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Policies That Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?

By
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As described in earlier articles, children whose parents have higher incomes and education levels are more likely to grow up in stable two-parent households than their economically disadvantaged counterparts. The widening gaps in fathers' involvement in parenting and in the quality and stability of parents' relationships may reinforce disparities in outcomes for the next generation. This article reviews evidence about the effectiveness of two strategies to strengthen fathers' involvement and family relationships—fatherhood programs aimed at disadvantaged noncustodial fathers and relationship skills programs for parents who are together. Fatherhood programs have shown some efficacy in increasing child support payments, while some relationship skills approaches have shown benefits for the couples' relationship quality, coparenting skills, fathers' engagement in parenting, and children's well-being. The research suggests that parents' relationship with each other should be a fundamental consideration in future programs aimed at increasing low-income fathers' involvement with their children.

Keywords: responsible fatherhood; marriage education; fatherhood programs; evaluation

Introduction and Policy Context

Men in the United States who grow up with different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds experience enormous disparities in their young adult outcomes, not only in the realms of education and employment but also in their likelihood of forming stable relationships with the mothers of their children and with the children (Berger and Langton this volume). Given considerable evidence that fathers' parenting support—both financial and emotional—is an important foundation for child well-being (Carlson and Magnuson this volume), increasing the number of children who grow up either in stable two-parent families or at least with the support of both parents is an important goal of public policy.

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One set of policies and programs that might ultimately affect fathers' capacity as partners and parents are those that target the educational and economic outcomes of young fathers. A complementary set of interventions targets family relationships and includes responsible fatherhood programs for low-income noncustodial fathers and marriage education or relationship skills programs for low-income parents who are in a relationship together. Both types of family relationship interventions aim to increase fathers' likelihood of playing a positive long-term role in their children's lives, either by increasing the quality and stability of the couple's relationship if parents are together or by helping fathers stay engaged with their children if the couple's relationship has ended. This article will provide an overview of the efforts to strengthen family relationships, what we have learned from evaluations to date about their effectiveness, and areas that research suggests should be priorities for future program development and evaluation. Based on rigorous evidence to date, there are grounds for optimism with respect to each of these approaches, but there are also considerable challenges that require additional program development and research.

In the past two decades, both the federal and state governments have funded programs to encourage noncustodial fathers' involvement with their children and to strengthen two-parent families. The early 1990s saw the advent of responsible fatherhood programs aimed at bolstering the capacity of low-income noncustodial fathers to pay child support. These were one element of welfare reform efforts to recalibrate the "social contract" balancing government-provided financial support for low-income children, on one hand, with contributions from parents via their own earnings, on the other. In 1996, when the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program was established with passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), one of its four goals was to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families" (PRWORA 1996, 8), in recognition that on average, two parents have

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greater capacity than one to provide children with economic and parenting support. A decade later, Congress authorized \$150 million per year for five years for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood funding within the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 that reauthorized the TANF program. These funds have been used by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to support the 2006 Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grants to state, local, and community-based service providers. Grantees offer voluntary programs that help individuals and couples to build skills and knowledge that research has found to be associated with stable, healthy relationships and marriages. Some states have also allocated some of their own TANF funds to programs targeting marriage and relationship skills and fatherhood, resulting in significant funding levels for these programs in Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah. In addition, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas waive marriage license fees for couples who take a premarital skills course.

One question of importance to practitioners is whether future federal and state efforts will reduce long-standing divides between proponents of funding in three related domains: programs for noncustodial fathers, for strengthened relationships or healthy marriages between parents, and for the prevention of domestic violence. Throughout the history described above, shifts in funding among these three priorities at the federal level resulted in a “swinging pendulum” effect, creating uncertainties that undermined efforts of community-based nonprofits and other providers of direct services to build high-quality, research-based programs (Martinson and Nightingale 2008). Reducing the influence of the swinging pendulum would provide an important foundation for building evidence-based services for families.

Two recent developments indicate that responsible fatherhood and couples’ relationship quality are closely linked rather than opposing priorities. First, qualitative, longitudinal, and now intervention research findings indicate that a man’s capacity to fulfill his role(s) as father is often embedded in his relationship with the child’s mother. For couples who live together, the quality of their relationship is associated with their ability to “coparent” (or parent cooperatively) and the father’s level of engagement with his child (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Egeland and Carlson 2004). In turn, programs that are effective at *strengthening* the relationship between parents who live together have been found to increase fathers’ involvement in parenting (P. Cowan et al. 2009). For parents who are no longer together, there is an even stronger link between the parents’ ability to cooperate and the father’s level of involvement with the child, because custodial parents (usually mothers) have considerable control over noncustodial parents’ access to their young children, and ongoing conflict between parents about visitation is likely to lead to fathers’ withdrawal. It therefore makes sense that responsible fatherhood programs, which have historically worked with noncustodial fathers but not the custodial parents, have found it difficult to change fathers’ involvement with their children other than their child support payments (Miller and Knox 2001). In short, these basic research and intervention findings suggest that engaged fatherhood and collaborative couple relationships are closely linked.

Second, in recent years, some local service providers have expended considerable effort to find common ground on behalf of the families they serve in responsible fatherhood and marriage and relationship skills programs (Ooms et al. 2006). Partly in recognition of the research evidence mentioned above, the grants that ACF funded in 2006 allowed responsible fatherhood grantees, not only healthy marriage grantees, to provide relationship skills programs to *couples* as part of their mandate to strengthen fathers' involvement with children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services n.d.-b). Supported by these policies, some providers of responsible fatherhood programs have added to their service menus relationship skills programs for unmarried or married couples. In addition, some family service centers that previously served primarily mothers and children but now work with couples report a better understanding of how to be supportive of fathers, a potentially important development in the community service landscape. Both responsible fatherhood and couple relationship service providers have worked closely with domestic violence partners in their communities to serve families safely and appropriately. Thus, on the ground, service offerings are beginning to reflect the evidence in research that services related to fatherhood and to couple relationships might be connected, rather than alternatives to one another.

