Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong And Healthy Marriages:

A Conceptual Framework For Interventions

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three of the four policy goals of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act involve family formation. These goals reflect a large body of evidence that documents negative consequences for children of nonmarital unions and single-parent households. Although there are exceptions, children raised in single-parent families are at greater risk of living in poverty and of developing social, behavioral, and academic problems than are children raised in married-parent families.

This report presents a conceptual framework for interventions that would address the needs and circumstances of unmarried parents and provide relationship skills instruction and knowledge for those who would choose to form and sustain healthy marriages. It builds on research indicating that the period around the time of a child’s birth may represent a critical moment for strengthening couple bonds. The conceptual framework therefore focuses on designs for intervening with unwed parents just before or soon after the birth of a child. The conceptual framework is the product of several activities conducted in the Strengthening Families With Children Born Out of Wedlock study (Strengthening Families study).

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES STUDY

The overall goal of the Strengthening Families study is to develop a framework for intervening with “fragile families” just before or soon after the birth of an out-of-wedlock child. Fragile families are defined as economically and socially vulnerable unwed parents and their children.

To develop the conceptual framework, the Strengthening Families study involved:

• An Expert Panel. An expert panel comprising practitioners, policymakers, and researchers provided input with regard to areas relevant for strengthening family relationships.

• Review of the Literature. This review focused on the characteristics and needs of families with children born out of wedlock and on the theoretical constructs and empirical evidence related to marriage and strengthening couple relationships.
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• **Extensive Fieldwork.** Telephone interviews with a broad range of programs and in-depth field research on selected programs provided useful information on programs that serve low-income families in general and on programs that focus on marriage and relationship skills and the transition to parenthood.

• **Technical Assistance.** Work with nascent state programs to encourage family formation and healthy marriages revealed the range of issues that state officials are facing in designing and implementing these programs.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents the Strengthening Families conceptual framework. It highlights the important linkages between the characteristics of families (column 1), program interventions to strengthen families with children born out of wedlock (column 2), intermediate changes in family and parent relationships (column 3), and longer-term behaviors and related outcomes potentially affected by program interventions (column 4).

Program interventions to strengthen families with children born out-of-wedlock are the primary focus of this conceptual framework (Figure 1, column 2). Three general program components are considered: services to improve couple relationships and promote healthy marriage, services to improve marriageability, and policy options to remove disincentives to marriage.

PROGRAM APPROACHES TO PROMOTING HEALTHY MARRIAGES BY STRENGTHENING COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

In recent years there has been a proliferation of programs that seek to help couples avoid interpersonal behaviors that undermine their relationship and develop positive behaviors that nurture it. The common assumption of these programs is that couples can be taught the skills they need to strengthen their relationship. Marriage and relationship skills programs fall into three categories: (1) programs that primarily involve couples in classes, lectures, seminars, or workshops, (2) programs that use couple-to-couple mentoring, and (3) programs that start with an assessment, or inventory, of the couples’ compatibility and relationship issues. Programs also vary by the target population served, which can be engaged or married couples, distressed couples, new parents, and middle- and high-school students. Marriage programs that intervene with couples around the time of their child’s birth are especially relevant to a conceptual framework that seeks to strengthen new fragile families. Most researchers conclude that although the period around a child’s birth is often joyful, the weeks and months afterward are typically stressful and can spawn maladaptive behavior patterns for a significant number of new parents—even among relatively advantaged middle-income families.

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Three program approaches to intervention during the transition to parenthood include:

- **Educational Approach.** This program approach uses classroom techniques to provide couples with the communication and conflict-resolution skills needed to successfully navigate the stressful period after childbirth and to prevent erosion in the marital relationship. This approach typically includes education on self-care and on the care and development of infants.

- **Emotional/Social Support.** An alternative approach for couples in transition to parenthood is to provide a supportive context in which they can process their feelings and learn from other couples who are also in transition. This approach takes the form of small couple support groups led by a mental health professional. The goal is to provide a safe place for couples to share their concerns about emerging family issues and to discuss actual, ongoing problems. Although the sessions should not be construed as group psychotherapy, they are therapeutic in the sense that couples receive emotional support in confronting real and present issues and in adjusting to their circumstances in a positive way.

