

Formative Research Report

Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for our Family

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Report Outline

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Introduction

In the fall of 2005, Michigan State University Extension received a grant from the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement (OSCE) to implement the *Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for Family* project. This project is designed to improve child support and marriage education services for ethnically and culturally diverse populations. There are three primary objectives:

- 1) To investigate the efficacy of integrating healthy marriage content into Family Support and Education (FSE) programs targeting African American and Latino families (Year 1)
- 2) To develop and test an educational intervention on healthy marriage formation for unmarried African-American and Latino parents participating in two Michigan communities (Year 2 and 3)
- 3) To disseminate program curriculum, lessons learned and other information to early-parenting programs statewide and nationally on promoting healthy marriage in FSE programs (Year 3)

Research shows that at or near the time of their infant's birth, unmarried couples feel most positive about their relationships and have high hopes for the future. Most fathers plan to be involved with their children and mothers support this involvement. However, as the child grows older, many unmarried parents separate and child support payment arrears often become an issue. We propose that by supporting unmarried parents at or near the child's birth to establish a positive co-parenting relationship, child support outcomes related to paternity establishments, child support orders established, collections and healthy marriage formation will be improved.

Based on the successful implementation of the *Caring for my Family* program in both Alabama and Michigan and a collaboration of public, private, and community-based organizations, a three-year project is being implemented. In year one, formative research was conducted to inform the development of culturally sensitive protocols to integrate into the existing home-visiting programs targeting low-income, ethnically-diverse parents at prenatal or early postnatal. In year two, a pilot study with a quasi-experimental design will be conducted in two Michigan sites. Based on the results of the pilot study, the program will be revised, published and placed on an interactive website for FSE programs during year three.

This report is a description of year one project activities on formative research in which we investigated, using a community-based research approach, the challenges and needs of unmarried parents in forming and sustaining healthy relationships and marriages as well as providing economic, social and emotional support to their children. These activities included:

1. A review of existing literature on unmarried parents, especially African American parents.
2. Distribution of a questionnaire on parenting, co-parenting, marriage and fathering attitudes and demographic information in the two communities.
3. Focus groups with unmarried parents of African American, Latino and Caucasian descent in two communities on their interest in healthy marriage education, barriers to building a high-quality couple relationship and the meaning of marriage.
4. Focus groups with service providers in the same two communities to ascertain knowledge of and attitudes towards healthy marriage promotion with Fragile Families in their community.

5. Preparation of a report of the themes from the literature review, community questionnaire, and focus group discussions to guide development of an intervention protocol for community-based programs that target unmarried new parents.

Literature Review

In the last 40 years there have been significant increases in the rates of children living in single-parent homes as a result of divorce and unmarried childbirth. In 1976, only 17% of single mothers had never married while in 1997 the percent of never married mothers had increased to 46% (Ventura & Backrach, 2000). In the United States, about one birth in three annually is to an unmarried parent. For African-American families, nearly 70 percent of children are born each year to unmarried parents as compared to the 33% of all children. In Michigan, of the 113,435 births reported in the first 9 months of 2004, 39,965 births (35.2%) were to unwed mothers; in 24,097 of these births the child's paternity was established. In most cases, these unmarried parents are young, and have low educational attainment, poor job prospects and low incomes.

This section describes relevant literature on unmarried parenting and single parenting. A brief overview of child support enforcement issues is given followed by a description of important findings for this project from the *Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study* (FFCWB). This literature is further explored through a review of literature related to cohabitation and co-parenting. Lastly, the implications of these various findings for designing and offering marriage and relationship education to unmarried parents are described.

Child Support Enforcement

Child support is a critical financial factor for single parent families, representing an average of 25% of family income for low-income mothers as compared to 7% to 9% for all women with child support orders (Miller, Farrell, Cancian, & Meyers, 2005). However, Miller et al. (2005) reported that only 9 to 22% of low-income women receive monthly child support as compared to 75% received by all eligible women. In the same report, child support was concluded to be a critical building block towards leaving welfare and not returning as well as serving as financial incentive for establishing paternity (Miller et al, 2005).

Couple relationship quality and father involvement are key factors in establishing and collecting child support. Voluntary paternity establishment in the hospital and not enforcing punitive measures were related to fathers being more willing to provide emotional and economic support and more likely to maintain involvement over time (Peters, Argys, Howard & Butler, 2004). In addition, fathers are more likely to regularly see their children and pay child support when they perceive a degree of parental involvement (Peters et al., 2004). Unmarried African-American fathers were found to be more involved with their children during infancy and at 3 years of age when the couple reported a more satisfying and supportive relationship with each other (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2004). However, strong enforcement of child support orders has been connected to greater couple conflict and a greater likelihood that the couple would break up (Fragile Family Research Brief, 2003). Policy interventions are needed to focus on strengthening mother-father relationships as well as improving fathers' ability to provide economic support and be involved in other arenas of parenting (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2000).

Unmarried Childbirth and Single Parenting

Social science research has consistently shown the negative impacts of unmarried childbirth and single parenting for children. The emerging consensus is that the quality of the relationship between children's parents matter for children, and that children benefit when both parents are present and functioning in a low-conflict relationship (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Notwithstanding single parents best efforts, children in these families, either resulting from divorce or unmarried childbirth, are at greater risk for a variety of adverse outcomes including: living in poverty, lower academic achievement, higher risk of teen and non-marital child bearing, behavior problems, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, and school problems (Amato, 2000).

These risks of negative outcomes can be reduced if the parents cooperatively work together to raise their children, and if regular financial and emotional support are received from the non-custodial parent (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Feinberg, 2002). Positive co-parenting (i.e., mutual support of the parenting role, childrearing agreement, equitable division of parenting responsibilities, and parents' management of interaction patterns) has been found to be an important mediator between the couple relationship and child outcomes. Even if the parents are experiencing relationship discord and distress but are able to maintain a positive co-parenting relationship, adverse outcomes for children will be reduced. Feinberg (2002) posits that focusing interventions on the co-parenting alliance, rather than exclusively on marital or couple relationship quality, will show stronger effects for the parents and children.

Even if the couple relationship ends, the empirical literature on the impact of divorce on children has shown that early involvement of the non-custodial parent with his or her child predicts a pattern of connection and support for the child (Bartfeld, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003;

Seltzer, 2000). Risks are further decreased for children when they live with their natural, married parents in a low-conflict household (Lerman, 2002). However, it is important to note that a two-parent household can be an unhealthy and dangerous place for children if there is unresolved conflict between the parents (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Residential fathers tend to be more consistently involved with their child(ren) than non-residential fathers (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2003), increasing the economic and social-emotional resources of the family.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study

Recent findings from *The Fragile Families and Child-Wellbeing Study* (FFCWB) show that most unmarried parents are highly committed to each other at their child's birth, and hope to sustain their relationship and marry (McLanahan et al, 2003). However, this study also shows that the percentage of couples who are working together to raise their children decreases from almost 60% at the child's birth to only 13% when the child reaches their teens, indicating that the parents either never married or divorced if they did marry. Only about 9% of those who were romantically involved got married by their child's first birthday. The term *fragile family* is applied to emphasize the fact that these families are more vulnerable to both family and economic stress than children born to married parents.

Fragile Families report experiencing numerous social and economic barriers for maintaining stable family life, resulting from low education attainment, few job skills and few life skills (McLanahan et al, 2003). These parents' low human capital as evidenced by lack of education and job skills create significant barriers to maintaining father involvement, getting married, and creating a stable marriage. In addition, higher rates of incarceration, domestic violence, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol abuse among this population are often

cited as barriers to healthy family formation and father involvement (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003b).

Interviews with unmarried mothers and fathers found that financial concerns, relationship problems, and timing issues interfered with couples' aspirations for staying together and marriage (Gibson, Edin and McLanahan, 2003). Financial concerns revolved around the mother and father being responsible and able to hold a job, acquiring assets, and having enough money saved for a “proper” wedding. Mothers also reported problems in their relationship related to beliefs that the father was not mature enough for the responsibility of marriage and low trust of their partner related to sexual infidelity and domestic violence. Many fathers and mothers were uncertain as to whether or not the relationship was strong enough to last. Timing issues included not having enough time to prepare for and get married at the present time as well needing a stretch of uninterrupted time to plan the wedding. Gibson et al. (2003) reported that high expectations of marriage and of those who marry could be preventing this group of parents from taking steps toward marriage.