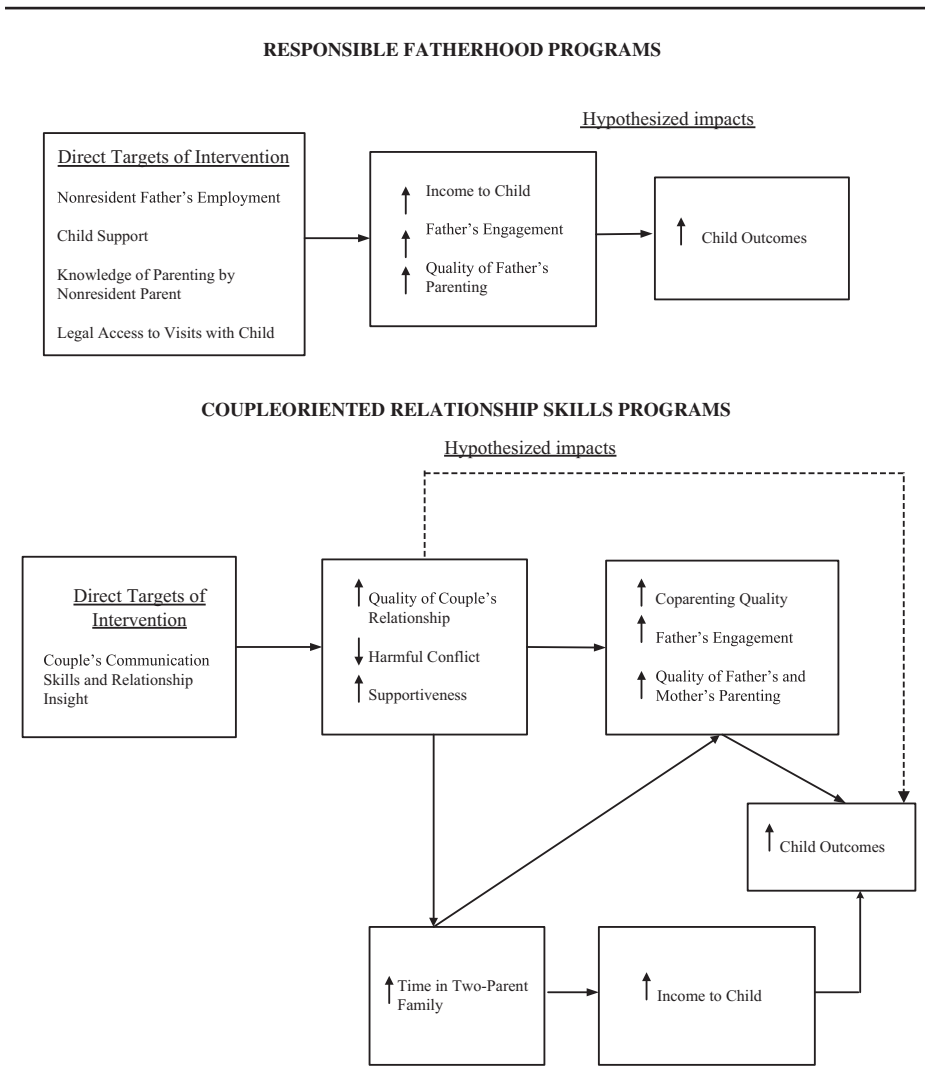
What Do We Know from Intervention Research about Strengthening Fatherhood and Families?

This section summarizes current evidence about “what works” from research conducted on responsible fatherhood programs and relationship skills programs targeting couples. These fields currently have different levels of evidence to support evidence-based policy-making. Marriage and relationship skills programs have been the subject of randomized trials, in part because a number of interventions were originally developed by researchers who were interested in applying basic research to find effective strategies to strengthen relationships. Fatherhood programs, in contrast, grew out of government officials' interest in increasing disadvantaged fathers' capacity to pay child support and have been the subject of many more implementation studies than random assignment studies. Nevertheless, there is much to learn from the body of evidence available for each of these program types.

Two program models: Responsible fatherhood and relationship skills programs for couples

Before discussing the results of particular intervention studies, it is worth understanding some basic differences between the most common models for responsible fatherhood programs and couple-oriented relationship skills programs. As shown in the top half of Figure 1, fatherhood programs targeting low-income noncustodial fathers have typically consisted of multiple components aimed at increasing capacity

FIGURE 1
 Strengthening Fatherhood and Family Relationships: Two Models



to support children financially and emotionally. These programs often provide a combination of employment services, group-based curricula aimed at helping fathers to develop a vision of their role as fathers, and, sometimes, links to the child support enforcement system. To varying degrees, they have also worked with fathers on parenting skills and relationship skills that would be helpful in coparenting with a former partner. The theory is that these programs can increase the income going to the child and improve the father-child relationship. In turn, these are expected to improve outcomes for children.

In contrast, relationship skills programs typically work with both members of a couple when they are still in a relationship together. Like responsible fatherhood

