

Formative Research Report

Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for our Family

Report Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. Literature Review
- III. Community Questionnaire
- IV. Focus Groups with Potential Participants and Community
Service Organizations
- V. Implications of Findings for Curriculum Development and
Program Delivery
- VI. References



**FAMILY AND
CONSUMER
SCIENCES**

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Introduction

In the fall of 2005, Michigan State University Extension received a grant from the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement (OSCE) to implement the *Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for Family* project. This project is designed to improve child support and marriage education services for ethnically and culturally diverse populations.

There are three primary objectives:

- 1) To investigate the efficacy of integrating healthy marriage content into Family Support and Education (FSE) programs targeting African American and Latino families (Year 1)
- 2) To develop and test an educational intervention on healthy marriage formation for unmarried African-American and Latino parents participating in two Michigan communities (Year 2 and 3)
- 3) To disseminate program curriculum, lessons learned and other information to early-parenting programs statewide and nationally on promoting healthy marriage in FSE programs (Year 3)

Research shows that at or near the time of their infant's birth, unmarried couples feel most positive about their relationships and have high hopes for the future. Most fathers plan to be involved with their children. However, as the child grows older, many unmarried parents separate and child support payment arrears often become an issue. We propose that by supporting unmarried parents at or near the child's birth to establish a positive co-parenting relationship, child support outcomes related to paternity establishments, child support orders established, collections and healthy marriage formation will be improved.

Based on the successful implementation of the *Caring for my Family* program in both Alabama and Michigan and a collaboration of several public, private, and community-based organizations, a three-year project is being implemented. In year one, formative research will be conducted to inform the development of culturally

sensitive protocols to integrate into the existing home-visiting programs targeting low-income, African-American parents at prenatal or early postnatal. In year two, a pilot study with a quasi-experimental design will be conducted in two Michigan sites. Based on the results of the pilot study, the program will be revised, published and placed on an interactive website for FSE programs during year three.

This report is a description of year one project activities in which we investigated, using a community-based action research approach, the challenges and needs of unmarried parents in forming and sustaining healthy relationships and marriages as well as providing economic, social and emotional support to their children. These activities included:

1. A review existing literature on early intervention programs for unmarried parents, especially African American parents.
2. Distribution of a questionnaire on parenting, co-parenting, marriage and fathering attitudes and demographic information in the two communities.
3. Focus groups with unmarried parents of African American, Latino and Caucasian descent in two communities on their interest in healthy marriage education, barriers to building a high-quality couple relationship and the meaning of marriage.
4. Focus groups with FSE and CSE service providers in the same two communities to ascertain knowledge of and attitudes towards healthy promotion with Fragile Families in their community.
5. Prepare a report of the themes from literature review and focus group discussions to guide development of an intervention protocol for FSE programs.

Literature Review

In the last 40 years there have been significant increases in the rates of children living in single-parent homes as a result of divorce and unmarried childbirth. In 1976, only 17% of single mothers had never married while in 1997 the percent of never married mothers had increased to 46% (Ventura & Backrach, 2000). In the United States, about one birth in three annually is to an unmarried parent. For African-

American families, nearly 70 percent of children are born each year to unmarried parents as compared to the 33% of all children. In Michigan, of the 113,435 births reported in the first 9 months of 2004, 39,965 births (35.2%) were to unwed mothers; in 24,097 of these births the child's paternity was established. In most cases, these unmarried parents are young, and have low educational attainment, poor job prospects and low incomes.

This section describes relevant literature on unmarried parenting and single parenting. A brief overview of child support enforcement issues is given followed by a description of important findings for this project from the *Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study* (FFCWB). This literature is further explored through a review of literature related to cohabitation and co-parenting. Lastly, the implications of these various findings for designing and offering marriage and relationship education to unmarried parents are described.

Child Support Enforcement

Child support is a critical financial factor, representing an average of 25% of family income for low-income mothers as compared to 7 to 9% for all women with child support orders (Miller, Farrell, Cancian, & Meyers, 2005). However, Miller et al. (2005) reported that only 9 to 22% of low-income women receive monthly child support as compared to 75% received by all eligible women. In the same report, child support was concluded to be a critical building block towards leaving welfare and not returning as well as serving as financial incentive for establishing paternity (Miller et al, 2005).

Couple relationship quality and father involvement are key factors in establishing and collecting child support. Voluntary paternity establishment in the hospital and not enforcing punitive measures were related to fathers being more willing to provide emotional and economic support and more likely to maintain involvement over time (Peters, Argys, Howard & Butler, 2004). In addition, fathers are more likely to regularly see their children and pay child support when they perceive a degree of parental involvement (Peters et al., 2004). Unmarried African-American fathers were found to be more involved with their children during infancy and at 3 years when the couple reported a more satisfying and supportive relationship (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2004).

However, strong enforcement of child support orders has been connected to greater couple conflict and a greater likelihood that the couple would break up (Fragile Family Research Brief, 2003). Policy interventions need to focus on strengthening mother-father relationships as well as improving fathers' ability to provide economic support and be involved in other arenas of parenting (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2000).

Unmarried Childbirth and Single Parenting

Social science research has also consistently shown the negative impacts of unmarried childbirth and single parenting for children. The emerging consensus is that the quality of the relationship between children's parents matters for children, and that children benefit when both parents are present and functioning in a low-conflict relationship (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Notwithstanding single parents best efforts, children in these families, either resulting from divorce or unmarried childbirth, are at greater risk for a variety of adverse outcomes including: living in poverty, lower academic achievement, higher risk of teen and non-marital child bearing, behavior problems, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, and school problems (Amato, 2000).

