

Building a Happy Home: Marriage Education as a Tool to Strengthen Families

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Marriage can connect adults in more secure, long-term relationships, while acting as a foundation for stable home life. The best type of marriages are healthy ones, and healthy marriages are linked with positive outcomes for adults, including higher life satisfaction, greater economic well-being, and better physical and emotional health.

These benefits are not limited to the couple; children raised by parents in a healthy, stable marriage are more likely to have positive outcomes when it comes to educational attainment, economic well-being, and mental and physical health.¹ Even children raised outside of an intact family are more likely to experience social mobility when raised in communities with more married-parent families.² Conversely, family breakdown is associated with poorer outcomes for the family and costs for the broader community.³

While most Americans desire a happy marriage and family life, many Americans experience family instability. Unfortunately, it is often the most vulnerable in society, those with fewer economic resources, who are most likely to experience family breakdown.⁴

The Social Capital Project's report on family stability suggests that leaders and communities can take a variety of approaches to strengthening marriages and families.⁵ Marriage and relationship education—which is designed to help people gain the knowledge and skills to build and maintain healthy marriages—is one potential avenue for strengthening marriages and families.

Historically, some researchers and political commentators have been dismissive of marriage and relationship education programs, and particularly critical of programs directed at low-income Americans. Opponents of these programs argue that research shows marriage education for low-income individuals is ineffective. However, their claims are based on limited findings from evaluations of marriage and relationship education programs funded in the early years of the federal Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative, a federal grant program that funds healthy marriage and relationship education programs.⁶

While marriage education is not a panacea for addressing the troubling trends in marriage and family stability, more recent evidence suggests it can be a useful tool in helping people strengthen their relationships. For instance, more recent evaluations of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative programs include more promising outcomes, and the broader body of research examining marriage and relationship education programs for low-income individuals and couples shows that, overall, participants experience modest improvements in relationship quality, communication skills, personal well-being, and sometimes in parenting practices and relationship stability.⁷

Communities, civic institutions, and state and local government should take the lead in providing marriage and relationship education. Although some marriage and relationship education programs have been supported with funding from

federal taxpayers, these programs need not and should not be the main source of support. Institutions closest to couples and families, such as churches, schools, and community organizations may have the greatest success in helping couples, as these institutions provide not only education but also supportive relationships that can bolster couples during challenging times.

INTRODUCTION TO HEALTHY MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Healthy marriage and relationship education programs are designed to help individuals and couples prepare for and maintain healthy relationships and marriages. These programs are offered to people at various relationship stages and provided in a variety of locations, such as churches, community centers, schools, and online. Some communities and a few states have even implemented healthy marriage initiatives to promote and provide marriage and relationship education throughout their communities.⁸

Marriage and relationship education curricula cover a variety of topics and vary in content depending on the target audience. Some types of marriage and relationship education include:

- *Relationship literacy education* for youth, which addresses topics such as avoiding unhealthy relationships, myths about love, and building healthy communication skills.⁹
- *Premarital education* for seriously dating or engaged couples, which focuses on helping couples assess their readiness for marriage as well as their compatibility, and teaches healthy relationship skills.¹⁰
- *Relationship development education* for unmarried parents or parents-to-be, which covers similar topics as premarital education, but also addresses topics such as parenting.¹¹
- *Marriage enrichment education* for married couples, which focuses on helping couples strengthen their marriages and covers a variety of topics such as: managing finances, dealing with conflict, step-parenting (some marriage education is specifically geared towards couples in blended families), and managing relationships with in-laws.¹²
- *Divorce orientation education* for couples in the process of divorcing or who are seriously considering divorce, which focuses on helping couples determine whether divorce or reconciliation is the most appropriate direction. It provides participants with an overview of the research on divorce (e.g., the effects of divorce on children, the likelihood of a distressed relationship improving), and helps familiarize participants with options available to them in the divorce process, such as mediation rather than litigation.¹³

- *Community healthy marriage education*, which is designed to spread healthy marriage education throughout a community, with the goal of reaching a critical mass beyond the population that formally participates in healthy marriage programs.¹⁴ This type of education includes not only providing courses to individuals and couples throughout a community, but also provides education through public advertising campaigns and public events, for example.

Healthy marriage and relationship education has existed for some time, but it gained new attention in the early 2000s when the George W. Bush Administration implemented the Healthy Marriage Initiative.¹⁵ The Healthy Marriage Initiative, now referred to as the Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative, is a federal grant program that provides funding to states on a competitive basis that can be used for a variety of marriage and relationship education activities. These activities include premarital education programs, marriage mentoring, high school education programs, and public advertising campaigns on healthy marriage, among other activities.¹⁶ Funding for these programs was roughly \$75 million in FY 2021.¹⁷

Federally-supported programs have generally been targeted to lower-income Americans.¹⁸ This is because those with lower income often experience greater relationship instability.¹⁹ Besides dealing with financial stress, low-income individuals are also more likely to have children with former romantic partners, creating more complexity in their family relationships.²⁰ Low-income Americans are also more likely to be in cohabiting relationships and raising children together outside of marriage, and these informal relationships are much less stable than marriage.²¹ Family instability places adults and their children at significantly greater risk for negative outcomes, including poverty, so marriage education can theoretically act as an anti-poverty measure, if it is effective.²²

Evaluations of some of the earliest Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative grant programs yielded underwhelming results, and some researchers have concluded this initial evidence decisively shows these programs do not help low-income couples improve their relationship outcomes.²³ However, as Dr. Alan Hawkins explains in a 2019 report, such claims are based on “early studies and a limited spectrum of relevant work.”²⁴ While it is true that most of the initial evaluations of federally-funded programs found few statistically significant outcomes, or outcomes that were unlikely to have occurred by chance, there were some positive findings from these studies, and a more recent evaluation of federally-funded programs has found promising outcomes.

Furthermore, the broader body of research indicates marriage and relationship education programs for low-income participants generally yield benefits. While the benefits are typically modest, marriage and relationship education programs nonetheless appear to help couples improve their relationship quality and sometimes increase their relationship stability.

The following sections provide a brief overview of the original federal evaluations, as well as a summary of findings from more recent federal evaluations. Later sections discuss findings from several meta-analyses examining healthy marriage and relationship education programs for low-income individuals. A summary of the findings of the federally-funded evaluations is presented in the Appendix.

EVALUATIONS OF FEDERAL HEALTHY MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION INITIATIVE PROGRAMS

Perhaps the best-known evaluations of marriage and relationship education programs are three U.S. Department of Health and Human Services commissioned federal studies. These rigorously designed studies were commissioned to examine some of the first programs that received funding from the federal Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative. Two of these evaluations, *Building Strong Families* (BSF), which examined programs for low-income unwed parents, and *Supporting Healthy Marriage* (SHM), which examined programs for low-income married couples, were randomized control trial studies, the gold standard in program evaluation. These evaluations also included long-term follow-up assessments to determine whether program effects extended beyond program completion, and included larger sample sizes than most evaluations of marriage and relationship education programs.

In the BSF and SHM studies, volunteers were randomly selected to participate in either a treatment group that received relationship education or assigned to a control group that did not receive education.²⁵ The groups were compared at the end of the treatment period on outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, parenting, and emotional well-being.

The third study, the *Community Healthy Marriage Initiative* (CHMI) evaluation, measured the impact of healthy marriage and relationship education provided via community initiatives.²⁶ A random sample of individuals from communities that implemented healthy marriage initiatives were compared to a random sample of individuals from demographically similar communities that did not have healthy marriage initiatives. The groups from treatment and comparison communities were assessed before the initiatives began and after the initiatives had been in place for two years to see if those in the treatment communities had received greater levels of education and if it had improved their relationship quality.²⁷

OUTCOMES OF THE FEDERAL EVALUATIONS

In two of the three initial federal evaluations, researchers found few significant differences at the long-term follow-up between treatment groups and control groups (or in the case of the CHMI evaluation, researchers found few differences between those in treatment communities and those in comparison communities).

One of the two studies that found very few significant effects was the CHMI evaluation, and researchers even found less favorable outcomes on some measures among those surveyed from the communities that had healthy marriage initiatives (Appendix Figure 1).²⁸ The other study in which researchers found few effects was the BSF evaluation, which examined federally-funded programs for low-income, unwed parents. Besides finding few significant improvements in relationship quality or stability at the three-year follow-up, researchers in the BSF study even found unexpected negative outcomes on measures of relationship stability and father involvement (Appendix Figure 2).²⁹ However, at one program location, Oklahoma City, which had been operating the longest of any of the programs, researchers found a few long-lasting positive effects on outcomes of relationship stability and partner fidelity.³⁰

In contrast, the SHM evaluation examined federally-funded programs for low-income married couples and although SHM did not lead more couples to stay married, it found several more significant positive outcomes than the other two federal studies (Appendix Figure 3).³¹ For example, participants reported significantly higher outcomes on measures of relationship quality than the control group, including a significantly lower likelihood that either spouse was unfaithful. Furthermore, both men and women reported significantly lower levels of psychological abuse compared to control group couples. The programs evaluated in the SHM study were likely more successful than those examined in the BSF study because participants were married and therefore likely more invested in their relationships than those in the BSF study who were mostly unmarried.

While all of these studies used rigorous study designs, even rigorous evaluations are not without limitation. For example, participants who volunteer for programs may be different than individuals in the general population in an important way. Thus, if program participation was mandatory or if participants were recruited differently for programs than they were in the context of the study, the program may not have the same effects. Generally speaking, however, participation in marriage and relationship education programs would be voluntary, as it was for study participants.³²

PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER EVALUATION

In addition to the three initial studies, a more recent federal evaluation from 2018, the *Parents and Children Together* study (PACT), examined two programs for low-income parents, both married and unmarried. This evaluation was also a randomized control trial study. In this study, researchers found significant, modest, effects in the expected direction for *both* married and unmarried low-income minority parents, and these effects were somewhat larger than in the other federal evaluations.³³ Still, married participants had more significant outcomes than unmarried participants.

