

## Marriage and Relationship Education:

### Will It Reduce Poverty and Strengthen Families?

Policy Brief No. 12

**Data indicates a correlation—but not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship—between child wellbeing, poverty and two-parent families with healthy relationships. This brief reviews the emerging practice known as “marriage and relationship education” and advocates for making family services available to all low-income families with children, regardless of marital status.**

#### Introduction

*Can a piece of paper change a child’s world?* Various child and family researchers, some practitioners and a growing group of policy makers answer “yes” if that paper is a marriage license *and* if the parents have a healthy relationship. Other practitioners and experts view efforts to encourage low-income parents to marry with considerable suspicion. Who is right?

A wealth of data clearly show that the conditions that children need to thrive are most often found in two-parent families, especially those with a healthy marriage or relationship. Such children are less prone to ill health, school failure, substance abuse and emotional and social difficulties than children growing up with a single parent. Poverty is four times less common in two-parent than in single-parent families. Many of the childhood benefits of having two married parents extend into adulthood. Sources: Parke 2003; Amato 2005; McLanahan et al. 2005

#### Policy Recommendations

Governments involved in supporting healthy marriages and relationships as a way to strengthen families and improve child outcomes should:

- Adopt the Marriage-Plus approach that ensures all low-income families with children can get the supports they need to raise children successfully.
- Improve the broader economic, social and cultural contexts for healthy marriages and child wellbeing.
- Proceed slowly and carefully with MRE programs because MRE is still a promising, not a proven, practice.
- Use the Building Strong Families three-part model for fostering healthy marriages/relationships.

The full policy recommendation section begins on page 9.

Can child poverty be reduced by encouraging more low-income parents to marry, stay married or improve their relationship? Governments at all levels and the private sector are betting so by investing millions of dollars into “marriage and relationship education” (MRE) programs. In fact, the Bush Administration has proposed spending \$1.5 billion over a five-year period to promote healthy marriages, which would include support for MRE programs. At least 32 states have MRE programs, many funded with federal welfare dollars. (See also Appendix A for a list of other marriage promotion strategies in use.)

The Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) recognizes that children benefit from growing up in two-parent families with a healthy relationship. In doing so, FSPC makes no judgments about what comprises marriage and recognizes that there are many different kinds of loving and caring families. Children do not choose the familial situations in which they live, and many forces shape whether parents or caregivers are biological, cohabitating or married. This brief aims to review the emerging practice known as “marriage and relationship education,” not marriage or what constitutes a healthy relationship between parents. In that context and with minor adaptation, the FSPC concurs with the nonprofit Center for Law and Social Policy’s “Marriage-Plus” approach, which was informed by research and practice.<sup>1</sup>

The dual goals of a *Marriage-Plus* approach are to:

- “Help more children grow up with their two biological, married parents in a healthy, stable relationship.” Public policies and programs

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<sup>1</sup> A national public interest/law non-profit, CLASP seeks to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects and family stability of low-income families and secure equal justice for all. CLASP’s research and policy analysis are independent. The Annie E. Casey Foundation underwrites CLASP’s policy briefs on couples and marriage.

### **What Is a “Healthy Marriage”?**

**Most marriages fall somewhere along a healthy/unhealthy spectrum, indicating nearly all could be improved. For marriages that include children, ChildTrends researchers have synthesized common features of healthy marriages.**

- **Commitment to the couple’s children.**
- **Commitment of the couple to a long-term relationship.**
- **Satisfaction with multiple aspects of the marriage.**
- **Positive communications.**
- **Conflict resolution skills.**
- **Absence of domestic violence.**
- **Fidelity.**
- **Quality interactions and enjoyment of time together.**
- **Intimacy and emotional support.**
- **Duration (staying married).**
- **Legal marital status.**

**These features appear to enhance the adult partners’ and their children’s wellbeing.**

**Infidelity and violence to any member of the family are clear markers of a relationship unsuitable for marriage.**

*Source: Anderson Moore et al. 2004*

should be “making marriages better to be in” instead of “making marriages more difficult to get out of.” Programs should intentionally address the needs of the family as a whole instead of focusing only on the parents.