These risks of negative effects can be reduced if the parents cooperatively work together to raise their children, and if regular financial and emotional support are received from the non-custodial parent (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Feinberg, 2002). Positive co-parenting (i.e., mutual support of the parenting role, childrearing agreement, equitable division of parenting responsibilities, and parents' management of interaction patterns) has been found to be an important mediator between the couple relationship and child outcomes. Even if the parents are experiencing relationship discord and distress but are able to maintain a positive co-parenting relationship, adverse outcomes for children will be reduced. Feinberg (2002) posits that focusing interventions on the co-parenting alliance, rather than exclusively on marital or couple relationship quality, will show stronger effects for the parents and children. Even if the couple relationship ends, the empirical literature on the impact of divorce on children has shown that early involvement of the non-custodial parent with his or her child predicts a pattern of connection and support for the child (Bartfeld, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Seltzer,

2000). Risks are further decreased for children when they live with their natural, married parents in a low-conflict household (Lerman, 2002). However, it is important to note that a two-parent household can be an unhealthy and dangerous place for children if there is unresolved conflict between the parents (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Residential fathers tend to be more consistently involved with their child(ren) than non-residential fathers (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2003), increasing the economic and social-emotional resources of the family.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study

Recent findings from *The Fragile Families and Child-Wellbeing Study* (FFCWB) show that most unmarried parents are highly committed to each other at their child's birth, and hope to marry (McLanahan et al, 2003). However, this study also shows that the percentage of couples who are working together to raise their children decreases from almost 60% at the child's birth to only 13% when the child reaches their teens, indicating that the parents either never married or divorced if they did marry. Only about 9% of those who were romantically involved got married by their child's first birthday. The term *fragile family* is applied to emphasize the fact that these families are more vulnerable to both family and economic stress than children born to married parents.

Fragile Families reported experiencing numerous social and economic barriers for maintaining stable family life, resulting from low education attainment, few job skills and few life skills (McLanahan et al, 2003). These parents' low human capital as evidenced by lack of education and job skills created significant barriers to maintaining father involvement, getting married, and creating a stable marriage. In addition, higher rates of incarceration, domestic violence, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol abuse among this population were cited as barriers to healthy family formation and father involvement (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2003b). Interviews with unmarried mothers and fathers found that financial concerns, relationship problems, and timing issues interfered with couples' aspirations for staying together and marriage (Gibson, Edin and McLanahan, 2003). Financial concerns revolved around the mother and father being responsible and able to hold a job, acquiring assets, and having enough money saved for a "proper" wedding. Mothers also reported problems in their relationship

related to beliefs that the father was not mature enough for the responsibility of marriage and low trust of their partner related to sexual infidelity and domestic violence. Many fathers and mothers were uncertain as to whether or not the relationship was strong enough to last. Timing issues included not having enough time to prepare for and get married at the present time as well needing a stretch of uninterrupted time to plan the wedding. Gibson et al. (2003) reported that high expectations of marriage and of those who marry could be preventing this group of parents from taking steps toward marriage.

Father involvement in *Fragile Families* is an important component for a positive couple and co-parenting alliance. Johnson (2001) reported that during pregnancy, almost 80% of unmarried fathers provided financial and other support. Paternal involvement during pregnancy was found to be the strongest predictor of paternal involvement after birth. McLanahan et al, (2003) found there was also a greater likelihood that the child had the father's surname and that the father's name was on the birth certificate when the father was involved during pregnancy. However, as noted above, they also found that father involvement and co-parenting, like the couples' romantic relationship, declined over time.

In a study by Kalil, Ziol-Guest and Coley (2005), family relationships, in particular with the paternal grandparents and maternal grandmother, were found to impact father involvement. If the mother had a positive relationship with the father's family and the father with the mother's mother, there were more positive patterns of father involvement. However, if the maternal grandmother provided greater social support, there were decreased levels of father involvement. The researchers concluded that these teen mothers were at greater risk for an initially highly involved father dropping out of parenting. As a result, home visiting programs and other intervention programs targeting Fragile Families need to take a family systems approach in which father involvement is tied to the couple relationship, the father's family, and the maternal grandmother (Kalil et al, 2005).

Cohabitation and Marriage

A significant proportion of unmarried parents choose to live together in lieu of or until they getting married. Cohabitation between heterosexual partners is a social trend currently attracting a great deal of interest among researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and the general public. Researchers do not agree whether cohabitation should be treated as a premarital event, a substitute for marriage, an extension of dating, or a new family form in which children are being raised. All of these scenarios exist, yet not one can frame all cohabiting relationships and the implications of cohabiting.

Research shows that cohabiting relationships are influenced by intergenerational trends, access to education and professional opportunities, community and personal risk factors, and potential partner selection effects in ways that are significantly different for couples in low-income groups than couples in higher income groups. Further, there are distinctly different embedded themes in these two communities regarding gender roles and relationships. Finally, cohabiting couples with fewer economic resources are less likely to eventually marry (Seltzer, 2004).

In 1970, there were half a million heterosexual cohabiting couples, and today, there are 4.6 million, and it is on the rise (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Not only are more couples cohabiting, more couples who cohabit appear to be getting married. Of couples that married between 1965 and 1974, 10% had previously cohabited. For those marrying between 1990 and 1994, well over 50% had previously cohabited (Sassler, 2004; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Raley, 2000). More than half of all young adults in their 20's and 30's in the 1990's shared a home with a partner outside of marriage (Sassler, 2004).

