

**Toward Interventions To Strengthen Relationships And Support Healthy Marriage
Among Unwed New Parents**

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Prepared for *Vision 2004: What is the Future of Marriage?*
National Council on Family Relations
65th Annual Conference
November, 2003

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Running Head: Interventions for Unwed Parents

Key words: marriage, relationships, fragile families, family policy, poverty

Abstract

So far, we know two things with some confidence about marriage and interventions to strengthen them. First, marriage matters to the well-being of children and of couples themselves (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Second, interventions that are well grounded in research on marital dynamics can improve some of the behaviors associated with marital outcomes and reduce divorce (Bradbury et al., 2000; Karney and Bradbury, 1995; Markman et al., 1993). Yet one-third of all births in the U.S. today are to women who do not marry prior to the birth of their child. Nonmarital childbearing is a special concern because the children are more likely to be raised in single-parent families, live in poverty, grow up without their biological fathers, and be at risk for problematic developmental outcomes compared with children born to married parents (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Amato and Booth, 1997).

In considering unmarried parents, there are also two things we do not know: whether interventions to improve relationship dynamics might be successfully designed and implemented, and what effects they would have on unmarried couples and their children. This paper describes three studies sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (DHHS, ACF), designed to answer these questions. The first study developed a conceptual framework that identified the factors to be considered in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs for unwed parents. A subsequent study focused on the implementation of such programs in the field. The third is a large-scale project that will help develop and then rigorously evaluate multiple programs that are based on a common research-based model for strengthening the relationships of unwed parents and supporting healthy marriage for those who choose it.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recently awarded a contract to Mathematica to conduct the Building Strong Families (BSF) project: a large-scale demonstration and longitudinal, rigorous evaluation of comprehensive programs intended to strengthen relationships and support marriage among unmarried expectant parents. Skeptics and supporters alike are eager to know what shape the BSF programs will take. Whom will they serve? What services will the intervention include and what curricula will be used? Who will provide these services, and for how long? The conceptual work behind the BSF program design goes back three years and involved two other studies conducted by Mathematica that provided the foundation for the current evaluation. This paper discusses the findings from these studies and from ongoing work that are providing the conceptual foundation for the BSF model. It also describes key features of the BSF intervention and evaluation, and presents some first insights from the field in terms of program development and implementation issues.

STUDY 1: A FOUNDATION FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

Many researchers today agree that children who grow up in stable, low-conflict families with married biological parents fare best compared with children in other family structures. (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Amato and Booth, 1997). Nevertheless, one-third of all births in the U.S. today are to unmarried women, and the proportion is much higher in some socioeconomic groups (Ventura and Bachrach, 2000). Until recently, the public policy response to this situation focused largely on reducing teen and nonmarital births and on encouraging fathers to financially support their children once the parents separated. The assumption underlying this approach seemed to be that unwed parents had little promise of a future together, and so the best that could be done was to (1) get the father to establish paternity and pay child support and (2) help the mother become self-sufficient and to support her in raising the child herself. More recent policy and program efforts seek to encourage father involvement beyond a financial commitment and help mothers and fathers learn to cooperate with one another—regardless of the nature of their relationship—to ensure that the child has access to both parents. In this approach, the mother-father relationship is addressed only insofar as it affects the likelihood that both parents will continue to be involved with the child. Programs based on this approach tend to serve

unmarried, often nonresidential, fathers and sometimes mothers, but they rarely work together with the two biological parents of a given child who are interested in working toward marriage.

Only very recently have researchers and policymakers begun to consider the possibility that unmarried parents might at some point in their relationship want to build a future together, but encounter barriers that discourage them from doing so. Early findings from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study in 1999 exploded the myth that unwed parents are not interested in marriage by showing that the vast majority of them were in viable relationships with one another around the time of their child's birth, that almost half lived together, and that many expected to marry the other parent of their child (McLanahan et al., 2003). These findings suggested that the hopes and expectations of unwed parents might, in fact, be an opportunity for building a healthy and stable family—provided the intervention occurs early, before couples become discouraged.

