



BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES is an evaluation of programs designed to help interested unwed parents achieve their aspirations for healthy marriage and a stable family life. It is being conducted under a contract from the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Supporting Healthy Marriage and Strengthening Relationships of Unwed Parents: Technical Assistance Available

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State and local governments and community organizations are increasingly interested in developing and implementing programs to support healthy marriage and strong families. Through the Building Strong Families (BSF) project, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and its partners are developing a model for programs that would serve low-income, unmarried parents who are expecting or have just had a child. The BSF project offers technical assistance to state and local organizations interested in developing services for this unwed parent population.

Proposals for reauthorizing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program include substantial new federal funding for healthy marriage initiatives. Even with reauthorization still under deliberation, many organizations are interested in planning for and designing programs to promote healthy marriages. These initiatives could be broad community-wide efforts intended to build coalitions and provide services in support of healthy marriage and to change public attitudes and norms. Or they could be more targeted efforts that would focus on particular groups, such as married couples, young people, or unwed couples with children. Such targeted initiatives would be designed to address the circumstances and needs of the group.

The BSF project will work with program planners interested in developing targeted initiatives to promote healthy marriage and strong families, focusing on expecting couples or new parents who are romantically involved but unmarried—a group that is predominantly low-income and generally not served by existing marriage education services. Findings from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study suggest that focusing on unwed parents around the time they have a child makes sense, because during that period couples have high hopes for their relationships and often expect to marry, yet their aspirations are rarely fulfilled in the absence of intervention (see <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>).

The BSF project aims to enhance child well-being by helping unmarried mothers and fathers establish and maintain healthy relationships with one another and with their child and, for those who are interested, to fulfill their aspirations for a healthy marriage. The project involves implementing and evaluating a comprehensive set of services for unmarried parents at or around the time of their child's birth. The BSF program model includes the following components:¹

- ***Marriage education and relationship skills instruction:*** Information about the meaning, value, and benefits of healthy marriage, supportive guidance for couples interested in marriage, and instruction in skills essential to healthy marriage and strong relationships
- ***Marriageability and family services:*** Services to help low-income parents address financial and family challenges to help them create a more positive environment for their children and to become more responsible and capable partners and parents
- ***Family coordinators:*** Trained staff who can reinforce relationship skills instruction, assess couples' circumstances and needs, make referrals to other services when appropriate, and provide ongoing support for dealing with couples' inevitable "bumps in the road"
- ***Addressing disincentives to marriage:*** Steps to reduce or offset financial disincentives to marriage in existing programs and policies for low-income couples that will complement direct services

As state, local, and community organizations consider developing programs based on this BSF program model, they may need assistance and support. BSF staff, and a set of national experts in policy, programs, and research, are available to provide technical assistance. This assistance can include (1) information and analysis for major planning decisions; (2) help with review and selection of curriculum for marriage education and relationship skills instruction; (3) guidance on how to add marriageability and family services, family coordinators, and policy innovation as parts of a comprehensive program; and (4) consultation on program implementation and operations. The BSF project has its own resources to support this technical assistance at no cost to the agencies that wish to take advantage of it.

Support for Program Planning

Once an agency's interest in healthy marriage initiatives has focused on developing a targeted program for unwed parents, the BSF project team can be a useful source of information in program planning and decision making. Specific examples of help that can be provided include the following:

- ***Facilitating high-level planning discussions:*** Defining the purpose and agenda of planning sessions, moderating discussions on key decision issues, and promoting open dialogue among agency leaders and concerned stakeholders
- ***Highlighting the relevant research:*** Presenting reliable research findings on the needs and relationships of unmarried parents, the benefits of marriage, and the effectiveness of marital education programs, as well as discussing implications for program design

¹Dion, M. Robin, Barbara Devaney, Sheena McConnell, Melissa Ford, Heather Hill, and Pamela Winston. "Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions." Princeton NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., November 2002. Available at www.mathematica-mpr.com/PDFs/redirect.asp?strSite=helpingunwed.pdf