- **Combined Approach.** This approach combines the two preceding approaches. It offers an educational component, such as a workshop, to teach specific marriage and relationship skills, encourage the positive involvement of fathers in their infants’ lives, and teach couples how to form healthy bonds with
their infants. But it goes beyond the skills-based component to provide couples support group sessions that encourage the processing of thoughts, feelings, and experiences and help couples develop insight and understanding from other couples. The support groups also reinforce the information provided in the workshop.

In considering the application of existing marriage and relationship education programs to the low-income unmarried-parent population, three limitations suggest the need for adaptation. First, most marriage education programs were primarily designed for and tested with middle-income, educated, and mostly white families. Second, the programs were developed for and are primarily used with couples who are already married or engaged—rather than unmarried couples who are romantically involved. And third, although all socioeconomic population subgroups experience personal and social challenges, the conventional programs typically do not address such issues as employment, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health problems, or other issues that can place considerable stress on couple relationships, and that are more commonly seen in low-income families.

**PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE MARRIAGEABILITY**

The target population for the interventions that could be developed on the basis of this conceptual framework is expectant or new unmarried parents. These parents, many of whom are low-income, are likely to face a range of personal and family challenges that may act as barriers to family formation and healthy marriages. In addition to strengthening relationships, it may be important to address such personal and family challenges so that unmarried parents become more capable, and more attractive as, marriage partners—that is, to enhance their “marriageability.”

Marriageability is conventionally defined as a person’s attractiveness as a marriage partner based on the human capital—education and employment history—that contribute to one’s labor market participation and earnings, and thus ability to help provide for a family. Marriageability can also be conceived more broadly as including personal resources and skills that, if improved, might make one more attractive as a marriage partner. Thus, the types of services that could improve marriageability are:

- **Employment and Education Services:** Employment services could include assistance with job search, on-the-job training, job development and networking, and classes in resume writing, interviewing, and “soft skills” such as the ability to show respect for authority and minimize conflict in the workplace. Programs may link participants to such training and education services as General Education Degree (GED) preparation, adult education, English-as-a-Second Language classes, and vocational training, all of which can lead to more and better job opportunities.
• **Assessment and Services for Health, Mental Health, and Domestic Violence.** Participants may need to be assessed for a variety of needs related to their personal health and well-being. Services could be arranged to address problems involving physical health, mental health (including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and generalized anxiety), and substance abuse/dependency.

• **Life Skills, Parenting and Child Development Education.** Many programs for low-income families offer parenting education to help participants understand the stages of child development, develop relationship and communication skills, set appropriate household rules, and effectively discipline their children. Life skills services teach parents how to perform the activities and tasks needed to maintain a household and remain financially stable.

• **Co-Parenting and Responsible Fatherhood.** Co-parenting services focus on the ability of mothers and fathers to work as a team to raise their children. These services encourage the financial and emotional involvement of fathers in their children’s lives. They often work to instill values—such as honesty, honor and commitment—while helping the men to be responsible fathers and role models in their communities.

The offer and delivery of any of these services to improve marriageability must be undertaken with paramount concern that program participants not be encouraged to remain with abusers and put themselves or their children at risk. In some cases, for example, programs will work to help victims of domestic violence leave abusive relationships and achieve safety. For some participants, services can help perpetrators learn nonviolent forms of communication and practice anger management. Other services can help victims recover from psychological trauma so they can enter into healthy relationships in the future. These services may not only treat the problem but also help to make victims and abusers more aware of what constitutes a healthy relationship or marriage.

**POLICY OPTIONS TO ENCOURAGE MARRIAGE**

Most means-tested programs that provide benefits on the basis of family income—including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, Medicaid, childcare subsidies, housing assistance, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—contain a disincentive for a second working adult to openly 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.

Some aspects of the child support enforcement program may also discourage marriage. The large current child support obligations and arrearages facing many low-income fathers, as well as the large share of child support payments they make that is retained by the government, may contribute to the tension between parents and push fathers away from their families. On the other hand, empirical evidence suggests that states with stricter child
Disincentives to marriage could be reduced by policy changes such as the following:

- **TANF Policy Changes.** Disregard some or all of the spouse or cohabiting partner’s income; remove the categorical eligibility requirements for two-parent families that still exist in some states; provide a lump sum payment or higher monthly benefits for married couples; ease the work requirements on two-parent families; and provide financial security as welfare recipients move into the labor force.