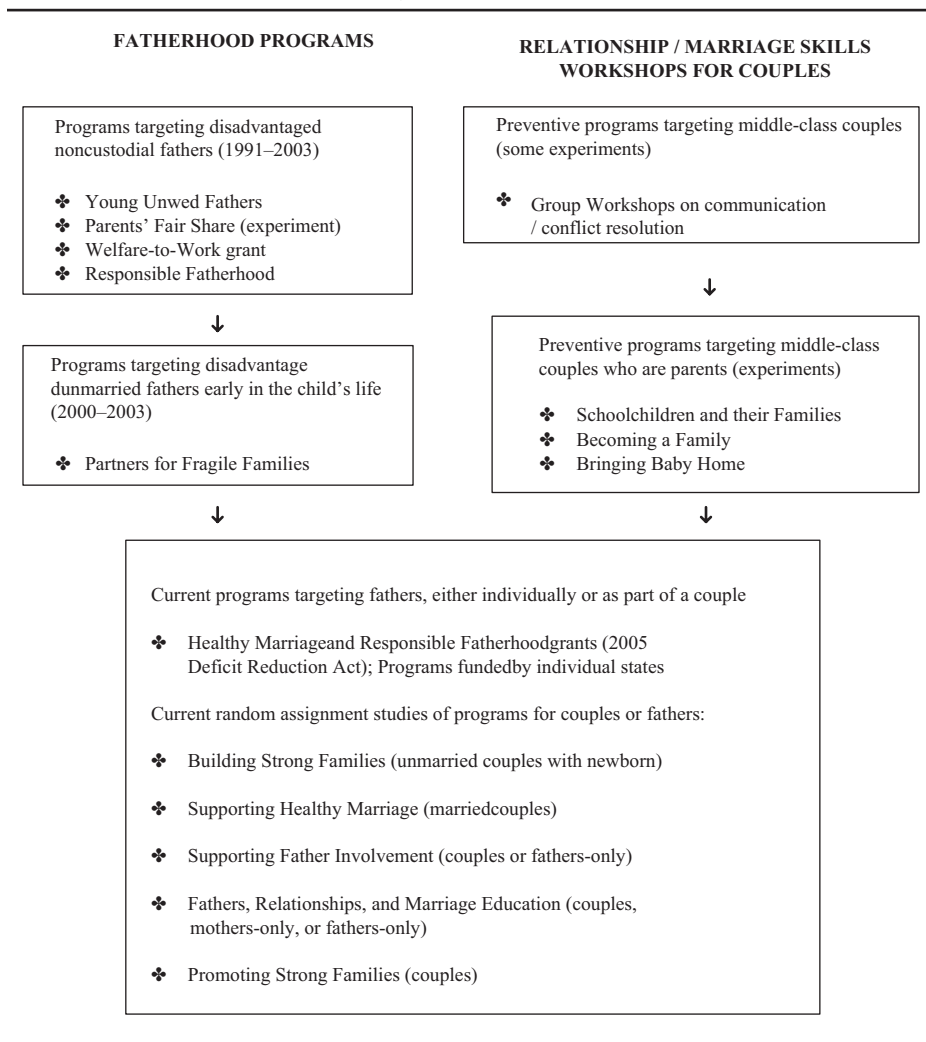
programs, these programs could ultimately increase fathers' long-term engagement with their children, income available to the child, and child well-being, but as shown in Figure 1, they aim to do so through a different set of mechanisms designed to bolster the relationship quality for an existing couple by improving specific skills such as handling of conflict and supportive behaviors toward one another. Changes in the couple's relationship could improve children's emotional security and social-emotional development through (1) improved coparenting (by which we mean cooperative parenting), (2) the child witnessing less mismanaged parental conflict, (3) increased willingness of the father to become engaged in family life, (4) increased engagement by the father with parenting the child, or (5) improvements in the quality of parenting by mother or father (due to improvement in the overall climate of the home or parents' generalization of their new relationship skills to their relationships with the child). Thus, improvements in the couple's relationship may ultimately increase the quality or quantity of fathers' engagement with children, whether they increase the amount of time they actually live with their children, the amount of time they spend together if they do not live together, or the quality of the father-child relationship whenever they are together (P. Cowan et al. 2008).

What have we learned from evaluations of responsible fatherhood programs?

The Family Support Act of 1988 instituted new requirements for participation in work-related activities for custodial parents of children receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Growing in parallel was an expectation that if earnings from mothers were to contribute more to the support of children receiving AFDC, so should child support payments from noncustodial parents. As shown in Figure 2, an initial programmatic effort in this direction was the Young Unwed Fathers Project, which operated in six sites from 1991 to 1993 and targeted noncustodial fathers under age 25 (Achatz and MacAllum 1994). Services were provided on a voluntary basis for up to 18 months. These included education and training to increase the fathers' earning capacity, assistance establishing paternity and paying formal child support, and fatherhood development activities to encourage parental values and behavior using a curriculum that later evolved into two curricula still used today, Responsible Fatherhood and Fatherhood Development.

Parents' Fair Share (PFS): A random assignment demonstration program for noncustodial parents. PFS, tested experimentally from 1994 to 1996, is the only large-scale experiment to date of a multicomponent fatherhood program. Authorized by the Family Support Act, PFS was conceptualized as a test of whether employment and training services, which had been shown to work for mothers on welfare, would be similarly effective for low-income, noncustodial fathers (Miller and Knox 2001; Knox and Redcross 2000).¹ PFS recognized that to increase fathers' financial support of their children through child support would

FIGURE 2
Intervention Studies Informing Future Initiatives for Fathers and Families



also require new responsiveness by the child support system toward the men's individual circumstances and attention to their nonfinancial involvement with their children.

Over the course of the demonstration, PFS randomly assigned more than fifty-five hundred noncustodial fathers—the vast majority of whom were African American—to either a mandatory program group or a control group at one of seven sites across the country. Implemented jointly by the child support agency, employment and training providers, and local social service agencies, PFS consisted

of four main components. After meeting with case managers, participants took part in *peer support* sessions led by trained facilitators and based on the Responsible Fatherhood curriculum. These sessions, held two to three times per week for six to eight weeks, focused on personal and professional skill-building. Upon completing a certain number of sessions (or concurrently), fathers participated in *employment and training*, typically implemented as job search assistance due to constraints in these fathers' access to skills training. Throughout their participation in PFS, fathers were also intended to benefit from *enhanced child support enforcement*, including temporarily lowered orders. Finally, fathers were offered the option of participating in *voluntary mediation services* with the child's mother.

Foremost among PFS's implementation challenges was creating collaboration and teamwork among agencies that typically do not work together, despite their working with the same client population. This affected recruitment and service delivery, and many sites fell short of their enrollment goals. In addition, the men who enrolled in PFS (average age 31) were significantly disadvantaged: 67 percent had been arrested at some point, only half had a high school diploma, most did not have stable housing, and 76 percent had not worked within the six months prior to entering the program. With fathers targeted for the program in part because of child support arrears, over half the men in PFS owed more than \$2,000 at the time they entered the program. Fathers cited their substantial arrears as a discouragement to formal employment, which, although it might offer more stable or higher-paying jobs than the informal sector, could also result in garnisheed wages.

PFS painted a portrait of father involvement that ran counter to stereotypes of disadvantaged noncustodial fathers. These were not fathers of newborns; the average age of their youngest child was six years old. Still, nearly one-third of control group fathers saw their children at least once a week during the six months prior to the follow-up survey. Another 40 percent of the control group fathers saw their children at least once during those six months. The remaining 30 percent of fathers did not see their children at all in the six months leading up to the follow-up survey. Meanwhile, only 34 percent of control group mothers reported that their relationship with the father during this same time period was friendly (though 46 percent of fathers did), and 13 percent of control group mothers and 6 percent of fathers reported aggressive conflict. In the six months prior to the follow-up survey, 6 percent of control group mothers had had a restraining order against the fathers.

