

# *Healthy Marriages, Healthy Children*



*Research on the Alignment  
of Marital Outcomes,  
Children's Psycho-Social  
Development  
and Marriage Education*



“What’s done to children, they will do to society.”

Karl Menninger, M.D.

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“Today, nearly one-third of American children are born outside marriage... More than half of the children in the United States will spend all or part of their childhood in never-formed or broken families.”

Robert E. Rector and Melissa G. Pardue. “Understanding the President’s Healthy Marriage Initiative”, Heritage Foundation, March 26, 2005.

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“Research suggests that children who grow up in healthy married, two-parent families do better on a host of outcomes than those who do not. Further, many social problems affecting children, families, and communities could be prevented if more children grew up in healthy, married families.”

[www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/factsheets\\_hm\\_matters.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/factsheets_hm_matters.html)

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“[I]ncreasing marital stability to the same level as in 1980 is associated with a decline of nearly one-half million children suspended from school, about two hundred thousand fewer children engaging in delinquency or violence, a quarter of a million fewer children receiving therapy, about a quarter of a million fewer smokers, about 80,000 fewer children thinking about suicide, and about 28,000 fewer children attempting suicide.”

Paul R. Amato. “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation.” *The Future of Children*. 2005; volume 15, number 2, pages 75-96.

Healthy Marriages, Healthy Children is a publication of  
California Healthy Marriages Coalition.  
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## Introduction

Research from across many social science disciplines draws an inescapable connection between marital outcomes and numerous interrelated consequences for the children of these relationships.

With divorces lingering at nearly 50% throughout society, and hundreds of thousands of children each year struggling with the new realities of living in a fragmented family, America's divorces generate a significant social services burden on State and Federal governments, as well as numerous problems that no amount of social services can adequately address.

The impact of marital failure on children is unfortunate and heart-wrenching. This booklet documents some of the many negative consequences for the children of divorce, consequences which no parent would wish to inflict on their child.

Fortunately, these costly byproducts of marital failure are far from being inevitable. Marriage Education presents society with a powerful and cost-effective preventive approach for helping couples form and sustain healthy marriages and healthy families. These data make clear that the mother's milk of our culture can be enriched through Marriage Education—for the betterment of our children and our whole society.





**Although the size and context of referenced studies differ, the weight of evidence supports the difference that marital outcomes make on the lives of children in the following areas...**

## **Children's Achievement in School and Beyond**

- Children from divorced homes perform more poorly in reading, spelling and math and repeat a grade more frequently than children from intact two-parent families;<sup>1</sup> Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (n = 11,519) showed children in families with their married, biological parents to have, on average, higher reading achievement scores than peers living with cohabiting parents or in stepfamilies, even when parents' education, family income and poverty status are taken into account.<sup>2</sup>
- The absence of the father lowers cognitive test scores for young children in general,<sup>3</sup> especially the math scores of daughters.<sup>4</sup> By age 13, there is an average difference of ½ year in reading abilities between children of divorced parents and those who have intact families.<sup>5</sup>
- Children from one-parent families do less well than their peers on test scores, expectations about college, grades, and school attendance;<sup>6</sup> 86% of children of divorce demonstrate lowered academic achievement.<sup>7</sup>
- Children aged 3 to 12 in families with married, biological parents performed, on average, better on a mathematical calculation test than peers in families with a biological mother and a stepfather, families with an unmarried biological mother and a cohabiting partner, or families with a biological father only.<sup>8</sup>

- Children from single-parent homes demonstrate higher rates of absenteeism and truancy, have lower achievement scores, and higher drop-out rates than those from two-parent families;<sup>9</sup> In data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (N= 6,954), in comparison with individuals from intact families, those living with divorced single parents or in stepfamilies at age 14 and (who) did not experience any (additional) changes in their family situation during late adolescence... had, on average, lower levels of education attainment, lower annual earnings, and less prestigious occupations at age 26.<sup>10</sup> Those living with divorced single parents or in stepfamilies at age 14 but (also) experienced (additional) changes in their family situation during late adolescence reported, on average, worse outcomes on college attendance, educational attainment, income, poverty status, and occupational prestige. The negative effects of living in non-intact families that experienced family transitions during late adolescence appeared to be twice as large as...those that did not undergo any (additional) family structure changes during late adolescence.”<sup>11</sup>
- French data show a link between parental separation and children’s academic achievement, regardless of other background factors; parental separation shortens the child’s total time in education by an average of 6 months to more than a year.<sup>12</sup>
- High school students from intact families “outperform those students from divorced families across all categories”, including having grade point averages (GPAs) 11% higher, and missing nearly 60% fewer class periods than those from non-intact families.<sup>13</sup>