Many cohabiters report reasons for moving in together such as sharing finances and increasing convenience (i.e., not having to go back and forth between two residences). Others describe cohabitation as a precursor to marriage. Sassler writes,

Today's young adults have opportunities for education, employment, and intimate relationships that are far more abundant than were available to

previous generations...In a time of rapid social change—economic shifts, childhood experiences with family disruption, and questioning of gendered family roles—co-residential unions may be viewed as an increasingly important way of moderating the risks inherent in romantic relationships.
(2004, p. 491)

The length of cohabiting relationships are relatively short. On average, they last 2 years, and the couple then either breaks up or gets married (Brown, 2003). The factors leading to each resolution, just as the factors leading to the initial union, are variable, but some key themes are consistently noted in the literature.

Central to the research on cohabitation is a discussion of the risks it presents to marital success and child outcomes. These risks are consistent across the literature. In general, couples that cohabit before marriage experience lower marital quality and an increased risk for divorce once married, and children who are raised in households with unmarried parents are at increased risk for poor outcomes. The literature does not contextualize the presented risks. Therefore, it is unclear if they are consistent across all socioeconomic groups, ethnicities, geographic locations, or other subpopulations. Further, we do not know adequately how these risks are impacted by community and family variables. Researchers suggest that it is important to explore partners who cohabit with and without plans to marry as two separate groups, though most current research aggregates the population (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004).

Researchers debate if cohabitation is in some way directly causal of marital failure, if the risk is created by a selection effect (e.g., those who choose to cohabit are also people who consider divorce more easily), or if the relationship between cohabitation and decreased relationship quality and/or divorce is spurious for other still unknown reasons. Cohabitation is one risk among a number identified by the literature that may contribute to decreased marital quality and/or divorce. Others include marriage at a young age, lack of

social support, and lack of financial resources. Of significance, research preliminarily indicates that couples who cohabit with the expressed plan to eventually marry each other have similar relationship quality to their married peers and higher relationship quality than cohabiters without plans to marry (Brown, 2003; Brown & Booth, 1996).

Because cohabiters often either marry or break-up after just a few years, there is a risk for cohabiting instability as much as there is risk for eventual marital instability for these couples. Accordingly, researchers debate the cause of such instability including the aforementioned selection effect as well as the lack of social support and boundaries available to cohabiters. When a couple gets married, there is a clear initiation, including the rituals and traditions associated with the proposal and wedding; cohabitation occurs in a more gradual and sometimes obtuse way. When couples are married there are legal barriers to quick dissolution; when couples cohabit, it is functionally easier to split. The familial, social, and legal validity provided married partners is often withheld from cohabiting couples, potentially increasing pressure on the relationship. Finally, there are often better and more educational and therapeutic resources available to married couples.

Though cohabitation is not always a substitute for marriage, nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive, much of research and policy of late has pitted one relationship type against the other. This is particularly true in relation to low-income families, the focus of many marriage education programs and policies. Researchers find that economic concerns are likely the greatest barrier to marriage for low-income families (Edin, England, & Linnenberg, 2003).

Fundamentally, marriage is more permanent and is therefore expected to provide more stability to families than cohabiting arrangements. Many questions are raised from such a theory regarding the risks and benefits of high-conflict marriages in comparison to cohabiting unions. Many studies confirm that children who grow up in families with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage are better off in a number of ways than children who grow up in single-, step-,

cohabitating-parent, or high-conflict households (White & Kaplan, 2003). Research has attempted to explore whether or not cohabiting parents' family environments are explicitly less stable than married parents' environments. Graefe and Lichter (1999), drawing on a sample of children born to young mothers from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, suggested that about one-fifth of children born to cohabiting couples will experience a transition within one year and 88% will experience a transition by age five. Manning, Smock, and Majumdar (2004) found that stability was increased for White children in the sample when their cohabiting parents married, but stability did not increase for Black and Hispanic children in their sample. Manning and Brown (2006) also found that marriage (compared to cohabitation) seemed to have a greater benefit for White children than their Black and Hispanic counterparts.

In general, when compared to children who are raised by married parents, children in other family types may be more likely to achieve lower levels of education, to become teen parents, and to experience physical, behavioral, and mental health problems. In addition, children in single- and cohabitating families may be more likely to be poor and experience multiple living arrangements during childhood (Anderson, Moore, Jekielek, & Emig, 2002). Brown (2004) examined data from the 1999 *National Survey of America's Families* ($N = 35,938$) and found that children in cohabiting families experienced worse outcomes when compared with children living with their married biological parents. However, they did not fare worse than children living in other kinds of family forms including remarried stepfamilies and single-parent families.

Coparenting

A core characteristic of unmarried parents in *fragile families* is their working together to raise their child, whether or not they are co-habiting. In 2005, there were 12.9 million single parents living with their children; of this group, 10.4 million were mothers. Also in 2005, 33% of all children under the age of 18 lived with only one parent. In 2004, 32% of all births were to unmarried women, with higher proportions of minorities represented (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Researchers predict that approximately two-fifths of all children will live in a cohabiting family at some point before adulthood (Bumpass & Lu 2000). With the ways in which families are formed and the environments in which children are being raised continuing to evolve, improved research of the co-parenting relationship is clearly critical.