The main impact of PFS was to increase the amount of child support paid, mainly as a result of the men's closer involvement with the child support system. PFS's other impacts were limited, in some ways, to participants on the "worst-off" end of the spectrum: employment rates and earnings increased only for program group men with the most severe employment barriers, and the level of involvement with their children increased modestly for those who were least involved initially. Still, PFS gave valuable insight into the tremendous challenges faced by the men it served and suggested new approaches for working with this group. PFS's findings are consistent with other research suggesting that programs working to strengthen low-income men's relationships with their children should contain a substantive

employment and earnings component, combining immediate income with longer-term skill-building and job retention. PFS also offered evidence that when working with noncustodial fathers, custodial mothers must be brought into the picture. While fathers' participation in peer support and parenting education reflected their desire for involvement with their children, their efforts were often frustrated by the children's mothers—especially if the families had lived apart for several years. PFS suggested that programs might get further if they directly address mothers' concerns, offer them some type of incentive to participate in some redesigned aspects of the program, and, when possible, help parents to develop common expectations about the father's role with the child.

Ultimately, the PFS demonstration's modest impacts suggested the value of striking while the iron is hot, that is, helping parents to map out their financial and emotional roles while parents are still together and the child is expected or very young. What is more, the PFS qualitative study revealed considerable differences in how younger and older participants viewed their goals and their challenges. The younger men (primarily in their 20s) almost all saw themselves as marrying someday, perhaps the mother of their child, but often described themselves as too young to "settle down." The older men in the program often had more stable lives and jobs but faced substantial struggles when they tried to reconnect with their children after years of living apart (Johnson, Levine, and Doolittle 1999). Consistent with these reports, program operators often indicate that, despite the conceptual appeal of targeting younger couples or fathers, extremely disadvantaged young men can be particularly challenging to engage in responsible fatherhood programs (Martinson and Nightingale 2008).

The Responsible Fatherhood Program, Welfare-to-Work Grants, and Partners for Fragile Families. While the Responsible Fatherhood Program and Welfare-to-Work Grants worked with populations that were quite similar to PFS, Partners for Fragile Families moved the field in a new direction. Based on challenges that earlier fatherhood programs had faced in increasing fathers' engagement with older children—and consistent with then-emerging findings from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study that the vast majority of unmarried parents were in a romantic relationship at the time their baby was born—Partners for Fragile Families aimed to work with fathers ages 16 to 25 before they had established paternity or had experience with the child support system and while they might still have a positive relationship with their child's mother. Nevertheless, Partners for Fragile Families still worked primarily with fathers rather than couples and experienced many of the same implementation and recruitment challenges as earlier fatherhood programs (Martinson et al. 2007).

One clear finding across demonstration programs for low-income noncustodial fathers has been that men who have previously been incarcerated face particularly acute challenges in meeting their child support obligations and in maintaining relationships with their partners and children. Interventions that are aimed at supporting fathers during incarceration and the process of reentry are the subject of the current National Evaluation of the Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage, and

Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Re-entering Fathers and their Partners (McKay et al. 2009). The study has begun to provide implementation lessons and will conduct a quasi-experimental impact evaluation for five of the twelve grantees.

What have we learned from evaluations of marriage and relationship skills programs for couples?

Whereas programs labeled “responsible fatherhood programs” have until recently typically targeted one group—disadvantaged noncustodial parents—marriage and relationship skills programs have targeted individuals or couples, married or unmarried, parents or not. Marriage education was developed as a preventive approach to help couples to learn skills that might prevent declines in relationship satisfaction, in contrast to marital therapy, which has historically worked with couples trying to repair relationships already in distress. Conducted initially as part of university-based research programs, and more recently funded on a larger scale by ACF grants, marriage and relationship skills are typically taught in group workshops, classes, or small groups facilitated by one to two people (often male-female pairs), using structured curricula.

Many of the recent grant-funded programs focus on low-income families in particular, because although such families are disproportionately affected by family breakup, they have had limited access to services that could help to strengthen their relationships and marriages. Early evaluations of such services found promising evidence of program effects, although they primarily included white, middle-income engaged or married couples who paid a fee for the services. Meta-analyses over the past two decades suggest that preventive psychoeducationally oriented programs can produce moderate positive effects on relationship satisfaction and communication (Hawkins et al. 2008; Butler and Wampler 1999; Carroll and Doherty 2003; Giblin, Sprenkle, and Sheehan 1985; Blanchard et al. 2009; Reardon-Anderson et al. 2005). However, even studies that used random assignment were limited in that many had small samples, suffered from attrition of study members, and measured a limited set of outcomes rather than longer-term marital stability or outcomes for children (Carroll and Doherty 2003; Reardon-Anderson et al. 2005). Some, but not all, reviews and meta-analyses have reported reduced impacts over time after the intervention ends (Halford et al. 2003; Reardon-Anderson et al. 2005; Hawkins et al. 2008; Blanchard et al. 2009).

Recently published random assignment studies have begun to address the limitations of these earlier studies, seeking to increase the likelihood of long-term benefits by designing programs to last for several months and by conducting studies with somewhat larger samples, more careful designs, longer follow-up, and broader outcomes of interest. What is more, at around the same time that responsible fatherhood programs were becoming increasingly interested in working with parents early in a child’s life, couples-oriented relationship skills programs seized on the value of working with couples at transition points that could precede declines in marital satisfaction, such as the birth of a baby. Programs such as

Bringing Baby Home and Becoming a Family, which focused on supporting relationships during the transition to new parenthood, have found a range of positive effects, including in couple relationship quality (but not stability); parenting, coparenting, and father-infant attachment; and infants' language and emotional development (C. Cowan and Cowan 2000; Shapiro and Gottman 2005). The Schoolchildren and Their Families study, targeting parents with children entering school, has reported improved adaptation to high school for children 10 years after the intervention (C. Cowan and Cowan 2006).

Current evaluations are beginning to shed light on whether, and how, relationships skills programs work for low-income families specifically. Each of the three studies discussed below is assessing the potential for interventions to increase the engagement of low-income fathers with their children and improve outcomes for children, by strengthening the couple's relationship. While current ACF healthy marriage grantees are expected to provide at least eight hours of group workshops, all three of the programs described below use a format in which groups meet weekly for a total of 24 to 42 hours, depending on the program, and have some capacity to link couples to additional supports. Thus, they are not representative of grantees currently operating marriage and relationships skills programs. Their results will indicate what can be achieved by real-world community-based organizations that use research-based curricula, provide modest incentives for participation, and receive close monitoring and technical assistance along the way.