- A review of the National Health Interview Survey of Child Health found that “children from disrupted marriages were over 70% more likely than those living with both biological parents to have been expelled or suspended.”<sup>14</sup> High school drop-out rates are much higher among children of divorced parents than among children of always-married parents;<sup>15</sup> this pattern remained even years after the divorce.<sup>16</sup>
- Numerous studies on the effects of divorce on children show lesser educational attainment as one of the long-term effects.<sup>17</sup> Single parenthood increases the risk of dropping out of high school by 150% for the average white child, 100% for the average Latino child, and 80% by the average black child; one-third of the total high school dropout rate in the U.S. may be caused by family break-ups (about 6% of the 19% total dropout rate, even higher if GEDs are excluded.)<sup>18</sup>
- Using data from both the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement Study to estimate how parents’ marital dissolution influences changes in adolescents’ mathematics course work, overall grade point average and course failure rates suggest that associations found between marital dissolution and their children’s academic achievement may be causal, regardless of data analysis methods used.<sup>19</sup>
- The college attendance rate is about 60% lower among children of divorced parents compared with children of intact families.<sup>20</sup>
- Data from a 20-year longitudinal study of Marital Instability Over the Life Course (n = 2,033) found that divorce in the first generation is associated with lower education in generations 2 and 3; having grandparents who divorced is associated with a lower level of educational attainment and a greater likelihood of marital discord. This association holds even if the grandparents’ divorce occurred before the birth of the grandchild.<sup>21</sup>





## Children's Mental and Physical Health

- Many links between marriage and better health in children and adults “have been documented in hundreds of quantitative studies covering different time periods and different countries.”<sup>22</sup>
- Children who experience a parental divorce have their life expectancy shorted by an average of four years, according to a 50-year longitudinal study—effects comparable to cigarette smoking.<sup>23</sup>
- Health effects during childhood from divorced families include a doubling of the risk of asthma and a significant increase in injury rate.<sup>24</sup>
- Numerous studies have found that approximately 10-12% of children from intact homes receive some type of mental health treatment, whereas roughly 25% of children from divorced households receive such treatment (roughly a twofold increase).<sup>25</sup>
- Swedish children growing up in non-intact families, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and psychological health of the parents, were found to be twice as likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders, diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism and drug abuse than those from intact families.<sup>26</sup>
- Girls with divorced parents are at particularly high risk for developing depressive symptoms during adolescence.<sup>27</sup>
- Studies of twins in Australia found that those who went on to divorce had children who were significantly more likely to suffer from depression, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency and thoughts of suicide. “The results of the modeling indicated that parental divorce was associated with young-adult offspring psychopathology even when controlling for genetic and common environmental factors related to the twin parent.”<sup>28</sup>



- Emotional problems associated with parental divorce that were experienced during childhood increased as young people reached young and middle adulthood.<sup>29</sup>
- A comprehensive review of research from several disciplines regarding long-term effects of divorce on children yields a growing consensus that significant numbers of children suffer for many years from psychological and social difficulties associated with continuing and/or new stresses within the postdivorce family and experience heightened anxiety in forming enduring attachments at later developmental stages including young adulthood.<sup>30</sup>
- The National Surveys of Children, a major longitudinal Federal study done in three waves, found that parental divorce was associated with higher incidence of several mental health problems in children: depression, withdrawal from friends and family; aggressive, impulsive, or hyperactive behavior; and either withdrawing from participation in the classroom or becoming disruptive.<sup>31</sup>

