

Why A Healthy Marriage Initiative

Research confirms that children who are raised by their own parents in a healthy married family enjoy, on average, better physical and mental health and are less likely to be poor than children raised in single-parent families. Because marriage is important to child well being, children can benefit from programs that work with couples to develop the skills and knowledge to form and sustain healthy marriages. Families and community marriage programs can work effectively together to help parents develop and maintain stable, healthy relationships for the benefit of their children.

Marriage promotion and strengthening is about:

- Highlighting the benefits of strong and healthy marriages for both adults and children.
 - Benefits to adults include being better providers; earning and saving more money; living longer; and decreasing reliance on government services, such as welfare, healthcare, and mental health.
 - Benefits to children include being more likely to do well in school; having a healthy self esteem; exhibiting empathy and pro-social behavior; and avoiding high-risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy and criminal activity.
- Helping unmarried parents to overcome the two biggest barriers to marriage: a lack of economic stability, and the challenges of communication, commitment and conflict resolution.
- Providing a roadmap about what to expect in marriage, including such challenges as the birth of a child, different philosophies on parenting, and negotiating work and family responsibilities.
- Helping couples better understand that commitment, acceptance, forgiveness, and sacrifice are the foundation for healthy relationships.
- Teaching individuals about risk factors associated with marriage so they can decide whether marriage is a good choice for them.

The marriage initiative is based on a growing body of research that indicates that the best situation for a child is to be raised in a home with two parents in a healthy marriage. For those parents who are not married, it will mean providing love and support between homes by taking steps to establish paternity and child support, and working together to reduce conflict between the unmarried parents. If parents raise their children in a cooperative manner, children can continue to rely on both parents for financial and emotional support.

The marriage initiative is NOT about:

- Trapping anyone in an abusive or violent relationship.
- Forcing anyone to get or stay married.
- Running a federal dating service.
- Withdrawing support from, or diminishing in any way, the important work of single parents.

The data tell us:

- Over 1.35 million children in America are born to unmarried parents each year, making up more than one-third of all births.¹
- Every year, approximately 1 million children experience the divorce of their parents.² Almost 40 percent of children experience the divorce of their parents before they turn eighteen.³
- Many children who live in a household separate from their fathers have diminished contact with them over time:
 - 40% of the children in fatherless homes have not seen their father at all during the past year.
 - 50% of children living apart from their father have never set foot in their father's home.
 - 26% of all children live in a different state than their father (Interstate cases).⁴

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- In one study, 57 percent of unmarried fathers with children younger than 2 years old visited their children at least once per week. By the time the children were 7 ½ years old, only 22 percent of these fathers visited their children weekly.⁵

On average, children growing up with only one parent in the household are at greater risk of developing social, emotional or psychological problems than children who grow up in stable two-parent, married homes.

- Financial resources matter in improving marriage stability and child wellbeing.⁶
- Children who grow up with both married parents are less than half as likely as children of divorced or unmarried parents to have serious social, emotional, or psychological problems (10 percent versus 25 percent).⁷
- Children with unmarried parents (whether cohabiting or not) are more than twice as likely to have behavioral problems as children living with married parents.⁸
- High school graduation rates are significantly higher for children growing up with two married parents than for children growing up with single parents – 90 percent compared to 75 percent in divorced parent families and 69 percent in unmarried parent families.⁹
- The family income of children whose parents divorce and do not remarry for the next six years falls by at least 40 percent. For children born to unmarried parents whose parent marries and stays married for six years, family income increases by at least 50 percent.¹⁰
- Almost 60 percent of children living with a single mother are near or below the poverty line – 45 percent of children living with divorced mothers and 69 percent of children living with never married mothers.¹¹
- More than 50 percent of children living with a single mother are below the poverty line, compared to 30 percent of children living with two married parents. Over 60 percent of children living with their mother receive public assistance, compared to less than 25 percent of children living with both married parents.¹²

Endnotes

¹ National Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 52, No. 10, December 17, 2003, National Center for Health Statistics.

² Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 43, No. 9, Supplement, March 22, 1995, National Center for Health Statistics.

³ “Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being,” Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2003.

⁴ *Father Facts*, 4th Edition, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2002.

⁵ “A National Profile of Young Unwed Fathers,” Robert Lerman, in *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies*, Robert Lerman and Theodora Ooms, 1993.

⁶ Miller, C., Knox, V., Gennetian, L., Doodoo, M., Hunter, J.A., & Redcross, C. (2002). “Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program.” New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.

⁷ “Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being,” Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2003.

⁸ “The Kids Are Alright? Children’s Well-Being and the Rise in Cohabitation,” The Urban Institute, July 2002.

⁹ “Father Absence and Child Well-Being: A Critical Review,” Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, November 2002.

¹⁰ “Will You Miss Me When I Am Gone? The Economic Consequences of Absent Parents,” National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2002.

¹¹ “Children With Single Parents – How They Fare,” U.S. Census Bureau, September 1997.

¹² Children’s Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002, U.S. Census Bureau, June 2003.