- “Help parents—whether never-married, separated, divorced, or remarried—to be financially capable and responsible and to cooperate, whenever appropriate, in raising their children” (Ooms et al. 2004).

In some individual circumstances, marriage is not possible or advantageous (including abuse, infidelity, spousal death). Thus, public assistance must provide essential supports for all low-income children regardless of family structure (Roberts et al. 2005).

In summary, **MRE programs have the potential to improve the lives and futures of children, especially if MRE is part of a comprehensive approach to strengthening low-income families with children.**

## Why Marriage Matters

### The Facts: Children and Family Structures

Over the course of childhood, many children go through more than one change in their family structure (Parke 2003). One third of children begin life with their parents unwed; one fifth are born to unmarried, non-cohabitating women (Cherlin 2005).

Although most low-income, unmarried parent-couples report thinking about marriage or cohabitating when their child is born, about 90% of these couples are unmarried by their child’s first birthday (Haskins et al. 2005). *Current statistics indicate over 50% of all children will live apart from a parent sometime before they turn 18 years old* (McLanahan et al. 2005). For black children, the rate is 80% (Horn et al. 2002).

### Dramatic Changes in the American Family

Thirty-five years ago, the average American family looked very different, as the Then and Now table

## Then and Now: The Structure of American Families

| Characteristic   | 1970 | 2002/3 |
|--|------|--------|
| Marriage rates for white females aged 15 years and older (Haskins 2005)                        | 63%  | 57%    |
| Marriage rates for black females aged 15 years and older (Haskins 2005)                        | 54%  | 36%    |
| Percentage of families with children that single mothers head (McLanahan et al. 2005)          | 12%  | 26%    |
| Percentage of births outside of marriage (Cherlin 2005)  | 4%   | 35%    |
| Percentage of children living with two parents (Lichter 2001)                                  | 85%  | 68%    |
| Percentage of families with children under 18 years below the poverty level (US Census Bureau) | 12%  | 15%    |
| Divorce rate per 1,000 married couples (USAToday 2004)—stable since the ‘80s                   | 2.2  | 4      |

Overall, single-parent families are more likely to experience poverty. While the poverty rate for children in two-parent married households is 8%, the rate for children in single-parent households is 38% (McLanahan et al. 2005). This and other *statistics indicate a correlation – but not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship – between child wellbeing, poverty and two-parent families with healthy relationships.*

illustrates. More couples wed; whereas today, women are less likely to ever marry, and among couples who do wed, more get divorced. One result of these demographic trends is that between 1970 and 2003, the percentage of families with children that are headed by a single mother more than doubled (McLanahan et al. 2005).

### **Most Children Benefit When Parents Have a Healthy Marriage or Relationship**

Based on a synthesis of reliable studies on family situations,<sup>2</sup> a group of 13 leading family scholars and practitioners concluded that:

*“Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike. Family structure and processes are of course only one factor contributing to child and social well-being.”*  
–Doherty et al. 2002

Compared to children raised by parents in unhealthy marriages, children in healthy-marriage families *on average*<sup>3</sup> are **more** likely to:

- Do better in school and go to college.
- Have good physical and mental health.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol.
- Experience good relationships with both parents.

... and are **less** likely to:

- Experience one or more years in poverty.
- Suffer physical or sexual abuse.
- Develop health, emotional, mental health and behavior problems.

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<sup>2</sup> That is, studies using large, nationally representative populations and methods to account for preexisting differences in individual characteristics that might contribute to marital status and family economics.

<sup>3</sup> These benefits are based on studies of child *populations*. Each child has a unique *individual* situation and the quality of the marriage or relationship affects the benefits it imparts.