## Premarital Sex/Unwed Births

- The rate of virginity among teenagers at all ages is highly correlated with the presence or absence of married parents.<sup>32</sup>
- Adolescent girls who grow up apart from an intact, married household are significantly more likely to have early menstruation, premature sexuality, and a teenage pregnancy.<sup>33</sup>
- Children who grow up in single-parent homes are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and more likely to have children outside of wedlock.<sup>34</sup>

- Women raised in female-headed families are 53% likelier to have teenage marriages, 111% likelier to have teenage births, 164% likelier to have premarital births, 93% likelier to experience marital disruptions.<sup>35</sup> For white adolescent women, the number of family changes (parental divorce, remarriage, etc.) experienced during childhood and adolescence was significantly related to the likelihood of engaging in sexual intercourse. Those that reported multiple family transitions were more likely to report having engaged in non-marital sexual intercourse.<sup>36</sup>
- Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health on sexually active teens who have had at least two sexual partners (n = 1,468), male adolescents living with both biological or adoptive parents were 64% more likely to always use contraception when compared to similar males who did not live with both parents.<sup>37</sup>
- Young women ages 13-19 that have ever lived with a single, solo parent have a greater risk of having a premarital teen pregnancy than young women that have never lived with a single, solo parent.<sup>38</sup>
- Among African American adolescent females, those living with a cohabiting parent had more than three times the odds of engaging in sexual activity when compared to adolescents living with married parents. Those living with a single parent as a result of marital disruption faced 2.8 times the odds of engaging in sexual activity, relative to those living with married parents.<sup>39</sup>
- Among a sample of adolescent virgins, those who reported living with two married parents were roughly 40 percent less likely to engage in sexual activity before the follow-up interview approximately a year later than adolescents who were not living with two married parents.<sup>40</sup>
- Children of divorced parents are more likely to get pregnant and give birth outside of marriage, especially if the divorce occurred during their mid-teenage years, and are twice as likely to cohabit than children of married parents. Moreover, divorce “predisposes them to rapid initiation of sexual relationships and higher levels of marital instability.”<sup>41</sup>



