship and healthy marriage. Facilitators could also help couples explore ways they can restrain themselves and remain faithful, such as delaying sex with a new partner when the current relationship seems bumpy, until things are really resolved.
- ***Managing Stress and Emotions to Prevent Conflict Escalation.*** Difficulty managing emotional responses can interfere with effective communication and lead to conflict escalation and even violence. Couples can be taught to recognize emotional "flooding" and learn to self-soothe and de-escalate.<sup>22</sup> In addition, economic uncertainty can contribute to chronic levels of stress that may negatively affect relationships and marriage. Parents can be taught to avoid interpreting moments of anger or short temper under stress as evidence of a deep intrinsic flaw in their partner and instead attribute them to the difficult circumstances facing him/her.
- ***Managing and Communicating About Family Finances.*** Money is a common point of disagreement among couples. Such conflicts may be

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especially common among unwed couples because resources are often more limited, and nonresident fathers may not understand what it takes to raise a child.<sup>23</sup> Providing training in financial management to both partners is also likely to empower the couple and improve their financial decision-making.

### **FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES TO ENHANCE MARRIAGEABILITY**

Unmarried parents face personal and family challenges that can impede their ability to form stable and healthy marriages. Limited education and employment skills, poor health, and difficulties in handling finances or in being an effective parent, for example, can stand in the way. Some unmarried parents may benefit from services that help them address these challenges and become more capable and attractive as marriage partners. To help those who need such services, BSF programs will provide referrals and linkages with existing community programs and help couples access the services they need.

- ***Help Finding a Job.*** Stable employment and income have been linked to positive marriage outcomes. Employment challenges may be particularly prevalent among particular groups. For example, job prospects for African American men have lagged relative to African American women.<sup>24</sup> Jobs that pay a living wage are often a particular problem for people with criminal records. Services could include assistance with job search, job placement, career counseling, networking, resume writing and interviewing skills.
- ***Connecting to Educational Services.*** Research with fragile families suggests that mothers with more education are more likely to marry. Services to support further education might include access to programs to attain a GED or ABE, or vocational school or college.
- ***Infant Care and Parenting Education.*** Some unwed couples in BSF programs will be first-time parents and may benefit from instruction in infant care and development. Others will have older children by the same or other partners. Couples who participate in parenting education together are more likely to learn to work cooperatively for the benefit of their children, which can reduce a major source of parental conflict and create a more stable family environment. Parenting education has been linked to positive development in children and could also improve marriageability, because parents may be more likely to stay with a partner who is a loving, fair, and effective parent.
- ***Physical Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Services.*** Substance abuse and physical or mental health conditions have been linked with marriage and relationship distress in the general population. New mothers are at higher risk for depression, which can interfere with being a good parent and partner. Screening mothers and fathers for mental health

conditions and referring them, if they are interested, to services that address detected problems can improve parents' effectiveness as partners and parents by making it easier for them to sustain employment and provide for their children.

- ***Access to Child Care, Health Care, Housing, and Other Assistance.*** Many unmarried parent families may be eligible for subsidies or assistance such as food stamps, TANF, child care for working parents, Medicaid or SCHIP for children, low-income housing, and services and support for disabled children. Assessing families for their needs and linking them to available services for which they are eligible would reduce stress on the parental relationship or marriage and increase marriageability.
- ***Addressing Domestic Violence.*** Physical and emotional abuse is a barrier to stable and healthy relationships and marriage, and BSF programs will convey a consistent firm message that people in healthy relationships and marriage by definition do not engage in domestic violence. Couples participating in BSF programs will be continually screened for signs of domestic violence. If couples are enmeshed in abusive relationships, the first priority will be to help them achieve safety. Links will be established to two kinds of services, for use in appropriate circumstances: those that help victims recover from psychological trauma so they can enter into healthy relationships in the future; and those that help perpetrators learn emotional regulation and anger management.

#### **FAMILY COORDINATORS: KEEPING COUPLES INVOLVED IN THE PROGRAM**

Parents will enter BSF programs with varying needs as couples and individuals. It will therefore be best to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach in BSF programs. Couples' needs will often be complex; the vulnerability and instability of these families suggests that sustained program support to encourage participation and program completion will be critical. Capable and well-trained family coordinators can help meet these needs. Each family will be assigned a coordinator whose role, over the entire time a couple is involved with the program, will be to:

- Conduct initial and ongoing assessments of couple's relationship status and family needs
- Link families to services most appropriate for their needs
- Encourage ongoing program participation and completion
- Provide sustained emotional support

- Reinforce healthy relationship and marital skills

The coordinators will provide initial and ongoing assessment of couples' relationship and marital status, and link participants to needed services that address barriers and support development of healthy relationships. Coordinators will be trained to detect signs of domestic violence and refer couples or individuals to more appropriate services. They will have knowledge of services to address physical or mental health issues, substance abuse, employment and education needs, or problems with child care or housing. Some services may be available in-house through the agency that sponsors the BSF program, and others through community resources external to the core program. Coordinators will also ensure that couples are aware of government benefits they might need and qualify for such as Food Stamps or WIC.

