



DISCUSSION PAPER

Healthy Marriage, Relationship and Father Involvement Programs: Critical Partners in States' Efforts to Strengthen and Support Child Welfare Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper describes innovative, couples group education and support programs in Oklahoma and California, funded by child welfare and child abuse prevention and treatment monies, that aim to strengthen parent-couple relationships and enhance fathers' involvement in low-income families. Rigorous evaluations of these programs have documented promising results. In this discussion paper, we make the case that this approach can provide a powerful new resource to use for child welfare families across the spectrum of child welfare services. In addressing the multiple challenges of child abuse and neglect, Child Welfare agencies rely heavily on parenting programs and anger management programs, but co-parenting and father engagement interventions have generally been neglected.

Our hope is that this paper will stimulate dialogue and discussion among national and state child welfare leaders about whether and how the lessons learned in these Oklahoma and California projects could be replicated, incorporated, and adapted into new models of collaboration to be forged between child welfare, father engagement, and couples and marriage education. We believe they have the potential for helping to stabilize couples and families, reduce child abuse and neglect, and increase permanency for children.

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PART I. BACKGROUND

Strengthening Families: Two Missing Dimensions in Child Welfare Reform

Child Welfare systems around the country are striving to do a better job of meeting the complex challenges of child abuse and neglect prevention, intervention and permanency through instituting financing reforms, strengthening caseworker, foster, and adoptive parent recruitment and training, and expanding best practices and innovative services. These reform efforts include more home-visiting and Family to Family (foster to biological, kinship care) programs, parenting classes attended mostly by mothers, family group conferences and, most recently, increasing efforts to find ways to support young people aging out of foster care.

The common theme linking these separate efforts is “strengthening families” (see www.strengtheningfamilies.net). However, in our view current child welfare reform efforts generally neglect to focus on two additional but crucial dimensions of families vital to assuring long-term stability for children: promoting father engagement and creating healthy and effective co-parent/couple relationships. Paying attention to these two dimensions has the potential to considerably strengthen the full spectrum of child welfare services.

This paper describes two recent, innovative programs in two very different states—the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) and the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) program in California—both of which address these missing family dimensions using a different but complementary approach. The success of these initiatives strongly suggests that untapped resources for improving Child Welfare include strategies, tools, and practices being used in programs focused on healthy marriage and couple relationship education and father engagement. These two new program fields usually are not well known to Child Welfare and thus are briefly defined here:

- **Couples and marriage relationship education (CMRE) programs** are offered in a group education format and use research-based curricula, several of which have been well tested. Historically provided primarily to engaged or married middle-income couples, these programs have recently been successfully adapted for low-income couples and individuals.
- **Responsible fatherhood (RF)/father engagement programs** typically provide a variety of employment and child support related services, but also include men’s groups designed to enhance low-income fathers’ positive involvement with their children. Participants are generally men who have fragile and unstable relationships with their children and the mothers of their children.

These two fields have different research and historical roots, and are generally funded and implemented in separate program silos. There has been minimal sharing of perspectives, resources, or expertise among the program funders, planners, and staff who deliver these two streams of services.

Over the past decade, much has been learned across the country about how to implement effective CMRE and RF/father engagement programs. Since 2002, at first using discretionary program dollars and then funding authorized by the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Act of 2005, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has funded hundreds of healthy couple and marriage programs and responsible fatherhood programs (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2010). Rigorous evaluations including randomized controlled studies have been conducted to learn about and document what works. These and other studies, summarized in research reviews and meta-analyses, find that vulnerable families can benefit from these services in numerous ways (Hawkins & Ooms, 2009; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007; Knox, Cowan & Cowan, 2011, Cowan & Cowan, 2014).

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There are several reasons why child welfare systems have not directly addressed these two missing dimensions of family life. Social programs are funded through categorical legislation addressing a particular problem or needy type of individual or family member (“child” or “mother”), leading to a highly fragmented, uncoordinated “siloe” system of health and social services, which provide little incentive or support for holistic approaches to helping individuals or family systems as a whole.

Another reason is that fathers or father substitutes are typically viewed by child welfare as a part of the problem, and often as major perpetrators of child maltreatment. Hence, child welfare systems have not made active efforts to effectively engage men and fathers in either prevention or intervention services, whether they are resident or nonresident, biological, or substitute fathers (Scourfield, Cheung, & Macdonald, 2014).