The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) project: An intervention for low-income parents who are married. Funded by ACF, the SHM project is the first large-scale, multisite, multiyear, rigorous test of marriage education programs for low-income married couples with children. A ten-year project that began in 2003, SHM is currently operating in ten locations and will be evaluated in both an implementation study and impact study.²

The SHM model consists of three mutually enforcing components operating from a strengths-based, couple-oriented perspective. At the core of the program is a 24- to 30-hour marriage-education workshop series. The group meetings are facilitated in a relaxed group setting and use four structured curricula with core materials that have been field tested over many years and have been recently adapted for low-income couples. While the curricula being used vary in content, target population, and format (for example, some are intended for parents with newborns; some focus more on group discussion than others), all address six broad content areas identified in prior research as potential influences on the quality of relationships for low-income couples: understanding marriage, managing conflict, promoting positive connections between spouses, strengthening relationships beyond the couple, coping with circumstances outside the couple relationship such as financial stress, and parenting.

Groups begin soon after enrollment and last nine to 15 weeks (depending on the local program). They are complemented by supplemental marriage education activities—social and educational events that aim to reinforce curricular concepts and build community. Meanwhile, the third component of the model, family

support services, pairs each SHM couple with a family support coordinator who promotes consistent engagement by maintaining direct contact with the couple for 12 months, refers the couple to community resources as needed, and reinforces the skills and themes of the core workshops.

SHM is a voluntary program. Couples must be married, have children under 18, and understand the language in which the program is offered (either English or Spanish). Each local program—with the help of a local domestic violence advocate—has also created a way to assess domestic violence at intake and throughout program participation. Program data indicate that the average age of wives in the SHM sample is 30.5 and the average age of husbands is 33 (though parents are younger in the two sites targeting families with newborns). The average length of marriage is 7.1 years. Almost three-quarters of the couples have incomes less than or equal to 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (and almost half have annual family incomes below \$30,000). Participants are roughly 50 percent Hispanic, about 30 percent white non-Hispanic, and about 15 percent African American. SHM couples also have an average of two children.

There are no impact results available yet, but we know that couples have enrolled in large numbers and tend to keep coming once they have attended a group workshop. More than 80 percent of early SHM couples attended at least one workshop together in the first six months after enrolling. On average, SHM couples who initiated attendance have attended 20 hours of workshops in the first six months. Participation in family support has been similarly strong, with 85 percent of couples in this early sample attending at least one meeting with a family support coordinator.³

The fact that both spouses nearly always participate together in SHM services is a promising trend that may in part result from the programs' deliberate efforts to appeal to men. For example, program offices use gender-neutral décor, and workshops are facilitated by a male-female pair to demonstrate that both perspectives are equally valued and to model supportive interaction. Programs have intentionally hired male staff and culturally sensitive staff. Many programs have also created supplemental marriage activities (such as workshops on being an involved dad) and family support services (such as job referrals) designed to appeal to men.

The SHM impact analysis, with 12-month follow-up due in 2012, is designed to comprehensively assess effects on multiple domains, including the quality of the couple's relationship and its stability; the mental health of each parent; quality of coparenting; fathers' engagement with their children; quality of parenting by each parent; employment and income; and developmental outcomes for children, including emotional security, behavior problems, and positive behaviors.

The Building Strong Families (BSF) project: An intervention for unmarried parents of newborns. Also begun as a part of the federal Healthy Marriage initiative, the BSF project is programmatically similar to SHM but targeted to unmarried parents of newborns or of babies up to three months old. With eight programs across the country, BSF is a ten-year demonstration project that will culminate in

an impact analysis of effects on the quality and status of couples' relationships, family outcomes, and children's well-being.

As in SHM, the core component of BSF has been a series of relationship skills workshops, supplemented by a family coordinator who encouraged program participation, reinforced curricular skills, and provided resource referrals. Most sites also held social events for participants, and some held ongoing educational activities to supplement the core curriculum. BSF used different curricula than those in SHM and included topics tailored to unmarried couples and parents of newborns. BSF-eligible couples were also screened for domestic violence.

The implementation study found substantial variation in the duration, length, format, and content of services.⁴ Once enrolled, couples participated in their 30- to 42-hour core workshop series, which generally ranged from 10 weeks to six months. Group size also varied from six to fifteen couples. Participants typically received incentives to participate such as cash, modest gifts, or gift certificates. Once a couple completed their workshop, some sites no longer offered family support services, while others expected couples to meet with their family coordinators quarterly for up to three years. Sites also took fairly different approaches to the content of family support services.

BSF parents were generally young: in more than 40 percent of the couples, at least one member was less than 21 years old. In the majority of the couples (52 percent), both partners were African American, 20 percent were both Hispanic, and 12 percent were both white non-Hispanic. While in 37 percent of couples both partners had a high school degree, their average combined annual earnings were \$20,475. Multipartner fertility was common: in 47 percent of the couples, one partner had a child from a previous relationship. In 57 percent of the couples, both partners reported that they were cohabiting "all of the time" at the time of enrollment. Another 7 percent were married (eligible for BSF because they were unmarried at the time their child was conceived).⁵

BSF gave high priority to engaging both members of the couple. However, some program operators struggled to maintain consistently strong participation levels, with participation varying considerably across sites. On average, BSF couples reported attending 12 more hours of relationship skills education groups than control-group couples. Sites reported a much higher likelihood of couple engagement if an initial contact was made with both members of the couple, and to further solidify couples' commitment to the program, many sites experimented with male-female recruiter teams.

Implementation lessons from BSF include the challenges of integrating a novel model into existing service delivery pathways, as well as the difficulties—given unpredictable schedules and many competing demands for time—of helping low-income couples maintain consistent participation in a long-term program. Still, BSF offers encouragement that relatively young, disadvantaged, unmarried parents have an interest in participating together in programs designed to improve their relationships and outcomes for their children.