Father involvement in *Fragile Families* is an important component for a positive couple and co-parenting alliance. Johnson (2001) reported that during pregnancy, almost 80% of unmarried fathers provided financial and other support. Paternal involvement during pregnancy was found to be the strongest predictor of paternal involvement after birth. McLanahan et al, (2003) found there was also a greater likelihood that the child had the father’s surname and that the father’s name was on the birth certificate when the father was involved during pregnancy. However, as noted above, they also found that father involvement and co-parenting, like the couples’ romantic relationship, declined over time.

In a study by Kalil, Ziol-Guest and Coley (2005), family relationships, in particular with the paternal grandparents and maternal grandmother, were found to impact father involvement. If the mother had a positive relationship with the father's family and the father with the mother's mother, there were more positive patterns of father involvement. However, if the maternal grandmother provided greater social support to the mother, there were decreased levels of father involvement. The researchers concluded that these teen mothers were at greater risk for an initially highly involved father dropping out of parenting. As a result, home visiting programs and other intervention programs targeting Fragile Families need to take a family systems approach in which father involvement is tied to the couple relationship, the father's family, and the maternal grandmother (Kalil et al, 2005).

Cohabitation and Marriage

A significant proportion of unmarried parents choose to live together in lieu of or until getting married. Cohabitation between heterosexual partners is a social trend currently attracting a great deal of interest among researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and the general public. Researchers do not agree whether cohabitation should be treated as a premarital event, a substitute for marriage, an extension of dating, or a new family form in which children are being raised. All of these scenarios exist, yet no one can frame all cohabiting relationships and the implications of cohabiting as the same.

Research shows that cohabiting relationships are influenced by intergenerational trends, access to education and professional opportunities, community and personal risk factors, and potential partner selection effects in ways that are significantly different for couples in low-income groups than couples in higher income groups. Further, there are distinctly different embedded themes in these two communities regarding gender roles

and relationships. Finally, cohabiting couples with fewer economic resources are less likely to eventually marry (Seltzer, 2004).

In 1970, there were half a million heterosexual cohabiting couples, and today, there are 4.6 million, and this figure continues to rise (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Not only are more couples cohabiting, more couples who cohabit appear to be getting married. Of couples that married between 1965 and 1974, 10% had previously cohabited. For those marrying between 1990 and 1994, well over 50% had previously cohabited (Sassler, 2004; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Raley, 2000). More than half of all young adults in their 20's and 30's in the 1990's shared a home with a partner outside of marriage (Sassler, 2004).

Many cohabiters report reasons for moving in together such as sharing finances and increasing convenience (i.e., not having to go back and forth between two residences). Others describe cohabitation as a precursor to marriage. Sassler writes,

Today's young adults have opportunities for education, employment, and intimate relationships that are far more abundant than were available to previous generations...In a time of rapid social change—economic shifts, childhood experiences with family disruption, and questioning of gendered family roles—co-residential unions may be viewed as an increasingly important way of moderating the risks inherent in romantic relationships. (2004, p. 491)

The length of cohabiting relationships is relatively short. On average, they last 2 years, and the couple then either breaks up or gets married (Brown, 2003). The factors leading to each resolution, just as the factors leading to the initial union, are variable, but some key themes are consistently noted in the literature.

Central to the research on cohabitation is a discussion of the risks it presents to marital success and child outcomes. These risks are consistent across the literature. In general, couples that cohabit before marriage experience lower marital quality and an increased risk for divorce once married, and children who are raised in households with unmarried parents are at increased risk for poor outcomes. The literature does not contextualize these risks. Therefore, it is unclear if they are consistent across all socioeconomic groups, ethnicities, geographic locations, or other subpopulations. Further, we do not fully know how these risks are impacted by community and family variables. Researchers suggest that it is important to explore partners who cohabit with and without plans to marry as two separate groups, though most current research aggregates the population (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004).

Researchers debate if cohabitation is in some way directly causal of marital failure, if the risk is created by a selection effect (e.g., those who choose to cohabit are also people who consider divorce more easily), or if the relationship between cohabitation and decreased relationship quality and/or divorce is due to still unknown reasons. Cohabitation is one risk among a number identified by the literature that may contribute to decreased marital quality and/or divorce. Others include marriage at a young age, lack of social support, and lack of financial resources. Of significance, research preliminarily indicates that couples who cohabit with the expressed plan to eventually marry each other have similar relationship quality to their married peers and higher relationship quality than cohabiters without plans to marry (Brown, 2003; Brown & Booth, 1996).

Because cohabiters often either marry or break-up after just a few years, there is a risk for cohabiting instability as much as there is risk for eventual marital instability for these couples. Accordingly, researchers debate the cause of such instability including the aforementioned selection effect as well as the lack of social support and boundaries available to cohabiters. When a couple gets married, there is a clear initiation, including the rituals and traditions associated with the proposal and wedding; cohabitation occurs in a more gradual and sometimes obtuse way. When couples are married there are legal barriers to quick dissolution; when couples cohabit, it is functionally easier to split. The familial, social, and legal validity provided married partners are often withheld from cohabiting couples, potentially increasing pressure on the relationship. Finally, there are often better and more educational and therapeutic resources available to married couples.

Though cohabitation is not always a substitute for marriage, nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive, current research and policy tend to pit one relationship type against the other. This is particularly true in relation to low-income families, the focus of many marriage education programs and policies. Researchers find that economic concerns are likely the greatest barrier to marriage for low-income families (Edin, England, & Linnenberg, 2003). Fundamentally, marriage is more permanent and is therefore expected to provide more stability to families than cohabiting arrangements. Many questions are raised from such a theory regarding the risks and benefits of high-conflict marriages in comparison to cohabiting unions. Many studies confirm that children who grow up in families with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage are better off in a number of ways than children who grow up in single-, step-, cohabitating-parent, or high-conflict households (White & Kaplan, 2003).

Research has attempted to explore whether or not cohabiting parents' family environments are explicitly less stable than married parents' environments. Graefe and Lichter (1999), drawing on a sample of children born to young mothers from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, suggested that about one-fifth of children born to cohabiting couples will experience a transition within one year and 88% will experience a transition by age five. Manning, Smock, and Majumdar (2004) found that stability was increased for White children in the sample when their cohabiting parents married, but stability did not increase for Black and Hispanic children in their sample when their parents married. Manning and Brown (2006) also found that marriage (compared to cohabitation) seemed to have a greater benefit for White children than their Black and Hispanic counterparts.

In general, when compared to children who are raised by married parents, children in other family types may be more likely to achieve lower levels of education, to become teen parents, and to experience physical, behavioral, and mental health problems. In addition, children in single- and cohabitating families may be more likely to be poor and experience multiple living arrangements during childhood (Anderson, Moore, Jekielek, & Emig, 2002). Brown (2004) examined data from the 1999 *National Survey of America's Families* ($N = 35,938$) and found that children in cohabiting families experienced worse outcomes when compared with children living with their married biological parents. However, they did not fare worse than children living in other kinds of family forms including remarried stepfamilies and single-parent families.

Coparenting

A core characteristic of unmarried parents or *Fragile Families* is their working together to raise their child, whether or not they are co-habiting. In 2005, there were 12.9 million single parents living with their children; of this group, 10.4 million were mothers. Also in 2005, 33% of all children under the age of 18 lived with only one parent. In 2004, 32% of all births were to unmarried women, with higher proportions of minorities represented (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Researchers predict that approximately two-fifths of all children will live in a cohabiting family at some point before adulthood (Bumpass & Lu 2000). With the ways in which families are formed and the environments in which children are being raised continuing to evolve, improved research of the co-parenting relationship is clearly critical.