Likewise, although the quality of the relationship between the parents is well documented as a primary risk factor for child maltreatment, child welfare programs generally have not provided services focused on improving the quality of the relationship between mothers and fathers in order to create the best possible environment for children to grow and thrive. This is undoubtedly partly because effective models of couple-based services did not exist until recently.

This situation is beginning to change. There is growing recognition within child welfare circles that in some cases fathers have the potential to be a part of the solution across the spectrum of child welfare services (Hahn, 2011). There is also growing awareness that more attention needs to be paid to strengthening the relationship between the biological, foster, and adoptive parents, and some programs are learning to do this well.

This discussion paper briefly describes two major research and demonstration efforts funded in part with child welfare monies. Conducted in Oklahoma and California, both programs aim to strengthen the co-parent/couple relationship and better engage fathers in families at risk of child maltreatment. The leaders of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative and the California-based Supporting Family Involvement (SFI) program conceived and implemented their programs independently of one another, although they share overlapping theory, goals, and evidence bases. Recently, realizing their common interests and experiences, these leaders have begun to work to create a more integrated intervention model to incorporate these two family dimensions—strengthening father engagement and the co-parent/couple relationship—in low-income families at risk of child abuse and neglect.

Our hope is that this paper will stimulate dialogue and discussion among national and state child welfare leaders about whether and how the lessons learned in these Oklahoma and California projects could be replicated, incorporated, and adapted into new models of collaboration to be forged between child welfare, father engagement, and couples and marriage education.

PART II **Two Examples of a Promising New Approach**

In this section, we first briefly describe the sponsoring projects: the innovative OMI and the SFI projects that aim in different but similar ways to strengthen the parent/couple relationship while more fully engaging fathers with their children. Then, drawing upon their experience, we discuss the following four overarching questions:

1. Why and how does strengthening marital and couple relationship stability and quality help to prevent and treat child maltreatment?
2. What are the most promising relationship education programs in Oklahoma designed to strengthen young parents' relationships and engage fathers, especially those at high risk of child maltreatment? What evidence do we have that they work?

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3. What are the goals and activities of the Supporting Father Involvement project funded by the California Office of Child Abuse Prevention? What are its outcomes?
4. What lessons for other states emerge from these experiences of the OMI and SFI? In what ways can state Child Welfare systems work in partnership with relationship education and father involvement resources to achieve their goals more effectively?

The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) which in 2015 was renamed **Project Relate Oklahoma, (PRO)** is a pioneering 12-year public health prevention effort designed to promote child wellbeing and strengthen families through addressing a major cause of family breakup and dysfunction—namely, the quality of the relationship between parents. The OMI offers free educational workshops in communities throughout the state designed to teach individuals and couples the attitudes, communication, and behavioral skills known to improve relationship quality and increase family stability, and thereby help parents work more effectively as a team. The OMI also provides more intense, customized relationship education to disadvantaged populations who are at high risk of family instability, father disengagement/absence, and parental stress and conflict. In its first decade, the OMI has served more than 300,000 adults and teens, reaching approximately 8% of the population. Rigorous evaluation of the Family Expectations program in OK City found a positive impact on family stability (20% after three years) and other positive couple relationship outcome.

Supporting Father Involvement (SFI). In 2003, the state of California realized that it was missing an opportunity to prevent child maltreatment and identify an untapped resource for child placement by failing to address the potentially positive role of custodial and non-custodial fathers. As a result, the state deployed its Supporting Father Involvement demonstration project in five counties. In SFI's first phase, it offered a free 16-week intervention in groups led by clinically trained co-leaders in which parent education and couples support was provided to 300 low-income couples from various cultural backgrounds, most of whom lived in rural areas. In its second phase, they added couples from a wider variety of cultural backgrounds. In the third phase, the program served families who were already involved in the child welfare system. Rigorous evaluation of the project, employing random assignment, has found a wide range of positive outcomes including reductions in many of the family factors associated with child maltreatment.

In the next section of this paper, we present some emerging answers to the following four questions based on the lessons learned from research and program experience of the past decade and in these two states.

1. Why and how does strengthening marital and couple relationship stability and quality help to prevent and treat child maltreatment?