Encouragingly, at the one-year follow-up, treatment couples reported significantly higher levels of relationship commitment, greater levels of support and affection, and less frequent use of destructive conflict behaviors (Appendix Figure 4). Furthermore, treatment couples were less likely to have experienced severe intimate partner violence by the follow-up, and they also reported higher quality co-parenting relationships.³⁴

Perhaps most importantly, participants in the programs evaluated by the PACT study were more likely to still be together at the follow-up: 63 percent of treatment couples were still together compared to 59 percent of control group couples (this finding resulted from more marriages staying intact rather than an increase in marriages among unmarried couples). Relationship stability is typically harder to influence than relationship quality, so this is a promising finding.

Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services Evaluations

In fall of 2021, three additional federal evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education programs were released as part of the *Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services and Evaluations* project. These evaluations included the *Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education with Integrated Economic Stability Services: The Impacts of Empowering Families* evaluation; the *Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for Expectant and New Mothers: The One-Year Impacts of MotherWise* evaluation; and the *Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for High School Students: The One-Year Impacts of Two Versions of Relationship Smarts PLUS in Georgia* evaluation.

The evaluation of *Empowering Families* examined the effects of a healthy marriage and relationship education curriculum for low-income parents, combined with economic services, such as financial coaching, employment counseling, and case management.³⁵ Couples were randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a control group.

At the one-year follow-up, researchers found that treatment couples had significantly better outcomes on every aspect of relationship quality measured, as well as significantly better outcomes on the quality of their co-parenting relationship (Appendix Figure 5). The effect sizes on relationship quality were larger on average than those found in the PACT evaluation.³⁶ The researchers did not find an overall significant difference in whether the couples were married at the one-year follow-up. However, couples who entered the program unmarried (45 percent of couples) were significantly more likely to have married by the one-year follow-up than those in the control group.³⁷

The researchers did not find improvements on labor market outcomes, but did find that the program resulted in reduced economic hardship among couples. They hypothesize the reduction in economic hardship could be due to the program helping couples better communicate about budgeting and finances.

The *MotherWise* evaluation examined a relationship education program for low-income women who are pregnant or have given birth recently.³⁸ The program was administered by the University of Denver. The MotherWise program included six four-hour sessions, case management, and an optional workshop for couples. The evaluation used a randomized control trial model to examine the program's effect on relationship skills, relationship attitudes, relationship quality, and relationship status after one year. The researchers found positive outcomes on measures of relationship skills, relationship attitudes (such as disapproval of relationship violence), as well as improvements on relationship quality at the one-year follow-up (Appendix Figure 6).³⁹ They also found that women who participated in the program were less likely to have an unintended pregnancy within one year of program enrollment.⁴⁰ There were no differences in relationship status among women who participated in the program and women in the control group.

The final evaluation looked at the effects of the *Relationships Smarts PLUS (RQ+)* curriculum on 9th grade students enrolled in high school health classes in the Atlanta area. This study used a randomized control design and was not specifically geared towards low-income participants like the other federally-funded programs. At the one-year follow-up, there were few differences between students who participated in the program and the control group on measures of: relationship skills, relationship attitudes and knowledge, and relationship expectations and experiences (Appendix Figure 7).⁴¹ Students who participated in the program did have small declines on some measures of unrealistic relationship expectations (the belief that love is enough to sustain a happy marriage and the belief that happily married couples do not need to work on their relationships). Students who received the curriculum were also more likely to disapprove of unhealthy relationship behaviors at the one-year follow-up compared to students in the control group.

Thus, looking at the federal evaluations so far, while there have been several programs that have yielded no significant benefits in the long-term, other programs have yielded modest effects on participants' relationships and behavior.⁴² Given that programs that seek to modify participants' behavior usually find little or no impact, these modest findings are encouraging, especially given the rigorous study design used to evaluate them.⁴³ It is also encouraging that some of the more recent evaluations have found positive outcomes on relationship commitment for unwed couples, higher relationship stability for married couples, and increased marriage rates among unwed couples.

While the federally-funded programs evaluated thus far seem more beneficial for married couples than for unmarried couples overall, there is evidence from the PACT study and from the *Empowering Families* evaluations that these programs can help unwed parents, too. While marriage and relationship education programs have room for improvement, the more recent findings indicate these programs are improving their ability to help low-income couples. Thus, the blanket conclusion that the Healthy Marriage Initiative programs have failed to help low-income couples is an incomplete assessment of the research.

META-ANALYSES OF HEALTHY MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

In addition to the evaluations of the federally-funded programs conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, other researchers have conducted studies examining the effectiveness of healthy marriage and relationship education for low-income couples. These studies include several meta-analyses, which use statistical methods to combine the results of multiple research studies and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the results of a body of research. Generally, meta-analytic studies examining marriage and relationship education programs for low-income individuals find modest, positive effects on outcomes of relationship quality and communication skills.

A 2019 meta-analysis examined 16 reports that included 48 randomized-control-trial studies of relationship education targeted to low-income or disadvantaged couples (unemployed, on welfare, or with less than a high school education).⁴⁴ The samples were ethnically diverse. Few of the studies had long-term follow-up assessments to determine whether program effects remained, but two of the 48 studies included follow-up assessments that took place within a year after the program and another two included assessments that took place 2.5 years or more after the program. The researchers concluded that the overall effects of the relationship education programs were “small and stable up to 1 year post intervention,” based on further analyses controlling for time of post-measurement. The two studies with longer-term follow-up evaluations were the federal BSF evaluation and the SHM evaluation, discussed above.

Overall, researchers found small but significant program effects on relationship quality and stability measures, communication outcomes, fatherhood outcomes, and personal well-being outcomes for both men and women. Researchers also found positive effects on co-parenting among female participants.⁴⁵ The researchers found larger effects in programs where the average age was higher, more couples were married, more of the participants had a high school education, the majority of participants were white or Latino (as opposed to black), when programs did not include couples with a history of violence, when participants attended at least half the sessions, and when programs had less attrition.

Furthermore, in a 2015 meta-analysis examining 38 studies, researchers similarly found that marriage and relationship education for lower-income participants resulted in small, positive outcomes overall.⁴⁶ Of the 38 studies included in the meta-analysis, 22 included control groups and 19 of those were randomized control trial studies. The majority of the programs examined were those evaluated in the federal BSF and SHM evaluations, consequently most of these control group studies had follow-up assessments that took place one to three years post-treatment.

Among the 22 studies that included control groups, outcomes were significant for three of the five categories of outcomes the researchers examined: relationship satisfaction/quality, communication, and relationship aggression. However, there were no significant differences between treatment and control groups on relationship stability or parenting outcomes. Effect sizes were largest in studies that included more married couples than unmarried couples, when more of the participants were in distressed relationships (meaning relationship quality was low on standardized assessments of relationship satisfaction), and when the studies included a larger proportion of “near-poor” couples (as opposed to couples below the poverty line).⁴⁷

Thus, the overall findings from these meta-analyses suggest healthy marriage programs for low-income couples result in modest positive effects for participants on measures of relationship quality and communication, and sometimes other outcomes, like co-parenting and personal well-being. These programs appear to be more effective for married couples than for unmarried couples overall (as the federal studies also found), as well as for participants who are not the most economically disadvantaged, although distressed couples appear to benefit more sometimes than non-distressed participants. Thus, while these programs seem to help improve some aspects of relationship well-being, more work should be done to understand how to better help the most disadvantaged couples, especially as it pertains to improving relationship stability.

EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HEALTHY MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION FOR OTHER POPULATIONS

Although federal policy has mostly focused on marriage and relationship education for low-income individuals and couples, the literature on marriage and relationship education programs extend beyond programs for this population. Researchers generally find positive effects for the broader population on outcomes such as relationship quality and communication skills, and they find that both distressed and non-distressed couples can benefit from these programs.⁴⁸

Researchers have also conducted meta-analyses to examine specific types of marriage and relationship education programs, such as relationship literacy education for youth and young adults, pre-marital education programs, and programs for couples transitioning to parenthood or blending families in a step-family setting. Overall, researchers find these programs benefit those who participate.

For example, researchers find that couples who participate in pre-marital education programs significantly improve their communication, as well as sometimes significantly improve their relationship quality and marital stability, although additional research is needed with more diverse samples and with longer-term follow-up assessments.⁴⁹

Research on relationship literacy education for youth and young adults is more limited, but initial studies suggest these programs may help youth develop healthy relationship perspectives and attitudes as well as develop healthy relationship skills.⁵⁰ More rigorous evaluations are needed, as few of these studies are randomized control trial studies or have long-term follow-up assessments.

Some meta-analyses have focused on couples in specific life stages, such as couples transitioning to parenthood or who are blending families as the result of a remarriage. One meta-analysis examining relationship education for couples transitioning to parenthood found that, overall, programs had small effects on couple communication, psychological well-being, and couple adjustment.⁵¹ The majority of studies examined—16 out of 21—were randomized control trial studies, although sample sizes were small.

Finally, a meta-analysis of 14 studies examined programs directed to parents in step-families. Only four of the studies were randomized control trial studies and only one had a long-term follow-up. Researchers found that participants experienced small, positive benefits on outcomes of parenting and family functioning, although there were no differences between participants and control group couples on relationship enhancement.⁵²

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXAMPLES OF MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Improving marital and family stability, particularly among the most disadvantaged, will require concerted effort. Although the benefits of healthy marriage and relationship education tend to be modest in most cases, participants of these programs generally experience improvements in their relationships. Rather than giving up on healthy marriage and relationship education, community leaders and policymakers should consider it a tool to help couples strengthen their relationships and marriages, and leaders should also seek innovative ways to increase the effectiveness and accessibility of this type of education. Below are seven recommendations for how community leaders can expand access to healthy marriage and relationship education, along with examples of how and where those recommendations have been put into practice. Families, churches, schools, community organizations, and local leaders should be at the forefront of providing healthy marriage and relationship education.