- **Providing analytical support:** Identifying existing state data sources that can inform program design and analyzing background data from administrative or survey sources to support planning decisions
- **Conducting focus groups:** Planning, carrying out, and reporting on focus groups with members of the defined target population, to explore the types of services that would respond to their interests and needs, and to understand how outreach could most effectively communicate the program's value
- **Helping to identify local resources and linkages for recruitment and delivering services:** Building partnerships with local organizations, such as prenatal clinics, childbirth classes, pregnancy testing clinics, family resource centers, and programs such as Healthy Start, Healthy Families, Early Head Start, and WIC

Assistance in Selecting a Curriculum on Marriage and Relationship Skills

Curriculum choices are at the core of developing a healthy marriage program for unwed parents. Program curricula will provide information on marriage and its benefits, strengthen skills essential to a healthy and stable relationship, and help couples understand and develop commitment to each other. The BSF project team, in consultation with its team of national experts, can help agencies with curriculum review and selection in the following ways:

- **Curriculum profiles:** Providing systematic descriptions of marriage and relationship skills curricula, particularly those designed for use with couples around the time of their child's birth, to facilitate comparisons of topics covered, methods, research basis, and implementation requirements
- **Curriculum evaluation:** Recommending a limited set of curricula for consideration as a program core, based on detailed reviews and observations of the major research-based marriage and relationship skills program curricula
- **Curriculum adaptation and supplementation:** Identifying where existing program curricula may need adjustments in delivery and where new material specific to the circumstances of unwed parents may be needed
- **Training and implementation guidance from curriculum authors:** Arranging for key program staff to participate in scheduled training offered by the original authors behind the curriculum, or in some cases for special on-site consulting or training in how to use the curriculum

Adding Other Components of the Model

In addition to marriage education and relationship skills instruction, the BSF program model includes 1) comprehensive services, such as employment services and enhanced parenting and child development instruction, to help low-income parents better meet the financial and other needs of their families; 2) family coordinators to assess family needs and provide ongoing support; and 3) strategies for reducing financial disincentives to marriage in existing policies and programs. Technical assistance activities in these areas could involve:

- **Guidance on marriageability and family services:** Assistance in assessing the service needs of the target population, identifying which needs can be met directly and which will require collaboration with other community partners, and, as needed, designing referral networks and follow-up procedures

- **Help in defining the role and training of family coordinators:** Advice on the necessary qualifications of family coordinators, specific responsibilities and activities, and training requirements
- **Advice or analysis on reducing disincentives:** Identifying potential policies and practices for programs interested in reducing disincentives to marriage, assessing the feasibility and implications of various options, and working with program staff to integrate changes into the overall program model

Guidance on Implementation and Operational Issues

Once a program model is agreed on and a specific curriculum adopted, program staff will be making decisions about how to deliver services effectively. Technical assistance from the BSF team can address issues involved in attracting and retaining program participants, delivering services, and managing and monitoring the program. Specific examples of the kinds of help that can be offered are:

- **Help in setting operational goals:** Advice on how to estimate likely participation and reasonable targets, and project the implications of attrition at various points of intake, enrollment, and program stages
- **Brainstorming on outreach and recruiting methods:** Support for planning how to identify unwed parents, disseminate information about the program, engage community partners, and make enrollment easy
- **Advice on screening:** Input from experts on domestic violence and substance abuse, to help plan how such problems can be identified early and dealt with in a way that addresses the problems and minimizes the risks
- **Consulting on staff planning:** Discussion of class sizes, demands on family coordinator time, overall supervisory burdens, and implications for staffing requirements
- **MIS planning and development:** Support for identifying information needs and how information will be captured, stored, and reported. For programs that become part of the BSF evaluation, Mathematica will provide MIS tools that programs can adopt.

If you are interested in technical assistance, please email TA@buildingstrongfamilies.info.

Technical assistance and support are available from the BSF project team, which includes Mathematica and its subcontractors, MDRC, Public Strategies, the Urban Institute, and Decision Information Resources, as well as national experts in marriage education and relationship skills curricula. Programs designed around the BSF model and implemented successfully will be considered for participation in a national study. These programs will benefit from additional technical assistance in refining and improving their programs, from the opportunity to work closely with other BSF program sites to learn from each other, and from a rigorous research design to determine program effectiveness. For additional information about the BSF project, go to www.buildingstrongfamilies.info or contact Alan Hershey at Mathematica, (609) 275-2384.

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