

OPRE Report  
2012-28B

# *The* **BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROJECT**

**The Long-Term  
Effects of Building  
Strong Families:  
A Relationship  
Skills Education  
Program for  
Unmarried Parents**



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**November 2012**





**OPRE Report Number:**  
2012-28B

**Contract Number:**  
233-02-0056

**Mathematica Reference Number:**  
08935.156

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# **The Long-Term Effects of Building Strong Families: A Relationship Skills Education Program for Unmarried Parents**

## **Executive Summary**

November 2012

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proportion of children born to unmarried parents continues to increase. Currently, more than 4 out of every 10 children born in the United States have unmarried parents. Although many unmarried parents live together when their children are born, their relationships are often tenuous and most end within a few years of the child’s birth. Therefore, most of these children are raised in households that do not include both of their biological parents. If interventions can improve the quality of unmarried parents’ relationships and increase the likelihood that they remain together, these interventions might also improve the well-being of their children. Thus, one possible approach to improving child well-being is strengthening the relationships of low-income couples through relationship skills education.

The Building Strong Families (BSF) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, evaluated this kind of approach. The project developed, implemented, and tested voluntary programs that offer relationship skills education and other support services to unwed couples who are expecting or who have just had a baby. Eight organizations volunteered to be part of a rigorous evaluation designed to test a new strategy to help new, unmarried parents strengthen their relationships. These organizations implemented BSF programs around the country, complying with a set of research-based program guidelines.

Mathematica Policy Research conducted an experimental evaluation of the eight BSF programs. More than 5,000 interested couples were randomly assigned to either a group that could participate in the BSF program or a control group that could not. An earlier report examined the impact of BSF on couples’ outcomes about 15 months after they applied for the program. That analysis found that, when data for the eight programs were combined, BSF had no effect on couples’ relationship quality or the likelihood that they remained romantically involved or got married. However, the results varied across the eight programs included in the evaluation. The BSF program in Oklahoma City had a consistent

<b>The Eight BSF Programs</b>		
Location	Sponsor Organization	Number of Couples Randomly Assigned
Atlanta, Georgia	Georgia State University, Latin American Association	930
Baltimore, Maryland	Center for Urban Families	602
Baton Rouge, Louisiana	Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge	652
Florida: Orange and Broward counties	Healthy Families Florida	695
Houston, Texas	Healthy Family Initiatives	405
Indiana: Allen, Marion, and Lake counties	Healthy Families Indiana	466
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	Public Strategies, Inc.	1,010
San Angelo, Texas	Healthy Families San Angelo	342
<b>All Programs</b>		<b>5,102</b>

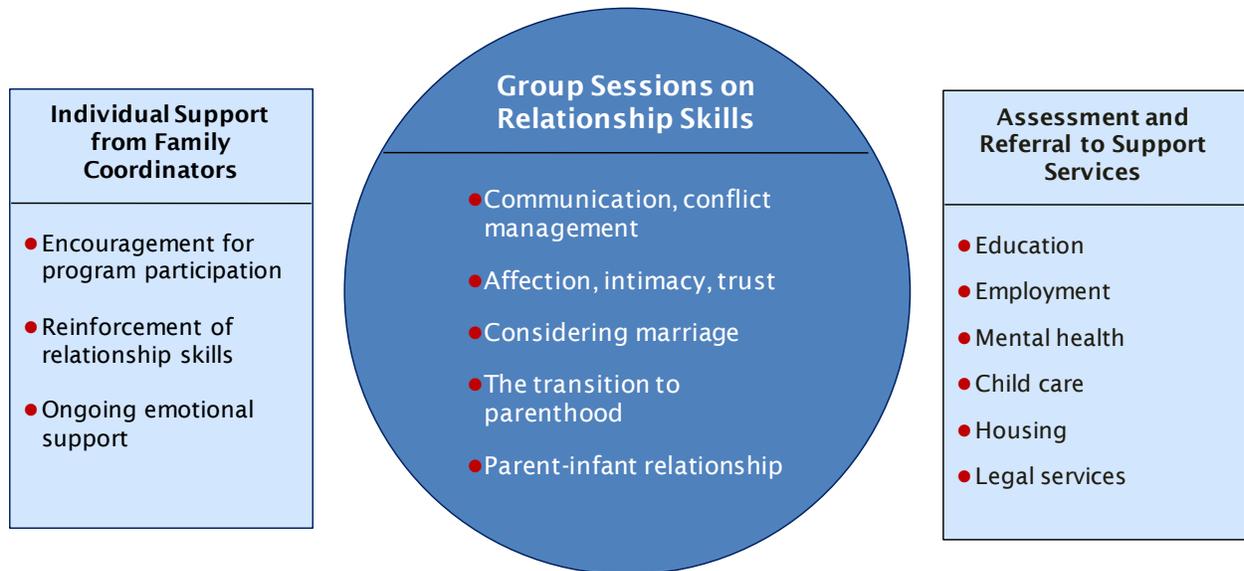
pattern of positive effects on relationship outcomes, while the Baltimore program had a number of negative effects. The other BSF programs generally had little or no effect on relationships.

