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Developing Resilience and Strengthening Families



"It was the worst of times..."

The United States is in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Millions of Americans have experienced foreclosure on their homes, job loss, or had their savings compromised in a volatile market. Countless families are experiencing poverty for the first time.

Nationally, 46.2 million people live in poverty. That number represents 15% of the population and 22% of all children, according to remarks by George Sheldon, Acting Assistant Secretary, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Health and Human Services. In September, Sheldon spoke at the 2011 Northeast Family Strengthening Conference in Richmond which was co-hosted by both ACF and the Virginia Department of Social Services. Poverty rates are higher than they have been since 1993. Sheldon noted that the causes of poverty are complex but today are largely due to lack of employment.

About one in ten Virginians (768,000) lived below the federal poverty threshold in 2008, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Children in Virginia are more likely than adults to live in poverty with 13.8% of children (about one in seven) throughout the Commonwealth living below the poverty line (Virginia's Poverty Reduction Task Force, retrieved September 28, 2011). Virginia's unemployment rate has risen from 4.9 % in 2001 to 9.1 % in 2011 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 13, 2011). The rates of poverty and unemploy-

ment are expected to increase as the full effects of the recession are experienced.

The implications of economic crisis include increased mental health problems (studies cited in Bezruchka, 2009), higher incidence of domestic violence (Benson & Fox, 2004a, 2004b), higher rates of suicide (studies cited in Bezruchka, 2009), increases in child abuse and neglect (Berger et al., 2011) and higher likelihood of school drop out (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

David J. Lett, Regional Administrator in the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families for ACF's Region III, addressed a packed audience at the 2011 Northeast Family Strengthening Conference. He told the nearly 600 participants, "The challenges that face our families every day can not be overstated. Our focus must be on strengthening families. We want to help vulnerable families create lives of security, stability, and well-being."

Those in human services are seeing families and elderly who must choose between medication and food, are unable to pay utility bills, have a higher need for transportation services, and experience difficulty in affording child care. These hardships have led to an increased demand for services such as supplemental nutrition assistance, fuel assistance and housing assistance. Bill Bolling, Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, gave opening remarks at the 2011 Family Strengthening Conference. He noted that the demand for public services is increased at a time

when resources are limited. Sheldon agreed. "The demands for programs have never been greater and the resources have never been less," he stated. The current crisis underscores the need to partner with community and faith-based organizations, remarked Lett. No one agency or group can address the magnitude of the problems that America's families are facing.

In addition, Sheldon addressed the need to adjust to the painful realities of reducing budgets. "Given the fiscal uncertainties, we must be more creative and more collaborative to make the most of scarce resources. It is an opportunity to seek common ground." Sheldon also spoke about the need to streamline and to focus on asset-building. He asserted that poverty is not a matter of income, but of assets.

Resilience

Resilience in parents is the ability to manage stress and succeed in situations of challenge. It means finding ways to solve problems, knowing how to seek help when needed, and the capacity to build and sustain positive relationships (Center for Social Policy, 2011). Resilience in children can be defined as how children overcome adversity and achieve a positive developmental outcome (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The study of resilience arose from findings that there are children who flourish in the midst of adversity.

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Strengthening Families

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Resilience results from the balance between protective factors and risk factors. Risk must be reduced and protective factors strengthened. Resilience is the ability to manage challenges. It includes finding ways to solve problems, sustaining trusting relationships and knowing how to seek help when necessary (Center for Social Policy, 2011).

Rapidly expanding knowledge about early childhood development indicates the importance of early years as a foundation for later competence. Underlying children's capabilities is the developing brain. Brain development is crucial (see VCPN, volume 76). Toxic stress can actually impair healthy brain development (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008).

Children who enter school with significant problems in self-regulation, who are distrustful of adults, or who have impaired learning abilities have a substantial academic disadvantage. It is important to note that as children develop, vulnerabilities and protective systems can change. A child may have multiple risk factors but also have multiple resources (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Literature suggests that children who succeed in high-risk environments have benefits of competent parenting, adults who care about them, self-regulation skills, and high cognitive functioning (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Authoritative parenting (warm; firm; high expectations) has been associated with children's success (Kaufmann et al., 2000). These parents also convey strong educational values and monitor their children's progress. Self-regulation abilities influence both behavior and academic success. Intellectual ability is important but needs to be accompanied by positive beliefs and attitudes about achievement and learning. Competence develops in the midst of adversity when the fundamental systems that usually foster competence operate to protect the child or even counteract the threat(s) to development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Risk Factors / Protective Factors

Both risk and protective factors can be found within an individual (temperament;

chromosomal abnormality; good health; physical attractiveness) or in the environment (poverty; family violence; loving parents; strong social network). The cumulative burden of multiple risk factors is associated with greater vulnerability to poor outcomes while the cumulative buffer of multiple protective factors is associated with developmental resilience (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

There is an extensive body of research indicating that children have better outcomes when they grow up with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. The reasons for this advantage are debated. For example, analysis of data from the Fragile Families Study suggested that differences in outcomes related to family type (married versus cohabitating) were less important than family stability. Marriage versus cohabitation had little impact on outcomes if the parents were in a stable relationship. Differences in background characteristics of parents who chose marriage over cohabitation accounted for the differences in child outcomes. Findings suggested that policies seeking to improve parents' economic resources and health as well as relationship status are likely to improve child outcomes. The authors noted, however, that research shows that marriages are more stable than cohabitation and the stability is good for children (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2005, No. 33).

It is important to note that the majority of children who are raised without both biological parents in the home grow up without serious problems (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Moore, Jekielek & Emig, 2002; Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, 2010). However, children who are born to unmarried mothers are more likely to be poor, to grow up in a single-parent family, and to experience multiple living arrangements during childhood. These factors are associated with lower educational attainment and higher risk of teen and non-marital childbearing. Also, divorce is linked to academic and behavioral problems (Hughes, 2009). As a group, children who had step-parents and those who were cohabitating fared less well than children who were raised by biological parents (Acs & Nelson, 2002; studies cited in Moore et al., 2002).

Children of single parents have been found to be at higher risk of physical abuse and all types of neglect. Overall, children in single-parent families had a 120-percent (or more than two times) greater risk of being endangered by some type of child abuse or neglect. Those living with only their fathers were approximately one and two-thirds times more likely to be physically abused than those living with only their mothers (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). The relationship between parent structure and maltreatment incidence is understandable, considering the added responsibilities and stresses of

single-parenting together with the likelihood that surrounding social and practical support may be inadequate.

It is important to note that the differences in child outcome between children raised by married parents and those raised by cohabiting parents or single parents will not simply equalize due to marriage. There are differences in the characteristics between these family types. Acs and Nelson (2004) undertook a study to determine how much improvement might be expected if cohabiting couples married. They concluded that there could be modest improvements in adult and child well-being if couples who were cohabiting married.

Waldfogel et al. (2010) discuss five key pathways that underlie the links between family structure and child well-being. These are: parental resources; parental mental health; parent relationship quality; parenting quality; and father involvement. Being raised in a fragile family does not result in uniform outcomes for children. Family instability appears to matter more than family structure for cognitive and health outcomes. Overall, stable single or stable cohabiting parents have less risk of poor child outcomes than children being raised in unstable situations.

Parent Resources: Fragile families are defined as families where parents may be partners but remain unmarried. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) was undertaken in order to examine the causes and consequences of non-marital childbearing. A large nationally-representative survey was conducted between the spring of 1998 and the fall of 2000. Researchers interviewed parents of approximately 5,000 newborns in hospitals in large cities with an oversampling of unmarried parents (approximately 3,600 of the sample). Follow-up interviews were conducted when the children were approximately one, three, five, and nine years old.

Data from the FFCWS show that few mothers who give birth to children while unmarried earn enough to support themselves and their children at more than twice the federal poverty level (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). Unwed mothers face many barriers in sustaining full-time, year-round employment. Among unmarried mothers, conditions that limited earning power and were associated with higher poverty levels were: higher rates of poor health; emotional problems; substance use; younger age; experiencing domestic violence; lack of a high school diploma; limited work experience; and having three or more children.

Mothers in this study were also unable to accumulate sufficient assets to carry them through inevitable financial difficulties. For example, while about half the married-couple households in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study lived in a home that they owned, only 11% of cohabiting couples

owned a home and less than 6% of single-mother families were home owners. While public programs can lessen the economic hardship that fragile families face, the most effective programs (such as Earned Income Tax Credit) are linked to the mother's employment status. Mothers with little education or other barriers to employment can not always take advantage of some of the public social programs and services (Kalil & Ryan, 2010).

Even if single mothers could count on receiving a share of the father's earnings, this would not guarantee that they could live out of poverty. Both mothers and fathers who have children outside of marriage are relatively economically disadvantaged. In the FFCWS 25% of the unmarried fathers were not working a steady job at the time of their child's birth. Many had been incarcerated and had poor employment prospects.

Parent Mental Health: Parent mental health is an important component to children's well-being (see VCPN, Volume # 56). Single mothers and cohabiting mothers report more depression and psychological problems than married mothers (Waldfoegel et al., 2010).

Parent Relationship Quality: The quality of the relationship is also very important. A healthy marriage is necessary as children will not fare well in conflicted or violent relationships. By the 10-year mark, approximately a third of all first marriages have ended in separation or divorce (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). Divorce can be predicted by negative communication patterns, criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness. While preventative interventions for couples in committed relationships can have short-term effects that are positive, longer-lasting benefits may require interventions and support to be available over time (Moore et al., 2000). Both cohabiting mothers and single mothers report poorer relationship quality than women who are married and they report more conflict and less cooperation in parenting (McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

Parenting Quality: Children's outcomes improve when parents are warm and nurturing while children fare worse if parents are harsh, punitive, detached, or neglectful. Parents must also engage in activities that promote children's wellbeing such as arranging health care, managing meals and nutrition, arranging recreational activities, being attentive to safety, guiding academic learning, and a variety of other tasks. Single or cohabiting parents may have excellent parenting skills. However, stress may affect the quality of their parenting.

Father Involvement: While a father who is not married to the child's mother may remain involved throughout that child's lifetime, many fathers who do not live in the home diminish their involvement as children age. By age five, nearly two-fifths of chil-

Protective Factors Framework

- **Parental Resilience**

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from all types of challenges. It means finding ways to solve problems, building and sustaining trusting relationships (including relationships with one's children) and knowing how to seek help.

- **Social Connections**

Networks of social support are essential and also offer opportunities for people to give to others. Isolated families may need extra help in reaching out to build positive relationships.

- **Concrete Support in Times of Need**

Basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing and health care are essential for families to thrive. When families encounter a crisis such as domestic violence or substance abuse, adequate services and supports need to be available to provide stability and treatment so the family can manage the crisis.

- **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development**

Having accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations promotes healthy development of children. Information is most effective if it comes at the time that the parent needs it.

- **Social and Emotional Competence of Children**

Children's ability for self-regulation and communication impacts their relationships. Challenging behaviors or delayed development creates extra stress.

Source: Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011

dren of unwed parents have no regular contact with their fathers (Carlson & McLanahan, 2009, cited in Waldfoegel et al., 2010).

What Makes Families Strong?

According to the national Strengthening Families framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (2011), there are five protective factors that strengthen families. These are: parent resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; concrete support in times of need; and social and emotional competence of children. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy Marriage Initiative (2011) stresses two aspects: mutual enrichment and spousal respect. Further, a healthy marital relationship is committed to ongoing growth, the use of effective communication skills, and the use of successful conflict management skills.

Parent resilience is how a parent deals with stress. It is the ability to handle challenges that inevitably occur. Social connections are friends, family members, neighbors, and community members who can and do provide emotional support and concrete assistance. Networks of support not only offer help but provide a mechanism where parents can "give back."

Accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for chil-

dren at every age are essential to promote healthy development. Information is most effective if it comes at a time when parents need it to understand their child's development.

Meeting basic economic needs (such as shelter; food; clothing; health care) is necessary for families to function well. When families encounter crisis such as mental illness, domestic violence or substance abuse, services and support are necessary for family stability.

A child or youth's social competence and ability to self-regulate will impact family stability and relationships. Challenging behaviors or developmental delays can be taxing for parents and siblings. Early identification and intervention are crucial.

