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Improving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) Programs for Unmarried Couples with Children

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs for couples with children aim to strengthen couples' relationships through instruction on topics such as communication, commitment, and intimacy, with the ultimate aim of improving the well-being of participants' children (Wadsworth and Markman 2012; Cowan and Cowan 2014). These programs often serve a mix of married and unmarried couples with a broad range of relationship circumstances and challenges (Dion et al. 2010; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). Although HMRE programs have shown some success in improving relationship quality and stability among participating couples (Moore et al. 2018; Lundquist et al. 2014; Stanley et al. 2014; Cowan et al. 2009), for unmarried parents, the success of these programs has been more limited (Moore et al. 2018; Hawkins and Erickson 2015; Wood et al. 2014).

In this brief, we examine potential reasons why HMRE programs have been less successful with unmarried parents when compared to married parents. We also suggest possible ways HMRE programs could be strengthened to bet-

ter serve unmarried couples. We proceed in three steps, following an intervention mapping process: (1) we describe the issue of interest; (2) we specify the objectives of the intervention; and (3) we identify services and strategies to address the issue and achieve objectives (Eldredge et al. 2016). To address the first step, we examine the characteristics of unmarried parents who participate in HMRE programs, how they are distinct from the married parents served by HMRE programs, and how these differences could limit the effectiveness of HMRE services for unmarried couples with children. In the second step, we discuss what the objectives of HMRE programs could be for unmarried parents in light of their characteristics and needs. In the third step, we suggest potential adaptations and enhancements to HMRE programs that are informed by the specific needs of this population as well as the appropriate goals of HMRE programming for them. To move the field forward, program developers and practitioners can consider adopting and testing these enhancements in order to strengthen program outcomes for unmarried parents.



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About the FRAMING Research project

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STEP 1: DESCRIBE HOW UNMARRIED PARENTS ARE DIFFERENT FROM MARRIED PARENTS SERVED BY HMRE PROGRAMS

An important first step when considering how to strengthen HMRE programs for unmarried parents is to describe the characteristics of these couples and, more specifically, how their characteristics are different from those of married parents served by HMRE programs. We specifically consider the characteristics of unmarried parents that could influence the effectiveness of HMRE programming in order to inform program objectives (discussed in Step 2) and potential program enhancements (discussed in Step 3).

To identify relevant characteristics, we conducted a targeted literature search and consulted with subject matter experts, including members of the project's technical work group (Wood 2020). One important aspect of unmarried parents that emerged is the substantial diversity among unmarried parents in terms of their relationship commitment and economic status. For example, while some unmarried couples with children are in fragile on-again, off-again relationships, others live together in highly committed relationships that resemble marriage (Cherlin 2009; Halpern-Meehin and Turney 2016). This diversity is important to incorporate into any consideration of how HMRE programs should serve this population. Nevertheless, acknowledging that the experiences of unmarried parents vary, we sought to understand the ways the needs of this group differ from married parents. To do so, we focus on two areas where unmarried parents differ, on average, from married parents: (1) their levels of relationship commitment and (2) their levels of economic disadvantage.

Lower levels of relationship commitment

One key distinction between married and unmarried couples with children is that unmarried parents tend to have more fragile, less committed romantic relationships. Unmarried couples report substantially lower levels of relationship commitment and trust than married couples (Horowitz et al. 2019; Stanley et al. 2014). A recent study of two HMRE programs found that unmarried couples reported lower levels of relationship commitment at program enrollment than married couples (Moore et al. 2018). Similarly, ethnographic research reveals that unmarried, low-income women report low levels of trust in their romantic partners (Edin et al. 2003; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Low levels of commitment are also apparent in the high rates of relationship dissolution among unmarried parents. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study—a nationally representative study of urban parents—found that fewer than 40 percent of parents who were unmarried when their child was born were still romantically involved five years later, compared with 80 percent of parents who were married when their child was born (Carlson and VanOrman 2017; Fragile Families Research Brief 2007).

