



# A Win-Win Partnership: How Child Support Enforcement Can Benefit from Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education

**By: Dr. Renay Bradley, Post-Doctoral Fellow, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia**

## Improving Child Outcomes through Education and Enforcement

The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program is a Federal/State/Tribal/local partnership that aims to promote family self-sufficiency and child well-being. In 2010, 17.5 million children were served by the CSE, which means that one in four children across the country was involved in a CSE case.<sup>1</sup> The main goal of the CSE is to ensure that financial and medical support are made available to children; this goal is achieved by identifying and finding parents, establishing their support responsibilities, and enforcing those responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

CSE has traditionally been a legally-driven program, focused on upholding support orders that have been put in place by the judicial system. CSE programs have begun to evolve in response to increased understanding of the reasons why some parents do not pay their court-ordered child support. The reasons that have emerged seem to revolve around parental relationships rather than the legal aspects of child support orders. Approximately 58% of CSE cases involve children born to never-married parents, and three out of every four children who live apart from a parent are served by the program.<sup>3,4</sup> When parents live apart, healthy relationships between them are vital for child well-being and stable child support payments.

Over the past decade, CSE has begun to adopt a more proactive method of meeting its goals of ensuring that proper support is made available to children.<sup>5</sup> CSE now takes a family-centered

approach and offers an array of services geared toward providing families and parents with tools and resources that are needed to help parents support children and be involved in their lives. For example, CSE now focuses on promoting healthy family relationships.

## The Common Ground Between Child Support Enforcement and Marriage and Relationship Education

Improving child outcomes by promoting healthy parental relationships is the common ground between CSE and marriage and relationship education programming. Parents who maintain a healthy relationship, even if they are separated and not romantically involved, are typically better able to co-parent their children; they are better able to cooperate and work together for their child's emotional and financial well-being.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a strained relationship between co-parents is the primary reason why many parents fail to pay child support. Parents who feel negatively toward the other parent are more likely to withhold child support or block access to visitation.<sup>7</sup>

Relationship education can be highly beneficial for families who are struggling with co-parenting and child support payments. CSE agencies are in a unique position to reach both parents and help them form and maintain healthy co-parenting relationships—doing so will benefit children and will likely lead to increased child support payments. This tip sheet provides ideas on how healthy marriage and relationship education practices can be integrated into CSE agencies.

## Child Support Enforcement Services

- Locating non-custodial parents. Officials use computerized State and Federal Parent Locator Services (FPLS) to locate parents and assess their income and assets.
- Establishing paternity. The process of legally identifying a child's father is required for a court order for child support to be created. Paternity establishment also can provide a child with access to financial and medical benefits as well as facilitate the child's relationship with both parents.
- Establishing support orders. Caseworkers partner with the courts to establish child support orders as determined by State guidelines.
- Collecting support payments. Caseworkers help collect overdue child support from non-custodial parents by withholding tax refunds, putting liens on property, revoking driver's or professional licenses, denying passports, and/or seizing bank accounts.
- Services for non-custodial parents. Non-custodial parents can use CSE services to establish paternity and request a review of support orders if circumstances have changed. The FPLS is available through State CSE programs to locate a child whose whereabouts have been hidden.

Source: Welch, D., Derrington, D., & Clune, M. (2010). *A win-win partnership: MRE and child*

## Tips for Integrating Relationship Education into Child Support Enforcement Services

### 1. Understand the goals of child support and how marriage and relationship education can help to achieve those goals.

Integration of relationship education into CSE programs should begin with an assessment of the agency's goals and how inclusion of healthy marriage and relationship education can help to achieve those goals. Marriage and relationship education has been identified as an effective way to enhance positive communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills between parents, even those who are not

together.<sup>8</sup> Relationship education can help to promote these skills in parents who come into contact with CSE and can, thus, result in increased parental cooperation with CSE. Research has found that the relationship between the mother and non-custodial father is the number one indicator for the father's involvement in the child's life.<sup>9</sup> For many couples who are separated or divorced, the non-custodial parent has to negotiate with the primary caregiver to have access to the children. As a result, improving communication skills and conflict resolution skills between parents can encourage long-term father engagement with his children. Non-custodial parents who are emotionally engaged in the lives of their children are more likely to financially support them.<sup>10,11</sup> CSE administrators and decision-makers may be more likely to support integration of relationship

education into CSE if they understand the link between what it can accomplish regarding CSE objectives.