- Make a suicide attempt.
- Engage in delinquent behaviors.
- Become an adolescent or unwed parent.
- Obtain a divorce.

The protective benefits of marriage are related to the higher standard of living, more effective parenting, emotional closeness and fewer stressful circumstances that are more common in stable, two-parent families than in other families.

*Most children in single-parent families enter adulthood without serious problems. Yet, the conditions needed for children to thrive are most often found in two-parent families.*

- The greatest benefits for children are when their biological parents have a healthy marriage.
- Children adopted at birth fare similarly to children growing up with both biological parents. Overall, adopted children in two-parent families do better than children raised in single-parent families.
- Benefits are less abundant for children in families with cohabitating than with married parents.
- Despite improved family economics, children in stepfamilies have similar outcomes in some measures as children living in single-parent families.
- Worst off are children in lone-parent families (single parents with no cohabitating partner).
- Children whose parents' marriage is highly discordant tend to do better when the parents divorce than if they stay married.

Also, married men and women do better in many aspects of wellbeing than unmarried adults.

*Sources: Doherty et al. 2002; Ooms 2002; Horn et al. 2002; Parke 2003; Acs et al. 2004; Amato 2005*

## MRE Programs At-a-Glance

Increasing the marriage rate and reducing divorce are common goals that governments and some private organizations cite for their marriage initiatives. Some MRE supporters also seek to decrease the number of women and children in abusive relationships, reduce poverty and/or enhance child wellbeing by helping couples develop and use skills associated with healthy relationships. Increases in MRE programs and funding suggest the programs are reaching more people, but no national data have been collected on the number of low-income participants.

Historically, most MRE curricula were designed for middle class, upper-income and/or white couples. Consequently, many MRE programs for low-income couples have adapted existing curricula that trained facilitators deliver. Other practitioners and experts have created curricula specifically for low-income couples and racial/ethnic minorities.<sup>4</sup> Although a wide variety of materials and program elements are in use, many programs have components for:

- Developing healthy relationship skills (such as communication, problem-solving and non-violent conflict resolution).
- Nurturing attitudes associated with healthy marriages.
- Educating participants about:
  - Benefits of healthy marriages/relationships for adults and children.
  - Characteristics of healthy marriages/relationships.
  - Behaviors and attitudes associated with healthy marriages/relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> One review of existing and “next generation” MRE curricula as they pertain to low-income couples is Dion, MR (2005). “Healthy Marriage Programs: Learning What Works.” Future of Children. Fall 15(2): 139-56. <http://www.futureofchildren.org/>.

- Signs that a marriage, relationship or partner is unsuitable (such as domestic violence).
- Improving money- and stress-management skills.
- Enhancing parenting skills.
- Debunking myths or unrealistic expectations.
- Increasing awareness of public and private resources for couples and families (such as marital counseling, domestic violence help).

A growing number, but still too few, of MRE programs address violent and abusive behaviors (in current relationships or the legacy of past relationships). Essential components include teaching participants about abuse and violence, steps to protect themselves and their children and sources for help. For example, Building Strong Families programs (a large MRE demonstration initiative) begin with and continue to screen couples for domestic violence. Couples in abusive relationships are referred to appropriate services and do not continue in the demonstration program.

Most MRE programs use structured group settings, such as classes, workshops and programs. Some last a single afternoon; others provide weekly classes over several months. Also, many programs target a specific population, such as:

- Unwed couples (especially near the birth of a baby).
- Married couples interested in improving relationship.
- Married couples in crisis.
- Single, unattached adults.
- High school students.

Across the board, not enough MRE programs are tailored to the unique needs of stepfamilies even though many couples want to learn how to blend their families.

States and localities greatly rely on federal funding to underwrite MRE. Community-based organizations have been successful in obtaining private grants to support their efforts.