The University of Missouri Extension has offered signs of strong and healthy families:

- Families can adapt and change to cope with crisis
- Family members appreciate each other
- Family members have clear roles
- Family members are committed
- Family members communicate clearly with each other
- Family members have ties to the community
- Family members encourage each other
- Family members spend time together (University of Missouri Extension, 2004)



Strengthening Families

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Family Strengthening Strategies

First and foremost, the family is the client. Family is defined however people define it themselves (National Human Services Assembly, 2009). While the focus may be on parents, extended family, especially if the family lives together, will contribute to both the protective factors and the risk factors.

Secondly, self-determination, sometimes termed 'empowerment' or 'engagement' is essential (NHSA, 2009). To strengthen families, service workers must believe in the strength of the family and enable family members to improve their functioning.

Fatherhood Initiatives

McLanahan et al. (2010) and Cowan, Cowan and Knox (2010) note that responsible fatherhood programs are often the result of grassroots efforts and have received little involvement from the research community. Of programs that have been evaluated, few have included unmarried couples and there is a lack of consideration of whether interventions may have different effects depending upon whether the fathers are living with the mothers or apart from them. Child outcomes are rarely assessed systematically. A separate article examines some current fatherhood initiatives and prior issues of VCPN (see Volumes 71, 88, and 92) have explored service models and recent efforts. Research findings on father involvement are discussed below.

Lerman (2010) discussed several factors that influence the extent to which unwed fathers remain involved with their children. Better-educated fathers, those who most identify with the father role, and those with positive relationships with the child's mother are the most likely to sustain involvement. Some studies suggest that strong child support enforcement increases father involvement. McLanahan et al. (2010) suggest that healthy marriage initiatives and fatherhood initiatives could combine resources to increase their potency for couples that cohabitate or want to marry.

Lerman (2010) maintains that the most promising approaches to increasing respon-

sible fatherhood are ones that involve training in a work-based context linked to careers. Partnerships between workforce training agencies and industry, he claims, have proved successful in raising earnings of less-skilled men. Apprenticeship training where a salary can be earned while undergoing training is particularly attractive.

Strengthening Relationships

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the number of adults over age 18 who are married has dropped from 72% in 1960 to 52% in 2008. As a result, the percentage of children born to unmarried mothers has grown from 5% in 1960 to 41% in 2008 and children being raised by single mothers has grown from 9% in 1960 to 25% in 2008 (Pew Research, 2010).

Marriage and relationship education programs share common goals with programs advocating responsible fatherhood. Both programs aspire to improve the lives of children by strengthening the interpersonal skills of parents. Since the relationship between the mother and non-custodial father is the primary determinant for the father's involvement in the children's lives, improving communication and lowering conflict can support long-term father engagement (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center).

Healthy marriages and relationships share common characteristics. A 'healthy marriage' is a mutually enriching and satisfying relationship where both partners have a deep respect for one another. The relationship is committed to ongoing growth, the use of effective communication skills, and the use of successful conflict management techniques (U.S. Department HHS, 2010). Marriage/relationship education (MRE) teaches skills that can help individuals communicate more effectively, resolve conflict constructively, recognize healthy boundaries, and understand the concept of a healthy relationship. Emotional regulation skills are also taught in many MRE programs. Concerns about intimate partner violence must also be addressed in MRE programs. Safety strategies and available resources for victims of domestic violence must be part of the education (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center).

Studies on MRE programs offered to the general population show positive results. For example, premarital intervention in couples planning to marry prevented some of the usual decline in relationship quality 18 months to three years later (Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storacisli, 1988). Likewise, couples involved in premarital preparation showed higher levels of positive communication and lower levels of marital violence at a 5-year follow up (Markman et al., 1993).

Literature exists about the effects of MRE programs for those who are already married.

For example, a meta-analysis of 16 studies on couple communication found improvements in marital communication, although gains deteriorated substantially between the post-test and the follow up (Butler & Wampler, 1999). A meta-analysis of over 100 programs found that MRE programs significantly strengthen existing marriages (Fagan, Patterson & Rector, 2002). Another meta-analysis found that moderate-dosage programs produced larger effects than low-dosage programs (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin & Fawcett, 2008).

Programs that are effective in sustaining or enhancing relationships with married couples or those who are engaged in premarital counseling have not yet been proven to be helpful for cohabiting parents or unmarried parents. Also, Hawkins et al. (2008) note that, unfortunately, research on the effects of MRE with couples from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds is scarce. Therefore, it is impossible to make conclusions about MRE for diverse groups.

There is limited data on efforts to improve marital and couple relationships with low income partners. Lerman (2010) reviewed the literature and reported that non-experimental literature suggests that enhanced couple relationships, particularly marriage, will increase earnings of fathers because they utilize more of their capabilities.

One large-scale study of eight sites across the country (Wood et al., 2010) assigned 5,000 couples volunteering to participate randomly to either a Building Strong Families program or a control group. Data on whether the couples were more likely to stay together, get married, improve their relationship quality, improve co-parenting, or increase father involvement was collected after fifteen months. When the results were averaged, no significant results were found with two exceptions. The Oklahoma City site had positive effects on a number of outcomes, though not marriage. The Baltimore site had negative effects, including an increase in domestic violence. One site showed modest but statistically significant positive effects for relationship quality for couples where both were African-American.

Numerous variables may have contributed to the outcomes from the Building Strong Families programs, according to an analysis by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services staff (2010). Attendance was a challenge for programs, especially when the service delivery model extended more than six weeks. At the Oklahoma site, participant incentives of \$800 per couple over the program period may have been helpful and staff also received incentives for engaging and retaining participants. Mixing married and unmarried couples may have been encouraging in the Oklahoma site. In Baltimore the couples were in less committed relationships at the start of the intervention than was true for other program sites. The analysis for all sites

included couples who had dropped out and may have attended only one session rather than examining effects only for those who completed the program.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) funded demonstration grants for programs designed to strengthen existing marriages and to prepare unmarried couples for successful marriages. Collectively, 21 programs served over 7,000 couples between 2005 and 2009. The programs were not funded for rigorous evaluation and a standard template for data-gathering was not used. Qualitative data indicated positive changes in communication skills and conflict resolution skills. Some programs showed improvements in financial skills, abuse prevention skills, and relationship skills. Only two programs showed improvement in attitudes towards marriage (U.S. HHS, 2010).

Suggestions from the experience of the OFA grants are several (U.S. HHS, 2010). One is to employ broad outreach in recruiting couples. Long programs may not be suitable for fragile families who are overwhelmed. A more intense dose over a shorter period of time (such as a weekend retreat with some follow up sessions) may obtain better participation than a 10-session once-a-week offering. Offering modules that can be attended

on a one-time basis may also reach more participants. Case management help with finding and maintaining employment, referrals for various forms of assistance, life skills, and parenting resources may meet some of the basic needs of couples and improve relationship stability.

At the 2011 Northeast Family Strengthening conference, Mary Hyde, Ph.D. and Patrick J. Patterson, MSW, MPH, summarized the findings from the OFA grants. They suggested seeking partnerships with trusted community organizations and use of social media to attract participants. Location is crucial as the marriage-enhancing activities must be easily accessible. The program approach must be culturally appropriate for the intended audience. Since adults have many different learning styles, a variety of teaching methods should be used.

Public Benefits

The FFCWS data indicates that one year after a non-marital birth, 94 percent of the mothers receive some form of public assistance. Nearly a third received TANF benefits and rates of participation are higher for women who are not cohabiting with the child's father (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). Still, TANF accounts for less than 5% of the

women's total income package. The EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit) represented about 12% of net income. Thus, stable work is important as losing employment means losing both income and the tax credit.

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is the program that has evolved from Food Stamps. About half the women in the FFCWS were participating with the program and 80 %were enrolled in WIC (Women, Infants and Children). Together, WIC and SNAP comprised a larger portion of fragile families' benefits than housing assistance. About 66% received Medicaid and in the year following the baby's birth, 70% of mothers in the FFCWS received Medicaid (Kalil & Ryan, 2010).

For those who received housing assistance (more than a quarter of all unwed mothers in the year following the baby's birth), the assistance was a significant in-kind benefit. However, child care may be the most critical benefit. Without public assistance, child care can take 25% or more of a low-income family's earnings. Unmarried mothers may not be able to work at all without some sort of subsidy unless friends and family can volunteer to offer child care.

While the vast majority of unwed mothers are wage-earners, their incomes are gener-

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Fragile Families Study

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study are following a group of about 5,000 children born in large US cities between 1998 and 2000. About three-fourths of these children were born to unmarried parents. Researchers in this study refer to unmarried parents and their children as "fragile families", for they are at greater risk of dissolution and living in poverty than more traditional families.

The Fragile Families Study was designed to address four questions of interest to researchers and policy makers: What are the conditions and capabilities of unmarried parents, especially fathers? What is the nature of the relationships between unmarried parents? How do children born into fragile families fare? How do policies and environmental conditions affect families and children?

The study interviewed both mothers and fathers soon after the birth of their child and again when the child was one, two, three, five, and nine years old. The parent interviews collect information on: attitudes; relationships; parenting behavior; demographic characteristics; physical and mental health; economic and employment status; neighborhood characteristics; and program participation. The in-home interview collects information on children's cognitive and emotional development, health, and home environment.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a joint effort of Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Center for Health and Wellbeing and Columbia University's Columbia Population Research and The National Center for Children and Families. Funding is provided by grants from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD) and a consortium of private foundations and other government agencies.

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Resilient Children and Adolescents

Youth Characteristics: good intellectual functioning; appealing and sociable disposition; self-confidence; talents; faith.

Family Characteristics: close nurturing relationship to a caring adult; authoritative parenting (warmth, structure, and high expectations); connections to extended family networks.

Extra-familial Context: bonds to prosocial adults outside the family; connections to prosocial organizations; attending effective schools.

Adapted from: Masten & Coatsworth, 1998.



Strengthening Families

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ally too low to adequately support themselves and their children. They depend upon support from the fathers of their children, from friends and family, and from private support. Also, the vast majority of unwed mothers rely on public benefits. Cash assistance (such as TANF) has become less important while in-kind assistance such as SNAP, housing assistance and Medicaid has become more important. These combined resources are often insufficient to bring the family out of poverty (Kalil & Ryan, 2010).

Assisting Children of Divorce to Achieve Positive Outcomes

As social science and developmental research have become more sophisticated, a more complex understanding of factors associated with children's positive outcomes and psychological problems in the context of both marriage and divorce has emerged. For example, stress for children can predate divorce if there is an ongoing high level of conflict or violence in the marriage. For some children, the conflict will lower after separation and divorce while for others, conflict can continue or even be intensified.

For children of divorce, living in the custody of a competent, adequately functioning parent is a protective factor and is associated with positive outcomes for children. When custodial parents provide warmth, emotional support, adequate monitoring, discipline authoritatively, and maintain age-appropriate expectations, children and youth experience positive adjustment compared to those whose divorced, custodial parents are inattentive, less supportive and use coercive discipline (studies cited in Kelly & Emery, 2003).

There are potential protective benefits from appropriate parenting of noncustodial parents. The frequency of contact does not predict outcomes, however, because frequency alone will not predict the quality of the relationship. In the context of low conflict, more frequent visits support better outcomes however, where conflict is high, more frequent visits predict poorer adjustment (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Low parental conflict is the primary protective factor for children of divorce. When parents have low conflict or when they can contain and encapsulate their conflict, children can and do thrive well. When parents have continued levels of high conflict, a protective factor can be parental warmth and a positive relationship with at least one caretaker (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Interventions that are more likely to benefit children from divorced families are those that seek to contain parental conflict, promote authoritative and close relationships between children and both parents, enhance economic stability, and allow children when appropriate to have a voice in shaping access arrangements. Again, it is important to emphasize that 75 to 80 percent of children and young adults who have experienced parental divorce do not suffer from major psychological problems (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Prevention

Preventing Teenage Pregnancy

Because of the well-documented costs of non-marital births, and due to the extra risks of teen pregnancy, reducing births to

Risks for Children of Divorce

- **Parental loss-** Children may lose contact with a parent after a separation or divorce. Two to three years after divorce, about 20% of children have no contact with their fathers.
- **Economic loss-** Single parent families, as a group, have fewer economic resources. Limited resources may mean moves and disruptions.
- **More life stress-** Children may need to switch schools, move, change child care providers, and need to make new friends. Extended family contacts may be lost or changed.
- **Poor parental adjustment-** Parents may experience emotional upset or depression.
- **Exposure to conflict-** Conflict is more common in divorcing families than in intact families.
- Children of divorce are significantly more likely to have behavioral, internalizing, social, and academic problems when compared to children from continuously married families. The extent of risk for children of divorce is at least twice that of children in continuously married families.
- The risk of teen pregnancy is doubled.
- Children of divorce are two to three times more likely to drop out of school.