A preliminary impact report for the BSF evaluation was released in May 2010, with assessments 15 months after couples entered the study. On average across all

eight sites, the intervention had no overall effect on couples' status, relationship quality, ability to manage conflict, coparenting quality, or fathers' involvement. The subgroup and site-specific results, however, suggest that the effects of this type of program may depend on how it is implemented or on the specific population being served, or both. Across the eight sites combined, the intervention produced positive effects on relationship quality for couples in which both partners were African American, but there were no positive impacts for couples in which at least one member was not African American. One of the eight sites, Oklahoma, showed significant positive effects on several measures of relationship quality and stability; perhaps importantly, the Oklahoma program had substantially higher participation rates than the remaining BSF programs. Couples at that site reported attending group relationship workshops for 19 more hours than control-group couples did, whereas across all BSF sites couples reported spending only 12 hours more than control-group couples. In contrast, the BSF site in Baltimore had a pattern of negative effects; this program served a population of couples who, on average, had more tenuous relationships with one another at the outset of the program and who attended relationship skills groups for only six more hours than control-group parents.⁶ Additional analyses are being conducted to further understand the effects of BSF summarized here. A 36-month follow-up report will provide information about longer-term relationship impacts as well as effects on child well-being.

Given that neither SHM nor BSF was designed to work with couples who are experiencing domestic violence, a set of questions remain about how to appropriately work with couples who may be experiencing what is referred to by some family violence researchers and practitioners as situational domestic violence. We will learn more about this issue through a study that ACF is currently funding, conducted by the Relationship Research Institute (RRI). In this study, RRI is assessing the effectiveness of the marriage-education curriculum titled *Couples Together against Violence* in reducing low-level situational violence, strengthening marriage/relationships, and increasing fathers' involvement. The evaluation is designed to identify not only the impact of the program but also the mechanisms responsible for decreases in domestic violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services n.d.-a).

The Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) study: An intervention for low-income fathers and couples. Impact results are available from the SFI study, which provided relationship skills workshops for primarily low-income Hispanic two-parent families (unmarried or married).⁷ SFI was designed as a side-by-side evaluation of preventive father-focused and couple-focused approaches to fostering fathers' positive engagement and strengthening family functioning.

Like SHM and BSF, SFI was a voluntary program, operated by four family resource centers in agricultural California counties from 2003 to 2009. (Data from a fifth urban site are forthcoming.) Two-thirds of participants were of Mexican descent. Couples did not have to fit specific cohabitation, marriage, or income criteria, but they did have to be biological parents of their youngest child. In

addition, if either parent suffered severe mental illness or substance abuse issues that interfered with daily functioning, or had had an instance of domestic violence or child abuse within a year prior to enrollment, the family was referred for other services. Median annual family income of \$29,700 reflected that more than two-thirds of participating families fell below 200 percent of the poverty line. Ninety-four percent of participants lived together, and 72 percent of participants were married upon entering the program.

The SFI model assigned couples to a couples group, fathers group, or comparison group (all held in either English or Spanish). Couples were not given incentives for participation in the groups but were compensated for completing each of three assessments. Both fathers and couples groups met for two hours each week for 16 weeks and were facilitated by a male-female pair of mental health professionals, with an identical curriculum. Men in the fathers groups attended alone, with mothers coming for two of the 16 weeks to meet with the female coleader, while fathers and mothers attended the couples groups together for all 16 weeks. Comparison group couples (who attended together) received a single-session, three-hour dosage of a condensed version of the curriculum, taught by the same facilitators. For all sessions, child care and food were provided. Families in all three study conditions were also assigned to a case manager responsible for promoting program engagement and providing resource referrals.

The SFI curriculum was a hybrid between a therapy-group approach and the more structured psychoeducational classes offered in BSF and SHM. Based on a family risk model of factors associated with father's positive involvement, couple relationship quality, and children's well-being, the curriculum covered parenting and coparenting, couple communication, three-generational family patterns, stressors and supports, and participants' self-conception and personal goals. Although the curriculum was previously used with middle-income couples, the researchers made few modifications other than adding material on financial stressors, de-emphasizing written materials, and emphasizing interactivity. The fact that group meetings always included an open-ended check-in allowed the participants to make sure that the curriculum directly addressed their needs. Four sessions focused on the couple's relationship and four focused on parenting; each remaining topic was covered in two sessions.

Over the course of the study, programs noticed that median attendance was significantly higher (75 percent for fathers, 80 percent for mothers) in couples groups than in fathers groups (65 percent), although overall attendance was high. Men in fathers groups tended initially to offer more positive reinforcement to one another and speak more openly to their peers than those in couples groups. Partners in the couples groups tended to spend more time discussing couples' communication and conflict resolution. In addition, programs reported a "ripple effect" of SFI in terms of their broader agencies' increased attention to fathers' needs and increased father-friendliness.

Current SFI impact data are based on a sample of 289 couples, with follow-up assessments at nine and 18 months. SFI produced positive results across a number of domains (though not, interestingly, on parenting attitudes). Fathers group

participants showed increased involvement with their children and stability of children's behavior problems over two years (compared with increases in problem behaviors in the comparison group). The couples group showed even larger gains in terms of increased involvement of fathers in the day-to-day lives of their young children and stable levels of children's problem behaviors. Furthermore, in the couples group only, parenting stress declined (compared with stable scores for the comparison and fathers groups), and the quality of the couple's relationship remained stable according to both fathers and mothers, whereas parents in both the comparison and fathers groups showed declining relationship quality over two years. SFI found that the positive results held across ethnic groups, income level, and marital status.

Given the lack of positive pre-post changes and the occurrence of negative changes for the comparison group, the SFI study concluded that single-dosage efforts are unlikely to benefit fathers, couples, or their children. SFI also concluded, as noted in the impact report, that "the question is not whether to intervene with fathers or with couples, but in either approach, how to involve both parents in the intervention program" (P. Cowan et al. 2009, 677).

The Fathers, Relationships, and Marriage Education (FRAME) project. We will learn more about the relative effectiveness of working with individual parents and working with couples through another multigroup randomized study currently under way, the FRAME project (Markman et al. 2009). This study, conducted by a team at the University of Denver with funding from ACF, targets parents who live together in a committed relationship and whose family income is below 200 percent of the poverty line. Couples are randomly assigned to a control group or one of three treatments—a workshop attended by couples, a workshop attended by male partners only, or a workshop attended by female partners only. All three workshops use FRAME, a 14-hour variant of the 24-hour Within Our Reach curriculum created by the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) for the SHM project. Relative to Within Our Reach, FRAME is designed with increased focus on the role of fathers, parenting, and coping with economic stress. The evaluation will assess whether the efficacy of this intervention depends on whether couples, fathers, or mothers participate.

