

# Issue BRIEF



The goal of BSF was to improve couple's relationships, support families, and promote child well-being.

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## Evidence from the Building Strong Families Evaluation: **Limited Father Involvement: Which Families Are Most at Risk?**

Healthy marriage relationship skills education programs serving unmarried parents aim to help these couples improve their relationships, with the ultimate aim of supporting family stability and promoting child well-being. A central goal of these programs is to promote fathers' sustained, active engagement in their children's lives. Data from Mathematica's evaluation of the Building Strong Families (BSF) program allow us to determine which families that enrolled in a set of healthy marriage programs were at greatest risk of having fathers with very limited involvement with their young children. We find that the following risk factors are associated with fathers having little or no contact with their children three years after entering the program: below average couple relationship quality at program entry, the father's having a child from a previous relationship, and the father's having grown up without his own father present. In addition, fathers who showed signs of psychological distress when entering the program had the greatest risk of having little contact with their children three years later. Future healthy marriage programs serving unmarried parents may want to consider additional mental health services for at-risk fathers, as well as tailored or more intensive supports for couples with multiple risk factors.

### **NONRESIDENT FATHERS WITHIN THE BSF SAMPLE**

We examined data on fathers from the Building Strong Families (BSF) study. These programs aimed to improve couples' relationships and increase fathers' involvement with their children by offering couples relationship skills education and other services. The success of these programs was limited. After three years, the programs generally had little effect on couple relationships, father involvement, or child outcomes (Wood et al. 2012). To gain insight into possible explanations for this limited success and to identify directions for future program improvements, we examined BSF families in which the fathers were nonresident three years after entering the

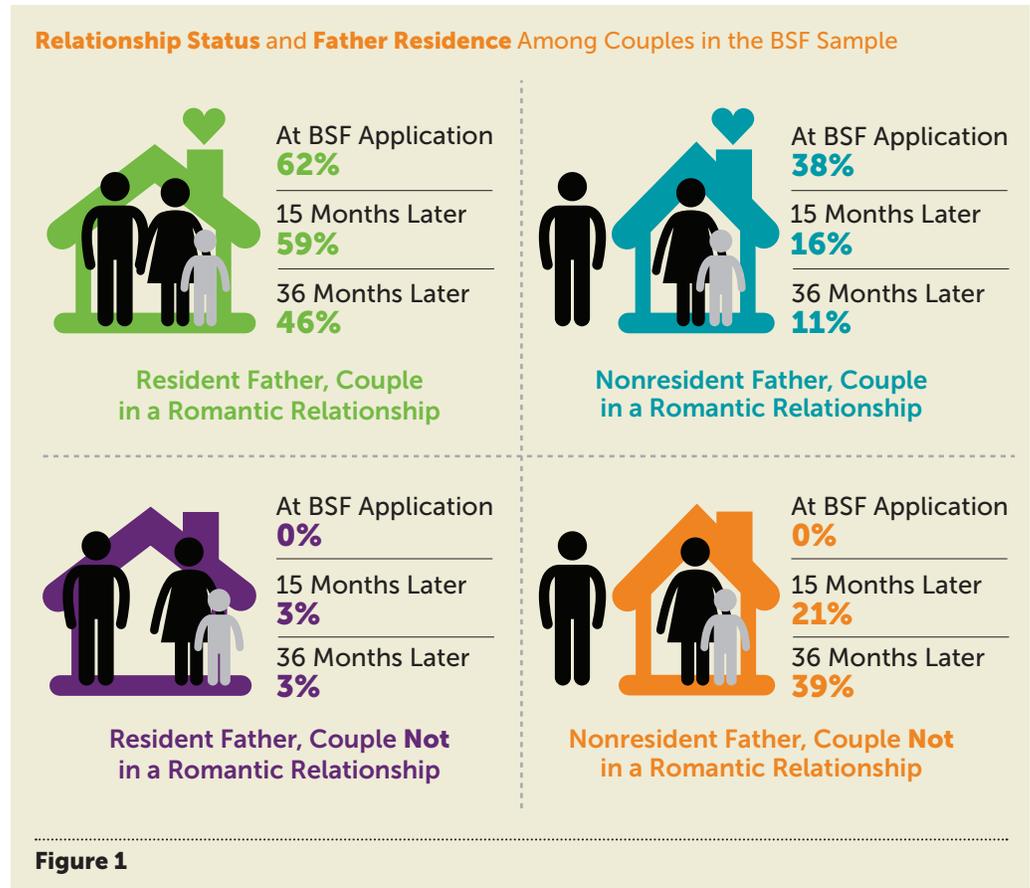
program, with particular attention to fathers who were nonresident and had little contact with their children at this point. A better understanding of these families, who experienced the poorest father involvement outcomes, may help improve the next generation of healthy marriage programs.

