

# In Brief

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## President Bush's Healthy Marriage Initiative and Child Abuse Prevention- A Research Review

As the Bush Administration's "compassionate conservatism" agenda evolves simultaneous to debate on key legislation impacting families, there has been widespread debate and promotion of the Healthy Marriage Initiative. Marriage promotion initiatives and commissions on marriage are forming across the country as legislation such as the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act, Child Support Enforcement Act, the Refugee Resettlement Program and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reauthorization emerge with potential healthy marriage provisions and funding.

There is no question this shift toward healthy marriage promotion holds implications for the family support field, including child abuse prevention programs. Due to the recent increase in research and dialogue on family formation and healthy marriage, this policy brief presents a range of research, sheds light on the complexities of the issues and clarifies the relevance to child abuse prevention programs.

### **Why is Healthy Marriage a Public Policy Issue?**

- One-third of all births are out-of-wedlock.
- More than 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce.
- Nearly 40 percent of all children do not live with their biological fathers.
- About 6 percent of children in married-couple families were poor in 1999 compared to more than 35 percent in single-mother families.
- Forty-three percent of unmarried women have children with multiple partners compared to 15 percent of married women (Jarchow, 2003).

### **Are Two-Parent Married Households Better For Kids?**

Research confirms that, on average, 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-, or cohabitating-parent households (White and Kaplan, 2003). When compared to children who are raised by married parents, children in other family types are more likely to achieve lower levels of education, to become teen parents, and to experience health, behavioral, and mental health problems. In addition, children in single- and cohabitating families are more likely to be poor and experience multiple living arrangements during childhood (Anderson Moore, Jekielek, and Emig, 2002). Despite these findings, however, most children not living with married, biological parents grow up without serious problems (Parke, 2003). Thus, research findings about the risks to children growing up in single parent families should not be exaggerated given that the majority of those children grow up as healthy and successful individuals.

### **Is Marriage a Panacea?**

There are many factors, beyond marital status, that negatively impact children in certain family structures. Family formation and its impact on children is complex and dependent upon multiple variables including the economic status of the family, cultural differences, the quality of the relationship between family members and the presence of risk factors that may lead to conflict or



violence in the home. To avoid oversimplification of research findings, critical questions about family formation should be explored such as:

1. To what extent can the negative outcomes of single parenthood be attributed to poverty?
2. How can the impact of a marriage vs. a healthy relationship between parents be measured?
3. How have multiple cultures in varying socio-economic conditions been researched to determine the nuances of marriage in different populations?
4. Are there consistent definitions of family types and comparison measures that can ensure greater reliability across studies on family formation?
5. How do you control for the various living arrangements children experience over the course of their childhoods?

### **The Complexity of Family Structures**

Not all non-married households are the same. Therefore, one must be cautious when comparing *all* two-parent families to *all* single-parent families. By examining data for divorced, widowed, never married, cohabiting parents, married step-parents, and same-sex couple families, research continues to examine the complexity of family structures. It is clear that different family structures yield different outcomes for children (Ooms, 2002). Therefore, the temptation to create categorical designations of family formation, i.e. married and not-married, must be curtailed. Rather, the subtleties of different family structures and their environments should be respected and understood.

#### *Effects of Divorce on Children and Family Income*

The effects of divorce on children and family income further illustrate the complexity of family structures. Divorce can negatively impact a child's development and can significantly decrease a family's financial stability. Researchers have linked divorce to academic and behavioral problems among children and to mental health problems among young adults (The State of Our Unions, 2003). Divorced families with children can experience enormous drops in income, unless there is subsequent parental cohabitation or remarriage following the marital disruption (Parke, 2003).

#### *High Conflict Marriage and Domestic Violence*

The quality of a marriage affects children. Research shows that children benefit from a low-conflict marriage. Children growing up in an intact but high-conflict marriage experience compromised emotional well-being than children whose parents are in a low-conflict marriage (Anderson Moore et al., 2003). Furthermore, the negative impact of domestic violence is well demonstrated with noted negative impacts on children's development. Therefore, it is critical that any dialogue on marriage directly address solutions for high-conflict and violent relationships.