Developing a Conceptual Framework

These findings and others that pointed to the difficulty of re-engaging unwed fathers with their children once the parents have become estranged (Knox and Redcross, 2000)—prompted ACF to sponsor a study of whether there might be some way to intervene with these families and support those who aspire to strengthening their relationship or to creating a stable and healthy marriage. Specifically, Mathematica was charged with identifying both the obstacles that might thwart these aspirations and the opportunities for realizing them. The overall goal of the study was to identify the factors that would be important to consider in developing, implementing, and evaluating programs to strengthen the relationship between unwed parents, and to help those who are interested prepare to enter and maintain a healthy marriage. This effort included identifying the intervention components that, based on research, would make sense for the population of unwed expectant parents. The study's methodology included a comprehensive review of the literature on the characteristics, needs, and circumstances of unwed-parent families and the theoretical constructs and empirical evidence related to strengthening couple relationships and marriage; consultations with expert researchers, practitioners and policymakers from a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds; and fieldwork with existing programs that could in various ways provide insight into

issues likely to be salient in a BSF program. We conducted a large number of in-depth telephone interviews and conducted multiple-day visits to directly observe selected sites.

The findings with respect to current practice were sobering. We found no programs or curricula that focused primarily on strengthening the relationship between unwed expectant couples.¹ We observed a wide range of marriage education programs used primarily by engaged or married middle-income couples, including programs specifically for married couples experiencing the birth of a child. But among the array of programs that serve low-income families, it was as if the mother-father relationship among unwed parents was presumed to be either nonexistent or so dysfunctional that it should be ignored or at least not encouraged. We did find many high-quality programs for low-income families that focused on strengthening either the mother's role or the father's role in their child's development, but none that zeroed in on the unwed parent relationship and the implications of that relationship and possible marriage for their child's well-being.

Indeed, the lack of attention to the relationships of low-income unwed couples is mirrored in research. That is, the science of marriage and couple interaction, and the development of knowledge on low-income and unmarried-parent families has proceeded on largely separate but parallel tracks. Marriage researchers (often psychologists) have identified interpersonal behaviors and attitudes that are central to the quality and stability of intimate relationships and marriage, but they have rarely studied these dynamics in low-income (much less unmarried-parent) couples, whose characteristics and circumstances—both in general and with regard to those that may affect their relationships—are likely to differ markedly from those of higher-income couples. Poverty researchers (many of whom are economists), on the other hand, have studied a wide array of contextual factors that affect the well-being of families but tend not to focus on the interpersonal factors that affect the quality and structure of their relationships, how these affect their children, and especially how their relationships might be strengthened. Demographers and sociologists track trends in family structure but rarely consider the potential effect of interventions that might change those trends.

Despite the separateness of these bodies of knowledge, we were able to draw upon the significant volume of research to identify well-supported findings that, once brought together, could inform the

design of unwed-couple programs worthy of testing and evaluation. For example, we learned that at least among middle-class couples, specific interpersonal behaviors have been linked to relationship outcomes (Gottman, 1994), these are teachable within the context of a focused intervention, and in some cases, couples have been shown to benefit from these interventions (e.g., Markman et al., 1993; Giblin et al., 1985). We also found, however, that research in this area has so far largely ignored the broader context of couple's lives and the many factors at play in any marriage/relationship (Bradbury et al., 2000). Scholars who study disadvantaged populations, on the other hand, have found that although unwed couples often have high hopes for their relationships, they also have lower levels of education, complex family relationships, and personal issues or other circumstances that can work against their relationships (Osborne, 2002; Mincy, 2002). They find that without intervention, the relationships between unwed parents quickly unravel, placing mothers and children at risk for poverty, welfare and a host of other negative outcomes (Carlson et al., forthcoming).

These findings and others are discussed in a comprehensive report that lays out a conceptual framework for designing and testing interventions for expectant unwed parents who are interested in strengthening their relationship and exploring marriage (Dion et al., 2003). Figure 1 summarizes this information and offers a structure for thinking about the linkages among these factors. For instance, the first column shows the antecedents of family formation that will drive the design and targeting of interventions and that may have direct effects on long-term outcomes or indirect effects on program participation and intermediate outcomes. The document on which Figure 1 is based discusses family formation in the low-income population, including the influence of (1) environmental factors such as economic conditions and cultural norms, (2) family demographic and other background characteristics that cannot be altered, and (3) parents' resources, skills, and capabilities that do have the potential to be improved. As summarized in the second column, the study's findings led to a detailed discussion of three potential components of an intervention to strengthen relationships of unwed couples expecting a child.

STUDY 2: PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Our second "strengthening families" study (currently nearing its completion) focuses on issues related to the development and implementation of programs to serve unwed parents. Two main objectives

of the study are: (1) to further identify implementation issues likely to arise with the development of programs for unwed parents--by directly observing existing similar programs, and (2) to provide design and implementation guidance to potential program sponsors, based on what we have learned so far.