Researchers have defined co-parenting in a variety of ways. The co-parenting relationship can be defined as the relationship between adult partners concerning issues of parenting (McHale, Kuersten Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000). However, “no consensus has been reached on what co-parenting actually *is*” (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Some common constructions of it include “shared parenting” (Deutsch, 2001), “parenting partnership” (Floyd & Zmich, 1991), and “parenting alliance” (Cohen & Weissman, 1984) (*in* Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Van Egeren (2004) indicates that co-parenting occurs when there is a “biological, adoptive, or cohabiting relations to [a] child” (pg. 455). Co-parenting could be defined very broadly, simply identifying the way parenting often occurs collaboratively, or it could be defined more narrowly, as a dyadic construct, as is often the case for a primary caregiver and his/her co-parent.

Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) define a co-parenting relationship as existing “when at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have conjoint responsibility for a particular child’s well-being” (pg. 166). The authors further suggest the following boundaries: *co-parenting requires a child, co-parenting requires a partner, co-parenting is a dyadic process, co-parenting is a bidirectional process.*

When considering what practices make up co-parenting, the construct of contributing or subtracting support is integral. Specifically, the support co-parents may provide each other is defined through behaviors from one’s partner that encourages accomplishing parenting objectives (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995; Frank & Tuer, 1988; McHale, 1995; M. Westerman & M. Massoff, 2001). Conversely, undermining co-parenting are those behaviors that intrude on

partners accomplishing parenting goals. Undermining co-parenting can be seen when one's partner expresses criticism, vocalizes disrespect, or undercuts their partners parenting decisions or behaviors (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995).

Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) suggest that co-parenting support is found in "helping" behaviors (i.e., retrieving objects when the partner's hands are full), or feeling reinforced by one's partner. Shared parenting encompasses the division of childcare labor and includes not only actual time spend on tasks, but also the responsibility carried for that task to be accomplished and partner's perceptions about the fairness of this division. It also includes the concept of how much each partner is engaged with the children. Knudson-Martin & Mahoney (2005) suggest that engagement is a circular process, and as mothers are able to yield to fathers' involvement, and fathers are able to approach child care with a sense of wanting to learn, not only are parent-child relationships strengthened, but also the relationship between co-parents.

While co-parenting and marital interactions are related, they are not mutually interdependent. The above definitions of co-parenting are inclusive of parenting partnerships that do not include marriage. Research shows that co-parenting is its own construct (Van Egeren, 2004). Yet, there is a demonstrated relationship between the quality of the coparenting relationship and the quality of marital interactions (Stright & Bales, 2003). Belsky and Hsieh (1998) and O'Brien and Peyton (2002) found that couples whose marital satisfaction declined over time experienced more co-parenting-related disagreements. Studies suggest that positive marital relationships carry over into the co-parenting relationship, and negative marital relationships trigger difficult co-parenting relationship (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997; McHale, 1997). However, some researchers have found that many families experiencing marital distress are able to maintain effective co-parenting relationships (McHale, 1995; McHale et al., 2000).

The *Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study* (FFCWB) has demonstrated that the quality of the couple relationship is a significant predictor

of positive child and family outcomes. Further, this finding is evident whether or not the parents are married. While there are new lessons being learned by research like the FFCWB, few studies have concentrated on the relationship between biological parents who are not living together. The FFCWB, which has followed a birth cohort of 5,000 children and their parents, has defined who is in a family based on a co-parenting couple and their children. This research has found that couples with fewer financial resources are less likely to marry and/or stay together than their wealthier counterparts because of financial or relationship obstacles (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Another major finding of this study (*relevant to the current study*) is that parents were likely to be romantically involved at the time of their children's birth, making this a critical period in the family's trajectory (Parke, 2004).

Research shows that the quality of the co-parenting relationship is significant to children's outcomes. Cohen (2003) found that unmarried African-American fathers' positive relationship with their child's mother was associated with being more involved with their child at infancy and at age 3. Additionally, although Jones' et al. (2005) definition of a co-parenting partnership extended beyond biological parents, they found that behaviors associated with co-parental support and co-parental conflict were predictive of maternal parenting behaviors.

Programmatic Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been made on programmatic approaches to helping Fragile Families marry and stay married over time. The first recommendation is to programmatically intervene with unmarried parents before, at or shortly after the birth of their child (McLanahan et al., 2003). Secondly, relationship education and healthy marriage are important, but not the only, ingredients for strengthening fragile families. Approaches need to include job training and placement, housing, health care, and substance abuse treatment along with life skills, parenting and couples education (Dion and Devaney, 2003). Lastly, program planners need to recognize that sometimes it is not possible to form a healthy, married family due to intense couple conflict, domestic violence, or other issues. In these cases, it is important to help parents to cooperate

together to raise their children if possible (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Summary

Community Questionnaire

To learn more about *fragile families*, co-parenting and cohabitation in the two communities (Saginaw and Oakland Counties), a questionnaire was developed and distributed to community members in the spring of 2006. The purpose of this questionnaire was to provide baseline data for the two communities and to inform the curriculum development process. Specifically, we hoped the data would provide descriptive information about the two communities and their interests and needs related to family processes and parenting.

Methods

Participants. Participants were recruited through Michigan State University Extension offices in Oakland and Saginaw counties. Current recipients of Michigan State University Extension programming were invited by program personnel to complete surveys if they currently parented children. Data from 95 participants who were parents of children birth to age 16 were included for analysis. Seventy-three respondents were parents of children birth to age 5.

