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Framing the Future of Co-parenting Evaluation Research for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network

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Framing the Future of Co-parenting
Evaluation Research for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network

Introduction

In 2012, the US Census Bureau reported that more than four out of 10 babies were born to unwed parents, which means the rate of children born to unwed parents has more than quadrupled since 1960. Among women between the ages of 20 and 24, the number of babies born to unwed parents is more than 6 out of 10. The trend toward unwed parenthood disproportionately impacts poorer children (and adults), adding to the social and economic disadvantages they face (Cherlin, 2009). High levels of family instability negatively affect many children's social, cognitive, and emotional development (Amato, 2005; Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010; Brown, 2010; Cherlin, 2009; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Indeed, children growing up with married parents fare better in almost every aspect of their development when compared to children growing up in single-parent households or unstable families (McLanahan & Sandefuer, 1994; Shah et al., 2011; Waldfogel et al., 2010). There is some recent evidence that the disadvantages of single parenthood begin even before the child is born, associated with low birth weight and premature delivery (Alio et al., 2010; 2011). The risks associated with single parenthood and family instability challenge prevention scientists to develop new strategies for helping young mothers and fathers forge a reasonable co-parenting relationship for the sake of themselves and their children (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006).

The difficulties facing young economically disadvantaged unwed parents and their children – who are referred to as "fragile families" for lack of a better phrase – require a coordinated and constructive response from family focused practitioners, researchers and policy makers. Over the past decade, the federal government has been experimenting with educational programs directly intended to help at-risk couples strengthen romantic relationships, increase responsible fathering, and improve co-parenting cooperation (Hawkins, 2013). A common approach taken to the problem of unwed parenthood has been to help couples form healthy relationships and enduring marriages through a range of relationship education programs. However, early efforts to date have seen only marginal success.

Traditionally, the institution of marriage has played an important role in society, helping to hold families together through difficult times. Because of the recent changes in how families are defined and constructed (Furstenberg, 2011), there is a need to develop new strategies – and perhaps new institutions – to help fathers and mothers learn to co-parent their children, regardless of whether or not they are married or romantically involved. Whatever those additional strategies are, they will need to build on a body of research indicating that the most salient predictor of father involvement is the quality of the father's relationship with the mother (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010; Sobolewski & King, 2005). This finding is directly relevant to the development of prevention and intervention programs for fragile families. Indeed there is emerging evidence from co-parenting intervention research which suggests that improvements in couples' relationship functioning are linked to positive father involvement and to positive outcomes for children (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010). These findings suggest that adopting a co-parenting approach to involving fathers in the lives of their children is likely to pay off for all members of the family. In an effort to address the emerging need for additional systems of support for

young unmarried parents, the goals of this paper are to (a) review current research on co-parenting programs for fragile families and (b) develop a framework for the next generation of co-parenting programs that address the current and future needs of young mothers and fathers.

A Review of Research on Programs to Strengthen Families and Promote Family Stability

In this section, we review early evaluation research on family strengthening programs for at-risk individuals and couples. First, we briefly review a body of evaluation work focused on couple and relationship education (CRE) programs designed primarily to strengthen couple relationships. For the most part, couples in these programs are in committed romantic relationships. Co-parenting relationships are not necessarily distinct from couple relationship dynamics but most co-parenting programs do not make the assumption that the parents are married or together and some are designed explicitly for divorcing parents. Many of the lessons learned from CRE research are relevant to the development of co-parenting programs. Then we review the research on co-parenting programs primarily designed to help parents develop the necessary skills to work together for the wellbeing of their child. As will become clear, the research on CRE is more extensive and advanced at this time than the research on co-parenting; as such, a short review of this literature is a good place to begin this "research brief" on co-parenting. (For a review of the body of work evaluating responsible fatherhood programs see the brief written by the FRPN Responsible Fatherhood Workgroup.)

Evaluation of Couple and Relationship Education Programs

A "first generation" of research on the effectiveness of CRE programs produced more than 150 program evaluation studies between 1975 and 2005. Meta-analytic reviews of this body of work generally found modest, positive effects of CRE on communication skills and relationship quality (see Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, & Albright, 2012), but few of these studies examined program effectiveness with at-risk, lower income samples. Fortunately, an emerging "second generation" of research has given increased attention to examining the feasibility and effectiveness of CRE programs among less-educated and lower income participants. Although this body of work is still maturing, we briefly review and summarize emerging results here.