To meet the first study objective, we are identifying, visiting, and studying the implementation of emerging programs that are providing unwed parents with services that are similar to the BSF program model. For example, one program is providing classes on relationships and marriage to an ethnically diverse population of low-income, mostly unmarried new parents (but not necessarily couples) in several pilot sites. Another program based in neighborhood prenatal clinics facilitates discussion groups with low-income unwed pregnant women and their partners to address various psychosocial issues including relationships and communication. Some of the implementation lessons we are learning from observing these and other programs include:

- The farther from the birth of the child (even within a few months), the less likely it is that unwed couples will still be together and interested in participating as a couple.
- To attract sufficient numbers of expectant unwed couples, programs need to have a clear and ready access point to prenatal clients (such as a birthing hospital, prenatal clinic, or a program that targets pregnant women).
- Staff-client trust is likely to be particularly important in successfully recruiting unwed couples for relationship programs. Program staff find it easiest to recruit participants they already know from their participation in other program services.
- Most unwed couples are open and interested, even “hungry” for information on relationships and marriage. They are eager to learn how to make their relationships work and are appreciative of the opportunity to talk about and discuss them.
- Up-front staff training needs to go beyond teaching the skills necessary for presenting the curriculum to address the motivation, rationale, and need for providing such services, and to help staff begin to think of the *couple* as the unit of service (rather than the mother or the father).
- Program staff are reluctant to make use of relationship skills/marriage education curricula that are not designed for use with low-income unmarried parents. They seek materials that are culturally appropriate and take into account the unique nature of unwed but romantically involved couples who are having a child together.
- Serving a variety of relationship types (unmarried with no partner, married couples, unmarried partners participating together) within the same class/group session can mean diluting or even confusing the lessons that are of particular importance to each.

To meet the study’s second objective, we are identifying a wide range of agencies and organizations that are interested in developing programs to strengthen relationships among unwed expectant parents,

and providing them with assistance as they design, plan, and begin to implement them.² Through this work, we have been able to test out BSF program design and implementation ideas with those on the ground floor while making use of what we have learned. So far we have provided some level of technical assistance to over 35 potential program sponsors including organizations in Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Indiana, Texas, California and elsewhere.

Examples of Current Program Development Plans

At this point, most program sponsors are planning to embed BSF services into, or “piggyback” them onto, other existing programs that provide direct services to low-income families as opposed to developing new programs altogether. The advantages of integrating the program into a developed infrastructure can include ready access to the target population and, sometimes, to other family services. In many cases, community-based providers have earned the trust of their clients or may have good outreach systems, which could make BSF recruitment easier. On the other hand, because these providers are not accustomed to serving couples as a unit, sponsors need to consider re-training or hiring additional staff with a background in relationships/marriage. The following are some examples of emerging BSF program-development strategies:

- ***Prenatal clinics for low-income families.*** One site is working with a major birthing hospital and its affiliated neighborhood prenatal clinics to integrate a BSF-type program. The vast majority of women served by the clinics and hospital are unmarried, low-income, and ethnically diverse. The challenge to successfully integrating a BSF program into this type of setting will be to engage the partners of the pregnant women.
- ***Community-based family resource centers.*** Another site is planning to embed a BSF-type program in multiple centers that serve low-income families with a broad array of social services for mothers and fathers, such as parenting education, fatherhood development, and substance abuse treatment. The challenge will be to attract and retain enough expectant couples.
- ***One-stop centers for new parents.*** A third site is considering adding a BSF-type program to its comprehensive array of family programs available under one roof, including on-site prenatal care. Because this center is affiliated with a major birthing hospital that serves low-income clients, the one-stop shop serves a large number of unmarried expectant parents and provides many of its family services free of charge.

STUDY 3: THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROJECT

The Building Strong Families project builds on the previous work and represents an ambitious effort to strengthen our understanding of how healthy marriage programs for unwed parents can be implemented and with what effect. There are two main goals of this nine-year project. First we are fostering the development and implementation of programs for unwed expectant or new parents, to help them strengthen their relationships and form and sustain a healthy marriage, if that is the path they choose. Because these programs do not yet exist, our role includes guiding and supporting agencies that are interested in developing them so that we end up with the strongest possible programs for evaluation. The second goal, then, once the programs are implemented, is to test what effects they have on couples' relationships and on the emotional and cognitive development of their children over time.