1. States could set aside a portion of TANF funding for healthy marriage and relationship education or other marriage strengthening efforts. All states receive funding from the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) to assist low-income families. Three of the four program goals of the TANF program focus on marriage and family stability. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, TANF is designed to:⁵³

- Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.
- End the dependence of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage.
- Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies.
- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Despite TANF's focus on maintaining two-parent families and marriages, however, only a tiny portion of its funding goes towards efforts to directly support marriage, according to a review of state plans for TANF funds.⁵⁴ To ensure TANF dollars are used for the stated goals of the program, states could dedicate portion of their TANF funding for marriage and relationship education.

Some examples of what states have done or could do with TANF dollars include state healthy marriage initiatives, community healthy marriage initiatives, relationship literacy education for high school students, premarital education promotion policies, or education for unwed parents. However, there are a variety of ways states can use TANF funding to strengthen marriage.

State Healthy Marriage Initiatives

States could use TANF funding for statewide healthy marriage initiatives. These initiatives provide various types of healthy marriage and relationship education through multiple avenues.

For example, Oklahoma began a marriage initiative in 2001.⁵⁵ Funding for the program has come from a mix of state dollars and federal funding, from both the TANF program and Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative grants. Oklahoma provided marriage and relationship education in various institutions throughout the state, including: schools, correctional facilities, community centers, and churches.⁵⁶ Although the state officially ended the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2016 due to funding cuts, the state continues to incorporate marriage education into TANF services and provides other healthy marriage and relationship education through federal Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative grants.⁵⁷

Utah also operates a state healthy marriage initiative, which began in the late 1990s.⁵⁸ The initiative's funding has come from a variety of sources over the years, but it is now funded through a small portion of the state's TANF funds. Utah has also recently started to raise revenue for their marriage initiative by using money from marriage license fees.⁵⁹ The initiative receives guidance from a marriage commission—a board that consists of leaders from multiple fields, such as: professors, family life specialists, government leaders, marriage and family therapists, clergy, media members, and business leaders.⁶⁰

Over the years, Utah's marriage initiative has supported a variety of activities.⁶¹ These have included: developing a website to provide information on building healthy relationships and marriages; updating a healthy relationship curriculum for high schools; providing healthy marriage and relationship education for Head Start parents; and funding continuing education for therapists and family life educators.⁶² One of the initiative's largest projects was a 2008 media campaign to drive traffic to the website.⁶³ Currently, the initiative's main focus is to increase the number of couples who avail themselves of premarital education.

Texas also operated a healthy marriage initiative, although the initiative has gone unfunded since 2011. Between 2006 and 2011, Texas used TANF funding as well as federal Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative funding to support the state initiative. Texas's initiative provided marriage and relationship education through community organizations, and the state board of education developed and implemented a mandatory relationship and parenting course for high school students (the Parenting and Paternity Awareness or p.a.p.a. program).⁶⁴ Another aspect of the initiative was their premarital education promotion policy, to encourage couples to participate in premarital education by providing a financial incentive.⁶⁵

Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives

Funding from TANF could also be used for smaller-scale endeavors such as community healthy marriage initiatives. For example, Chattanooga, Tennessee's community healthy marriage initiative, called First Things First, uses a variety of approaches to strengthen relationships. For example, the initiative runs a media campaign to point people to a website where they can find information about healthy relationships as well as where they can find relationship education courses. The initiative also holds events designed to strengthen marriage and family relationships.⁶⁸

Tallahassee, Florida has a community healthy marriage initiative called Live the Life that focuses on providing relationship and marriage education to high school students, premarital couples, married couples, couples considering divorce, and military couples.⁶⁷ In Dallas, Texas, an initiative called Anthem Strong Families provides not only marriage and relationship education, but also provides fatherhood courses, domestic violence intervention programs, and workforce preparation classes.⁶⁸ (Anthem Strong Families has received funds through the federal Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative and was one of three organizations evaluated in the *Community Healthy Marriage Initiative* study.)

Relationship Literacy Education for High School Students

States could focus some of their TANF dollars on providing relationship literacy education to high school students. Relationship education in high schools has the potential to help youth prevent poor relationship choices that can

negatively affect their ability to form healthy, stable relationships and marriages in adulthood.

For example, Alabama created the relationship literacy education program *Love U2: Relationship Smarts Plus* (RS+) (now called *Relationships Smart Plus 4.0*) for high schools throughout the state. This program covers topics such as: healthy relationship decisions, dating violence, healthy communication skills, and the wise use of social media.⁶⁹ At the one-year follow-up, students who participated in this program had significantly greater declines in faulty relationship beliefs compared to control group students, and participants also experienced improvements in conflict resolution skills compared to students in the control group, although the differences faded over time.⁷⁰

Texas implemented a relationship literacy education program in their high schools as well, the previously referenced “p.a.p.a. program.”⁷¹ This program primarily focuses on the problems with teen parenting, however, it is different than sex education programs. It teaches the benefits of having children within marriage, healthy relationship skills, and how to avoid unhealthy relationships, among other topics.⁷² Initially, this program was widespread, as it was required for high school graduation, but that requirement is no longer in place.⁷³ Researchers found participants of the program experienced positive changes in their attitudes and understanding about relationships. However, this study did not include a control group.⁷⁴

Oklahoma and Utah have also implemented relationship literacy education in their high schools. For example, Utah high school students participate in a program called *Adult Roles and Responsibilities*, a curriculum which includes a section on healthy relationships and marriage.⁷⁵

Contrary to some of the previous research, the recent federally-funded evaluation of the *Relationship Smarts Plus* (RQ+) curriculum provided in Atlanta high schools found few differences between ninth-graders who participated in the program and students in the control group. The researchers suggested this could be because the program was offered to ninth-graders, and these students may not be as focused on dating or future marriage relationships as older high school students might be. Thus, schools and other places offering relationship literacy education may need to consider when the best time is to offer this type of education. Schools may also consider whether relationship literacy education should be mandatory or optional. Students who choose to participate would likely be more motivated to learn the material and implement what they learn than those who participate involuntarily.

Premarital Education Promotion Policies

TANF funding could also be used for premarital education programs. A handful of states have supported premarital education for engaged couples through premarital education promotion policies. Researchers have found preliminary evidence that Texas' premarital education promotion policy resulted in a modest reduction in divorce—a 1.5 percent reduction, which translated to 14,785 fewer couples divorcing in Texas in 2016.⁷⁶ Implementing these policies correctly, by providing oversight and funding, for example, is associated with the effectiveness of these policies.⁷⁷

Premarital education promotion policies generally are set up so that the state provides a financial incentive to engaged couples—usually by waiving the marriage license fee—if couples participate in premarital education or counseling.⁷⁸ Sometimes states cover the cost of the waived marriage license fee by increasing the cost of marriage licenses.⁷⁹ Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia have these policies in place, although some states have implemented the policies more diligently than others.

Education for Unwed Parents

TANF funding could also be used towards helping unwed parents improve their relationships. These families are arguably some of the most at-risk for breakup. Oklahoma City operates the Family Expectations program for unwed couples and parents to help them build healthy, stable relationships and marriages. Besides providing classes, the program also assigns a family support coordinator to each couple to help them review what they are learning in class and to provide guidance regarding challenges they may be facing, such as financial problems or unemployment.⁸⁰

Although the *Building Strong Families* evaluation found only a few significant outcomes for Oklahoma City's program at the long-term (36-month) follow-up, there were several significant outcomes at the 15-month follow-up. Furthermore, two significant effects remained at 36 months. The first was an increase in the likelihood that a child had continuously lived with both parents from birth through age three (48.9 percent among the treatment group and 41.4 percent among the control group). The second significant effect was a lower rate of infidelity (67.1 percent among treatment group couples reported that neither member had been unfaithful over the course of the study compared to only 59.6 percent of control group couples).⁸¹ Furthermore, researcher Sarah Halpern-Meehin finds that couples who participated in the Oklahoma City Family Expectation's program expressed that these programs provided an important network of support, which many of these couples would have otherwise lacked.⁸²

2. Set aside a portion of Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative funding to test innovative approaches to providing healthy marriage and relationship education. Should the federal government continue its investment in the Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative, a portion of the program's funding could be directed to researching innovative ways of providing this type of education, in order to increase effectiveness. Given the benefits of marriage, encouraging healthy two-parent families is an important component of reducing poverty. Researchers could examine methods such as self-directed education, usually provided online. Researchers could also examine the effectiveness of providing marriage education in smaller increments over a longer period of time, as well as the effectiveness of providing booster sessions to supplement the initial programming.

One example of an innovative program that has been effective is the online OurRelationship program. This 8-hour, online program for couples pairs online educational activities with personal phone consultations with professionals who provide additional educational support. Researchers have found the program increases relationship quality, as well as helps individuals improve personal outcomes such as mental health and work functioning.⁸³ Researchers have also found this program, as well as the ePREP online program, to be effective specifically for low-income participants.⁸⁴ The ePREP program, a similar online relationship education program, is another program researchers have found to be effective for low-income individuals.⁸⁵

Innovative approaches like this may be a particularly important way to increase reach, since self-directed relationship education is easier to access and can be done in the privacy of one's home. Furthermore, because self-directed marriage and relationship education is often the first method of relationship education couples seek, it may have the potential of helping couples address relationship problems before they worsen.⁸⁶ Examining and testing creative approaches of providing healthy marriage and relationship education, such as online programs, can help practitioners understand how to best reach people and better meet their various needs.

3. Provide or continue to provide healthy marriage and relationship education for military couples. Military marriages face significant challenges. Spouses deal with being away from one another for long stretches of time due to deployment. Injury and mental health challenges that can come as the result of military service are also associated with higher marital discord.⁸⁷ Military family service centers provide resources such as healthy marriage and relationship education, and should continue to do so.⁸⁸ If family service centers are not providing this type of education, they should consider implementing it. Furthermore, churches and community centers could implement healthy marriage and relationship education programs specifically geared to military families.