Beginning in about 2005, federal policymakers began investing significant funds in CRE demonstration programs targeted primarily to low-income, less-educated couples, who are at higher risk for relationship instability and who have the least access to CRE. Practitioners have been going through a steep learning curve to figure out how best to solve the challenges of recruiting and retaining disadvantaged participants, but many have made significant progress (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012). Researchers have been examining the effectiveness of these programs over the last decade. For example, in a rigorous, multi-site, large-scale RCT investigation, the *Building Strong Families* study examined the impact of CRE on low-income, unmarried couples having a child together (Wood et al., 2014). Three years after enrolling in the study, there appeared to be few effects of the program on

various relationship, parenting, couple, and individual wellbeing outcomes. One site—Oklahoma City—did show a significant, positive effect (20% increase) on family stability, and a reanalysis of the *BSF* data by Amato (in press) found small but positive program impacts among the most disadvantaged couples that participated in the program. Nevertheless, the ability of CRE programs to help unmarried parents remains in question. It is important to note that the primary goal of *BSF* was to increase the chances that unwed parents would remain together as couples; it seems plausible that the pro-marriage focus of the program may have adversely affected the co-parenting outcomes of couples who broke up.

Another rigorous, multi-site, large-scale, RCT investigation, the *Supporting Healthy Marriage* study, examined the impact of CRE on young low-income married parents (Hsueh et al., 2012). Results for *SHM* were somewhat more promising; at 12 months post enrollment, the program showed a consistent pattern of small but statistically significant positive effects on many aspects of couple relationships, including happiness, positive and negative communication patterns, warmth and support, and sense of stability - but not on co-parenting. The longer-term (30 months) impacts of the CRE in the *SHM* study were similar to the early impact findings, suggesting little deterioration (or growth) of early effects (Lundquist et al., 2014). The *SHM* findings are consistent with other rigorous but smaller-scale RCT studies that have found (a) positive effects on couple relationships and father involvement, (b) lower rates of children's problem behaviors (Cowan et al., 2009) and (c) lower divorce rates at 1-and 2-years post-program (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010; Stanley et al., in press).

Although these findings are mixed, Hawkins and Erickson (2014) recently reviewed the results of 19 rigorous RCT evaluation studies of CRE programs targeted to lower income samples (including the *BSF* and *SHM* studies). They found a small but statistically significant positive effect on relationship quality (d = .07) and reduced intimate partner violence (d = .05), but not on relationship stability or other couple outcomes. In addition, this meta-analysis identified 4 quasi-experimental studies (with non-randomized control groups) and 25 pre-post fieldwork studies (without a control-group comparison). Overall, these less rigorous studies produced larger (but still moderate), positive effects of CRE on couple outcomes, but should be interpreted cautiously in light of the weaker effects seen in the most rigorous studies.

In summary, research on CRE programs that have focused on helping disadvantaged couples establish stable and higher quality relationships has produced mixed results. There have been some important small successes, some noteworthy modest effects, but some disappointing no-difference findings as well. These mixed results are being interpreted in various ways. Some sense futility—believing the programs have not been effective enough to merit continued investment—and recommend alternative policy strategies for helping to stabilize families (Johnson, 2012) while others point to some encouraging initial successes and stress that we are still early in the process of learning how to help lower income families with these kinds of programs (Hawkins et al., 2013). Clearly, further research is needed to help better understand how some CRE programs are effective in helping lower income couples strengthen their relationships and increase family stability. Fortunately, an active group of talented scholars continues to labor in this important area of research. Moreover, the small successes observed so far for these kinds of programs suggest potential for helping couples with another important outcome: co-parenting.

Evaluation of Co-parenting Education Programs

Another emerging line of educational interventions has focused on improving co-parenting behavior—helping parents learn to cooperate effectively as parents on behalf of their children—regardless of family circumstances. These programs, which are designed to help couples strengthen their capacity to work together for the wellbeing of their child, have become increasingly important in light of the fact that most children will witness their parents separate before they reach their 18th birthday (Vespa et al., 2013). When CRE programs fail to forge an enduring bond between partners, co-parenting programs may help parents maintain some level of family stability for their children. Regardless of the status and quality of the couple relationship, children benefit from effective cooperation of their parents (McHale & Lindahl, 2011; McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012).[1] There are three types of co-parenting programs: those that focus on co-parenting within the context of a couple's committed romantic relationship; those that focus on co=parenting during and after a divorce; and those designed for unmarried couples whose relationship status is fragile, ambiguous, no longer romantic or virtually nonexistent. In this section we briefly review findings on each type of co-parenting couple, but give greater attention to the last category who are the least understood and perhaps the most in need of support.

