

EMBEDDING JOB AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT SERVICES IN HEALTHY MARRIAGE PROGRAMS: LESSONS FROM TWO PROGRAMS IN PACT

Heather Zaveri and Robin Dion

Introduction and background

The family environment in which children are raised can affect their later decisions in every area of life, from education and employment to marriage and childbearing (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Wolfinger 2003; Wolfinger et al. 2003; Wu and Martinson 1993). Research confirms that growing up with two parents in a stable, low-conflict, healthy marriage can lead to favorable outcomes for children (Amato 2001; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Creating that environment is particularly difficult for low-income couples, however, because financial difficulties may put them at high risk for conflict and ultimately dissolution (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Conger et al. 2010).

In the early 2000s, federal policymakers began focusing on strengthening marriage and parental relationships as a way to foster child well-being. As part of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood program, 125 healthy marriage (HM) grantees received federal funding in 2005 and, in 2011, 60 organizations received grants. In both rounds, grantees were to offer one or more of eight “allowable activities” defined in the legislation, such as marriage and relationship skills education, which may include topics on parenting and financial management.¹ Grantees could offer services to youth, engaged couples, people interested in marriage, unmarried but romantically involved parenting couples, and married couples. The allowable activities in the legislation authorizing the HM grants in 2005 only permitted grantees to offer job and career advancement services to the narrowly defined population of non-married expectant couples. Eligibility for job and career advancement services was expanded in the 2010 program re-authorization, such that the 2011 grantees electing marriage and relationship skills education could also offer these services to participants. To be eligible for a grant, organizations that proposed incorporating job and career advancement into their HM program still had to maintain their emphasis on the marriage and relationship aspects of the program.

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Allowable Activities under the Federal Healthy Marriage Legislation

Public advertising campaigns	Marriage enhancement
Relationship education for youth	Divorce reduction
Marriage and relationship skills education	Marriage mentoring
Premarital education	Efforts to reduce marriage disincentives in social programs

¹ If grantees selected to implement a public advertising campaign, they were required to implement another allowable activity in conjunction with the advertising campaign. If grantees selected any of the other allowable activities, they were permitted to implement only one activity.

This brief describes how two HM grantees integrated job and career advancement services for parenting couples into their programs and the role these services played in meeting the needs of couples and engaging them in services. The research described here is part of the multicomponent Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation of selected 2011 grantees, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The PACT evaluators are exploring two aspects of the HM programs: (1) program design and operations and (2) effects of the programs on couples' lives. This brief summarizes information gathered about program design and operations, obtained through staff interviews and program observations during site visits in early 2014; ongoing interactions with program leadership; and data from a management information system that programs use to record data on couples' receipt of services.

HM grantees in the PACT study

The two HM grantees in PACT's evaluation of HM programming were selected following a review of all 2011 HM grant applications.² These two grantees demonstrated suitability for a large-scale rigorous evaluation involving random assignment of couples to either the program or a control group who could receive other community services. These programs were also selected because they planned to offer job and career advancement services to a relatively large share of participants. Both grantees had been operating since 2006 and had previously participated in the Supporting Healthy Marriage³ evaluation of marriage and relationship skills programs for married couples. The two selected grantees are:

- Healthy Opportunities for Marriage Enrichment (HOME) Program at the El Paso Center for Children (EPCC, El Paso, Texas)
- Supporting Healthy Relationships Program at University Behavioral Associates (UBA, Bronx, New York)

The grantees in PACT serve both married and unmarried parenting couples (Table 1). At enrollment, slightly more than half of the couples in the two HM programs in PACT were married, and another one-third described their romantic relationship as steady. More than

El Paso Center for Children	
Program Name	Healthy Opportunities for Marriage Enrichment (HOME) Program
Location	El Paso, Texas
Healthy Marriage Workshop Curriculum	Within Our Reach
Healthy Marriage Curriculum Delivery	Nine two-hour sessions Individual make-up sessions
Economic Stability Services	Case managers provide individual-level assistance regarding job and career advancement Employment assessment for interested participants Stand-alone two-hour job readiness workshop every other month

² Three grantees were initially involved in the PACT HM Evaluation, and two have remained in the evaluation. This brief describes implementation at these two grantees.

³ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/supporting-healthy-marriages>



two-thirds of the couples were Hispanic (almost exclusively so in EPCC, where nearly 60 percent of mothers and fathers were born outside of the U.S.). At least one partner in three-quarters of the couples thought their relationship or marriage was in trouble in the three months before entering the program, and the vast majority indicated that improving their couple relationship was their primary reason for enrolling.

Table 1. Enrollment characteristics of couples in the PACT study

	El Paso Center for Children	University Behavioral Associates	Total HM PACT sample
Demographics			
Average age (years)			
Mothers	33.4	33.6	33.5
Fathers	35.8	35.9	35.9
Race and ethnicity (%)			
Both partners Hispanic*	92.9	57.6	70.3
Both partners black, non-Hispanic*	0.0	23.8	15.2
Both partners white, non-Hispanic	0.8	0.1	0.4
Both partners other or couple mixed race*	6.3	18.5	14.1
Foreign born (%)			
Mothers*	56.7	39.9	45.9
Fathers*	58.6	42.3	48.2
Spanish is primary language (%)			
Mothers*	73.6	34.8	48.7
Fathers*	68.1	35.8	47.4
Socioeconomic Status			
Have high school diploma or GED (%)			
Neither partner	13.4	14.5	14.1
Only mother	17.4	20.9	19.6
Only father	12.9	12.3	12.5
Both partners	56.3	52.3	53.7
Worked for pay in last 30 days (%)			
Neither partner*	5.0	21.8	15.8
Only mother*	6.8	11.0	9.5
Only father*	50.0	37.0	41.7
Both partners*	38.2	30.2	33.1
Couples' earnings in last 30 days (%)			
No earnings*	5.0	22.7	16.3
\$1–\$1,000	20.7	22.4	21.8
\$1,001–\$2,000*	34.8	23.1	27.3

The grantees in PACT serve married and unmarried parenting couples.

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	El Paso Center for Children	University Behavioral Associates	Total HM PACT sample
\$2,001–\$3,000	17.0	13.8	14.9
More than \$3,001*	22.5	18.1	19.7
Living Arrangements and Housing (%)			
Couple lives together all or most of the time*	94.2	80.8	85.6
Children and Relationships			
Total number of children	3.2	3.3	3.3
Common between partners*	1.9	1.3	1.5
Noncommon between partners*	1.3	2.0	1.7
Number of children living with couple¹	2.4	1.9	2.1
At least one partner has at least one child with another partner (% of couples)*	46.3	62.7	56.8
Relationship status (%)			
Married*	75.1	46.0	56.5
Romantically involved on steady basis*	17.8	38.4	31.0
In on-again/off-again relationship*	5.2	12.5	9.9
Not in a romantic relationship	1.8	3.1	2.6
Relationship trouble in last three months (%)			
Only mother	16.2	13.5	14.5
Only father	12.1	10.7	11.2
At least one partner*	74.3	79.3	77.5
Both partners*	45.3	54.9	51.4
Primary Motivation to Attend Program (individuals, %)			
Improve relationship with children*	23.3	10.6	15.2
Improve job situation*	2.9	7.7	5.9
Improve relationship with partner*	73.8	81.8	78.9
Sample size	382	684	1,066

Source: PACT baseline survey. Includes all couples enrolled between July 22, 2013, and August 22, 2014.

¹ Limited to couples who were living together all or most of the time.

* Differences between couples at two programs are significant at .01 p-value.

At enrollment, at least one partner (usually the father) was employed in 84 percent of the couples; both partners were working in one-third of all couples. Combined earnings were relatively low for many, especially considering household size (see next paragraph): almost half had monthly earnings under \$2,000.

The partners in these couples had, on average, 3.3 children combined and 1.5 children in common (for more than half of the couples, at least one partner had a child by a previous partner). Couples had, on average, two children living with them at the time of enrollment, indicating that households often included children in common and not in common.