The family coordinators will also encourage completion of the BSF program through regular periodic contact, and by following up with couples who may miss classes or sessions. Particular attention and sensitivity will be needed to encourage full participation by men. Coordinators will be skilled in the concepts taught in the marriage education core, and will reinforce those skills through modeling and coaching during contact with families over a sustained period, even after the period of formal program instruction has ended. This reinforcement will help couples internalize the skills so they become a natural part of their interaction.

Because they will be involved with the couples over a sustained period, coordinators will be in a unique position to provide emotional support. As they help couples practice new skills, the coordinator can also guide them in using skills to defuse the potentially damaging effect on relationships and marriage of personal difficulties or external crises, such as depression or unemployment. Another strategy family coordinators might use to provide ongoing support to couples may be to link them up with mentor couples, although the use of such volunteer mentors would not be a substitute for the trained family coordinators.

Regular and ongoing communication between family coordinators and group facilitators should be built into the system, to ensure a consistent approach to dealing with specific couples. Family coordinators might even be encouraged to sit in on group sessions with their assigned couples from time to time. Because of the multiple roles and functions the family coordinators will perform, it will be important to ensure that they maintain modest caseloads, with perhaps 25 families as an upper limit.

## **STRATEGIES TO REDUCE DISINCENTIVES TO MARRIAGE**

BSF services could be complemented by efforts to reduce financial disincentives to marriage created by certain government programs and policies. Most government programs that provide benefits on the basis of family income—including TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, childcare subsidies, housing assistance and the EITC—contain disincentives for a second working adult to join the family. The income of an additional adult counted as part of the eligibility unit both increases the likelihood that the family will be ineligible for

benefits and decreases benefit levels for eligible households. Two approaches to reducing these potential disincentives are possible. Actual policy changes could be made within specific means-tested programs (e.g., cash assistance under TANF or child care subsidies) for BSF couples. Alternatively, payments could be made to offset losses in benefits that would otherwise occur when a couple marries.

Certain aspects of child support enforcement may also discourage marriage among BSF couples. One scenario arises in the context of multiple partner fertility: if the BSF mother (or father) receives child support for a child from a previous union, that payment (in some states) may be reduced if the BSF couple chooses to marry. In another scenario, BSF fathers may in some cases be required to reimburse the state for their child's Medicaid-covered birth, as part of their child support obligation. Unless the state has a policy that forgives such arrearages upon marriage, this policy may deter mothers from marrying because of the substantial debt owed by the father and the implications for their economic future together.

Some researchers and policymakers have argued that disincentives to marriage could be reduced by policy changes such as the following:

- ***TANF and Food Stamp Policy.*** Some or all of the spouse's income could be disregarded in eligibility determination, and the TANF categorical eligibility requirements for two-parent families that still exist in some states could be removed.
- ***Medicaid Policy.*** Some evidence suggests that low-income parents may avoid marriage because under current eligibility rules they would be likely to lose health care coverage for themselves or their children. Because low-wage workers often do not receive employer-sponsored health care benefits, Medicaid coverage is considered a particularly valuable benefit. Policy changes could expand health care coverage for low-income married-parent families by raising income and asset limits for these families in determining Medicaid eligibility.
- ***Child Support Enforcement.*** Policies could be changed to eliminate the reductions that can occur in child support for children from a previous union when the mother decides to marry the father of a new child. Forgiving child support arrearages owed on behalf of the BSF couple's child (which may include expenses for a Medicaid-covered birth) upon their marriage to each other would also eliminate the penalty some BSF couples will face in the decision to marry.
- ***Other Policies.*** Some or all of a spouse's earnings could be disregarded in determining housing assistance eligibility and eligibility for child care subsidies. In addition, tax policy could be changed to expand EITC eligibility for low-income married couples with a child.



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Changing policy is a complex process, and the feasible options and prospects are likely to vary widely across sites. Some of the policies that contribute to disincentives are determined at the federal rather than the state level. Calculating the costs of various options will be important as some changes could be quite expensive. Establishing payments to offset the financial consequences of marriage would not involve existing state or federal policies, although this strategy is also likely to be challenging in other ways. Ongoing research and consultations are likely to lead to further guidance with respect to this potentially important BSF component.

### **DELIVERING SERVICES THROUGH THE UPS AND DOWNS OF COUPLES' RELATIONSHIPS**

Given the focus of BSF programs, unwed parents will enter as romantically involved couples, but the trajectories of their relationships thereafter will be diverse. At the outset, many will be cohabiting, and some will be romantically involved but not living together. However, some couples' relationships will be volatile, and they may move in and out of various levels of involvement. Some may decide rather quickly to marry, but others may break up and reconcile, even repeatedly. Some breakups may appear final but turn out to be temporary, and couples may succeed in their relationship and even marry after repeated periods of turmoil.