There is broad agreement on the key demographic and family structure factors associated with increased risks of child maltreatment—child's age, race, poverty, single parenting, and the presence of a non-biological father in the home (Haskins & Paxon, 2009; Sedlack et al., 2010; Radhakrishna et al., 2001). While these risk factors can help identify populations for target interventions, they are not modifiable, at least not in the short run.

However, reviews of research in academic contexts (Cowan & Cowan, 2006; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000) and government reports show that there are five major psychological factors associated with child maltreatment that are more susceptible to modification (see <http://acf.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>) including:

- **Individual:** One or both parents are suffering from mental illness, depression, or substance abuse. The child has health or behavior problems, or developmental disabilities.
- **Couple/co-parent relationship quality.** The child lives in a single parent household; parents (co-parents) have unstable relationships, are engaged in domestic violence, and/or are

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unhappy with their relationship as a couple or as co-parents.

- **Family patterns** of antisocial behavior, alcohol abuse, and/or maltreatment that are transmitted across generations.
- **Harsh, punitive parenting from either parent**, unrealistic expectations for children's behavior, high parenting stress, fathers either uninvolved or punitively involved with the children.
- **Stressful family circumstances** (including low income, unemployment, inadequate housing, violent neighborhood) and social isolation (without family, friends, or connections with social institutions).

The research also shows that the relationship between the child's parents, whether they are living together, married, separated, or divorced, plays a central role either in creating conditions conducive to child abuse or neglect (Barth, 2009), or in protecting children from the risk of neglect or abuse, even when controlling for poverty, single parenthood, and other environmental factors.

How does strengthening couple relationships and engaging fathers affect child maltreatment? Evidence from hundreds of research studies indicates that the quality of the relationship between the child's parents is the central engine governing the functioning of the family system. Unresolved conflict between the parents is harmful to children's development by leaving them anxious, vigilant, and troubled in ways that reduce their curiosity, their freedom to play, and their ability to concentrate and learn.

Reducing the conflict and other signs of distress between parents and improving their communication and cooperation (whether married/remarried, cohabiting, separated, or divorced) sets in motion a cascade of positive changes in the family that result in reduced risks of child abuse and neglect. The children become more relaxed and their cognitive, emotional, and social functioning improves. Parents who have a good relationship are more able to shield their children from the stress and negative influences of living in poor and violent neighborhoods, and break the negative cycles through which maltreatment is transmitted across generations.

Additionally:

- When parents have a difficult relationship with each other, either or both partners are more likely to suffer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other forms of emotional distress.
- When parents are violent with each other, or engage in frequent, escalating, unresolved conflict, the relationship between each parent and the child is more likely to be neglectful or punitive, or both. The parents' violent behaviors provide poor models for the children as they attempt to cope with the challenges in their lives.
- Conversely, fathers and mothers who communicate well and engage in collaborative co-parenting are much more likely to be effective in guiding children and setting limits in a firm but warm manner.
- Involved positive fathering is a key component of child wellbeing and is also linked to payment of child support. Couple relationship quality is the single best predictor of whether fathers are positively involved with their children and pay child support (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010).

In summary, there is a large body of research demonstrating that interventions to strengthen couple relationships and promote positive father engagement have the potential to directly affect the risk and

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protective factors associated with child maltreatment. Fortunately, we now have strong evidence of promising interventions that work.

2. What are the most promising relationship education programs in Oklahoma designed to strengthen young parents' relationships and engage fathers, especially those at high risk of child maltreatment? What evidence do we have that they work?

Below, we describe in more detail the core components of the OMI, focusing mainly on the Oklahoma County-based Family Expectations program for lower-income new and expectant parents and its Thriving Marriages weekend retreats for foster and adoptive parents and other high-need couples.

The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI)

Launched in 1999, the OMI is the longest running, most comprehensive, and consistently innovative state marriage initiative, becoming known internationally for its strategies to address complex family needs. The OMI aims to strengthen and stabilize marriage and couple relationships and thereby improve child wellbeing statewide, making special efforts to reach out to the state's more disadvantaged and high need populations. (For more details, see the final report and briefs of the federally funded process evaluation, Dion et al., 2008, and the OMI's website, www.okmarriage.org).