Sources: Stanley et al. 2003; Hershey et al. 2004; Macomber et al. 2005; Ooms 2005

## Why Is MRE Controversial?

### Areas of Consensus

Many stakeholders generally agree that:

- The best setting for children to grow up is in two-parent families with healthy relationships.
- Child poverty is concentrated in single-parent (and single-income) families.
- Low earnings and/or financial instability appear to discourage marriage.

## Debate on MRE Programs

### MRE Proponents Assert...

Considerable data shows that children benefit in many ways when they are raised in a married-parent family. Also, studies indicate it is possible to strengthen relationship skills associated with healthy marriages.

Married, two-parent families experience considerably less poverty than single-parent families. Some studies strongly suggest a causal linkage between marriage and poverty reduction.

MRE programs have bettered relationship satisfaction and communication.

The continuous decline in married, two-parent families warrants attention given the high cost imposed on children and society. Also, governments have long been involved in marriage and family issues (such as marriage and divorce laws, tax policy, etc.).

It is time to try a new approach because public assistance programs have not moved enough families out of poverty and economic disadvantage.

A wide variety of human services are available, but few offer unmarried parents the help they want in improving relationships with partners.

Many MRE programs funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services must detect and attend to domestic violence. Other initiatives have also sought to address this concern.

### MRE Critics Assert...

No long-term evaluations of MRE programs have documented the impact in terms of increasing marriage rates, reducing family poverty and improving child wellbeing and outcomes.

Studies have not established that marriage by itself directly affects family income when cohabitating couples wed.

Most MRE evaluations were with middle-class populations. There is little evidence that MRE programs for disadvantaged populations are effective.

Government should not be involved in MRE because marriage and family is a private matter.

To pay for MRE programs, policy makers may divert funding from programs that have demonstrated effectiveness (employment, child care, housing, health care), but that often lack sufficient resources to meet demand.

Separating MRE from services that support low-income families increases the odds for failure.

Many MRE programs have yet to adequately address domestic violence. MRE may keep women in relationships that are violent and abusive.

Sources: Ooms 2002; Ooms et al. 2004; Dion 2005; Edin et al. 2005; Haskins et al. 2005; Hoffman 2005; Nock 2005; Ooms 2005; Thomas et al. 2005

The debate centers not only on whether MRE is an effective way to help low-income families with children but also on how government should be involved, if at all, in promoting marriage. The following table summarizes some common arguments made for and against MRE.

How might marriage impact family stability and economics in single-parent and cohabitating families? The bottom line is that no one knows. Simulations have yielded a wide array of results (Lerman 2002; Acs et al. 2004; Roberts 2004). Notably, this research is very difficult because families and their circumstances are dynamic and complex. In short, marriage should not be mistaken as a panacea for poverty.

**Thus, while millions of government and private funding supports MRE programs, there is limited evidence that they will reduce poverty.** In the next five to 10 years, policy makers and practitioners will have the results of three important long-term research projects funded by the US Administration for Children and Families (ACF): Supporting Healthy Marriage, Building Strong Families and Community Healthy Marriage Initiative. The findings from these demonstrations will be useful to improving the impact of MRE programs.

## Will Love Keep Us Together? Marriage Facilitators and Barriers

### Reasons for Optimism

Although the challenges facing low-income couples are many, their relationships have strengths on which MRE programs can build. The majority of low-income, unmarried couples:

- Value marriage, seeing it as an ideal.
- Believe marriage will benefit their children.

- Are romantically involved and/or living together when their child is born.
- View the odds of getting married as 50-50 or better.
- Are willing to participate in educational programs to improve their relationships.

