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Healthy Relationship Skills: Innovative Approaches to Strengthening Families and Communities

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Strengthening America's Families and Communities

Achieving balance between work and family—especially within a shrinking economy—is challenging for all families, but particularly difficult for the most vulnerable Americans already struggling to meet their families' most basic needs: quality education and child care, accessible health care, food security, safe neighborhoods, and affordable housing. Because these vulnerable families often live in concentrated geographic areas, and as the current economic crisis affects more and more families in the middle class, the challenges they face in protecting their overall well being are quickly becoming collective burdens that jeopardize the stability of local communities across the country. The Obama-Biden plan for families includes several agenda items for supporting low-income and working families, and presents an overall strategy to strengthen families at home. President Obama's holistic approach proposes several economic and social policies designed to ensure that all American families can work *and* care for their children.

Implicit in this plan is the understanding that marriage, good relationship skills, and responsible fatherhood can make a real difference in (1) achieving economic self-sufficiency and security, (2) ensuring children's well-being, and (3) creating a loving, safe and supportive family environment.

> *"There's a lot of talk these days about the decline of the American family…Given this hand-wringing, it may be helpful to step back and remind ourselves that the institution of marriage isn't disappearing anytime soon…Still, there's no denying that the nature of the family has changed over the last fifty years…Whatever the effects on adults, though, these trends haven't been so good for our children…and the evidence suggests that on average, children who live with both their biological mother and father do better…"*
>
> —Senator Barack Obama
> *Audacity of Hope*

Experts assert that when families are intact and economically self-sufficient[i], (1) children and youth are less likely to drop out of school, (2) more likely to persist toward higher educational aspirations, (3) less inclined to participate in risky behaviors, and (4) tend to realize positive social and psychological outcomes.[ii] The positive influence of fathers is supported by research results that indicate children raised in homes with their fathers exhibit better developmental outcomes from an early age—and that active fathers improve child performance in language, problem solving, and adaptation to new social situations.[iii] A father's presence in a child's life and in the family has become an important lens for researchers.[iv]

Emerging evaluation data also indicate that marriage, relationship and fatherhood education services can be effective, with studies showing short-term gains in interpersonal skills and relationship quality among premarital couples.[v] Some evidence suggests improved communication and a lower likelihood of divorce five years later among married couples.[vi] It follows that, by expanding access to skills-based relationship services—together with job training and placement, medical coverage and other sufficiency services that target low-income populations—both the family and the community will be strengthened. In the words of Geoffrey Canada, "We have realized that you cannot save children without saving families and you cannot save families without rebuilding communities."[vii]

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Innovative Social Policy Needed

Historically, America's social policies have not prioritized relationship education, skills training, and the integration of domestic violence dialogues—despite the significance that cooperative parenting, healthy parent-child relationships, and non-violent relationships in general play in maintaining our country's social fabric. While significant public dollars have been, and continue to be, invested in workforce development and financial assistance for our most vulnerable families, less public investment has been made in services that teach individuals (children, youth, and adults), couples (dating and married), and parents (custodial and non-custodial) good communication, conflict-resolution, and problem-solving skills.

However, investments in healthy relationships, marriage, and responsible fatherhood will provide essential supports that further strengthen the safety net available to families. In our country's current economic crisis, these types of support will be even more important as families face increasing pressures and challenges to their well being.



Social Policy Pioneers: ACF's Healthy Marriage Education and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Grantees

> *"Strengthening marriages and relationships in low-income families has emerged as a national strategy for enhancing the well-being of children."*

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA), and Healthy Marriage Education and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grantees provide important community-based services to families. By offering voluntary programs in partnership with other key service providers (e.g., domestic violence prevention organizations, birth centers at hospitals, TANF and workforce investment agencies, faith- and community-based organizations) these grantees strengthen the safety net available to families in their communities. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) appropriated $150 million in discretionary grants each year from 2006 through 2010 to implement the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives. These demonstration programs are a part of the ACF's national strategy of enhancing child well-being by strengthening families.

The Healthy Marriage Education and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grantees build core relationship skills (e.g., communication, problem-solving, parenting, employment, and economic stability) that couples and parents (custodial and non-custodial) can use to strengthen their families. These local service providers also help establish realistic expectations about the emotional and financial responsibilities associated with healthy and stable relationships—both marital and parental—as well as promote positive attitudes and beliefs about these important relationships. Imparting knowledge about what constitutes a healthy relationship—one that is free from violence—is also a primary component of these innovative social programs. In many communities, these services may be the *only* access that residents have to positive role models of these behaviors and attitudes.

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High-school youth and college students participating in these services are also learning skills that will contribute to successful developmental outcomes. Relationship skills taught in these academic settings are expected to help young people build healthier relationships with parents, peers, teachers, employers, boyfriends, and girlfriends. In turn, healthier relationships are expected to facilitate better academic and employment outcomes. If young people have lacked parents or other adults to role model healthy relationship skills, these school-based services can provide essential supports for their transition to productive adulthood.