Providing the core HM services

The core service in both programs is the marriage and relationship skills workshop. Each program uses an evidence-informed curriculum on marriage and relationships that program staff deliver to couples during a cohort-based, multisession group workshop. The two programs in PACT use different curricula but cover similar topics, including communication, conflict resolution, and commitment. EPCC delivers the *Within Our Reach* curriculum via nine weekly, two-hour group sessions. UBA provides the *Loving Couples, Loving Children* curriculum through two formats: (1) nine weekly three-hour sessions or (2) three eight-hour sessions on consecutive Saturdays. Both programs encourage couples to make up missed sessions. At UBA, couples may make up missed sessions by meeting with the facilitators outside the group sessions, and at EPCC, couples may attend sessions of other groups covering the content they missed.

Both programs also offer supplementary workshops and individualized support to further assist couples with improving their relationships. EPCC offers booster workshops twice a month on relationship and parenting topics. Facilitators at UBA provide individualized support to “distressed” couples, and three times a month they conduct supplementary workshops to reinforce and extend relationship skills.

Strategies for offering job and career advancement services

Both HM programs complement their marriage and relationship skills workshops with job and career advancement services, recognizing that unstable employment and poor financial management may contribute to conflict and instability among couples. The two organizations had not previously included such services in their HM programs but had provided employment services in other programs offered within their respective organizations.

University Behavioral Associates

Program Name	Supporting Healthy Relationships Program
Location	Bronx, New York
Healthy Marriage Workshop Curriculum	Loving Couples, Loving Children
Healthy Marriage Curriculum Delivery	Nine three-hour sessions or three eight-hour sessions on consecutive Saturdays Individual make-up sessions
Economic Stability Services	Individual-level help in job and career advancement provided by employment specialists Development of informal employment profile Stand-alone job readiness workshops twice monthly for one to three hours Content on presenting one's self to an employer, career aspirations, and how career and finances affect relationships in the workshop on marriage and relationship skills Supplementary workshop on financial planning



Compared with EPCC participants, UBA participants were over three times more likely to attend at least one workshop covering job and career advancement, potentially reflecting a higher demand for employment assistance and/or more convenient service offerings.

The HM programs deliver job and career advancement services through individual meetings and stand-alone workshops. Depending on the program, individual assistance is provided by an employment specialist or a case manager. These staff assess interested couples to identify their employment needs; UBA constructs a profile identifying employment barriers and goals, and EPCC uses an abbreviated version of the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA).⁴ During individual meetings, staff offer work-related information, such as the dates of upcoming job fairs, and provide other assistance, such as arranging job interviews. In both programs, the staff providing these services are the primary staff working individually with couples on employment and economic stability issues as well as general needs and barriers to program participation. In both programs, these staff are available during all marriage and relationship skills workshops to facilitate meeting with participants before or after sessions.

The job readiness workshops assist individuals in the marriage and relationship skills services who are interested in employment. UBA offers twice monthly workshops of one to three hours on discrete topics such as resume development, professionalism, job search strategies, interviewing skills, career exploration, and training opportunities. EPCC offers a standard two-hour job readiness workshop once every other month that covers resume preparation, interview and communication skills, and appropriate work attire.

Both programs also offer information on economic stability that is applicable to all couples, including those not in immediate need of assistance with work. UBA's marriage and relationship skills workshop covers employment-related content during two sessions. In the first session they introduce the employment services and discuss presenting oneself to an employer, to generate interest for these services, and in the fifth session they discuss employment-related soft skills, career aspirations, and how employment and finances may affect the couple relationship. UBA also offers a supplementary workshop on financial planning. EPCC occasionally offers a supplementary session called *Money Habitudes*, where couples explore their similarities and differences about saving and spending. Also after couples at EPCC have attended four sessions of the marriage and relationship skills workshop they earn up to \$150 in "credit" that can be applied to training or education costs. Couples may access the account after they complete the workshop.