### **Nonresident fathers increased over time**

All BSF fathers were romantically involved with the mothers of their children when they entered the program, since this was a program eligibility requirement. However, some of these couples did not live together at this point. More than a third of BSF fathers were nonresident at program entry (Figure 1). Over time, the proportion of couples who were no longer romantically involved and in

which the father was nonresident increased. By the three-year follow-up, half of the fathers in the BSF sample were nonresident (Figure 1). Most of these nonresident fathers were no longer in a

romantic relationship with the mothers; however, just over 20 percent of the nonresident fathers were still romantically involved with the mothers of their children at the three-year follow-up.<sup>1</sup>



### FINDINGS IN BRIEF

Our analysis examines data on fathers from the BSF study. These fathers volunteered to participate in a relationship skills education program for unmarried parents with the mother of their child around the time their child was born. We focus on fathers who were nonresident three years after entering the program and divide these fathers into two groups: (1) those with high levels of contact with their children and (2) those with little or no contact. We find that:

- High-contact nonresident fathers often provide substantial financial support for their children and have levels of paternal engagement and warmth similar to those of resident fathers

- Low-contact nonresident fathers typically provide little financial support for their children and often have poor relationships with their children and coparents
- Having a lower quality relationship with the mother at program entry and having a child from a previous relationship are risk factors for BSF fathers having little contact with their children three years after entering the program
- A father's psychological distress around the time of his child's birth emerged as the strongest predictor for poor father involvement outcomes three years later

<sup>1</sup> Not shown. Half of BSF fathers were nonresident at this point and 11 percent were nonresident and still romantically involved with the mother (11 percent/50 percent=22 percent).

In our analysis, we divide nonresident BSF fathers into two groups:

1. **High contact**—the 56 percent who spent an hour or more with their children at least a few times in the past month at the time of the three-year follow-up (when their children were about 3 years old).

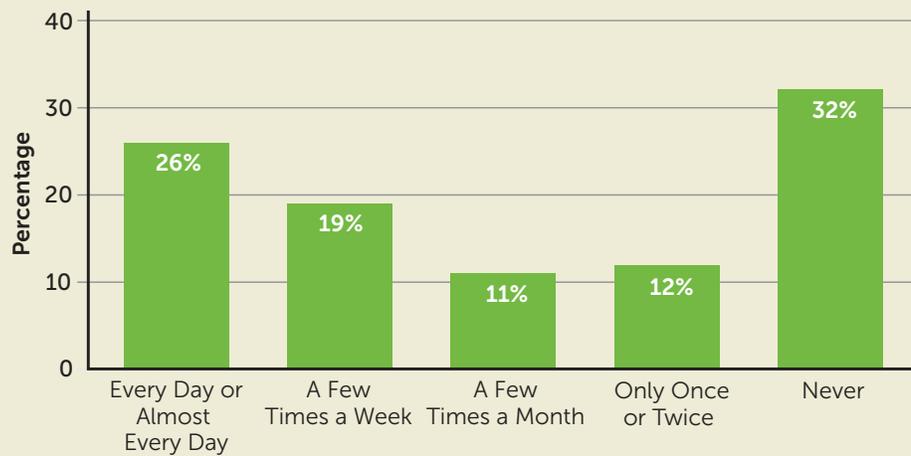
2. **Low contact**—the 44 percent who spent an hour or more with their children no more than once or twice in the past month at this point.

## Nonresident fathers are not all the same

At the three-year follow-up (when the children were 3 years old), some nonresident fathers spent time with their children regularly; others spent little or no time with their children. According to the mothers of these children, 56 percent of nonresident fathers spent an hour or more with their child at least a few times during the past

month. About one in four spent that much time with their children almost every day (Figure 2). Other nonresident fathers spent very little time with their children. According to the mothers, 32 percent never spent an hour with the child in the preceding month; another 12 percent only spent that much time with their children once or twice in the past month (Figure 2).

Nonresident Father Contact with BSF Child in Past Month\*



\*Based on mothers' report.