Researchers have defined co-parenting in a variety of ways. McHale, Kuersten Hogan, Lauretti, and Rasmussen (2000) defined the co-parenting relationship as the relationship between adult partners concerning issues of parenting (2000). However, “no consensus has been reached on what co-parenting actually *is*” (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Some common constructions of it include “shared parenting” (Deutsch, 2001), “parenting partnership” (Floyd & Zmich, 1991), and “parenting alliance” (Cohen & Weissman, 1984) (*in* Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Van Egeren (2004) indicates that co-parenting occurs when there is a “biological, adoptive, or cohabiting relations to [a] child” (pg. 455). Co-parenting could be defined very broadly, simply identifying the way parenting often occurs collaboratively, or it could be defined more narrowly, as a dyadic construct, as is often the case for a primary caregiver and his/her co-parent.

Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) define a co-parenting relationship as existing “when at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have conjoint responsibility for a particular child’s well-being” (pg. 166). The authors further suggest the following boundaries: *co-parenting requires a child; co-parenting requires a partner; co-parenting is a dyadic process; and co-parenting is a bidirectional process.*

When considering what practices make up co-parenting, the construct of contributing or subtracting support is integral. Specifically, the support co-parents may provide each other is defined through behaviors from one’s partner that encourages accomplishing parenting objectives (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995; Frank & Tuer, 1988; McHale, 1995; M. Westerman & M. Massoff, 2001). Conversely, undermining co-parenting are those behaviors that intrude on partners accomplishing parenting goals. Undermining co-parenting can be seen when one’s partner expresses criticism, vocalizes disrespect, or undercuts their partners parenting decisions or behaviors (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995).

Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) suggest that co-parenting support is found in “helping” behaviors (i.e., retrieving objects when the partner’s hands are full), or feeling reinforced by one’s partner. Shared parenting encompasses the division of childcare labor and includes not only actual time spend on tasks, but also the responsibility carried for that task to be accomplished and partner’s perceptions about the fairness of this division. It also includes the concept of how much each partner is engaged with the children. Knudson-Martin & Mahoney (2005) suggest that engagement is a circular process, and as mothers are able to yield to fathers’ involvement, and fathers are able to approach child

care with a sense of wanting to learn, not only are parent-child relationships strengthened, but also the relationship between co-parents.

While co-parenting and marital interactions are related, they are not mutually interdependent. The above definitions of co-parenting are inclusive of parenting partnerships that do not include marriage. Research shows that co-parenting is its own construct (Van Egeren, 2004). Yet, there is a demonstrated relationship between the quality of the co-parenting relationship and the quality of marital interactions (Stright & Bales, 2003). Belsky and Hsieh (1998) and O'Brien and Peyton (2002) found that couples whose marital satisfaction declined over time experienced more co-parenting-related disagreements. Studies suggest that positive marital relationships carry over into the co-parenting relationship, and negative marital relationships trigger difficult co-parenting relationships (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997; McHale, 1997). However, some researchers have found that many families experiencing marital distress are able to maintain effective co-parenting relationships (McHale, 1995; McHale et al., 2000).

The *Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study* (FFCWB) has demonstrated that the quality of the couple relationship is a significant predictor of positive child and family outcomes. Further, this finding is evident whether or not the parents are married. While there are new lessons being learned by research like the FFCWB, few studies have concentrated on the relationship between biological parents who are not living together. The FFCWB, which has followed a birth cohort of 5,000 children and their parents, has defined who is in a family based on a co-parenting couple and their children. This research has found that couples with fewer financial resources are less likely to marry

and/or stay together than their wealthier counterparts because of financial or relationship obstacles (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Another major finding of this study (*relevant to the current study*) is that parents were likely to be romantically involved at the time of their children's birth, making this a critical period in the family's trajectory (Parke, 2004).

Research shows that the quality of the co-parenting relationship is significant to children's outcomes. Cohen (2003) found that unmarried African-American fathers' positive relationship with their child's mother was associated with being more involved with their child at infancy and at age 3. Additionally, although Jones' et al. (2005) definition of a co-parenting partnership extended beyond biological parents, they found that behaviors associated with co-parental support and co-parental conflict were predictive of maternal parenting behaviors.

Programmatic Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been made on programmatic approaches to helping Fragile Families marry and stay married over time. The first recommendation is to programmatically intervene with unmarried parents before, at or shortly after the birth of their child (McLanahan et al., 2003). Secondly, relationship education and healthy marriage are important, but not the only, ingredients for strengthening fragile families. Approaches need to include job training and placement, housing, health care, and substance abuse treatment along with life skills, parenting and couples education (Dion and Devaney, 2003). Lastly, program planners need to recognize that sometimes it is not possible to form a healthy, married family due to intense couple conflict, domestic violence, or other issues. In these cases, it is important to help parents to cooperate together to raise their children if possible (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Summary

This literature review describes the importance of child support for low-income mothers and the impact of couple conflict, aggressive child support enforcement efforts, and policies designed to strengthen the co-parenting on child support payments. In addition, a description of the *Fragile Families* research study was given, including the barriers faced by unmarried parents in maintaining couple relationships and moving to marriage. Co-habitation was discussed as an interim step towards marriage; the evidence on marital quality and children were found to be mixed. Lastly, the concept of co-parenting, as distinct from the marital relationship and parenting practices, was examined. The themes from this literature review were used to inform the community questionnaire, focus groups and curriculum development. These activities are discussed in the next sections.

Community Questionnaire

To learn more about *fragile families*, co-parenting and cohabitation in the two communities (Saginaw and Oakland Counties), a questionnaire was developed and distributed to community members in the spring of 2006. The original work plan for the formative research did not include this step. However, as we prepared the literature review, we wanted to learn more about families in the two communities and about the family processes related to marriage, parenting and co-parenting within each community. Therefore, the purpose of this questionnaire was to provide baseline data for the two communities and to provide critical information on marriage, parenting and co-parenting to inform the curriculum development process. Specifically, we hoped the data would

provide descriptive information about the two communities and their interests and needs related to family processes and parenting.

Methods

Participants. Participants were recruited through Michigan State University Extension offices in Oakland and Saginaw counties. Current recipients of Michigan State University Extension programming were invited by program personnel to complete surveys if they currently parented children. Data from 95 participants who were parents of children birth to age 16 were included for analysis. Seventy-three respondents were parents of children birth to age 5.

Participants in this study consisted of 29 men (30.5%) and 66 women (69.5%). These men and women ranged in age from 18 to 67 years old, with a mean age of 32.6 years old ($SD=9.45$). Among the sample, 65.2% were African American, 18.5% were Caucasian, 10.9% were Hispanic, 4.3% were Bi-Racial, and 1.1% identified as “Other.” Forty-six respondents were from Oakland County, and 49 respondents were from Saginaw County. Forty-six percent of respondents were unemployed, 18.4% worked part-time, and 35.6% worked full-time. The average income of participants was \$1,466 per month. Thirteen percent of respondents never finished high school, 37% completed a high school diploma (or a GED), 38% of respondents had some college but did not graduate, and 12% graduated from college.

Procedures. This study used a non-experimental, descriptive, single-group design. Parents were asked to complete a single survey that included standardized scales and qualitative inquiries yielding descriptive data (as described below). Participants were given a five-dollar gift card to Meijer stores upon completion of the survey. A survey was

excluded from final analysis if more than one scale within a survey was not completed. All subscales were modified for this study so that all gender-specific words (e.g., “mother”) were changed to be gender inclusive (e.g., “mother/father”). Also, for analysis purposes, missing items were replaced with the mean.

Measures

Four standardized measures were chosen to assess target constructs of parenting, co-parenting, marital attitudes, and family resources. Additionally, qualitative questions assessing household composition and social support were coded to yield descriptive data of these variables. All variables were chosen based on reviews of the relevant body of scholarship as well as *Together We Can* programming objectives.

Assessment of parenting. The Parental Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC) was used to assess parents’ perceptions of their own parenting abilities (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978). Sample items include: “Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved” and “Being a good mother is a reward in itself.” This scale is a 16-item, 5-point, Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. The authors identify two subscales: skill knowledge (7 items) and valuing/comfort (9 items). The authors originally reported alphas of .70 for the skill knowledge subscale and .82 for the valuing/comfort subscale, with 6-week test-retest correlations ranging from .46 to .82. Additional studies subsequently examined this scale with similar results.