It is important to note that 75-80 percent of children and young adults who have experienced parental divorce do not suffer from major psychological problems. Thus, the majority of children whose parents divorced are not distinguishable from their peers whose parents remained married.

Sources: Hughes, 2009; Kelly & Emery, 2003

teenagers is one prevention focus. Many teens have a second child within two years after the first, further compounding their difficulties. Home visiting programs such as Healthy Families can support young parents and connect them with needed services. VCPN has devoted some past issues to the topic of preventing teenage pregnancy. Please refer to issues 13 and 52.

Preventing Non-marital Childbearing Between Adults

Helping couples avoid unintended pregnancies is a logical strategy for increasing the likelihood that children are born into a family with two married parents. Approximately eight in ten pregnancies to teens and never-married adults are unintended at the time of conception. Also, 63 percent of pregnancies to formerly-married adults are unintended. While there is a fair knowledge base about preventing teen pregnancies, there is limited information about pregnancy prevention for older women (Moore et al., 2002). A component of pregnancy prevention is to expand access to effective contraception for individuals who can not afford it (McLanahan et al., 2010). More information is needed about how to discourage risk-taking in young adults and how to improve the use of contraception as well as helping young adults build positive relationships. The connections between unintended pregnancy and substance abuse may be worth exploring.

Helping Unmarried Parents Marry

Nearly half of the births outside of marriage are to cohabitating couples. Most of these parents have high hopes for a future together. Marriage promotion efforts could target this population. Fathers are more highly involved around the time of the baby's birth and feel optimism about the future. The birth of a child can be seen as a 'magic moment' when both fathers and mothers can be highly motivated to work together. Marriage promotion efforts may be most successful at this time frame (Centers for Disease Control, 2002; McLanahan et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2000).

Successful efforts to increase employment and education may also indirectly promote marriage (Centers for Disease Control, 2002; Fragile Families Research Brief, July, 2004, No. 25; Moore et al., 2000). While unwed fathers who marry or cohabit with their child's mother earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more than those who do not marry or cohabit, authors caution that the act of marriage itself may account for only a small proportion of the differences between these two groups (McLanahan et al., 2010). Thus, substantial help with education and employment is likely needed as well as promotion of marriage. Improvements in urban labor markets

Benefits of Healthy Marriages

Children raised by parents in a healthy marriage are more likely to:

- Attend college.
- Have higher academic achievement.
- Have better physical health.
- Have better emotional health.
- Have a positive relationship with their parents.

Children raised by parents in a healthy marriage are less likely to:

- Attempt or commit suicide.
- Show behavioral problems in school.
- Be a victim of physical or sexual abuse.
- Have a divorce as an adult.
- Abuse alcohol or illicit drugs.
- Commit delinquent behaviors.
- Become pregnant as a teen or impregnate someone.
- Be sexually active as a teenager.
- Contract STD's.
- Be raised in poverty.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2011

would result in higher numbers of employed men who are in turn perceived as more "marriageable."



Provide Premarital Counseling

Unmarried couples who plan to marry may benefit from premarital counseling. This intervention can assist the couple in deciding whether or not to marry and help them strengthen their relationship. While research appears limited, one study of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) found that couples in the treatment groups had better marital quality than those in the control group (reported in McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

Provide Support for Transitions

Couples may be more amenable to intervention at transition times such as the birth of a baby. The Becoming a Family Program focused on the transition into parenthood. It showed positive effects on marital quality at

both the five- and the ten-year follow-up, but had no effect on marital stability. Findings from a related program (Bringing Baby Home) also showed higher marital quality at a one-year follow up (reported in McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Home-visiting Programs

Waldfogel, et al. (2010) maintain that the risk of poor child outcomes can be lowered through high quality early childhood education programs and through high-quality home visitation programs. Home visiting enhances parenting, links at-risk families to community resources, and helps prepare young children for school (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007).

Summary

Family fragmentation is costly. The Institute for American Values (2008) estimates that family fragmentation costs the American taxpayers at least \$112 billion dollars a year. Reducing these costs is a legitimate concern of government. More compelling even than the financial cost is the effect on children. Children benefit when parents form close, supportive, stable relationships. Strengthening families results in a stronger nation.

Reference List Available on the Website or by Request

THE CHANGING AMERICAN FAMILY



Family structure and children's living arrangements have changed over the last decades in the United States. Children are less likely to be raised in a home that includes both of their biological parents. Rising rates of divorce, non-marital childrearing, and cohabitation have replaced the traditional family structure.

Single-parent families caused by widowhood were the impetus in the 1930's for providing welfare and social security benefits for children. In the 1970's divorce began to replace widowhood as the primary reason for single-parent families. Divorce rates continued to increase in the 1970's and early 1980's before stabilizing and decreasing in the late 1980's and 1990's (Moore, Jekielek & Emig, 2002).

Births to unmarried women increased steadily during post-war decades, accelerating into the 1980's. The proportion of all children born to unmarried parents grew tenfold over a seventy-year time period changing from about 4% in 1940 to nearly 40 percent in 2007. The impact is greatest for African-Americans (seven of ten babies born to unmarried parents) and Hispanics (half of babies born to unmarried parents) compared to whites (one in four babies born to unmarried parents)(statistics cited in the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative and in McLanahan et al., 2010). In the early 1960's less than 1% of children lived with a never-married parent. By 2000, nearly one in ten children lived with a parent who had never married. Teens comprise less than three in ten non-marital births (Moore et al., 2002). While the teen birth rate has dropped, the rate of non-marital births for women in their 20's has continued to increase. The increase is due, in part, to the increase in cohabitation.

The retreat from marriage is correlated with education according to the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project (2010). Children of highly educated parents are now *more* likely than in the recent past to be living with both parents, while children with moderately educated parents and those of high school drop outs are increasingly being born or raised outside of marriage. The trend is placing the American Dream beyond the reach of many. The retreat from marriage makes the lives of mothers harder and drives fathers away from their children. It increases the odds that children will not finish high school, will become delinquent, become parents as teenagers, and have other poor outcomes.

The term 'fragile families' was created in the 1990's to refer to relationships outside of marriage that were not casual encounters and that resulted in childbirth. Most unmarried parents are involved in a romantic relationship at the time their child is born with approximately 51% cohabitating and another 31% involved but living apart. The term 'fragile' connotes that these relationships face greater risks than traditional marital relationships both in terms of economic security and relationship stability (studies cited in McLanahan et al., 2010).

The traditional path for young adults was to complete their educations, obtain stable employment, marry, and then have children. Today, for many couples, parenthood occurs prior to completing educational programs, precedes employment, and is outside of marriage. These young, unmarried and underemployed parents often experience the dissolution of their relationships and later have children with other partners (McLanahan et al., 2010).

Various factors have been considered as accounting for the changing structure of American families. Support for battered women has allowed many women formerly trapped in abusive marriages to divorce and establish independence. Rising male incarceration rates have reduced the pool of available men. Legal changes have made it possible for women to earn better wages and financial independence, lessening the need to marry for economic reasons. Sawhill, Thomas and Monea (2010) cite some other factors that might contribute to the rise in non-marital births: a cultural shift towards acceptance of unwed childbearing; a lack of alternatives to motherhood among disadvantaged populations; a sense of fatalism or ambivalence about pregnancy; a lack of marriageable men; limited access to contraception; inadequate knowledge about family planning; and difficulty in using contraception properly. Additionally, some mothers express a distrust of males and believe that single mothers can raise a child as well as married mothers can (McLanahan et al., 2010).

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was undertaken in order to examine the causes and consequences of non-marital childbearing. A large nationally representative survey was undertaken between the spring of 1998 and the fall of 2000. Researchers interviewed parents of approximately 5,000 newborns in hospitals in large cities with an oversampling of unmarried parents (3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents). Follow up interviews were conducted when the children were approximately one, three, five,

and nine years old.

The researchers found that at the time of the child's birth, most parents (80%) were romantically involved and hoped to marry. At the time the baby was born, 44% of the couples were living together and over 70% of the mothers rated their chances of marrying the baby's father at "50-50" or better. Years later, however, the majority were not able to establish unions or long-term cooperative parenting relationships with each other.

Five years after birth, about 16% of unmarried mothers had married (26% of those who were cohabitating at the time of the baby's birth and 7% of those who were romantically involved at the time of the birth). In total, 40% of the parents were still romantically involved (either married or living together or dating). About a third of the fathers had not seen their children in the prior month. About half of non-cohabitating fathers were seeing their child on a regular basis and 27% were providing formal child support (33% provided informal cash support). Among the single mothers, new partnerships and new children were common. Only three percent of the single mothers had never changed partners during the five-year period (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2007, No. 39; McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

There were distinct racial and ethnic differences in marriage rates among new, unwed parents. White and Hispanic parents in the Fragile Families Study were 2.5 times more likely than African-American parents to marry during the year following the baby's birth. Rates of cohabitation were also lower for the African-American families and rates of relationship breakup were higher when compared to White and Hispanic parents. An analysis found that African-American mothers had stronger "pro-marriage" attitudes than did Hispanic and White mothers. The significant reason emerging from the study for the differences in marriage rate was the shortage of "marriageable" men. For example, there were only 46 employed African-American males per 100 females in the twenty cities in the Fragile Families Study, while there were about 80 employed males per 100 females in the Hispanic and White communities. This finding suggests that improvement in urban labor markets might be a potent factor in encouraging marriages (Fragile Families Research Brief, July 2004, Number 25).

McLanahan and Beck (2010) found that the search for new partners resulted in high levels of instability for children, both in co-residential partnerships and in dating relationships lasting at least two months. Changes in dating can have indirect effects (such as less time with the children) or direct effects (if the new partner is involved with the child). The predictors of instability were low economic resources; government policies that contained 'marital penalties'; cultural norms that support single motherhood; demographic factors (such as shortages of marriageable men); and psychological factors (such as substance use) that made it difficult for parents to maintain healthy relationships. No single factor appeared to be dominant.

Poverty can be a fluid state for fragile families. Data from the Fragile Families Studies showed that about half of unmarried mothers slipped into and climbed out of poverty within a five-year period. While about 75 percent of mothers experienced at least one episode of poverty, only 29% were below the poverty line at every interview. Marrying was one method of avoiding a spell of poverty (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2008, No. 41).

Economic resources varied by race and ethnicity (Hummer & Hamilton, 2010). White mothers were more likely to have incomes above the poverty level, were more likely to own a car, were more likely to report living in a safe neighborhood, and were less likely to have children from a prior relationship. Access to private health care and access to child care followed a similar pattern. Completion of education was an exception. African-American and white mothers were equally likely to have completed high school while Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant mothers were less likely to have a diploma.

Children living with parents who are married or cohabitating have greater economic security than children living in single-parent families. There were racial and ethnic differences in the composition and stability of fragile families over time. African-American women are less likely to be in a marriage or cohabiting relationship than are white or Hispanic mothers. Over time, the differences become more pronounced with African-American mothers having the lowest rates of marriage and cohabiting and the highest breakup rates and Mexican immigrant mothers having the highest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the lowest breakup rates (McLanahan & Beck, 2010; National Survey of American Families, 2004).

The findings of the Fragile Families Study provide some support for the idea that marriage initiatives might have a positive effect on some unmarried parents. At the time the baby was born, about a third of couples appeared to have no significant barriers to marriage and they planned to marry or live together. Eighteen percent of couples were not romantically involved and did not plan to reconcile or continue their relationship.

Other couples who wanted to marry had significant barriers to marriage. At the time of the child's birth, about 21 percent of fathers were not working. About half of those were romantically involved with the mothers. Violence was more common in the couples that were unmarried and for 13 percent of the couples there was a history of violence, suggesting that marriage may not be a safe option for the woman and the child. The prevalence of mental health problems was also high among the unmarried parents. For example, the incidence of serious depression was 1.6 times as great for unmarried mothers compared to married mothers and 1.4 times as great for unmarried fathers compared to married fathers. Figures for anxiety disorder and substance abuse were also higher in the unmarried parents. All together, 23% of unmarried parents who were romantically involved had at least one parent in the couple with a mental health or substance abuse problem. In order to benefit from marriage relationship programs, these individuals will likely need treatment for mental health and/or substance abuse problems as well.