Figure 2

## ABOUT THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES STUDY

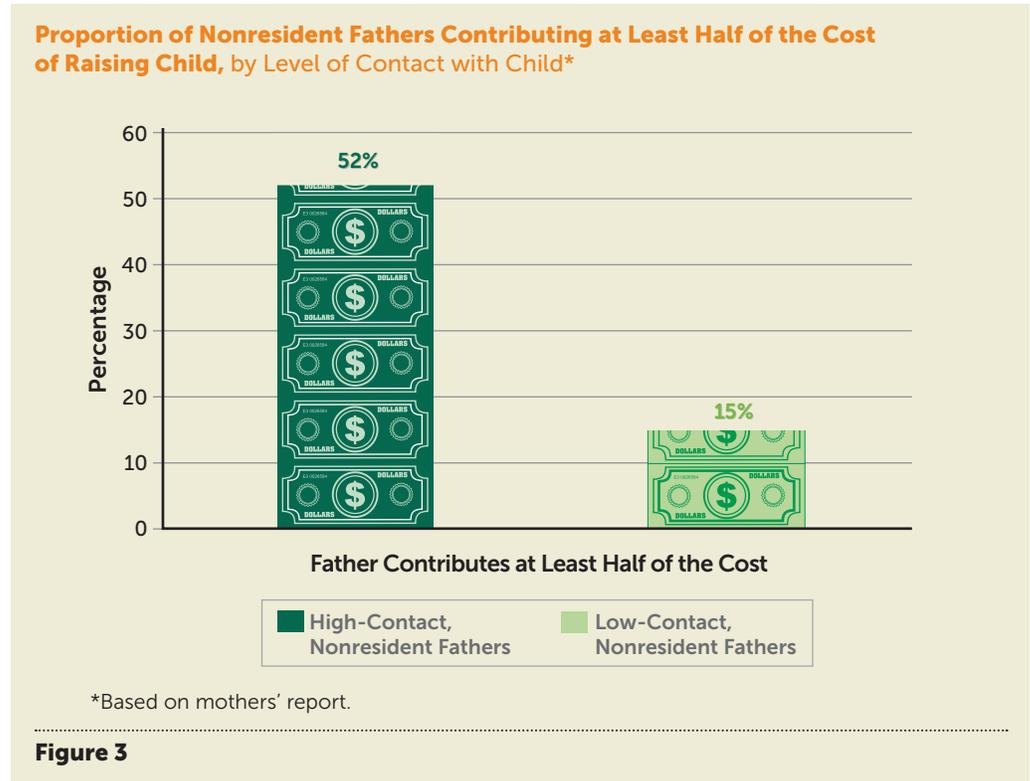
The Building Strong Families (BSF) study was sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research. BSF was a voluntary program for unmarried parents who were expecting or had just had a baby. The program offered couples relationship skills education in group sessions, as well as other supports. It aimed to improve couples' relationship quality and ultimately to increase the stability of their families and their children's well-being. To be eligible for BSF, couples

had to be in a romantic relationship. They also had to be expecting a baby or have had one in the past three months and had to have been unmarried when their baby was conceived. In addition, both members of the couple had to be at least 18 years old and agree to participate in the program and the study. The BSF study used a random assignment design and included more than 5,000 couples in eight locations around the country. Follow-up surveys were conducted with mothers and fathers about 15 and 36 months after random assignment.

## Child contact and financial support

Nonresident fathers who had frequent contact with their children provided much more financial support than did those who had little or no contact. Among “high-contact” nonresident fathers (those who spent an hour or more with their children at least a few times in the past month), 52 percent covered at least half of the cost of raising the child, according to the mothers. In contrast, only 15 percent of “low-contact”

nonresident fathers (those who spent an hour or more with their children no more than once or twice in the past month) covered that much of the cost (Figure 3). High-contact nonresident fathers were much more likely to provide informal financial support not provided through the formal child support system than low-contact nonresident fathers were. High- and low-contact nonresident fathers were equally likely to provide formal child support.



High-contact nonresident fathers reported much higher levels of paternal engagement and paternal warmth than low-contact nonresident fathers did.