The OMI trains volunteer facilitators to offer 12-hour series of weekly workshops and daylong community events free of charge to couples and individuals in counties across the state and offers customized education programs to high-need groups. The OMI's goal is to make available statewide information and skills-based education to improve couple relationships across the life span (youth, singles, dating, engaged, married, married with children, remarried, etc.). Specific objectives include helping individuals and couples make wise relationship choices, learn how to communicate well and manage conflict safely, co-parent their children, and nurture their relationships into the future. In addition, these preventive, educational services often serve as a gateway to other more specialized services that couples may need (substance abuse treatment, referrals for domestic violence services, etc.).

The OMI uses a single evidence-based skills curriculum for all its services, the widely respected Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP®) across all its activities, adapted for many different settings. PREP® is built on decades of studies about family protective and risk factors, and on the efficacy of efforts to teach relationships skills. Over the years, rigorous evaluations of PREP® have produced compelling evidence of positive results—improvements in couples' relationship satisfaction, reduced negative interaction, strengthened positive bonds, reduced likelihood of divorce, and reduced risk for domestic violence (see www.prepinc.com).

Using a public education approach and in partnership with the OMI, PREP® has been adapted and customized for high-need target groups such as new parents, fathers, high school students, TANF recipients, military couples, step-families, incarcerated men and women, and high-risk youth and business environments. To date, approximately 300,000 individuals (representing 8% of Oklahoma's population) have received at least six hours, and up to 16 hours, of relationship education. Approximately 3,500 professionals and paraprofessionals have been trained to deliver workshops.

Family Expectations (FE).

This innovative program was launched in 2006 to serve as a comprehensive family-strengthening intervention for new and expectant parents. Located in Oklahoma City, FE provides married and unmarried couples with 30 hours

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of relationship education and a variety of case management and support services. Funded primarily with federal and state TANF funds, the site-based program has served nearly 2,700 couples. In 2011, through additional funding, services related to child support and employment, and additional services for fathers were added.

FE participants are not linked officially to the Child Welfare system, but their life circumstances often put them at risk for child maltreatment. Additionally, county Child Welfare offices make preventive referrals to FE, and at times FE reaches out to Child Welfare staff to cooperatively manage challenges that present in FE families' lives.

Family Expectations was evaluated through two federal multi-site demonstration studies using randomized clinical trial designs—Building Strong Families (BSF), serving unmarried couples, and Strengthening Healthy Marriage (SHM), serving married couples. Although Family Expectations is widely touted as a premier example of a relationship strengthening program for couples, many observers have noted that one of its most striking features is the program's success in engaging low-income fathers, who have so often been difficult to recruit and retain in human service programs.

The BSF and SHM 15-month impact reports have already convincingly shown the positive impact of the FE program. Oklahoma was the only site in BSF to demonstrate positive impacts on relationship stability and quality, while a wide range of positive impacts were found across all eight sites in SHM (Devaney & Dion, 2010; Hsueh, et al., 2012, www.familiesok/research).

Of note, there were positive impacts on the relationship quality of African American unmarried parents across all BSF sites, while across all SHM sites, there were positive impacts on the relationship quality of Hispanic married couples.

Thriving Marriages Retreats

In 2004, through funding from ACF's Children's Bureau and the Office of Family Assistance, the OMI developed a first-of-its-kind partnership with OKDHS to serve foster and adoptive couples with weekend retreats designed to strengthen the couples' relationships and provide a strong foundation for their children. In subsequent years, the retreat model has been replicated for other couples who have been identified as at high-risk for marital disruption and thus family instability, including couples caring for children with disabilities, military couples, couples impacted by addiction, couples in stepfamilies, and others. In total, the OMI has delivered these services to more than 5,000 people (2,500 couples).

Many of the children cared for by these couples have unique physical, emotional, and behavioral needs requiring special support from parents and necessitating access to community resources. The varied, chronic, and often severe challenges these couples face can cause serious stress on the couples' marital relationship and negatively affect their ability to parent their children together. Weekend retreats provide an opportunity for the couples to renew their abilities to navigate their life and family stressors as a team in the company of trained leaders and other parents coping with similar challenges.

The short-term goals of the program are to:

1. Enhance participating couples' knowledge about and the importance of their parent-to-parent and parent-to-child relationships, as well as the community resources available to them.
2. Enhance couples' skills within their marital relationships, in the areas of communication, conflict resolution, recognition of danger signs, and fun and friendship.
3. Cultivate community networks among peers.

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4. Provide respite for couples confronting significant stressors.

