Overview

- The Building Strong Families Project
- Activities in support of BSF program development
- Lessons learned from program development efforts
The BSF Project

- Involves both program development and a long-term experimental evaluation of program impacts
- A research-based intervention that is comprehensive, intensive, and voluntary
- For romantically involved unwed couples having a baby together
- Aim is to improve child well-being through healthy parental relationships and marriage
The BSF Program Model

- Skills for improved couple relationships and marriage: education, information, and support
- Support services to address problems that can affect relationships and marriage
- Family coordinators to encourage participation and reinforce skills over time
- Potential policy changes to reduce marriage penalties
Source of Lessons Learned

- Process study of similar programs
- Technical assistance to interested sites
- Curriculum development and testing
Process Study of Similar Programs

- Implementation analysis of programs with aspects similar to those of BSF model
  - Direct observation of program operations
  - Interviews with program staff
  - Focus groups with program participants
BSF Curriculum Development

- Sponsoring the adaptation of “foundational curricula”
- Sponsoring development of supplementary material specific to needs of unwed parents
- Monitoring field testing of adaptations
Technical Assistance to Prospective Sites

- Guidance on strategy and design
- Understanding of service needs and gaps
- Curriculum selection and adaptations
- Outreach and recruitment strategies
- Staffing plans and structure
- Systems to monitor participation
- Guidance on evaluation design
Lesson: Choose Program Setting with Access to Target Population

- Go where the target population goes: programs for low-income unmarried parents
- Identify programs that serve such parents during pregnancy or shortly after
- Embed services in trusted community-based programs
- Use programs with existing infrastructure and access or links to support services
Lesson: Choose Appropriate Staff and Train Well

- Address misconceptions, concerns among existing staff
- Retrain and/or add new staff
- Use male-female teams for recruiting and for class facilitation
- Build in access to professional counseling for couples in distress
Lesson: Focus on Recruitment and Retention Strategies

- Develop strong and creative efforts to recruit both partners
- Screen to focus on couples with ongoing relationships
- Make program engaging and accessible
- Use incentives and personal contact to encourage program completion
Lesson: Select a Curriculum Tailored for Unwed Couples

- Providers want curricula that are relevant, meaningful, and sensitive to those they serve.
- Content should be tailored to needs of unwed romantically involved couples—a unique subset of the low-income population.
- Relationship goals of unwed couples are often not the same as those of unattached single parents.
Lesson: Existing Curricula Need to Be Adapted for BSF Couples

- Lower literacy level
- Use concrete, experiential exercises
- Seek participant input
- Break skills down into multiple steps
- Slow the pace and increase skill review
- Use culturally sensitive materials
- Use simple handouts instead of a text
- Reflect a nonjudgmental approach
- Increase emphasis on the positives
Lesson: Existing Curricula Need to Be Supplemented for BSF Couples

- Trust and Commitment
- Understanding Marriage
- Complex Family Relationships
- Regulating Emotional Responses
- Communicating about Finances
Lesson: Unwed Couples Are Interested in BSF Services

- Evidence from work conducted to date suggests that unwed couples are hungry for help with relationships and marriage.
- The majority of unwed couples participating in 4-6 hour curriculum field tests have:
  - Participated enthusiastically
  - Showed clear interest in the material
  - Enjoyed being with couples like themselves
  - Indicated they would attend the full program if it were offered
Summary

- Process study, TA, and curriculum development activities providing lessons about program development/implementation
- Curriculum specific to unwed couples being developed and field-tested by experts
- Many organizations interested in implementing BSF program model
- Unwed couples are interested in participating