It is essential to understand that couples' participation in BSF programs is completely voluntary. Because the unique aim of BSF is to improve child well-being by strengthening the relationship of the biological parents, recruitment will target unmarried couples who are interested in that goal or who may be thinking of moving toward marriage—not individual mothers or fathers who are not in a viable relationship with the other parent of their child.³ Moreover, the program will serve the unwed parent population, broadly defined. That is, it will not exclusively or primarily target TANF recipients. While most of the unwed parent population is low-income, not all unwed mothers receive TANF (although they are at risk of going on TANF if there is only one adult earner in the home.) Finally, BSF will target adults 18 years and older, since research suggests that marriage among younger teens is often unstable.

Based on the work of the foregoing studies and on continued consultations with experts and practitioners in the field, we have developed a preliminary set of guidelines that lay out the major components of these programs (Hershey, et al., forthcoming). Although the guidelines will continue to evolve, we are confident that there will be four main elements of the BSF program model:

1. ***Marriage Education and Relationship Skills Development:*** The core of the program will be a skills-focused curriculum that centers on strengthening interpersonal behaviors found in research to be the essential underpinnings of a good marriage, such as effective communication skills, strategies for conflict resolution, ways to build fondness and affection, and managing emotions to prevent the escalation of conflicts. This component will be tailored to the needs of low-income unwed parents identified in both research and practice, including such topics as building couples' understanding of what a healthy marriage is, developing constructive relationships with

the parents of children they may have from earlier unions, and dealing with issues of fidelity, trust, and commitment.⁴

2. ***Family Support Services:*** Unmarried parents face personal and family challenges that can impede their ability to form healthy and stable unions, more so than couples who marry before childbearing and who, on average, have higher incomes and education. BSF programs will assess for and offer, either directly or through linkages, various types of assistance such as help finding a job, learning infant care and parenting skills, obtaining health and substance abuse services, and finding child care and housing.
3. ***Family Coordinators:*** Given the complex needs of unwed parents, family coordinators will provide initial and ongoing assessments to identify and link couples to needed services. This will include careful monitoring for domestic violence, but also the range of other issues families may be struggling with. Coordinators will also reinforce the relationship skills taught in the core component, and will encourage completion of the program through regular contacts with families over an extended period of time.
4. ***Strategies for Reducing Disincentives to Marriage.*** BSF services could be complemented by efforts to reduce disincentives to marriage for program participants. Most programs that provide benefits on the basis of family income—including TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies, housing assistance and the EITC—contain disincentives for a second adult to join the family because their earnings are added to the total income that is used to determine benefits. How to reduce these disincentives in ways that give a fair test to realistic policy alternatives is the subject of ongoing discussion.

The BSF program will be intensive in that couples will continue to have contact with it in some way over 12 to 18 months. For instance, a period of relationship/marriage skills instruction over several months might be followed by a much longer period of ongoing support provided through groups, mentors, or individual home visits by family coordinators.

The content of the relationship/marriage skills curriculum will be informed by the best available research and program experience. There are hundreds of relationship/marriage education programs, each with a variety of strengths and weaknesses—especially with regard to unmarried low-income expectant parents. A limited number of existing curricula will be suggested as the foundation for the BSF instructional component. These curricula will need to be both adapted and supplemented for use with the target population, as described more fully in the BSF program guidelines.

The BSF Evaluation Plan

Programs that fulfill the BSF guidelines will be considered for the evaluation. Beyond the program guidelines, other criteria will be important for the selection of evaluation sites. To achieve sample sizes large enough to detect program impacts, we will have to choose sites that can enroll, randomly assign and

serve at least 1,000 couples. We also will want sites that reflect some diversity in the populations served, the region of the country, and the specific content and format of the intervention services. We expect to end up with six sites. Some may be multi-location programs, perhaps with each location operating at a modest scale, but in the aggregate with a large enough sample for the site analysis.

The evaluation will both document the implementation of BSF services and estimate their impacts.

It will thus address four questions:

1. *Foundation:* What underlying conditions, preparation, resources, and context make it possible to implement programs that focus on supporting healthy relationships and marriage among low-income unwed couples with children? On what theories of behavior and family well-being do the programs rest? What types of organizations are well suited to operating such programs?
2. *Operation:* What are the important issues and challenges in designing, implementing and operating these programs; and what lessons can be drawn from the program experience? What services are included, and how do they complement existing programs for low-income families?
3. *Participation:* Who participates, and for how long; and what services do they receive? How does participation differ for subgroups?
4. *Impacts:* How do BSF programs affect couples' attitudes and expectations about marriage, whether they marry, and the quality and stability of their relationships? What are the effects on parents and their relationships with their children, and on the well-being and development of the children? Which program designs work best?