The way that couples participate in BSF programs may thus depend to some extent on the ups and downs of their relationships. On the up side, couples who are getting close to or have already made a decision to marry should be supported in their decision process and in taking steps to marry. A family coordinator, for example, may help them sort out how their financial situation will look once they are married, and help solve issues relating to housing, child care, or transportation that stand in their way. Program staff, as well as other program participants, could help find low-cost approaches to a wedding, and support for focusing on the emotional and spiritual importance of the event.

BSF programs should be prepared to continue serving couples when their relationships falter. It is unrealistic to assume that all couples will marry or even stay together, and it is precisely when they hit rough spots that the skills taught in the program, and the support of the group, may have the greatest potential to make a difference in their lives and for their children. Parents who break up after program enrollment should be allowed to continue participating in the core group activities as long as they are willing, because their breakup may be repaired. In some cases only one parent might attend, and in some instances both might wish to attend but prefer at least temporarily to be in different sessions. Some topics in the BSF curriculum may seem less relevant to them during a period of estrangement, but the basic focus on communication skills and emotion regulation may help them find their way back together.

Where a couple's breakup seems permanent, some elements of the program will continue to be relevant and important for the couple's child. Programs can refer parents to other services that focus on co-parenting and father involvement, to help them work together productively for the sake of their child's development.<sup>25</sup> As individuals, the parents

may continue to get help from a family coordinator, particularly to connect with family support services.

### **PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY: FOUNDATIONS FOR BSF PROGRAMS**

BSF programs need not be developed in their entirety “from scratch.” Two general implementation approaches could allow BSF program sponsors to build on or make use of existing program resources.

1. ***Integrating Marriage Skills into Comprehensive Family Services.*** One strategy is to begin with existing programs that serve the target population of unmarried expectant or new parents. Some such programs might now serve single mothers, noncustodial fathers, unwed couples, or intact low-income families. Their existing services might be focusing on what we define in the BSF model as the “marriageability” issues, but not on strengthening how the mother and father relate to each other or chart the future of their relationship. To develop a BSF program from this institutional foundation, it would be necessary to add the marriage/relationship skills education and family coordinators.
2. ***Creating Marriage Education Programs with Links to Family Services.*** A second strategy would be to create a new program that provides the core marriage/relationship skills instruction and family coordinators. The core program staff would link participants to existing service providers for family support services on issues such as employment, mental health, and substance abuse.

Development of strategies for reducing marriage disincentives can fit into either of these program development strategies. Approaches to reducing disincentives can be undertaken without regard to whether BSF programs are operated as unified comprehensive services under one organizational roof or through a combination of a core program and referral links.

Building on a comprehensive program that already serves low-income parents has both advantages and disadvantages. Such programs are likely to have a well-developed infrastructure, staff with experience in the needs of unmarried parent families, and experience recruiting and enrolling from low-income populations. On the other hand, such programs are not usually oriented to serving couples together or recruiting them for joint participation. Special effort will be needed to ensure that the goals and messages about healthy relationships and marriage are strongly embraced by staff who will deliver BSF services.

Building a new BSF program, and relying on outside sources for family support services, also presents advantages and challenges. The core marriage program can be designed without the constraints of having to fit into a structure of existing staff, schedules, and organizational habits, and the challenge of adapting an existing closely related mission to

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include the healthy marriage message can be avoided. However, even this approach is likely to involve a program sponsor such as a hospital or public health agency, and that sponsor may have to overcome its own organizational or philosophical hurdles. Recruitment and retention may present challenges if the program sponsor is inexperienced in serving unwed parents, or lacks an identity in the community that is conducive to recruiting such couples. Linking participants to family support services may also be a challenge; referring a couple or individual to another agency does not always get the participant to the service as reliably as an internal handoff in a comprehensive agency, and tracking of referral outcomes can be difficult.

## **IMPLEMENTING A BSF PROGRAM**

Implementing a BSF program means building on experience, but also addressing likely challenges. These challenges include recruiting and retaining couples in the program, choosing the appropriate program setting, deciding on the best service delivery approach, selecting and training staff to deliver services, and providing services that are intense and long enough to make a difference.

### **RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

Recruiting and retaining individual participants in any program can be a significant challenge, but BSF programs will be recruiting and serving couples. Two people are involved, with their own attitudes, needs, schedules, and barriers to participation. Although BSF programs will be pioneers in recruiting couples from the target population, evidence from other programs that serve couples and/or low-income populations suggests that the following approaches should be considered.

**Recruit During Pregnancy Whenever Possible.** Although programs may enroll couples with a child up to three months of age, beginning the intervention during pregnancy whenever possible will allow programs to capitalize on the motivation and receptiveness of couples during this period. Couples may be more willing and able to join a program during pregnancy than after the birth of the child, when they will have the additional responsibilities of caring for an infant. Flexibility on when couples enter the program is also important, however, since some individuals, especially fathers, may not feel strongly motivated until after the baby has arrived. Recruitment may thus be designed to encourage early participation, but program plans should be drawn in a way that acknowledges and takes into account the possibility of participants with infants (and possibly older children).