Co-parenting Instruction in CRE Programs. Some CRE programs for intact couples include co-parenting instruction in their curricula, and a few studies have shown positive effects on co-parenting (e.g., Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010; Cowan et al., 2009; Shapiro, Nahm, Gottman, & Content, 2011). Kirkland et al. (2011) found in a small sample of Head Start parents in Alabama that CRE participants had less co-parenting conflict after the program than nonparticipants. Moreover, Adler-Baeder et al. (2013) found in a pre-post study with a large and diverse sample of lower income parents in Alabama that positive changes in couple relationships during a CRE program were associated with reductions in co-parenting conflict. The Hawkins and Erickson (2014) meta-analysis mentioned above, however, found that these programs, overall, do not have positive effects on co-parenting behavior with lower income parents, at least as assessed with rigorous, RCT studies. They did find moderate, positive effects in less rigorous fieldwork (pre-post) and quasi-experimental studies.

Conceptually and pragmatically, there is considerable merit in including co-parenting instruction in CRE programs. The ultimate purpose of CRE programs' efforts to strengthen couple relationships is to improve children's wellbeing. Good parenting is even more proximate a factor in child wellbeing than the parental relationship itself. Moreover, co-parenting is a common source of relationship conflict. Thus, dealing directly with co-parenting may reduce couple conflict. Also, CRE programs help individuals assess how healthy their relationships are and can lead to some deciding to end an unhealthy relationship. In these cases, cooperative co-parenting becomes the most important objective of the intervention. Pragmatically, co-parenting education can make use of the expanding CRE infrastructure for delivering educational programs for families. Moreover, greater integration of relationship and

[1] We acknowledge that co-parenting couples do not always include couples currently or formerly romantically involved. Co-parenting couples sometimes are made up of mothers/fathers and grandmothers/grandfathers, mothers/fathers and aunts/uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers, etc. (Gleason, Strozier, & Littlewood, 2011). However, here we place emphasis on the more common co-parenting relationship between mothers and fathers.

parenting education makes sense for many families (Hawkins, 2013). Nevertheless, programs focused primarily on cooperative co-parenting rather than the romantic relationship also are needed, especially for parents whose romantic relationships have ended (or are likely to end soon).

Co-parenting Education for Intact, New-Parent Couples. A few prevention scholars have developed and tested educational interventions primarily focused on co-parenting behaviors, although they have done so with samples of mostly married parents. As such, these programs bear resemblance to and overlap with CRE programs. Most notably, Mark Feinberg, with the Penn State Prevention Research Center, developed and tested the efficacy of the *Family Foundations* co-parenting program with expectant new parents. This is an 8-session (pre- and post-natal) universal intervention focused on emotional self-management, positive communication, conflict management, problem solving, and mutual support strategies that foster positive joint parenting. A series of published reports found moderate, positive effects upon completion of the program for treatment-group parents on self-reported co-parenting behavior, with less educated parents and those in less secure relationships benefitting the most from the program, as well as those who received a greater dose of the curriculum (Feinberg & Kan, 2008). Subsequent analyses at one-year post-intervention employing observational measures of co-parenting also found moderate positive effects (Feinberg, Kan, & Goslin, 2009). Three-year follow-up reports still found positive effects on co-parenting, and positive change in co-parenting was associated with positive change in child behavior and wellbeing (Feinberg, Jones, Kan, & Goslin, 2010; Solmeyer, Feinberg, Coffman, & Jones, 2013). This work now needs to be tested with couples in more fragile relationships.

Co-parenting Education for Divorcing Parents. Research on co-parenting grew during the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of increased divorce rates and problematic co-parenting (McHale & Lindahl, 2011), so it is not surprising that the largest body of educational interventions and corresponding evaluation research is focused on programs for divorcing parents. Most states have mandated a co-parenting program of some kind for divorcing parents (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). A meta-analytic review of 28 (court-mandated) divorcing parents program evaluation studies found evidence of small-to-moderate, positive effects on self-reported co-parenting behavior and other parenting outcomes (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011). Although, many important questions remain about the effectiveness of and ways to improve the quality of divorcing parents programs that likely reach 1-2 million parents each year, we argue that a primary focus for this brief and for the work of the FRPN should be on the much less investigated area of co-parenting programs for unmarried families, including adolescent parents. We note, however, that some education programs for divorcing parents do include and involve unmarried parents in their intervention efforts. If this trend gains momentum, there may be a merging of co-parenting programs for divorced and never-married couples in the near future and/or the development of programs targeted to never-married parents.