Perhaps the most effective marriage enrichment program evaluated has been a program for military couples, the PREP for Strong Bonds program (PREP is an acronym for the Prevention and Relationship Education Program). In a 2015 evaluation of the program researchers found that participants were roughly half as likely to be divorced at the two-year follow-up compared to control group couples, a noteworthy result.⁸⁹ Furthermore, minority couples were approximately one-fourth as likely to divorce over the period of the study compared to control group couples. Couples with greater economic challenges also experienced greater improvement in relationship stability.⁹⁰

PREP for Strong Bonds used military chaplains to serve as instructors, which may have contributed to the program's high level of success. Given their personal connection to the military community, chaplains may understand more intimately the challenges military couples face and how best to support couples in this circumstance.

4. Allow child welfare funding to be used for marriage and relationship education. Children are far more likely to experience abuse when they are raised outside of their married-parent family. Title II of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act provides grants to communities for the purpose of preventing child abuse and neglect, and one of the stated purposes for which the grants can be used is for efforts to increase family stability.⁹¹ However, Congress could change the law to make it clear that Title II funding can be used for healthy marriage and relationship education.

Funding provided under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act—which provides grants to states for foster care and adoption services—can also be used for promoting healthy marriage.⁹² States should consider using some of their Title IV-B funding for providing healthy marriage and relationship education for families at risk of having their children placed in foster care.

5. Provide educational information on healthy marriage and relationships at Title X family planning clinics. Should the federal government continue to support clinics with Title X funding, it could require these locations to provide information to their patients about where they can go for information on strengthening their relationships. These clinics could provide information about online resources as well as information regarding healthy marriage and relationship education classes in their area.

6. Require most divorcing couples to participate in divorce orientation education. States could provide resources to help couples salvage their marriages when possible. Most divorcing couples, particularly those with children under age 18, could be required to participate in a minimum number of hours of divorce orientation education as a prerequisite to filing for divorce.

Although not all marriages should remain intact, many couples divorce for reasons that can be addressed.⁹³ Furthermore, researchers find that in some cases, at least one if not both spouses say they would be interested in reconciliation, even in cases where couples are relatively far along in the divorce process.⁹⁴ However, states have made divorce easier to obtain over the years by implementing no-fault divorce laws and unilateral divorce options.⁹⁵ Divorce orientation education, on the other hand, is designed to help individuals think more carefully about their decision to divorce by providing information to help them assess their relationships.

Divorce orientation education addresses topics such as research-based information on divorce, including: common reasons for divorce, the effects of divorce on adults and children, and the likelihood of unhappy marriages improving. Divorce orientation education also helps participants assess their relationships, points them to further resources should they choose to reconcile, and includes information on the associated legal process and alternatives to litigation.⁹⁶

While many states require some type of co-parenting education for divorcing parents, co-parenting education does not usually include information on the potential for reconciliation.⁹⁷ Utah is rare in that it requires divorce orientation education, although all that is required is a one-hour session.⁹⁸ In Utah, divorcing couples are required to take the course within 60 days after filing a divorce petition but are provided a discount if they take the class within 30 days of filing for divorce, as taking the course earlier is expected to increase the likelihood for reconciliation.⁹⁹ On a smaller scale, Oklahoma's co-parenting education for divorcing parents includes a section on reconciliation as an option to divorce.¹⁰⁰

While a few other states have introduced legislation to require divorce orientation education, such legislation has not been adopted thus far. For example, the *Parental Divorce Reduction Act* was introduced in New Mexico in 2011, while similar legislation was introduced in both North Carolina and Georgia in 2013.¹⁰¹ Other states could look to these examples and move to implement divorce orientation education in their states.

7. Implement Community Marriage Policies or marriage ministries. Faith leaders could implement Community Marriage Policies, in which houses of worship pledge to require couples to participate in premarital education before a couple marries, as well as commit to provide other activities and resources to support marriage, such as marriage enrichment courses, marriage mentoring, and couples' retreats.¹⁰² In a 2004 study, researchers found that counties that implemented these policies had two percent fewer divorces annually than comparison counties.¹⁰³

Houses of worship could also implement other types of marriage programs, such as those supported by Communio. Communio is an initiative designed to support churches in providing marriage and relationship education to members

of their communities. In addition to providing healthy marriage and relationship education, Communio programs help couples build networks of support, as their education programs are embedded within faith communities.

In an initial evaluation of a Communio program in Jacksonville, Florida—one of the pilot cities for the program—researchers found that the divorce rate in Duval County (where Jacksonville is located) decreased by 27 percent between 2015 and 2017.¹⁰⁴ Although the researchers cannot definitively determine it was the program that caused the large decline in divorce in Duval County, they noted that “the increase in family stability in Jacksonville during the years of the project was larger than the increase in family stability witnessed in the vast majority of other large, comparable counties across the U.S.”¹⁰⁵

Given the strong social support religious groups provide, marriage and relationship education in faith-based settings may be particularly effective, as participants not only receive education but are also connected with a strong social network.¹⁰⁶ Social support is helpful to marriages, and thus building support networks through marriage education programs could help increase the efficacy of these programs.

CONCLUSION

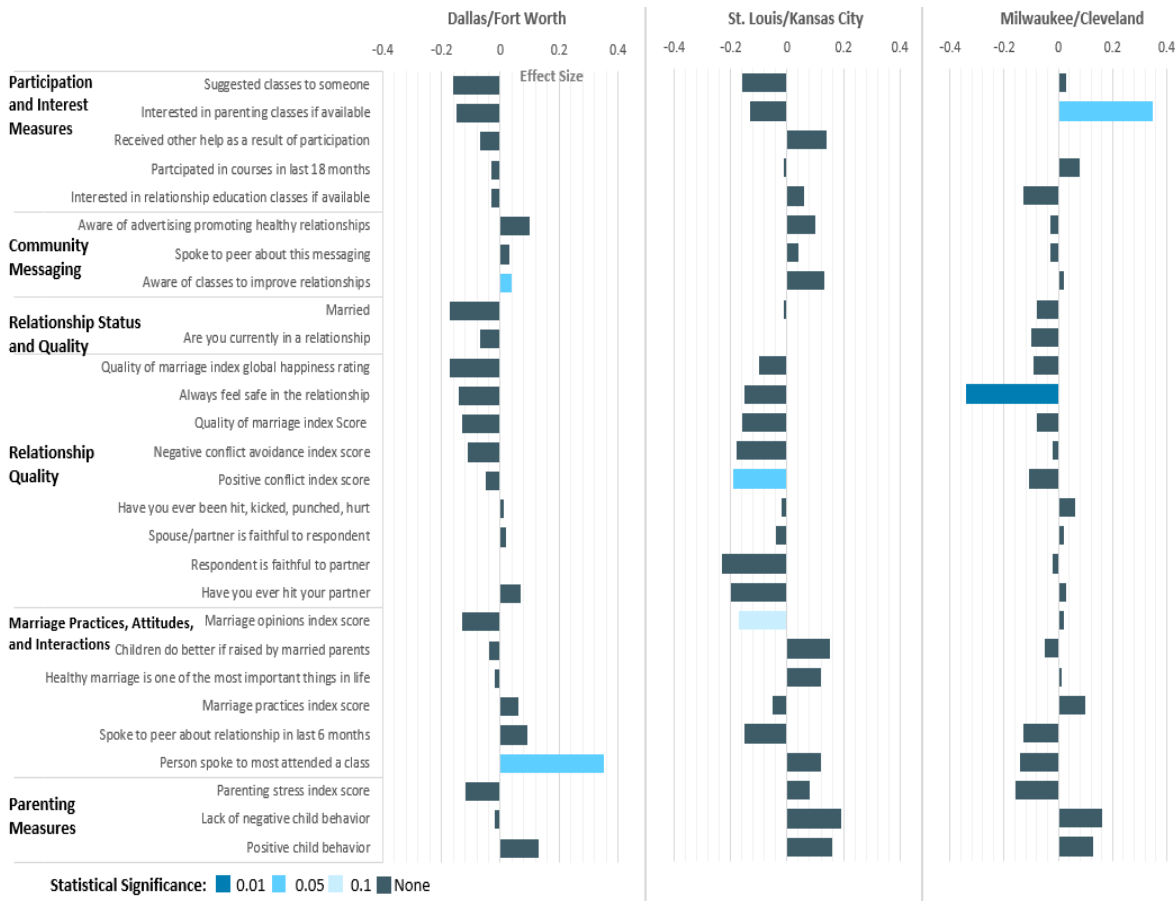
Overall, evidence suggests marriage and relationship education often can be an effective tool for helping couples strengthen their relationships and preparing individuals to build healthy relationships and marriages. Although the effects of marriage and relationship education programs have been modest, growing evidence indicates these programs benefit individuals and couples, even couples who are low-income and face substantial challenges in their relationships. State and local leaders should make a greater effort to use marriage and relationship education to help those within their influence build and maintain healthy marriages.

Several community and faith-based organizations across the nation are working to provide healthy marriage and relationship education, and a few states have also been active in extending this type of education through statewide initiatives. Other local and state leaders can look to these examples for guidance. The combined efforts from various institutions of society can help increase the likelihood that more Americans have the tools they need to build and maintain healthy marriages so more adults, children, and communities reap the benefits of stable family life.

