

network notes

2010 November | Volume 8, Issue 4



What works in marriage and relationship education for low-income couples?

In the fatherhood field we have become increasingly aware of the importance of the co-parent relationship on a father's involvement with his children. This influence holds true whether parents are married, cohabiting or living separately. Voluntary marriage and relationship education (MRE) is one strategy to improve the co-parent relationship that has grown exponentially over the last decade, thanks to an influx of federal and state funds. Here we review the findings from a research report on MRE programs that work with low-income couples, "What Works in Marriage and Relationship Education? A Review of Lessons Learned with a Focus on Low-Income Couples," by Alan J. Hawkins and Theodora Ooms.

Background. The Deficit Reduction Act (DRA), passed by the U.S. Congress in 2005, contained \$150 million a year for five years to fund Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs. Although termed "healthy marriage" programs, many of these federally funded programs focused on couples who were neither married nor engaged. Therefore, we follow the convention of the authors who use the more inclusive and accurate term "marriage and relationship education" to describe the mix of programs funded. MRE programs "aim to teach interested couples and individuals in a group format the knowledge, attitudes, and relationship skills that research has shown to be associated with

Marriage and relationship education programs "aim to teach...the knowledge, attitudes, and relationship skills...associated with healthy, stable relationships and marriage."

healthy, stable relationships and marriage" (p. 2). This is distinguished from couples therapy or counseling, which focuses on the particular issues of a specific couple. MRE programs vary in intensity and duration. Some programming may be provided to the public using websites, fact sheets, DVDs, etc.

Funding from DRA is the first influx of substantial federal funding into the marriage and relationship education area. Prior efforts in this area such as those that gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s were delivered primarily by professional educators and religious groups in

privately-run organizations or faith-based programs. These early programs were largely delivered to white, middle-class couples who were in or entering marriages.

Although the DRA funding was not required to specifically target low-income

couples, many programs did. Thus, this report looks at how these programs have been implemented with low-income couples and what the early evidence shows about their impact.

Key findings:

1) "Marriage and relationship education programs—newcomers in social policy—are operating well throughout the United States." Many MRE programs faced problems very familiar in

"Marriage", continued on page 3. ►

Parents are anti-bullying agents

National attention has been focused recently on the victims of bullying and the responses by schools and communities to protect all children.

Less emphasis has been placed on the responsibility that our families and communities carry for encouraging an environment that allows bullying to continue. Both messages—protection and prevention—deserve coverage in our media and homes.

Various children's advocates have found a com-

mon link between parenting quality and a child's active role as a bully. For example, the Pacer Center cites that bullies may "have parents who are unable to set limits, are inconsistent with discipline, do not provide supervision, or do not take an interest in their child's life." At the same time, North Dakota State University professor Laura DeHaan writes, "Bullies tend to come from families that are characterized as having little warmth or affection. These families also report trouble sharing their feelings and usually rate

"Bullies", continued on page 2. ►

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

A voice for fatherhood

MFFN seeks to provide a voice for Minnesota's fatherhood and family services organizations. If you have a best practice or information you would like to share, please contact MFFN. *Network Notes* is published each February, May, August, and November.

Minnesota Fathers & Families Network

161 Saint Anthony Ave.
Suite 845
Saint Paul, MN 55103
(651) 222-7432
info@mnfathers.org
www.mnfathers.org



Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.

Recent funders

MFFN thanks the following entities for their support in 2010:

- Bush Foundation
- Children's Trust Fund
- Independent School District No. 318, Grand Rapids
- Initiative Foundation
- Mardag Foundation
- McKnight Foundation
- Minn Child Support Enforcement Division
- Minn Dept of Corrections
- Northland Foundation
- Northwest Minnesota Foundation
- Otto Bremer Foundation
- Order of Saint Benedict—Saint John's Univ.
- Q Foundation
- Southern Minn. Initiative Foundation
- Southwest Initiative Foundation
- United Way of Otter Tail County
- University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Center for Leadership Education in Maternal and Child Public Health
- U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement
- West Central Initiative

Contribute now

MFFN is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Donations are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law. Donate online at www.mnfathers.org or call for details at (651) 222-7432. Thank you.