Sources: Doherty et al. 2002; Parke 2003; Hershey et al. 2004; Ooms et al. 2004

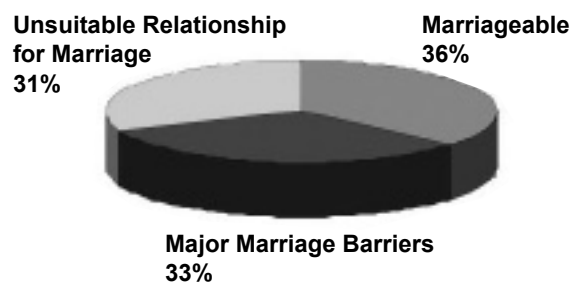
Most low-income, unwed parents see a trusting relationship and financial stability as prerequisites to a marriage that will thrive (Edin et al. 2005).

### Circumstances that Impede Marriage

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (of low-income, unmarried couples near the time of their child's birth) assessed the potential for MRE programs to make a difference among three types of relationships.

- *Unsuitable Relationship for Marriage* – About one third of low-income, unmarried parents' relationships were characterized by the researchers as "unsuitable" for marriage due to:
  - Domestic violence; or
  - Romantic involvement ended before child was born.

### Marriageability Estimates for Unwed, Low-Income Couples at Birth of Child



Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (2003). Barriers to Marriage among Fragile Families. Research Brief No. 16.

- *Major Marriage Barriers* – Another third faced one or more serious barriers known to stress marriages:
  - Unemployment.
    - Mental health problems (such as depression).
    - Drug or alcohol problems.
    - Incarceration.
- *Marriageable* – Just over a third of relationships appeared to not face any serious risks to marriage.

Source: CRCW 2003

Other important and common barriers to marriage include domestic violence, infidelity, lack of trust, low earnings that produce financial instability and an experience of forced intercourse during the woman's lifetime. Children from prior relationships often create additional strains on relationships. Finally, cultural and behavioral norms and attitudes can discourage marriage.

Unless barriers to marriage are addressed in MRE curricula and related supports, MRE programs may have no or little impact on the parents' marital status, family economics and overall child wellbeing. Programs must also be prepared to help participants connect with domestic violence assistance. Sources: Bramlett et al. 2002; CRCW 2003; Edin et al. 2005

## Case Studies

### Building Strong Families in Greater Atlanta, Georgia

<http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.org>  
<http://latinamericanassoc.org/index.asp>  
<http://www.familiesfirst.org/>

Funded by ACF, Building Strong Families (BSF) is a multi-site research intervention for low-income, unwed couples who are interested in marriage. Outreach

occurs during pregnancy or close to the birth. BSF programs have three primary components: MRE, family support services and individualized family support. For couples leaning towards marriage, the focus is on achieving a healthy marriage. For participants who do not marry, the programs strive to help them develop and maintain a positive, healthy relationship to enhance their child's development.

Greater Atlanta is one of seven BSF pilots being implemented by the Latin American Association and Families First. For the Hispanic/Latino population, the Latin American Association is providing BSF services in tandem with its existing array of family support services (counseling for domestic violence, referrals to and help with accessing community resources and the Latino Fatherhood Initiative). Families First offers similar services as the Latin American Association, plus has programs in teen pregnancy prevention, adoption and foster care, substance abuse and mental health treatment and individual counseling. Both organizations are working with public health clinics to recruit couples. Other source: Dion 2005

### Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids (HMGR)

Grand Rapids, MI

<http://www.healthymarriagesgr.org>

HMGR's approach recognizes that 75% of marriages begin in houses of worship, so clergy can play a key role in helping couples create foundations for healthy relationships. A key strategy is community marriage policies in which clergy in a city or region together pledge to:

- Marry only couples who have completed pre-marital counseling and preparation (such as educational classes, couples mentoring).
- Develop and sponsor programs to enrich marriages, help troubled marriages and support stepfamilies.