#### *Disruption to Family Structure*

More than half of the negative education outcomes for children in single-parent families are due to living with a significantly reduced household income. Other major factors related to disruptions in family structure include the negative impact of parents separation and/or re-coupling with a step-parent; weakened connections between the child and his/her non-custodial parent and weakened connections to resources outside of the immediate family (Acs and Nelson, 2003).

Given the significant influence of divorce, conflict and the disruptions to families that can ensue, any national initiative to address marriage must craft its approach carefully and recognize the unique needs of distinct family arrangements.



### **Other Approaches to the Healthy Marriage Initiative**

Given the complexity and diversity of families, how does one think about the healthy marriage initiative? The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), offers a useful framework through which to consider the healthy marriage initiative – the “Marriage Plus Approach.” This approach offers an inclusive way to relate the healthy marriage initiative’s relevance to family structure. The first goal of this approach is to emphasize the well-being of children by aiding their growth in married healthy, two-parent families. However, the approach also recognizes that in many cases, marriage is not a feasible nor desirable option for parents. Consequently, the second goal of the approach recommends helping parents – whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried – improve communication to raise their children effectively in healthy environments.

By recognizing the importance of different family structures and putting the well-being of children first, the marriage-plus approach acknowledges the economic and non-economic supports needed to stabilize marriages and strengthen relations between parents. Of the seven elements listed in the approach, the following two elements are noteworthy for Healthy Families America, Circle of Parents and other child abuse prevention programs:

- Strengthen “fragile families” at the birth of a child. Provide services such as relationship skills, marriage education workshops, peer support groups, medical coverage and job training and placement assistance.
- Educate those who want to marry and stay married about how to have a healthy relationship and a good marriage through existing marriage education programs and augmenting family support programs with information on marriage issues (Ooms, 2002).

The marriage-plus approach realistically focuses on strengthening existing family structures instead of maligning certain family arrangements. The approach also acknowledges the role of economics in family well-being and proposes providing financial resources that support families with young children.

### **The “Magic Moment” Theory**

Another theory that has relevance to child abuse prevention programs, particularly home visitation, is the “magic moment” theory. The *Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study* has reported on the optimal “magic moment” (i.e. the prenatal period and the time shortly after the birth of the baby) when most parents are excited about their baby and optimistic about a future together. This research suggests that unmarried parents may be most receptive to marriage promotion efforts before or immediately around the time of birth of their child (Ooms, 2002). The “magic moment” theory makes a clear argument for programs that reach families early, such as Healthy Families America.

Research suggests that if the right kinds of help were offered to married and unmarried couples at these “magic moments,” perhaps some of the relationships could be stabilized. The Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. report, *Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions*, recommends introducing programs that can educate and strengthen relationships as an effective prevention strategy at this critical stage in a couple’s relationship. Likewise, the marriage-plus approach recognizes this period as a crucial time to provide services for families.



For programs such as Healthy Families America and Circle of Parents that seek to strengthen parental bonds and parent-child relationships, it will be important to monitor the landscape of marriage promotion programs, explore how marriage and relationship education may fit into one's program and discuss ways to respond to policy challenges and funding opportunities to promote marriage.

### **Additional Research Needs**

A great deal needs to be learned from how different family structure and marriage education programs affect child well-being. Areas for further exploration include (Parke, 2003):

- The relevant measures of a “healthy” or “good enough” marriage from the perspective of child well-being. How does the quality of marriage impact children?
- The ages that children are most vulnerable to negative outcomes due to changes in family structure.
- The long-term effects of family structure patterns -- for example, children who live in long-term cohabiting families vs. long-term, single-parent, unmarried families.
- How children in families from different cultural backgrounds are affected by changes in family structure.
- How children in families with lower incomes are affected by family structure.
- The demonstrated components of a program that would promote strong, stable marriages and how those programs are evaluated.

### **Conclusion**

The healthy marriage initiative is raising new questions in social policy and may greatly influence the funding of programs that work directly with challenged families. While many questions remain, it is important for child abuse prevention programs to be aware of the research on family formation, educate others on the complex issues faced by the families they serve and explore what aspects of marriage education programming might be relevant to and appropriate for their target populations.

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