- **Child Support Policy Changes.** Enforce child support policies more strictly; bring child support payments in line with the father’s ability to pay and forgive some arrearages; reduce the amount of child support retained by the government; and require paternity establishment and determination of child support obligations for all unwed, cohabiting fathers.

- **Other Policy Changes.** Expand health care coverage for married-parent families, disregard all or some of spouse’s earnings in determining housing assistance eligibility and benefits, reduce or eliminate any disincentives to marriage in child care policies, and reduce the marriage penalty in the tax system.

**PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

An overall program model could blend elements from each of the three general approaches. There are two possible paths for developing such a blended model: (1) modifying existing relationship skills and marriage education programs to include a focus on the needs and circumstances of unwed low-income families and (2) adding or strengthening a relationship component in a program that currently provides other services to low-income families.

Using the first approach, program development would entail modifying marriage education and couple relationship programs to serve a target population of expectant or new unmarried parents. One advantage of this option is that there is no need to adapt the program mission, goals, or core service components in order to provide couples with the skills needed to encourage, develop, and sustain healthy relationships and marriages. Because existing couple relationship programs have typically served middle- and upper-income married or engaged couples, however, this option may pose challenges with regard to fully reaching the target population—not only geographically, but culturally and linguistically as well.

The second option—adding a relationship component to a program that currently serves low-income families—is promising because many of these programs have a well-developed infrastructure and staff with strong awareness of the needs of such families.
Because such programs already serve a low-income target population, recruitment and enrollment procedures may be less of an issue. In addition, existing programs have organizational foundations and structures in place to deliver services, so adding new services may be more feasible than developing a new program. On the other hand, many existing programs are not oriented toward couples and, as a result, may find it challenging to incorporate a message about healthy relationships and marriages into the program’s mission, goals, and services.

The choice of one program development path or the other may depend on the nature of the sponsoring organizations and the foundation of existing program services on which a new program is built. Organizations that already run programs focusing on relationship skills could modify their couple and marriage programs to address broader human capital and service needs of low-income couples. In contrast, public or community agencies that already provide services to low-income families—with home visiting programs, fatherhood interventions, prenatal care initiatives, or early childhood development programs—could strengthen or add a relationship or healthy marriage component to their services. The extent to which TANF and child support policy changes are integrated into either program model is likely to depend on the involvement of high-level officials in a state welfare agency or governor’s office who can “champion” the new program, rallying the will and support needed to change current welfare or other social policies.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Moving from a general program model to implementation is a complex, intensive, and ongoing process. It involves multiple decisions concerning building support, providing culturally sensitive services, conducting outreach and recruitment of program participants, assessing couples and families, and resolving service delivery issues such as the setting and mode of service delivery, service intensity, and staffing.

Building Support for a Focus on Healthy Marriage. Addressing marriage poses a dilemma for some programs and program staff, at least as they first design and implement a new program approach. This is especially true for staff working with existing programs that provide services to low-income families. They are often hesitant to encourage, or to discuss, the benefits or challenges of different relationship outcomes such as marriage for fear of either stigmatizing those couples who are not married or encouraging the continuation of unhealthy relationships.

Despite some uneasiness about promoting marriage, relationship issues are commonly discussed in the course of many services provided to low-income families. Program staff say they sometimes discuss topics like conflict, co-parenting, and communication with their participants, but this does not occur in a structured way, and the use of a formal research-tested curriculum is rare. Nevertheless, the natural interest in couple and family relationships provides an opportunity for encouraging healthy marriage, and creative ways to overcome the resistance to this goal need to be considered. Several possibilities are:
• **Provide Information on Marriage Research and Marriage Education.** Many individuals are unaware of the research showing that children fare best when raised by married parents. Others are unfamiliar with the array of promising program approaches that could, with some adaptation, be used to help couples who are interested in strengthening their relationships. Information dissemination efforts could involve addressing these “why” and “how” questions by:

- Providing easy-to-read and readily understandable information taken from research on the beneficial effects of healthy marriage on child well-being
- Compiling, disseminating, and demonstrating some of the most promising curricula used in marriage education and relationship skills programs
- Suggesting areas for adaptation to make programs more appropriate for low-income unmarried parent couples

• **Avoid Overstating the Research Findings.** Presentations involving long lists of the statistics on better outcomes for children and adults in married households can come across as simplistic and as slights to the successes of single parents. This might be avoided if the presenters acknowledge that marriage is not for everyone, that getting married is not a sure path to positive outcomes, that the real goal is to improve the chance of success, and that, other things being equal, a healthy marriage gives parents and children a better chance of success in many spheres of life.