Beyond public awareness campaigns (such as celebrate-marriage month and events), HMGR sponsors diverse community programs: premarital and marriage enrichment workshops, clergy and lay-leader training and mentoring resources. An African-American task force guides specific outreach to that community. In 2003, HMGR received a \$900,000, five-year federal grant (approved by Michigan) to help low-income families by creating linkages between existing family services and MRE programs. Other source: Doherty et al. 2004

### **Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI)**

<http://www.okmarriage.org/>

OMI aims to cut by one third Oklahoma's divorce and births outside of marriage by 2010. The initiative is a public-private partnership dedicated to strengthening families and helping couples who choose marriage for themselves gain access to assistance that will help them build and sustain healthy marriages. OMI's work with low-income couples is supported by the state's unspent federal welfare block grant reserve along with state and private sector contributions.

Although it is not a Marriage-Plus approach (because of the considerable focus on promoting marriage), four aspects of OMI's approach are notable.

- Statewide nature (most MRE programs are local or regional).
- Extensive market research analysis for program design and evaluation.
- Training for a wide cadre of stakeholders – from publicly funded agencies, to community leaders that facilitate MRE programs, to staff in a wide range of family services.

Training for MRE workshop facilitators by the domestic violence community, which also advises OMI leaders.

Other sources: Jarchow 2003; Ooms et al. 2004

### **Promoting Child Welfare by Strengthening Marriages**

<http://www.thrivingcouplesthivingkids.syr.edu/>

With a five-year, \$852,000 grant from ACF, Syracuse University's College of Human Services and Health Professions aims to reduce child abuse and neglect among families in the child welfare system. The college will develop and pilot training courses to build child welfare professionals' skills in supporting healthy marriages, relationships and families. A multi-disciplinary team is also identifying and developing policy and practice interventions appropriate for racially, ethnically and economically diverse populations in the child welfare system.

### **Policy Recommendations for Governments**

In summary, marriage offers protective benefits, but is not a cure for poverty or family instability, and MRE programs remain to be validated as an effective approach to strengthening families. Even if MRE programs prove to be effective, family circumstances are only one of many factors that affect child wellbeing, so other family-strengthening strategies must be continued. Further, not all couples should wed or stay together. For the foreseeable future, a significant number of low-income children will grow up in a wide variety of family settings. Accordingly, family-strengthening policies and programs must serve a wide range of family types.

**“(I)ncreasing parental employment and income, reducing work stress, and preventing teenage and out-of-wedlock pregnancies can all contribute to strengthening marriage and improving coparenting by unmarried parents”**

–Ooms et al. 2004

*Governments that are planning, implementing or supporting MRE programs should take three steps to make such programs more likely to strengthen low-income families with children.*

**#1: Adopt the Marriage- Plus approach that ensures all low-income families with children can get the supports they need to raise children successfully.**

If MRE programs prove to be successful, years will go by before a noticeable change occurs in the number of children being raised in two-parent families. As a result, a broad array of human services will continue to be needed to give low-income families the support they need to successfully raise children and move towards economic self-sufficiency. The Marriage-Plus approach (see also page 2) entails:

- *Making available the supports low-income children need regardless of family structure.* (Other FSPC policy briefs address essential supports for low-income families with children and are available at <http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/index.html>.)
- *Assisting all low-income parents, regardless of relationship status, to fulfill their responsibilities and team-parent their child as possible and appropriate.* (Roberts et al. 2005)

**#2: Support policies and programs that tend to the broader economic, social and cultural contexts for healthy marriages/relationships and child wellbeing.**

- Expand *investment in job creation, training, placement and supports* so low-income parents can provide for their family. Low-income women indicate they want some measure of financial stability before they marry (Edin et al. 2005). Regardless of marital status, jobs that pay a living wage are essential to ending the cycle of poverty for children.
- *Reduce other serious barriers to marriage through comprehensive prevention and intervention programs* for:
  - Domestic violence.
  - Substance abuse problems.
  - Mental health conditions.
- *Encourage the development of MRE programs tailored to stepfamilies*, regardless of marital status (see page 5) (Adler-Baeder et al. 2004).
- Step up efforts to *reduce teen pregnancy* through research-based, comprehensive approaches that include education, counseling, support services, treatment and community programs for positive youth development. Pregnancy prevention programs should provide medically accurate and realistic information about both abstinence and contraception (National Collaboration for Youth).
- Provide support for strong local collaborations of community groups, organizations and centers offering a *broad range of developmental programs enabling young people to meet their basic physical and social needs and build competencies*. Such programs help prepare adolescents for success when they enter the workforce and become parents (National Collaboration for Youth).