Rachel Sheffield
Senior Policy Advisor

APPENDIX

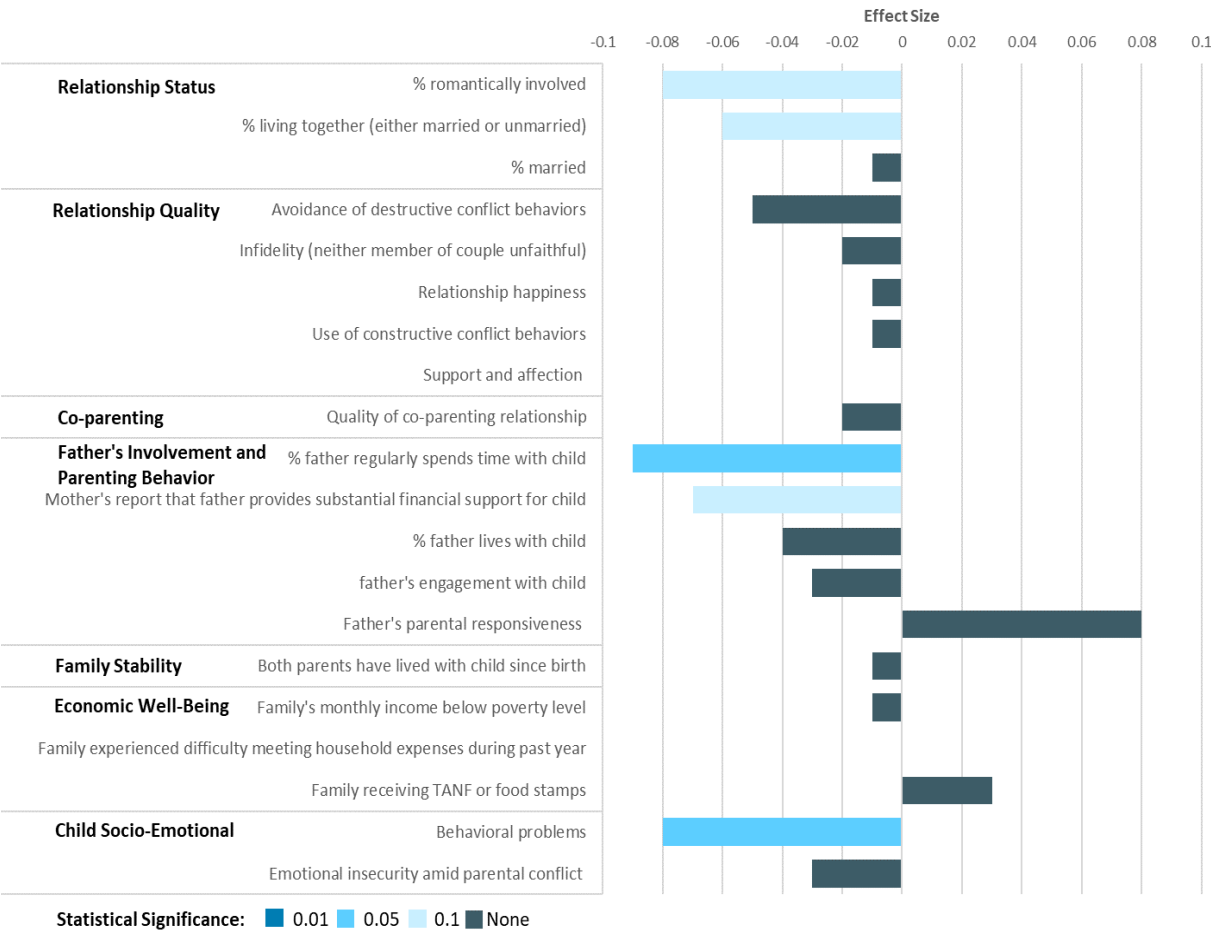
Appendix Figure 1. Results from the *Community Health Marriage Initiative (CHMI) Evaluation*



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children & Families. Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "The Community Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation: Impacts of a Community Approach to Strengthening Families." November 2012. Table 5.1.1, Tables 5.1.2, 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.3, and 5.4. Accessed December 3, 2021. https://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/chmi_impactreport.pdf

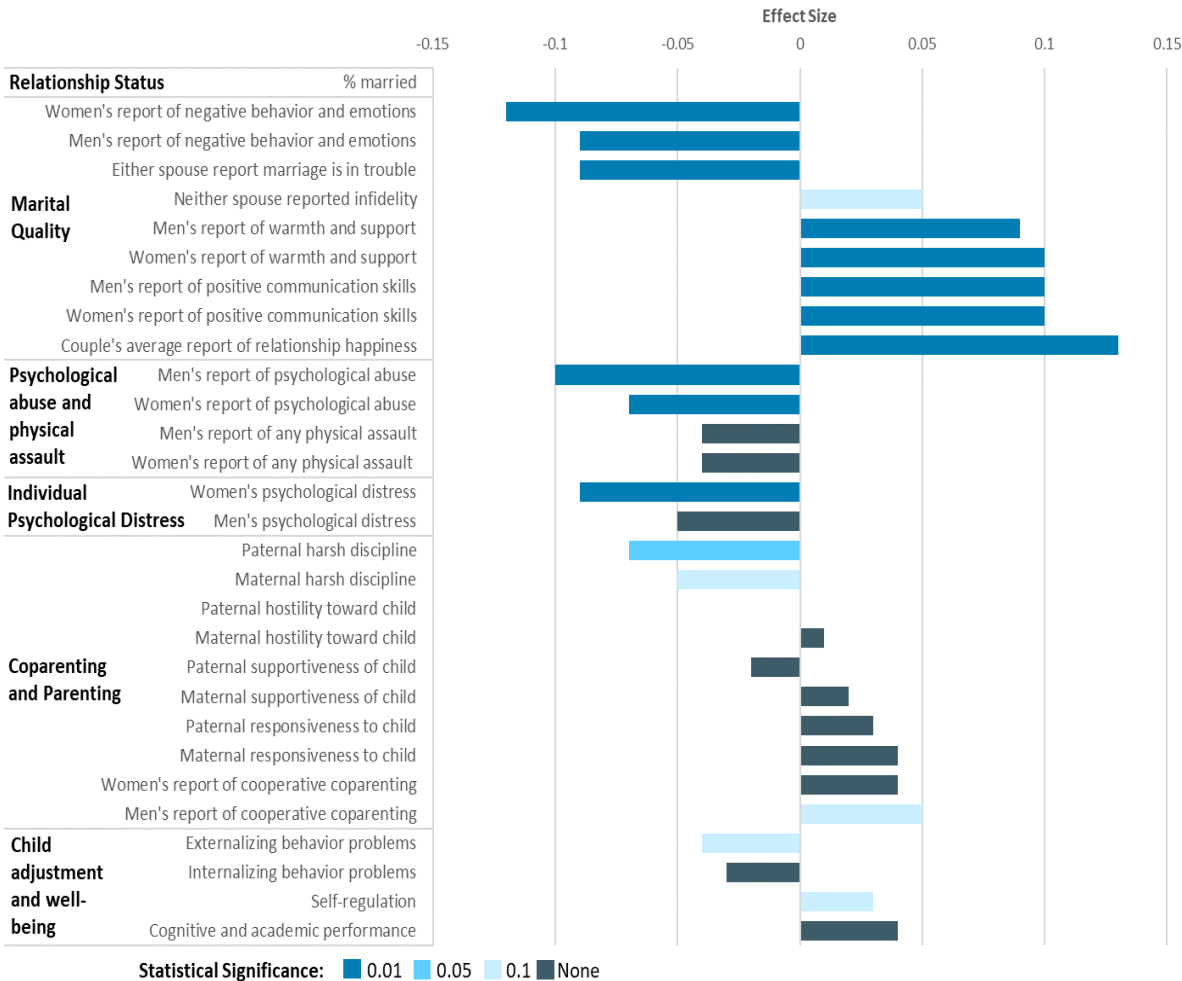
Note: When the effect is statistically significant it means the result is unlikely to have occurred by chance. Statistical significance at a lower threshold (0.01) is less likely to have occurred by chance than statistical significance at a higher threshold (0.10). Generally, the effect size is the difference in the average between two groups (for example, the difference between the treatment and the control group), divided by the standard deviation. An effect size of 0.2 or less is generally considered small; 0.5 is considered moderate; and 0.8 or greater is considered large.

Appendix Figure 2. Results from the *Building Strong Families* (BSF) Evaluation



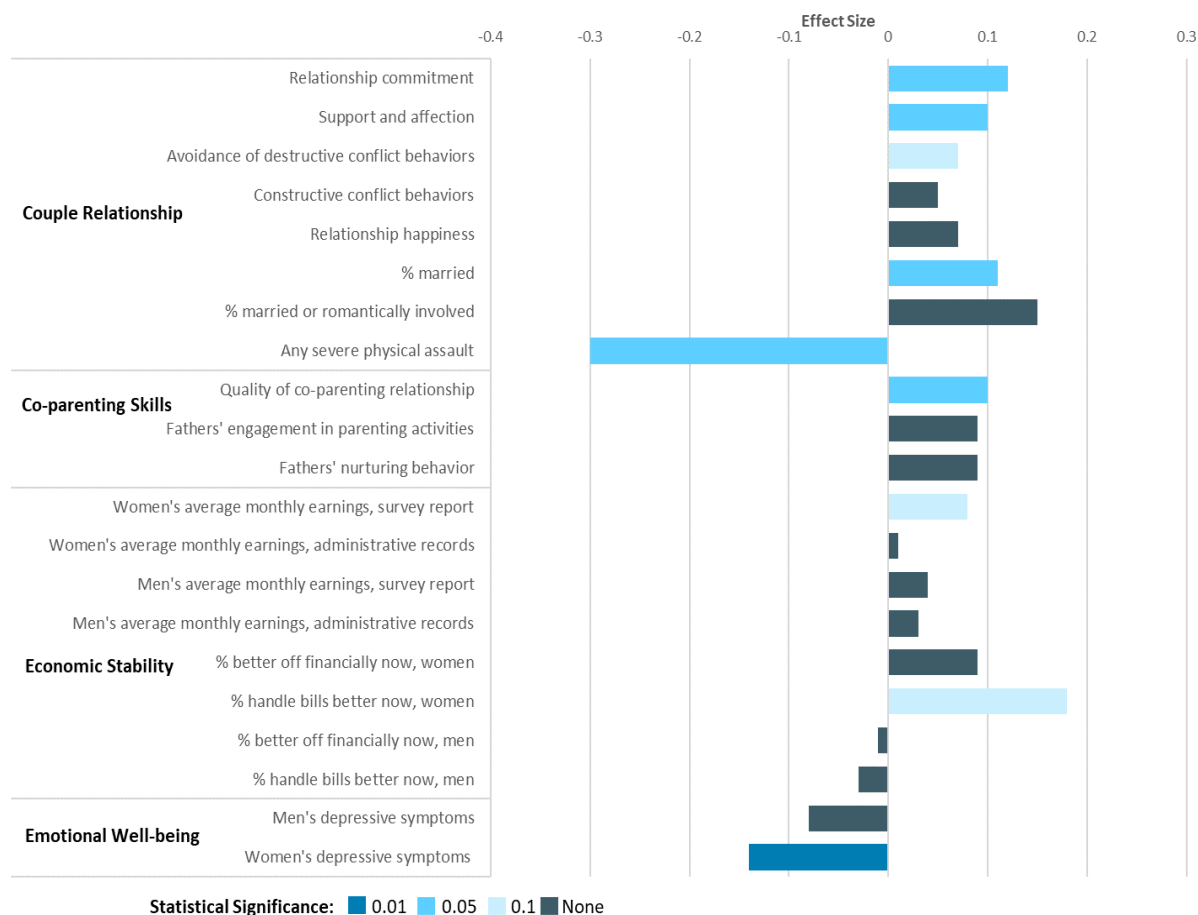
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "The Building Strong Families Project: The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families: A Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents." Table A 1a. Impacts of Building Strong Families on Relationship and Parenting Outcomes at 36-Month Follow-Up. Accessed December 3, 2021. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/BSF_36month_impact_fnlrpt_0.pdf