Given resource constraints, it is important to gain information about how program effectiveness varies with its mode of delivery and its intensity. Promoting Strong Families, a study by the University of Georgia of a relatively short family intervention, combines modules from two curricula that were found to be effective in prior randomized studies. A five-year demonstration sponsored by ACF, Promoting Strong Families consists of six educational sessions based on PREP, which has shown efficacy at improving couples' relationship quality, and on the Strong African American Families program, which worked primarily with mothers and their early adolescent children and had positive impacts on parenting skills and parent-reported child behavior (Brody et al. 2004). Of the 460 couples

enrolled in the study, half will receive the Promoting Strong Families curriculum through in-home sessions facilitated by trained presenters, while the other half will review written materials independently (University of Georgia n.d.).

Future Directions

Responsible fatherhood programs

It is clear that we have a larger body of evidence about how to help committed couples to improve the quality of their relationships, and about the effects of those efforts, than about how to facilitate the quantity and quality of father-child engagement for disadvantaged men who are already living away from their children. There have been few impact evaluations of responsible fatherhood programs, and implementation studies of these programs have consistently highlighted the significant challenges of changing the employment and family relationship patterns for low-income noncustodial fathers (Martinson and Nightingale 2008). We offer some suggestions for ingredients of the next generation of multicomponent responsible fatherhood programs based on what has been learned to date.

- Many disadvantaged fathers highly value assistance with getting good jobs and care deeply about better relationships with their children. On the other hand, they are skeptical that the child support system will treat them fairly.
- Particularly in voluntary programs, but even in mandatory programs linked to child support mandates, it has been difficult to recruit fathers and to achieve consistent participation over time. Given both participation challenges and disadvantaged fathers' lack of access to public assistance and their need to support themselves and their children, programs for fathers that focus solely on these men will likely benefit from building in stipends, paychecks, or other financial incentives for participation.
- It will take innovative approaches in training and job ladders to substantially improve labor market prospects for very disadvantaged men.
- Responsible fatherhood programs that do not explicitly work with mothers have found it difficult to make headway in improving fathers' relationships with their children. However, it is challenging to improve adult relationships once partners are deeply estranged, suggesting that coparenting or relationship skills programs will gain more traction when offered while parents are still in a relationship together. Programs offered later are likely to need to work with some mothers and fathers outside of group workshops, and sometimes separately from one another, to create plans for fathers' involvement.
- The child support system has an important role to play in getting incentives in the right place for custodial and noncustodial parents to collaborate on parenting issues and for fathers to participate in employment-related activities.

It will be difficult to create more effective programs for young noncustodial fathers without innovation in each of these areas: child support, employment, and family relationships. To make headway, responsible fatherhood programs could be integrated with the innovative policy ideas for child support and employment that are outlined in other articles in this volume. Below, we focus on the third leg of a comprehensive responsible fatherhood strategy: interventions directly aimed at strengthening family relationships.

One area that would benefit from new attention is to develop and carefully test methods to engage custodial parents (mostly mothers) in achieving the goals of these programs. This may be important not only as a means to increase fathers' engagement with their children but because of recent evidence that low-income nonresident fathers' engagement with their children is associated positively with young children's well-being only in the context of high-quality coparenting relationships (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2009). Involving custodial parents in fatherhood efforts does not necessarily mean that mothers would be physically present at fatherhood programs as often as noncustodial fathers; in some cases, it may make sense for them to be active participants, and in others, it may not. It is possible that such efforts could draw on some of the concepts used in coparenting programs for parents who are married, cohabiting, or divorcing that have shown some efficacy in randomized studies (Cookston et al. 2007). In addition, efforts should be informed by recent qualitative research that has uncovered issues that matter to low-income unmarried parents and about which fathers and mothers sometimes have substantially different perspectives, such as: Must a responsible and successful parent be a breadwinner? A disciplinarian? Do conflict and distrust between parents affect children and how parents relate to them? In what ways do new partners affect both parents' relationships with their children? (Waller 1997; Furstenberg 2007; Young and Holcomb 2007; England and Edin 2007; Hamer 2001). While coparenting support interventions would likely be designed quite differently for parents who are still together and those who are not, in either case, they could help fathers and mothers to clarify their own perspectives on these challenging issues, to understand their partners' or former partners' perspectives, and to agree upon joint expectations for parenting the child they have in common.

Another area for careful consideration is the content and format of peer support groups within fatherhood programs that have typically been aimed at basic "fatherhood development." For example, given what we now know, will these workshops be most effective at changing outcomes for the family if attended by noncustodial fathers alone, or with their current partners, or some of both? Should they focus on a broad range of fatherhood topics, as is currently usually the case, or cover a few topics in greater depth? Although these workshops often offer material on parenting or couple relationship skills, this tends to be covered briefly rather than in the kind of multisession format that has been found effective at building these skills (Barth 2009). Moreover, there are critical emerging issues, such as the challenges facing parents who have children with multiple partners or the role of social fathers who often play important roles in children's lives, which have not yet been the subject of extensive curriculum development. Ultimately, to treat

critical topics in some depth, and to acknowledge the differing needs of different families, responsible fatherhood programs may find it useful to move away from “one-size-fits-all” curricula for group workshops and toward a more flexible approach that includes both an individual support component and a menu of group workshops that would vary depending on fathers’ individual circumstances. Individualized services, in turn, require thoughtful design of tools for initial screening and assessment related to domestic violence, family composition, and other issues that will influence how services are tailored.

Finally, we should not forget that research on how fathers affect child well-being consistently finds that it is not the quantity of fathers’ involvement that matters, but the quality (Carlson and Magnuson this volume). This suggests that we should clarify the basic goals of responsible fatherhood programs to ensure that they go beyond the collection of child support and the father’s level of access to his children to include actively ensuring that the interaction that does occur is as supportive of child well-being as possible. For many children, greater involvement by a low-income nonresident father is likely to be unambiguously helpful; for others, for example in relationships marked by domestic violence, substance abuse, or severe mental illness, increased involvement is likely to be unwelcome and unhelpful; and for others, greater involvement may improve some domains of child well-being and undermine others. We clearly need to understand more about the dynamics of these complex relationships—how the quality, not just the quantity, of low-income nonresident fathers’ involvement affects children and how public policy can balance the well-being of children with the rights and responsibilities of each parent.

