Building Strong Families: From Concept to Reality

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Why Focus on Unwed Parents at the Time of Their Child’s Birth?

- 1/3 of all births are to unmarried women.

- Children growing up without their biological, married parents are at increased risk for:
  - Poverty
  - Dropping out of school
  - Delinquency
  - Substance abuse
  - Becoming teen parents.

- Unwed couples have romantic, supportive relationships and hope to marry.
Over 80% Are Romantically Involved When Their Child Is Born

- Not Romantic: 18%
- Visiting: 35%
- Cohabiting: 47%

But a Year Later, Few Couples Have Achieved Their Aspirations

Several Factors Predict Relationship Status

- Predictors of stability:
  - Mutual supportiveness
  - Women’s trust of their partners
  - Positive attitudes toward marriage
  - Earnings and education

- Predictors of break-up:
  - High conflict and physical violence
  - Multiple partner fertility
  - Problems with alcohol and drugs
Potential Interventions Could Address These Factors

- Research shows it is possible to improve behaviors associated with healthy marriage.

- Contextual factors have received less attention, but could also be addressed:
  - Education and employability
  - Physical and mental health
  - Parenting skills
  - Kin support
  - Attitudes toward marriage
The BSF Concept: Address Obstacles to Healthy Marriage

- Family Support Services
- Marriage and Relationship Education and Skills
- Family Coordinators

Reduction of Marriage Disincentives
There Are Challenges to Implementing This Concept

1. Until now, there were no research-based relationship and marriage curricula for this population.

2. Traditional social service providers do not address relationships and marriage.

3. Neither marriage skills nor social service providers have much experience with couples in this target group.
1. Suitable Marriage and Relationship Curricula Are Needed

- To be used in BSF, a curriculum should:
  - Teach skills shown by research to be predictors of healthy relationships and marriage
  - Be based on curricula with a track record of positive impacts
  - Focus on the transition to parenthood
  - Be appropriate for BSF demographic groups.
Existing Core Curricula Are Being Modified for BSF

Several curricula meeting these criteria are being adapted for BSF, covering:

- Communication
- Conflict resolution
- Enhancing intimacy
- Managing emotions
- The effect of the new baby on the couple’s relationship.
Supplemental Curricula Will Address Other Salient Issues

- New modules are being developed on issues of special importance to unmarried parents:
  - Considering marriage
  - Building mutual trust and commitment
  - Coping with complex families, including children and partners from previous unions
  - Communicating about money
2. Focusing on Relationships and Marriage Takes Some Adjustment

- Providers may have concerns, and need to evolve and adapt their thinking and attitudes.
- Initial staff skepticism fades with experience.
- However, the BSF model resonates with agency sponsors already working with fragile families.
Yet Couples Have Responded Positively

- Once exposed to relationship and marriage skills education, couples have been eager and open-minded.

- Those in a similar pilot program, in focus groups, and in curriculum pilot sessions
  - Said they were surprised--and interested
  - Told us why they would participate
  - Asked that programs reflect their needs.
3. BSF Will Require New Approaches and Provider Capacities

- For BSF programs to succeed, they will need
  - Couple-focused outreach and retention
  - Qualified and well-supported staff
  - Plans for dealing with domestic violence.

- Programs must also reflect participant needs (including logistics).
Overall, BSF Offers a New Opportunity

- Programs are voluntary.
- Providers can be creative in responding to participant needs and interests.
- Both couples and providers may find programs fun and rewarding.
Interest Has Been High and Several BSF Programs Will Begin Soon

- More than 60 entities have requested BSF information or assistance.
- Program development is under way in a dozen sites.
- Pilot operations are anticipated in several sites beginning in winter 2005.
BSF Reinforces the Importance of Evaluation

- Only a careful and rigorous evaluation can determine if BSF has met its goal to improve child well-being.
- MPR will conduct random-assignment evaluations in up to 6 BSF sites.