Assessment of co-parenting. The Measure of Co-Parenting Alliance Scale was used to assess the quality of participants’ relationships with their co-parents (Dumka, Prost, & Barrera, 2002). Sample items include: “When I have a problem with our child, I can go to my child’s other parent, and he will listen to me and be supportive” and “I say

good things to my child about my child's other parent when he is not around." This scale is a 21-item, 5-point, Likert scale ranging from (1) Not At All to (5) Almost Always. The authors reported excellent internal consistency with alphas of .93 (women) and .90 (men). The authors standardized this scale with a diverse sample of participants, and reported their results across ethnic groups; high reliability was maintained across groups.

For the purposes of this study, a modification was made to the administration of this scale. Respondents were provided the following directions: "You should answer each question with your child's other parent in mind. However, if your child's other parent has no contact with you and your child, please think of another parenting partner and write in [on the line provided] that person's relationship to you here (e.g., my mother, my mother-in-law, my brother, my boyfriend, etc.)." This modification was made due to the diversity in families among our target populations. However, the majority of participants completed the scale related to their child's other parent (94.5%) while only 3 respondents completed the scale related to an alternative partner (child's maternal grandmother or parent's current romantic partner).

Assessment of marital attitudes. The scale assessing marital attitudes was adapted from the Fragile Families Study. This scale is a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Sample items include: "All in all, there are more advantages to being single than to being married" and "It is better for children if their parents are married."

Assessment of family resources. The Family Resource Scale (FRS) was used in this study to assess family resources (Dunst & Leet, 1987). The FRS is a 31-item, 6-point, Likert scale ranging from (1) Does Not Apply to (6) Almost Always Adequate.

Participants rated a series of items according to “how well the need is met on a consistent basis.” There are 7 subscales on this measure: food and shelter, financial well-being, time for family, extrafamilial support, child care, specialized child resources, and luxuries. This scale has excellent internal consistency with an alpha of .92 for full scale. Test-retest reliability reported over an interval of 2-3 months was .52.

Descriptive statistics. Twenty qualitative questions assessed descriptive constructs including demographics, social support, household composition of parent and child, and caregiver status. Only one question was open-ended; this question inquired about circumstances of any extended separations between parent and child. Otherwise, questions were a choice format to aid subsequent coding procedures.

Results

Reliability Analyses. Prior to analyses, each measure’s psychometric properties were examined, and alphas are reported herein. Chronbach’s alpha for the Measure of Co-parenting Alliance was .92. No items were deleted. The alpha coefficient for the Marital Attitudes Scale was .46. The first item (“The main advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security”) was deleted to achieve a final alpha of .59. Chronbach’s alpha for the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale overall is .77, and no items were removed. The alpha for the valuing/comfort subscale was .75, and the alpha for the skills knowledge subscale was .78. One item, item 6 (“A difficult problem in being a parent is not knowing whether or not you’re doing a good job or a bad one”), was removed from the skills subscale to yield a final alpha of .85. Chronbach’s alpha for the Family Resource Scale was .92. No items were deleted.

Descriptive Statistics. The household composition of survey participants was measured. Thirty-four percent of respondents were in their first marriage, 4.3% were engaged to be married for the first time, 5.3% were remarried, 9.6% were not married and cohabiting with a partner, 11.7% were in romantic relationships without marriage or cohabiting, and 35% reported no romantic relationship. Alternatively, 43.6% were married or engaged to be married, 64.9% were in a romantic relationship, and 21.3% were in a relationship but not married. Eighty percent of respondents report acting as a primary caregiver to their child or children.

Most respondents, 82.9%, live with their children, and 17.9% do not, either because their child is in the custody of the other parent or child welfare (a foster home). Forty-five percent of respondents live in a two-parent family home including a significant other and children. Twenty-four percent of respondents live in a single-parent home, or they live alone with their children. Thirteen percent of respondents live in a single-parent kinship home, or they live with their children and other family members such as their own parents.

Respondents had between 1 and 6 children with a mean age of 3.59 years old ($SD=3.83$). Thirty-nine percent of respondents report their child is in the joint legal custody of themselves and their child's other parent, 46.8% report their child is in their sole legal custody, and 9.6% report their child is in the other parent's sole legal custody. Thirty-seven percent of respondents report their child is in the joint physical custody of themselves and their child's other parent, 45.7% report their child is in their sole physical custody, and 12.8% report their child is in the sole physical custody of their child's other parent.

Seventy-two percent of respondents report being satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of social support they receive, while 7.6% report being unsatisfied or very unsatisfied (the remainder were “neutral”). Seventy-one of respondents reported having a “parenting partner.”

Respondents overall had a mean score on the co-parenting scale of 81 (highest possible score of 105) ($SD=16$), a mean score on the family finances and resources scale of 144 (highest possible score of 186) ($SD=22$), a mean score on the marital attitudes scale of 18 (highest possible score of 30) ($SD=4$), and a mean on the parenting scale of 60 (highest possible score of 80) ($SD=8$). The mean scores on the subscales of the parenting scale were 35 ($SD=6$) on the warmth subscale and a 24 ($SD=4$) on the skills subscale.

T-tests were run to compare the mean scores across scales for men and women and married and unmarried respondents. T-tests showed there were no significant differences in mean scores on these scales between the men and women in this sample. T-tests showed significant differences in the mean scores for people who were married versus those who were not married on the co-parenting scale and on the marital attitudes scale. When comparing the bottom quarter of scores to the top quarter of scores, respondents who were married were more likely to fall in the top quarter on these scales, and respondents who were not married were more likely to fall in the bottom quarter on these scales. T-tests showed the same results (those for married compared to unmarried respondents) for respondents who were cohabiting versus not cohabiting. There were no significant differences when comparing respondents who were married versus cohabiting without marriage.

Correlation Analyses. A number of correlations were run to determine the relationship between the variables examined in this study. Across participants, household composition had a significant association with several variables. Cohabiting status was significantly correlated with total scores on the co-parenting scale ($r=.440, p<.01$). Additionally, parents' custody of children was significantly correlated with cohabiting status, marital status, marital versus cohabiting status, and co-parenting.

Family finances and resources were significantly correlated with parenting overall ($r=.356, p<.01$), parenting skills ($r=.247, p<.05$), and parenting warmth ($r=.329, p<.01$); co-parenting ($r=.315, p<.01$); and satisfaction with social support ($r=.372, p<.01$). However, family finances and resources were not correlated with marital or cohabiting status.

Additionally, participants' attitudes about marriage were significantly correlated with a number of variables. Marital attitude scores were correlated with co-parenting scores ($r=.269, p<.01$), single versus two-parent families ($r=.435, p<.001$), legal custody of children ($r=.219, p<.05$), and physical custody of children ($r=.250, p<.05$).

For parents of children birth to age 5, co-parenting was significantly correlated with parental warmth scores ($r=.232, p<.05$). However, this result disappeared when cases in which youngest children were over the age of 5 were added to the analysis.

Implications of Survey Findings for the Project

The results of the community questionnaire provide descriptive information about families and family processes in the two targeted communities that informs the program development and delivery process. Of the ninety-five individuals completing questionnaires in Saginaw and Oakland Counties, the majority were parents and acted as

their child's primary caregiver. Almost 50% were married or engaged to be married and lived in a two-parent family home that included a significant other and children while 24% lived in a single-parent home with their children. Three-fourths of the respondents (71) reported having a "parenting partner."

These data indicate that most parents in the two communities, regardless of their marital status, have someone they view as a parenting partner. It is not clear if this partner is the child's other biological parent, another relative, or a romantic and/or co-habiting partner. In addition, when the mean scores for married respondents and co-habiting respondents were compared on the parenting, co-parenting, family resources, and marriage attitudes, there were not significant differences. This result indicates that the presence of another adult in the household, whether one is married to that individual or not, to help with parenting responsibilities seems to make the difference in their co-parenting scores and marital attitudes.

