



Tip Sheet

Integrating Healthy Marriage Education into TANF Programs

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Introduction

The past several decades have seen a dramatic increase in the percentage of children living in single-parent households. While in the early part of the 20th century, the formation of most single parent households resulted from the death of a spouse; growth in the later half was driven by dramatic increases in divorce and unwed childbearing. For example, in 1950, only 6.3% of families were headed by a single parent (usually a mother) compared to 23.9% in 2010.¹ This shift has left a growing number of children being raised without the benefit of two parents. For instance, in 1970, 86% of all children lived in a home headed by a married couple compared to only 69% in 2006.² Scholars now estimate that only 50% of all children in the United States will live with two continuously married parents throughout their childhood.³

Impacts of Family Fragmentation

Although some see divorce and unwed childbearing as a form of social diversity to be embraced, the potential negative impacts of these family transitions and structures are not easily dismissed. Children who grow up in single-parent families are at increased risk for numerous negative outcomes.⁴ Adults who are married also seem to fare better across numerous economic, physical, and mental health markers than do their divorced or unmarried counterparts.^{5,6,7} Family fragmentation is very costly for society as well. One study estimates that divorce and unwed childbearing cost U.S. taxpayers approximately

\$112 billion each year, or more than \$1 trillion over a 10-year period.⁸

If the trends in family fragmentation were stopped, or even slowed down, the impact on the number children growing up in poverty would be noteworthy. For example, one study found that if the marriage rate would have remained constant at 1970 rates, the percent of children currently living in poverty would decrease by more than 25%.⁹ Amato and Maynard have shown that reducing the divorce rate by doubling the number of couples who attend premarital education programs every year could reduce child poverty by 20-29% over seven or eight years.¹⁰



Marriage and Relationship Education and Welfare Reform

These findings and others led lawmakers to enact the 1996 welfare reform, which authorized the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. TANF ended welfare as an entitlement program by setting time limits for receiving aid, increasing expectations for

work, and including the encouragement of two-parent families as a goal of welfare. It also represents a symbolic shift in how our country envisions a solution to poverty. Specifically it implies a move from problem remediation to problem prevention, and a turn toward a more holistic way of viewing families instead of a focus on the individual or specific problem.¹¹ The four broad goals of TANF illustrate this shift in thinking.

The TANF goals are:

- **Provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of their relatives;**
- **End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;**
- **Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and**
- **Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.**

Making the Case for Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education

Early evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education programs that occurred during the mid-1970s until about the early-2000s, looked at helping couples prevent divorce and were conducted on primarily middle-class white families. Meta-analytic studies of this body of research conclude that programs were generally effective at improving relationship quality from 40-50% and communication skills from 50-60%, and increasing marital stability (decreasing divorce

rates) during the first two to three years for those receiving healthy marriage and relationship education.^{12,13,14}

A second generation of healthy marriage and relationship programs has begun to address low-income couples and unmarried-couples that are romantically involved and have a child in common. Although a minority in the population, research suggests that these couples struggle to formalize their relationship in marriage and, when they do, they have higher divorce rates than do middle-class families.¹⁵ The emerging research on the effectiveness of healthy marriage and relationship education with this population has shown mixed, but promising results. Several randomized controlled trials and a meta-analysis of 15 evaluation studies have shown that healthy marriage and relationship education impacts both the quality and the stability of relationships among these couples but, so far, does not seem to impact marriage rates.^{16,17,18} Much is yet to be learned about how to best address the needs of low-income families through healthy marriage and relationship education programs including the implementation strategies needed to bring to scale empirically supported programs. Still, the research to date provides growing evidence that healthy marriage and relationship programming can be a tool in the effort to increase the quality of life for many.

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned for Integrating Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education into TANF Services

The overarching purpose of the 1996 welfare reform was to reduce poverty by moving people from dependence on government assistance toward self-sufficiency. Although most TANF funds are used to address job readiness and employment expressed in goals one and two, three out of the four TANF goals focus on

marriage and healthy families:

- Under goal two, non-custodial parents or working parents are eligible for TANF services. These services may include numerous job-related activities or support services such as healthy marriage and relationship education, and may be paid for with federal TANF or state Maintenance of Effort funds.
- Goal three allows for family formation support services including healthy marriage and relationship education to be provided to a larger population (i.e., not only the needy). Also under goal three is the provision for youth-based services that promote healthy relationships and build a foundation for future healthy marriages. This would include abstinence and pregnancy prevention programs and other programs and campaigns to bolster awareness.
- Goal four is broad enough to provide for any service that will assist in the maintenance and formation of two-parent families. Activities may include, but are not limited to, healthy marriage and relationship education and other services for both custodial and non-custodial parents, individuals and couples.

