



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# Using Evidence to Get Results

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**Project Relate Oklahoma (PRO)** is a pioneering, 15-year effort designed to create and sustain stable Oklahoma families. The governor of Oklahoma launched the initiative in 1999 to combat the negative consequences for children of Oklahoma's high divorce and nonmarital birth rates. Since that time, PRO has evolved into the nation's most robust, longest running statewide family strengthening effort. Directed by Oklahoma's Department of Human Services (DHS), and funded with TANF dollars and grants, PRO is managed by Public Strategies, with ongoing guidance from a national Research Advisory Group (RAG).

**Evidence is the cornerstone of PRO.** The strategic and foundational use of data and research has been critical to achieving the desired results across PRO programs. This commitment to research and data began with the establishment of a Research Advisory Group, comprised of national research and policy experts in marriage, fatherhood, family strengthening, and other issues facing low income families. Initially, RAG members partnered with Oklahoma State University to design and help interpret the findings of an initial statewide survey on marriage, relationships, and divorce in 2001. The information learned from this process helped to guide the direction, strategies, and priorities of the initiative in its formative years.

When PRO leadership determined from the survey data that Oklahomans, especially low income families, were interested in learning skills to improve their relationships, a strategy to deploy community-based workshops was developed. Continuing to align decisions with research, a single, evidence-based relationship education curriculum, the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP®), was selected for dissemination, serving as the core component of the services offered. PREP® has demonstrated the strongest evidence of effectiveness of any relationship education curricula in clinical trials and is listed on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

Impressed by the breadth and depth of PRO as a state-led strategy, the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) funded an in-depth process study of the PRO, under contract with a premier human services research firm, Mathematica Policy Research. The three-year study resulted in a summary report and seven research briefs (Dion et al. 2008) intended to inform policymakers and practitioners alike about key decisions and lessons learned from this frontrunner statewide marriage initiative, focusing on information that can be useful to other states and communities interested in strengthening marriage and relationships.

PRO offers preventive, skills-based relationship education to individuals and couples at four different levels of access and intensity. Each evidence-based service has a research and evaluation component which, as appropriate, might include: randomized controlled trials, participant surveys, qualitative in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation, and careful ongoing assessment of administrative performance data.

# Using Evidence to Get Results

## 1. Community-Based Education and Services

PRO is charged with providing access to free-of-charge and skills-based workshops to a wide variety of couples and individuals statewide through its volunteer network and staff efforts. Educational workshops are provided in numerous formats to best meet the needs of Oklahomans. PRO regularly trains professionals and paraprofessionals in the widely respected PREP curriculum to serve as facilitators for these small group workshops. Over the years, PRO has worked with PREP on adaptations of the core content for single, low income moms; other singles; military families; incarcerated adults; youthful offenders; fathers; new parents; low income married couples; faith organizations; and youth.

Another important outcome is that PRO has developed a collaborative relationship with the state domestic violence coalition (OKDVSA) to ensure that awareness and information about how to have safe respectful relationships and about domestic violence resources are shared with the public in PRO's activities and web sites.

## Results

Almost 400,000 Oklahomans have participated in at least one of the PRO workshops, with each of these individuals completing a minimum of 70% the program services offered. (Additional individuals have received smaller doses.) Over 94% of participants surveyed report learning to communicate more effectively, making a renewed commitment to their partner, and they say they would recommend the program to family or friends. In addition, over the past decade more than 4,000 Oklahomans with varying backgrounds and skills have received training to serve as workshop leaders and/or to ensure PREP is effectively disseminated through their organization. Even when they are not delivering workshops, PRO trained educators find that the way they talk about and interact in relationships, both personally and professionally, has fundamentally changed. Even though PRO does not track this aspect of their training system, many leaders embed curriculum concepts into their overall work.

The consistent deployment of PREP, and its strong, evidence-based, and rigorously tested material, gives PRO confidence that similar positive impacts are being realized by Oklahomans through the replication of PREP services.



## RESULTS

- 375,000 Oklahomans have participated
- Over 94% report improved communication, making renewed partner commitments, and recommend the program
- 4,000 Oklahomans trained to lead workshops
- PREP® couples have lower rates of divorce, a greater likelihood of maintaining relationship satisfaction, and lower levels of physical aggression
- PREP® participants have lower levels of negative communication and higher levels of positive communication

# Using Evidence to Get Results

## 2. County-Wide Education and Services for New Parents: Family Expectations (FE)

Family Expectations is an intensive education and services program for low income unmarried and married couples living in Oklahoma County who are expecting or have just had a baby. The program offers 30+ hours of relationship education to biological parents in a group format, supplemented with individualized family support and referral services. FE holds the distinction of being the only program to participate in two federal multi-site randomized clinical trials of relationship education: the Building Strong Families (BSF) and Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluations.

### Results

**Building Strong Families Results:** Within the national BSF study, Oklahoma's Family Expectations was the only one of 8 sites to show a consistent pattern of significant positive impacts on a wide range of measures. The positive effects for these couples included significant increases in relationship happiness, support, and affection, use of constructive conflict behaviors and avoidance of destructive behaviors. There was also an increase in the proportion of fathers living with and supporting their children. The high rates of participation among Family Expectations couples has been discussed by researchers as a key component of the positive impacts, as the majority of the other study sites were not able to keep couples engaged for the same number of hours.

The first few years of a child's life are critical because among other things they can help to firmly establish the relationship between the parents and their child, resulting in increased support from both parents and their families for years to come, whether the parents stay together or not. Three years after enrollment, the BSF study found a significant impact on family stability in Oklahoma, with a 20% increase in the likelihood of program couples staying together.