There are several implications of these findings for the curriculum development and program delivery process. First, when developing marketing materials for the program, we can not assume that a single parent would attend the program alone. We will want to direct our marketing messages to the parent and his or her primary "parenting partner," encouraging the involvement of both in the program. Second, the educational messages contained in the curriculum need to assume that most participants will have a parenting partner and that this partner may be the biological parent, a romantic partner, a relative, or friend. Our goal needs to focus on strengthening various aspects of the the parenting partner relationship including the co-parenting alliance. Lastly, these findings indicate that parents' romantic and marital relationships are an important aspect of family

processes and need to be addressed in the curriculum. Although participants may not marry their children's biological parents or their current partner, the quality of their current and past couples relationships make a difference in parenting and child outcomes. Parents need to consider the impact of couple relationships on their children, making healthy decisions regarding them and taking steps to improve their quality.

Focus Groups with Potential Participants and Community Service Organizations

Ten focus groups were conducted in Oakland and Saginaw Counties, including three community partners' group, three fathers' group, and four mothers' group. The purposes of the focus groups with community partners were to learn more about current community efforts to educate parents, about family and community needs from the perspective of service providers; and about how community partnerships can best be created related to promoting healthy marriage education. The purpose of the focus groups with fathers and mothers was to obtain more in-depth information about family processes, including co-parenting, couple relationships and family strengths that would augment the literature review and community questionnaire results. In addition, we wanted to hear parents' thoughts on a healthy marriage education program. Appendix B includes a copy of the Community Partners Focus Group Guide and Appendix C includes the Parents Focus Group Guide.

Participants for the focus groups were recruited by Extension Educators in Saginaw and Oakland Counties. The focus groups were conducted by members of the project team; the Extension Educators served as co-facilitators.

Data Analysis

The typed transcription document from the focus group was modified into a table with four columns based on the method recommended by La Pelle (2004). This approach uses standard software tools like Microsoft Word for qualitative data analysis.

Essentially, each question and participants' responses in the transcribed discussion were placed in an individual cell on the table in the order they occurred. The first column on table indicated the participant or moderator of the comment being described. The second column identified a theme code for response. The response of the participant or the question posed by the moderator was contained in the third column. The sequence number of the responses or questions was contained in the fourth column.

A coding guide was then developed using a three-step process (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). First, the transcript text was read several times and impressions were written down while reading through the data. It was determined that the data were of a high enough quality to continue with analysis. Second, the purposes of the implementation evaluation and key questions that we hoped to have answered were reviewed. These questions, described above as the purposes of the focus group, were used to focus the data analysis process. The last step in developing the coding guide involved identifying themes and patterns of ideas, incidents and interactions, and organizing them into coherent categories. Abbreviated codes were assigned to themes and placed in the appropriate column on the transcript. Transcripts were then coded and patterns and connections within and between categories were identified.

The focus group transcripts were grouped based on these three populations: fathers, mothers, and community partners. The transcripts within each group were coded

and analyzed based on the interview questions (see Appendix B and C). These major themes emerged from the ten focus group transcripts: 1) family relationships; 2) parenting and co-parenting relationships; 3) community resources; 4) recruitment and retention; and 5) the evaluation of the previous curriculum. These five themes were compared and contrasted among three groups.

Background Information

There were three groups conducted with the community partners, two in Oakland County and one in Saginaw County with a total of 19 participants. There were 18 females and one male representing the helping professions. These helping professionals were from agencies that related to court, domestic violence/sexual assault, child protective services, parenting education and support, physical health, mental health, fathering, and human services.

Forty-five parents participated in the seven focus groups with mothers (four groups) and fathers (three groups). Oakland County held one father's group and two mother's groups, and Saginaw County held two groups each with mothers and fathers. Among the 45 participants, there were 22 males (4 in Oakland County, 18 in Saginaw County) and 23 females (11 in Oakland County, 12 in Saginaw County).

Fathers and Mothers' Characteristics

At the beginning of the focus group, participants shared background information about themselves with other focus group members. The background information shared by the participants was coded and analyzed.

... I'm a single parent. Her dad lives in Lansing and he has other children in Lansing with him and he has some more kids...My child is with me and it's just, he has so many different things going so he's just like, even if he wanted to, he couldn't. He just has too much going on and then he has a lot of exterior issues that

he's trying to deal with to where it might even be better for her than he not, you know, come. I'm not saying not come around but not to be in there totally 100% because there's some things that he's involved with that I don't want her exposed to and if you could understand what I'm saying, you know.

Mother in Oakland County Focus Group

Table 2 displays the number of the children that each gender reported. Other than two of the males who didn't identify the number of children they had, the number of children that the participants had ranged from one to six children. The women generally had fewer children than the men had. Most of the women had less than three children, with 15 out of 23 women having only two children. On the other hand, 13 out of 20 men in this group had at least three children.

Table 2. The number of children reported by participants' gender

how many children does the participant have * gender
Crosstabulation

Count		gender		Total
		male	female	
how many children does the participant have	1	4	9	13
	2	3	6	9
	3	6	5	11
	4	3	1	4
	5	2	2	4
	6	2	0	2
Total		20	23	43

Table 3 displays the number of the relationships that their children were from based on the gender differences. Nearly half of the participants didn't identify whether their children were from the same relationship, and if not, how many previous relationships they had. However, for the 24 participants who shared this information, most of the females had only one relationship that produced children and males reported more relationships by different partners than the female participants. That is, most of the

female participants' children were from the same father. Thirteen out of 14 females who identified this information had children with the same partner. On the other hand, one of the men in this group had children from three different relationships, and another man reported that his children were from four different relationships. Among 10 men who shared their relationship history information, at least half of the men (6 out of 10) had children are from 2 different relationships.

Table 3. The number of relationships that participants reported having produced children.

how many relationships the participants children are from * gender
Crosstabulation

Count

	gender		Total
	male	female	
how many relationships the participants children are from 1	4	13	17
2	4	1	5
3	1	0	1
4	1	0	1
Total	10	14	24

Table 4 displays the age of children identified by their parents. Male participants' reported having children whose ages spanned from prenatal to adulthood. Almost all the female participants' children were under age 13. The only participant whose five children were all older than 21 was a grandmother who was the primary caregiver of her granddaughter at the time of the focus group interview.

Table 4: Number of Children by Participants Gender and Children's Ages

	Male	Female
Prenatal	1	3
Younger than 1	2	3
1	1	6
2	5	7

3	1	3
4	1	4
5	3	2
6	1	3
7	4	1
8	6	1
9	2	3
10	1	0
11	1	0
12	1	2
13	3	6
14	1	0
15	6	0
16	4	0
17	4	0
Older than 18	4	5
Total	52	49

From this background information shared by the fathers and mothers, several themes emerged. First, fathers in this group had children across different age groups while the mothers tended to have more minor children. Second, fathers in these focus groups had more relationships in their history that produced children than mothers did. The male participants had children from different relationships, while the mothers seemed to have children from the same partner. Third, the fathers may be dealing with stepfamilies issues more often than mothers. This theme also re-appears under the theme are on parenting and co-parenting. These mothers would have to deal with the issues of the influence of her relationships breaking up on her children, childcare issues, and child support issues. Again, this theme also appears and will be discussed later in the parenting and co-parenting theme area.

I got 3 different baby mothers, you know. I have been married. I'm recently divorced now. My youngest son, I went to prison in 2000 so he was like 1 ½ when I left so he really doesn't remember me but she like kept my memory alive in him so when I got home, he knew he had a daddy out there, you know, ready to take over. So she was down with me just cause when I leave, when I get out of this

half-way house, I'm going to get him and he's going to spend all the time with me now so she can go ahead and do her thing, whatever, but she said that she tried to teach him boy things but she didn't, there was only so much she could do cause I told her don't be having my son acting like no girl when I get home, you know, so she, he – I talked to him (?) I haven't really, I ain't seen him yet but yea, he sounds like he all right. She did a good job.

Father in the Saginaw County Focus Group

Family Relationships

I didn't have a father growing up. I found my dad when I was 21 so I really missed out on things so I always wanted my children to have a mom and a dad living in the same household. I think that is why I struggle a lot, if I should stay or should I leave when we have domestic problems and things and when I don't agree with how he lives life.