**Recruit Through Venues Commonly Frequented by Unwed Parents.** Programs need to use a multipronged outreach strategy, including intensive outreach efforts.<sup>26</sup> Such a strategy might include:

- “Piggybacking” on the recruitment efforts of other programs. For example, WIC participants or clients enrolled in Medicaid managed care plans could be informed about the BSF program.<sup>27</sup>
- Recruiting through health facilities—such as hospitals, crisis pregnancy centers, and prenatal clinics—used during pregnancy, at delivery, and afterwards.
- Providing information about the program on flyers, posters, and brochures at community locations frequented by expecting and new parents, such as baby-oriented stores, public transit, and housing units.
- Providing information at community events, such as health fairs.
- Sending outreach workers door-to-door to tell potential participants about the program.
- Making special efforts to connect with fathers, through outreach to organizations that serve men and through marketing materials that establish a program identity and image that appeals to men.
- Conducting broad public education efforts that use caller hotlines and radio and newspaper advertisements.
- Allowing ongoing “open enrollment” over defined periods, to capitalize on word of mouth spreading information about the program.

**Use a Two-Step Strategy and Male-Female Recruitment Teams When Necessary.** Both partners will not always be present when a recruitment offer is made. Relying on one partner to recruit the other is an approach that preliminary work suggests will not be adequate. Instead, a two-step process is possible: one member of the couple is offered the program and is asked for permission to approach the partner. For example, a woman attending a prenatal care visit may be offered the program by a female recruiter. Upon receiving her consent and permission, the female recruiter dispatches a male recruiter to meet with the expectant father and offer the program.

**Use the Potential Benefits to the Child and the Couple as a Motivation.** To appeal to new or expecting parents, outreach should stress the benefits of participation to the couple, but especially to their child.<sup>28</sup> Early experiences in delivering marital skills education to romantically involved couples suggest that once couples enroll in the program and attend the first session or two, they find the experience highly gratifying and are motivated to continue attending precisely because of the focus on their relationships and marital aspirations. However, because most people are unfamiliar with marriage education and may need to have some experience with it to decide whether they would find such a program helpful, the initial recruitment message may be best focused primarily on the

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benefits to the child of program participation. For example, outreach materials and conversations could describe the health benefits to babies of a warm and stable marriage between the parents. They might also stress the important role both the father and mother play in the relationship with their child and highlight the program components that will provide information on infant and toddler development and care.

**Avoid Terms with Negative Associations.** It will be important to work with sites to develop effective language that avoids terms that might have negative associations such as “therapy” and “support groups.” Some participants may not favor the term “classes” if they have had previous negative experiences with formal education. Therefore sites should seek to identify terms that resonate with the target population.

**Continually Encourage and Support Participation.** Participants in BSF programs will be expected to devote considerable time to the program. To retain participants, it will be important to provide tangible and intangible incentives, and to make it easy and convenient for couples to attend.<sup>29</sup>

Tangible rewards could include providing baby-related items or gift certificates for items related to infant care or development. These modest incentives could be contingent on actual participation by both mother and father and so would only be provided at the end of each session or group of sessions. Great care should be taken to avoid the impression of paying couples to participate or inducing participation just for these rewards. Door prizes can also add to the sense of an experience that is fun. To tie the rewards to working toward the financial goals for marriage, programs could match deposits into an Individual Development Account for participants; withdrawals would be allowed for common assets such as household furniture, a down payment on a car, or even a deposit on a house.

As couples master skills, they will be more likely to begin feeling successful in their efforts and thus be more interested in continuing and completing the program. One use of incentives could be to recognize demonstration and practice of marriage skills, perhaps with modest “merit awards” for completing certain program components or homework exercises designed to build skills.

More intangible rewards are also likely to be useful. Focus groups held with unwed couples suggest that they especially long for opportunities to interact and socialize with other couples like themselves. Recreational and social activities (such as trips to ball games or backyard barbecues) could create opportunities for participants to develop friendships with each other and comfortable bonds with program staff. These friendships will encourage participation and also mean that participants feel more comfortable expressing themselves during classes. Efforts can also be made to help couples feel personally connected to the program. Family coordinators should strive to develop open and supportive communications with participants. This relationship can be reinforced by gestures such as program birthday cards to children.

Making attendance easier in practical ways is also likely to increase the chances that couples will show up at each class. These can include arranging transportation to the group

sessions and providing free child care during classes. Offering refreshments or even informal meals at group sessions will eliminate the need for families to eat before coming to evening classes, and provide a socializing opportunity.

**Attempt to Reengage Nonparticipants.** Given the unique challenges of engaging unwed couples, it is imperative that BSF programs have a plan for reengaging participants who fail to attend classes or other services. The family coordinators can play an important role in this reengagement by identifying and addressing barriers to participation. Alternative modes of service delivery may help in reengagement. For example, instruction in the skills associated with healthy marriage may be provided in participants' homes if one or both partners miss classes.