## **2. Train staff to integrate marriage and relationship education into their caseloads.**

To have the broadest impact, CSE staff need to be exposed to healthy marriage and relationship education and how it can benefit them when incorporated into agency services. To accomplish this, marriage and relationship education can be incorporated into CSE training and professional development opportunities. The training opportunities should address the importance of healthy relationships between custodial and non-custodial parents, how this relates to better child outcomes, and what CSE staff members can be doing to encourage healthy relationships between parents with whom they interact. Trainings can be made available on an ongoing basis, and caseworkers can learn practical skills and be provided with up-to-date tools. They should also be provided with a clear explanation for why these trainings are a good use of their time and how participation in trainings will help them to achieve agency goals.

One option that is available nationwide is the use of Cooperative Extension educators.<sup>12</sup> Cooperative Extension educators provide programs and services that address critical issues relating to families, youth, and communities, including those that work to strengthen co-parenting relationships. CSE agencies have access to Cooperative Extension educators that can help facilitate trainings, or connect CSE staff with local resources that can help them achieve their goals of strengthening co-parenting and family relationships. Cooperative Extension educators can work with CSE agencies to show them how to incorporate relationship-strengthening activities and strategies directly into their services. For example, the Healthy Relationship

and Marriage Education Training, a multi-state Cooperative Extension program (<http://www.hrmet.org>), aims to train child welfare professionals how to bolster family relationships via integration of relationship education into their work. This type of training can be done over the course of one day, or for a couple of hours a day for several weeks. The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families (<http://healthymarriageandfamilies.org>) provides training and technical assistance that can be used to teach staff members from a variety of agency backgrounds how to integrate relationship education into their existing services.

## **3. Identify and/or create tools to assist caseworkers with marriage and relationship education integration.**

Caseworkers may not always be able to spend a sufficient amount of time with parents to provide them with the level of support that they need to truly make a difference. Therefore, it is important to provide caseworkers with aids that will assist them in making referrals and enable them to relay main points to their clients. This can be done through something simple like a flyer that lists marriage and relationship education programs and services that are available.\* CSE caseworkers could be made aware of such resources so that they can share them with clients. Alternatively, caseworkers could provide clients with simple tip sheets that describe ways to strengthen their co-parenting relationships and successfully manage conflict with the other parent. Agencies need to be realistic about integration goals and the ability to achieve them. Even in cases where full integration is not feasible, tools and resources

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\* For example, online classes are available for the "Co-Parenting for Successful Kids" program (<http://marketplace.unl.edu/extension/cpsfk.html>), which was developed by Cooperative Extension at the University of Nebraska.

that promote healthy co-parenting relationships that can be easily distributed to clients may still be useful and beneficial.

#### **4. Document, share, and celebrate success stories.**

When caseworkers learn about a success via service evaluation or even just word of mouth—whether it be small or large—they should document this and share it with others. People in the agency will appreciate hearing how the work they are doing has benefited their clients. People in the community will appreciate knowing that the agency is doing its job to strengthen families and improve child and family adjustment. This may also encourage various constituents to further support integration efforts. CSE agencies should also recognize caseworkers for their efforts and referrals. Praising a CSE worker for their creative use of healthy marriage and relationship education in their work can be a great way to encourage continued use of those strategies. When employees are not recognized for their efforts in one area, they tend to focus on other areas that are more rewarding; praise encourages them to keep going.

In sum, although many people might not readily think that CSE agencies can benefit from the inclusion of healthy marriage and relationship education, integration of relationship education into CSE services may actually help staff members to achieve program goals. If, through integration of relationship education into their existing services, CSE agencies can address the relationship issues many co-parents experience that often lead to withholding of child support and blocked visitations, then they may be able to better achieve their primary goal—to ensure that financial and medical support are made available to children.

### **A Case Example**

A non-custodial parent had not paid any child support to his family for over five years. The reason was because he was angry with the custodial parent for not letting him visit his son and for moving to another state without letting him know. He registered to participate in an eight-week healthy marriage and relationship course with his new girlfriend and soon began to realize how his past actions contributed to losing his privileges to see his son. This realization encouraged him to begin making child support payments and send letters (via the CSE agency) to the custodial parent, stating that he wanted to apologize for his behavior and see his son. After a period of time, he was given an opportunity to see his son and reached an agreement to have the son stay with him in the summers. Both biological parents improved their co-parenting, visitation started, and child support obligations began being met.

Source: Welch, D., Derrington, D., & Clune, M. (2010). *A win-win partnership: MRE and child support enforcement*

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## Notes

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