Taken together, the Fragile Families Study data suggest that almost a third of parents who are unmarried at the time of the baby's birth have no significant barriers to marriage and most of these (60%) are interested in a marriage program. Almost a third of couples are not good marriage candidates due to risk of domestic violence or due to the termination of the relationship prior to the baby's birth. The final third of couples might benefit from a marriage program if, in addition, they receive help with employment and if mental health needs are addressed (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003, No. 16).

Resources



National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

Phone: (866) 916-4672 or (866) 91-NHMRC
 Email: info@healthymarriageinfo.org
<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org>

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center is a comprehensive website for documents to help couples research topics ranging from family structure, marriage education, culture, and relationship dynamics. This website is beneficial because readers can view several opinions and documents instead of spending large amounts of time searching databases. This site also has many types of data ranging from case studies, presentations, videos, and how-to-guides.



Bringing Baby Home, John M. Gottman, PhD, Founder, Renay P. Cleary Bradley, PhD, Research Director, Emily Nackley, Program Coordinator, Allison White, Volunteer Research Assistant
 Website: <http://www.bbhonline.org/>
 Email: bbh.ct@bbhonline.org
 Phone: (206)-832-0355

The Bringing Baby Home project aims to improve the quality of life for babies and children by strengthening their families. This birth preparation program is offered to expectant couples and new parents in a variety of locations. It teaches couples how to strengthen their relationship with their partner and foster their baby's development.

PREP, Howard Markman, PhD, & Scott Stanley, PhD, Directors
 Website: <http://www.prepinc.com>
 Email: info@prepinc.com
 Phone: (303)-759-9931 or (800)-366-0166



The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is based on 30 years of research in the field of relationship health. PREP teaches marital/premarital couples the essential skills that are linked to effective marital functioning. These abilities include: conflict management; working as a team; forgiveness; speaking and listening techniques; and how to preserve and enhance fun, friendship and sensuality. The groups are led by trained facilitators.



Strengthening Families- A Subsection of the Center for the Study of Social Policy

Strengthening Families
 1575 Eye Street N.W. Suite 500
 Washington, D.C. 20005
 Phone: (202) 371-1565
 Fax: (202) 371-1472
<http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/>

The goal of this website is to allow every child to have a healthy environment, to be safe, and to be prepared to make decisions. All children should have equal opportunities in education, no matter their family background. Strengthening Families encourages family members to build strong connections with each other and encourages communities to assume an active role in helping children to make wise decisions. Topics include: parent resilience; knowledge of parenting and child development; social connections; and how to find support in times of need. The website offers many resources for parents as well as community members to learn how to make a positive impact on children's lives.



National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
 200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
 Washington, D.C. 20201
 1-877-696-6775
<http://fatherhood.gov>

The presence of a father is one of the most important relationships in a child's life. This site was formed to ensure that fathers can have guidance about how to build a connection with their child. This site encourages fathers to maintain a loving relationship with their children. Fathers can find tips on how to help their child with homework, fun activities, and how to build a strong family. Fathers can ask questions or share experiences with other dads on the blogs that are available. This website allows fathers to have a comfortable place to ask questions and bond with others and share similar experiences.

POLICY for RESULTS .org

Better results for kids and families through research-informed policy

Policy for Results- A Subsection of the Center for the Study of Social Policy

Policy For Results
 Center for the Study of Social Policy
 1575 Eye St. NW, Suite 500
 Washington, DC 20005
 Phone: (202) 371-1565
<http://www.policyforresults.org>

A successful strategy for change not only considers what behaviors to change, but determines what outcomes are desired. Policy for Results focuses on results and how to achieve them. It examines accountability, success strategies, and trends that may affect how results occur. Helpful topics that Policy for Results discusses are: preventing childhood obesity; reducing teen and unplanned pregnancies; and preventing child abuse and neglect. Strategies to help achieve goals are also explained. This website is helpful to parents who like to explore options and different strategies for raising their children.

Parent Help

1-866-826-8990
<http://www.parenthelpcenter.com>



Parent Help is a website that assists parents with raising children and teenagers. The three steps that Parent Help advises adults to take with troubled teenagers are: taking control, choosing a program, and getting financing. The website discusses what options are available to help rebuild family structures and gain order in the household. This website makes certain that families have a place to explore options in dealing with their troubled teenager. This website allows fathers to have a comfortable place to bond with other dads.

Spotlight on Hampton, Virginia The National Center for African American Marriages and Parenting

HAMPTON
UNIVERSITY



The National Center on African American Marriages and Parenting (NCAAMP) is directed by Linda Malone-Colon, PhD, and is a part of the Department of Psychology at the historically Black College – Hampton University. The NCAAMP is committed to transforming marriages, empowering parents and strengthening families in African American and other communities. Their mission is to help African Americans gain essential knowledge, skills and other resources required for building and sustaining healthy marriages and practicing effective parenting. They accomplish this goal by increasing



public awareness of the status and value of healthy African American marriages and parent-child relationships and of the importance of effective cultural and societal supports for families.

The NCAAMP aims to serve as an information resource on Black marriages and families for Black churches, the general public, practitioners and the academic community. To accomplish this goal, the NCAAMP implements the following: outreach to and collaboration with faith-based communities; outreach to and collaboration with historically Black colleges and univer-

sities; provides a National Marriage and Family Summit of influential individuals and marriage and family leaders across the political, regional, cultural and race/ethnicity spectrum; and sponsors a media campaign on African American marriages and families.

Currently, the NCAAMP is ready to launch their first major research project. This will be a comprehensive study on the quality of African American marriages. The purpose of the Quality of African American Marriages (QAAM) Research Project is to help determine factors that weaken and those that strengthen African American marital relationships through a qualitative and quantitative study of African American married couples.

For more information, contact:
Linda Malone-Colon, PhD., Executive Director of NCAAMP and Chair, Department of Psychology, MLK Building, Room 238, Hampton, VA 23668 (757) 727-5301 FAX: (757) 728-4903 Email: NCAAMP@hamptonu.edu Website: <http://www.hamptonu.edu/ncaamp/>



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Administration for Children & Families

The Healthy Marriage Initiative

The Healthy Marriage Initiative was created after Congress enforced the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. This Act allowed funding of \$150 million per year for healthy marriage promotion and father engagement. The goals of this initiative included: increasing the percentage of children raised by two parents in a happy marriage; encouraging and supporting research on healthy marriages and healthy marriage education; and increasing the percentage of premarital couples who are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage.

Research shows that being in a healthy marriage and environment not only benefits the members of the marriage, but also the children involved. For example, children raised by parents in a healthy marriage are more likely to attend college and succeed academically while being less likely to be sexually active as teenagers or to abuse alcohol or drugs.

The Healthy Marriage Initiative utilized various methods to promote healthy marriage such as through advertising, education in high school, research on benefits of healthy marriage, and divorce reduction pro-

grams that teach healthy relationship skills. The Healthy Marriage Initiative gives guidance to couples who want to gain knowledge about having and maintaining a healthy marriage and aims to reduce the risk of an unhealthy marriage and increase benefits to children, enabling them to have a brighter future.

For more information contact: Bill Coffin, Administration for Children and Families, 370 L'Enfant Promenade, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20447(202) 260-1550 E-mail: bcoffin@acf.hhs.gov Web site: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage>



Spotlight:



Virginia Department of Social Services Strengthening Families Initiative



“As the family goes, so goes the nation,” commented Governor Robert F. McDonnell in a video address to the 2011 Northeast Family Strengthening Conference on September 26th in Richmond. “Families’ lack of financial stability has an impact on both short-term and long-term outcomes for members of the household.”

Governor McDonnell noted that the child poverty rate increased 18% from 2000 to 2009, affecting approximately 2.4 million children. In Virginia, 9.9% of individuals live below the poverty line and 24.2% are under 200% of the poverty line. While Virginia ranks 39th lowest in poverty, he said, it is 6th highest in the amount of credit card debt, 19th in the rate of bankruptcy, and 33rd in home affordability compared to other states. Many families do not have the minimum savings required to survive short-term financial emergencies.

The recent economic crisis, noted Governor McDonnell, has been accompanied by increased health problems, an increased likelihood of youth dropping out of school, and increases in domestic violence and substance abuse. The government, he says, has an obligation to protect the most vulnerable citizens, both young and old, but can not be all things to all people. Therefore, he says, “People across the political spectrum are coming together to think differently about the work that we can do together.”

Hayley Mathews, project manager for the Virginia Department of Social Services’ Strengthening Families Initiative, relates that the system-wide family strengthening effort

began as the vision of Commissioner Martin D. Brown. “When he was appointed in the spring of 2010, he set a goal to strengthen families at every point of client contact with the Virginia Department of Social Services,” she explained.

Commissioner Brown, speaking to the 2011 Northeast Family Strengthening Conference, acknowledged that the economic landscape has contributed to an increased demand for public services. Commissioner Brown reported that enrollments in Medicaid and SNAP are at historic highs with 75% of participants living in fragmented families. Marriage rates continue to decrease and are almost half the rates of the 1970’s. The overall non-marital birth rate, he said, was below 10% until the 1960’s and is now at 34%. He commented that in the African-American community, the changes are more pronounced. The non-marital birth rates were around 15% until the 1960’s when it increased to 22% in 1964. Now seven out of ten (70%) births are outside of marriage.

Nationally, only 6% of two-parent families live in poverty while 36% of single parents live below the poverty line. In Virginia, said the Commissioner, 30% of all children live in a single-parent household. Despite the challenges they face, the Commissioner noted that most single parents are doing a good job of raising their children. The question is how can social services help and are the efforts effective.

Virginia’s Strengthening Families Initiative is focusing on three main goals:

- Reducing non-marital births;

- Connecting and reconnecting fathers with their children; and
- Encouraging the formation and maintenance of safe, stable, intact two-parent families.

The Strengthening Families Initiative focuses on a holistic approach to improve the ways in which services are delivered to individuals and families. It requires a fundamental shift regarding how systems work with families. Through the alignment of resources, policies, and processes, and through the implementation of specific strategies, VDSS will impact the well-being of the families served by strengthening them at every point of contact.

VDSS has launched the Strengthening Families Initiative because of changes in the composition of families in the Commonwealth and the nation and record high case-loads. Over the past fifty years, social and cultural forces have led to drastic changes related to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, childbearing and childrearing, mentioned earlier. Marriage rates have dropped, unmarried births are rising, and more couples are cohabiting. For first marriages, 33% end in separation or divorce within ten years (Centers for Disease Control, 2011).

Research (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1993) indicates that children who are raised in intact, two-parent families with both biological parents show better outcomes as a group on a range of variables compared to children with single parents. Children with single parents are at greater risk of dropping out of school, con-

ceiving a child as a teenager, becoming a juvenile delinquent, living in poverty, and experiencing health, emotional and behavioral problems. While single-parent homes are not the only factor in negative outcomes, family structure has an impact on the well-being of children.

“We are in the business of helping people,” notes Mathews. “Since the structure of the American family is changing, we are examining how to realign our policies and programs to better support families. This effort is aimed at supporting all families.”

Following Commissioner Brown’s appointment, he gathered select stakeholders from the local, state, and federal level to discuss the direction of the initiative. During that same time, he reorganized the Department around several key functions and appointed Paul D. McWhinney, Deputy Commissioner for Programs, to lead the Strengthening Families Initiative. Shortly thereafter, a steering committee was established, staffed with key managers and Department leaders to provide oversight and guidance.

VDSS has adopted several strategies to reach the initiative goals. They have developed a practice model that sets forth standards of practice and serves as a value framework. The practice model is meant to guide thinking and decision-making across all areas of the Department. In addition, the Department has also established ten outcome measures related to the three goals of the initiative, and is developing process measures, and benchmarks relevant to the work of VDSS that are aligned with the val-

ues outlined in the practice model. For example, the Department hopes to observe a decrease in non-marital birth rates.

“We don’t want to inadvertently create disincentives for families to be together or stay together,” notes Mathews. As a result, policies and processes across all VDSS divisions are currently being evaluated and revised as necessary to align with the goals of the initiative. The Department is identifying opportunities to streamline and maximize Department resources through performance-based contracting, waivers, and reallocation of funds. The Department is also providing grants to local communities to implement family-strengthening practices related to fatherhood involvement, parenting, healthy relationships and marriage and plans to develop a comprehensive marketing campaign to share information with various target audiences. In addition, they plan to develop strategic partnerships with various community partners to garner support.