## The BSF Program: Three Key Components

The BSF program was designed to serve unmarried, romantically involved couples who were expecting or had recently had a baby. Before determining eligibility for BSF, program staff screened couples for intimate partner violence; if there was evidence of violence that could be aggravated by BSF participation, the couple was ineligible for BSF and was referred to other services.

BSF programs had three components: (1) group sessions on relationship skills, (2) individual support from family coordinators, and (3) assessment and referral to support services (Figure ES.1). The core service was relationship skills education offered in group sessions. The BSF model did not require a specific curriculum to guide these sessions, but required programs to use a curriculum that covered key topics specified by the program model. The eight BSF programs chose one of three curricula developed for the study by experts who tailored their existing curricula for married couples to the needs of unmarried parents. The relationship skills education was designed to be intensive— involving 30 to 42 hours of group sessions. Not all couples who enrolled in BSF participated in these sessions, however. Overall, 55 percent of couples offered BSF services attended a group session. Among those who did attend, couples averaged 21 hours of attendance at these sessions. BSF offered other services to participating couples. Under the program model, a family coordinator assigned to each couple was to reinforce relationship skills, provide emotional support, and encourage participation in the group sessions. The family coordinator also assessed family members’ needs and referred them for appropriate support services. The average cost of BSF per couple was about \$11,000 and ranged from approximately \$9,000 to \$14,000 across the eight programs.

Figure ES.1. The BSF Program Model



## The Impact of BSF After Three Years

The BSF 36-month impact analysis examines the program's effects on three main groups of outcomes: (1) the status and quality of the couples' relationships, (2) parenting and father involvement, and (3) child well-being. Results are summarized below.

- **After three years, BSF had no effect on the quality of couples' relationships and did not make couples more likely to stay together or get married**

At the three-year follow-up, about 6 in 10 couples were still romantically involved.<sup>1</sup> Among those who were, BSF and control group couples reported similar levels of happiness in their romantic relationships, with both groups reporting average ratings of 8.3 on a 0-to-10 relationship happiness scale. BSF and control group couples also reported very similar levels of supportiveness and affection in their relationships, with average ratings of 3.4 on a 1-to-4 scale among romantically involved couples in both research groups. In addition, BSF and control group couples were equally likely to remain faithful to each other over the three-year follow-up period.

BSF did not improve couples' ability to manage their conflicts. Among the 8 in 10 couples who were still in regular contact at the three-year follow-up, the average score on a scale measuring the use of constructive conflict behaviors (such as keeping a sense of humor and listening to the other partner's perspective during disagreements) was the same for both BSF and control group couples (Table ES.1). Similarly, there was no difference between the research groups in the avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors such as withdrawing when there is a disagreement or allowing small disagreements to escalate.

BSF did not increase the likelihood that couples remained together after three years. In fact, it made this outcome somewhat less likely. Three years after study enrollment, 57 percent of BSF couples were still romantically involved, compared with 60 percent of control group couples, a difference that is marginally statistically significant (Figure ES.2). Similarly, BSF couples were somewhat less likely than control group couples to be living together (married or unmarried) at the three-year follow-up (47 percent versus 50 percent). However, BSF and control group couples were equally likely to be married to one another three years after study enrollment, with 21 percent of couples in both research groups married at this point.