Although marriage and relationship education addresses three of the four TANF goals, it is not a “silver bullet” that will end poverty. Because of the complex nature of poverty, a multidimensional approach that addresses the many needs of TANF recipients is required. For example, while high job turnover and low wages decrease the probability of marrying and remaining married, marriage also leads to increases in job stability and higher wages across all socioeconomic groups,¹⁹ especially among African Americans.^{20,21} Therefore, cash assistance, quality childcare, job training, accessible healthcare, and relationship

education that helps to reduce teen pregnancies and to form stable healthy relationships are some of the factors that must be addressed in a comprehensive strategy to positively impact the economically disadvantaged in this country.



Several promising programs across the country are beginning to bring together multiple programmatic emphases in a comprehensive plan to address poverty. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* focuses on three strategies: (1) creating opportunities to increase wages and build assets; (2) enhancing relationships and close ties with family, neighbors, kin, faith communities, and civic groups; and (3) having reliable services close to home. Another example is the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative’s *Family Expectations* program. This program focuses on unwed romantically involved parents and includes, in addition to healthy marriage and relationship education, financial training, job placement services, nutrition education, parenting classes, and other family support services through linkages with government entities such as local TANF agencies. In both of these cases, local TANF dollars have been used to directly fund these community organizations, and to fund other programs and services that complement and enhance their efforts and increase their impacts. Collaborative efforts such as these that cross programmatic areas and sectors of society are leading the way in the next generation of comprehensive

way in the next generation of comprehensive efforts to eliminate poverty.

Innovative partnerships across the nation are pointing out how to better integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into TANF services at different levels. Because relationships are central to human existence, healthy marriage and relationship education can be integrated into multiple programs that benefit TANF clients, or that are already funded by TANF dollars to create more comprehensive approaches. A first point of integration involves raising awareness and providing information to targeted populations. Public health initiatives have distributed materials to the general public and created ongoing media campaigns through public service advertising. A second point of integration involves developing partnerships that provide healthy marriage education skills. This can be done by referring clients to a partner agency or having the partner bring workshops onsite. A third point of integration involves incorporating healthy marriage education skills into existing programs or service delivery systems. For instance, new healthy marriage and relationship education programs have been developed for single individuals and youth to prevent teen pregnancy and poor mate selection.²² These programs have been held as classes in schools, as after school programs, in treatment facilities, and in juvenile detention centers. Healthy marriage and relationship education programs have also been implemented in different institutional settings such as prisons, Head Start, job training, child welfare agencies, the military, and corporations.^{23,24} Others have begun to integrate marriage and relationship education components into health care programs and settings.²⁵ Ongoing efforts are attempting to integrate marriage and relationship education into domestic violence programs for distressed couples,²⁶ and into programs for disadvantaged youth.²⁷ Together these efforts and others represent promising new directions in which

TANF and community organizations can work together to promote the goals of TANF.

Examples of healthy marriage and relationship education programs implemented by states

- **The California Healthy Marriages Coalition has created public awareness campaign templates, tools, and resources that are available to healthy marriage coalitions and initiatives.²⁸**
- **Oklahoma has implemented healthy marriage education classes for high school students that are facilitated by family and consumer sciences teachers. These classes focus on helping students prepare for and have healthy relationships.²⁹**
- **Minnesota has reduced the fee for marriage license fees from \$115 to \$40 for couples that attend healthy marriage and relationship programs prior to marriage.³⁰**

Conclusion

Both research and the lessons learned from practice underscore the reciprocal relationship between poverty and family fragmentation; the harmful effects of unwed childbirth and divorce on men, women, and children; and the need for comprehensive action that involves input from public, nonprofit, and business sectors to improve the quality of life for our nation's underprivileged population. To meet TANF goals, all 50 states have enacted some sort of healthy marriage and relationship education program, such as public health campaigns, relationship education classes, and reduced marriage license fees for couples attending relationship classes.

Still, due to the discretion states have in the use of TANF funds, which activities and to what extent they have been implemented varies considerably from state to state. The 1996 welfare reform placed TANF programs at the heart of the nation's safety net for the poor. At the heart of TANF are the four purposes that delineate healthy marriages and the formation of stable two-parent families as a central focus of TANF programs and policies. As such, it is imperative for new research-based practices related to marriage and relationship education to continue to be integrated into TANF programs and for TANF officials to persist in their efforts to form effective partnerships with community organizations to address the needs of economically disadvantaged families.

Notes

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