Lower levels of commitment and trust among unmarried parents might be driven, at least in part, by the order in which milestones occurred in their relationship. For some unmarried parents, factors such as financial obligations or an unplanned pregnancy might have motivated them to remain in a relationship or move in together (Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler and Miller 2011). In contrast, married parents are more likely to have made a deliberate decision to remain together long term before choosing to live together or have children (Stanley et al. 2004). The process of moving through relationship transitions without fully considering their implications has been referred to in the literature as “sliding versus deciding” (Owen et al. 2013; Stanley et al. 2006). This process is associated with lower levels of commitment and higher levels of relationship distress, perhaps because it leads partners who are less than ideally compatible to remain together when they otherwise would have broken up (Stanley et al. 2006).

Unmarried parents are also more likely to have children from previous relationships. In 59 percent of unmarried couples in the Fragile Families study, one or both parents had a child by another partner; in contrast, this was only true of 21 percent of married couples (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006). The continued contact with former partners that accompanies raising children together can make it difficult to form a trusting bond with a new partner. Ethnographic research has shown that among both mothers and fathers, continued contact with a former partner can spark feelings of jealousy and distrust, resulting in hesitancy to fully commit to their current partner (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Nelson 2013).

Lower levels of relationship commitment among unmarried parents might limit the effectiveness of HMRE programs that serve them. The behavioral changes required to improve a romantic relationship require substantial personal effort. Higher levels of relationship commitment are closely associated with a greater willingness to make personal sacrifices to benefit a romantic partner (Stanley and Markman 1992; Van Lange et al. 1997; Wieselquist et al. 1999; Whitton et al. 2007). Those who are less committed to a relationship or distrustful of the commitment of their partner might be reluctant to take the steps necessary to improve the relationship. Thus, unmarried couples might be less likely than married couples to put newly learned relationship skills to use if they are uncertain about their own or their partner's commitment to the relationship.

Greater economic disadvantage

Another key difference between unmarried and married couples with children is the greater levels of economic disadvantage among unmarried parents. Nationally representative data indicate that, relative to married parents, unmarried parents have substantially lower levels of education and earnings and higher rates of poverty (McLanahan 2009). Similarly, a study of HMRE programs serving both married and unmarried parents found that unmarried parents had lower earnings at study enrollment and were less likely to have attained a high school diploma or high school equivalency degree (Moore et al. 2018).

Several reasons could explain why unmarried parents tend to display higher levels of economic disadvantage than their married counterparts. Unmarried parents are, on average, younger than married parents, and as a result, might not have completed their education or be as established in their careers (McLanahan 2004, 2009). They are also more likely to have children from previous relationships, and supporting children financially might exacerbate existing economic challenges (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Edin and Nelson 2013; Guzzo 2014). Qualitative research also suggests that many couples express a desire to be in a stable financial position before getting married (Cherlin 2009; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Reed 2005; Smock et al. 2005). Thus, couples might intentionally delay marriage until they feel they have achieved certain financial goals.

Greater economic disadvantage among unmarried parents could also contribute to the limited impacts of HMRE programs for this group. Economic stressors, such as poverty and debt, are associated with lower relationship quality and stability (Bodenmann 1997; Conger et al. 1999). Therefore, couples under economic stress might have relationships that require more intensive support than can be provided through group relationship skills training (Bradbury and Karney 2004; Bradford et al. 2015). In addition, the fact that unmarried parents are operating in an environment of greater scarcity might inhibit their ability to benefit fully from HMRE programs. Experiencing economic stress can consume people's mental energy, affecting what they pay attention to and how they make decisions (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; Haushofer and Fehr 2014). Under conditions of scarcity,

people focus their attention on the most pressing needs and recognize the trade-offs they must make against those needs (Shah et al. 2015). If unmarried parents are experiencing substantial economic stress, they might not have the “mental bandwidth” to learn and apply new relationship skills, limiting the effectiveness of HMRE programs with these couples. In addition, the most economically stressed couples might not have the capacity to complete tasks that are not immediately essential (Shah et al. 2015), which could include program participation.



