



The Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has launched a new project called Supporting Healthy Marriage. It is the first large-scale, multi-site, multi-year, rigorous test of marriage skills programs for low-income married couples. It is designed to inform program operators and policymakers of the most effective ways to help couples strengthen and maintain healthy marriages.

The project will measure the effectiveness of programs that provide instruction and support to improve relationship skills. Some programs might also include services to help low-income couples address barriers to healthy marriage, such as poor parenting skills, or problems with employment, health, or substance abuse. Programs will screen for domestic violence and help participants gain access to appropriate services.

Supporting Healthy Marriage is motivated by research that indicates that married adults and children raised by their married parents do better on a host of outcomes. Low-income couples face greater challenges to building and maintaining healthy marriages, however, and their families are consequently less likely to receive the benefits of healthy marriages. While an extensive body of research exists on strengthening marriages, this research consists primarily of small-scale studies on a limited range of demographic groups.

Project Goals

Supporting Healthy Marriage is a nine-year project that is being conducted by MDRC, Abt Associates, Child Trends, and Optimal Solutions Group, along with leading experts on marriage, marital education programs, and serving low-income families. The project will have several stages, including the following:

- **Helping program operators understand what is likely to be effective.** The project team will review what is known about how to build healthy marriages, consult with experts on healthy marriage, and visit existing programs to identify promising services and practices. The resulting knowledge will be used to help participating program operators in at least eight sites modify their programs or design new ones.
- **Providing assistance in implementing programs.** The team will recruit organizations that are implementing or planning to implement innovative programs, and that are interested in having their programs studied. Program operators will be given ongoing help developing, implementing and improving their programs. Examples of help might include curriculum development and training, a web-based system with step-by-step guidance on implementing couples relationship programs, or a management information system to help track the services that clients need and receive.
- **Learning what works.** The ultimate goal of the study is to learn which types of programs most effectively improve marital relationships, reduce marital instability, and benefit children. The project team will visit programs and interview staff to better understand what services are provided and how couples view those services. Researchers will also interview and observe parents and children to learn how they are doing on a range of outcomes. The effects of the programs will be studied using random assignment, generally considered the most reliable way to assess what difference programs make.

Supporting Healthy Marriage is part of a larger HHS research agenda to study the effectiveness of efforts to sustain healthy marriages. Other research projects include the Building Strong Families evaluation targeted to low-income unwed couples beginning around the time of their child's birth, and the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation, which is evaluating community saturation approaches for strengthening healthy marriage.

For More Information

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