Co-parenting Education for Fragile Family Parents. The *Family Foundations* studies and the research documenting some success of divorcing parents programs are promising for co-parenting interventions, but they do not adequately address the crucial question of whether co-parenting programs can help parents and children in more disadvantaged circumstances who face greater risks of family instability and conflictual co-parenting. Only a few programs have targeted parents in unmarried,

fragile romantic relationships or single parents. Cox and Shirer (2009) evaluated the efficacy of the *Caring for My Family* program, which has a significant co-parenting component, with a sample of lower income individuals and couples and found a moderate, positive effect on self-reported co-parenting one week after the program for (non-randomized) treatment-group participants compared to control-group participants. Fagan and his colleagues (Fagan, Cherson, Brown, & Vecere, 2013) tested the efficacy of the *Understanding Dads* program in a small pilot study of mostly unmarried or divorced mothers. This 8-week program developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative is designed to improve the quality of the parental relationship for the sake of their children by increasing mothers' understanding of fathers and improving communication and cooperative co-parenting with the father. These researchers reported significant gains in co-parenting knowledge at the end of the program. This early pilot work is encouraging, but we are still in the infancy of co-parenting programs for fragile families.

Co-parenting Education for Never-married, Nonresident Fathers. Very few programs for never-married, nonresident fathers have addressed the father's relationship with the child's mother, even though parent conflict is one of the prime obstacles to their continued involvement. There are two kinds of programs targeted to fathers who are no longer romantically involved with the mother that may include co-parenting components. First, facilitation/mediation programs have shown some early encouraging results for reconnecting fathers to their children and promoting more regular child support payments (see McHale et al., 2012). These programs are designed to establish parenting plans or address visitation problems for nonresident fathers, sometimes connected to courts and child support enforcement agencies that establish and enforce formal child support orders. Second, many responsible fatherhood programs try to help nonresident fathers obtain visitation rights and become connected or reconnected with their children. Such programs are important to co-parenting, however, because they serve an important function as the gateway to helping many nonresident fathers become involved in their children's lives again or for a first time. That is, without programs to establish parenting plans and visitation rights, co-parenting would not even be a possibility for many nonresident fathers, especially never-married fathers with out-of-wedlock children. It is worth noting that some couples may need co-parenting education prior to establishing visitation and some may need a visitation order before they can begin to function as co-parents. Incorporating a co-parenting component into court supported visitation programs may have a positive pay off for all family members.

Co-parenting Education for Adolescent Parents. Another line of co-parenting intervention work focuses on the special circumstances and needs of unmarried adolescent and young adult parents, many of whom are growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. Paul Florsheim developed the *Young Parenthood Program* to help these parents develop the skills to maintain a positive, supportive co-parenting relationship in order to provide a stable, nurturing environment for their child. The 12-session program is designed to be delivered by trained clinicians within a variety of settings, utilizing an individualized, couple-focused format. In a pilot study of the program (Florsheim, Burrow-Sanchez, Minami, McArthur, Heavin, & Hudak, 2012), researchers found that treatment-group fathers were more engaged with their children and reported more positive co-parenting. For example, young mothers' changes in relationship competence predicted higher rates of fathers' nurturing behavior with their toddlers and higher rates of father's relationship satisfaction with their co-parenting partners, suggesting the value of a couples-approach to intervention. The program also was associated with

reductions in intimate partner violence, although this effect diminished over time (Florsheim, McArthur, Hudak, Heavin, & Burrow-Sanchez, 2011). Similarly, Fagan (2008) tested the efficacy of the *Minnesota Early Learning Design for Young Dads* program. This 5-session program is designed to teach young fathers about successful father involvement and co-parenting strategies with the mother (regardless of relationship status). The study documented self-reported improvements in father co-parenting as compared to fathers in a (non-randomized) comparison group (traditional childbirth education class).

Summary. The brevity of this review of co-parenting programs highlights the narrow limits of our current theory and empirical knowledge about efforts to help support cooperative co-parenting, regardless of family structure or circumstances. All parts of the co-parenting intervention field are missing an adequate research base.[2] Most have only a few studies for practitioners and policy makers to draw on for any guidance. In this situation, it would seem difficult to prioritize the areas for greatest research attention. However, given the multiple layers of disadvantage and risk that children in fragile families experience and the higher rates of father absence and family instability they face, programs to support cooperative co-parenting for fragile family couples should be the first priority. Moreover, co-parenting education is needed to fill an important gap in current social policy. As previously noted in this review, substantial public resources are being invested in CRE programs to help fragile family couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages. In addition, substantial government funds are targeted to responsible fatherhood programs to strengthen father-child bonds. Most states now mandate co-parenting education for divorcing parents. Other extensive public efforts not reviewed here target strengthening the mother-child relationship and maternal parenting. This set of interventions captures the dyadic components of family systems but not the triadic nature of families (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). While diverse approaches to strengthening families are valuable, programs that target the mother-father-child triad, especially in families at high risk for instability, certainly have a key role to play.

