



Smart new ways to help families thrive

This month, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is scheduled to launch a new Fatherhood, Marriage and Families Initiative, offering funding to state agencies and local organizations working to help struggling dads to stay involved, and moms and dads to stay together. It's the Obama administration's stab at a big problem, the large and growing national shift from two-parent to one-parent family households — and the resulting high costs in increased child poverty, decreased child well-being, and strain on government social services. Today 41% of American babies are born each year to unmarried parents, who, if they do not marry, may drift apart within a few years. Nor even does marriage guarantee that parents will stay together, as close to half of all American marriages end in divorce. Though many unmarried parents do well with their children, it's tough going it alone. Children in a single parent household are nearly 5 times as likely to be living in poverty as children in a household with married parents. Additionally, studies show that children raised in two-parent households throughout their childhoods tend to do better in school, have fewer health problems, report greater happiness, and are more likely to later complete college, become employed, and avoid brushes with the law than children whose parents live apart.

While the need is clear, the challenge is to provide services which actually work. The new initiative comes on the heels of a nearly ended, five-year federally-funded Building Strong Families demonstration project, which had similar goals but little success. The BSF program, a Bush administration initiative, offered relationship support and family stability education to lower income, unmarried new parent couples in eight demonstration project sites, hoping to increase the likelihood that the couples would marry, stay together, and raise healthier children. By the time of preliminary evaluation, however, six of the eight demonstration project sites showed no improvement among participants in family stability or child welfare; one program showed only modest gains; and one showed actual negatives. So now, with the welfare of our nation's children at stake — and with government budgets too tight to permit speculative experimenting — the pressing question remains: *What have we learned about what works?* In a rare bit of good news, recent evidence suggests that much of what works best for families can actually save programs money. To build on what we now know, five key strategies can help:

1 *Seizing the moment.* Most new parents, even unmarried ones, want to build a healthy, happy two-parent family. In fact, studies show that, at the crucial time when a baby is born, most unmarried parents are still involved romantically, either living together (51%) or seeing each other regularly (31%), and most hope to raise their child together. Though often struggling with practical issues such as low income and limited education, most of the dads are still physically and financially involved. This key time, when parents want to be together, but are facing a host of new challenges, is an ideal time to offer the services and supports which can help them to meet those challenges together. Fortunately, a small upfront investment in helping new parents to build a strong, healthy family, rather than just addressing the far greater needs later if the family falls apart, can be as cost-effective for the state as it is good for the kids.

The past BSF initiative did wisely target new parents; the need now, however, is to serve them more effectively.

2 *Serving families as families.* New programs to promote father involvement and/or marriage can't thrive if our existing family services inadvertently push young families apart. Sadly, however, many otherwise excellent parenting programs today serve primarily mothers and their babies, or have separate services for moms and dads. Similarly, some shelters designated for homeless families actually house only women and children, while separate shelters house men. These "separate but equal" services can keep kids and caring dads apart, and can even split up romantically involved couples who want to raise their child or children together. Yet, as noted above, fully 82% of unmarried new parents *are* romantically involved and hoping to raise their child together. If we want to

support their goals, we need to treat them as the families they are, serving moms and dads together whenever possible. There are, of course, specific important exceptions where separate services are crucial to safety (such as for domestic violence) or privacy (such as breastfeeding support). In the absence of such needs, however, service to families as families should be the norm, whether or not the parents are legally married. This means parenting classes and materials that are couples-friendly, family shelters that welcome two-parent as well as one-parent families, housing vouchers that are available to financially qualifying two-parent families, state university scholarships that don't disappear if a single parent marries, and so on. It's sensible, fair, and crucial to helping families who want to stay together. It is also almost certain to be less expensive than providing duplicative services to moms and dads separately.

3 *Serving families efficiently.* Struggling new parents may also need specific information and services to help them to build a more secure and stable family future. To be effective, however, programs must be easy to access, and must respect the time constraints of overwhelmed parents. This is an area in which the new federal initiative clearly can and must differ from the past one. Under the BSF initiative requirements, all program sites used lengthy (30-42 hour) curriculums adapted from marriage therapy or enrichment models, delivered to participants over a period of months. From the outset, programs faced difficulty even getting couples to come to all the scheduled meetings. In fact, in most of the program sites, only 9% of couples regularly attended (measured as presence at 80% or more of the sessions). Significantly, the only program which showed *any* measurable success was the shortest program. Yet even this was a 30 hour program offered over 6 to 10 weeks, with less severe but still significant attendance problems. The take-away lesson should not be to give up on clearly needed services, but instead to keep services sensibly short enough to be accessible to busy, stressed new parents. Happily, shorter, more efficient curriculums can also spell cost savings for cash-strapped agencies and programs.

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4 *Integrating services effectively.* New parents, especially young, unmarried and/or financially struggling ones, may feel overwhelmed by the pressing demands of infant care and paying the bills. The relationship with a partner, while important, can seem like one more demand on new parents already stretched thin. This reality may have been another barrier in the BSF model, which focused solely on couples' relationship issues, without addressing the high-need areas of infant care and family finances (except, optionally, by referral). Under the new Fatherhood, Marriage and Families Initiative, however, we have an opportunity to better integrate existing practical services for new parents with a brief and efficient family stability component. For example, programs already providing infant care support to new parents, such as Early Head Start or other early childhood programs, could offer a once-a-month workshop on such family stability topics as solving conflicts, saving money, and how marriage protects children. Programs assisting with financial needs, such as Temporary Aid to Needy Families, could provide a workshop on how teamwork and marriage can help family finances. Or information on all the basics at-risk new parents need – infant care, family finances, and family stability – can be combined into one efficient curriculum. Families will benefit from the one-stop-shop approach, while agencies will enjoy the cost-efficiency of service consolidation.

5 *Building on community strengths.* Professional program staff serving new parents need not assume the long-term, financially draining task of providing ongoing support for all family stability needs. Instead, an effective program can provide basic needed information up front, such as how to work as a parenting team, how to avoid or protect against family violence, and how healthy marriages can protect and help children. Families can then be linked to local resources such as parenting networks, schools, faith groups, and/or other community programs. Where local resources aren't enough, programs can sponsor volunteer family-to-family mentoring, matching experienced, stable families with struggling new families. This basic *inform and connect* model of service can do more than just save program dollars. As young parents learn from established families and get encouragement close to home, they'll be better able to build their own strong and stable families. As that happens, our families, our communities and, most of all, our children stand to gain.