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Preparing Unmarried New Parents to Make Healthy Decisions about Marriage, Father
Involvement and Family Formation

Karen Shirer, Ph.D.

Michigan State University

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D.

Auburn University

Dawn Contreras, Ph.D. and Jodi Spicer

Michigan State University

Contact Information:

Karen A. Shirer, Ph.D.

Extension Specialist and Assistant Professor

Department of Family and Child Ecology

Michigan State University

14A College of Human Ecology

East Lansing, MI 48825

517-432-8703

email: shirerk@msue.msu.edu

Abstract

About one-third of all births each year in the United States are to unmarried parents. With the increased focus on promoting healthy marriage in the pending federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families re-authorization, interest is growing in developing approaches to effectively reach this population in the area of relationship education. This paper presents key findings from the literature on the Fragile Family Research Project, and the barriers and risks that fragile families face in forming families and involving fathers, including couple violence and domestic violence. The process of planning, implementing and evaluating a pilot educational intervention for unmarried new parents on promoting family formation and father involvement in Michigan and Alabama is discussed. Recommendations for providing education to unmarried new parents who present multiple risk factors related to poverty, family dissolution and negative outcomes for their children are given.

Preparing Unmarried New Parents to Make Healthy Decisions about Marriage, Father Involvement and Family Formation

Approximately one-third of all births annually are to unmarried parents. In response, several goals of the 1996 federal welfare reform legislation focused on encouraging family formation and father involvement. To date, most states have focused their efforts on identifying the father at the birth of a child and recovering child support from the father. In 2002, the process for re-authorizing federal legislation began with a greater emphasis on promoting healthy marriage; if passed as proposed, additional funding would be available to support marriage education.

Several states, including Michigan and Alabama, have initiated educational efforts to promote family formation and father involvement targeting unmarried new parents. In Michigan, the Cooperative Extension Service developed a curriculum for local communities to provide prevention education to new mothers on cash assistance and their children's fathers. The curriculum focuses on making healthy decisions about marriage and father involvement. In 2003, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System received federal funding to implement the curriculum in four pilot sites and evaluate its effectiveness. Michigan recently began piloting the curriculum in four sites.

This paper presents key findings from the literature on the Fragile Family Research Project, and the barriers and risks that fragile families face in forming families and involving fathers, including couple violence and domestic violence. The process of planning, implementing and evaluating a pilot educational intervention for new unmarried parents on promoting family formation and father involvement in Michigan and Alabama is discussed. The paper ends with a

summary of implications for providing education to unmarried new parents who present multiple risk factors related to poverty, family dissolution and negative outcomes for their children.

The Fragile Families Research

The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study has followed a group of approximately 5,000 children from their births to age five years and their unmarried parents in 20 cities across the United States. *Fragile families* consist of children born outside of marriage whose two natural parents are working together to raise them. These low-income parents may be either living together, or have frequent visitation. The term *fragile families* is applied to emphasize the fact that these families are more vulnerable to both family and economic stress than children born to married parents. For example, by the time poor children reach adolescence, only about five percent live in fragile families where the father has remained actively involved and almost 60 percent live with their mothers only, and see their father less than weekly (McLanahan, Garfinkel and Mincy, 2001).

To date, McLanahan and colleagues (2003) have reported that at the time of their baby's birth, over 80 percent of unmarried parents were romantically involved and over 50 percent live together. Three-fourths of mothers report that there is a 50-50 chance or better that they will marry their baby's father. Eighty percent of fathers provide financial and other support during pregnancy. There is also the greater likelihood that the child will have the father's surname and that the father's name will be on the birth certificate when the father is involved.

Fragile families faced numerous barriers to forming a family, maintaining father involvement, and getting married. Although these new mothers and fathers expressed high hopes for getting married, only about 9 percent of those who were romantically involved got married by their child's first birthday and another 42 percent were no longer in any type of relationship

(Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003a). These parents' low human capital as evidenced by lack of education and job skills created a significant barrier 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 were 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 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 fears of 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. Couples did not identify barriers to marriage that are typically cited in the literature, such as, jeopardizing public assistance or having deep philosophical differences; they also did not talk about the benefits of marriage for their children. 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.

Based on the findings from the *Fragile Families Research* a number of recommendations have been made on programmatic approaches for strengthening fragile families. The first of these recommendations is to work 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. An approach that incorporates job training and placement, housing, health care, and substance abuse treatment along with life skills, parenting and couples education is recommended (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 (Ooms, 2001).

Development of a Program for Unmarried New Parents

In 2001, MSU Extension received a grant from the Michigan Family Independence Agency (MFIA) to develop a prevention program for unmarried new mothers and fathers that encouraged co-parenting, couple communication, father involvement, and family formation with the possibility of marriage. The MSU team applied a model for prevention program development initially proposed by Dumka, Roosa, Michaels, and Suh (1995) to guide curriculum development. In stage one, we defined the problem or goal that would be addressed by the curriculum by learning more about the needs and strengths of unmarried new parents, identifying the needs and interests of those who would deliver the curriculum, and determining the best ways to reach the target population. Literature on family stress and coping, unmarried parents (including the Fragile Families research), the impact of welfare reform, marriage education, and father involvement were reviewed.