- **BSF had no effect on couples' co-parenting relationship; it had small negative effects on some aspects of father involvement**

At the three-year follow-up, BSF and control group couples reported that their co-parenting relationships were of similarly high quality (Table ES.1). The average rating for both groups was 4.2

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the substantial amount of missing data for analyses of some relationship quality measures, the evaluation team assessed the potential risk of bias in these impact estimates using widely used standards developed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse. Analyses of measures based only on the 6 in 10 couples who were still romantically involved at the 36-month follow-up (relationship happiness and support and affection) meet these standards with reservations, indicating that there is a moderate risk of bias in these estimates. However, analyses of relationship quality measures based on the 8 in 10 couples who were still in regular contact (conflict management) and on all couples (fidelity), meet these standards without reservations, indicating that the risk of bias for these analyses is low. See the full report for more information.

**Table ES.1. Impacts of Building Strong Families at 36- Month Follow- Up**

Outcome	Statistical Significance of Estimated Impact
<b>Relationship Quality</b>	
Relationship happiness <sup>a</sup>	○
Support and affection <sup>a</sup>	○
Use of constructive conflict behaviors	○
Avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors	○
Neither member of the couple was unfaithful since random assignment	○
<b>Relationship Status</b>	
Romantically involved	—
Living together (married or unmarried)	—
Married	○
<b>Co- Parenting</b>	
Quality of co-parenting relationship	○
<b>Father’s Involvement and Parenting Behavior</b>	
Father lives with child	○
Father regularly spends time with child	— —
Father’s engagement with child	○
Father provides substantial financial support for raising child	—
Father’s parental responsiveness (observed) <sup>a</sup>	○
<b>Family Stability</b>	
Both parents have lived with child since birth	○
<b>Child Economic Well- Being</b>	
Family’s monthly income below poverty threshold	○
Family experienced difficulty meeting housing expenses during past year	○
Family receiving TANF or food stamps	○
<b>Child Socio- Emotional Development</b>	
Absence of behavior problems <sup>b</sup>	+ +
Emotional insecurity amid parental conflict	○

Source: BSF 36-month follow-up surveys and direct assessments, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

<sup>a</sup> Because of a high rate of attrition from the sample used for this analysis, there is a moderate risk of bias in these impact estimates. See the full report for more details.

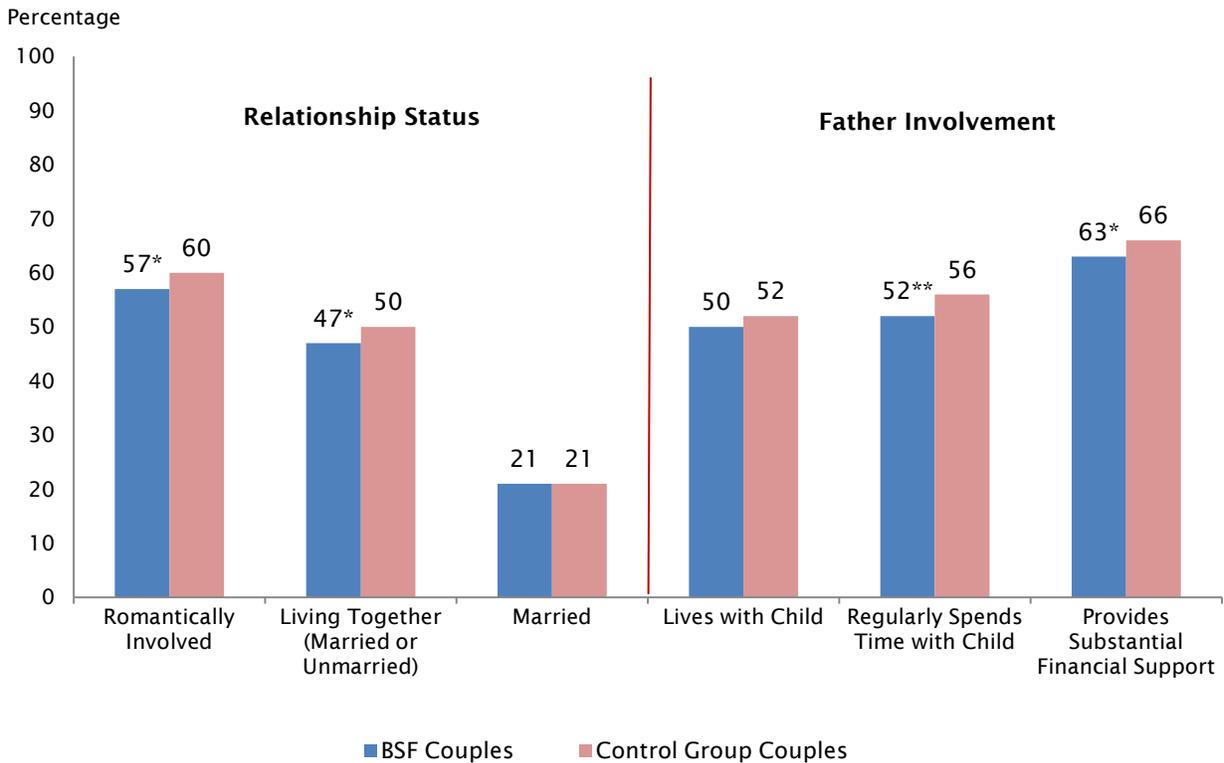
<sup>b</sup> Measure reverse coded so that a positive impact is in the desired direction.