Mathews comments, “There is a tremendous amount of national momentum underway around responsible fatherhood, healthy marriage and relationships, and asset development. Our federal partners have been supportive of the initiative since discussions began in 2010 and are working with the Department to develop ways to integrate best practice strategies across different program areas. For example, we want to utilize asset development strategies and give families tools to improve their financial knowledge so they can become financially independent.” While the programs and services that the Department plans to improve are not

new, system-wide attention regarding how families are structured and how services are delivered is expected to improve program effectiveness across the entire Department.

Governor McDonnell summarized the initiative in his address to the participants at the Family Strengthening conference, saying that Commissioner Martin Brown was leading Virginia’s social services system to think creatively and to develop and deploy innovative strategies to strengthen youth, children, and families. “Partnerships with individuals in businesses and faith communities will help support families in times of need,” he said. Virginia’s efforts are part of a national momentum to strengthen families through supporting responsible fatherhood, healthy marriages and relationships and financial security.

With nearly 600 participants in attendance from local, state, and federal levels and over fourteen different states, Governor McDonnell applauded conference attendees and their commitment to improving child and family well-being. He concluded, “Personal responsibility and accountability, economic independence, community health, and the meaningful involvement of both parents in the lives of their children are absolutely critical to the success of this country.”

The Virginia Department of Social Services website has more information on the Strengthening Families Initiative. Interested readers can find additional information at: <http://www.dss.virginia.gov/about/sfi/>



Spotlight: Poverty in Virginia

Virginia’s Poverty Reduction Task Force was initiated because of the Commonwealth’s keen interest in advancing strategies to lessen the burden of poverty for over 750,000 Virginians and buffer thousands more who live on the economic margins. The Task Force formed in 2009 and worked throughout the year evaluating ideas and recommendations. Task Force members numbered 31 and had diverse professional backgrounds and strong expertise in a variety of disciplines. Additionally, over 1,200 citizens participated in public input sessions and through the Task Force website survey. The Task Force issued a summary report that is available on the Virginia Department of Social Services website.

More than ten percent of Virginians live below the poverty level. They are highly concentrated in inner cities and among the

Commonwealth’s southern and southwest borders with growing clusters in suburban areas. The projection of analysts is that poverty will increase over the next several years. Improvements in financial status overall are not expected until around 2022.

Virginia’s most vulnerable populations are children (13.8% poverty rate), persons over age 85 (27% poverty rate) and persons with disabilities (19% poverty rate). Factors that most influence the risk for poverty are educational attainment, household type, and the number of full-time employment incomes in the household. Children are more likely to live in poverty because parents of young children tend to be younger than other adults and have less work experience and earn lower wages.

There are different measures of poverty. The Task Force Report notes that the official

poverty rate is often lower than alternative poverty thresholds. Alternative methods address flaws such as underestimates of basic living costs and ignoring the public dollars and government assistance (such as Medicaid; Food Stamps; SNAP). Beyond income, economic deprivation may involve lack of access to health care, lack of quality education, lack of labor market opportunities, and neighborhood quality.

The poverty rate of the Commonwealth does not indicate the degree to which poverty can be highly concentrated, either by geography or personal characteristics. In Virginia, counties and cities in the southern part of the Commonwealth have the highest poverty rates, especially in southwest, Southside, and the Eastern Shore. Northern counties near Washington, D.C. have lower



Poverty in Virginia

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poverty rates. Rural areas have higher rates (14.9%) than averages elsewhere in the Commonwealth (9.1%). Even so, since most of Virginia's population lives in urban and suburban areas, nearly 80% of those in poverty live in urban and suburban areas as well. Within localities, poverty rates can vary tremendously. For example, some areas in the city of Richmond have poverty rates of 1 or 2% while other neighborhoods only miles away have rates between 50% and 73%. Children born to poor parents in high-poverty neighborhoods have higher odds of remaining in poverty.

As is true for the nation, poverty rates in Virginia are higher for children, less-educated adults, African-Americans, Hispanics, female-headed families, and families with no working adults. Those with less than a high school education have poverty rates that are twice that of high school graduates and five times higher than those with some college courses. Adults with disabilities are twice as likely to be poor compared to their non-disabled peers.

The strongest predictors of poverty are marital status and work status. Married families with children in Virginia have a 4% poverty rate compared to a 60% poverty rate for families headed by a single female. Among female-headed families, having an adult who is working reduces the probability of being poor from 60% to 18%. The combination of work and marital status is particularly potent as married families with at least one adult working have a poverty rate of only 2%.

Who is the "typical" Virginian who is poor? That person, says the report, is a white female head of household who is ages 25 to 34, who has less than a high school education, who works, and who has children.

Poverty exists in older Virginians as well. The poverty rate for those 85 and older (who may have spent down their savings) is twice as high (27%) as those who are 65 to 84 (11%). Men are less likely to be poor. For those ages 65 to 84, males have a 7% poverty rate while the rate for women is 13%. For those 85 and older, 32% of women and 18% of men live in poverty. Women's longevity means they live longer than their spouses as a group and there is often a loss of income when the spouse dies. Women are less likely to have an earnings history that qualifies them for the maximum social secu-

rity benefits. The number and proportion of Virginians over age 65 is expected to grow rapidly over the next 20 years because of the "baby booms" in the 1950's and 1960's. A decline in coverage by benefits pensions and a higher retirement age for social security will mean that more individuals will need to work past age 65.

Reducing Poverty

According to the report, clear evidence exists that:

- Quality pre-school programs improve educational outcomes and increase later earnings;
- The Food Stamp program (now SNAP) reduces hunger;
- Work incentives can increase income.

The primary paths out of poverty are education, work, and living in a household with more than one full-time income. Preschool interventions may have a higher return than interventions later in life, since skills must build upon prior skills. For example, neighborhood poverty can affect the quality of schools which depend on local funding.

Virginia's System of Supports

Virginia's unemployment rate is consistently lower than the national average. The Commonwealth has one of the most restrictive unemployment insurance programs in the nation (Virginia ranks 26th nationally). Only 26% of unemployed persons qualify. Virginia is also known for its exceptional educational system, with one of the best public university systems. The community college system is also a cornerstone in innovative workforce development.

Safety net programs greatly reduce the numbers of people in poverty. Programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, SNAP, and SSI are estimated to lift 284,000 people from poverty annually. For those who still remain below the poverty line, the safety net greatly decreases the severity of poverty. Official poverty rates (based on cash income) may not reflect the positive benefits of safety net programs.

Goals for Poverty Reduction

- **Increase Opportunities for Future Economic Security by Investing in Children and Their Education.** Every effort should be made to ensure that all children have the opportunity to benefit from high quality early childhood education. Increasing supports for at-risk students could increase high school graduation rates.
- **Enhance Workforce Readiness by Expanding Access to Career Development programs and Employment Supports.** A skilled workforce is critical to economic prosperity. Adults with high

school completion credentials are more than 50% less likely to live in poverty. Subsidized child care can help adults to take advantage of work and training opportunities. Expanded ESL services can help eliminate language as a barrier to employment. Evidence-based prisoner re-entry programs can increase successful re-integration into the community.

- **Enhance Family Financial Resources by Increasing Returns on Work and Promoting Family Savings and Diversified Asset Accumulation.** Strategies include lowering the tax burden, offering high-quality financial education, and encouraging participation in savings and asset development programs. The Earned Income Tax Credit has benefitted approximately 500,000 households resulting in \$1 billion in tax credits or nearly \$2,000 for each participating household. Individual Development Accounts enable low-income individuals to save and build assets by matching \$2 for every \$1 saved.
- **Expand Safety-Net Opportunities for Families in Crisis.** Part of this effort is increasing public awareness of assistance programs by promoting Virginia's 211 Information and Referral system.

Source: Virginia's Poverty Reduction Task Force Report

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

Hayley Mathews

Kate M. Jaeger

Anne Yeoman



Asset Management and Antipoverty Strategies

“With income we get by, but with financial assets we get ahead,” declared Rita Bowen, Region II Consultant for the ASSET Initiative. “Those who escape poverty do so through saving and investing for the long-term,” she adds.

Poverty status depends on the number of working adults in a household, their hours of work and wage rates, and the number of people they need to support. Poverty rates have remained “stubbornly high” in the last decades (Cancian, Meyer & Reed, 2010). Single parents are at a disadvantage and women, as a group, have lower compensation than men. Some families qualify for Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The earned income tax credit (EITC) is a source of income for low-income families as well.

Even if they work full-time, many single parents, especially those with high school degrees or less, will not be able to support their families (Cancian et al., 2010). Families with young children require child care which can be expensive. Employer-sponsored health care benefits are important for many but low-wage earners are less likely to have health care as a benefit.

Financial and property assets are the tools to helping low-income families become self-sufficient. Assets will promote family stability and stability enhances family and child well-being. Families with assets or savings can meet an unexpected expense or weather a layoff. Assets can help pay for education or manage emergencies (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007).

Child support can be an important component of supporting children. However, only 41% of poor single mothers due child support receive the full amount that the courts have ordered and 31 percent receive nothing at all. Low income and poor health are two of the most important factors in lack of payment of child support. Even so, enforcing the responsibility of nonresident fathers to provide for children and providing the supports needed for them to work and meet these obligations is one component of an anti-poverty strategy (Cancian et al., 2010).

Other assets that can help families avoid poverty are less tangible. Literacy, skills desired by employers, reliable transportation, and a positive credit history can improve a family’s chances of financial stability (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007).

Strategies

People with the fewest economic resources have the smallest margin of error in managing their money and assets. Therefore, budgeting and financial education are necessary tools for low-income individuals. Bowen notes that good credit can triple an individual’s income. Homeowners have children who are more successful than those who lack home ownership and home owners experience less domestic violence. Youth who have their own savings accounts are 4 to 7 times more likely to attend college when compared to youth with no savings.

Financial Education

In order to set financial goals and progress towards them, families must understand basic financial concepts. Financial education can include many components. Topics might include: budgeting; reducing debt; increasing and leveraging savings; improving credit scores; understanding and using non-predatory credit resources; investments; increasing awareness of income support programs; establishing a relationship with a mainstream financial institution; and taxes and tax credits. Web sites with materials for financial education are featured in this newsletter and on the VCPN web site.

Financial education should be easily accessible to those who are in need. Christina Cain is the director of the Asset Development Center, New Visions, New Ventures, in Richmond. They work with families whose children are enrolled in early childhood programs. New York’s Office of Financial Empowerment places financial counselors in domestic violence shelters. Cathie Mahon, Executive Director and Deputy Commissioner, notes that finances are the primary reason causing many victims of domestic violence to remain in abusive situations. Her agency also works with youth aging out of foster care. Yolanda Butler, Acting Deputy Director of the Office of Community Services for Health and Human Service’s Administration on Children and Families, encourages Assets for Independence (AFI) Programs to connect to Head Start programs because they are available to both parents and teachers. AFI provides matched savings, financial education, asset training, and other financial tools to participants. Thus far, AFI programs have helped

over 80,000 people individuals open accounts for matched savings.



Access to Financial Services- “Getting Banked”

Access to financial services includes access to banking, access to programs for asset-building, and asset protection. When families connect to mainstream financial institutions and products, they pay less for necessary financial transactions, such as cashing checks and paying bills. Families without a mainstream financial institution are more vulnerable to predatory financial practices, such as high interest on small loans until the next payday. High-interest credit cards used for medical expenses or other bills can mean that families go further into debt. “Getting Banked” includes help in opening savings, checking and money market accounts, using direct deposit, and accessing financial products.

Consumer Credit Counseling/Debt Management

These services connect individuals to reliable community agencies that offer credit repair and debt reduction services (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007). Many families with low incomes face challenges related to credit and debt. Poor credit scores or no credit history at all might mean that a family could not qualify for a favorable mortgage or small business loan. Credit counseling helps people learn to manage and reduce debt and to take positive steps to improve credit ratings. A better rating leads to cheaper cost of credit when it is needed and a better rating can impact employment and housing opportunities.



Asset Management and Antipoverty Strategies

continued from page 15

Tax Preparation Services

Tax credits such as the Earned Income Credit (EITC), Child Tax Credit, and the Child Care Credit lift more families above the poverty line annually than any other poverty-reduction effort. Recently, nearly 26 million families received \$57.7 billion due to the EITC alone. However, as many as 25 percent of eligible families do not know about the tax credits and many more do not maximize their refunds by claiming all available credits, or lose value of their credits by paying preparers or taking refund anticipation loans (Assets for Independence Resource Center, 2011).