Given that family stability is related to so many important outcomes for children, this finding is highly significant for both the affected families and for policy makers interested in these issues. To give a sense of the potential impact, if Family Expectations were provided to all families having a baby in the United States whose birth was funded by Medicaid (approximately 1 million), the number of children living with both parents would increase by more than 80,000 annually, leading to improved child outcomes and reduced costs of public programs. In Oklahoma, 64% of live births are funded by Medicaid, which represents 34,050 children that could benefit from FE services. Additionally, many of the FE families have other children, so an impact on family stability affects even more children than those calculated by this study.



### RESULTS

#### MEASURES OF RELATIONSHIPS

- Increased happiness
- Increased support
- Increased affection
- Increased Constructive Conflict Behaviors
- Decreased Destructive Behaviors
- Increased fathers living with children

20  Relationship Stability

\*20% increase finding over a 36 month period.

# Using Evidence to Get Results

**Supporting Healthy Marriage Results.** The SHM report of the 12 month impacts found a consistent pattern of small positive effects on multiple aspects of couples' relationships across all sites. Relative to the control group, the program group showed higher levels of marital happiness, lower levels of marital distress, greater warmth and support, more positive communication, and fewer negative behaviors and emotions in their interactions with their spouses. There were slight reductions in psychological and physical abuse, as well as lower levels of adult psychological distress. These are all outcomes that have been associated with positive outcomes for children. In the 30 month report, some of the relationship quality impacts were still present. Despite the barriers to participation that many low-income families encounter, on average, couples participated in 27 of 30 total hours of intervention in the SHM project.

It is important to understand that in both of these studies, the research commenced close to the launch of the programs, so the host organizations were offering new and not seasoned services. Additionally, it was the first time the services were offered at such a large scale for primarily low income couples. Finding impacts in rigorous large scale studies like this is often difficult, even when the research involves well-established programs. The fact that these first generation programs, like Family Expectations, produced positive impacts, has policy makers taking note.

### 3. Targeted Services to High Risk Groups:

In order to meet the often complex needs of Oklahomans, PRO is consistently customizing programs and adapting services and the curriculum (in partnership with PREP) for targeted groups of individuals and couples. Program adaptations have been made for populations to include high school students, college and university students; male and female inmates; single mothers receiving government benefits, fathers, and more.

### Results

These programs have been very well received. To date, 25 correctional facilities (includes institutions, community corrections, work centers, and halfway houses), and 454 schools (in 425 independent school districts) have offered customized programs. The Prison PREP Inside and out program was offered to couples where one partner was an inmate in an Oklahoma correctional institution. From evaluation data, participants report substantial gains in all variables (e.g., relationship satisfaction, confidence, communication skills) and also reported high program satisfaction, regardless of their gender and racial/ethnic background.

Supporting  
Healthy  
Marriage

## RESULTS

### 12 MONTH IMPACTS

- Higher marital happiness
- Lower marital distress
- Greater warmth and support
- More positive communication
- Fewer negative behaviors and emotions
- Reduced psychological and physical abuse
- Lower levels of adult psychological distress

## Walking The Line RESULTS

### RELATIONSHIP PROGRAMS OFFERED TO:

- 25 correctional facilities
- 454 schools

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In addition, more than 85 weekend retreats for high-need married couples have been held since 2004 with positive comments from participants and evaluation data illustrating the positive impact on the couples' communication skills following their retreat experience. Oklahoma was the first state to offer retreat-based services to foster and adoptive couples, and the resulting evaluation data compelled the federal government to offer other states specific resources to replicate the program model as a best practice strategy.



*Thrive  
Marriages*

## RESULTS

### PARTICIPANTS REPORT SUBSTANTIAL GAINS IN:

- Relationship satisfaction
- Confidence
- Communication skills

## 4. Supportive Services Available to All Oklahomans

All Oklahoma residents now have access to general information about making wise and safe relationship choices, and creating and sustaining stable family environments through the availability of the free community workshops and through information they can access on two web sites developed and managed by PRO ([www.ProjectRelate.com](http://www.ProjectRelate.com) and [www.ForeverForReal.com](http://www.ForeverForReal.com)). In addition, PRO developed and continues to distribute 100,000 guides, Marriage OK Magazine, which is available to all couples seeking a marriage licenses via county court clerk offices across the state. This resource is also distributed free of charge through churches, counselors, and other help-seeking organizations, as well as in public forums targeting engaged couples.

In addition, PRO regularly seeks input from Oklahomans in honoring inspiring couples from around the state. This method of engagement raises the profile of what healthy marriages look like and allows the public to hear from couples who have faced numerous challenges and have accessed resources and support to keep their marriage and family a priority. This effort has resulted in full-page stories in newspapers, t.v. spots, and printed products that are distributed statewide to couples.

## Future Directions

PRO plans to continue to use its performance data and other inputs to improve, innovate, and learn better and more cost effective ways of strengthening couple relationships and stabilizing families. With the ongoing feedback and advice of its Research Advisory Group, Project Relate will also continue to positively impact families. PRO is currently testing ways to embed complementary services into its action plan and over time the expectation is that these services will also have effects on child and family health, employment outcomes, and on the broader culture of support for marriage and engagement of fathers.

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## PROJECT RELATE

In 2014, Project Relate was launched as an umbrella brand of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI), encompassing the array of services offered to couples, individuals, fathers, families and divorcing couples. These services are designed to create and nurture healthy, satisfying and long-lasting marriages and relationships. Relationship strengthening skills provided at points throughout the life cycle of a relationship provide necessary opportunities for couples and individuals to learn healthy behaviors that positively impact their lives and the lives of their families and communities. Since 2001, OMI has led the nation in providing a free, statewide marriage education system that has reached over 370,000 Oklahomans with the skills and knowledge necessary for relationship resiliency and satisfaction. Please visit [www.projectrelate.com](http://www.projectrelate.com) for more information.