The long-term goal specific to adoptive and foster couples is to stabilize placements and state adoptions in order to achieve permanency, ensuring that more children grow up with two happily married parents. As families are strengthened, parents are better equipped for protecting and providing the best environment for their children's development and wellbeing.

Couples attending a retreat are often overwhelmed positively by the experience. For some, it is the first weekend in years that they have spent with their spouse without their children. Of couples attending a retreat between September 2006 and September 2011:

- 90% reported making a stronger commitment to their relationship
- 80% felt better equipped to solve difficult problems in their relationship
- 75% of couples indicated they learned skills to parent their children more effectively
- 80% left the retreat aware of new resources to support themselves and their family

These data reflect exciting results, but the stories behind the numbers provide even more powerful personal testimony of couples beginning the weekend hopeless and full of stress and leaving feeling refreshed, more connected to their spouse, and armed with information about resources their families need to continue to meet the challenges of caring for their foster or adoptive children.

Most financial and program resources within Oklahoma's Child Welfare system are currently targeted toward families in which abuse and neglect have already occurred. The OKDHS/OMI partnership provides an opportunity to invest proactively in primary prevention services, addressing the risks of child maltreatment before families become involved in the Child Welfare system, while also helping the Child Welfare system maintain and support its critical supply of foster and adoptive parents, involve fathers as a resource for their children, and work with couples already engaged in the Child Welfare system.

3. What are the goals and activities of the Supporting Father Involvement project funded by the California Office of Child Abuse Prevention? What are its outcomes?

Supporting Father Involvement (SFI), California

The Supporting Father Involvement program is a parent education and couples support program built upon decades of research and testing by clinical psychologists Philip and Carolyn Pape Cowan, in collaboration with Marsha Kline Pruett and Kyle Pruett. Although the format and curriculum used differed somewhat from the Family Expectations program—placing less emphasis on teaching relationships skills and more on guided group exercises and discussion—the program goals and much of the core content are shared.

The SFI program is grounded in family systems theory and was designed to test a couples group approach to father involvement. Its original aim was to prevent high levels of stress and inadequate parenting following the birth of a child (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). SFI was later set up to test two different approaches to encouraging low-income fathers' involvement in the rearing of their children in Northern California. Using a randomized control group design, it compared the results of providing a 16-week education and support group to fathers only, to couples together, or a single 3-hour information session provided to groups of parents (a low-dose control group).

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The creation and evaluation of the program was funded over the past 12 years by the California State Office of Child Abuse Prevention. In that time, more than 800 low-income California families from various cultural backgrounds have been served—Mexican American, African American, and European American—most of whom live in rural areas of five California counties.

With state of the art research designs, assessment measures, and group interventions, clinically trained leaders, and a case manager for each family, the SFI program is the first to show that working with mothers and fathers in education and support groups is even more effective than working with fathers who participate in groups alone using the same curriculum.

The 16-week SFI groups were found to:

- Reduce parents' anxiety and depression
- Increase fathers' active, positive involvement in the care of their children
- Reduce harsh parenting and parenting stress
- Improve communication between the parents
- Reduce couples' unresolved conflict and domestic violence incidents
- Maintain partners' satisfaction as a couple and as co-parents

While both groups for couples and groups for fathers improved fathers' involvement with their children, and resulted in no increases in the children's problematic behaviors—as reported by parents in the control group—the couples groups had additional positive benefits in maintaining couple-relationship satisfaction and reducing parental stress. These positive findings resulted in the SFI program being rated as an evidence-based intervention by the California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare as well as recognition and interest from state, national, and international family researchers, agency staff, and policy makers (Cowan & Cowan et al., 2009; Cowan & Cowan et al., 2014).

The first two phases of the SFI were designed as a primary prevention for families at risk of child maltreatment but who had not had any contact with the Child Welfare system. The most recent third phase of the SFI study focused on secondary prevention in that of the newest 257 families enrolled in the program, half had been referred to the Child Welfare System because of child abuse, neglect, or domestic violence. The data from the third phase reveal that the advantages of participating in couples groups found in the first two trials extend to the Child Welfare-referred families as well. Results reveal that the SFI intervention produces positive shifts in parents' symptoms of anxiety and depression, alcohol use, parenting stress, couple conflict and violence, harsh parenting, and, notably, family income—for Mexican American, African American, and European American parents.