○ No statistically significant impact.

+ + +/+ +/+ Statistically significant positive impact at the .01/.05/.10 level.

— — —/— —/— Statistically significant negative impact at the .01/.05/.10 level.

**Figure ES.2. Impact of BSF on Relationship Status and Father Involvement at 36 Months**



Source: BSF 36-month follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

\*\*\*/\*\*/\* Statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 level.

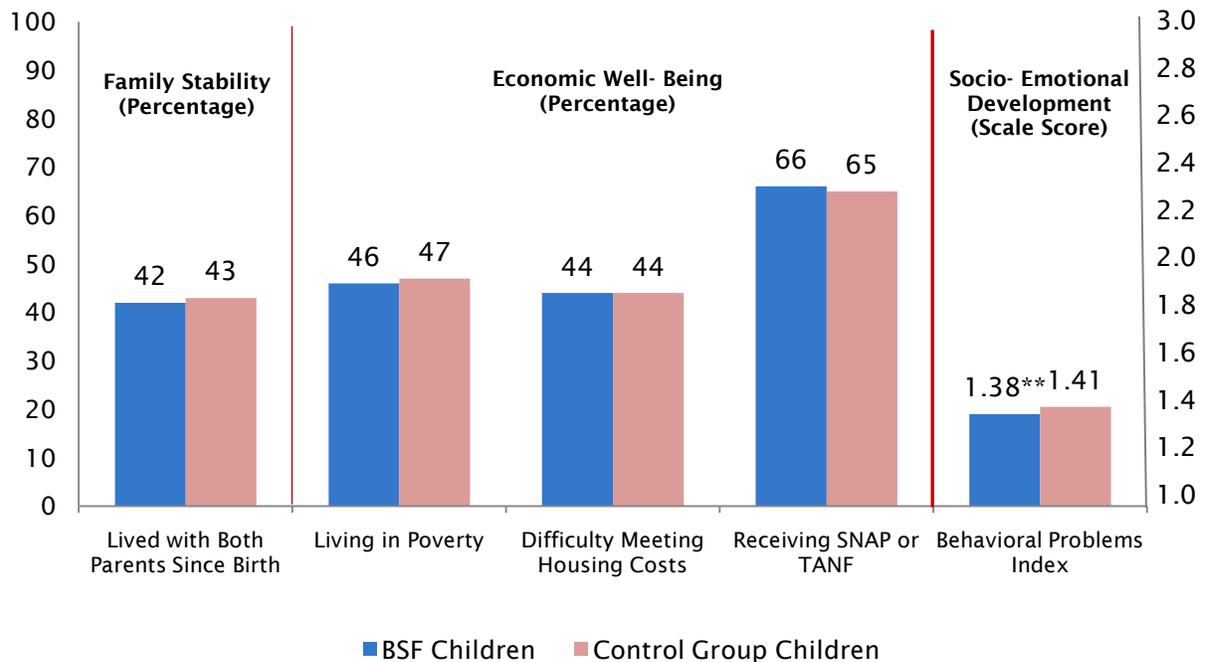
on a 1-to-5 co-parenting scale. BSF’s effects on father involvement were mixed. BSF and control group fathers were equally likely to live with their children three years after program application (Figure ES.2). However, BSF fathers were somewhat less likely than control group fathers to spend time with their children and to provide financial support for them. At that point, 52 percent of BSF fathers regularly spent time with the focal child, compared with 56 percent of control group fathers, a statistically significant difference.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 63 percent of BSF mothers reported that the father covered at least half the cost of raising the child, compared with 66 percent of mothers in the control group, a difference that is marginally statistically significant. These reductions in father involvement do not appear to have reduced the quality of father-child interactions. BSF and control group fathers had similar levels of self-reported engagement with their children and similar levels of parental responsiveness as measured through direct observations.