Parents can discourage bullies

◀ Continued from page 1.

themselves as feeling less close to each other. Parents of bullies also tend to use inconsistent discipline and little monitoring of where their children are throughout the day. Sometimes parents of bullies have very punitive and rigid discipline styles, with physical punishment being very common."

Given the strong connection between bullying and the quality of the parent-child relationship, it's important for parent educators, family service workers, and schools to help parents find ways to stay connected with their pre-teen and teenage children. Teens tend to value the opinions of their parents and look to their parents for guidance. Thus, parents have a key role in helping to lessen the incidence of bullying and other detrimental

behaviors. According to the Pacer Center, many parents don't know that their children are bullying. "Yet knowing the facts—and acting to change the situation—is vitally important to making the future safer for your child and all children."

Resources:

MFFN offers some ideas for parents to develop and maintain strong relationships with their children on our two-page *InfoSheet 20*, "Six ways dads (and moms) can connect with teens", online here: www.mnfathers.org/resources.html

The Pacer Center offers bullying prevention resources in English, Spanish, and Somali, online here: www.pacer.org/publications/bullying.asp

University of Minnesota Extension offers resources for families with teens, online here: www.extension.umn.edu/FamiliesWithTeens

Photo: Some rights reserved. flickr.com/photos/enigmaphotos

Minnesota Fatherhood & Family Services Summit



Register online
www.mnfathers.org/summit.html



Join us this winter to reinvigorate professionally, learn best-practice strategies for engaging fathers & strengthening families, and network with social service professionals, educators, and family advocates from across the Upper Midwest.

Keynotes by:
 Carolyn and Phil Cowan, Professors of Psychology Emeriti, Univ. of Calif., Berkeley
 Bill Doherty, Professor of Family Social Science, Univ. of Minnesota
 Michael Hayes, Deputy for Family Initiatives, Texas Office of the Attorney General

January 24—25, 2011
 Kelly Inn Hotel
 Saint Cloud, Minnesota

a winter conference for professionals serving families & children

Marriage & relationship education

◀ Continued from page 1.

the fatherhood field—how to recruit and retain participants, particularly men and fathers. But they found it can be done. And, as with other programming, once men come in the door and participate, they frequently fully engage in the MRE programming. Moreover, low-income couples are participating in large numbers in MRE programs throughout the US. Participants generally highly value the experiences and report that it helps them become better partners. And if they have kids, they also report it helps them become better parents.

2) *“Many MRE programs are successfully engaging low-income men/fathers in learning how to be more effective partners and parents.”* MRE programs are in many ways serving as successful father-engagement programs.

While one key motivator for some fathers was the emphasis on how their children would benefit from their participation, other programs found that it was the unique focus on the couple relationship that attracted men.

For some programs “the unique, primary focus on the couple relationship...was the major attraction because so few programs for low-income families consider the couple relationship, and there was a palpable hunger for these kinds of services” (p. 8).

3) *“Investment in program development and program management is critical to helping these new types of government programs be successful.”* The primary challenge of many new-comers in this arena was learning to recruit and serve men/fathers and to focus on the couple as the “client.” Programs can benefit from expert technical assistance and support up front.

4) *“MRE programs for low-income participants seem to work best when they create strong organizational partnerships.”* Programs that worked closely with health, employment, domestic violence prevention, child support and related social service programs were more successful with recruiting participants and helping them get other necessary services.

5) *“The emerging evidence suggests that MRE programs can work for low-income populations as well as for those who are economically better off.”* For example, in one meta-analysis of three experimental studies of MRE programs targeted to low-income couples, those couples who received MRE were 20-30% better off across a variety of measures

(relationship quality, commitment, relationship stability and communication skills) compared to those who did not receive MRE. The authors note that the strength of these effects are comparable to other programs aimed at effecting family behavior, such as teen pregnancy prevention, alcohol and drug abuse prevention, and co-parenting education for divorcing parents.