Participation in HM and job and career advancement services

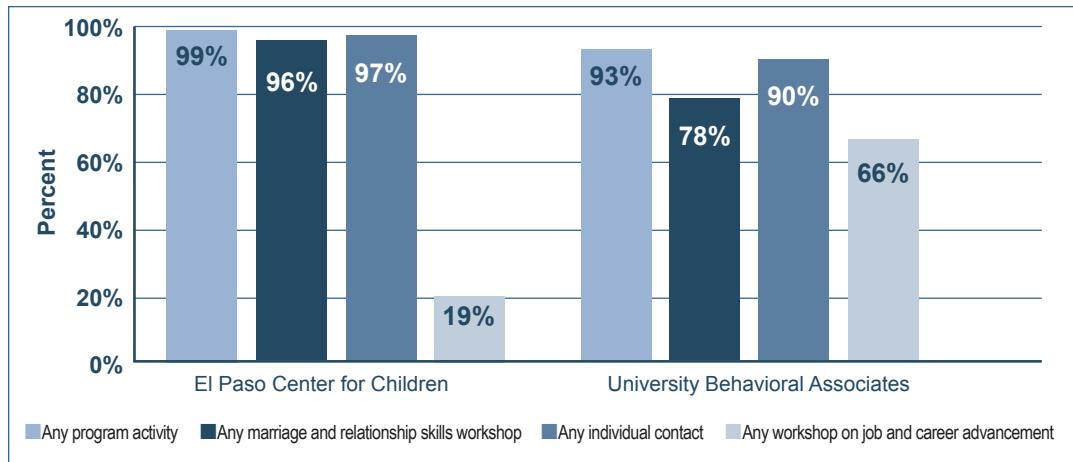
Initial participation in services indicates how well HM grantees were able to engage couples. Overall, nearly all enrolled couples took part in at least one program activity (Figure 1). Participating in at least one activity was more common among couples at EPCC than at UBA, particularly for initial attendance at the marriage and relationship skills workshop. In both programs, attendance at this workshop and in individual meetings covering any topic was more common than participation in a workshop on job and career advancement, including sessions of the marriage and relationship workshop at UBA focused on job and career advancement.

Compared with EPCC participants, UBA participants were over three times more likely to attend at least one workshop covering job and career advancement. The higher rate of attendance at UBA suggests more participants were in need of jobs at UBA. Alternatively, this difference could reflect the breadth and convenience of service offerings. UBA offered more frequent and varied job and career services: job readiness workshops twice a month on a changing set of

⁴ <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/tanftc/>



Figure 1. Percentage of couples participating in at least one program activity



Source: Data from PACTIS/Site management information system.

Note: Sites began PACT intake on July 22, 2013. The data reflect couples randomly assigned through June 30, 2014, with at least four months since random assignment. The EPCC sample included 146 couples, and the UBA sample included 261 couples. The analysis includes individual contacts that lasted five or more minutes and did not occur by mail or voicemail. Workshops on job and career advancement include sessions of the marriage and relationship skills workshop focused on job and career advancement topics.

topics, material on job and career advancement in a marriage and relationships workshop, and a separate workshop on financial planning. At EPCC, the only such service was a job readiness workshop offered every other month that featured the same content each time.

Retention is an indicator of the extent to which couples continue to attend a program. We measured retention as the percentage of couples who attended at least half of the marriage and relationship skills sessions within four months of program enrollment. In the first year of the programs' participation in PACT, nearly four out of five couples at EPCC attended at least half of the marriage and relationship sessions, whereas slightly more than half of the couples at UBA attended this often (Table 2). Make-up sessions helped couples who had attended some of the sessions receive more content, particularly at UBA, which strongly encouraged couples who missed a session to attend an individual make-up session with their facilitator.

On average, couples in each program received about 17 hours of services, mostly in the marriage and relationship skills workshop (Table 3). Eighty percent of the time couples spent in program activities at EPCC was at the marriage and relationship skills workshop. The emphasis on attendance at this core workshop is consistent with the rules of the grant, which require programs to focus on marriage and relationship skills.