- **BSF had no effect on the family stability or economic well-being of children; however, the program led to modest reductions in children’s behavior problems**

<sup>2</sup> The “focal child” refers to the child born around the time the couple applied for BSF and who made them eligible for the program.

BSF had no effect on two of three key dimensions of child well-being examined by this analysis: (1) family stability and (2) economic well-being. BSF did not increase the likelihood that children lived with both their biological parents through age 3. In both research groups, about two in five children had lived with both parents continuously since birth at the time of the three-year follow-up (Figure ES.3). Similarly, BSF had no effect on the economic well-being of children. At the three-year follow-up, there were no statistically significant differences between the research groups in the percentages of children who lived in poverty, lived in a family that had difficulty meeting housing expenses during the previous year or lived in a family that received public assistance (Figure ES.3).

**Figure ES.3. Impact of BSF on Child Outcomes at 36 Months**



Source: BSF 36-month follow-up surveys conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Note: Child economic well-being outcomes are measured based on the family in which the focal child resides. A negative impact on the behavioral problems index corresponds to a reduction in behavioral problems.

\*\*\*/\*\*/\* Statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 level.

BSF did have a small positive effect on a third key dimension of child well-being, socio-emotional development. Specifically, compared to parents in the control group, BSF parents reported slightly fewer behavior problems among their children. This effect was concentrated in the four BSF programs that also provided Healthy Families home visits, which aimed to improve parenting behavior; there was no effect on behavior problems in the other four BSF sites. This pattern, combined with the fact that BSF had no positive effects on the couple relationship, suggests that the impact on behavior problems is more likely due to the home visiting services offered in these four BSF sites than it is to the relationship skills education services that were offered in all BSF sites.

- **As at 15 months, BSF's effects at the 36-month follow-up varied across the eight local BSF programs; however, the pattern of this variation changed substantially over time**

At the 15-month follow-up, the BSF impact findings varied across the eight programs included in the evaluation. The BSF program in Oklahoma City had a consistent pattern of positive effects on relationship outcomes, while the Baltimore program had a number of negative effects. Other programs had little or no effect at 15 months. At the 36-month follow-up, this pattern had changed substantially. After three years, the negative impacts observed in Baltimore had faded and were generally not statistically significant. Similarly, most of the positive effects in Oklahoma City observed at 15 months did not persist; however, a positive impact on family stability had emerged. At the three-year follow-up, 49 percent of BSF children in Oklahoma City had lived with both their biological parents since birth, compared with 41 percent of control group children, a difference that is statistically significant. While the impacts observed in Baltimore and Oklahoma City generally faded, negative impacts emerged in the Florida BSF program after three years on relationship status and quality, father involvement, and family stability. The other BSF programs had little or no effect at either follow-up.

## **Discussion**

BSF represented a new approach to addressing the needs of unmarried parents and their children. Many new unmarried parents report that they want and expect to marry each other. BSF aimed to help these parents achieve this goal by offering them services designed to teach relationship skills. The hope was to improve the quality and stability of couples' relationships and ultimately improve outcomes for their children. Although relationship skills education had been shown to be successful in improving relationship quality among middle class and married couples, the approach had not yet been implemented on a large scale with low-income, unmarried parents and its effectiveness with this population had not yet been rigorously tested. The BSF program model was developed based on the best available research evidence on relationship skills education and the needs of unmarried parents. The goal of the BSF evaluation was to examine whether and how a carefully designed program model offering relationship skills education to unmarried parents might work.

As summarized above, BSF did not succeed in its primary objective of improving couples' relationships. What factors may have limited BSF's success? Some have suggested that poor attendance at group sessions limited couples' exposure to program services and thus reduced the effectiveness of the program. Across the eight programs, only 55 percent of couples assigned to the treatment group attended a group relationship skills session. However, analysis of BSF's impacts among couples who did attend found little evidence of effects on relationship outcomes. Thus, it does not appear that low participation rates explain BSF's limited success in improving couples' relationships.