STEP 2: SPECIFY THE GOALS OF HMRE PROGRAMMING FOR UNMARRIED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

When thinking through how to strengthen HMRE programming for unmarried parents, it is important to clarify what the goals of programs should be for these couples. Statutory language authorizing funding for HMRE programs supports a range of activities related to healthy relationships and marriage (U.S. Congress 2010). As specified in OFA’s 2015 funding opportunity announcement, these activities should aim to improve family functioning and adult and child well-being (ACF 2015). In this step, we discuss the goals that HMRE programs for unmarried parents should consider addressing in order to achieve these broad objectives, and how the goals are informed by the distinct characteristics of unmarried parents identified in Step 1. Figure 1 illustrates these goals.

Strengthen the couple relationship

For both married and unmarried parents, HMRE programming aims to help couples foster a healthy and stable romantic relationship (Cowan and Cowan 2014). Maintaining a healthy romantic relationship might involve increasing the level of intimacy and affection between partners, enhancing overall relationship satisfaction, and increasing the likelihood that couples remain together in the future. To achieve these long-term outcomes, HMRE programs have traditionally addressed goals aimed at giving couples the information and tools they need to strengthen their romantic relationship. HMRE programming for unmarried couples should continue to address these goals. Such goals include:

- **Improve understanding of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.** Characteristics of healthy romantic relationships include feelings of security, comfort, and respect; interest in each other’s activities; open and honest communication; and the ability to maintain outside interests and relationships with friends and family. Warning signs of unhealthy relationships include feelings of worry or anxiety during disagreements, lying or other attempts to control or manipulate one another, not making time for one another, yelling or physical violence during arguments, and not having outside interests or relationships with friends and family (Gottman 1999; Young and Kleist 2010). By recognizing these signs, couples can take steps to address unhealthy aspects and enhance healthy aspects of their relationship. In some cases, couples may decide to end an unsafe or toxic relationship.
- **Build communication and conflict management skills.** Communication and conflict management skills include avoiding criticism and defensiveness, sharing concerns in a calm manner, listening and accepting influence, and stopping conflicts before they escalate (Futris et al. 2014; Wadsworth and Markman 2012). Building these skills may help parents manage differences and disagreements and avoid triggers that undermine the quality of their romantic relationship.

The distinct characteristics and needs of unmarried parents identified in Step 1—including lower levels of relationship commitment and greater economic disadvantage—suggest that HMRE programs serving this population might also consider addressing additional goals to help parents fully benefit from the program and strengthen the quality of their romantic relationship. These goals include:

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- **Evaluate the strengths of their romantic relationship.** HMRE programs serving unmarried parents are in a unique position to help parents evaluate the strengths, challenges, and future prospects of their romantic relationship. Programs can help couples assess the quality of their relationship based on the information and skills presented in the program. Equipped with a better understanding of what makes a relationship healthy or unhealthy and how their relationship compares to these standards, couples can make an informed decision about whether to continue their relationship.
 - **Build commitment and trust.** Commitment and trust are foundational to a healthy relationship. Building these feelings takes time and requires both partners to demonstrate through daily actions that they are dedicated to each other and the success of the relationship (Stanley et al. 2010). For unmarried parents who decide to continue their romantic relationship, enhancing their feelings of commitment and trust is a necessary step to encourage them to devote the time and effort to improve other aspects of their relationship.
 - **Improve economic security.** To address high rates of economic disadvantage among unmarried parents, programs might also consider addressing goals related to economic security, such as helping parents find a well-paying job or affordable childcare, or helping them plan financially for their future together. In addition to improving parents' chances of achieving their relationship goals, helping parents achieve their goals related economic security is likely to have direct benefits for children's well-being (Conger et al. 2010; Duncan 1998).

Provide supports that will promote child well-being regardless of what happens to the couple relationship