## Low contact linked to poor relationships

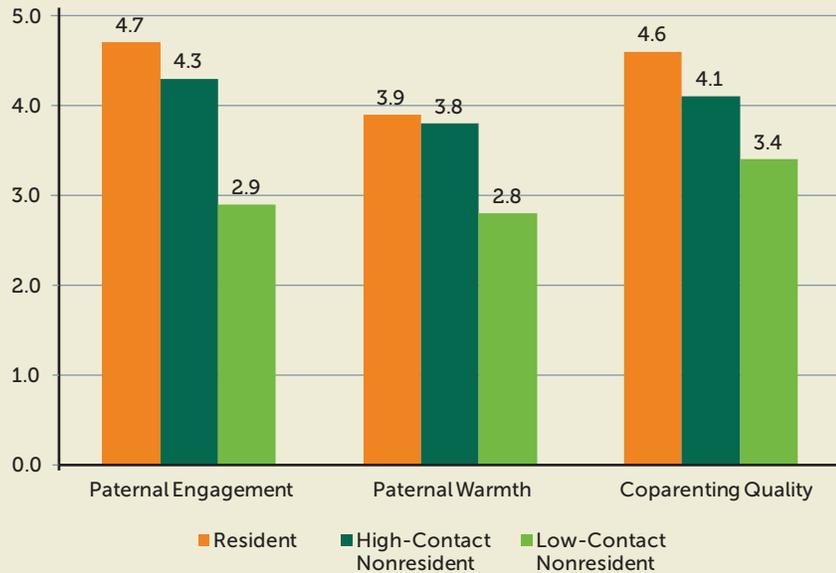
High-contact nonresident fathers reported much higher levels of paternal engagement and paternal warmth than low-contact nonresident fathers did. We measured paternal engagement using an index (on a 1-to-6 scale) of the frequency with which fathers reported engaging in a series of 12 caregiving, physical, cognitive, and social play activities with the child in the preceding month. The average paternal engagement scale was 4.3 for the high-contact group, compared with an average of 2.9 among low-contact nonresident fathers. We measured paternal warmth using an index (on a 1-to-4 scale) that combined fathers' responses to three questions about the warmth of their relationship with their children.<sup>2</sup> The average paternal warmth index was 3.8 for high-contact

nonresident fathers, compared with 2.8 for low-contact nonresident fathers (Figure 4). The rates of paternal engagement and warmth reported by high-contact nonresident fathers were much closer to those reported by resident fathers than they were to those reported by low-contact nonresident fathers.

Coparenting relationships were also better in families where nonresident fathers had more frequent contact with their children. We measured coparenting using an index based on the average responses of both parents to 10 questions concerning how well they communicated in their coparenting roles and functioned as a good coparenting team. The index ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 corresponding to both parents strongly agreeing with all 10 positive statements about coparenting and 1 corresponding to both parents

<sup>2</sup> See Moore et al. (2012) for more information on how the paternal engagement, paternal warmth, and coparenting measures were conducted.

**Level of Paternal Engagement, Warmth, and Quality of Coparenting Relationship, by Father's Residence Status and Level of Contact**



**Figure 4**

strongly disagreeing with all these statements. The average coparenting quality index for the high-contact nonresident group was 4.1, compared with 3.4 for the low-contact nonresident group.<sup>3</sup> The fact that higher quality coparenting relationships were associated with higher levels of contact with children by nonresident fathers could indicate that poor quality coparenting leads to less contact with children by nonresident fathers. Alternatively (or in addition), less father contact with the child could lead to lower opinions by both parents of the quality of the coparenting relationship. Our analysis does not allow us to determine whether either of these possible explanations is correct.

**LOSING TOUCH—WHICH FATHERS AND CHILDREN ARE MOST AT RISK?**

Research suggests that, on average, children who have nonresident fathers with whom they have little contact are at higher risk for poor outcomes. Low-contact nonresident fathers often provide limited financial support for their children and frequently have poor quality relationships with their children and coparents. Relationship skills education programs aim to limit these risks and to keep fathers actively engaged in their children's lives. A better understanding of which families

who participate in these programs are at greatest risk of poor father involvement outcomes may help improve these programs in the future.

Here, we examine risk factors associated with fathers being low contact and nonresident three years after entering the BSF program. Our results are expressed as the likelihood that a father who has a particular characteristic (such as not being employed when he applied for BSF) but who otherwise has the average characteristics of all fathers in the BSF sample will be low contact and nonresident when his child is 3 years old (see text box on page 8 for more details on methods).

**Initial relationship quality matters**

Fathers who were not living with the mother of their child when they applied for BSF and who had a poorer quality relationship with the mother were more likely to be low-contact nonresident fathers three years later. Men who were nonresident partners at BSF application had a 26 percent chance of becoming low-contact nonresident fathers, compared with a 19 to 20 percent chance for otherwise similar men who were living with their partners when they applied for BSF (Table 1). Men who were in couples with relationship quality below the average for BSF couples were also more likely

<sup>3</sup> All differences between high-contact and low-contact nonresident fathers in Figure 4 are statistically significant at the .01 level.

