Policies to Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships:
What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?

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Pendulum swings between Responsible Fatherhood and Marriage Education/Relationship Skills for couples

- Responsible fatherhood programs focus on enhancing fathers’ capacity to pay child support and to parent.
- Relationship skills programs follow TANF goal to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.”
- Common goals for both: To increase the number of low-income children who grow up with emotional & financial support from their fathers
Parents’ relationship is related to fathers’ involvement and its benefits for children

- Non-resident fathers have less involvement with children than resident fathers.
- The degree of father involvement is influenced by the parents’ relationship quality.
- Father involvement is more positively associated with child well-being when there is a high quality co-parenting relationship.
- Quality of father involvement, not quantity, is associated with child well-being.
Responsible Fatherhood: Parents’ Fair Share

• Target group: Non-resident fathers who were behind in child support. Children receiving AFDC. Typically only fathers participated, not mothers.

• At child support hearing, judge would order NCP to PFS instead of jail if he was under-employed.

• Program model:
  – 6-8 week peer support workshops
  – Employment and training
  – Temporarily lowered child support orders and enhanced CSE
Parents’ Fair Share impact findings

• Programs increased child support paid
• No overall increase in fathers’ earnings or involvement
• Lessons on earnings:
  – Need training providers for very disadvantaged men
  – Combine skill-building with immediate stipends or earnings
• Lessons on involvement
  – Try to work with parents earlier in child’s life (don’t wait until behind in child support)
  – When appropriate, engage mothers in programs (with fathers or separately)
Parents’ Fair Share and other Fatherhood programs: substantial implementation challenges

- It’s very difficult to recruit fathers into voluntary programs.
- Men need wages immediately.
- Fatherhood program, child support agency, and employment programs have different cultures and face different incentives.
- Funding is often unstable, making it difficult to build programs over time.
Marriage /relationship skills programs for couples

- Programs began as pre-marital preparation and preventive alternatives to marriage counseling.
- Curricula teach skills in communication, conflict resolution, and supportiveness as well as how expectations and assumptions affect relationships.
- There is evidence that structured group workshops can improve relationship satisfaction of middle class couples.
- The quality of research is mixed; mostly looked at relationship satisfaction not outcomes for children.
Relationship skills programs designed for parents

• Newer programs are starting to focus on parents
  – Programs target parents of babies and young children (committed relationships or married; Gottman, Cowans; found a range of positive impacts).

• ...and lower income parents
  – Supporting Father Involvement (committed or married low-income; positive impacts)
  – Supporting Healthy Marriage (married low-income, no impact results yet)
  – Building Strong Families (unmarried parents with newborn; fewer / mixed impacts)
Future Programs

• Responsible fatherhood ... or quality of couple relationships? To improve father engagement and child well-being, it’s not “either-or”, it’s “both-and.”

• Need to learn more about the effects of programs that:
  – engage parents (couples) preventively where possible
  – attend to co-parenting relationships where possible, taking safety and domestic violence issues into account
  – attend to quality of fathers’ parenting engagement
  – use innovative employment, child support approaches

• Embed in existing systems rather than stand-alone to promote participation.
For more information

Working Paper:

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