## **PROGRAM CONTEXT AND SETTING**

The context and setting of BSF programs should send a clear message to expecting or new parents about the goals of the intervention and expectations for participants. The BSF program setting affects services in tangible ways such as convenience, accessibility, capacity, and comfort. It also affects how prospective and new participants will perceive what the program is about, and whether they will feel it is “for them.” The program setting is a combination of the identity of the agency or agencies that run the program and the physical setting where services are actually delivered. Some factors to consider are:

- Program settings should be avoided if they might contribute to an impression of coercion or pressure. For example, participants might think their receipt of government assistance is somehow contingent upon program participation or their commitment to marriage if the BSF program is closely identified with a government assistance agency.
- Settings should be culturally sensitive, incorporating relevant cultural beliefs, traditions, and teachings into program curricula, activities, materials, and program center décor.<sup>30</sup>
- Preference should be given to locations for program classes and meetings that convey professionalism. Parents are likely to respond well when they see the program as a source of real skills and insight, prepared by professionals who know the science of human relationships and child development.
- Settings should be welcoming to participants. Programs implemented in settings that have historically served women and children, for example, will need to make the environment and organizational culture more “father friendly.” Father-friendly programs include male staff and incorporate activities and issues of interest to men as well as women.

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The following are examples of potentially useful program delivery settings:

**Facilities Providing Health or Prenatal Services.** Locations and agencies serving pregnant women and expecting couples, or offering childbirth services, are a natural context in which to recruit and serve unwed parent couples around the time of their child's birth. The involvement of clinical and highly trained staff in service delivery can foster trust and acceptance of the program's guidance and instruction. Programs that use a health context include various childbirth education programs, hospital or clinic-based prenatal services, and programs for disadvantaged pregnant women like Healthy Start.

**Child Abuse Prevention Programs.** Programs like Healthy Families, Nurse Home-Visiting Partnership Programs, and family resource centers often target expectant mothers who are at risk for child abuse or neglect due to a range of circumstances (such as having a nonmarital birth, low income, or lack of social support). These programs offer a range of home-visiting and center-based services that provide parenting education and information about child development. Because children are at higher risk for abuse by non-biological fathers, providing additional support and education to help romantically-involved biological parents stay together is a natural extension of existing services.

**Early Childhood Development Programs.** Programs that focus on early childhood education, such as Early Head Start, are likely to already be working with the family—sometimes including fathers. Such programs often begin intervention services around the time the child is born or shortly thereafter, so they may be well positioned to implement services that focus on the couple. In the case of Early Head Start, staff are equipped to discuss sensitive issues and family challenges, as they already work with parents to set goals as part of the family development component of the standard program model.

**Community-Based or Faith-Based Organizations.** A BSF program might be provided by a community-based or faith-based organization that provides a range of services for low-income families. These can include, for example, fatherhood or family support programs, employment services, or center-based parenting education. Many of these organizations develop in response to identified community needs and have the staff and infrastructure in place to address personal and family challenges. Such organizations often have strong ties to the local community and achieve the cultural and linguistic sensitivity that is key to effective outreach and service delivery.

Programs may use different recruiting channels and service delivery settings. For example, a program may choose to recruit through a health setting, where it will be relatively easy to identify expecting or new parents, while providing services through a community-based organization or early childhood program, which might be better equipped to assess participants' needs for services and link them to the appropriate resources. Similarly, a program might choose to concentrate its recruiting efforts on participants in a WIC program, but organize service delivery through an Early Head Start program. If the scale of the program makes it possible, a variety of settings could be used for core classes, since different couples might feel most comfortable in different settings.

## SERVICE DELIVERY MODE

How services are delivered should respond to couples' needs, but is also likely to reflect factors such as cost, availability of qualified staff, and facilities. Each program sponsor will have to make relevant trade-offs. However, there are useful guidelines, gleaned from the experience of existing programs.

**Making Group Classes Effective.** The marriage skills core of the BSF program will most likely lend itself well to group sessions. Group classes, compared to individualized sessions, are more likely to be affordable. Groups allow instructors to provide interactive instruction, while also allowing participants to learn and gain support from one another. As long as groups are of modest size, couples can still be observed and receive feedback on their practice and application of skills they are learning. In setting up these classes, BSF sponsor agencies should consider the following guidance:

- ***Keep Participant-Staff Ratios Low.*** The number of staff attending each class, and the activities planned, affect feasible class size. Classes larger than 6-8 couples risk becoming impersonal, and even that size class is likely to require the presence of more than one program staff member, at least for periods of small-group or individual couple breakout for skills practice.
- ***Accommodate Couples' Schedules.*** BSF programs will need to think creatively about how to schedule activities at times that accommodate both parents' schedules. Services provided in the evening or on weekends might accommodate parents who work during the day. In programs operating at sufficient scale, it might be possible to offer services at different times and on different days, allowing couples to choose the schedule that best meets their needs. Some sessions might be suitable for fathers or mothers alone; such activities would pose less burden on their schedules.
- ***Provide Child Care.*** For couples with infants and young children, it will be important to provide child care. Care for toddlers and older children could be provided in an adjacent room. Accommodations can be made to allow new parents—some of whom may be reluctant to put their infants in child care—to keep their infants in the room with them. This may involve having staff available who can help respond to the demands created by the babies' presence in the room.<sup>31</sup>
- ***Use an Accessible and Convenient Location.*** BSF program activities should be held in locations that are accessible to participants who walk, drive, or take public transportation. If participants rely on public transportation, services and activities should be scheduled at times when buses or trains are running frequently.



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**Use Home Visits When Necessary.** For some couples, at some times, it may be useful or necessary to provide marriage skills instruction and meetings with the family coordinator in the participants' home. Home visits may yield insights about factors affecting the couples' engagement in the program, provide a more private setting for discussion of personal issues, and allow marriage skills instruction to be tailored to the couple. Home visits might be made routinely if a couple or either parent fails to attend group sessions. Home visits can obviously drive program costs up, but if they succeed in maintaining the participation of a couple who would otherwise have dropped out, they could be worth the effort.

### **INSTRUCTIONAL FORMAT**

The way in which material is presented and delivered will be almost as important as the material itself. When the instructional approach and format are engaging, participants will be more likely to return. Presenting material in terms that participants can relate to will put them at ease and help them to feel comfortable participating in discussions and exercises, while also improving the likelihood that they will absorb and retain the information they receive.

- Instruction should be clear and concise, reflecting the importance of the topics discussed, but not presented in a manner that is demeaning to the participants.
- Language used by the instructors must be easily understood by the BSF participants.
- Ample opportunity for couples to practice skills in the presence of a trained facilitator or coach should be provided.
- Instructional approaches should be interactive, be hands-on in nature, and include activities such as role-playing.
- Skills should be broken down into multiple small steps and fully demonstrated by instructors before couples are asked to try them.
- The use of visual materials, such as pictures and videos should be incorporated to sustain interest, meet the needs of those with limited cognitive skills, and to provide a basis for in-home makeup sessions.
- Instruction should focus on the attainment of specific skills. Some program administrators argue that men prefer educational approaches that are skills-based and present opportunities for mastering something new.
- Programs should limit the use of complex written materials and homework.

- Materials will need to be translated and instruction provided in other languages if a high proportion of the target population are non-English speakers.
- Classes that are fun and enjoyable will promote continued participation.

### **STAFFING: QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING**

Successful implementation of BSF programs will require a mix of professionally trained, culturally sensitive, and experienced staff who share a desire to help unwed parents build strong and healthy relationships and enter and sustain stable marriages. Marriage education curricula can be taught by trained staff from a wide range of backgrounds, including nurses, social workers, schoolteachers, childbirth instructors, family counselors, and clergy.<sup>32</sup> Family coordinators will need to be qualified to conduct assessments of couples' needs and have enough knowledge of available services in the community to make appropriate referrals. Other considerations when hiring staff for a BSF program include:

**Staff Need to Understand Participant Needs and Circumstances.** The program is more likely to be successful if BSF participants feel comfortable and understood by program staff. Staff must understand and appreciate the cultural backgrounds and community norms that influence unwed couples. These may be staff who have had life experiences like the target population's or have experience serving the target population.<sup>33</sup>

**Mixed Gender Teams May Be Useful.** Preliminary work suggests that male-female co-facilitator teams are more effective in engaging men and couples in program content. Facilitators in mixed-gender teams tend to feel more confident and participants seem more at ease because both partners have someone to whom they can relate. For similar reasons, male-female recruitment teams may be especially effective at bringing in both partners.

**Some BSF Staff Should Have a Mental-Health Background.** While not all instructors or family coordinators need to have clinical training, at least some staff should be available who have professional background and qualifications in assessing mental health problems, especially those that may be common in the target population, such as postpartum depression, substance abuse, and problems resulting from current or past sexual or physical abuse. Family coordinators who will be working closely with couples throughout the program period should be well trained in responding to a range of issues that although not necessarily clinical, may affect the development of couple relationships and entry into marriage.

**Thorough Training of Staff Is Important.** In particular, all staff should be trained in:

- ***The Objectives of the BSF Program.*** It is important that all staff understand the main focus of the BSF program—to improve children's well-being by providing the skills and information needed for their parents to enter and sustain a healthy marriage. Special training should be provided

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to help staff recognize that many unwed parents are already in viable relationships that have the potential to be strengthened, and that healthy marriage is in fact desired by and may be possible for many. Having a clear understanding of the program's goals and their feasibility will dispel potential misconceptions staff may have about the goals of the program.