Participants in this study consisted of 29 men (30.5%) and 66 women (69.5%). These men and women ranged in age from 18 to 67 years old, with a mean age of 32.6 years old ($SD=9.45$). Among the sample, 65.2% were African American, 18.5% were Caucasian, 10.9% were Hispanic, 4.3% were Bi-Racial, and 1.1% identified as "Other." Forty-six respondents were from Oakland County, and 49 respondents were from Saginaw County. Forty-six percent of respondents were unemployed, 18.4% worked part-time, and 35.6% worked full-time. The average income of participants was \$1466 per month. Thirteen percent of respondents never finished high school, 37% completed a high school diploma (or a GED), 38% of respondents had some college but did not graduate, and 12% graduated from college.

Procedures. This study used a non-experimental, descriptive, single-group design. Parents were asked to complete a single survey that included standardized scales and qualitative inquiries yielding descriptive data (as described below). Participants were provided a five-dollar gift card to Meijer stores upon completion of the survey. A survey was excluded from final analysis if more than one scale within a survey was not completed. All subscales were modified for this study so that all gender-specific words (e.g., “mother,”) were changed to be gender inclusive (e.g., “mother/father”). Also, for analysis purposes, missing items were replaced with the mean.

Measures

Four standardized measures were chosen to assess target constructs of parenting, co-parenting, marital attitudes, and family resources. Additionally, qualitative questions assessing household composition and social support were coded to yield descriptive data of these variables. All variables were chosen based on reviews of the relevant body of scholarship as well as *Together We Can* programming objectives.

Assessment of parenting. The Parental Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC) was used to assess parents’ perceptions of their own parenting abilities (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978). Sample items include: “Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved” and “Being a good mother is a reward in itself.” This scale is a 16-item, 5-point, Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. The authors identify two subscales: skill knowledge (7 items) and valuing/comfort (9 items). The authors originally reported alphas of .70 for the skill knowledge subscale and .82 for the valuing/comfort subscale, with 6-week test-retest correlations ranging from .46 to .82. Additional studies subsequently examined this scale with similar results.

Assessment of co-parenting. The Measure of Co-Parenting Alliance Scale was used to assess the quality of participants’ relationships with their co-parents (Dumka, Prost, & Barrera, 2002). Sample items include: “When I have a problem with our child, I can go to my child’s other parent, and he will listen to me and be

supportive” and “I say good things to my child about my child’s other parent when he is not around.” This scale is a 21-item, 5-point, Likert scale ranging from (1) Not At All to (5) Almost Always. The authors reported excellent internal consistency with alphas of .93 (women) and .90 (men). The authors standardized this scale with a diverse sample of participants, and reported their results across ethnic groups; high reliability was maintained across groups.

For the purposes of this study, a modification was made to the administration of this scale. Respondents were provided the following directions: “You should answer each question with your child’s other parent in mind. However, if your child’s other parent has no contact with you and your child, please think of another parenting partner and write in [on the line provided] that person’s relationship to you here (e.g., my mother, my mother-in-law, my brother, my boyfriend, etc.).” This modification was made due to the diversity in families among our target populations. However, the majority of participants completed the scale related to their child’s other parent (94.5%) while only 3 respondents completed the scale related to an alternative partner (child’s maternal grandmother or parent’s current romantic partner).

Assessment of marital attitudes. The scale assessing marital attitudes was adapted from the Fragile Families Study. This scale is a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. Sample items include: “All in all, there are more advantages to being single than to being married” and “It is better for children if their parents are married.”

Assessment of family resources. The Family Resource Scale (FRS) was used in this study to assess family resources (Dunst & Leet, 1987). The FRS is a 31-item, 6-point, Likert scale ranging from (1) Does Not Apply to (6) Almost Always Adequate. Participants rated a series of items according to “how well the need is met on a consistent basis.” There are 7 subscales on this measure: food and shelter, financial well-being, time for family, extrafamilial support, child care, specialized child resources, and luxuries. This scale has excellent internal

consistency with an alpha of .92 for full scale. Test-retest reliability reported over an interval of 2-3 months was .52.

Descriptive statistics. Twenty qualitative questions assessed descriptive constructs including demographics, social support, household composition of parent and child, and caregiver status. Only one question was open-ended; this question inquired about circumstances of any extended separations between parent and child. Otherwise, questions were a choice format to aid subsequent coding procedures.

Results (consider inserting tables that give additional information for scales)

Reliability Analyses. Prior to analyses, each measure's psychometric properties were examined, and alphas are reported herein. Chronbach's alpha for the Measure of Co-parenting Alliance was .92. No items were deleted. The alpha coefficient for the Marital Attitudes Scale was .46. The first item ("The main advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security") was deleted to achieve a final alpha of .59. Chronbach's alpha for the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale overall is .77, and no items were removed. The alpha for the valuing/comfort subscale was .75, and the alpha for the skills knowledge subscale was .78. One item, item 6 ("A difficult problem in being a parent is not knowing whether or not you're doing a good job or a bad one"), was removed from the skills subscale to yield a final alpha of .85. Chronbach's alpha for the Family Resource Scale was .92. No items were deleted.

Descriptive Statistics. The household composition of participants was measured. Thirty-four percent of respondents were in their first marriage, 4.3% were engaged to be married for the first time, 5.3% were remarried, 9.6% were not married and cohabiting with a partner, 11.7% were in romantic relationships without marriage or cohabiting, and 35% reported no romantic relationship. Alternatively, 43.6% were married or engaged to be married, 64.9% were in a romantic relationship, and 21.3% were in a relationship but not married. Eighty percent of respondents report acting as a primary caregiver to their child or children.

