

Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families

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Program Development

- The development of this program was based on:
 - Research from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study at Princeton and Columbia.
 - Research-based marriage education programs.
 - Research on relationship skills for African-Americans.
 - Input from low-income parents in focus groups.
 - Research from the MEE Report: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation.
- Program curriculum has three tracks:
 - Couples with a mutual interest in exploring the possibility of formalizing their commitment through marriage.
 - Unmarried fathers interested in making a formal commitment to a mature relationship that could result in marriage.
 - Unmarried mothers interested in making a formal commitment to a mature relationship that could result in marriage.
- Intended population is low-income, never married African-American parents, between the age of 18 and 35.
- Facilitators are trained and often married couples.
- Mentors, or married couples who are similar and race and background, serve as positive role-models, guides, and sources of support.

Eight Weekly Sessions Address

- Stages of healthy families
- Values and skills
- Realities of marriage
- Conflict management
- Respectful communication and listening
- Skills for relationship maintenance and keeping love alive
- Managing major issues and conflicts
- Reflecting on current and future commitment

Guiding Principles

- Healthy adult relationships benefit parents, children and community.
- Children receive economic, legal, psychological and social benefits when raised in a stable family.
- Marriage is not appropriate for or desired by everyone.
- Program is open and respectful.
- Participation is voluntary.

- Facilitators are resources and guides, not experts.
- A model of healthy and safe relationships based on respect and equality is promoted.
- Anger is normal and conflict is expected. However, violence is neither natural nor acceptable.
- Race, culture, socioeconomic status and gender have an impact on the health of the relationship. Issues must be dealt with in a culturally relevant style.
- There are many barriers to marriage (e.g. employment, education, incarceration, substance abuse, etc.). These issues should be addressed individually through appropriate social service referrals.

Goals and Objectives For Facilitators

- Help couples make relationship decisions designed to stabilize their families.
- Create a safe environment for this population.
- Promote honest discussion, skill development, self-discovery and emotional growth.
- Prepare for marriage.
- Manage relationships effectively.
- For couples: Gain knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to develop and maintain a healthy marriage.
- For mothers/fathers for whom marriage is not a current option: Learn to work together respectfully for their children.

Overarching Goals

- Promote understanding of what it takes to be part of a healthy relationship in which both express sincere commitment to each other and their children.
- Promote the well-being of low-income children by encouraging healthy relationships between their biological parents.

Format of the Program

- Small groups: Group discussion, handouts, role play, and practicing.
- Experiential.
- Affirm the participant's expertise.
- Allow participants to form their own conclusions based on what they have learned.

Information obtained from:

Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development. (n.d.). Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families: Facilitator Guide. Baltimore, MD: Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development.

Family Connections in Alabama

- Approximately 120 participants in both urban and rural locations.
- Focused on couple relationships among low-income, unmarried parents.
- Measured outcomes before, during, and just after classes.
- Accepted parents who were romantically involved and those who were not, with children up to three years old.

Purpose of Family Connections

- Increase the level of father involvement.
- Improve the quality of the co-parenting relationship.
- Help parents understand how their relationships affect their children.
- Help parents to make relationship decisions and to decide whether marriage is appropriate.
- Promote cooperation between parents.

Family Connections Program

- Utilized the Caring for my Family (CFMF) curriculum, which involved four modules.
- Facilitators presented at least 10 of the 24 lessons, either individually at home or in groups, and adapted the lessons for the needs of their group.
- Modules focused on the role of the father, self-care, communication, and building a strong family.
- Participants were recruited primarily from those already involved in activities at the site, but also from Healthy Start, fatherhood programs and welfare-to-work services.
- Also involved extensive case management to recruit participants, monitor their participation and screen for abuse.

Recommendations Resulting from Family Connections Study

- Emphasizing benefits to children was a useful recruitment tool.
- Since participants were largely female, recruitment should involve direct outreach to male partners, rather than relying on females to convince their partners to attend.
- Small incentives improved participation.
- Child care, transportation and hot meals improved attendance.
- Group settings should be used instead of one-to-one settings.
- Facilitation teams should include one male and one female.
- Curriculum should be adapted to meet the culture, language level, and educational level of the participants.
- Participants preferred more interactive and experiential activities.

Participant's Response to Family Connections

- Participants reported that the program had helped them to communicate with their partners, deal with anger and conflict, and build their parenting skills.
- They enjoyed the opportunity to talk about relationships and learn from others.
- Facilitators felt that participants had improved communication and changed their attitudes about relationships and co-parenting.⁴¹

Information Compiled from:

Adler-Baeder, F., Jensen, L., Pflieger, J., Higginbotham, B., Armstrong, S., & Long, A. (2004). Evaluating a marriage education program for low-resource families: The *Family Connections in Alabama* project. Presented to the 2004 NCFR Annual Conference: Orlando, FL.

and

Mincy, R., Pouncy, H., Reichert, D., & Richardson, P. (2004). Fragile Families in Focus: How low-income never married parents perceive relationships and marriage, full report. State of Louisiana, Louisiana Division of Administration: Maximus. Retrieved December 16, 2004 from <http://www.state.la.us/tanf/Fragile%20Families%20Final%20Report.pdf>.