



Policies to Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships:

What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?

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The Changing Face of Child Support Forum
Los Angeles, CA
April 28, 2011

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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