The following are some examples of the types of services these grantees are providing in their communities:

- A local initiative, by engaging faith communities, public institutions, and community leaders, improves access to healthy marriage education, healthy relationships, and supports to more than 3,600 Hispanic adults and 1,300 high school students.
- A statewide program that provides training and technical assistance to seven non-traditional service delivery programs targeting *non-custodial fathers*. Funds are used to reduce existing barriers to employment for low-income fathers, strengthen life skills, increase the number of fathers earning a living wage, and increase job readiness including basic GED.

Relationship skills taught in academic settings are expected to help young people have healthier relationships with parents, peers, teachers, employers, boyfriends, and girlfriends.

- A community-based collaborative that provides leadership in the development of *citywide neighborhood-based family support systems* including parent support groups and safe visitation centers.
- A national effort to provide education in *high schools* on the value of building healthy relationships skills and budgeting, resolving conflict and the benefits of marriage. They also provide marriage education skills training for non-married pregnant women and non-married expectant fathers.

Targeted Technical Assistance: Advancing the Field

The Office of Family Assistance has invested significant resources in supporting the success of the Healthy Marriage Education and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grantees. In turn, the work of these grantees is building knowledge in the field. These grantees have access to "state-of-the-art" knowledge management and information dissemination services provided through either a Federal clearinghouse or national resource center. Through the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse and the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, grantees are connected to information and resources that support successful service delivery. These clearinghouse/resource center services use the latest technology and include:

- Web site and database development
- Online libraries

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- Information, referral, and research services
- Customer call centers
- Inventory management and warehousing
- Publication development
- Communities of practice
- Outreach and conference support
- Technical assistance (e.g., webinars)

Supplementing these services is a continuum of responsive and customized technical assistance. Grantees are exposed to both content experts and peer-to-peer methods to improve their programs and advance the overall field. In addition, core performance measures have been developed and are in the process of being implemented so that results for families and communities can be tracked. Finally, these grantees also have access to a number of products and tools (e.g., reports highlighting grantee successes, web-based tools for grantees, resource binders, promising practices) that provide program support and document program results.

Shaping Social Policy and Programs to Strengthen Families and Communities

The Office of Family Assistance's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood demonstration grantees are developing critical knowledge about how to design and deliver these services in partnership with other community-based service provides. This knowledge can be harnessed and used as a foundation for informing future social policy. Although program results are still emerging, we have learned enough to know that strengthening our country's social fabric will require action steps like the following:

- Raise public awareness about the significance that healthy relationship skills play in building communities of productive citizens.
    - Launch an integrated national awareness and marketing campaign that incorporates Healthy Marriage, Relationship Education, Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Communities initiatives.
    - Inform the campaign with a multi-disciplinary perspective such that marriage, fatherhood, early childhood education, domestic violence prevention, and pregnancy prevention sectors are represented.
- Invest in accessible, community-based, culturally-competent, holistic family services that include skills-based relationship education as part of a comprehensive array of services that address the interrelated needs of couples, parents and children.
    - Establish Family Support Centers or Family Support Kiosks throughout the community that offers a range of services: skills-based relationship education, workforce development, reproductive health, domestic violence prevention, early childhood education, and housing.
    - Integrate skills-based relationship education into elementary, secondary, and post-secondary educational settings.

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  - Develop relationship education curricula that incorporate information, activities, and examples that ensure program relevance for low-income and culturally and ethnically diverse populations.

- Replicate what works by funding communities to deliver successful program models and allocate sufficient fiscal resources to support rigorous evaluation research so that social policy and programs continue to be evidence-based.
- Create opportunities for information about promising practices to be shared virtually through online communities of practice.
- Provide technical assistance to faith-based and neighborhood partnerships so that they can incorporate healthy relationship skill building into their wrap-around support initiatives.

There is much to be learned from the OFA Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood demonstration grantees. The lessons learned from this ground-breaking work can be disseminated in order to promote innovative approaches to strengthening relationships, families, and communities.

About the Authors

This paper was written by Dr. Mary M. Hyde, Ms. Cheryl L. Cook, and Dr. Jeanette M. Hercik of ICF International. Dr. Hyde, a senior project manager at ICF, is a human services expert specializing in community-based interventions designed to strengthen the most vulnerable families and communities. She has worked with Federal government agencies to manage technical assistance for organizations offering skills-based relationship education services, manage a national evaluation of an initiative designed to prevent juvenile delinquency through the reduction of childhood exposure to violence, and evaluate the implementation and impact of TANF in Maryland. Ms. Cook, a senior technical consultant at ICF, brings extensive knowledge on family strengthening policy and programs as well as experience in the area of youth development. Dr. Hercik, a vice president at ICF, is a poverty expert specializing in welfare, asset building, and workforce issues. She has worked extensively with Federal, state and local government agencies, universities, private and nonprofit entities, and community organizations to strategically plan, manage, and evaluate effective economic and community development and human service projects and programs. The authors benefited from the support and input of Ms. Kristin S. Abner, Ms. Jacqueline Schwartz and Ms. Marissa Stone of ICF, who conduct work on family self-sufficiency, human services, and community development. The views expressed in this paper and any errors are those of the authors and not necessarily those of ICF International.

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