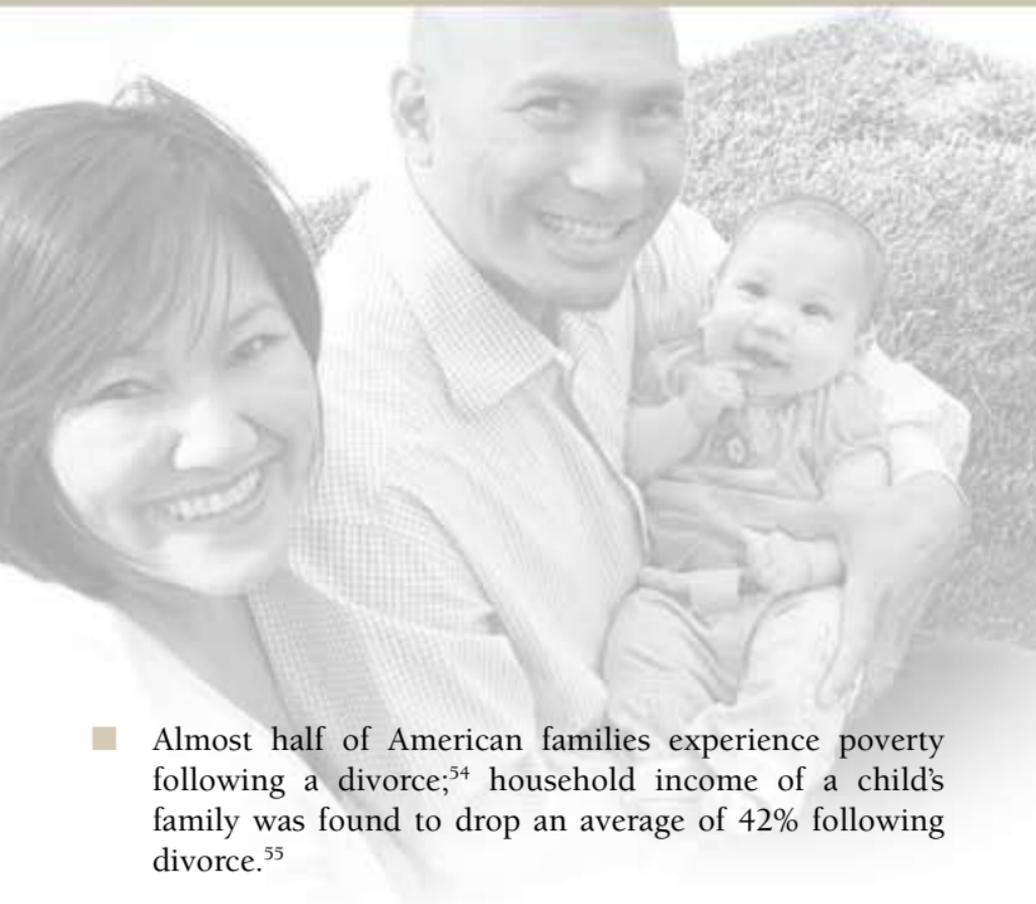
- Using a research design to separate the mechanisms responsible for the association between parental divorce and offspring well-being, researchers attribute to divorce a causal role in children's earlier initiation of sexual intercourse.<sup>42</sup>
- Among teenage boys who father an illegitimate child, twice as many come from single-parent households than from teenage boys who are from two parent families.<sup>43</sup>
- In surveying 3,828 adolescents ages 14-16, those living with their biological father and mother were 2.4 times less likely to be sexually active than those living with their mother and her cohabiting partner, and 1.7 times less likely than those living with a never married single mother.<sup>44</sup>
- Women who experience changes in their caretaking situation during childhood (e.g., parental divorce, remarriage, mother's partner moves in, etc.) are significantly more likely to have an early pregnancy. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth (n = 10,141) found that females experiencing such a childhood transition were 1.7 times more likely to have a pregnancy during adolescence, those experiencing two transitions were 3.13 times more likely to become pregnant as an adolescent, and those experiencing 3 or more transitions were 5.73 times more likely to have an adolescent pregnancy than cohorts experiencing no changes in their caretaking situation during childhood.<sup>45</sup>





## Children Living in Poverty

- Almost 50% of households with children undergoing divorce move into poverty following the divorce.<sup>46</sup>
- 40% of families on TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, formerly called Welfare) are divorced or separated single-parent households.<sup>47</sup>
- “Children raised by never-married mothers are seven times more likely to live in poverty than children raised by their biological parents in intact marriages. Overall, approximately 80% of long-term child poverty in the United States occurs among children from broken or never-formed families.”<sup>48</sup>
- Research has consistently shown that both divorce and unmarried childbearing increase the economic vulnerability of both children and mothers. The effects of family structure on poverty remain powerful, even after controlling for race and family background.<sup>49</sup>
- Some studies indicate that all of the increase in child poverty since the 1970s can be attributed to increases in single parenthood due to divorce and non-marital childbearing. When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even when controlling for race and family background.<sup>50</sup>
- The majority of children who grow up outside of intact married families experience at least one year of dire poverty;<sup>51</sup> e.g., one study found that 81% of children living in non-married households will experience poverty during the course of their childhood, compared to 22% of children living with married parents.<sup>52</sup>
- Divorce increases the likelihood that a family will become economically distressed, with single-parent families constituting more than 73% of the lowest income quintile.<sup>53</sup>



- Almost half of American families experience poverty following a divorce;<sup>54</sup> household income of a child's family was found to drop an average of 42% following divorce.<sup>55</sup>
- Because divorce leads to decreased household income and higher risk of poverty, it affects a child's level of academic achievement, which translates into lower earnings as an adult.<sup>56</sup>