Most respondents, 82.9%, live with their children, and 17.9% do not, either because their child is in the custody of the other parent or child welfare (a foster home). Forty-five percent of respondents live in a two-parent family home including a significant other and children. Twenty-four percent of respondents live in a single-parent home, or they live alone with their children. Thirteen percent of respondents live in a single-parent kinship home, or they live with their children and other family members such as their own parents.

Respondents had between 1 and 6 children with a mean age of 3.59 years old ($SD=3.83$). Thirty-nine percent of respondents report their child is in the joint legal custody of themselves and their child's other parent, 46.8% report their child is in their sole legal custody, and 9.6% report their child is in the other parent's sole legal custody. Thirty-seven percent of respondents report their child is in the joint physical custody of themselves and their child's other parent, 45.7% report their child is in their sole physical custody, and 12.8% report their child is in the sole physical custody of their child's other parent.

Seventy-two percent of respondents report being satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of social support they receive, while 7.6% report being unsatisfied or very unsatisfied (the remainder were "neutral"). Seventy-one of respondents reported having a "parenting partner."

Respondents overall had a mean score on the co-parenting scale of 81 ($SD=16$), a mean score on the family finances and resources scale of 144 ($SD=22$), a mean score on the marital attitudes scale of 18 ($SD=4$), and a mean on the parenting scale of 60 ($SD=8$). The mean scores on the subscales of the parenting scale were 35 ($SD=6$) on the warmth subscale and a 24 ($SD=4$) on the skills subscale.

T-tests were run to compare the mean scores across scales for men and women and married and unmarried respondents. T-tests showed there were no significant differences in mean scores on these scales between the men and women in this sample. T-tests showed significant differences in the mean scores for people who were married versus those who were not married on the co-

parenting scale and on the marital attitudes scale. When comparing the bottom quarter of scores to the top quarter of scores, respondents who were married were more likely to fall in the top quarter on these scales, and respondents who were not married were more likely to fall in the bottom quarter on these scales. T-tests showed the same results (those for married compared to unmarried respondents) for respondents who were cohabiting versus not cohabiting. There were no significant differences when comparing respondents who were married versus cohabiting without marriage.

Correlation Analyses. A number of correlations were run to determine the relationship between the variables examined in this study.

Across participants, household composition had a significant association with several variables. Cohabiting status was significantly correlated with total scores on the co-parenting scale ($r=.440$, $p<.01$). Additionally, parents' custody of children was significantly correlated with cohabiting status, marital status, marital versus cohabiting status, and co-parenting.

Family finances and resources were significantly correlated with parenting overall ($r=.356$, $p<.01$), parenting skills ($r=.247$, $p<.05$), and parenting warmth ($r=.329$, $p<.01$); co-parenting ($r=.315$, $p<.01$); and satisfaction with social support ($r=.372$, $p<.01$). However, family finances and resources were not correlated with marital or cohabiting status.

Additionally, participants' attitudes about marriage were significantly correlated with a number of variables. Marital attitude scores were correlated with co-parenting scores ($r=.269$, $p<.01$), single versus two-parent families ($r=.435$, $p<.001$), legal custody of children ($r=.219$, $p<.05$), and physical custody of children ($r=.250$, $p<.05$).

For parents of children birth to age 5, co-parenting was significantly correlated with parental warmth scores ($r=.232$, $p<.05$). However, this result disappeared when cases in which youngest children were over the age of 5 were added to the analysis.

Implications for Curriculum Development and Program Delivery

Focus Groups with Potential Participants and Community Service Organizations

Ten focus groups were conducted in Oakland and Saginaw Counties, including the community partners' group, three fathers' group, and four mothers' group. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain descriptive and in-depth information about family processes, including co-parenting, couple relationships and family strengths.

Participants for the focus groups were recruited by Extension Educators in Saginaw and Oakland Counties. The focus groups were conducted by members of the project team and the Extension Educators served as co-facilitators.

Data Analysis

The typed transcription document from the focus group was modified into a table with four columns based on the method recommended by La Pelle (2004) that uses standard software tools for qualitative data analysis. Essentially, each question and participants' responses in the transcribed discussion were placed in an individual cell on the table in the order they occurred. The first column on table indicated the participant or moderator of the comment being described. The second column identified a theme code for response. The response of the participant or the question posed by the moderator was contained in the third column. The sequence number of the responses or questions was contained in the fourth column.

A coding guide was then developed using a three-step process (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). First, the transcript text was read several times and impressions were written down while reading through the data. It was determined that the data were of a high enough quality to continue with analysis. Second, the purposes of the implementation evaluation and key questions that we hoped to have answered were reviewed. These questions, described above, were used to focus the data analysis process. The last step in developing the coding guide involved identifying themes and patterns of ideas, incidents and interactions, and organizing them into coherent categories. Abbreviated codes were assigned to themes and placed in the appropriate column on the transcript. Transcripts were

then coded and patterns and connections within and between categories were identified.

The focus group transcripts were grouped based on these 3 populations: father, mother, and community partners. The transcripts within each group were analyzed and coded based on the interview questions. There are 6 themes that emerged from the ten focus group transcripts. These themes are family relationship, parenting and co-parenting relationship, community resources, recruitment and retention, and the evaluation of the previous curriculum. These 6 themes were compared and contrasted among three groups.

Background Information

There were three groups conducted with the community partners, 2 in Oakland County and 1 in Saginaw County with a total of 19 participants. There were 18 female and 1 male helping professionals from the community who participated in this study. These helping professionals were from agencies that related to court, domestic violence/sexual assault, child protective, visitation, parenting, physical health, mental health, and department of human services.

