Building us up stronger: Unmarried parents’ experiences in a relationship and marriage education program

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Overview
- Unmarried new parents say they want to create lasting, two-parent families, but few realize this dream (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan, 2006).
- Recent interventions, started under the Building Strong Families evaluation, attempt to assist couples in turning these dreams into reality.
- The present longitudinal, qualitative study examines couples’ motivations for participation, program experiences, and perceived relationship changes for those in Oklahoma’s Family Expectations (FE) program, which has been part of the Building Strong Families project.

Overview of Family Expectations Program
- Participation in FE lasts for about one year: approximately two months of weekly workshops (30 hours total), regular meetings with a “family support coordinator,” and available “extended activities.”
- Workshops are a combination of lectures, videos, group discussion, and couple activities. They are led by mixed gender/race teams of “marriage educators.” Lessons include specific communication and conflict management techniques, trust, relationship expectations, and infant parenting information.
- Family support coordinators encourage couples’ participation in workshops and activities, lead couples in getting-to-know-you and goal-setting activities, and offer referrals to other community services/programs.
- Extended activities include moms’ and dads’ groups, child safety workshops, date nights, and play dates.
- Couples’ participation is incentivized by monetary rewards (e.g., “Crib Cash”) that can be used to purchase baby items at the FE store and enabled by assistance with transportation (gas cards and taxis) and childcare (on-site center for children under two).

Description of Sample
- Low levels of education (29% no HS diploma or GED; 53% HS diploma or GED; 18% HS+), problems with employment (for men: 23% unemployed; 16% part time; 59% full time), and lower incomes (average monthly couple income = $1,452).
- Additional obstacles: lack of reliable transportation, felony convictions (for men), addictions, and poor mental health.
- The vast majority of these participants come from troubled family backgrounds themselves, with few having been raised by both parents and many having experienced parental abandonment, abuse, parental drug use or addiction, and multiple parental relationship transitions.

Description of Study
- Wave 1: in-person couple and individual interviews at program start (n = 31 couples)
- Wave 2: in-person couple interviews four months later, after most had completed workshops (n = 28 couples; 90.3%)
- Wave 3: in-person individual interviews approximately one year after Wave 1 interviews (n = 24 couples; 85.7%)
- Total over three waves: 191 couple and individual interviews

Couples’ Experiences in Family Expectations
- Across the board, participants respond very positively to FE. They like the physical space, the food and the friendly staff.
- Generally, participants really enjoy the workshops. They like the marriage educators, finding them entertaining and personable. They feel they learn new information about how to get along (or are made to be more mindful of getting along how they know they should).
- Couples do not mind the fairly intensive, on-going time commitment FE involves. In fact, a substantial minority say they think the workshops should last longer. Some say the workshops give them a chance to spend uninterrupted, positive time together as a couple.
- Couples have a wide range of experiences with their family support coordinators, from feeling that they are like family or close friends to feeling put off by a lack of competence or responsiveness.

Couples’ Motivations for Participating in Family Expectations
- The unhealthy relationships participants have witnessed while growing up play a role in their interest in taking part in FE; they want to provide their children with a better childhood and family environment than they experienced in their youth.
- Couples want to improve their relationships. Their concerns most frequently center on communication and conflict.

Couples’ Perceived Relationship Changes following Family Expectations
- Across the board, participants report very positively to FE. They like the physical space, the food, and the friendly staff.
- Generally, participants really enjoy the workshops. They like the marriage educators, finding them entertaining and personable. They feel they learn new information about how to get along (or are made to be more mindful of getting along how they know they should).
- Couples do not mind the fairly intensive, on-going time commitment FE involves. In fact, a substantial minority say they think the workshops should last longer. Some say the workshops give them a chance to spend uninterrupted, positive time together as a couple.
- Couples have a wide range of experiences with their family support coordinators, from feeling that they are like family or close friends to feeling put off by a lack of competence or responsiveness.

Summary
- Couples’ motivations for participating in FE are rooted in their desire to improve their relationships, and they report positive changes following FE.

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Note
- All names and locations have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Citation