Earned Income Tax Credit or EITC is a refundable federal income tax credit for low to moderate income working individuals and families. Congress originally approved the credit in 1975 in part to offset the burden of social security taxes and in part to provide an incentive to work. When EITC exceeds the amount of taxes owed, it results in a tax refund to those who qualify and who claim the credit. To qualify, taxpayers must meet certain requirements and they must file a tax return, even if they do not have a filing requirement.



An example of tax preparation services is the Virginia CASH Campaign. CASH stands for Creating Assets, Savings and Hope. Coalition partners are organizations or a group of organizations working together to provide free income tax preparation services in their communities. Some provide additional services such as financial education, matched savings programs, and credit report counseling.

The Virginia Community Action Partner-

ship (VACAP) serves as the lead organization, along with the Virginia Department of Social Services and the IRS, for the CASH Campaign. There were 29 coalitions with over 1,000 volunteers active in the Virginia CASH Campaign for tax year 2010. A total of 21,274 federal returns were filed, a 15% increase over 2009. Families received \$30,881,418 in federal returns with the average refund being \$1,452, a 19% increase over 2009. A total of 18,378 Virginia returns were prepared (a 5% increase over 2009) resulting in \$3,642,607 in refunds.

More information is available from: Virginia Community Action Partnership, 707 E. Franklin Street, Suite B, Richmond, VA 23219 (804) 644-0417, E-mail: cspohrer@vacap.org, Web site: www.vaecitc.org



The Importance of Saving

For the 40 million people living in poverty, life out of poverty must be sustainable, according to Tom Shapiro. Dr. Shapiro is the Pokross Professor of Law and Social Policy Director at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. He maintains that financial assets are the tool to sustaining families who move out of poverty and financial assets motivate individuals to continue to save. "Even the act of saving creates change," asserts Dr. Shapiro. Cash savings can help families remain solvent in case of job loss, a health crisis, or other emergency.

According to Dr. Shapiro, the major source of equity for 60 percent of American families is home ownership, not stocks or financial assets. The top 1 percent of the population garners 45% of the wealth-building. In contrast, the bottom 60 percent of the population receives only 3 percent of wealth-building assets. "We know what works to help those in poverty," says Dr. Shapiro. He endorses financial coaching and family self-sufficiency programs such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) are matched savings accounts that enable low-income and low-wealth working people to save money for specified goals. The three savings goals that can be supported through an IDA are first-time home ownership, small

business development, and postsecondary education.

One program to help those in poverty is AFI (Assets for Independence). HHS awards about 70 AFI grants each year. Grants help a variety of organizations to help them fund IDAs (Individual Development Accounts, discussed above) and other asset-building strategies.

For each dollar that the participant earns and saves, the Assets for Independence (AFI) program provides a match of between \$1 and \$8 with about three quarters of the programs offering matches of \$2 or \$3 for each dollar earned and saved. The Federal portion of the match is capped at \$2,000 per participant. The program must ensure that the match also includes at least an equal amount of non-Federal funds.

To qualify to participate in an AFI project, an individual must: 1) be eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) at the time of the application, or 2) have an adjusted gross household income equal to or less than 200 percent of the Federal poverty line or be eligible for the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit and have a household net worth less than \$10,000 (excluding the value of a primary dwelling and one motor vehicle).

As stated earlier, savings and match funds can be used for three specific asset goals: first-time home ownership; business capitalization; or postsecondary education. AFI began in 1999. Since then nearly 81,000 individuals have opened IDA savings accounts.

Helping Young Couples Make Financial Management Plans

Counselors can provide personalized financial advice, planning, and assistance. When counseling is paired with high-quality educational programs, parents can improve their financial management practices. Ongoing access to financial counseling enables families to develop skills not only to manage household expenses but also to grow assets (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007).

Accessing Federal and State Benefits

According to David Hansell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Administration for Children and Families (part of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services), several benefits programs are important to single parents. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are two important programs. Child support has also emerged as one of the main income supplements for low-wage, single mother-headed families. Next to the mother's own earnings, child support is the second largest source of income for these

families (2011).

According to information supplied by Assets for Independence (2011), only about 60 percent of eligible families participate in SNAP. Other programs that may be underutilized are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Low Income Home Energy Assistance, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Assessing benefit programs at the State and Federal level can not only help with daily living expenses, but can also assist families in being able to save and build assets.

Workforce Training and Education

These programs help youth and parents acquire basic education as well as more advanced training. "Soft" skills such as job etiquette and interviewing skills are taught as well. The emphasis is on helping individuals obtain technical skills that are valued by employers so individuals can obtain and keep jobs (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007).

Employment Services

A full spectrum of services can place individuals in jobs that offer benefits and support career development. Because stable employment is related to both marriage rates and to father's involvement with their children, Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives and programs designed to promote relationship quality and marriage are increasingly networking with or providing referrals to workforce enhancement and employment programs.

To learn more about financial education and asset management, check the resources on VCPN's website. Also, interested readers can contact:
Assets for Independence Resource Center,
1-866-778-6037,
E-mail: info@IDAresources.org
Website: IDAresources.org

Reference List is Available on the Website or by Request

Spotlight: The ASSET Initiative



The ASSET Initiative is a collaborative effort within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and partner agencies and organizations. The Initiative seeks to extend the benefits of financial education and other asset-building services to individuals and families across the nation. Asset building is an approach to overcoming poverty. It enables individuals and families to learn about and use sound budgeting and money management practices, address financial issues, and plan for long-term success. When combined with other support services, an asset-building approach helps families set financial goals and progress towards financial stability.

The ASSET Initiative builds on the success of ACF's Assets for Independence (AFI) program (see Asset Management and Antipoverty Strategies, this issue). The AFI program funds local projects to provide an array of asset-building opportunities including financial education, matched savings through Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), and other services.

ACF seeks to bring the asset-building approach to more families by working with affiliated organizations and networks. The projects include:

• Fathers and Families

Both custodial parents and noncustodial parents (usually fathers) can benefit from financial education and asset-building. The Office of Child Support Enforcement is funding several demonstration waiver projects that involve State child support enforcement agencies and AFI grantees.

• Families with Young Children

The ASSET Initiative aims to bring asset building not only to families with young children but also to child care providers, re-

ferral networks, and Head Start center staff. AFI grantees are partnering with local service providers to integrate asset building into their programs and to encourage parents and staff to participate in local AFI projects.

• Native Americans

Through the ASSET Initiative, ACF is sponsoring outreach and training for Native American communities. ACF is administering the Native Asset Building Initiative, a new grant program in FY11 that combines Administration for Native Americans (ANA) funding with AFI funding.

• Refugees

Refugee families have shown that they can be extremely successful asset builders, saving regularly. ACF is working with the Office of Refugee Resettlement grantees and AFI grantees to increase the number of refugee families who have access to asset building programs.

• People with Disabilities

A disproportionate percentage of people with disabilities and their families are low income. ACF is partnering with disability service providers to bring asset building to this community. Seven sites involving disability service providers and AFI grantees have formed strategic alliances.

• Survivors of Domestic Violence

The ASSET Initiative is creating partners with domestic violence services. They will sponsor training and policy forums to explore strategies.

There are tools and materials on the AFI Resource Center web site at: www.IDAresources.org Interested persons can also call the Assets for Independence Resource Center at 1-866-778-6037.

Virginia's Individual Development Accounts Program

Louellen Brumgard
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The Virginia Individual Development Accounts (VIDA) program is an account program that can triple savings of eligible participants. They provide a 2 to 1 match for savings in a VIDA account. The funds are limited to \$4,000 per participant with a maximum of two participants per household. Participants also receive financial literacy training for their savings goal, along with budget training, and help locating and preparing to purchase their desired asset. The program can assist people who want to: save in order to buy a home, start a business, or save for their own, their children's or their spouse's education. In order to participate, individuals must work with a local intermediary to complete an application. There are more than 50 of these intermediaries that partner with the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to provide IDA services. Eligibility requirements include:

- Being a U.S. citizen or legal alien, 18 or older, residing in Virginia;
- Being employed;
- If saving for a business or education, having a dependent child under 18 living in the household with the parent or guardian;
- Meeting income requirements;
- Saving a minimum of \$25 per month or more;
- Being accepted into the program.

For those accepted, a VIDA savings account is opened and monitored through BB&T or Wachovia. Participants have two years to complete their training and meet their assets' goal.





Spotlight on BETHANY. CHRISTIAN SERVICES

Bethany Christian Services is a non-profit agency that provides pregnancy counseling, orphan care and adoption services. They aspire to make certain that every child has a loving family and a safe environment. Bethany Christian Services serves children in countries on five continents. The focus of their services is their core values including selflessness, passion, impact, integrity and courage.

From 2007 to 2011, Bethany Christian Services had one of the federal government's 5-year \$500,000 per year grants to promote healthy marriage among low-income unmarried couples. Debi Jarman joined the effort in 2008, serving first as the Program Coordinator and then as the Program Manager for the Fredericksburg site.

"We had three locations with very different demographics," Jarman explained. "Our site in Fairfax had Spanish-speaking staff and attracted mainly a Hispanic population. The site in Richmond served mainly African-American families. The Fredericksburg site had mainly Caucasian and mixed racial couples." Jarman said that what most of the couples had in common was being raised in fractured homes. "Some participants did not have even a single person in their extended family who was in a stable marriage," Jarman explained. "These young parents have never witnessed the satisfactions of a long-term relationship and therefore, they do not understand the value and the emotional benefits of stable marriages."

In Fredericksburg, couples were recruited from the pregnancy center. The pregnancy center provides free pregnancy testing and referrals. They work with women who want to relinquish children for adoption and do referrals for those who want to parent. Participants were recruited from couples who wanted to parent and from local departments of health and private doctors. In Fairfax, the majority of referrals came from NOVA Hospital's maternity clinic and in Richmond most couples were located through the department of health maternity clinics.

Bethany's Healthy Marriage Initiative began as a mentoring program. Volunteer mentors were trained by the Bethany staff to work with low-income unmarried couples who were expecting a child. The mentors built relationships that in some cases lasted years. Jarman liked this model because of its

flexibility and because of the aspect of ongoing support. "With mentoring, the volunteer and the couple work out their own schedule. You don't have to gather everyone together at the same place at the same time," Jarman explained.

About a year and a half into the grant, the program was switched to an education program at the request of the federal government. Between the three locations, approximately 125 couples were served each year. The initiative offered the marriage education in four, three-hour modules. Each session covered two topic areas. The first session dealt with Communication Skills and Family Background. Couples were taught about positive communication styles. They examined what each person "brings to the relationship" in terms of expectations and ways of operating. The second session considered Conflict Resolution, taking the communication skills learned in session one to a new level. This session also examined Lifestyles and Values, and participants added depth to their understandings of each other's expectations.

The third session's topics were Personality and Parenting. An emphasis was placed on how the parents-to-be might work together. The value of fathers was also stressed. "Many women in the groups had been taught that they did not need a man. They failed to understand that their children did need fathers," commented Jarman.

The final session dealt with Finances and Commitment. Money management is often a point of conflict between couples and few had many skills for money management. Views on marriage and commitment were often negative and based on exposure to relationships that were not supportive. Jarman mentioned that the program made a point of addressing domestic violence. "We had a goal of enhancing the relationship. Marriage may not have been the best choice for all of our participants," noted Jarman.

Jarman said the needs of the clients varied. Many were unemployed or lacked stable housing. Some were in crisis. She noted that it was difficult for some clients to concentrate upon relationship-building when they were facing a need to find housing and meet basic needs. In some cases, only one of the partners wanted to be in the program and the reluctant participant might be silent or distant during the sessions.

Working with couples in a group had both positive and negative aspects. A positive aspect is that couples could share their viewpoints. A negative aspect is that the education is not tailored to a particular couple's needs and may not apply to their situation. Another issue was the educational levels of the participants. Jarman remarked that the materials often had to be rewritten or otherwise modified due to the varied education level of many of the participants, some of whom had not completed high school. She recommended starting with an icebreaker, such as a discussion about their partner's best traits. Jarman used power point slides and some video clips to help make points and trigger discussion. Participants had a notebook of written materials and exercises as well.