## Child Abuse/Sexual Trauma

- A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk for child abuse.<sup>57</sup>
- Compared with their counterparts living with both parents, children in single-parent families had a 77% greater risk of being harmed by physical abuse, a 63% greater risk of experiencing any countable physical abuse, an 87% greater risk of being harmed by physical neglect, a 165% greater risk of experiencing any countable physical neglect, a 74% greater risk of being harmed by emotional neglect, a 64% greater risk of experiencing any countable emotional neglect; a 220% greater risk of being educationally neglected, an approximately 80% greater risk of suffering serious injury or harm from abuse or neglect, an approximately 90% greater risk of receiving moderate injury or harm as a result of child maltreatment; and a 120% greater risk of being endangered by some type of child abuse or neglect.<sup>58</sup>
- British data show that the lowest level of serious abuse occurs in the always-intact married family; stepfamily abuse levels are six times higher; always-single mother family abuse levels are 14 times higher; cohabiting family, 20 times higher, and the single-father family, 20 times higher. The most dangerous family structure is when the mother cohabits with a boyfriend who is not the father of the child, where the abuse rate was found to be 33 times greater than in the intact married family.<sup>59</sup>

- The probability of marital disruption is higher among people who during childhood have experienced physical abuse, rape or serious physical attack or assault.<sup>60</sup>
- Fatal abuse of children of all ages occurs 3x more frequently in stepfamilies than in intact married families.<sup>61</sup>
- When parents divorce, most children suffer; for some, this suffering turns into long-lasting psychological damage. Neglect of children, which can be psychologically more damaging than physical abuse,<sup>62</sup> is twice as high among separated and divorced parents.<sup>63</sup>
- Not only do higher levels of divorce accompany higher levels of child abuse, but remarriage does not reduce the level of child abuse and may even add to it.<sup>64</sup>
- The rate of sexual abuse of girls by their stepfathers is at least 6x higher,<sup>65</sup> and may be as much as 40x greater,<sup>66</sup> than sexual abuse of daughters by their biological fathers who remain in intact families.



“A meta-analysis of all divorce studies from 1960 to 2000 found that the differences between outcomes for children from intact families in comparison with those from divorced families has increased since the 1980s.”

Amato, Paul R. “Children of Divorce in the 1990s: An Update of the Amato and Keith (1991) Meta-analysis,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 15, no. 3 (2001): 355-370.





“[P]reliminary research shows that marriage education workshops can make a real difference in helping married couples stay together and in encouraging unmarried couples who are living together to form a more lasting bond. Expanding access to such services ...should be something everybody can agree on...”

Obama, Barack. 2006. *The Audacity of Hope*. New York: Three Rivers Press, p. 334.

- Children two years of age and younger are 70-100x more likely to be killed at the hands of their stepparents than by their biological parents. Infants, because of their small size, are even more vulnerable.<sup>67</sup>

## Drug and Alcohol Abuse

- Data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse show that, even after controlling for age, race, gender, and family income, teens living with both biological parents are significantly less likely to use illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.<sup>68</sup>
- Drug use in children is lowest in intact married families;<sup>68</sup> after controlling for age and gender, adolescents living in single-parent family structures were more likely to report having engaged in use of illegal drugs when compared to those living in non-divorced, two biological parent families.<sup>70</sup>
- Children whose parents marry and stay married have lower rates of substance abuse, even after controlling for family background and the genetic traits of the parents.<sup>71</sup>
- Twice as many young teens in single-mother families and stepfamilies have tried marijuana; young teens living with single fathers were three times as likely.<sup>72</sup>
- Results from nearly 20,000 students from the National Education Longitudinal Study found that children whose parents were recently divorced were more likely to drink alcohol in greater quantities more frequently and were more likely to be under the influence of alcohol while at school.<sup>73</sup>
- Children who use drugs and abuse alcohol are more likely to come from family backgrounds characterized by parental conflict and parental rejection, and because divorce increases these factors, it increases the likelihood that children will abuse alcohol and begin using drugs.<sup>74</sup>