- *Alter policies that inadvertently discourage marriage* such as increased work requirements for two-parent families receiving welfare benefits (Jarchow 2003).

**#3: Because MRE is only a promising practice, proceed slowly and carefully with MRE programs.**

Until multi-year, rigorous evaluation studies on MRE programs are completed, prudent investment is warranted given the availability of alternate family-strengthening strategies that are known to be cost-effective. When investing in MRE pilot efforts as a family-strengthening strategy, governments should:

- *Increase the odds for success by using the Building Strong Families three-part model* because it recognizes relationship skills are one of many barriers keeping many low-income parents from providing a healthy, stable family life for their children. The three parts are:

1. Trained facilitators who use tested MRE curricula and do not pressure parents about relationship outcomes. Participation should be voluntary, not required. Measures of effectiveness should be built into programs.
2. Linkages between MRE and a wide range of family services, including education and job training, employment services, income supports, housing and transportation assistance, child care and more.
3. Individualized case managers who work directly with each couple and help coordinate services for the entire family.

*Source: Hershey et al. 2004; see also Ooms et al. 2004*

- *Fund MRE programs with new money instead of diverting funding from existing family services.* Indeed, helping MRE program participants access family supports to overcome their various barriers to marriage may increase case loads.
- *Require high-quality evaluations of publicly funded MRE programs* so effective components can be replicated by practitioners.
- *Test community-based initiatives that aim to build a community culture that encourages healthy marriages and relationships.* One current community-based strategy is public education campaigns about the benefits of marriage to children and the harms to them when relationships are violent or have high levels of conflict (Edin et al. 2005).

### Recommendations for Family Service Agencies

As with governments, family and human service agencies should aim to strengthen all types of low-income families with children through direct services and by working with other community-based organizations to create a seamless network of supports.

Agencies that are exploring or implementing MRE programs should:

- Use tested curricula that are tailored to the target population's specific needs and issues.
- Employ recruiting and retention strategies directed at both men and women. Tapping other low-income fathers to recruit has been a successful strategy for some programs.

- Link MRE to existing services and supports. In engaging men in MRE programs, practitioners recommend offering supports to meet their immediate needs (for jobs, referrals to services, immigration assistance, legal services and more). In particular, it may be necessary to partner with agencies addressing domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse.
- Provide proper training to and use qualified facilitator teams with male and female members who model healthy relationship skills.
- Choose neutral (nongovernmental), convenient and accessible settings.
- Offer tangible and intangible incentives for participation: meals, baby gifts, door prizes or deposits in individual development accounts (IDAs).
- Set convenient class times.
- Arrange for transportation.
- Provide child care during classes.
- Incorporate evaluations into MRE programs.

Agencies not involved or interested in directly offering MRE can:

- Identify MRE programs in their community and explore ways to create program/service linkages.
- Educate policy makers about the importance of high-quality evaluations of MRE programs funded with public dollars.

*Sources: Hershey et al. 2004; Ooms et al. 2004; Hoffman 2005; Macomber et al. 2005*

## RESOURCES

### **Administration for Children and Families (ACF), US Dept. of Health and Human Services**

<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/index.html>

ACF is the federal agency funding state, territory, local and tribal organizations to provide family and child supports, including a wide array of public benefits. ACF is the lead agency in the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative, on which information can be found at: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html>.

### **Annie E. Casey Foundation**

<http://www.aecf.org>

With 55+ years of experience in investing in child and family wellbeing, the foundation's website provides a broad collection of research- and practice-based publications on strengthening families.