Appendix Figure 3. Results from the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) Evaluation



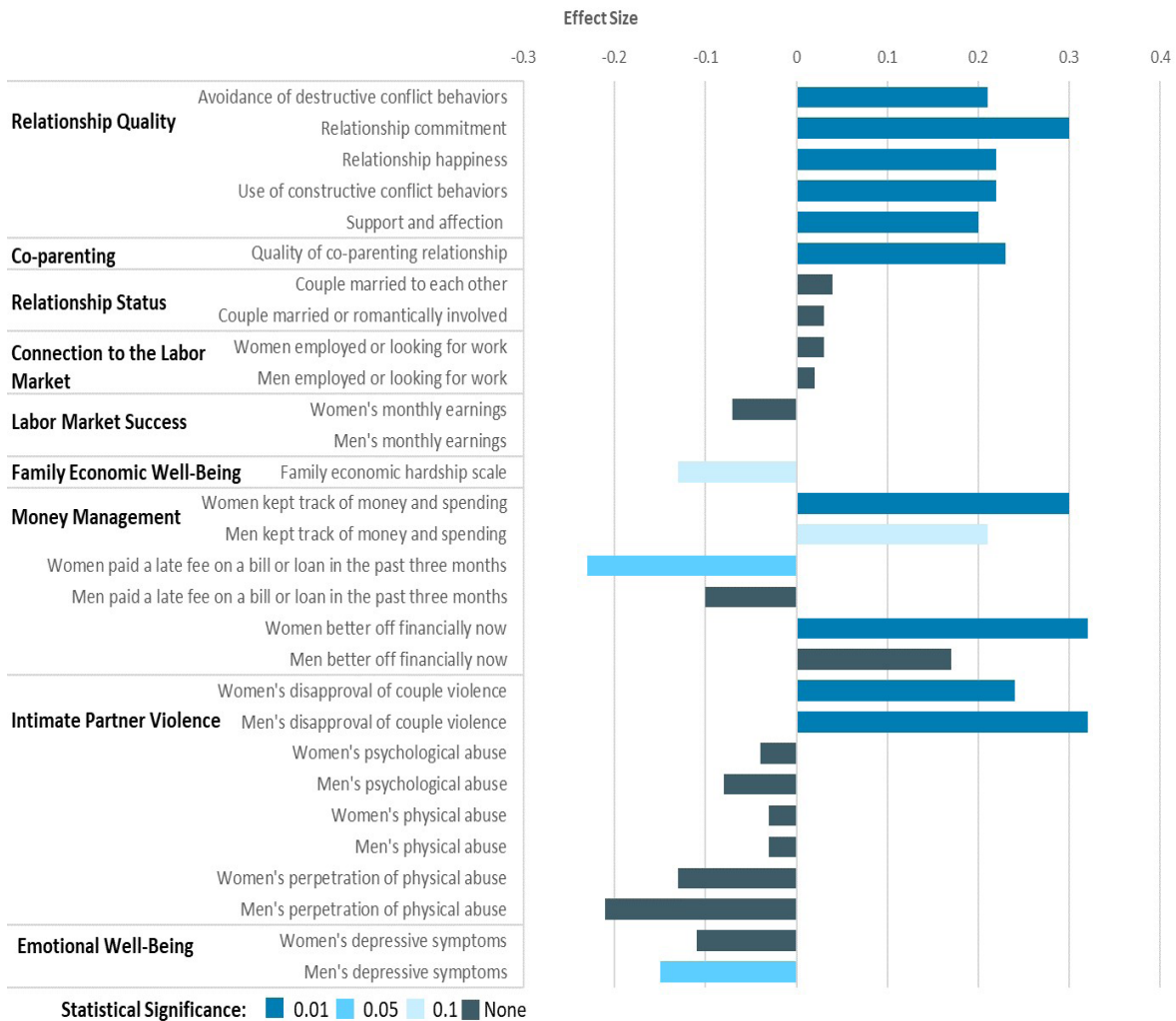
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. "A Family Strengthening Program for Low-Income Families: Final Impacts from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation." January 2014, 12. Table ES. 1 Estimated Impacts on Primary Outcomes at the 30-Month Follow-Up. Accessed December 3, 2021. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/shm2013_30_month_impact_reportrev2.pdf.

Appendix Figure 4. Results from the *Parents and Children Together* (PACT) Evaluation



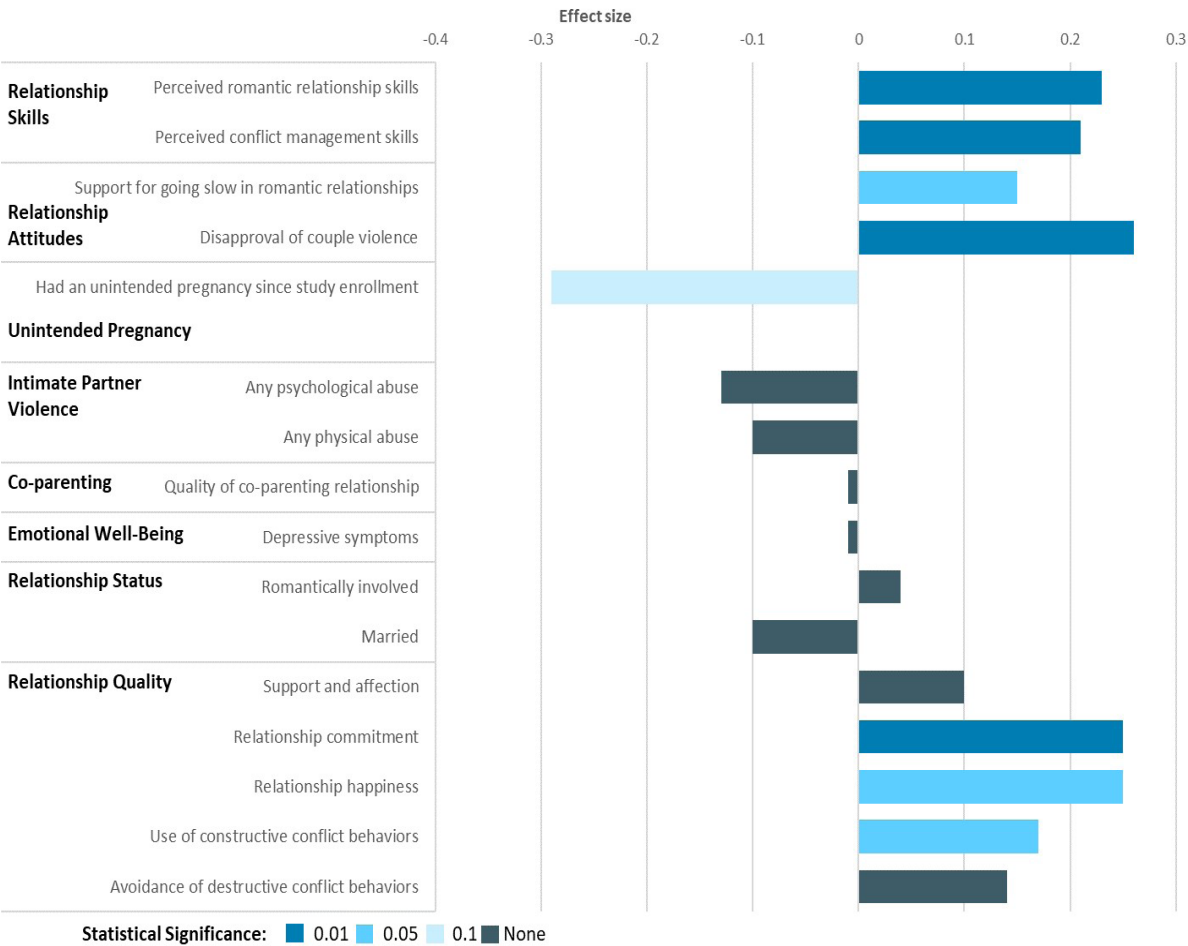
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Parents and Children Together: Effects of Two Healthy Marriage Programs for Low-Income Couples." June 2018. Tables 5 - 8. Accessed December 3, 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/parents-and-children-together-effects-two-healthy-marriage-programs-low-income-couples>.