The grant provided funding for incentives. Couples received a \$15 gift card to cover transportation costs and child care expenses were also covered. A free dinner was provided. Couples who completed all four sessions received a \$100 gift card. The program's drop out rate was about 10 percent.

The program had an evaluation component, coordinated by Anne J. Atkinson, Ph.D. at PolicyWorks, Ltd. A self-report survey was utilized with responses from 410 participants. In general, couples were very pleased with the program quality (79% gave ratings of 'excellent' and 19% rated the quality as 'good'). Likewise, program helpfulness was rated as 'excellent' or 'good' by 94%. Linkages to the community were rated by 56% as 'excellent' and as 'good' by 37%. All but four of the 410 respondents would recommend the program to others.

Considering program value outcomes, the pre-post testing showed the greatest gains in three areas: Communication; Money Management; Ability to Co-parent. When asked to comment on the most helpful aspects of the marriage education program, client couples overwhelmingly chose two particular topics to praise: help with money management and communicating with their partners. Many of the couples noted that they learned how to budget and handle finances. This was important to them, but the emphasis on communication skills seemed to be even more important. Participants stated that they learned how to listen to their partner, learned

Spotlight on New Visions, New Ventures

to discuss issues and found that they learned many new things about their partners as a result. They thought these skills would enhance their relationships in many ways and for years to come. In much smaller numbers, clients said that they enjoyed talking to the coaches, gained insight from them and really appreciated them.

PolicyWorks, Ltd. also did an online survey with program graduates. They received 89 responses (53 mothers and 36 fathers) representing 29 couples (some responses were from only one member of the couple; some responses included both partners). The evaluation utilized items from the Fragile Families Study (see main article, this issue). Four of the 29 responding couples had married (15%). This figure was similar to the findings of the other grant programs in the Building Strong Families federal grant study (17%) and to the control group (18%). (Readers: The federal study is described in more detail in VCPN's main article, this issue.)

While Bethany's program, similar to other strengthening families programs, had no significant impact on the number of marriages in the short-term, the self-reported impacts on the quality of the relationships between the couples may be a more important finding. Better than 80 percent of couples reported improvement in conflict resolution, communication skills, understandings about the value of marriage, and sharing financial decisions. Jarman commented, "You need to account for where the couples started. Marriage is a serious commitment. Some couples may have achieved an insight that their relationship was not viable."

"I know we did make a significant impact on some of the couples," Jarman concluded. "For example, not long ago I encountered one of our mothers. She stopped to talk and tell me how the program had changed her outlook. She and her boyfriend had married. She had her children with her and they were well-dressed and appeared to be developing well. Those children are being raised in a committed relationship. That should make a difference throughout their lives."

Bethany Christian Services has a branch in Atlanta with a large population base. They offer weekend marriage encounters and they are continuing that service. The Virginia locations are not continuing the marriage initiative. However, those who wish to discuss ideas and lessons learned from the program development can use the contact information below.

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Christina Cain,
Director

New Ventures, New Visions in Richmond is a Small Business Administration Women's Business Center. They serve approximately 1,000 clients a year in the Richmond, Virginia area. Christina Cain, MSCED, Director for New Visions, New Ventures' Center for Asset Building, spoke in September at the Family Strengthening Conference in Richmond. She also spoke with VCPN staff about her unique organization. There are 110 Small Business Administration centers across the country with two in Virginia. Cain explains that New Visions, New Ventures is unique because of their holistic and comprehensive approach.

Although they are classed as a Women's Business Center, Cain stressed that the organization works with everyone. They began in 1998 as a program to help individuals transition from incarceration. "It is difficult for those with a criminal record to find jobs," noted Cain, "and we found that small business opportunities could help create jobs for our clients."

The usual image of a small business is a physical location that offers services or products. While some of the clients progress to that point, there are other options for small business persons. Cain relates that many of their clients have a full-time job but need additional income. Some come with only a single idea or product while others have actually launched a business already. "We focus on micro-business," says Cain. These are enterprises that can be operated in a home. Examples are accounting and book keeping services, photographers, film-makers, food suppliers, and child care.

Cherrelle Hurt, a single mother who started a child care business, also spoke at the Family Strengthening Conference. She began with a small day care in her home and progressed to opening a center at a separate location. Now she is planning a second center at another location. She is full-time at her business and has a number of employees.

Another example discussed by Cain is a woman who came in with a recipe for pizza dough. She began by placing her product, Pizza Tonight, in small grocery stores where it was tremendously popular. Later, she and her husband invested in a portable oven that they take to catering jobs and Farmer's Mar-



Cherrelle Hurt,
left, watches
President Obama
sign the Small
Business Jobs Act
on September 27,
2010

kets. The fire-roasted pizza has been a popular item at outdoor venues.

New Ventures, New Visions offers a full range of courses year-round. These include: How to Start a Business; Business Taxes; Marketing; Networking; How to Get a Small Business Loan; How to Write a Business Plan. Cain teaches the six-week class on How to Write a Business Plan. It is offered six times a year and costs \$120. There are scholarships to help those who can't afford the fee. She is proactive in her teaching approach. There is homework every week.

"The assignments allow individuals to practice the skills they are learning and it is a wonderful way to communicate and receive feedback specific to their hopes and dreams." Cain estimates that about 60% of those taking the class get to the point of having a business license and generate revenue.

All those applying for services at New Visions, New Ventures attend an orientation. They receive individual counseling that helps assess their credit histories and financial literacy. They help the individual examine their total situation to determine how a small business fits into their life. "We are women-run and we understand the conflicts that can occur when balancing home and business interests," explains Cain.

One mechanism to help individuals achieve their goals is the use of IDA accounts. (These are discussed elsewhere in this issue of VCPN). Persons generally save towards opening a small business but may set additional accounts for home-buying as well.

New Visions, New Ventures helps clients network as well. Cain notes that if a client can place a product in an existing business, it is a "win-win" situation. The organization is very flexible about their services. Cain says that a client can consult with them once or indefinitely. One client has returned regularly for assistance for over three years.

Those interested in more information can contact: Christina Cain, MSCED, Center for Asset Building, Director, New Visions, New Ventures, 701 E. Franklin Street, Suite 712, Richmond, VA 23219 (804) 643-1081,
E-mail: ccain@nvnv.org
Web site: www.nvnv.org

Responsible Fatherhood



In many ways, I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence—both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill. We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference. That is why we need fathers to step up, to realize that their job does not end at conception; that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one.

President Barack Obama, *Father's Day*, 2010

A father's involvement with their children has measureable and positive effects on how children develop. For example, researchers have found that the more fathers participated in the physical care of their infants, the more socially responsive those babies were. The more active the father's involvement was, the higher the scores of babies on tests of development. Father involvement appears to help babies become more resilient when faced with stressful situations (Pruett, 1997).

Unmarried fathers and mothers are now bearing 40% of the nation's children. Most policy interventions have, and continue, to target women. Some efforts try to prevent teen and out-of-wedlock pregnancies while other efforts aim to improve the status of single parents. The primary efforts towards men have been to increase child support payments (Lerman, 2010).

Unwed fathers are a heterogeneous group. About 12% have an associate's or bachelor's degree, a rate far below the 35% to 40% figure for the general population of men. Only about one in four unwed fathers have earnings of more than \$25,000 a year. About half are living with the mother of the child at the time of birth. Although most fathers spend considerable time with the child in the years

after its birth, over time, their involvement fades (Lerman, 2010).

Young, minority, and poorly educated fathers in fragile families have little capacity to support their children financially. The unwed fathers who cohabit with or marry the mothers of their children earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more than fathers who remain single. It is important to note that the act of marrying is not a cause of the relative success of those fathers who marry or cohabit. It is likely that women marry or cohabit with men who offer resources and who have better potential to provide for a family and distance themselves from men who are less promising.

Lerman (2010) reported that some fathers have multiple children with more than one mother. Using data on Wisconsin's welfare recipients, Meyer, Cancian and Cook found that 26% of fathers had children to only one mother who had children only to him; 28% had children to a mother who had children also to other fathers; 9 percent had children to two or more mothers who had connections only with him; and 37% had children to two or more mothers who also had connections and children to other men. Fathers with multiple children face large support obligations that might take most of their income. Dressel (2010) noted that teenage fathers are the most likely to have multiple children with multiple partners.

As noted earlier, efforts directed towards fathers in the past have focused upon establishing paternity and increasing child support collections. These efforts are felt to raise the standard of living for children and also discourage men from becoming unwed fathers.

Today's efforts have been expanded to include a larger vision. Paula Dressel of Just-Partners, Inc. outlined the vision for responsible fatherhood (2010). Dressel notes that father absence costs taxpayers \$100 billion per year and is related to child poverty. Additional troubling effects for children include: depressed academic performance; increased high-risk behaviors; juvenile delinquency; lowered self-esteem; poor school behaviors and attitudes; increased chances of living in a low-opportunity

neighborhood; problematic interpersonal relationships; and depressed later-life earnings.

From this larger context, the vision for Responsible Fatherhood is:

- All children should have the love, care, emotional, and financial support of both parents, regardless of whether or not the parents live together.
- Fathers should take personal responsibility for their children and have necessary resources to fulfill their parenting roles. At minimum, fathers must acknowledge paternity, have access to jobs with sufficient income and benefits, develop effective fathering and relationship skills, and find support for their fathering roles in public places.
- Policies and programs should affirm and promote responsible fatherhood.

Some fathers face special challenges.

Incarcerated Fathers

Fathers who have been incarcerated may lose contact with their children. Even if the individual was employed prior to imprisonment, it may be difficult to find a job after release. Pre-existing child support obligations may have continued to accrue, making fathers vulnerable to re-incarceration due to failure to meet child support obligations. There are some promising programs to help fathers overcome these challenges. Prisons can offer parenting education and classes in maintaining positive relationships. Enhanced child visitation programs can benefit both children and incarcerated parents. Substance abuse treatment and job readiness programs can increase the likelihood of successful re-integration (Dressel, 2010; see also VCPN, volume 81).

Fathers of Color

African-American, Latino, and Native American children are more likely to live in single-parent families. In metropolitan areas with concentrated poverty, Blacks and Latinos represent three out of four residents. Prejudice and challenges of low-opportunity locations can produce self-defeating responses (studies cited in Dressel, 2010).

Immigrant Fathers

Immigrants are a diverse group. VCPN discussed serving immigrant populations in Volume 90. Immigrant fathers face additional challenges due to language barriers and many begin in low-paying jobs, so poverty rates are higher in immigrant populations.

Military Fathers

Deployment is associated with family anxiety and increased behavioral problems of children. VCPN explored this issue in Volume 86. Resources to help to help prepare families and to keep in contact during deployment are also discussed.

Teen Fathers

For these men, the pregnancy is generally unplanned and occurs outside of marriage. Teen parents need to complete educations, support themselves and the new arrival, and establish a stable relationship. Teen fathers are less likely to be involved with their children and are less likely to employ positive parenting styles when they are involved. Even though teens birth rates are declining, over 1 million males ages 15 to 19 have a child (Dressel, 2010). VCPN has explored the issues associated with teen pregnancy in Volumes 13 and 52.

Key Findings from Fatherhood Demonstration Programs

According to Dressel (2010), recent findings reinforce learning from a decade of fatherhood programs. Some of these are:

- Being a good father is important to non-resident fathers.
- Low income parents face significant barriers such as low levels of education and limited work histories, lack of transportation, housing instability, health and mental health problems, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system.
- Recruitment and enrollment in fatherhood programs is a challenge.
- Programs have had difficulty in establishing employment services that are effective in improving fathers' status in the labor market.
- Services related to child support are a critical component and are generally effective in improving the status of children even though child support orders may in some cases be set at levels the fathers are unable to sustain.
- There is a need for child support enforcement staff to collaborate with fatherhood programs.
- Alliance with domestic violence providers can be beneficial.
- When the baby is born and for several

years, fathers typically remain involved. This time frame is optimal for intervention.

- Lack of long-term sustainability of fatherhood programs inhibits their development.

Others (Grossman, Harper & Idczak, no date) focus on recruitment. Educating the community on the value of fatherhood programs can result in referrals and interest in the program. Timely paternity testing is recommended as well as strong partnerships with courts and legal systems. Mothers are a key to involving fathers, so educating them about the benefits of father involvement can be an important component. Streamlining intake procedures can help with recruitment. Partnering with other father coalitions and efforts is helpful. Veteran fathers from the program can be enlisted as mentors.