Armed with the positive results of the three replications obtained in this five-county study, the California Office of Child Abuse Prevention has funded Strategies, a training organization, to disseminate the study results and offer technical assistance to agencies who wish to make their organizations more father-friendly and/or to improve the quality of the parent relationships for Child Welfare families in the remaining 53 counties of California. The SFI intervention model is also currently being used in Calgary, Alberta, Canada and in five boroughs of London and Manchester in the U.K.

4. What lessons for other states emerge from these experiences of the OMI and SFI? In what ways can state Child Welfare systems work in partnership with relationship education and father involvement resources to achieve their goals more effectively?

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Together, these OK and CA programs demonstrate solid evidence of benefits to children and their parents. The program evaluations were not designed to collect data to assess direct impacts on incidence of child maltreatment, but we do know that they are effectively reducing some of the primary risk factors for child abuse and neglect—the parents' adjustment as individuals, the quality of their relationships as couples and co-parents, their parenting stress, unresolved conflict, and children's wellbeing.

Oklahoma's and California's human service systems operate in two very different political and service environments. Yet the innovative, effective relationship strengthening programs described here have core elements in common. Both use a group educational format and process to help engage fathers more actively in parenting, and at the same time help the young parents strengthen their relationship as a couple and thereby be more effective and safe parents. These demonstration programs employ strategies and tools developed in two new human service fields and integrate them effectively in the traditional field of Child Welfare. This approach has been most fully tested to date as a primary prevention strategy, but in both states it has gradually been applied to families already in the Child Welfare system and to post-adoptive services.

Next Steps

We strongly suggest that the experience in OK and CA demonstrates the potential benefits of adding a new relationship strengthening component to existing Child Welfare services that may improve their effectiveness. We thus recommend that state Child Welfare leaders consider following the example of these two pioneer states and explore what similar or new approaches might work for them. These efforts will need to focus on strengthening couple relationships and engaging fathers in so called "fragile families," and will need to further develop and rigorously evaluate co-parenting models (as discussed in a forthcoming research brief, Florsheim & Hawkins).

We list here some suggested next steps for Child Welfare officials interested in moving in this direction.

- Child welfare officials in the state could begin with an inventory of what CMRE and father involvement services exist in their state, especially any that have experience serving low-income populations. These programs may be publicly funded, or supported by private sector foundation dollars.
- Spend time getting to know these CMRE and father involvement services and providers. Explore common goals, exchange ideas about available expertise, tools and resources, and current concerns. For example, the OMI has created a very effective ongoing collaboration with the state domestic violence coalition, which has resulted in periodic staff cross training activities and the development of specific tools and protocols that are integrated into various programs.
- Identify and discuss potential system wide financial and attitudinal barriers to focusing on working on couple and co-parenting relationships and father engagement. (One of these may be concerns about how to protect against increasing the risks of domestic violence in couples-focused work.)
- Discuss strategies to move beyond these barriers and ways the federal Children's Bureau could be helpful (for example, adding incentives to program grantees to collaborate and work across traditional program silos).
- Conduct site visits to OK and CA to consider whether to adapt the OMI, FE, and SFI models to meet their states' needs. (These programs are highly manualized and technical assistance could be made available.)

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- Consider ways to adapt and expand the couple relationship and father engagement approaches used in OK and CA to those biological families already in the Child Welfare system. While this may seem more challenging, the results from the third phase of the SFI program suggest that these programs can be effective with some higher-risk families.
- Use the retreat approach to train and support existing foster and adoptive parents, providing much-needed post-placement services.
- Consider offering relationship workshops in the workplace to Child Welfare supervisors and selected front line staff to help them deal with their ongoing stress and pressures. (The OMI has pioneered a curriculum designed to give employees skills to manage change and communicate effectively about difficult issues.)

Conclusion

In this discussion paper, we have identified two key dimensions of family life that are not, in our view, being effectively addressed in current efforts to prevent and address child maltreatment, namely the relationships between the parents and between fathers and their children. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative and the California Supporting Family Involvement program, which do address these two dimensions, are proposed as offering child welfare services some new strategies and tools which, when combined with the other efforts, resources, and expertise of the Child Welfare system, can better prevent child maltreatment, provide protective services, and strengthen and stabilize foster and adoptive placements.

We maintain that partnering traditional Child Welfare approaches with these emerging CMRE and father engagement strategies will improve states' ability to effectively address risk and protective factors in order to keep children safe and promote their wellbeing.

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