The Next Generation of Co-parenting Research

Up to this point, we have reviewed programs designed to help couples -- including economically disadvantaged, unmarried parents -- provide their children with more stable family lives. In the next section of this paper, we frame an agenda for future evaluation research on co-parenting programs. The goal of this agenda is to provide practitioners with evidence-based guidance on how to help fragile families manage the challenges of co-parenting under unstable and stressful circumstances.

This research agenda draws from the principles of implementation science designed to bridge the gap between knowledge and know-how, between understanding and practice (Ogden & Fixsen et al., 2014). Implementation science addresses the issue of how to develop evidence-based programs that can be effectively integrated into real world settings, which are often idiosyncratic, rapidly evolving, and constrained by financial limitations. The traditional approach to implementation has been to transfer

[2] We acknowledge and appreciate ongoing, rigorous investigations supported by ACF funding of educational programs that will produce knowledge about co-parenting outcomes, such as the PACT, CSPED, and FaMLE projects.

evidence-based programs from the laboratory to the community "whole cloth" with the goal of maintaining "fidelity to the model." More recently, implementation scientists have adopted a more flexible, organic approach that is oriented toward adapting programs to meet the demands of the setting (Hoagwood et al., 2013). The challenge, of course, is to find ways to integrate programs into existing systems while retaining the integrity of its most important components or "active ingredients." This requires that we (a) have a clear understanding of how our programs work and (b) have effective strategies for integrating programs (or components thereof) into community settings.

The agenda outlined below is an ambitious list of research priorities intended to advance the "science" of co-parenting practice and enhance our capacity for helping young co-parenting couples. Drawing from this list, researchers and practitioners can identify which priorities resonate with their own interests and local needs. The agenda is to be addressed incrementally, one step at a time, by helping community-based co-parenting programs become more amenable to research and by initiating small but well-designed studies that will promote our understanding of how to implement new or newly-adapted programs.

A Proposed Agenda For Implementation Research on Co-parenting Practice

In this section we discuss five key recommendations for research on co-parenting programs. These recommendations are based on our experience of conducting co-parenting program research, conducting meta-analyses, and our understanding of the tenets of implementation science.

Identify critical components or active ingredients in co-parenting counseling/education. Most of the research on co-parenting programs is designed to address the basic question of whether a program – as a whole – works. This research is useful – it is important to know that a program works – but it is also useful to know *how* a program works. Co-parenting programs tend to include an array of educational and relationship-focused components, such as "active listening," "problem solving" or "stress reduction." To date, there has been no research designed to identify the "active ingredients" or critical components of co-parenting interventions. Research that tells us how a program works can help practitioners become more efficient and effective. If they understand the "active ingredients" of a program they will know how to focus their time and sharpen their skills.

One way for researchers to identify how programs work is to conduct small-scale comparative effectiveness trials that randomly assign co-parents to different interventions (or intervention modules) and then test for pre-post program changes in specific, targeted co-parenting behavior and, if possible, include a no-treatment control group. This sort of research can help us evaluate specific hypotheses about the sorts of activities (and associated skills) we think will be most useful for co-parenting couples. For example, we do not know if it is helpful to teach co-parenting couples to work out their conflicts through constructive communication or to provide stress reduction and acceptance skills training. Many basic questions about how to teach young couples to become constructive and cooperative have not been adequately tested in either laboratory or community-based settings. We advocate for continuing this work but doing so in a way that brings the lab to the community by working closely with community-based institutions, including clinics and schools.

To illustrate the value of comparative effectiveness research, we will use an example from the CRE literature. Rogge et al. (2013) compared three different relationship enhancement approaches to a no-treatment control group among a relatively modest sample of engaged and newlywed couples. Two of the conditions included skill-based models (PREP and CARE). In the third group, couples watched a series of five "relationship" movies and then discussed their reactions with each other (no counselor) using some written guidance provided from the research team. The goal of this group was to raise the couples' awareness of their relationship issues. Couples in all three interventions did better than couples who either declined treatment or who could not be scheduled for an initial appointment. However, it was somewhat surprising that couples assigned to the relationship awareness condition did just as well or better than couples assigned to the skill-based programs. The primary finding that "less can be more" is good news for prevention scientists working with low-risk couples. While these findings may not pertain directly to the issue of co-parenting with fragile families, this study challenges us to test our fundamental assumptions about what works in relationship education.