Mother in Saginaw County Focus Group

The three groups, community partners', fathers', and mothers' group, all identified "love" as the important quality a family needs to have. The mothers' and the fathers' groups also identified communication, support, bonding, and parents' working together as a team as important qualities that a family needs to have. The mother and the community partner groups identified that having basic needs fulfilled and education were important qualities. In terms of the challenges that families had, there were no common themes among the three groups. However, the mother and the community partner groups both identified that their cultural values/expectations versus the expectations from the majority culture as one of the challenges faced by their own families or the families with which they worked.

...my children have their father ...it's like super important, not just for the balance but I think it makes like such an impression on your life seeing how your parents, whether they're married or not, interact with each other ...I feel like it totally affected my life and it affects what type of parent I am ... Even if people aren't married, it's just like real important that your children see that you can talk to each other civilly and that you're not talking about each others. I think

stuff like that goes back generations, not just what you're handling today because it totally affects what type of parent I am based on what my parents did.

Mother in Oakland County Focus Group

Both the fathers' and mothers' group identified important qualities for parents to have including supporting each other, the ability to calm one's self down, and instilling good behaviors, moral and values in their children. The challenges they faced as parents with their partners included negative influences from their families of origin, the division of fathers' resources across children from different former relationships, differences in parenting style, child support and money issues, and power struggles between parents. The influences from the family origin also appeared in the community partners' group. However, from the community helping professionals' perspective, this issue was a common challenge that they saw in the families they served in the community, which was coded under the family relationships.

... Values and morals. Some of the stuff I've been reading in the paper lately just blows my mind in reference to some of these parents abusing their 1 year old kid or 8 month old kids. It's just – I'm 42 years old and I'm a brand new parent. Even though I didn't get to see my older 2 grow up, I get to watch these 2 from birth grow up and I'm part of their life because being in the military, I was always gone. And just how they've – people batter kids is just – blows my mind and granted, being from the military, it's a violent place. Being there myself but to come home, it should be more of a loving, supportive environment instead of more of that violence.

Father in the Oakland County Focus Group

There was not a common theme between the father and community partners' group. The mother and the community partners' group both identified the fathers' commitment to be involved in the child's life as problematic. They also identified that marriage was not equal to establishing paternity, and that marriage and parenting were two different issues.

... there's some things that a mother can't teach the children. There's things a father can teach the children, especially when you have different sex children or certain ages or whatever.

Mother in the Oakland County Focus Group

Current Community Resources Used

Both mothers and fathers reported that they got emotional support from their churches. They also mentioned they went to trainings regarding fatherhood/motherhood as well as child development. The mothers identified specifically the “Birth to Five” and “Healthy Start” programs in which they participated; some participants in the community partners’ focus group were from these programs. Lastly, one mother identified the disincentives associated with getting married for receiving community resources.

...but when you're dealing with the system even doing your income taxes or general FIA, they don't like the man to be on the grant with you, or whatever, I'm just saying, you don't get a lot of resources of help when you're married...It's like your penalized for being married and you're trying to make it work and have both parents and do it together but it's harder.

Mother in Oakland County Focus Group

Current Curriculum Revision

During the focus groups, participants in all focus groups were asked to review a list of topics that might be included in a curriculum for unmarried parents. Appendix D gives these lists of topics. Participants from the three groups identified these topics as highly important for inclusion in the curriculum: child development, fatherhood/motherhood, effective parenting strategies, communication, stress management, and money management strategies. The fathers and mothers also identified the importance of discussing the stepfamily issues. Lastly, the mothers and the community partners reported the importance of discussing abuse and learning conflict resolution skills.

When comparing the fathers and the community partners' ideas about the curriculum topics, participants from these two groups cautioned the researchers to be sensitive about men's needs, which they believed were different from women's. They also cautioned that developers consider the cultural expectation regarding men's tendencies to not ask for help. They also reminded the researchers to be careful not to blame the men for all of a family's problems. Another common theme but opposite suggestion was the educator's ethnicity. The community partners voiced the importance that the educator teaching the curriculum have the same ethnicity as the participants, but the fathers did not think the same ethnicity between the educator and the participants was necessary.

Recruitment and Retention

Again, there was no consensus among three groups in this theme. However, comparing the fathers and the mothers' group, they both identified that the fathers usually get the information about classes offered in the community from their female partners. This seemed to correspond to one of the themes identified by the fathers that men were conditioned not to ask for help. Therefore, they would not get the help or seek help directly from the community, but they would be willing to take help if the information was provided from their intimate partners. Comparing the mothers and the community partners' group, they both identified that child care was an important incentive to participate in a program. Comparing the fathers and the community partners' group, they both identified that financial incentives were important. They also suggested that the program could recruit male participants from men who had already participated in the program. Again, this seems to correspond to the men's comments in the focus groups

about not asking help since it was not culturally expected. But it is okay to ask for help if another man who had participated in the program had done so.

Implications of the Focus Groups Findings for the Project

From the Family Life Cycle Theory (Carter & McGodrick, 2005), the traditional family life cycle starts when young adults leave home and set up their own household. They find their partners and form couple relationships. At this time, these two young adults' families of origin need to make room and adjustments for the new couple. The important tasks for this new couple revolve around forming their own couple system and a clear boundary between their families of origin. When this couple has their first child, the whole family system starts to change again. The couple system needs to adopt a new parental role with the newborn baby, which involves re-negotiating their roles in child care, family care, finance, and couple relationships.

When the child is born to an unmarried couple, there is a risk that the couple relationship has not yet formed and solidified. No matter whether the couple stays together or not, and no matter how long they stay together with or without legal bonding, parental roles and responsibilities for the child will never disappear even if the couple relationship is dissolved. Couples need to re-negotiate their roles as parents together to their children if their relationship ends.

The findings from the focus groups correspond with the Family Life Cycle Theory. The participants in both the mothers' and fathers' groups identified supporting each other as an important quality in their parenting and co-parenting relationships. They also identified that power struggles with their partners and disagreements with extended family members are primary challenges in their family lives. These findings seem to

correspond to the Family Life Cycle Theory in that the support from the partners, no matter the status of their couple relationship, is very important in the parenting and co-parenting relationships.

In addition, the extended family relationships are important, but easily overlooked. As the Family Life Cycle Theory posits, the extended families for both partners need to respect the boundaries of the couple system and the newborn child's parental system. Therefore, the Theory also indirectly reminds us that there are influences of the family of origin on the partners individually and on their couple relationships. The community partners', the mothers', and the fathers' groups all talked about the influences from the family of origin as one of the important issues that the curriculum needs to address.

When taking into consideration of the differences of the participants' characteristics between the mothers' and the fathers' group, we can see that they had different struggles but still fit with what the Theory tells us. Because fathers had children from more relationships compared to the mothers who usually dealt with one relationship, the fathers talked more about the difficulties of communicating around parenting issues with the ex-partners and current partners. On the other hand, the mothers in the focus group had to deal with the child support issues and worry about putting food on the table. In the meantime, their partners' resources might be spread thin as the mother's partners might have children from other different relationships as the fathers in the focus groups.

The other important finding from the focus groups is the importance of the gender expectations. The fathers reminded us that males and females have different needs and the curriculum design needs to be tailored to men's need. They also reminded the

researchers that men are culturally expected not to ask for help. Therefore, in the recruitment process, the researchers could recruit participants from the male's partner or the previous participants.

The gender of the focus group participants across the groups seems to be a factor in the shared themes. All the helping professionals recruited for the community partners focus groups were females except for one male. In general, this might be the explanation why it was easier to find more common themes between the mothers' and community partners' group, but not the fathers' and the community partners' group. The fathers' and the community partners' group only have the themes in common in the areas of recruitment and retention and curriculum revision. They both suggested that the financial incentive is important in the recruitment process, which, again, reflects expectations that a man should bring home the money. They also suggested having past male participants recruit men to participate in the program, which again, reflected the cultural expectations that a man does not ask for help unless it was from someone to which they were very close.