The information gathered in stage one then guided the work of the second stage in which a proto-type program was designed. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with the five pilot sites in Michigan. Information was gathered about the participants in their programs, the

challenges the sites faced, and what worked and did not work in the current program. This information confirmed what was learned from the Fragile Families Study as well as provided additional information on potential participants in the program. Site staff reported that many participants did not feel deserving of marriage and that they could not achieve a healthy family and relationship. Many participants did not have role models of healthy marriage and relationships. They also reported that their child's father had children by other women, were in prison or involved in illegal activity, were incompetent caregivers, and were not marriage material. Participants were interested in learning more about financial matters, solving practical life problems, and becoming more marriage-able.

As a result of these focus groups, it was concluded that the curriculum would need to:

- Approach family formation and father involvement in an inclusive and ethnically diverse manner.
- Offer a new and different approach to premarital education designed for unmarried new parents than what is typically done for middle-class engaged couples.
- Address ethical concerns related to promoting marriage and father involvement when there were risks of abuse, neglect and other negative outcomes.
- Include the needs of more than one group. Unmarried new parents were not a homogeneous group with one set of needs.
- Be flexible and adapt to a variety of programmatic and community settings.

Based on this input and the information from the literature review, we determined that the overall goal for the program would be to help new parents build the knowledge and skills necessary to form and sustain healthy family relationships and make healthy decisions about marriage. Specific objectives focused on increasing participants' knowledge and skills about:

- Improving personal health and well-being, and other marriage-ability skills.
- Strengthening communication and other skills related to healthy relationships.

- Developing a support network and strengthening the family unit.
- Making healthy decision-making related to father involvement and marriage with one's child in mind.

Next, an evaluation logic model was developed for the program tentatively titled *Caring for my Family*. Participants would be recruited into the program and complete a pre-program questionnaire that assessed father involvement, interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy, and family strengths. Based on this assessment and their current situation, they would begin the program and tentatively choose one of four potential paths: co-parenting but no romantic relationship; co-habitation with the child's father; no relationship with father; and potential relationship but no co-habitation. Mothers were targeted in initial recruitment efforts but they were strongly encouraged to participate in the program with the child's father. Participants would learn knowledge and skills about making healthy decisions related to father involvement, co-parenting, marriage, and family strengths. During the program, they would make decisions about whether or not to involve their child's father, or to marry their child's father. Anticipated outcomes for completing the program would be increased father involvement, marital readiness, and improved family functioning.

Pilot Testing of the Curriculum

The curriculum for the *Caring for my Family* program was developed as prototype to be pilot tested with community-based programs addressing the needs of unmarried new parents. To guide curriculum development, we used the trans-theoretical model of change (Prochaska, Norcross and Diclemente, 1994), which posits that individuals move through specific stages to create and sustain change in their lives. The model as proposed by Prochaska et al (1994) describes the individual as progressing through five stages of change – pre-contemplation, contemplation, planning, action, and maintenance -- in their attempt to change an undesirable

situation or behavior. The curriculum was designed to work with new parents by identifying their level of change related to making improvements in father involvement, marital readiness, and family strengths.

The curriculum has four modules: Roadmap to a Stable Family and Involved Father; Caring for Myself; Relating to Others; and Caring for our Family. Module One – Roadmap to a Stable Family and Involved Father forms the core of the curriculum in that all participants will complete the lessons in this module. The remaining modules contain lessons that a facilitator would use to address the specific needs of participants by incorporating them into module one. The initial assessment was designed to provide critical information about what to include from these supplementary modules. The full curriculum can be found at URL:

www.fcs.msue.msu.edu/cfmf/

In 2002, through a Federal grant provided by the Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, the Family Connections in Alabama project was initiated to help low income fathers meet their child support and family responsibilities, and encourage new ways to approach unwed parents that emphasize the importance of healthy marriage to a child's well-being. The project is currently testing the *Caring for my Family* curriculum in four sites. In addition, Michigan State University is beginning the pilot test process in four sites. Both states are using a quasi-experimental design (Boruch, 1997) in which control groups are compared to those who receive the intervention on pre and post program questionnaires measuring father involvement, interpersonal relationship quality, and stage of change on father involvement, marital readiness, family strengths, and co-parenting quality.

The facilitators in the Alabama project report that participants are very responsive to program content. They initially became involved in the program because of the incentives given

but soon found they enjoyed the sessions and were learning new information. Participants reported that they liked the “hands-on” or experiential nature of the curriculum. They also related positive benefits from the program, including that they fight less with their partner and have increased social support from the group interactions. Reports on pre/post program data gathered and evidence of program effects and impact will be available in early 2004.