Test specific modes of program delivery. In addition to conducting comparative effectiveness trials to identify the critical components of co-parenting programs, it is also important to compare the effectiveness of different strategies for delivering services. Co-parenting programs are administered in different doses, using different modalities (e.g. couple focused, individual focused) at different stages of the parenting process (e.g., prenatal, early childhood) and in different settings (e.g., courts, clinics, homes)[3]. For example, co-parenting program developers (including those in the FRPN) have mixed opinions regarding the feasibility and efficacy of providing co-parenting education/support to: (1) the individual couple or dyad; (2) groups of couples; (3) gender-specific groups of individual parents (fathers or mothers only); or (4) mixed-gender groups of individual parents. It seems plausible that these different approaches to co-parenting may be more or less useful for different groups of young parents. When we require that couples participate in co-parenting programs together, we exclude those parents who cannot or will not meet with their partner. These parents might benefit from an approach to co-parenting education that allows them to participate without their child's other parent. Rather than assume the superiority of one mode of delivery over another, we need research that comparatively tests the efficacy of different approaches with the ultimate goal of identifying what works best for specific groups and subgroups. Having a diverse set of approaches makes sense given the vast diversity of co-parenting couples with different needs and proclivities. Moreover, previous research on "common factors" in psychotherapy research suggests that *how* an intervention is delivered can be as important as *what* is being delivered (Snyder & Halford, 2012). Thus, there is some value in determining the relative effectiveness of different approaches, particularly if some approaches may not be effective at all.

We have been unable to identify any research testing different approaches to the administration of co-

[3] Another set of variants pertains to the role, status and qualities of the practitioner. The practitioner's training, theoretical orientation, gender, race/ethnicity and interpersonal acumen may differentially affect the progress of individuals, couple or groups. Examining these practitioner variants is important but complex. For this reason, we believe that the five recommendations outlined in this brief are a good place to start. Examining practitioner effects will be important to include in the next wave of studies on co-parenting programs.

parenting programs, such as a study that experimentally varies dose or setting. Moreover, there have not been sufficient numbers of co-parenting studies to conduct a meta-analysis examining differences in treatment effects based on modality. However, there are some closely related studies, which provide guidance regarding next steps. For instance, Pinquart and Teubert (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of parenting programs across the transition to parenthood and examined the moderating effect of modality (dose, timing, individual vs. group approach) on parenting outcomes. In summary, they found that: (1) medium-length and shorter-length parenting programs had stronger effects than longer programs; (2) programs using an individual approach had stronger effects than programs that used a group approach; and (3) programs that included both pre- and postnatal components had stronger effects than programs delivered during one phase alone. (See also Hawkins et al., 2012, for similar modality moderator analyses in a meta-analysis of CRE programs.) While these findings cannot be directly generalized to co-parenting programs, they underscore the value of testing our assumptions about what approach will be most effective.

We believe that questions about how co-parenting programs can be most effectively delivered warrant our immediate attention. For example, the surge in home visiting programs for pregnant women creates an opportunity for integrating co-parenting support services for young mothers and their partners into the training of home visitors. Thus, there is a pressing need for research to test if a home visiting approach could support positive co-parenting outcomes among fragile families (Ammerman, NIH grant in progress). Second, because of the significant challenges of recruiting young mothers and fathers into co-parenting programs, we believe it is important to compare the effects of brief programs (6 sessions or less), that likely have less attrition, to the effects of medium length programs (8-20 session). While there is some evidence to suggest that medium-length programs may be most effective, the advantage of shorter programs is that they can be more easily integrated into existing systems of care (including home visiting programs).

The issue of how to deliver services is complicated and highly dependent on the particularities of specific settings and local population needs. We may never definitively identify which modality is optimal – because what's best almost always depends on the circumstances. However, the process of testing alternative strategies can help frame the parameters of acceptable approaches to co-parenting education and support. These parameters will help us make informed decisions about how to tailor co-parenting programs to specific groups.

Test methods to increase accessibility and attractiveness of co-parenting programs. The challenges of recruiting fragile families into psychoeducational programs are formidable (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012). Generally speaking, prevention services are hard to sell to almost any young audience; young expectant parents are a particularly difficult audience because they are usually stressed about school and work (or the lack of it) and getting ready for parenthood (Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). Young couples decline to participate in co-parenting programs for a variety of reasons: (1) they believe their relationship is good enough and they do not need help; (2) they acknowledge relationship problems but do not believe that counseling or education will help; (3) they do not want to share their personal relationship issues with strangers; (4) they are busy with other more pressing matters and do not have the time (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). As such, co-parenting programs are often under-enrolled and

retaining participants can be difficult, expensive, and labor intensive (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012; Wood et al., 2014). As discussed previously, different approaches to co-parenting education and support may attract somewhat different types of co-parents, so it is important for researchers and practitioners to be aware of how a program's focus or mode of delivery may affect recruitment.