## Crime and At-risk Youth

- A U.S. longitudinal study which tracked over 6,400 boys over a period of 20 years found that children without biological fathers in the home are roughly 3x times more likely to commit a crime that leads to incarceration than are children of intact families.<sup>75</sup>
- Juvenile incarceration rates for children of divorced parents has been found to be 12x higher than for children in two-parent families.<sup>76</sup>
- A child raised outside of an intact marriage is more likely to commit crimes as a teen and young adult. Boys reared in single-mother households and cohabitating households are approximately 2x more likely to commit a crime that leads to incarceration in comparison to children who grow up with both parents.<sup>77</sup>
- Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that even when controlling for maternal characteristics and background characteristics, adolescents aged 10-14 living with both biological parents who were continuously married exhibited lower levels of problem behavior than peers from any other family type.<sup>78</sup> Among adolescent girls, there is a strong correlation between family structure and delinquency,<sup>79</sup> hostile behavior,<sup>80</sup> drug use, larceny, skipping school,<sup>81</sup> and alcohol abuse.<sup>82</sup>
- Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (n = 10,286), researchers found that adolescents from homes with a recently divorced mother, a mother and stepfather, a single mother, or a single father reported more problem behaviors regardless of the community context.<sup>83</sup>



- The State of the Nation Report in Britain (2006) found that 70% of young offenders come from lone-parent families, and children who had grown up in lone-parent or broken families were 3-6 times more likely to have suffered abuse.<sup>84</sup>
- The proportion of adolescents born outside of marriage is linked to significant increases in homicide arrest rates for 15-19 year olds.<sup>85</sup>
- Juvenile incarceration rates for children of divorced parents have been found to be 12x higher than for children in two-parent families.<sup>86</sup>
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- The proportion of adolescents born outside of marriage is linked to significant increases in homicide arrest rates for 15-19 year olds.<sup>93</sup>

- Data from the National Longitudinal Adolescent Study of Adolescent Health (n = 13,231) showed that adolescents living with married, biological parents are less likely to exhibit delinquent behaviors such as deliberately damaging property, stealing, seriously injuring another individual, selling drugs, etc., than youths living with their mothers only, those living with their mothers and married stepfathers, or those living with their mothers and mothers' cohabiting partners.<sup>94</sup>
- Divorce is correlated with more truancy, decreased ability to form successful social relationships and solve conflicts, and more frequent involvement in crime and drug abuse. This constellation of factors increases a children's likelihood of being at-risk for gang influence and involvement.<sup>95</sup>
- High rates of family disruption and low rates of marriage were associated with high rates of murder and robbery among both African American and white adults and juveniles. "Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations in urban violence across cities in the United States."<sup>96</sup>



## Links between Marriage Education and Marital Outcomes

- A meta-analysis of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—“to reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.” Researchers conclude that “...Marriages can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship work.”<sup>97</sup>
- A meta-analysis of 20 different Marriage Education programs across 85 studies involving 3,886 couples found an average positive effect size of 0.44, indicating that the average couple participating in any one of the Marriage Education programs studied improved their behavior and quality of relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any Marriage Education program.<sup>98</sup>
- A meta-analysis of 16 studies observed meaningful program effects with regard to gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The average couple after taking the Marriage Education training was able to out-perform 83% of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.<sup>99</sup>





- A longitudinal study on a well-known Marriage Education program found that, compared with couples without the training, participating couples maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training; they also demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction, and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.<sup>100</sup>
- In a meta-analytic study on 117 studies... Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) was found to produce “significant, moderate effect sizes on two different outcomes that were commonly examined... For relationship quality, those effects range from .24 to .36. For communication skills, the effects were somewhat larger, ranging from .36 to .54. Moreover, when follow-up assessments were employed and evaluated, there was not much evidence of diminishing effects... Thus, it seems reasonable that federal and state policy makers are interested in exploring whether greater availability of MRE services can help more couples form and sustain healthy marriages.”<sup>101</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Popenoe, David. (1996). *Life Without Father: Compelling Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society*. New York: The Free Press, p. 57; Hill, M. Anne and June O'Neill, "Family Endowments and the Achievement of Young Children with Special Reference to the Underclass." *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 29 (1994), pp. 1064-1100.

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<sup>3</sup> Powell, Mary Ann and Toby L. Parcel, "Effects of Family Structure on the Earnings Attainment Process: Differences by Gender." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 59 (1997), p. 419, reporting on unpublished research by Frank Mott (1993), prepared for NIH/NICHD.

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<sup>15</sup> Archambault, op. cit., pg. 67.

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Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant: 90FE0104. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.