Implications and Lessons Learned

As a result of developing and pilot testing the *Caring for my Family* program, the authors are learning important lessons about working in the area of premarital education with “fragile families.” Federal welfare reform legislation is currently being studied and debated as re-authorization approaches in the Spring 2004; policy makers appear poised to strengthen the family formation, healthy marriage, and father involvement aspects of the legislation. There are divergent viewpoints about whether or not welfare policies for the poor should focus on these issues and, if so, what the best approach for doing this work is (Solot and Miller, 2002). However, it is clear that there will be opportunity for family life educators to work with individuals receiving TANF benefits providing programs on family development, marital readiness and father involvement.

To be effective and “do no harm,” these recommendations are put forward by the authors’ from their implementation experiences to date in this area of work for family life educators:

- Select or adapt appropriate curricula
- Proceed cautiously on promoting marriage and father involvement
- Create a helpful package of hard and soft services for couples
- Offer flexibility in delivery methods and approach

- Use incentives to promote participation in classes
- Incorporate a rigorous evaluation design

Michigan found that available premarital education curricula addressed the needs of middle class couples without children and were not appropriate for the needs of *fragile families* (Sorensen, Mincy, and Halpern, 2000). Alabama determined that instead of testing the applicability of marriage education curricula designed for white, middle-class audiences to low-income, ethnically-diverse families, the project would test the *Caring for my Family* curriculum because it was based on studies of fragile families and the barriers to family stability. This curriculum serves as a first step towards developing new interventions for premarital education that address the needs of the TANF population without placing them at greater risk for domestic violence, economic distress, and other kinds of family disruption (Edin, 2000).

Michigan and Alabama proceeded cautiously in its promotion of marriage and father involvement. Michigan found during the development phase that local human services staff were very reluctant and skeptical about promoting marriage among its clientele. Although research demonstrates that two parents who are married provide the more beneficial environment for child development. The important caveat is that this is the case under the condition of a cooperative, nurturing marital relationship. There are clearly situations in which marriage or father involvement would not be in the best interest of the child. The curriculum contains information and tools on recognizing unhealthy, abusive relationships. Alabama provided training to their site facilitators from the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Michigan is also providing training on domestic violence to their sites. In addition, both states explicitly acknowledge and expect to deal with diverse, complex family situations where marriage is not always a viable or desirable option. For these situations, information on and skills for negotiating multiple co-

parenting relationships – where one parent has children by multiple partners – and the importance of father involvement are emphasized.

Low-income, ethnically diverse families require other information, skills, and services in addition to information and skills in healthy relationships in order to comprehensively address issues of family formation, father involvement, and marriage. Both states have grounded their projects in an ecological family systems approach, which suggests addressing the broad range of issues that confront low-income families and impact family formation decisions. Efforts are being made to incorporate this new program into existing programs and services for the target population. For example, sites in both Alabama and Michigan utilize Department of Labor-sponsored work programs, parenting education, and health education programs in their project.

Flexibility and adaptability of the curriculum to a variety of delivery models and target audiences were sought during its development. The early pilot sites in Michigan reported difficulty in retaining participants in the program, and found that participants came from a variety of complex family situations. During curriculum training for Alabama sites, trainers recognized the importance of preparing facilitators not to deliver a prescribed series of lessons but to adapt the curriculum to the participants' needs. Alabama also found that there was interest among participants to attend as couples, to attend singly without their partner, and for attendance among individuals not currently in a relationship but hoping to use the information in a future relationship. To date, participants have been receptive to education on father involvement, family formation, and marriage. Alabama also reports that participants have found the learning environment non-threatening, enjoy the “hands-on” nature of the activities, and like the strengths-based approach in the curriculum. The participants also recognize that this curriculum addresses their relationship and express an understanding of the linkages among how they are

functioning as a couple, their decisions about marriage, and their child's well-being.

Incentives can become a powerful motivation to recruit and retain participants in these kinds of programs. Both Alabama and Michigan are offering monetary incentives to participants in the control and intervention groups. Alabama has found that incentives are important for getting people into the class but that they keep coming because they enjoy the sessions and found them helpful. Facilitators reported being assured that participants were using the money to benefit their families by buying items for their children.

Experimental evaluation designs, utilizing control groups, require significant resources but are critical for convincing critics and potential funders of the program's value. Evaluation of this nature requires additional funds and research expertise and support that may not be readily available in community agencies. Family life educators can partner with universities if they or the organization they work for do not have this expertise. Evaluation results will serve to information the expansion of work in this area of family life education.

Conclusion

The work in Michigan and Alabama represents a theoretically-informed and research-based approach to beginning work with fragile families on family formation and marriage issues. It is clear that efforts should be made to empower individuals through a family systems approach that addresses multiple needs and builds strengths that promote individual and family capacity. Within this programmatic context is our best hope for supporting healthy decisions about marriage and family formation among fragile families.

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