Building Strong Families: Testing Marriage and Relationship Skills Education for Unmarried Couples

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MATHEMATICA
Policy Research, Inc.
Overview

- Origins and Purpose of BSF Project
- BSF program model and evaluation design
- Characteristics of enrolled participants
- Lessons from early program operations
- Possible programmatic links to family law issues
What is Building Strong Families?

- Project includes both programs and research

- Program purposes:
  - Help unwed parents strengthen relationship
  - Support healthy marriage if couples choose to wed
  - Ultimate goal: Enhance child development

- Target population: Unwed new parents over 18, romantically involved

- Rigorous evaluation to test program impacts on relationships and children
BSF is Part of Broader Healthy Marriage Initiative

- Three major research demonstrations
  - Building Strong Families
  - Supporting Healthy Marriage
  - Community Healthy Marriage Initiative

- Support of efforts for particular populations
  - African-Americans
  - Hispanic
  - Native American

- Program grants through multiple arms of the Administration for Children and Families
Why Focus on Unwed Parents at the Time of Their Child’s Birth?

- Research shows advantages of children growing up with both married parents
- "Fragile Families" study shows strengths in unwed couples’ relationships
- Most unwed parents have romantic relationships
- Most such couples are interested in marriage
Most Unwed Parents Romantically Involved at Child’s Birth

- Cohabiting: 47%
- Visiting: 35%
- Not Romantic: 18%

Couples Generally Positive About Their Relationship

But Couples Typically Fall Short of Their Relationship Aspirations

- Most don’t marry, and many break up
- Interventions to help some couples improve relationships have been shown to be effective
- But unwed, low-income parents have generally not had opportunity for such services
- Unwed parents face particularly complex personal and circumstantial problems affecting their relationship
Developing the BSF Program Model: Guiding Principles

- Voluntary participation
- Alertness about domestic violence
- Focus on couples
- Comprehensive and intensive intervention
- Emphasis on *healthy* marriage and relationships
- Use available research and program experience to shape interventions
Major Elements of the BSF Intervention

- Family Support Services
- Marriage and Relationship Skills Education
- Family Coordinators
The Centerpiece: Instruction in Marriage/Relationship Skills

- Focus is on developing skills shown to be associated with healthy marriage

- Couples learn skills to help them:
  - Communicate more effectively
  - Become a team
  - Build trust and commitment
  - Enhance affection
  - Resolve problems and conflicts
  - Deal with stressors
Skilled Staff Work One-on-One with Couples

- Assess participant needs
- Encourage practice of relationship skills
- Promote attendance at workshops
- Provide sustained emotional support for couple

Family Coordinators: Encourage, Support and Connect
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Host Program</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>Georgia State University, Families First, Latin American Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baltimore, MD</td>
<td>Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baton Rouge, LA</td>
<td>Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Healthy Families Florida</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Healthy Families Indiana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>OK Department of Human Services</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
<td>Healthy Families San Angelo and Houston</td>
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## Couple Features at Intake

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percentage of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed (father)</td>
<td>ATL 76, BALT 55, BTR 78, FL 84, IN 83, OK 78, TX 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting (per mother)</td>
<td>ATL 79, BALT 69, BTR 75, FL 74, IN 82, OK 83, TX 89</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple Partner Fertility (Mother)</td>
<td>ATL 33, BALT 37, BTR 27, FL 26, IN 28, OK 29, TX 30</td>
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<td>Birth intended (per father)</td>
<td>ATL 41, BALT 51, BTR 37, FL 43, IN 30, OK 35, TX 49</td>
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<tr>
<td>High chance of marriage (per father)</td>
<td>ATL 67, BALT 52, BTR 85, FL 74, IN 74, OK 79, TX 80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total N = 1,314</td>
<td>ATL 189, BALT 198, BTR 147, FL 271, IN 108, OK 139, TX 262</td>
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Operational Lessons to Date

- Once involved, couples are positive about BSF
  - Both men and women engage, enjoy, continue
  - Group dynamic can be powerful component

- But creative, energetic outreach is essential
  - Active outreach for recruitment
  - Ongoing encouragement to sustain participation

- Supports for participation keep couples coming
  - Child care and transportation
  - Social rewards, incentives, attention

- Strong management builds program momentum
Extending BSF into Family Law: One Site’s Exploratory Efforts

- **Original motivation:** Reinforce perception of marriage as best way to “be responsible”

- **Method:** Presentation by authoritative CSE attorney on “The Legal side of Marriage and Kids”

- **Response:** Strong interest, especially because of complex multi-partner obligations

- **Potential importance:** Clarifying law and helping to resolve problems could put current relationship on stronger footing
What We *Don’t* Know Yet

- Whether programs will affect rates of healthy marriage and sustained relationships
- Effects on children
- What program dosage is needed for impacts
- Which operational strengths are necessary….and sufficient