UBA spent more time covering the topic of economic stability than did EPCC. At UBA, about one-fifth of the time couples spent in program activities—about 3.5 hours—was focused on economic well-being. This time was almost evenly divided among job and career advancement workshops, individual contacts, and economic stability content in the marriage and relationship workshop. On average, less than 3 percent of the total

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Table 2. Attendance at marriage and relationship skills workshop

	El Paso Center for Children	University Behavioral Associates
Number of Couples	146	261
Percentage of Couples Attending a Marriage and Relationship Workshop At Least Once		
Group attendance only	95	76
Percentage of Couples Attending Half or More of Marriage and Relationship Workshop Sessions		
Group attendance only	79	52
Group attendance and individual make-up sessions	80	56

Source: Data from PACTIS/Site management information system.

Note: Sites began PACT intake on July 22, 2013. The data reflect couples randomly assigned through June 30, 2014, with four months since random assignment. Only attendance by both partners was counted.

The need for and interest in job and career advancement services likely depends on the population served by the program. Compared with EPCC, more UBA participants needed jobs and were more likely to attend the job and career workshops.

time that couples spent attending activities at the EPCC program—about a half-hour—focused on economic stability; most of this time was spent in job and career advancement workshops.

Summary and implications

The couples in the two HM programs enrolled primarily to improve their romantic relationships, which led to moderately high rates of participation in the marriage and relationship skills workshops, particularly at EPCC. Some couples also faced economic instability, a challenge that the programs attempted to address.

The experience of these two HM grantees in providing job and career advancement services to couples offers an opportunity to consider when and how these services are offered. The need for and interest in job and career advancement services likely depends on the population served by the program. Compared with EPCC, more UBA participants needed jobs and were more likely to attend the job and career workshops. The vast majority of couples in EPCC had at least one partner who was employed, which may have limited their interest in those services. Other HM programs serving couples who are mostly employed may want to pattern their job-related programming after EPCC's.

However, even couples with jobs may seek help to improve their situation. For example, although many couples were working, they often had low earnings. Programs may want to provide services that are relevant and appealing to both employed and unemployed couples, such as help finding jobs with higher pay or benefits, or guidance exploring alternative career paths. Such content could be integrated within the marriage and



Table 3. Hours of participation

	EI Paso Center for Children	University Behavioral Associates
Total Hours Spent in All Program Activities	17.3	17.7
Percentage of Total Hours Spent in Program Activities by Type of Activity		
Marriage and relationship skills workshop and make-up sessions	80	71
Individual-level assistance	10	19
Job and career advancement workshops	2	7
Supplementary activities	8	3
Total Hours Spent in Economic Stability Activities	0.5	3.5
Percentage of Total Hours Spent in Economic Stability Activities, by Type of Activity		
Marriage and relationship skills workshop and make-up sessions	n.a.	37
Job and career advancement workshops	80	34
Individual-level assistance	20	29
Number of Couples	146	261

Source: Data from PACTIS/Site management information system.

Note: Sites began PACT intake on July 22, 2013. The data reflect couples randomly assigned through June 30, 2014, with at least four months since random assignment. The analysis includes individual contacts that lasted five or more minutes and did not occur by mail or voicemail.

Programs may want to consider offering economic stability services that are relevant to both employed and unemployed couples directly within the marriage and relationship skills workshop.

relationship skills workshop or covered during individual meetings with program staff, particularly if those staff have a background in job development. This may allow the program to reach more couples than it would if employment content were only available through workshops that are offered separately from the core marriage and relationship skills workshop.

Offering services for both employed and unemployed couples might involve creating two tiers of services. Employment-related information relevant to all couples could be incorporated into the marriage and relationship skills workshop, and more intensive services could be offered as a separate activity for partners seeking jobs. Including job and career advancement issues in the marriage and relationship skills workshop could also help identify couples with an interest in or need for more specific and intensive services.

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For more Information about this project, please contact Robin Dion at rdion@mathematica-mpr.com or Seth Chamberlain at seth.chamberlain@acf.hhs.gov.