Appendix Figure 5. Results from the *Empowering Families Evaluation*



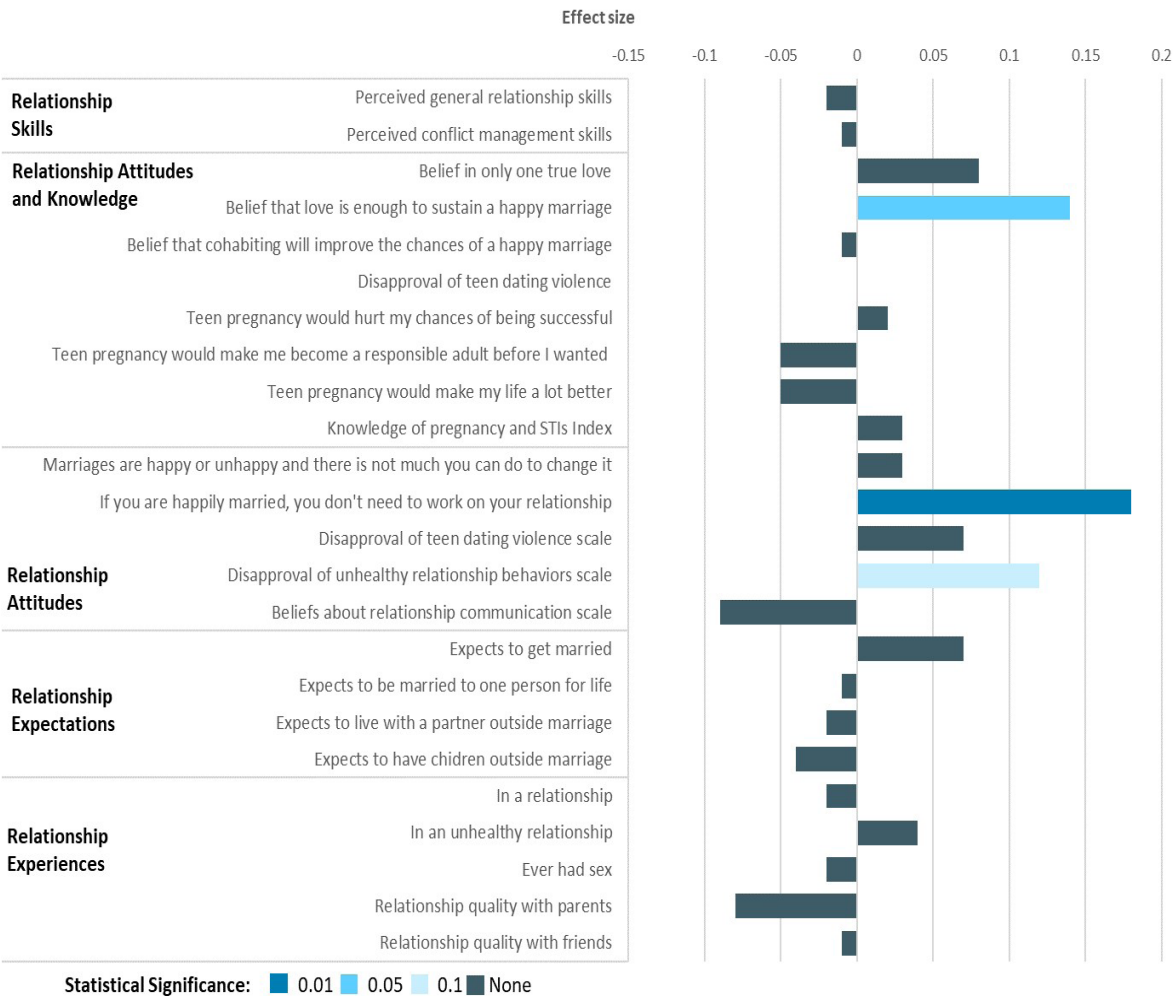
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education with Integrated Economic Stability Services: The Impacts of Empowering Families." November 2021. Tables 5-7. Accessed February 11, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/healthy-marriage-and-relationship-education-integrated-economic-stability-services>.

Appendix Figure 6. Results from the *MotherWise* Evaluation



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for Expectant and New Mothers: The One-Year Impacts of MotherWise." September 2021. Tables 5-6. Accessed February 11, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/healthy-marriage-and-relationship-education-expectant-and-new-mothers-one-year-impacts>.

Appendix Figure 7. Results from the *Relationship Smart PLUS* Evaluation



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for High School Students: The One-Year Impacts of Two Versions of Relationship Smarts PLUS in Georgia." September 2021. Tables 7, 9-10. Accessed February 11, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/healthy-marriage-and-relationship-education-high-school-students-one-year-impacts-two>.

ENDNOTES

1. See Joint Economic Committee, Social Capital Project. "The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home." July 23, 2020.
2. Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter. "The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility." Working Paper No. 25147. National Bureau of Economic Research. Accessed February 14, 2022. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25147/w25147.pdf.
3. Given that single-parent families are far more likely to be poor and rely on public benefits for support, increasing marriage rates or reducing divorce by even a small percentage can significantly reduce poverty and government dependence.

See Benjamin Scafidi. "The Taxpayer Cost of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States." Institute for American Values, Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, Georgia Family Council, and Families Northwest. 2008. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/The-Taxpayer-Costs-of-Divorce.pdf>.

4. Joint Economic Committee, Social Capital Project. "The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home." July 23, 2020.
5. Ibid.
6. The initiative was originally called the Healthy Marriage Initiative but is now referred to as the Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education initiative. See for example Michelle Goldberg. "Why Marriage Won't Solve Poverty." January 15, 2014. The Nation. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/why-marriage-wont-solve-poverty/> and The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. 2019. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>. Also see Alan J. Hawkins. "Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?" American Enterprise Institute. September 2019. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/are-federally-supported-relationship-education-programs-for-lower-income-individuals-and-couples-working-a-review-of-evaluation-research/>
7. Alan J. Hawkins. "Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?"; Alan Hawkins et al. "How effective are ACF-funded couple relationship education programs? A meta-analytic study." *Family Process* (January 2022): 1-16.
8. See First Things First website. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://firstthings.org/>; Live the Life website. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.livethelife.org/consulting-to-churches>; Anthem Strong Families website. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://anthemstrongfamilies.org/>; Utah Marriage Commission website. Accessed February 14, 2022. extension.usu.edu/strongermarriage/.
9. Alan J. Hawkins. *The Forever Initiative: A Feasible Public Policy Agenda to Help Couples Form and Sustain Healthy Marriages and Relationships*. North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013: 110-118; Alan

- J. Hawkins and Betsy VanDenBerghe. "Facilitating Forever: A Feasible Public Policy Agenda to Help Couples Form and Sustain Healthy Relationships and Enduring Marriages." The National Marriage Project. 2014. Accessed February 14, 2022. <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/blog/resources/facilitatingforever/>.
10. Alan J. Hawkins. *The Forever Initiative*, 141-155.
 11. Ibid., 160-163.
 12. Ibid., 186-187.
 13. Ibid., 241-249.
 14. Alan J. Hawkins. "Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?", 10.
 15. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services. CSBG IM No. 89 Healthy Marriage Initiative. July 20, 2005. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/policy-guidance/csbg-im-no-89-healthy-marriage-initiative#:~:text=Background%3A,form%20and%20sustain%20healthy%20marriages>.
 16. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Family Assistance. "Healthy Marriage & Relationship Education for Adults." Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage-responsible-fatherhood/healthy-marriage>
 17. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. "Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees. Fiscal Year 2022." 10 & 356. Accessed February 10, 2022. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/olab/fy_2022_congressional_justification.pdf. The federal government allocated \$148.8 million for Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs in FY 2021, which is split equally between healthy marriage programs and responsible fatherhood programs. Grants average \$1.1 million.
 18. Liz Schott, LaDonna Paveti, and Ife Floyd. "How States Use Federal and State Funds Under the TANF Block Grant." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. October 15, 2015. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/how-states-use-federal-and-state-funds-under-the-tanf-block-grant>; Also see 45 CFR § 260.31. "What does the term 'assistance' mean?" Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/45/260.31>.
 19. See Joint Economic Committee, Social Capital Project. "The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home." July 23, 2020.
 20. Karen Benjamin Guzzo. "New Partners, More Kids: Multiple-Partner Fertility in the United States." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 654, no. 1(July 2014): 66-86. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4182921/>.
 21. See Sara McLanahan. "Fragile Families and the Reproduction of Poverty." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621, no. 1(2009): 111-131. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831755/>; See also Julia Alamillo, Daniel Friend, and Robert G. Wood. "Improving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) Programs for Unmarried

Couples with Children." Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. Accessed February 14, 2022. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/framing_hm_knowledge_map_508.pdf; Cynthia Osborn and Sara McLanahan. "Partnership Instability and Child Well-Being." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69, no. 4 (2007): 1065-1083.

22. See Joint Economic Committee, Social Capital Project. "The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home." July 23, 2020.
23. See Michelle Goldberg. "Why Marriage Won't Solve Poverty" and The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Also see Alan J. Hawkins. "Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?"
24. Alan J. Hawkins. "Are Federally Supported Relationship Education Programs for Lower-Income Individuals and Couples Working?"
25. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "The Building Strong Families Project: The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families: A Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents, Executive Summary." November 30, 2012. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/the-building-strong-families-project-the-long-term-effects-of-building-0> and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. "A Family Strengthening Program for Low-Income Families: Final Impacts from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation." January 2014, 12. Accessed February 14, 2022. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/shm2013_30_month_impact_reportrev2.pdf.

The *Building Strong Families* evaluation examined marriage and relationship education programs for unmarried parents (or soon-to-be parents) in eight locations across the United States. Researchers examined program participants at 15 months post enrollment and at 36 months post enrollment.

The *Supporting Healthy Marriage* evaluation examined marriage education programs for lower-income married parents or parents-to-be in eight locations across the United States. The programs lasted for one year and the final follow-up took place at 30-months post enrollment.

26. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "The Community Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation: Impacts of a Community Approach to Strengthening Families." November 2012. Accessed February 14, 2022. https://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/chmi_impactreport.pdf.

Communities in three cities were examined: Dallas, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. Three comparison communities were also selected: Fort Worth; Kansas City, Missouri; and Cleveland.

27. Ibid.

28. See Ibid., ES-5 and 7-3.

The lack of significant differences between the treatment and comparison communities may be because a large portion of the funding went towards education for high school students (40 percent of participants were high school students), but high school students were not included in the evaluation. Furthermore, the researchers found that there was comparable community marriage education provided in the comparison communities as in the treatment communities, which makes it challenging to determine whether the programs examined were effective.