The National Clearinghouse for Responsible Fatherhood (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz & Metz, 2008, available at www.fatherhood.gov) has issued a summary of "Ten Lessons Learned from Evidence-Based Practice." These are preliminary conclusions about ten common features of effective fatherhood programs.

- #1 Incorporate teaching methods and materials that are culturally appropriate.
- #2 Select facilitators who believe in the program. Provide them with training.
- #3 Maintain a high staff-to-participant ratio.
- #4 Set clear goals to be achieved by the program.
- #5 Use theory-based approaches that have proven effective in other contexts.
- #6 Use a variety of teaching methods and personalize the information.
- #7 Allow sufficient time to complete important core activities.
- #8 Have staff engage in one-on-one relationships with fathers.
- #9 Provide incentives to engage fathers and families.
- #10 Replicate curricula with fidelity.

Bronte-Tinkew et al. recommend hiring staff who match the age, gender, culture and personal background of participants. Fathers may respond better to male staff. Ancillary services such as English-language classes or help finding employment may be important. Recruiting fathers can be time-consuming. Case management or one-on-one counseling can begin while the program recruits a sufficient number of fathers to begin group activities. Longer programs will allow fathers to practice using skills and become comfortable with new behaviors over time. One-on-one relationships can allow for better



identification of needs. Fathers are more likely to enact suggestions if they have individual relationships with staff. Modest financial incentives can also increase participation, as can non-financial incentives such as provision of transportation, child care, and offering food.

Research also suggests that more intensive interventions over longer time periods will be more effective. For example, Cowan et al. (2009) found that when compared with a low-dose condition (a one-time meeting), interventions that were longer (16 weeks) showed positive effects on fathers' engagement with their children, couple relationship quality, and children's problem behaviors.

Involvement of couples in the father intervention has also been promising. In the Cowan et al. study (2009), participants in couples' groups showed more consistent, longer-term positive effects than fathers-only groups. Some believe that the best predictor of a father's engagement with his children is the quality of the relationship with the children's mother, regardless of marital status of the parents.

Given the overlapping goals, collaboration between responsible fatherhood programs, healthy marriage initiatives, and domestic violence prevention and intervention programs may be effective (Roberts, 2006). Suggestions for increasing collaborative work include: encouraging cross-referrals and linkages through websites; co-location of staff; periodic cross-training of staff; and regular consultation among program staff. Programs that can work together are likely to provide the most appropriate and helpful services.

In reviewing the data about fathers, researchers with the Fragile Families Study suggest that fatherhood programs can be effective if they are targeted to receptive men and if they are timed correctly. New fathers who are romantically involved with the mother are the most likely to be motivated to take advantage of programs. Therefore, fatherhood program staff should start at the hospital at the time of delivery, provide a range of services, and view the fathers as members of a family rather than simply as individuals (Fragile Families Research Brief, May, 2000, Number 1).

Reference list Available by Request or on the Website

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ECONOMIC DISTRESS AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)



The National Institute of Justice has funded a number of studies that have shown relationships between:

- Financial strain and IPV
- Employment status and IPV
- Economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and IPV

The studies utilized data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) which is a nationally representative sample of U.S. households and U.S. Census data. The studies examined physical violence and did not consider verbal or emotional violence (Ashcroft, Daniels, & Hart, 2004).

Financial Strain

The rate of violence among couples with high levels of subjective strain is approximately three and a half times as great as it is among couples with low subjective financial strain (9.5 versus 2.7 percent) (Benson & Fox, 2004a, 2004b). Financial strain has similar effects in both advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods, raising the risk of IPV. For couples in advantaged neighborhoods, 2.3 percent of low-strain couples and 7.3 percent of high-strain couples reported IPV. For couples in disadvantaged neighborhoods, 3.8 percent of low-strain couples and 13.8 percent of high-strain couples reported IPV. Thus, in disadvantaged neighborhoods, high levels of economic stress yielded IPV at a rate 3.63 times higher than for low strain couples. In advantaged neighborhoods, IPV increased 3.17 times between couples with low versus high subjective strain (Benson & Fox, 2004b). As the ratio of household income to needs rises, the likelihood of IPV lowers (Benson & Fox, 2004a).

Repeat victimization of women was more frequent in couples feeling financial strain. For couples experiencing low levels of financial strain, there was less than 2 percent that reported repeated episodes of IPV while over 5 percent of couples experiencing high levels of financial strain reported repeated IPV (Benson & Fox, 2001).



Employment Status

Rates of IPV increase as the number of periods of male unemployment increases. In couples where the male is steadily employed, the rate of violence is 4.7 percent. The rate rises to 7.5 percent when the male experiences one period of unemployment and to 12.3 percent when males experience two or more periods of unemployment (Benson & Fox, 2004b). Thus, women whose male partners experienced two or more periods of unemployment over the 5-year study period were nearly three times more likely to be IPV victims as were women whose partners were in stable employment (Benson & Fox, 2004a).

Employment instability was related to IPV regardless of neighborhood type. In advantaged neighborhoods, IPV increased dramatically from 4 percent for males with stable employment to 10.6 percent for males with unstable employment. In disadvantaged neighborhoods, reported IPV increased from 8.2 percent for those with stable employment to 15.6 percent for males with unstable employment (Benson & Fox, 2004b).

The employment status of the women can also be a factor in IPV. Women who are victims of IPV are more likely to experience unstable employment (Riger & Staggs, 2004). Women's employment can also be adversely affected by IPV due to physical and emotional problems stemming from the abuse. Health and mental health problems can impact women's employment status (ability to gain and retain employment) for at least as long as two years.

Neighborhood Disadvantage

IPV is more prevalent and more severe in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Ashcroft, Daniels & Hart, 2004). For example, Benson and Fox (2004b) found the rate of IPV in disadvantaged neighborhoods was 8.7 percent compared to 4.3 percent in advantaged neighborhoods. Serious IPV, defined as re-



peated violence with injury was nearly twice as high in the disadvantaged neighborhoods (5.8 versus 2.4 percent) (Benson and Fox, 2004a, b).

Additional Findings

The effects of concentrated disadvantage and economic distress on IPV remained significant even after variables such as age, race, education level, alcohol use, and number of adults in the household are examined. Prior violence did have sizeable effects on current violence but even so, concentrated disadvantage, employment instability, and subjective financial strain continued to show significant effects on the likelihood of IPV (Benson & Fox, 2004b).

Whites and African-Americans with the same economic characteristics have similar rates of IPV. African-Americans as a group have a higher overall rate of IPV due in part to higher levels of economic distress and their location in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Benson & Fox, 2004a).

For the individual couples, both objective distress (being unemployed; not having enough money to meet family needs) and subjective distress (worrying about finances) increased the risk of IPV. Women who live in economically disadvantaged communities and who are struggling with finances in their own relationships, suffer the greatest risk of IPV (Benson & Fox, 2004a). Financial strain may also keep women in abusive relationships. The women who were at greatest risk of IPV were in relationships where the couple has few economic resources, high subjective distress about finances, higher levels of unemployment, and live in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. In these relationships, the partner's economic contribution may outweigh the risk of IPV (Benson & Fox, 2001).

Reference List is Available on the Website or by Request



Spotlight: Boot Camp for New Dads



Boot Camp for New Dads is a man-to-man workshop that gives new fathers the confidence to become involved with their babies. It has a 21-year history in a variety of communities. Chuck Ault, National Training Director, has been involved with the program for 14 years. "This program is the best thing since sliced bread!" he declared in a recent interview with VCPN staff. "We are the beginning of a continuum of what young fathers need."

Ault is passionate about the program. He is the training director for 240 programs in 45 states, Canada, Japan, Italy, and 16 cities in the United Kingdom. Some programs are located in U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force bases. With more than 300,000 "graduates," it is the largest program for fathers in the United States.

The contact headquarters are in Irvine, California. Staff help new programs with start up and training needs. Twice a year, there are two-day training workshops in Denver. Start up costs can be as low as \$1400 plus the travel to Denver for the training. Those who want onsite training can arrange that for approximately \$750. When trainers go to the site, they generally help the program "kick off" by orchestrating the first workshop.

The "Boot Camp" is held one to two months prior to the baby's birth. Another session is held 3 to 4 months after the baby is born. About a third of the participants return for the second session. Follow up or additional services vary from site to site. For example, the New York program has the possibility for multiple year follow up activities.

The objectives are to build confidence in three areas: 1) the transition to fatherhood;

2) changes in the relationship with the baby's mother; and 3) knowledge about infant care and development. The all-male environment is a comfortable learning atmosphere. The sessions, led with the assistance of five to six "veteran" fathers, are very flexible. They typically last three hours.

Topics for the 3-hour program are driven by the concerns of the "rookie" dads. Ault explained that frequent topics are: team work in caring for the baby; handling visitors; setting boundaries with relatives; how to decode crying; calming a baby; Shaken Baby Syndrome; safety; understanding the 'baby blues' and post-partum depression. They also discuss topics such as the men's own parenting, identifying what aspects of their own upbringing the men want to keep and which parts they want to discard. "We cover a multitude of information and it comes at the optimal time for these men. The last trimester is when men are more open and receptive and best able to consider a variety of topics," adds Ault. "We capture those 'magic moments' and deliver tangible, real skills that they will use in short order."

Veteran fathers and their babies come to the three-hour session. The 5 to 6 veteran fathers are woven into the discussions and topics. For instance, if the facilitator is discussing Shaken Baby Syndrome, the veteran fathers might be asked to share times when they felt frustrated by their baby's crying and how they were able to cope when the baby continued to cry despite efforts at comfort. The veteran fathers help the rookies learn 'hands-on' skills such as diapering. "It is good for the rookies to see a man be totally responsible for an infant's care for three hours. Many men have only witnessed men in care-giving roles for about 10 minutes.

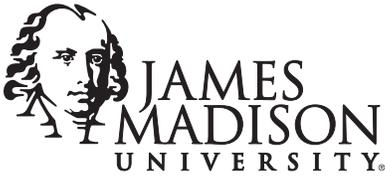


The baby cries or needs something and the man hands the baby back to the mother or grandmother," he adds.

Ault notes that babies and parents experience 'predictable cycles' of behaviors. For example, at 22 weeks when the first sonogram is done, men take the pregnancy more seriously because the image is concrete evidence of the baby's existence. Around the time the baby is three months of age, the parents' communication can "bottom out" he says. Ault claims that dealing with changes in the partner relationship is actually more difficult than infant care. To help with the changes, some Boot Camp programs offer a 2-hour session for couples. The men and women meet separately for the first hour and the time allows for 'venting' of concerns. The couples come together for the second hour and discuss a variety of topics relating to communication. "We are still experimenting with this model," says Ault. He says the follow up programs are examples of what can be tried once the men have an effective introduction to program facilitators. He likes the concept that Boot Camp for New Dads uses: deliver the knowledge and skills to new parents just at the time they are needed.

Scientific data to support the program's effectiveness is not yet available, according to Ault. "We are in the midst of doing evaluation research and learning about the research-based outcomes," he says.

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Boot Camp for New Dads

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Many communities offer the “Boot Camp” for no charge. Some programs have a fee to cover the materials. Programs don’t generally serve food. “We have the babies there and trying to handle babies and cups of hot coffee or something with many crumbs is not a good idea,” explains Ault. Also, men are not given any financial incentive to attend. The class is open to all men, although some programs try to target low-income unmarried men.

Virginia has four “Boot Camp” programs. In Charlottesville, the contact is UVA Health System. In Chesapeake the program is housed at Chesapeake General Hospital. The Hampton program is coordinated by the Healthy Families Partnership. In Richmond, the program is housed at First Things First of Greater Richmond. Richmond’s Boot

Camp for New Dads reaches over 300 men a year, according to LeMar Bowers, Head Coach and Trainer. The Richmond program started in 2007 and has grown due to media attention. Their referrals come through birthing hospitals and private doctors and funding comes from hospital systems, donations and private funding. Their goal is to involve fathers prior to the birth of their child so that they are ready for that “magic moment of birth.” Bowers comments, “Our ‘guys with guys’ strategy makes it easy for participants to open up during the workshops. We help debunk the myths about fathers and help them acquire practical skills. The program benefits mothers, too, because mothers have more confidence when the father is more interactive and supportive.”

Ault agrees. He views the program from a

prevention angle. “We get fathers before they have made a single mistake,” he notes. “The outcome is powerful.”

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