From the male participants' reminder about the curriculum and cultural expectations about male gender roles, it is important to reconsider the research findings from the literature review regarding the fathers' lack of motivation and commitment in the children's life. Is this true or is it because the curriculum was not tailored to the male's needs? These focus group findings indicate that the curriculum developers can not assume that men are not interested when they do not participate. Instead, they need to ensure that recruitment strategies and curriculum content are supportive of men's needs and interests.

The other important issue to consider relates to curriculum implementation. First, if the males had more previous relationships that produced children, will it be reasonable to set the curriculum goal to have the couple get married? Second, if the males report different needs than the females, and it will be harder for them to seek help, will it be reasonable to have him attend the program with his female partner at the beginning of the program? Or, might be more reasonable to help males become accustomed to the curriculum and have some of their self-development needs met prior to opening dialogue with their female partners?

Summary and Conclusions

This report describes the results of a formative research study for the *Together We Can* project, funded by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. The purpose of the formative research study was to investigate, using a community-based research approach, the challenges and needs of unmarried parents in forming and sustaining healthy relationships and marriages as well as providing economic, social and emotional support to their children. The results of the study inform the development of a culturally sensitive curriculum targeting low-income, ethnically-diverse parents at prenatal or early postnatal. Four methods were used to gather information: 1) a comprehensive literature review on unmarried parenting, Fragile Families, cohabitation, and co-parenting; 2) a community survey on parenting, co-parenting, marriage and fathering attitudes and demographic information in the two targeted communities; 3) focus groups with unmarried parents of African American, Latino and Caucasian descent in two communities on their interest in healthy marriage education, barriers to building a high-quality couple relationship and the meaning of marriage; and 4) focus groups with service providers in

the same two communities to ascertain knowledge of and attitudes towards healthy marriage promotion with Fragile Families in their community.

A number of important findings resulted from this study that have implications for curriculum development, recruitment and retention of participants, and program delivery of the *Together We Can* program. Below is a description of the implications.

Implications for curriculum development. A number of findings gave direction on how to modify existing materials and design new curriculum for the *Together We Can* project. We learned that men and women in the two targeted communities experienced different parenting and co-parenting issues. Fathers were more likely to report problems associated with multiple ex-partners and current partners around parenting. They also reported more issues related to step families. Mothers reported being more worried about receiving child support and needing childcare assistance, and meeting their children's basic needs. In addition, men distinguished between parenting and co-parenting with parenting being associated with the child and co-parenting with the child's mother. On the other hand, women talked about parenting and co-parenting in similar ways because they often had custody and consider co-parenting as an element of their parenting. In the new curriculum, both mothers and fathers views on parenting and co-parenting will be addressed and participants will be helped to understand each other's point of view. The curriculum also needs to be carefully written to include both mothers' and father's voices in the narrative and activities, and to address the unique needs of male participants.

Implications for recruitment and retention of participants. Several important implications for recruitment and retention to the *Together We Can* program were revealed by the results of this study. The physical proximity of the parents had the most significant impact on

parenting and co-parenting. That is, co-parenting adults who live together in the same household with the child reported the highest co-parenting satisfaction and sense of parenting competence. Because one's family of origin strongly influences parenting attitudes and co-parenting satisfaction, all adults living in the household need to be recruited and involved in the program, especially when working with adolescent mothers.

To overcome the cultural barriers for involving men in the program, several important implications emerged. Male facilitators need to be hired and trained to recruit participants and facilitate the educational sessions with a female staff member. MSU Extension has traditionally not hired men to work in its parenting education program. In addition, men who have participated in the program can play an important role in recruitment by reaching out to other men to encourage their participation in the program.

Lastly, recruitment efforts need to target parents with young children. The results of the community survey showed that the sense of parenting warmth disappeared after age five. This finding reinforces previous research cited in the literature review that co-parenting education efforts should target parents with young children. These parents are most likely to be interested in working on developing a positive co-parenting relationship.

Implications for program delivery. The results of this study gave important guidance on effectively delivering the program to unmarried parents. First, facilitators need training on family of origin issues and should encourage communication among all family members and not just the primary co-parenting partner, when delivering the program. Fathers should be encouraged by all family members to stay in close proximity to the child in order to increase both parents' co-parenting satisfaction and parenting sense of competence.

Second, men in the focus groups reported a reluctance to ask for help and the need to remain strong and able to handle everything. As a result, male participants will be most comfortable in the program if there is a male facilitator and other men participating in the program. Although the Healthy Marriage Initiative promotes involving couples, we believe that the evidence from the formative research compels us to have male-only and female-only groups as well as couple groups during the first year of implementation. By having male-only and female-only groups, the facilitators can tailor the content and learning activities to the issues unique to each gender. At the same time, common themes were reported by both males and females in the focus groups, including parenting strategies, communication skills, stress management, and stepfamily issues. Facilitators will need to thoughtfully select and implement learning activities for the groups with which they work.

Third, facilitators need to convey the message that the goal of the program is to do what is best for participants' children and to improve their child's well-being. They need to reinforce that the goal of the program is to help unmarried parents better understand each other and to gain the communication skills needed to sustain a low-conflict relationship. The core message throughout the program should be "in the best interest of the children."

Finally, participants need practical supports and incentives to retain their participation in a multi-session program. Child care, meals, a comfortable program location, and financial incentives need to be provided in order to keep parents coming back week after week. One or two sessions are not a sufficient dosage to make and

sustain the kind of impacts that we hope to achieve in this program. These supports and incentives will encourage participants to come back for six to eight sessions.

Conclusion

The results of this formative research project have provided critical information for the development and implementation of the Special Improvement Project *Together We Can* by Michigan State University Extension. We believe that this year-long process will be funding and time well spent in delivering a program that has positive program effects on the participants and for the staff who deliver it. In the end, fewer unmarried parents will find themselves back into the court system to resolve their differences and more children will have two parents who work together to secure their future.

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Appendix A. Community Questionnaire

TOGETHER WE CAN
FOCUS GROUP GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Notes to focus group leaders:

Our goals for this focus group are to learn:

- I. Challenges parents in this community face and the strengths and resources related to parenting that are present and available for focus group participants.
- II. Participants' interest in and need for the educational intervention proposed in the *Together We Can* grant.

Before the focus group begins, the research assistant (Erika or Grace) will obtain participants' consent and get the Informed Consent forms signed. Name cards will be given to all participants.

Once the informed consent is completed, the research assistant will distribute the questionnaire that collects information about the participant and their current family situation. When all participants have completed the questionnaire, the focus group will begin. For those who complete the questionnaire quickly, offer refreshments and ask them to remain quiet.

Turn on Tape Recorder

- I. Introduction
 1. Introduce yourself and anyone else from the research team who is present.
 2. Explain the purpose of the focus group: to learn more about the challenges they face in parenting as well as to learn more about the positive things that help them to be good parents, so that we can develop a family education program based on their community characteristics.
 3. Give reminder: *"Your names won't be written on any materials other than the consent form you signed. We want everyone to feel comfortable in talking today. So, it's important that everyone keeps comments that come up in this room rather than repeating things said here to others outside of this room. Your participation in this focus group is not related to any services you or your family receives, and findings from this focus group will only be shared in a groups format. So, for instance, we might say, "In general, many parents in this community experience...."*
 4. Let them know there are no right or wrong answers.

5. Explain the “rules” of focus groups, including respecting other opinions, refraining from criticism, refraining from arguing, etc.
 6. Explain that speaking one at a time is especially important. Everything participants say is valuable, and we want to get it on tape.
 7. Say, “*We have a number of areas to cover today, so please be brief, but complete, in your responses. We’d like to take about 10 minutes or so as a group per moderator’s question.*”
 8. Icebreakers
 - a. Introduce yourself and give the names and ages of your children.
 - b. Tell us what you think the three most important qualities a great parent has.
-

II. Questions

“Okay, thanks. We all have great ideas on what makes a good parent. I want to talk more about this...”