Table 1:

gender * County Crosstabulation

Count		County		Total
		oakland	saginaw	
gender	male	4	18	22
	female	11	12	23
Total		15	30	45

Table 1 displays the number of the participants from each gender in both counties. In terms of the fathers’ and mothers’ groups, there were 45 participants in the 7 focus groups held in the 2 counties in this study. These 7 focus groups included 4 mothers group and 3 fathers groups. There were 1 father’s group and 2 mother’s groups in Oakland County, and 2 groups for each in Saginaw County. Among 45 participants, there were 22 males (4 in Oakland County, 18 in Saginaw County) and 23 females (11 in Oakland County, 12 in Saginaw County).

Fathers and Mothers’ Characteristics

The participants decided how much of their background information they wanted to share in the beginning of the focus group. The background information shared by the participants was coded and analyzed.

Table 2:

how many children does the participant have * gender
Crosstabulation

Count

		gender		Total
		male	female	
how many children does the participant have	1	4	9	13
	2	3	6	9
	3	6	5	11
	4	3	1	4
	5	2	2	4
	6	2	0	2
Total		20	23	43

Table 2 displays the number of the children that each gender has. Other than two of the males who didn't identify the number of children they had, the number of children that the participants had ranges from 1 to 6. In this small sample data set, the women in this group generally had fewer children than the men had. Most of the women had less than 3 children, with 15 out of 23 women having only 2 children. On the other hand, 13 out of 20 men in this group had at least 3 children. Please refer to table 2 for the details.

Table 3:

how many relationships the participants children are from * gender
Crosstabulation

Count

		gender		Total
		male	female	
how many relationships the participants children are from	1	4	13	17
	2	4	1	5
	3	1	0	1
	4	1	0	1
Total		10	14	24

Table 3 displays the number of the relationships that their children are from based on the gender differences. Nearly half of the participants didn't identify whether their children were from the same relationship, and if not, how many previous relationships they had. However, with 24 participants who shared

this information, most of the female have only one relationship and males seemed to have more relationship than the females. That is, most of the female participants' children were from the same father. 13 out of 14 females who identified this information had children with the same partner. On the other hand, one of the men in this group had from 3 different relationships, and another man whose children were from 4 different relationships. Among 10 men who shared their relationship history information, at least half of the men (6 out of 10) had children are from 2 different relationships.

Table 4:

	Male	Female
Prenatal	1	3
Younger than 1	2	3
1	1	6
2	5	7
3	1	3
4	1	4
5	3	2
6	1	3
7	4	1
8	6	1
9	2	3
10	1	0
11	1	0
12	1	2
13	3	6
14	1	0
15	6	0
16	4	0
17	4	0

Older than 18	4	5
Total	52	49

Table 4 displays the age of children identified by their parents. In terms of children’s age, with the data that shared by the participants, male participants’ children’s age crossed prenatal to adult stage. Other the other hand, almost all the female participants’ children were under age 13. The only participant whose 5 children were all older than 21 was a grandmother who was raising her granddaughter at the time of the focus group interview.

From this background information shared by the fathers and mothers, several themes emerge. It seems that, first, male participants in this group have children across different age groups and the mothers tend to have more minor children. Second, male participants in this group have more relationship history. The male participants have children from different relationships, while the mothers seem to have children from the same partner. Third, therefore, the fathers seem to have to deal with the stepfamilies issues more often than the mothers. This theme actually appears under the parenting/co-parenting issues. On the other hand, the mothers would have to deal with the breaking up issues, childcare issues, and child support issues. Again, this theme also appears and will be discussed later in the parenting/co-parenting issues.

Family Relationships

The three groups, community partners’, fathers’, and mothers’ group all identified “love” as the important quality a family needs to have. The mothers’ and the fathers’ groups also identified communication, support, bonding, and parents’ working together as a team as important qualities that a family needs to have. The mother and the community partner groups identified that having basic needs fulfilled and education were important qualities. In terms of the challenges that families had, there was no common theme among three groups. However, the mother and the community partner groups both identified that their cultural values/expectations versus the expectations from the majority culture as one of the challenges faced by their own families or the families they’ve worked with.

Parenting/Co-parenting Relationships

There is no common theme when comparing three groups in the parenting/co-parenting relationships. Comparing the fathers' and mothers' group, they identified that the important quality as parents was to support each other, to have ability to calm oneself down, and to raise their children to have good behaviors/morals/values. The challenges they faced as parents with their partners included the influences from their families of origin, the fathers' resources divided by different previous relationships and children from different former relationships, different parenting style than their partners', child support money issues, and power struggle among parents. The influences from the family origin also appeared in the community partners' group. However, from the community helping professionals' perspective, this characteristic was the common challenge they saw in the families they served in the community, which was coded under the family relationships.

There was no common theme between the father and community partners' group. Comparing the mother and the community partners' group, they both identified that challenges for the parents was the fathers' commitment to be involved in the child's life. They also identified that marriage is not equal to the legal bonding, and marriage and parenting were two different issues.

Current Community Resources Used

There was no common resource used among three groups as the community partners might not have offered the services to the participants in our groups. However, both the mothers and fathers mentioned that they got emotional support from their churches. They also mentioned they went to trainings regarding fatherhood/motherhood as well as child development. The mothers identified specifically about "Birth to Five" and "Healthy Start" programs that they participated and some of the community partners' were from these programs.