Researchers and providers have utilized a number of strategies for increasing enrollment and retention among fragile families attending co-parenting programs, including: (1) providing concrete incentives to participants; (2) maintaining flexible hours of operation that include evening and weekend meeting times; (3) offering the option of providing in-home services; and (4) work with community stakeholders to increase buy-in and generate program endorsement through social networks (Dumka et al, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2007; Pregulman et al., 2011). While these strategies seem intuitively correct, they have not been empirically tested. Because many co-parenting programs report relatively low rates of participation, we believe it is important to conduct research designed to identify ways to increase the appeal and accessibility of co-parenting support/education. Research on recruitment might compare: (1) different approaches to incentivizing participation; (2) different strategies for promoting father involvement in prenatal care; or (3) the appeal of different modes of intervention, including group versus couple focused or clinic-based versus home-based. Recruitment and engagement are clearly related to the previous suggestion that researchers comparatively test different co-parenting strategies. It seems plausible that some differences in modality will be more attractive than others from the outset. High rates of recruitment do not necessarily translate into high rates of efficacy, but high rates of efficacy are problematic, if not meaningless, when recruitment is low.

New possibilities for engaging couples in co-parenting programs continue to emerge and it is important for researchers and practitioners to remain attentive to the opportunities that arise as policies and practices change. For example, there is recent interest in creating state policies that encourage or require unmarried couples to establish visitation plans to help insure that fathers have access to their children (Tach et al., 2010). These plans are often issued through family courts, which could become valuable partners in co-parenting education by providing a new channel for recruitment. It seems likely that visitation and parenting plans for unmarried fathers could be more successfully implemented when both parents are engaged in the process of negotiating their terms. One possible approach to testing this hypothesis would be to randomly assign some parents filing visitation motions or receiving visitation orders to a co-parenting education program. Follow-up data collection might focus on paternal engagement in childrearing and/or the quality of co-parenting relations.

Examine adaptations of promising interventions for use with fragile families. Co-parenting program developers are just beginning to address the issue of "adaptability" or whether a program developed for one group can be effectively modified for use with another group (Parra et al., 2012; Barrera & Castro, 2006). For example, *Family Foundations*, the co-parenting program, which has been found to have strong effects in supporting positive co-parenting among married middle-class couples (discussed above in Part 2), is currently being modified for use with disadvantaged populations facing different co-parenting challenges. One group of clinical researchers is testing the use of *Family Foundations* with a sample of young unmarried couples (Lewin et al., 2012) and another group is testing whether this program can be delivered by home visitors (Ammerman et al., in progress). Research that

modifies and adapts existing programs helps us avoid the common tendency to "reinvent the wheel." While there is certainly value in building local programs from the ground up – and sometimes this is necessary – we endorse a model of dissemination that is oriented toward the adaptation of existing co-parenting programs that have some evidence of efficacy. Generally, successful adaptations of intervention programs involve finding the right balance between fit and fidelity by making thoughtful, appropriate modifications while preserving the theoretical and practical "essence" of the model.

Focus on diversity among couples in evaluations. The population of fragile families is large and diverse and it seems safe to assume that different types of couples will have different needs with respect to co-parenting education and support. For example, a 15-year-old adolescent couple may need a different approach to co-parenting than a 20-year-old young adult couple; a high-conflict couple may require a different set of skills than a "disengaged" couple; an impoverished African American couple in Milwaukee may need a different level of support than a White working-class couple in Salt Lake City. However, it is also plausible that some co-parenting education and support services may be generically useful across different groups of fragile families.

Because we are still in the earliest phases of co-parenting program development, we know little about the particular needs of specific couple types, defined by risk status or demographic factors or value of employing a more generic approach. What little we know is extrapolated from meta-analyses and other types of studies examining the effects of parenting programs and relationship enhancement programs. For example, there is some evidence that some programs may have stronger effects on high-risk couples (Amato, in press; Hawkins et al., 2013). However, there is also evidence that programs that teach general communication skills training can be effective (improve outcomes) for both distressed and non-distressed couples, including couples at risk for aggressive behavior (Blanchard et al., 2009; Florsheim et al., 2011). These findings raise hopes about the potential role of broad-based co-parenting programs in addressing some of the significant risks facing fragile families, including intimate partner violence, high levels of maternal stress, and substance abuse.

There are several ways for researchers to examine how co-parenting programs might be more or less relevant for specific groups of young co-parents. One approach is to focus on a particular group (based on demographic status or psychological profile) and test different approaches to co-parenting support. For example, one might propose that high-conflict couples would benefit from a program that helps them resolve their conflicts more constructively. However, it could also be argued that these high-risk couples would be better off learning to "let go" of conflicts and focus on mutual support, acceptance, and shared parenting goals. At this point, we do not have the evidence to make well-informed decisions about some very important clinical and developmental issues. There are different ways to address this problem.