- ***The Importance of Both Parents and Making the Program Couple-Friendly.*** Most existing organizations that serve low-income families tend to have histories of serving either single mothers or fathers, but not both within the same program. To overcome the unintentional biases that staff may have developed with regard to low-income fathers (or mothers), programs could engage the assistance of experts to help staff create a more couple-friendly environment.
- ***Marriage Skills Curriculum.*** All staff, including the family coordinators, will need to be trained in the core curriculum that covers the skills and information needed for healthy marriage. The family coordinators can reinforce the use of these skills by couples in dealing with their specific issues. Staff training should be provided by the original curriculum developers or their designees, and ongoing technical assistance, pointers, and monitoring should also be provided by them during the initial stages of implementation.
- ***The Signs of Domestic Violence.*** Shame, guilt, or denial on the part of both the abused and the abuser can keep individuals from admitting that a domestic violence issue exists. It is important that all staff be trained in recognizing the signs of domestic violence so that the issue can be addressed promptly.

## **PROGRAM INTENSITY AND DURATION**

Strengthening relationships and encouraging healthy marriage is likely to take time. Ample time will be needed for actual class instruction. Spreading the program over an extended period is likely to be an important ingredient in helping participants digest, internalize, and put into practice the skills they are taught, and to overcome corollary problems affecting their relationships.

Programs should therefore be both intensive and sustained, although the schedule can take a variety of forms. The marriage skills core is likely to require at least 30 to 40 hours of instruction. Classes or groups could be provided, for example, as two-hour sessions once a week over a 15 to 20-week period. Alternatively, schedules could be constructed that involve more frequent and longer classes at the beginning, with shorter and less frequent sessions later in the program, perhaps spread over a longer period. Some meetings with a family coordinator can be scheduled at regular intervals, and might be used for informal

skills practice, delivery of some of the curriculum, or simply to keep lines of communication open and check on how a couple is faring.

In some form, contact with the program should be sustained over a long period. If the duration of skills training is relatively compressed, contacts should continue beyond the instructional period so that principles taught can be reinforced. This may involve a combination of ongoing contact with the family coordinator, attendance at couple support groups, and/or mentoring from a married couple. The overall period of involvement with the program for couples who experience it fully is thus likely to be 12 months or more. By providing intensive and ongoing services, BSF programs will maximize their chances of having lasting effects on couples and their children.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Dion, M.R., B. Devaney, S. McConnell, M. Ford, H. Hill, and P. Winston. "Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2003. Also see Dion, M.R. and D. Strong. "Implementing Programs to Strengthen Unwed Parents: Lessons from Family Connections in Alabama." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Low-income in this section is defined as a Medicaid-covered birth; see Carlson, M. "Low-Income Unmarried Parents: What Can We Learn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study?" Presentation at the Fifth Annual Welfare Reform Evaluation Conference, Washington, DC, June 2002. Proportions of relationship type are similar in the full sample of all fragile families; see McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, Teiler, Carlson, and Audigier. "The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing National Baseline Report." Revised March 2003. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.

<sup>3</sup> Carlson, Marcia, S. McLanahan, and P. England. "Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families." *Demography*, under review.

<sup>4</sup> See notes 2 and 3. Also Edin, K. "How Low-Income Single Mothers Talk About Marriage." *Social Problems*, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 112-133.

<sup>5</sup> Gibson, C., K. Edin, and S. McLanahan. "High Hopes but Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from Marriage Among Low-Income Couples." Working Paper 2003-06. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, June 2003. Edin, K. "Couple Dynamics, Father Involvement and the Attitudes of Fragile Families to Marriage." Presentation at the Sixth Annual National Welfare Reform Evaluation Conference, Washington, DC, May 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See note 3.

<sup>7</sup> Osborne, C. "Diversity Among Unmarried Parents: Human Capital, Attitudes, and Relationship Quality." Working paper 2002-01. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, October 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Edin, K. "Few Good Men: Why Low-Income Single Mothers Don't Get Married." *American Prospect*, vol. 11, 2000, pp. 26-31. Also see note 3.

<sup>9</sup> See note 5, Edin 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Mincy, R. "Who Should Marry Whom? Multiple Partner Fertility Among New Parents." Working Paper 02-03. Princeton, NJ: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, February 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Raphael, J., and R. Tolman. "Trapped by Poverty, Trapped by Abuse: New Evidence Documenting the Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Welfare." Chicago, IL: Taylor Institute, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> See note 5, Edin 2003.

<sup>13</sup> There is one exception to this generality. Unwed couples who marry after conception could also be eligible for BSF because their relationships are also likely to be fragile.

<sup>14</sup> Although some topics are covered in a wide range of curricula, we call attention to two that are most relevant for our target population of expectant/new parents and that have the strongest research base: Becoming Parents (BP) and Bringing Baby Home (BBH). We also have profiled a third curriculum, Couples'

Relationship Enhancement (RE), because of its breadth of use with a variety of populations, including low-income families, and because of its unique focus on empathy.