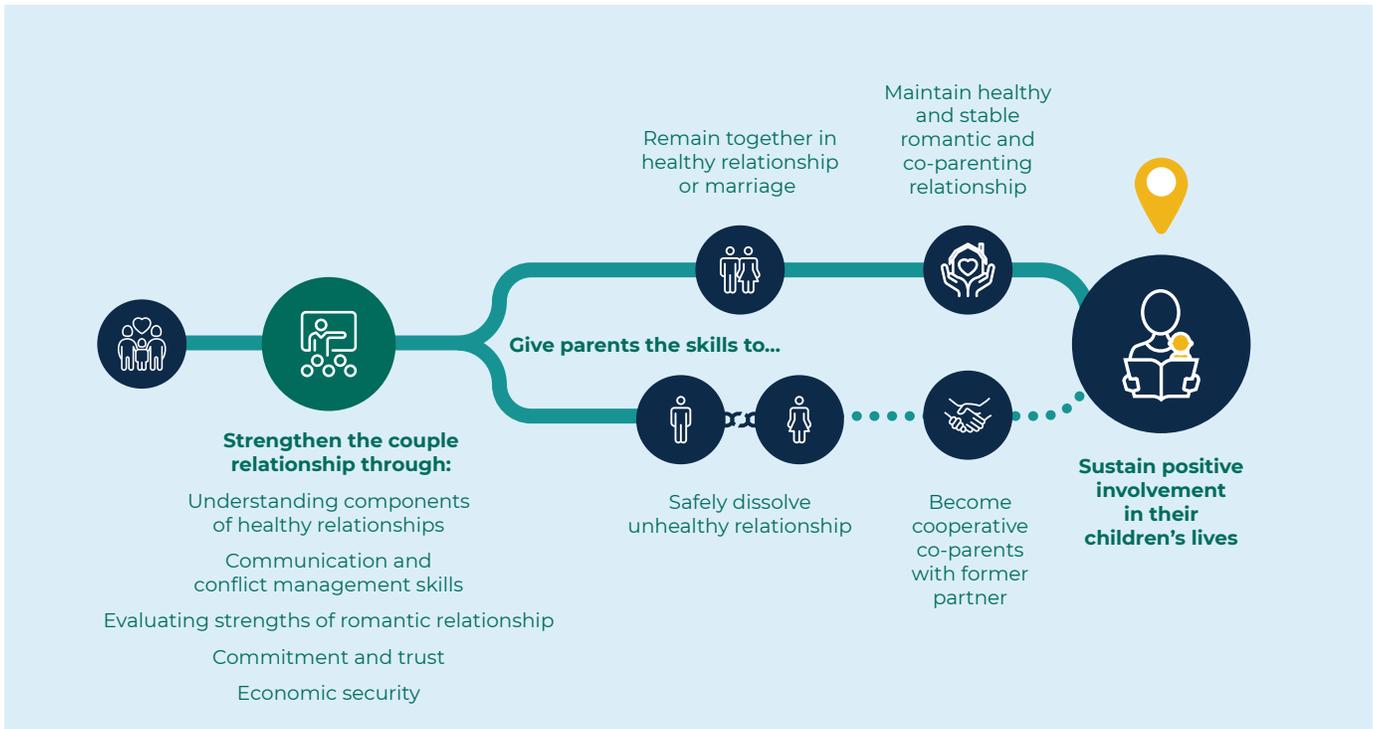
Strengthening parents' romantic relationships is considered a primary focus of HMRE programs. However, many unmarried parents are likely to break up within a few years of the birth of their child (Fragile Families Research Brief 2007). For this reason, HMRE programs serving unmarried parents should also consider approaches that will promote child well-being even in the event that the couple relationship ends. Programs could provide parents with information on how to recognize the warning signs of unhealthy relationships and how to safely dissolve their relationship, if appropriate. Offering resources to parents in unsafe or toxic relationships, such as referrals to mediation services or domestic violence shelters, may protect children against adverse outcomes if their parents' relationship ends.

As we discuss in more detail in Step 3, HMRE programs serving unmarried parents should also consider explicitly highlighting how the skills covered in the program could also be used to enhance other relationships—such as relationships with family, friends, and future romantic partners that could ultimately enhance the well-being of their children. For example, being able to recognize the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships could help parents make better decisions when beginning a new romantic relationship, thus increasing the chances that their children grow up in a healthy, stable family environment. These broader relationship skills can also help families strengthen their social networks and reduce their sense of social isolation, which can be common among those served by HMRE programs (Halpern-Meekin 2019).

To further support child well-being, HMRE programs serving unmarried parents should also consider focusing on strengthening parents' co-parenting skills. Co-parenting refers to parents' supportiveness of each other's parenting efforts, as well as their level of agreement and communication about how their child should be raised (McHale 1995). When co-parents cooperate with each other, they share responsibility for their child and minimize parenting-related conflicts and disagreements (Belsky et al.