• **Engage in Strategic Planning Discussions.** It takes time and open dialogue to address initial resistance to the idea of healthy marriage as a program goal. Reaching out to key state and local agencies and community leaders (especially those involved with domestic violence issues), convening community or statewide meetings or workshops to discuss the role of healthy marriage promotion in a public program, and contacting other states or community organizations that are operating marriage initiatives are some ways to start and sustain the dialogue needed for buy-in.

• **Provide Staff Training.** The reluctance to promoting healthy marriage sometimes emanates from an inadequate understanding on the part of program staff about the nature of relationship education services or the conditions under which services would be provided. Staff may be concerned about the risk of encouraging individuals to remain in unhealthy relationships, or they may fear that the new initiative will require that they push marriage for particular couples. Investing in staff training may help to alleviate these and other staff concerns by presenting information on the content of the intervention and the circumstances under which couples would be eligible.
• **Tailor the Intervention.** Staff may be less resistant to marriage education and relationship skills instruction in programs in which client needs are assessed and services are tailored to them. In particular, unmarried parents in an abusive relationship and very young unmarried parents might need a different set of services to address their needs.

**Providing Culturally Sensitive Services.** Participants are more interested and motivated to participate in services that are sensitive to their culture and community. Culturally appropriate programs seek to understand the attitudes and values of the population being served and to integrate aspects of that culture into services. Programs do this in a variety of ways, including incorporating traditions and cultural teachings in curricula, hiring staff of similar backgrounds, and using cultural themes in program materials.

**Conducting Outreach and Recruitment.** Enrolling individuals in programs is often a major challenge faced by program staff. Even if a program is mandatory, eligible individuals in the target population need to be aware of their need for program services and the likelihood that the program services will benefit them. Much can be learned from the outreach strategies already used by some programs.

It may be easier to address outreach and recruitment issues if relationship services are being added to programs that already serve the target population. For example, programs focusing on early childhood development or those serving pregnant and postpartum women already have the infrastructure and a client base from which to recruit participants for additional services.

**Assessing Couples and Families.** Assessing the needs and circumstances of low-income unmarried parents can be critical to providing them with relevant services, including marriage and relationship education. Personal and family problems can act as barriers to stable and healthy relationships. They also have the potential to complicate the provision of services. In most cases, assessments could be used to tailor services to couple needs; in other cases, these assessments may screen individuals away from services that would not be relevant to them.

**Service Delivery Issues.** Programs developed to strengthen families will need to address the following service delivery issues:

• **Context and Setting for Service Delivery.** Settings that could serve as a base for service delivery are health care clinics and programs, welfare programs, early childhood education settings, faith-based programs, and community-based organizations.

• **Mode of Service Delivery.** Possible modes of service delivery are classes, lectures, seminars, or workshops; home visits; or support groups.
• **Program Intensity.** Programs often face a trade-off between providing fewer services to more people or providing more services to fewer people. Services can be considered as low, moderate, or high in intensity, depending on their frequency and duration, participants’ exposure to the program, and extent of interaction between participants and program staff.

• **Program Staffing and Training.** Hiring and training high-quality staff to implement the program is key. Individuals who implement relationship and marriage education programs must be trained and certified in the use of the program’s curriculum. One of the most important characteristics that staff must have is an understanding of and a sensitivity to the needs and challenges facing the service population with which they are working.

**PROGRAM EVALUATION: DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS**

To provide policymakers and other stakeholders with the most defensible evidence of the effectiveness of the interventions, evaluations should be based on random assignment, have a sample of families that is large enough so that policy-relevant impacts can be detected, collect a wide variety of outcome data, and follow the study families long enough to detect long-term impacts.