



# EFFECTS OF TWO HEALTHY MARRIAGE PROGRAMS FOR LOW-INCOME COUPLES: EVIDENCE FROM THE PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER EVALUATION

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Research shows that parents and children tend to fare better on a range of outcomes when they live in low-conflict, two-parent families. Parent-child relationships are strengthened when parents experience less distress and more stability in their romantic relationships, and growing up with married parents in a stable, low-conflict household is associated with many improved outcomes for children, from education and employment to marriage and childbearing. Recognizing the potential benefits of healthy relationships for low-income families, Congress has funded three rounds of grants for Healthy Marriage (HM) programs since 2006. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA), in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awards and oversees the grants, which aim to promote the well-being and long-term success of children and families by fostering parents' relationship stability and economic well-being. To learn more about the effectiveness of HM programs, OFA funded, and ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation oversaw, a contract with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct the multicomponent Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation. This evaluation included a large-scale, random assignment examination of two federally funded HM programs serving low-income couples that received grants in 2011.

## HEALTHY MARRIAGE PROGRAMS IN PACT

The evaluation team selected two grantees to participate in the PACT HM study: (1) Supporting Healthy Relationships, at University Behavioral Associates in the Bronx, New York; and (2) the Healthy Opportunities



### Results after one year

Compared with usual services available in the community, the HM programs in PACT...

- improved couples' relationship quality, including relationship commitment and support and affection, although they did not improve relationship happiness
- helped couples avoid destructive conflict behaviors, although they did not improve use of constructive conflict behaviors
- increased the likelihood that couples were married at the one-year follow-up
- improved co-parenting, as measured by the degree to which couples reported they believed they worked well together in raising their child(ren)
- did not affect men's earnings or their perceptions of economic improvement; improved women's self-reported earnings, but not earnings based on administrative data

for Marriage Enrichment Program, at the El Paso Center for Children in El Paso, Texas. The core service of the two programs was a group-based workshop, run by trained facilitators and designed to teach couples the skills to support and strengthen their relationships. Topics included understanding the partner’s perspective, developing strategies to avoid harmful fights, and communicating effectively. The two programs also offered job and career advancement (JCA) services, including an optional two-hour JCA workshop and one-on-one meetings with employment specialists. Couples at both PACT HM programs received just over 18 hours of service, on average, mostly from the relationship skills workshops.