The BSF results differ from findings from two other recent studies of similar relationship skills education programs that served low- and moderate-income married couples. A study of a relationship skills program for married military couples, PREP for Strong Bonds, found that the program reduced the likelihood that couples divorced in the year after the program ended. In addition, the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, which tested programs similar to BSF but served low-income married couples, found a pattern of small positive effects on relationship quality, but no effect on marriage stability at the 12-month follow-up.

The results for these studies of married couples represent short-term impacts and it is not clear whether these effects will persist in the longer term. Even so, it is useful to consider the differences between the unmarried parents served in BSF and the married couples served in these other studies to consider whether these differences offer insights into reasons for BSF's more limited success. One contributing factor may be the relatively low levels of trust and commitment among low-income, unmarried parents. The behavioral changes required to improve a couple's relationship may involve substantial personal effort. Partners who are less committed to a relationship or distrustful of the commitment of their partner may be more reluctant to do the hard work that relationship improvement may require. Thus, on average, unmarried parents may be less likely than married couples to put newly learned relationship skills to use if doing so requires considerable effort on their part and if they are uncertain about their own or their partner's commitment to the relationship. Other differences in the characteristics of married and unmarried parents may also play a role, such as the higher rates of economic disadvantage among unmarried parents and the more frequent occurrence of having children with different partners in these families. These additional stresses may make it difficult for some unmarried parents to focus on putting their newly learned relationship skills to use. Future programs may want to place greater emphasis on directly addressing these stresses.

A noteworthy finding from the BSF evaluation is the fact that a program that aimed to increase relationship stability and father involvement instead led to small reductions in the likelihood that couples remained together and that fathers regularly spent time with their children or provided them with substantial financial support. Perhaps BSF helped some couples with particularly negative or hostile relationships recognize this fact and break up sooner than they otherwise would have, an outcome that may be an appropriate one for these couples. In addition, qualitative research with BSF couples indicated that the need for fathers to "step up" and be more responsible was one of the strongest messages that couples took from the program. This expectation may have led some fathers in particularly disadvantaged circumstances to instead distance themselves from their partner and children. For example, if men do not see themselves as capable of being economically supportive or meeting other expectations of responsible fatherhood, they may reduce engagement with their children in order to protect themselves from a sense of failure. Consistent with that hypothesis, recent research using BSF data to examine negative impacts of the Baltimore BSF program at 15 months found that BSF fathers in that site were more likely than control group fathers to blame themselves—and especially their own financial, criminal justice, and substance abuse problems—for a relationship breakup, even though their objective outcomes related to earnings, arrests, and substance use were no worse than those of control group fathers. Thus, program messages concerning what is involved with being a good father and partner may have led some men to believe they could not meet those expectations and to instead withdraw from these relationships. Future programs serving unmarried parents should give careful attention to the messages they convey to fathers and be sure that goals for good parenting and partnering are presented to fathers in ways that make these goals appear realistic and attainable.

The BSF model was implemented by eight local programs; seven of them did not achieve the central objective of improving couples' relationships. The one exception to this pattern was the program in Oklahoma City, which at the 15-month follow-up had positive effects on relationship quality, romantic involvement, co-parenting, and father involvement. These impacts had generally faded by the three-year follow-up. However, the Oklahoma program did increase the likelihood that children lived with both their biological parents until age 3. Given that increasing family stability was one of BSF's central goals, this result is noteworthy. New programs that plan to offer relationship skills education services to unmarried parents may want to examine the approach used by the

Oklahoma City BSF program. Future programs may be able to build on Oklahoma's successes while they also aim to develop strategies to increase the likelihood that success will be maintained over the longer term.

The decision to marry can be a complex one for couples with limited economic prospects. Qualitative research suggests that many low-income couples want both parents to be in a stable economic position before they consider marriage. In addition, recent research on low-income fathers underscores the importance of fathers' perceptions of their economic success in their ability to be engaged and supportive parents. These factors may have limited the success of the BSF program model. More recent ACF grant initiatives have placed greater emphasis on approaches that offer low-income couples both employment and relationship services. In addition, ACF is currently sponsoring the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation, which will examine the effectiveness of programs that offer both employment and relationship services. Perhaps these integrated approaches will have greater success in improving the outcomes of unmarried parents.

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