

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, 2005).
- 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 (onsite center for children under two).

Description of Sample

- Age range: 18-42. Average age for women: 24. Average age for men: 26.
- 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.

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.

"With Family Expectations you get peace of mind. You're around good positive people. Nothing negative. Nothing." -Denelle

"The whole environment of it was...maybe this feeds into my snobbishness...It wasn't all cheap and generic, like I thought it would be." - Cara

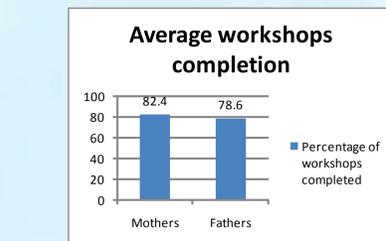


Figure 1

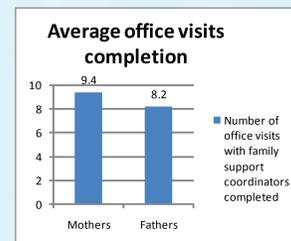


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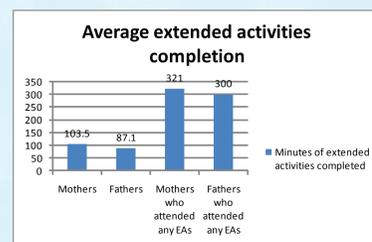


Figure 3

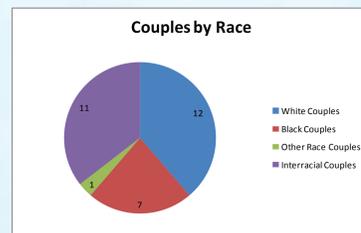


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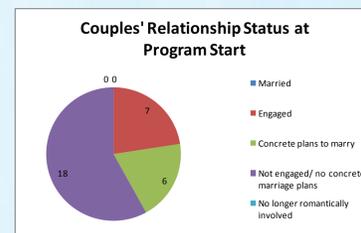


Figure 6

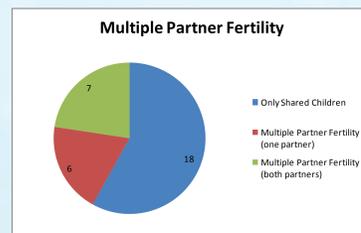


Figure 5

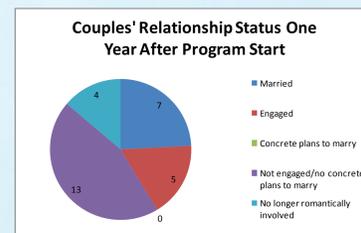


Figure 7

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.

"If it's something that can help me understand her and her personality and emotions a little bit better, and how to cope and deal with those little situations... that's what I'm expecting to get out of this right now. Cause, I mean, sometimes I just can't figure her out." - Robert

"Just learning to be happy with each other. Make it good for your child. I mean, that's really what we're in this whole thing about is for her." -Tiana

Couples' Perceived Relationship Changes following Family Expectations

- All couples were able to spontaneously recall lessons from FE following the workshops.
- Most couples experimented with the communication and conflict management techniques from FE; however, couples rarely discussed with one another how and when to use particular techniques. They were generally used on an ad-hoc basis and adapted to meet couples' needs and comfort levels.
- Immediately following workshop completion, couples were quite likely to discuss both the Speaker-Listener and Time Out techniques. Six months later, they were less likely to refer to techniques by name, although use of "Time Outs" remained common.
- Couples describe learning general lessons about communication and its importance to a relationship's success. This includes being more thoughtful about how you say things, considering how your partner feels, and letting small issues go. Participants also say they learned about the necessity of spending fun time together as a couple.
- Although most describe seeing positive changes in their relationships during the year they have taken part in FE, there are some couples who do not engage with or use the FE lessons and those who are not able to make permanent the changes FE brings to their relationships.

"Now we can identify exactly what the problem was. It was like Family Expectations put a phrase or a word above the problem we had. It was like 'This is your problem here' so now we knew how to take care of what steps we needed to do to take care of it, so that was definitely building us up stronger each week." - Robert

"The classes was like the best time in our relationship...I learned that he wanted to do a lot of things, but he just decided he doesn't have the ability to do 'em...That class really helped us...He opened up, talked...I couldn't have a conversation with him right now if I wanted to." - Necie (now separated from her boyfriend)

"Every time I start to think...getting mad at him for being gone [at work], I think, 'Why are you getting mad for no reason?...I don't blow up as easily like I used to. I stop to think and listen.'" - Ann

"And I don't hold it in until I can't no more...Communicate openly. Something's on your mind and it's bothering you, let's get it off your chest instead of letting it build up..." -Trenton

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