29. The researchers hypothesize that these negative outcomes may have been due to fathers receiving messages that discouraged them, setting ideals for fatherhood they felt they could not meet. The program may also have led some couples to realize they were in an unhealthy relationship and to choose to end their relationships or at least end their relationships sooner than they otherwise would have, hence the greater relationship instability among the treatment group. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "The Building Strong Families Project: The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families. A Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents, Executive Summary."

30. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "The Building Strong Families Project: The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families. A Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents, Executive Summary." Appendix A. Table OKC.2.a and Table OKC.6. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/building-strong-families-project-long-term-effects-building-strong-families-0>.

Furthermore, another researcher who examined the *Building Strong Families* data found that the most disadvantaged participants in these programs in fact did benefit significantly, although this study was done with only the data from the 15-month follow-up and used a less rigorous statistical design than the federal evaluation. See Paul R. Amato. "Does Social and Economic Disadvantage Moderate the Effects of Relationship Education on Unwed Couples? An Analysis of Data from the 15-Month Building Strong Families Evaluation." *Family Relations* 63, no. 3(July 2014): 343-355.

31. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "A Family-Strengthening Program for Low-Income Families: Final Impacts from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation." January 2014.

32. Some exceptions might be states making relationship education mandatory for high school students or requiring divorcing couples to participate in divorce orientation education.

33. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Parents and Children Together: Effects of Two Healthy Marriage Programs for Low-Income Couples." June 2018. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/parents-and-children-together>

[children-together-effects-two-healthy-marriage-programs-low-income-couples.](#)

The *Parents and Children Together* evaluation examined federally-funded healthy marriage and relationship education programs in two locations: New York City and El Paso, Texas. The programs were targeted to low-income parents, including married and unmarried couples. The majority of couples had lower income and lower levels of education, and roughly three-quarters of the sample was Hispanic. Most couples, 59 percent, were married and about half had been together for five years or more.

34. Ibid.

35. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education with Integrated Economic Stability Services: The Impacts of Empowering Families." November 2021, ix. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/streams-empowering-families-report.pdf>.

This study examined low income parents, both married and unmarried. The majority of the sample was Hispanic. Among about half of the couples, 52 percent, both partners had at least a high school degree or GED. The average participant was in his or her mid-30s, and 84 percent of the couples lived together most or all of the time. See Table 4.

36. Ibid., 19.

37. Ibid., 15.

38. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for Expectant and New Mothers: The One-Year Impacts of MotherWise." September 2021. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/healthy-marriage-and-relationship-education-expectant-and-new-mothers-one-year-impacts>. Education Program for Unmarried Parents, Executive Summary."

This study included low-income women who were pregnant or who had given birth within the previous three months. Two-thirds of the women in the sample were Hispanic and their average age was 28. Nearly three-quarters of women in the treatment group had at least a high school diploma or GED. Seventy-six percent of the women were in a steady romantic relationship with the baby's father. See Table 4.

39. Ibid., Table 5 and Table 6.

40. Ibid., Table 5.

41. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. "Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for High School Students: The One-Year Impacts of Two Versions of Relationship Smart PLUS in Georgia." September 2021. Accessed February 9, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/healthy-marriage-and->

[relationship-education-high-school-students-one-year-impacts-two.](#)

42. See also Hawkins et al. "How effective are ACF-funded couple relationship education programs? A meta-analytic study."
43. Peter H. Rossi. "The Iron Law of Evaluation and Other Metallic Rules." *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy*, Vol. 4, 3-20. 1987. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.gwern.net/docs/sociology/1987-rossi.pdf>; Peter H. Rossi. "The 'Iron Law of Evaluation' Reconsidered. AAPAM Research Conference. Washington, D.C. October 2003. Accessed February 14, 2022. http://welfareacademy.org/rossi/Rossi_Remarks_Iron_Law_Reconsidered.pdf
44. Louisa S. Arnold and Andreas Beelmann. "The Effects of Relationship Education in Low-Income Couples: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized-Controlled Evaluation Studies." *Family Relations* 68 (February 2019): 22-38.
45. Ibid.
46. Alan J. Hawkins and Sage E. Erickson. "Is couple and relationship education effective for lower income participants?" *Journal of Family Psychology* 29, no. 1(February 2015): 59-68.
47. The meta-analysis also included 16 studies without control groups (one-group/pre-post studies). The overall effect size for these studies was moderate, which was larger than the effect size for the control-group studies. Similar to the control-group studies, significant outcomes were found for three categories of outcomes: relationship satisfaction/quality, communication, and parenting. Effect sizes were larger for programs that included more minority participants and for those that included more near-poor couples (as opposed to more couples below the poverty line).
48. Alan J. Hawkins, Victoria L. Blanchard, Scott A. Baldwin, and Elizabeth B. Fawcett. "Does Marriage and Relationship Education Work? A Meta-Analytic Study." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76, no. 5(2008): 723-734; Victoria L. Blanchard, Alan J. Hawkins, Scott A. Baldwin, and Elizabeth B. Fawcett. "Investigating the Effects of Marriage and Relationship Education on Couples' Communication Skills: A Meta-Analytic Study." *Journal of Family Psychology* 23, no. 2(2009): 203-214; Jane Reardon-Anderson, Matthew Stagner, Jennifer Ehrle Macomber, and Julie Murray. "Systematic Review of the Impact of Marriage and Relationship Programs." Urban Institute. February 11, 2005. Accessed February 14, 2022. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/systematic-review-impact-marriage-and-relationship-programs>.

For example, Hawkins et al. (2008) examined 117 evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education programs and found that overall, participants significantly increased their relationship quality and communication. Unlike the meta-analyses in which researchers examined studies with lower-income participants, the majority of the samples in this meta-analysis were middle-class and non-minority. Furthermore, the majority of participants were married and were not experiencing high levels of distress in their relationships. Of the evaluations that included measures of relationship quality, 46 were randomized-control-trial studies. Overall, the effect size for relationship quality at follow-up was significant but small, and for those studies which included follow-up assessments (typically three to six months post-treatment), the effect size was even smaller, but still significant. Of the evaluations that examined communication outcomes, 37 were randomized control

trial studies. The effect size for communication was significant and larger than the effect size for relationship quality, although still small.

A second meta-analysis by Blanchard et al. (2009) examined 143 studies to understand how marriage and relationship education programs effected communication skills. Of these studies, 41 were randomized control trial studies. The researchers found a small significant effect size on communication skills. Among these studies, only five had follow-up assessments that took place at seven months or longer, but researchers found a moderate effect size on communication among these studies.

Another meta-analysis, Reardon-Anderson et al. (2005), consisted of 39 evaluations of marriage and relationship programs conducted between 1960 and the early 2000s, the vast majority of which were randomized control trial studies. Eight studies in the meta-analysis included a follow-up, with follow-up times ranging from three weeks to one year after the initial post-test. Effect sizes for these studies were small but significant on outcomes of relationship satisfaction, and program effect sizes were larger for distressed couples than for non-distressed couples. However, not all of the programs included in this study were specifically marriage and relationship education programs, as some were therapy or counseling programs. The sample sizes were also fairly small, with an average size of 34.

49. Elizabeth B. Fawcett, Alan J. Hawkins, Victoria L. Blanchard, and Jason S. Carroll. "Do Premarital Education Programs Really Work? A Meta-analytic Study"; Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty. "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Outcome Research." *Family Relations* 52, no. 2(April 2003): 105-118.

Fawcett et al. (2010) examined 47 studies, of which 17 included a control group. Because the researcher found similar effects for both quasi-experimental (non-randomized) and randomized control group studies, they reported combined effects for all control group studies. Most of the studies did not include a long-term follow-up. The researchers found a moderate effect size for communication skills for pre-marital couples. They did not find significant effect on relationship quality, however. When researchers limited their evaluation to only published studies, they found a moderate effect size for relationship quality and a large effect size for communication skills. (Studies are more likely to be published when they have significant results.)

Carroll and Doherty (2003) examined 23 evaluations of premarital education programs. Several of these studies had small sample sizes of less than 100 people, and most of the samples consisted mainly of white, middle-class participants. Thirteen of these studies used control groups, and 11 were randomized control trial studies. Of the 13 control-group studies, the researchers found significant differences between the control groups and the treatment groups in all but one of the studies, on measures of communication and relationship quality. Overall, the researchers found, among the experimental studies, that the average participant in premarital education programs was 69 percent better off than those who did not participate. Among studies that had long-term follow-up assessments (took place at three or more years after), the average participant was 61 percent better off than those who did not participate, and for studies with a mid-term follow-up (took place at 6 months to 1.5 years after), the average participant was 68 percent better off

than those who did not participate.

50. David M. Simpson, Nathan D. Leonhardt, and Alan J. Hawkins. "Learning About Love: A Meta-Analysis Study of Individually-Oriented Relationship Education Programs for Adolescents and Emerging Adults." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 47 (2018): 477-489; Alyssa McElwain, Julianne McGill, and Rachel Savasuk-Luxton. "Youth relationship education: A meta-analysis," *Children and Youth Services Review* 82 (2017): 499-507.

Simpson et al. (2018) examined evaluations of relationship literacy education for youth and emerging adults (ages 18-29). The researchers examined 17 studies that included control groups, and six of these studies also included randomized samples. Because the researchers found no significant differences in effect sizes between studies with randomized and non-randomized samples, they combined both types of studies in their analyses. Overall, the researchers found small but positive effects for outcomes of relationship attitudes and relationship skills among participants. Samples that included a larger portion of lower-income participants saw larger program effects. However, most of these programs did not include long-term follow-up evaluations.

McElwain et al. (2017) examined 15 youth relationship literacy education programs. The researchers found an overall significant program effect for conflict management, as well as for faulty relationship beliefs (program participants had lower faulty relationship beliefs after the program). However, few of these studies included a control group or had follow-up assessments.

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The majority, 79 percent, of the couples in the sample were married, 80 percent had a high school education, and roughly a quarter of the sample belonged to an ethnic minority. Eleven of the studies included a follow-up evaluation, with the average time between the treatment and follow-up being 12.2 months.

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