1996; McHale 1995). Although cooperative co-parenting has been shown to promote children’s well-being in two-parent families (Palkovitz et al. 2012), the co-parenting relationship might be even more important after parents break up and their primary or only interactions relate to their shared child. Strengthening parents’ co-parenting skills might increase the chances that both parents sustain positive involvement in their child’s life even after their romantic relationship ends (Feinberg and Palkovitz 2011), which in turn, should promote children’s development. By addressing co-parenting skills, HMRE programs may also enhance other co-parenting relationships in parents’ lives, such as relationships with prior or future romantic partners.

Figure 1. Goals for HMRE programs serving unmarried parents



STEP 3: IDENTIFY HOW HMRE PROGRAMS CAN BETTER SERVE UNMARRIED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

In this last step, we build on Steps 1 and 2 to discuss possible ways that HMRE programs can better fulfill the distinct needs of unmarried parents to achieve program goals. We focus on four possible enhancements: (1) adapting relationship skills content to the needs of unmarried parents; (2) integrating additional content on cooperative co-parenting; (3) offering enhanced job and career advancement (JCA) services to help them overcome financial challenges; and (4) offering more intensive case management to address other needs.

Adapt relationship skills content to address the needs of unmarried parents

Although unmarried parents are a diverse group, some may enter HMRE programs with lower levels of commitment to their relationship and trust in their partner than married parents. To better serve these couples, HMRE programs should consider adding content to help develop trust and commitment. Currently, most HMRE curricula provide relationship skills training designed to improve communication and conflict management skills, avoid aggressive or violent behavior, and enhance other qualities associated with healthy relationships, such as emotional intimacy. To make relationship skills instruction even more relevant

to the specific needs of unmarried couples, programs could add training to improve skills and knowledge related to fidelity, trust, and commitment. For example, programs can add content about how to mitigate feelings of jealousy toward former partners, especially when former partners are co-parents that participants interact with regularly. Explicitly addressing these topics should help participants improve their current relationship. In some cases, it could also help participants take a close look at the health and safety of their current romantic relationship and decide whether it is worth continuing (Stanley et al. 2019).

Because many unmarried couples with children are likely to break up within a few years of participating in services, HMRE programs should also emphasize how the skills taught in HMRE workshops can be applied to a wide range of relationships, not just the romantic relationship. This can include relationships with colleagues, family members, and former partners. By intentionally demonstrating the broad applicability of these relationship skills, HMRE programs can further enhance children's well-being by helping participants improve relationships other than just their current romantic relationship. In addition, if the couple ultimately breaks up, this emphasis could help them draw on these skills as co-parents going forward, or with future romantic partners.

Integrate more content on cooperative co-parenting

Being raised by parents who have a cooperative co-parenting relationship is important for children's healthy development, regardless of whether the parents are romantically involved (Teubert and Pinquart 2010). Although HMRE programs often include some content on co-parenting, a recent meta-analysis on the impacts of HMRE programs revealed that programs have not produced significant changes in co-parenting behavior with lower-income parents (Hawkins and Erickson 2015). This finding suggests that HMRE programs serving unmarried couples could benefit from enhancing services to strengthen the co-parenting relationship.

One way to enhance the programs would be to integrate content from existing co-parenting curricula into HMRE workshops. This content would ideally be drawn from a curriculum designed for couples, but relatively few programs of this sort exist. Many co-parenting curricula are designed for either mothers only or fathers only (Fagan et al. 2015; Lewin-Bizan 2015) or for divorcing or divorced parents (Fackrell, Hawkins, and Kay 2011). Material from these programs could be difficult to adapt for couples.