**Table 1.** Predicted Probability BSF Fathers Are Low Contact and Nonresident When Their Children Are Three Years Old, by Couple Characteristics at BSF Application

Variable	Percentage with Characteristic	Predicted Probability
Overall	100	22
<b>Couple's Relationship Characteristics</b>		
<b>Couple Relationship Status</b>		
Married	7	19**
Living together full time	56	20***
<i>Neither married nor living together</i>	37	26
<b>Couple's Relationship Quality</b>		
Below average	46	25***
Above average	54	20
<b>Mother Believes Marriage Important for Children</b>		
Yes	73	22
No	27	24
<b>Father Believes Marriage Important for Children</b>		
Yes	79	22
No	21	22
<b>Mother Wanted Birth</b>		
Yes	83	21***
No	17	26
<b>Father Wanted Birth</b>		
Yes	89	22
No	11	23
<b>Couple Has More than One Child Together</b>		
Yes	26	20
No	74	23
<b>Demographic and Background Characteristics</b>		
<b>Couple's Race/Ethnicity</b>		
<i>Both African American</i>	54	23
Both Hispanic	19	20
Both White	11	19**
All other couples	16	25
<b>Mother Has Child by Another Partner</b>		
Yes	32	22
No	68	22
<b>Father Has Child by Another Partner</b>		
Yes	30	26***
No	70	21
<b>Mother Lived with Own Father Growing Up</b>		
Yes	40	23
No	60	22
<b>Father Lived with Own Father Growing Up</b>		
Yes	40	18***
No	61	23

Variable	Percentage with Characteristic	Predicted Probability
Overall	100	22
<b>Demographic and Background Characteristics (cont.)</b>		
<b>Mother is an Immigrant</b>		
Yes	15	19
No	85	23
<b>Father is an Immigrant</b>		
Yes	15	16**
No	85	22
<b>Mother Less Than 21 Years Old</b>		
Yes	38	24*
No	62	21
<b>Father Less Than 21 Years Old</b>		
Yes	22	25*
No	78	22
<b>Mother Has High School Diploma/GED</b>		
Yes	67	23*
No	33	20
<b>Father Has High School Diploma/GED</b>		
Yes	65	22
No	35	23
<b>Other Characteristics</b>		
<b>Mother Employed at BSF Enrollment</b>		
Yes	33	23
No	68	22
<b>Father Employed at BSF Enrollment</b>		
Yes	74	21**
No	27	25
<b>Mother's Psychological Distress</b>		
Moderate or high distress	26	24
<i>Low distress</i>	75	22
<b>Father's Psychological Distress</b>		
Moderate or high distress	21	28***
<i>Low distress</i>	79	21
<b>Mother Ever Sentenced to Jail Time</b>		
Yes	12	24
No	88	22
<b>Father Ever Sentenced to Jail Time</b>		
Yes	35	23**
No	65	20
<b>Sample Size = 3,947</b>		

Source: Building Strong Families 36-month follow-up survey and baseline information form.

Note: Tests of statistical significance refer to the difference between the predicted probability of sample members with the particular characteristic and the predicted probability for those in the reference category in each group. For each characteristic, the reference category is indicated by italics.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* Statistically significant at the .10/.05/.01 level.

to be low-contact nonresident fathers three years later. This group had a 25 percent chance of being low contact and nonresident at the three-year follow-up, compared with a 20 percent chance for similar men in couples with above-average relationship quality.

Other factors associated with the initial relationship status and quality also made a difference. For example, the mother's reporting when she applied for BSF that she did not want the pregnancy increased the risk of the father being nonresident and low contact at the three-year follow-up. Men in this group had a higher likelihood of being low-contact nonresident fathers than men whose partners reported wanting the pregnancy (26 versus 21 percent). In contrast, there was no association between the father's reporting that he wanted the pregnancy and his likelihood of being low contact and nonresident at follow-up.

### **Father's background influences risk**

Several factors associated with fathers' family backgrounds influence their risk of having little contact with their child when the child is 3 years old. For example, men who had children by other partners when they applied for BSF were more likely than otherwise similar men to be low-contact nonresident fathers three years later (26 versus 21 percent). In addition, men who did not grow up with their fathers present most of the time were more likely to be low-contact nonresident fathers at follow-up than similar men whose fathers were present when they were growing up (22 versus 16 percent). We also find that men who were immigrants were at lower risk of being low contact and nonresident than similar native-born men (16 compared to 22 percent). In contrast, the mother's multiple partner fertility, immigrant status, and whether she grew up with her own father present were not statistically significant predictors of whether the father was low contact and nonresident at follow-up.