Figure 2 provides an overview of the BSF project schedule. At this point, we expect that refining the program model and developing sites that will implement it will last well into 2004. The identified sites will be observed during a pilot operations period before sample enrollment begins, most likely in mid-2004 in the earliest sites. We expect that in each of the six sites, sample enrollment will continue for 18 months. Impact results will thus be reported in 2008, based on the 12-month follow-up survey and in late 2010, based on the 36-month follow-up. Ongoing information about the project will be posted at www.buildingstrongfamilies.info.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, substantial progress has been made in defining the features of interventions that could strengthen and support healthy relationships and marriage among interested unwed expectant parents. We are continuing to refine the key principles of such interventions along with their likely components, topics to be covered, and service delivery strategies; and program sponsors are identifying ways to implement

the program in their areas. Yet we are only at the beginning of learning what works to help unwed parents reach their aspirations for a healthy marriage and family. The continuing evolution of our knowledge in this area will benefit from collaboration among researchers and practitioners who study or work with low-income families and those whose primary focus has been relationships and marriage.

Endnotes

¹ Two curricula are now in development stages but have not yet been used or tested.

² To request this assistance, visit our website at www.buildingstrongfamilies.info and leave an email message. For a description of the type of assistance that is available, see the BSF brief “Supporting Healthy Marriage and Strengthening Relationships of Unwed Parents: Technical Assistance Available.”

³ However, those uninvolved couples may benefit from an intervention that focuses on “team parenting” – helping parents learn to cooperate with one another so that the child can have access to the involvement of both parents.

⁴ For more information on barriers to marriage identified in qualitative and quantitative research, see Edin and England 2003; Edin 2003; and Gibson et al 2003).

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FIGURE 1

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

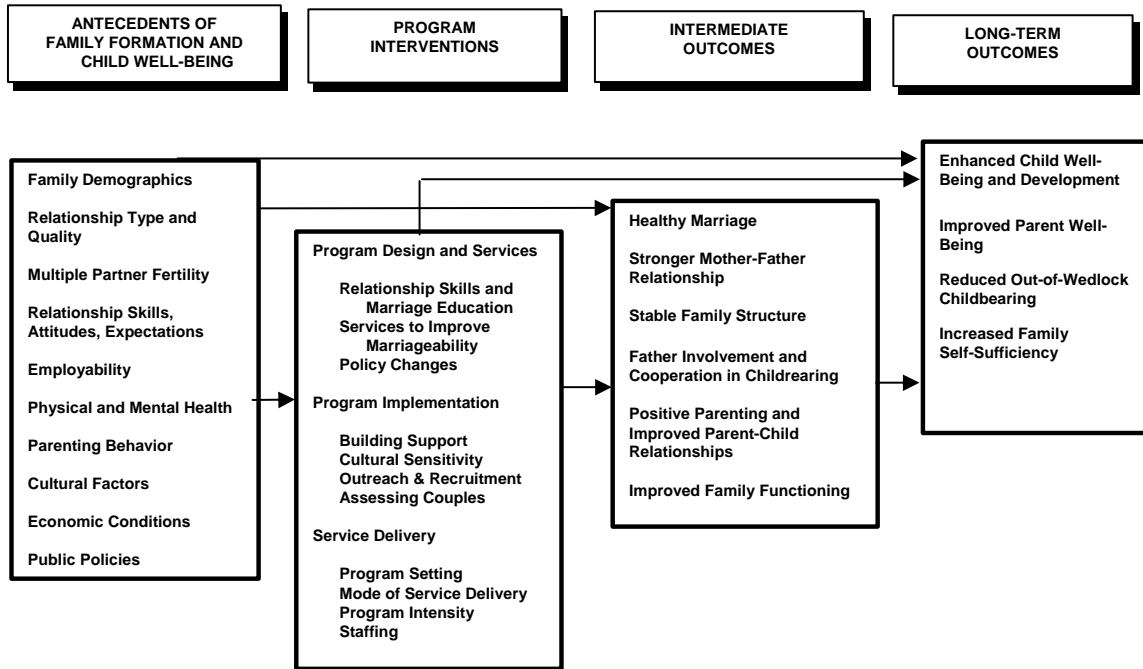


FIGURE 2

BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROJECT SCHEDULE

	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11
Develop programs	*****									
Monitor pilots		*****								
Enroll sample		*****								
Document services			**R*****R							
Follow-up surveys				*****			*****			
Analyze/report impacts						*****R			*****R	

R = Interim or final report