An example of a co-parenting curriculum for couples that shows promise for potential adaptation is the *Family Foundations* curriculum. *Family Foundations* provides skills training for couples expecting a new baby to improve teamwork and reduce parental conflict (Feinberg et al. 2010; Solmeyer et al. 2014). Lessons cover topics such as expressing appreciation for partners' parenting behaviors, building partners' confidence, and managing difficult conversations about parenting. Although there are several versions of the *Family Foundations* curriculum available, including one for low-income parents (Feinberg et al. 2016), all of them focus on expectant parents. Therefore, HMRE programs would need to think carefully about how to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of a broader population of unmarried parents. For example, programs might need to address the topic of having children with former partners and help couples develop ways to support each other as they navigate complex family relationships. Programs could also address strategies for maintaining a cooperative co-parenting relationship in the event that couples' romantic relationship ends.

Programs should also consider how best to integrate additional co-parenting content into existing HMRE curricula. HMRE programs typically deliver curricula weekly, often over several months. Adding a substantial amount of content could negatively affect retention and, ultimately, the program's effectiveness. For example, most of the eight HMRE programs in the Building Strong Families (BSF) study, which served

exclusively unmarried couples with children, featured over 40 hours of curriculum content delivered over five months. The length of the programs could have contributed to retention issues documented in BSF (Dion et al. 2010). Programs will need to consider how to add co-parenting content to their existing HMRE curricula without substantially extending the time spent in weekly workshops. Programs should work with curriculum developers and technical assistance providers to identify the essential components of a co-parenting curricula and the best way to integrate content into weekly workshops.

Offer enhanced JCA services to address economic challenges

As noted, many unmarried couples served by HMRE programs face economic challenges, which can create stress and make it difficult to focus on improving their relationships. For this reason, couples could benefit from enhanced JCA services, such as help with financial planning, finding a well-paying job or affordable childcare, or getting additional education and technical training. Addressing economic challenges could also involve reframing relationship skills content already offered in HMRE workshops by integrating employment content. Examples include discussing the importance of conflict management skills in an employment context or the influence of relationship issues on employment or career development.

In addition to thinking about the types of JCA services to offer, programs should also consider the appropriate intensity of these services, taking into account program resources and participants' needs. Programs can address economic challenges with either stand-alone services or services integrated into the core HMRE workshop. For example, some HMRE programs funded by OFA in 2011–2015 offered stand-alone job readiness workshops and one-on-one help with job and career advancement (Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). More recent HMRE programs have integrated JCA and HMRE services more fully by having employment service providers attend HMRE workshop sessions to deliver JCA content, in addition to delivering services outside of the workshop (Friend and Paulsell 2018).

Offer more intensive case management to address other needs

Given the greater needs of unmarried parents and the considerable diversity within this population, these couples might also benefit from more intensive case management. Although HMRE programs typically offer referrals to outside services, they could consider having a dedicated case manager work directly with each couple to assess the barriers to improving their romantic relationship and enhancing their children's well-being. Case managers could then connect couples with appropriate services within their own organization or other services within the community. Services could include referrals to food or utility assistance programs to help couples address their families' basic needs. Referrals to supplemental services from program partners, such as family counseling, can support couples with blended families or couples who decide to end their relationship during their time in the program. These supplemental supports could also help couples regularly attend HMRE program sessions and benefit from the content presented in the program.

Case managers may also be able to serve as relationship coaches, working directly with each couple to process and apply the curriculum content. In this role, case managers could use techniques like motivational interviewing to help participants self-assess and strengthen their relationship with their partner using the skills taught in the program. Working with a case manager in this capacity could also help couples evaluate the health of their relationship and connect with other partner-providers' services, such as mediation.



NEXT STEPS FOR STRENGTHENING HMRE PROGRAMS FOR UNMARRIED PARENTS

In this brief, we considered strategies for improving HMRE programs for unmarried couples with children. We proceeded in three steps: (1) examining the distinctive characteristics of unmarried couples with children; (2) discussing what the goals of HMRE programming for these couples could be; and (3) proposing enhancements to HMRE programs to better address the characteristics and needs of unmarried parents.

To move the field forward, HMRE program developers and practitioners can consider the enhancements proposed in the brief along with other enhancements designed to strengthen HMRE programming for unmarried parents. Developers and practitioners can then begin the work of integrating new program elements into their HMRE programs. They can test these new elements through a series of learning cycles, during which they try out and refine enhancements. Once a promising set of enhancements to HMRE programming for unmarried parents has been developed, the adapted program could be rigorously evaluated to test its effectiveness.

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