To continue to improve policies and programs, both responsible fatherhood and couples-based family strengthening programs should be embedded in a rigorous research agenda that addresses outstanding questions for various types of families. Research should be focused on understanding the effectiveness of specific program components, different curriculum approaches, different levels of staff training, and what works best for different subgroups of families, as well as assessing the total effects of comprehensive programs, since individual components may have synergistic effects. In addition, given the relative paucity of research on the dynamics of low-income nonresident fathers, their children, and former or current partners, high-quality basic research on these families and their perspectives on emerging intervention strategies is critical. Given the complexity of these policies, it is important to understand their short- and long-run implications for the well-being of fathers, mothers, family relationships, children, and government budgets.

Strengthening relationships of low-income couples: Two paths for progress

Given the complexities of family behavior, no single policy or program is likely to reach all families. As we develop more understanding of what works best for whom, it might be most efficient to combine preventive strategies that are targeted

to a broad population with somewhat more intensive interventions for families who face immediate challenges. Thus, “research and development” toward relationship skills programs could proceed on two tracks. One track would continue to fund local community-based service providers to offer stand-alone relationship skills programs for low-income couples, adapting the program models and targeting strategies as new research results become available. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has encouraged both participation in relationship skills programs and involvement of fathers with their children through existing programs for parents such as Head Start or Early Head Start programs. However, these particular programs are largely limited to families below the poverty level, so a substantial proportion of their clients are single-parent families. To also provide existing two-parent families with access to relationship skills programs would likely require recruitment from additional venues such as health clinics, obstetricians’ or pediatricians’ offices, child care centers, preschools, hospital- or neighborhood-based childbirth classes, and Medicaid or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs.

A second approach that could be pursued systematically could be dubbed the “developmental” approach to strengthening family relationships. The goal here would be to strive for every young person to leave high school with a basic understanding of the relationship skills that he or she will need to sustain employment, a satisfying long-term relationship with a partner, and effective parenting as an adult. These skills might include, for example, effective communication, problem-solving strategies, regulating one’s emotions in difficult conversations, and understanding the perspective of another. Identifying the “active ingredients” of strong relationship skills and introducing them into *existing* educational settings at a number of developmental stages could reach a much larger number of people than stand-alone programs for which adult participants must take steps to volunteer and attend consistently over time. Even if fully implemented, this type of preventive approach would not negate the need for relationship-strengthening opportunities for couples with children or noncustodial fathers, but it would provide a foundation for these skills earlier in life. For an example of this type of layered approach, see the Triple P parenting program, which is designed with multiple tiers of increasing intensity, from support for universal parenting skills that all community members should possess to more intensive programs for those who need additional support (Prinz et al. 2009).

The foundations of this developmental approach are already beginning to emerge. Parents’ capacities to nurture babies’ earliest social and emotional development are being supported through Early Head Start or other programs for new parents such as those described in this article. As children enter child care, preschool, Head Start, or pre-kindergarten, evaluations are under way to understand how teachers can best support their socioemotional development and handle behavioral issues in the classroom (MDRC n.d.). Many elementary, middle, and high schools are undertaking efforts to integrate violence prevention, peer-to-peer communication, and conflict resolution training into their curricula (Aber, Brown, and Jones 2003). Comprehensive teen pregnancy prevention and youth development

programs often include some attention to relationship skills, whether geared toward peer relationships, healthy dating decisions, or relationships with supervisors in a workplace. Once the young person has become a partner or spouse, strengthening that adult-couple relationship by building attention to it into existing service settings—whether in employment programs for fathers, in home visiting programs for parents of newborns, or in place-based approaches such as Baby College of the Harlem Children's Zone—could be a logical continuation of this more universal, integrated approach to strengthening family relationships.

Ultimately, it is possible that attending to partner relationships in existing programs for adults would bring benefits not only for fathers' engagement and couple relationships but also for the programs into which they are integrated, since there is evidence that attending to the couple's relationship can bolster the effects of other interventions. For example, for children with behavior problems, two different studies of parenting interventions (of the Incredible Years and Triple P) have found that when couples were in distressed relationships, adding curriculum content that focused on the couple's relationship led to an increase in the intervention's effects on parenting (Webster-Stratton and Taylor 2001). Similarly, a head-to-head test of two substance abuse treatment models found that treatment was more effective when the spouse of the substance abuser was trained to be supportive in the treatment process (O'Farrell and Fals-Stewart 2000).

We recognize that our urging of agencies to bring relationship skills more centrally into responsible fatherhood or other programs may engender some resistance. Ooms et al. (2006) describe how representatives of fatherhood, couples' relationship, and domestic violence programs each have some fear that the other approaches are missing essential ingredients or may compromise the intended goals of their own programmatic approach. Our intention here is not to replace existing programs with a new couple-focused model, but rather to take seriously the evidence that a family-relationship perspective addresses some of the key risk factors that affect both family functioning in diverse types of families and children's development. A wide range of programs—from those aimed at parents' employment or asset-building to those targeting children's early development—could find that they benefit from synergies that are created as we learn more about how to support couples in planning together for their families' well-being.

Notes

1. Though random assignment was open to all noncustodial parents who fit the eligibility criteria, more than 95 percent of the parents in the demonstration were men.

2. Information about the SHM model, implementation, and early participation rates is drawn from Gaubert et al. (2010) as well as from Knox and Fein (2009).

3. The SHM demographic information is taken from Gaubert et al. (2010).

4. This description of BSF implementation draws from Dion et al. (2008), with additional information taken from the project website at www.buildingstrongfamilies.info.

5. This description of BSF couple demographics draws from Wood et al. (2010).

6. This discussion of BSF impacts draws from Wood et al. (2010).

7. This discussion of implementation and intervention results is based on P. Cowan et al. (2009) and C. Cowan et al. (2007). Some details were taken from the project Web site at www.supportingfatherinvolvement.org.

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