### **Brookings Institute**

<http://www.brookings.edu>

Brookings recently launched its new Center on Children and Families. The center will conduct research and outreach on the reasons for poverty, especially among working families, as well as the potential of various policies to improve the life chances of poor children. For Brookings' extensive resources on children and families section, go to: [http://www.brookings.edu/index/taxonomy.htm?taxonomy=Social%20Policy\\*Children%20and%20families](http://www.brookings.edu/index/taxonomy.htm?taxonomy=Social%20Policy*Children%20and%20families).

### **Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)**

<http://www.clasp.org>

CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects and family stability of low-income parents, children and youth and to secure equal justice for all. The website

offers many research publications and briefs on a wide range of family strengthening policy issues, including MRE.

### **Child Trends**

<http://www.childtrends.org>

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information on children and their families.

### **Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education**

<http://www.smartmarriages.com/>

The coalition sponsors the Smart Marriages conference that attracts a broad spectrum of stakeholders. The website offers other resources on marriage education.

### **Cooperative State Research, Education, Extension Service (CSREES)**

[http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/in\\_focus/family\\_if\\_strengthening.html](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/in_focus/family_if_strengthening.html)

An agency within the US Department of Agriculture, CSREES and its land-grant university and county extension partners are conducting research on marriage education and implementing outreach programs on marriage education. Its website (see URL above) provides linkages to resources and state-based programs. The service's CYFERnet provides linkages to marriage and couple relationship resources at <http://www.cyfernet.org>.

### **Family Relations**

<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/toc/fare/53/5>

In October 2004, this peer-reviewed journal published by the National Council on Family

Relations focused on low-income families and marriage education. All articles are free online.

### **Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study**

<http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/index.asp>

The study is following a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born to unmarried couples in the US between 1998 and 2000. Researchers are examining the conditions and capabilities of unmarried parents, especially fathers; the nature of the relationships between unmarried parents; outcomes of children born into these families; and the impact of policies and environmental conditions on these families and children. Go to the publications tab for a long list of available data and analyses.

### **Future of Children: Special Issue on Marriage and Child Wellbeing**

[www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org)

All articles in the Fall 2005 issue of The Future of Children are free online.

### **National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)**

<http://www.ncsl.org/>

This association tracks different ways states are working to strengthen families and provides policy summaries. Key pages include:

- Family Economic Success: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/sfn/sfn.htm>.
- Human Services: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/hswelfare.htm>.
- Marriage, Fatherhood and Family Formation: <http://www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/familyform.htm>.

## Urban Institute

<http://www.urban.org/>

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit policy research and educational organization that examines the social, economic and governance challenges facing the nation. Its website offers 150+ publications on family wellbeing, which can be accessed at: <http://www.urban.org/Template.cfm?Section=ByTopic&NavMenuID=62&TopicID=159&TopicName=Family%20Well%20Being>.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Examples of Other Marriage Promotion Initiatives**

Since the mid-1990s, each state has altered one or more policies or started at least one intervention to promote marriage, decrease divorce and strengthen two-parent families. Types of initiatives include:

- Relationship-strengthening for couples.
- Relationship skills for high school students.
- Media and public awareness campaigns promoting marriage.
- Community marriage initiatives.
- TANF programs and policy changes.
- Father involvement programs.
- Child support enforcement.
- Family law changes: marriage license fees, marriage and divorce prerequisites, no-fault divorce laws, covenant marriages.
- Teen pregnancy prevention.
- Support for families in which a parent is/has been incarcerated.

*Source: Ooms et al. 2004*

**This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC)** seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of “family strengthening” in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children and their families.

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*For more information about the Family Strengthening Task Force and its membership, please see the Family Strengthening Policy Center website at: [www.nassembly.org/fspc/aboutus.html](http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/aboutus.html).*