6) *“Across nearly all the studies reviewed for this report, MRE improves communication—a core, essential relationship skill—as well as other measures of relationship quality.”* They also found some initial evidence that MRE programs for low-income couples can decrease divorce rates, reduce aggression, and improve children’s problem behaviors.

7) *“Much has been learned, but there is more to be studied.”* Over the next three years, more will be learned about MRE programs for low-income couples from several large-scale studies currently underway.

In their conclusion, the authors expound upon different strategies for expanding this work and make recommendations for future evaluation research. Of particular interest to the MFFN audience are suggestions about integrating relationship education components into other kinds of health and human services programs as well as reaching youth. The authors also suggest that MRE and responsible fatherhood programs should collaborate more or even “join forces.”

This report is a must-read for anyone working in co-parenting. The report also gives insight into how to recruit and retain fathers in

“MRE programs that serve low-income populations often serve...as successful father-engagement programs... Responsible fatherhood and MRE programs should collaborate and perhaps even join forces...” (p. 18).

programming, thoughts on the intersection of fatherhood/co-parenting work and domestic violence, as well as a window into the expanding role and importance of evaluation in federally funded projects. The report can be found at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/whatworks_edae.pdf.

MFFN 2010 Board of Directors

- Molly Crawford, Minn Dept of Human Services, St. Paul
- Gilbert Domally, Family Service Rochester, Rochester
- Karla Drown, Lincoln, Lyon and Murray Human Services, Marshall
- Jennifer Garbow, University of Minn, Family Resource Management, Crookston
- DeeAnn Gieseke, Watonwan Co. Early Childhood Collaborative, St. James
- Jan Hayne, Dads Make a Difference, St. Paul
- Michael Jerpak, Crossroads College, Rochester
- Lowell Johnson, Brainerd Lakes Early Childhood Coalition, Brainerd
- Gar Kellom, St. John's University, Collegeville
- Joe Kelly, The Emily Program, St. Paul
- Danielle Kluz, Partnership for Domestic Abuse Services, St. Paul
- Brad Kramer, Southwest Initiative Foundation, Hutchinson
- Lori Lofrano, Minn Dept of Corrections, St. Cloud
- Ellie McCann, University of Minn Extension, Moorhead
- Lynn Nesland, Otter Tail Wadena Community Action, New York Mills
- Sam Simmons, Samuel Simmons Consulting, Minneapolis
- Dwaine Simms, Twin Cities RISE!, Minneapolis
- Brian Thorbjornsen, Fond du Lac Social Services, Cloquet



Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.

Minnesota Fathers & Families Network
161 Saint Anthony Avenue, Suite 845
Saint Paul, MN 55103

NONPROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE PAID
MINNEAPOLIS MN
PERMIT NO 31828

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

page 4

Navigating a New Normal: Web resource informs families and the economy

This fall, MFFN collaborated with the University of Minnesota Extension to offer 8 day-long training sessions in locations across the state. We were pleased to have over 250 attendees across the locations who joined us to learn about the economy's impacts on fathers, families, and future expectations.

As part of the session, MFFN and the University of Minnesota Extension compiled a useful list of web-based resources, links, and tools for professionals to use when addressing economic issues in families.

The webpage is divided into the following categories:

- General: Economy & Family Life
- Public Assistance Programs and Tax Credit Information
- Jobs & Family Resource Management
- Food & Hunger
- Housing Issues
- Change, Resilience, and Mental Health

View the webpage: www.mnfathers.org/newnormal.html



The page has over two-dozen links to useful resources. **For example, here are three interesting resources linked at www.mnfathers.org/newnormal.html**

Minnesota Data Trends: This site looks at the financial struggles faced by increasing numbers of Minnesotans. The data focuses on long-term trends in income, employment, and the cost of basic needs such as food, health care, housing, and transportation.

Bridge to Benefits: This online web tool, sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund, is designed to improve the well-being of families and individuals by linking them to public work support programs and tax credits.

Change: Loss, Opportunity, and Resilience: These resources describe the stages that people go through when they experience life changes. The resources present ways to cope with change, and to possibly see change as an opportunity.