### **Psychological distress is a major risk factor**

Men who showed signs of psychological distress when they applied for BSF were at substantially higher risk of being low-contact nonresident fathers at follow-up. Men who gave baseline survey responses indicating that they had a moderate to high level of psychological distress, but who otherwise had the average characteristics

of men in the BSF sample, had a 28 percent likelihood of being low contact and nonresident at follow-up—the highest risk of any group we examined.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, similar men who gave responses that indicated a low level of distress had only a 21 percent likelihood of being low contact and nonresident. Women's level of psychological distress at BSF application was not associated with the likelihood that their partner was a low-contact nonresident father at follow-up.

Other characteristics of fathers at BSF application were also associated with the likelihood of their being low contact and nonresident at follow-up. Men who reported having been sentenced to jail time were somewhat more likely to be low contact and nonresident than similar men who did not (23 versus 20 percent). In addition, fathers who were not employed at baseline were at greater risk of low-contact nonresidence than similar men who were employed (25 versus 21 percent). Women's employment at baseline and their history of jail time were not predictors of their partner's likelihood of being a low-contact nonresident father at follow-up.

## **WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY?**

Many nonresident fathers in the BSF sample had relatively high levels of contact with their children when their children were 3 years old, spending an hour or more with them at least a few times a month. These high-contact nonresident fathers often provided a substantial amount of financial support for their children and typically reported positive relationships with them. They and their partners also reported relatively positive coparenting relationships. Other nonresident fathers had little contact with their children at this point, seeing them no more than once or twice a month and in some cases not at all. These low-contact nonresident fathers typically provided little financial support for their children and reported low quality relationships with them. On average, they and their partners reported poor quality coparenting relationships. This group of low-contact nonresident fathers is of particular concern, since being in this group is associated with multiple factors linked to poorer outcomes for children: limited financial support from the father, weak father-child relationships, and poor coparenting. Since these families sought help to strengthen their relationships from the BSF program but

Men who showed signs of psychological distress when they applied for BSF were at substantially higher risk of being low-contact nonresident fathers at follow-up.

<sup>4</sup> We assessed psychological distress using the Kessler-6 scale (Kessler et al. 2003). Categorization of "low," "moderate," and "high" follows the developer's guidelines.

then experienced particularly poor father involvement outcomes, a better understanding of who these families are could help improve future healthy relationship skills education programs serving unmarried parents.

### Support for those at highest risk

We identified several factors that were associated with increased risk of fathers being low contact and nonresident when their children were 3 years old. These include poor relationship quality at program entry, certain background characteristics for fathers (such as not having grown up with their fathers present), and in particular, fathers having symptoms of psychological distress. Since these factors predict a status that has been found to be strongly associated with poor outcomes for children, future relationship skills programs serving low-income parents may want to use these risk factors to identify couples for particular attention. Couples with multiple risk factors may need additional supports to help reduce the likelihood that their children will grow up with little support from their fathers.

### Provide mental health supports

The approximately one in five men who showed signs of psychological distress at BSF application were at substantially higher risk than other applicants of having little or no contact with their children three years later. This pattern suggests that relationship skills programs may want to give additional attention to the mental health of the fathers they serve. Program administrators could consider working with experts to identify screening tools to use as part of their initial assessment procedures to identify fathers who are most in need. In addition, they could integrate material that addresses mental health issues into their programming. They could form partnerships with mental health service providers and refer fathers who need extra support to them. An increased focus on the mental health of the fathers they serve might help healthy marriage relationship skills education programs achieve their goals of increased family stability and father involvement.

Program administrators could consider using mental health screening tools as part of initial assessments to identify fathers in need and integrate material addressing mental health into their programming.

### METHODS: PREDICTING WHICH FATHERS ARE AT RISK OF LIMITED CONTACT

We used a logistic regression model to examine the association between couples' baseline characteristics and men's likelihood of being low-contact nonresident fathers at the three-year follow-up. To make the results from this multivariate analysis easier to interpret, we used coefficients from these models to estimate a series of predicted probabilities that men who have a particular characteristic—such as not being employed at BSF application—but who otherwise have the average characteristics of all male sample members would be low-contact nonresident fathers at the three-year follow-up. We combined data from program and control group members for these analyses. When we replicated the analysis with only the control group, we found similar results.

### REFERENCES

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