1. *In addition to the qualities a parent has, what qualities does a successful family have?*
2. *How can a family help a parent to do his or her job as a parent?*
3. *How has your family helped you to do your job as a parent?*
4. *How has your community helped you to do your job as a parent?(probably need some prompts here as to what this question means)*
5. *Please tell me about your families in your cultural group.*

For better or worse, often one of the most significant parts of parenting is working with the child’s other parent. Some experts call this “co-parenting,” or working together to raise one’s children. We want to hear about what you think of what it means to co-parent.

I am wondering about the self-disclosure we are asking for here. Maybe we should have them think about people they know, their family members or neighbors or friends. What kind of things do they see going on related to co-parenting? I did some re-wording below but it probably needs a little more work for literacy level. Another way we could approach this is to write a case study or use one from the curriculum and have them talk about the issues or a set of questions related to it.

1. *Do you find that parenting involves working with your child's other parent to be true for yourself and those you know? Who else besides the baby's other parent do you or your friends get help from with parenting?*
2. *What are good examples that you have seen where parents helped each other with parenting? (I think we want examples here how they work together or help each other with parenting)*
3. *Do you ever find that the other parent makes parenting more difficult? If so, what examples can you share?*
4. *If a child's other parent is not working with the parent who has primary custody, tell us about why you think this situation occurred. What were the reasons from your perspective?*
5. *If you were to give advice to other parents you know about working with a co-parent, what would you tell them?*

(Break –if needed)

Even with all of these wonderful supports, parenting can be a difficult job. Let's talk together about the challenges we face as parents.

1. *What is the most difficult part of parenting for you?*
 - a. *Probe further:*
 - i. *Obstacles in self, co-parenting, parent-child relationship, and community.*
2. *How do you cope with these difficulties?*
3. *What material or financial resources are most important to you in being able to parent as well as you would like?*

One kind of resource parents have available to them is a family education program. We are interested in offering a new program for parents in our community and we would like to hear your opinions about it. First, we would like to know about your past experiences with parenting classes.

1. *Have you taken a parenting class before?*
2. *What was helpful about that class?*
3. *What was unhelpful about that class?*
4. *If you were creating a parenting class, what is the one thing you think parents need to learn about?*

Next, here is an outline of the program we are thinking of offering to parents in Saginaw or Pontiac. (Distribute outline of the CFMF program). The purpose of this program will be to strengthen the relationship between a child's parents so that they can do a better job of working together to raise their child.

1. *Would you and/or your friends be interested in a class like this? Why or why not?*
2. *Do you think the topics being offered are important for parents to know to work together? Which topic do you think is most important? Least Important?*
3. *Are there any topics that we are missing? That would be really important for parents to know in working together on parenting?*

4. *Do you think people in different situations would be interested in different topics? For example, would a couple that are no longer together need the same kind of information to parent together as couples who are married? What do you think?*

Before we end today's focus group, I want to give you chance to say anything that you might not have had a chance to say. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in the focus group. We really appreciate the information you have shared with us.

TOGETHER WE CAN
FOCUS GROUP GUIDE FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Notes to focus group leaders:

Our goals for this focus group are to learn about:

- III. Current community efforts to educate parents;
- IV. Community needs from the perspective of service providers; and
- V. How community partnerships can best be created.

Before the focus group begins, a research assistant (Erika or Grace) will obtain participants' consent and get the Informed Consent forms signed. Name cards will be given to all participants.

Turn on Tape Recorder

- III. Introduction
- 9. Introduce yourself and anyone else from the research team who is present.
- 10. Explain the purpose of the focus group: to learn more about their perspectives of their community members' needs and to obtain their guidance in beginning to meet these needs. I think we also want to disclose the purpose of the SIP project.
- 11. Give reminder: *“Your names won’t be written on any materials other than the consent form you signed. We want everyone to feel comfortable in talking today. So, it’s important that everyone keeps comments that come up in this room rather than repeating things said here to others outside of this room. Your participation in this focus group is not related to any performance evaluation, and your comments will not be directly reported to your supervisor. We will talk about findings in a group format. For example, we might say, “In general, many service providers in this community experience....”*
- 12. Let them know there are no right or wrong answers.
- 13. Explain the “rules” of focus groups, including respecting other opinions, refraining from criticism, refraining from arguing, etc.
- 14. Explain that speaking one at a time is especially important. Everything participants say is valuable, and we want to get it on tape.

15. Say, “*We have a number of areas to cover today, so please be brief, but thorough, in your responses. We’d like to take about 10 minutes or so as a group per moderator’s question.*”
 16. Icebreakers
 - a. Introduce yourself and briefly describe the program for which you work.
 - b. What is the most important resource the families with whom you work need in order to be successful?
-

IV. Questions

“Okay, thanks. We all have great ideas on what makes a family successful. Let’s talk more about that...”

6. *Knowing that families need certain things to be successful, how likely are you to see these characteristics in the families you serve?*
7. *What strengths do you tend to come across?*
8. *What are the most important resources the families you serve possess that you think can be tapped into when serving them?*

Often when serving at-risk families, we see so many challenges. Let’s talk about these...

1. *What are some challenges that you often come across?*
 - a. Probe: individual, couple, community, context, resources.
2. *What resources do you feel are most needed in your community?*

Tell us about some of the resources that are present, especially the education and programming available.

1. *What current programs are available to your families that you feel are helpful?*
2. *What current programs are available to your families that you feel are not working?*
3. *What are the obstacles programs most often face in successfully intervening?*

We are interested in developing and testing a new program for parents in your community and we would like to hear your opinions about it. One of the purposes of this focus group is to get your opinions and thoughts about this program. Here is an outline of the program we are thinking of offering to parents in Saginaw or Pontiac. (Distribute outline of the CFMF program). The purpose of this program will be to strengthen the relationship between a child’s parents so that they can do a better job of working together to raise their child. The Office of Child Support Enforcement at the federal level has funded the project. We will be especially targeting parents who are not married and would like assistance in deciding how to work together in raising their child.

1. *Would participants involved in your services or programs be interested in a class like this? Why or why not? Would you refer them to this program? Why or why not?*
2. *Do you think the topics being offered are important for parents to know in order to work together raising their children? Which topic do you think is most important? Least Important?*
3. *Are there any topics that you think are missing and need to be included? Topics that would be really important for parents to know in working together on parenting?*
4. *Do you think people in different situations would be interested in different topics? For example, would couples that are no longer together need the same kind of information to parent together as couples that are married? What do you think?*
5. *What suggestions would you have for recruiting people into the program? What agencies or organizations do we need to contact? What barriers might we encounter in getting the target audience to enroll? Do you have suggestions for overcoming these barriers?*
6. *Any other thoughts on the program you want to share?*

You have a lot of important expertise in this area. We want to know more about how we can contribute to community partnerships. Please tell us the things that are most important to you when working with new programming efforts.

Our time for the focus group is coming to a close. We want to give you the opportunity to tell us anything else you haven't had a chance to say. Is there anything else?

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. We will really appreciate your efforts and will keep you posted on how the program develops.

Appendix D. Caring for My Family - Suggested Revised Outline for the Curriculum

Lesson One: Family Connections

- Characteristics of strong families
- Intentionally creating a strong family
- Beginning a family scrap book -- The Story of Our Family

Lesson Two: Relationship Skills - Building Friendships

- Giving and receiving positive strokes
- How to listen and show empathy

Lesson Three: Relationship Skills - Managing Conflict

- Conflict as normal
- Negative cascade mechanisms
- Unhealthy patterns of communication during conflict
- Listening to non-verbal messages

Lesson Four: Part I: Managing Conflict, continued (page 44) and Part II: Money Matters (page 48)

- Defensive listening
- Techniques for managing conflict in communication
- Importance of saving for your child's future
- Ways to save money

Lesson Five: What about marriage? (page 60)

- Importance of marriage
- Personal and situational factors that lead to a healthy marriage
- How to make healthy choices about a relationship

Lesson Six: Dads are Important, Too: Effective Co-parenting (page 80)

- Importance of father involvement for child well-being
- Barriers to involving fathers
- Benefits of ways to co-parent
- Children's rights

Final Lesson: Planning the Rest of the Trip (page 114)

- Conclusion of the program
- Plan for the future

Evaluation: Where am I now? Based on the Transtheoretical Model of Change