Continuing with the preceding example, a research design that randomly assigns high-conflict couples to different curricula for managing interpersonal strife (e.g., problem solving versus stress reduction) is a straightforward approach to addressing some fundamental theoretical issues that have pressing clinical implications. This sort of comparative effectiveness research that targets specific groups of at-risk couples will help us address the question of "what works for whom?" A somewhat different approach to

addressing that same question would be to recruit a large and diverse sample of couples, administer a single co-parenting education program to all of them and then test for the moderating effects of demographic and/or psychological profiles on outcomes. Both approaches could help identify how to address the particular needs of specific couple types.

In section two, we discussed the role of co-parenting education programming across a variety of family contexts, including residential and nonresidential unmarried couples. The growing diversity of family types has made the development of co-parenting programs more challenging because we know that "what works" for committed co-residing couples might not work as well with co-parents who are no longer speaking. Differences in relationship quality may suggest different starting points for co-parenting education. As indicated earlier, a father who has no contact with his children may need help establishing his rights to visitation before he can reasonably address co-parenting issues with his "partner." In this instance, a father-focused approach to co-parenting education might seem advisable as a first step. Once a visitation plan is established, it may be beneficial for the "disengaged" co-parents to work together (as a couple) on communicating about parenting issues and concerns. This example raises the issue of "programmatic sequencing" (i.e., where to begin?). The issue of "sequencing" may also be relevant to addressing some of the recruitment and engagement challenges noted earlier. For example, some fathers may be amenable to participating in a program that is "front loaded" with a job coaching/placement component. Once engaged, these fathers may be open to addressing other co-parenting issues – such as how to communicate effectively – that might have initially seemed uninteresting or intimidating.

A note on outcome measurement. The research agenda outlined in the previous section focuses on exploring some critical issues in the development and delivery of co-parenting programs, issues related to focus, modality, engagement/recruitment, and accommodating to the complexities of couple types. We have not focused on the issue of measuring program outcomes. While critically important for knowing whether a program is effective, a lengthy examination of this challenge is beyond the scope of this brief. There are three common components of co-parenting program outcomes, however, which we touch upon very briefly here. Readers are referred to other sources for more information about the assessment of co-parenting program outcomes (McHale et al., 2012; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

The first and most directly relevant component of outcome measurement is how well a program helps couples work together to support their child(ren). This phrase –"work together to support the child" – defines the concept of co-parenting, but what this means can be operationalized and measured in a wide variety of ways (McHale et al., 2012). It is not our intent to review or recommend measures of co-parenting, but we want to acknowledge that some excellent measures have been developed (Feinberg et al., 2012; McHale, 2011) and suggest that more work is needed to create and validate measures that can adequately assess co-parenting across the vast diversity of family structures and circumstances.

The second component of outcome measurement is parental functioning (such as time with child, behavior toward child, financial support for child, attitudes about parenting). This component is important because co-parenting programs are expected to improve the quality of parenting and parent-

child relations. Again, it is not our intent to review or recommend specific parenting measures, but we encourage researchers and practitioners to think carefully about what they expect their programs to achieve with respect to the issue of parenting. There are important conceptual differences in how parenting is measured and clarity of expected outcome will help determine and sharpen a program's focus. For example, if a program is expected to increase a father's capacity for nurturing behavior, identifying nurturance as a targeted outcome has concrete implications for the nature of program activities and the type of fathering behavior and attitudes to be assessed.

The third possible component of outcome measurement is child functioning, which is important if we expect co-parenting programs to have a positive impact on child development. The literature strongly suggests that positive co-parenting and parenting have direct effects on child functioning (Grych & Fincham, 2001; Teubert & Pinquart, 2011), but there has been little research that directly tests the impact of co-parenting programs on children. Unfortunately, the assessment of child functioning tends to be very expensive and beyond capacity of many clinical programs. However, there are several well validated measures of child functioning that rely on parent report (such as the BITSEA and the CBCL). These measures will help build the case that the effort and expense spent in helping co-parenting couples improve their relationship can have an important, enduring impact on child wellbeing. And evidence that co-parenting and father involvement interventions improve the lives of children and adolescents are highly relevant to policy decisions about whether to fund and expand such programs.

The complex lives of "fragile families" provide family researchers with a number of challenges and difficult choices when it comes to designing, implementing, and testing co-parenting programs. This research agenda outlines some key issues that we consider to be important for facilitating the development of flexible and effective programs for supporting fragile families. As indicated in our introduction, we believe there is a need to create new forms of institutional support for young fathers designed to help them remain constructively engaged with their families. A well-designed system for providing co-parenting education that can be effectively implemented in real world settings would help fragile families meet the significant challenges of raising children within increasingly fluid family structures. This "brief" was written to provide a rudimentary road map for guiding the next round of co-parenting program studies designed to answer the fundamental question of what works for fragile families?

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