<sup>15</sup> For example, these include Bernard Guerney's expressive listening technique in RE; Howard Markman's and Scott Stanley's speaker-listener technique used in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program and BP; and John Gottman's techniques that focus on softened startups, accepting partner's influence, and repair and compromise strategies.

<sup>16</sup> These include exercises and activities that build positive feelings and emotional intimacy, such as Gottman's "love maps," as well as strategies such as positive sentiment override. For more information, see Gottman, J., and N. Silver. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert*. Three Rivers: Random House, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Gottman's research identified specific behavioral predictors of marital meltdown, which he named the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (see Gottman, J. "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail." New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). Other researchers call these and similar behavior patterns "danger signs" (Markman, H., S. Stanley, and S. Blumberg. "Fighting for Your Marriage." San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> For research on the transition to parenthood, see Belsky J., and E. Pensky. "Marital Change Across the Transition to Parenthood." In *Transitions to Parenthood*, edited by Palkovitz and Sussman, The Haworth Press, 1988, and Cowan, C.P., P.A. Cowan, G. Heming, E. Garrett, W.S. Coysh, H. Curtis-Boles, and A.J. Boles, III. "Transitions to Parenthood: His, Hers, and Theirs." *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1985, pp. 451-481. Two of the curricula profiled in the appendix (BP and BBH) draw on this body of knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> Two of the curricula profiled in the appendix (BP and BBH) include a strong focus on both infant development and father-infant interaction.

<sup>20</sup> See note 10. Although BSF programs will not decide who marries whom—that is the couple's choice—multiple partner fertility means there may be many stepfamily situations. Interventions will need to be prepared to help couples in their relationships with the noncustodial biological parents of their children from other unions.

<sup>21</sup> Edin, K. and P. England. "Love and Distrust Among Unmarried Parents." Presentation at the National Poverty Center Conference, Washington, DC, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Gottman's research using physiological measures shows that it is important to know how to respond to feeling emotionally overwhelmed or "flooded" by a partner's demands or complaints (Gottman, J. "What Predicts Divorce?" Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1994). Specific breathing and relaxation techniques can be taught to help individuals soothe themselves and move the conversation to a more positive place. Practitioners using RE techniques with families have found that teaching emotion regulation is especially important with low-income couples who may tend to respond more emotionally than cognitively to stressful situations (Mary Ortwein, personal communication).

<sup>23</sup> Research suggests that in terms of its effects on relationships, *how* couples argue is more important than *what* they argue about. Nevertheless, even in the general population, marital conflicts are often about money (Stanley, S. and H. Markman, "Marriage in the 90s: A nationwide random phone survey." Denver, CO: PREP, Inc.) Some scholars believe it is underlying issues like power and control that are often at the heart of these conflicts.

<sup>24</sup> See Tucker, M.B., and C. Mitchell-Kernan. *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans*. New York, NY: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Program experiences with low-income families suggests that it takes more than passive invitations like posters or fliers to attract participation. More aggressive outreach strategies such as those used in Healthy Start, which offers case management and health education to low-income pregnant and postpartum women and their children, will likely be needed.

<sup>27</sup> Data from the Fragile Families study show that 83 percent of unwed mothers in the Fragile Families sample received WIC benefits (McLanahan, personal communication).

<sup>28</sup> Experiences of other programs that serve low-income families often find that such parents are quite motivated to do what is in their child's best interests.

<sup>29</sup> Several marriage/relationship skills programs provide both tangible and intangible incentives for participation. One site of the Family Connections of Alabama program provides \$100 cash for completing the program; another awards "Baby Bucks," points that can be cashed in for various baby items at an on-site

“store.” In an Ohio program, participants receive diapers and baby clothes through the program’s corporate sponsors. In a relationship skills program used in the military, Building Strong and Ready Families, participants receive promotion points and the couple can stay in a hotel with expenses paid while they are trained. The Becoming Parents Program offers payment for home visits and sends participants’ infants a card and gift on their birthday.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the center’s décor at the Bienvenidos family support program in East Los Angeles include posters, art, and photographs that capture Hispanic/Latino cultural themes.

<sup>31</sup> Several programs allow parents to have their infants in the class with them. In BHH, participating couples who have already given birth bring their infants along. Aides are available to hold babies as needed and walk around the room with them while their parents complete exercises or focus on the instruction. Child care for older children is provided in an adjacent room.

<sup>32</sup> The instructors in BBH include teachers and childbirth instructors. The couples’ support groups in BAF are led by mental health professionals. Nurses provide home visits in David Olds’ Children First program and in that program were found to be more effective than paraprofessionals.

<sup>33</sup> Many, but not all, programs for low-income populations hire staff who share race, ethnicity, and language with participants along with life experiences and a connection to local neighborhoods. Instructors who share these characteristics with participants but who are also successfully married can serve as powerful role models, as in the Family Connections of Alabama program (see Dion and Strong, 2004).