Current Curriculum Revision

Participants from the three groups identified the importance of the following topics which needed to be included in the curriculum, and these were child development, fatherhood/motherhood, effective parenting strategies, communication, stress management, and money management strategies. The fathers and mothers also identified the importance of discussing the stepfamily issues. The mothers and the community partners also identified the importance of discussing abuse and conflict resolution.

When comparing the fathers and the community partners' ideas about current curriculum, participants from these two groups cautioned the researchers to be sensitive about men's needs, which were different from women's, and their tendencies not to ask for help as it is the cultural expectation. They also reminded the researchers be careful not to blame the men for all the problems. Another common theme but opposite suggestion was the educator's ethnicity. The community partners voiced the importance that the curriculum educator had the same ethnicity as the participants, but the fathers did not think the same ethnicity between the educator and the participants was necessary.

Recruitment and Retention

Again, there was no consensus among three groups in this theme. However, comparing the fathers and the mothers' group, they both identified that the fathers usually get the information about classes offered in the community from their partners. This seemed to correspond to one of the theme identified by the fathers, which is, men were expected not to ask for help. Therefore, they would not get the help or seek help directly from the community, but they would be willing to if the information was provided from their intimate partners. Comparing the mothers and the community partners' group, they both identified that child care was an important incentives. Comparing the fathers and the community partners' group, they both identified that financial incentives was important. They also suggested that the program could recruit male participants from the previous participants. Again, this seems to correspond to the male

participants' comment about not asking help as this was not culturally expected. Therefore, from their friends who had participated from the class before seemed to give them a reason to get the help.

Summary of Focus Groups

From the Family Life Cycle Theory (Carter & McGodrick, 2005), the traditional normal families start when the young adults leave home. They find their partners and form their couple relationship. At this time, these two young adults' families of origin need to make room and adjustments for the new couple. The important tasks for this new couple are to form their couple system and a clear boundary with their families of origin. When this couple has their first child, the whole family system starts to change again. The couple system needs to adopt a new role, which is the parental role to the newborn baby. The parental roles for the couples involve re-negotiating their roles in child care, family care, finance, and couple relationships.

When the child is born from the unmarried couple, there is a potential risk that the couple relationship is not solid. No matter whether the couple stays together or not, and no matter how long they stay together with or without legal bonding, the parental roles to the child will never disappear even when the couple relationship is dissolved. So, how the couples negotiate their roles as parents together to their children seems to be the focus based on the Family Life Cycle Theory.

The findings from the formative stage also correspond to the Family Life Cycle Theory. The participants from the parents' groups both identified supporting each other as an important quality in their parenting/co-parenting relationships. They also identified that the power struggle between the partners and disagreement with the extended family members are the challenges in their lives. These findings seem to correspond to the Family Life Cycle Theory that the supports from the partners, no matter they are together or not, is very important in the parenting/co-parenting relationships. In addition, the extended family issues are also important, but easily to be neglected. As the Family Life Cycle

Theory points out, the extended families for both partners need to respect the boundaries of the couple system and the newborn child's parental system. Therefore, the Theory also indirectly reminds us that there are influences from the family origin to the partners individually and their couple relationships. The community partners', the mothers', and the fathers' groups all talked about the influences from the family of origin is one of the important issues that the curriculum needs to address, which, again, corresponded to the Family Life Cycle Theory.

When taking into consideration of the differences of the participants' characteristics between the mothers' and the fathers' group, we can see that they struggled differently but still fit with what the Theory tells us. Due to the fathers had children from more relationships comparing to the mothers who usually dealt with one relationship, the fathers talked about the difficulties communicating the parenting issues with the ex-partners and current partners. On the other hand, the mothers in the focus group had to deal with the child support issues and worry about putting food on the table. In the meantime, their partners' resources might be spread thin as the mother's partners might have children from other different relationships as the fathers in the focus groups.

The other important finding from the focus groups is the importance of the cultural expectations. The fathers reminded us that males and females have different needs and the curriculum design needs to be tailored to men's need. They also reminded the researcher that men are culturally expected not to ask for help. Therefore, in the recruitment process, the researchers could recruit participants from the male's partner or the previous participants.

The gender differences seem to reflect on the theme comparison. From the participants' combination, especially the community partner participants' gender combination, all the helping professionals recruited were females except one male. In general, this might be the explanation why it was easier to find more common theme between the mothers' and community partners' group, but not the fathers' and the community partners' group. The fathers' and the community

partners' group only have the themes in common on the "recruitment and retention" and "curriculum revision." They both suggested that the financial incentive is important in the recruitment process, which, again, reflects the cultural expectations that a man should bring home the money. They also suggested to recruit new members from the old participants who were in the program before, which again, reflected the cultural expectations that a man does not ask for help unless it was from someone they were very close to. In the curriculum revision, they all suggested that the curriculum design needed to be sensitive about male's needs and understood that male's needs and behavioral patterns were different from female's.

From the male participants' reminder about the curriculum and cultural expectations about male gender role, it was important to reconsider the research findings from the literature review regarding the fathers' lack of motivation and commitment in the children's life. Is it true or is it merely because the curriculum is not tailored to the male's needs?

The other important issue to take into consideration was the curriculum implementation. First, if the males had more previous relationships, was it reasonable to set the curriculum goal to have the couple getting married? Second, if the males had different needs than the female's, and it was harder for the males to seek for help as they were not expected to do so from the cultural expectation, would it be reasonable to put him with his female partner in the groups together in the beginning? Or, it might be more reasonable to help males get use to the curriculum before open the dialogue with their female partners'?

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