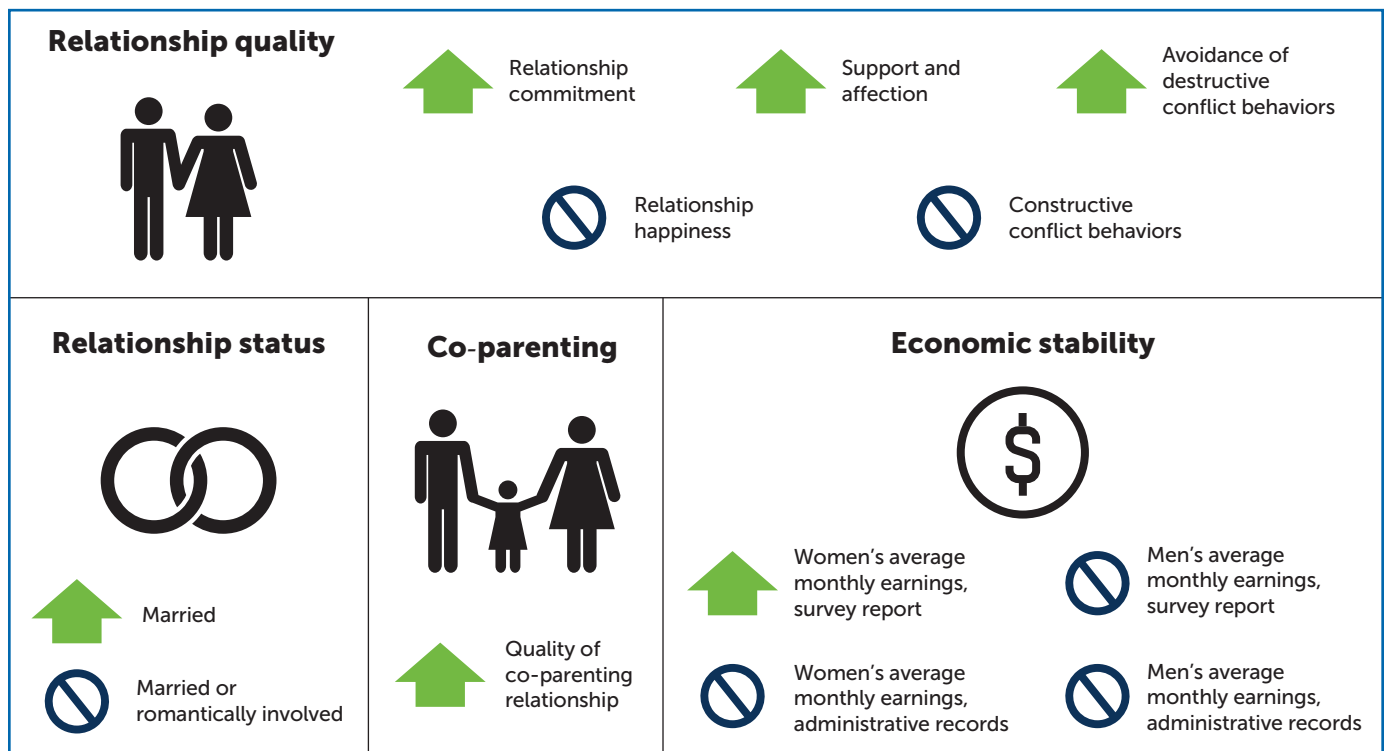
### KEY FINDINGS

The HM programs in PACT improved multiple aspects of the couples’ relationship quality, including the level of commitment partners felt toward their relationship and the level of support and affection they felt for each other, though the programs did not improve relationship happiness (Figure 1). Among the 88 percent of couples

who were married or romantically involved at follow-up, average relationship commitment scale values (on a scale of 1 to 10) for those who were offered the program (the program group) were 9.4 compared to 9.2 for those who were not offered the program (control group), a difference that is statistically significant. Also among the couples who were still together at the time of the follow-up survey, average support and affection scale values for the program group were 3.4 compared to 3.3 for the control group (on a scale of 1 to 4), a difference that is statistically significant. There is also some evidence that the programs helped couples avoid destructive conflict behaviors. The programs did not improve use of constructive conflict behaviors.

The programs increased the likelihood that couples were married at the one-year follow-up by about 4 percentage points (63 percent for the program group versus 59 percent for the control group). Exploratory analysis indicates that this increase in marriage resulted from helping couples who were married at baseline to stay together, rather than encouraging marriage among those who were not initially married.

**Figure 1. Effects of PACT HM programs after one year**



Source: PACT follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research; administrative data, the National Directory of New Hires.

Notes: The arrow indicates the effect was significantly different from zero (at the .10 level or less, using a two-tailed test). The “no” sign indicates the effect was not significantly different from zero.

The programs improved couples' co-parenting relationships, with couples in the program group reporting more positive views about how they worked together in raising their children than control group couples did. The average co-parenting scale score at follow-up was 3.43 for program group couples and 3.38 for control group couples, a difference that is statistically significant. The maximum value for this scale (4) indicates that both partners strongly agreed with the 10 positive statements about the co-parenting relationship used to create the scale.

The programs had limited success in improving the economic outcomes of participants. Men in the program and control groups had similar earnings during the one-year follow-up period. There is mixed evidence that the programs improved women's earnings during the follow-up period. Although women in the HM programs in PACT reported higher earnings on follow-up surveys than did women in the control group, the two groups showed similar earnings in administrative records.

## EVALUATION METHODS

From July 2013 to April 2015, the PACT HM study team randomly assigned 1,595 eligible couples, with equal probability, to either a program group that was offered the HM program services or a control group that was not. The control group received information about other services in the community and could choose to participate in those.

To estimate the overall effect of the HM programs in PACT, the study team tested the difference in average outcomes between program and control group couples. The two programs were weighted equally in this analysis. These estimated effects represent the difference, on average, between what actually happened to couples who were offered PACT HM program services and what would have happened to them if those services had not been available. The study team measured outcomes using data from three sources: (1) baseline surveys completed by each member of the couple when he or she enrolled in the study, (2) follow-up surveys conducted with each member of the couple about a year later, and (3) administrative employment records collected from the National Directory of New Hires, a national database on employment and earnings maintained by the Office of Child Support Enforcement.

### The PACT evaluation

The PACT evaluation is a large-scale multicomponent project to broaden our understanding of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) and Healthy Marriage (HM) programs. The PACT evaluation addresses research questions from several angles by using a mixed-methods approach that includes the following:

- Implementation study of four RF and two HM programs
- Impact study of four RF and two HM programs
- Qualitative study of fathers in four RF programs
- Descriptive study of Hispanic RF programs
- Study of trauma-informed approaches for men in re-entry

Learn more about the evaluation at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/parents-and-children-together-pact-evaluation>.

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