



Head Start

Approaches to Strengthening Families

Office of Head Start



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start



Introduction

Since its inception, Head Start/Early Head Start has been the leading federal effort to prepare the nation's most at-risk children for strong futures. The program provides low-income children from birth to five with opportunities to develop holistically through nutritional and social services, as well as classroom experiences where teachers lay the groundwork for success in school. A key objective of the program is to provide all children with safe, nurturing, and secure learning environments along with opportunities to acquire skills that boost confidence. Early Head Start extends to pregnant women, offering prenatal treatment, access to healthcare, and information on child development. The program also connects pregnant women with other community services they may need.

Because Head Start/Early Head Start is committed to the overall wellness of each child, partnerships with families are formed to give parents tools to become self-sufficient, identify their own needs and interests, and find solutions to the challenges they face. Community networks also are vital to the success of Head Start. Collaborations with caregivers, agencies, businesses and organizations help support the healthy development of children and families of all cultures.

Focus on Families: Improving the Well-Being of Children

Recognizing the paramount importance of healthy families and child development, leaders of the Office of Head Start broadened the program's focus in September 2007. Through 24 demonstration grants totaling \$40 million over a five-year period, Head Start launched its Healthy Marriage and Family Initiative (HMFI) designed to stabilize and strengthen the home environments of children involved in the program.

The Initiative is a layered approach to connecting parents with the resources they need to develop as individuals and lead their families. Primarily through classes and workshops, couples learn how to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts safely and effectively. These classes also provide opportunities for parents – single or married – to formulate attitudes and learn skills that improve communication, conflict resolution, and cooperation among family members. Improving family relationships can positively effect children as they grow and develop in the early years.

In addition to classes, participants also are connected with a vast array of community resources. In some areas, the HMFI also includes classes for youth and siblings of children in Head Start programs so they too can better prepare for healthy relationships and improve their decision-making skills.



Benefits of Strong Families

Studies repeatedly show that children who grow up in homes with strong family relationships are physically healthier, more successful academically and less likely to have behavioral problems than children raised in unstable environments. In fact, research shows the entire family benefits from improved relationships. Men live longer and are healthier. They have greater stability in employment and earn higher salaries. Women are physically and emotionally healthier, earn more, and report improved relationships with their children.

In the first two years of Head Start's Initiative, more than 13,000 individuals participated in at least eight hours of family, marriage and relationship education classes; 35 percent of all participants were couples, 57 percent were single, and 8 percent were youth. Of those participants, more than 80 percent reported increased marital satisfaction and knowledge about communication and conflict resolution skills. They also said they had improved their parenting skills. And 90 percent of the men who participated said the program helped them relate better to their children.

Today, forty percent of all Head Start families are married and 56 percent of single-parent households say they have aspirations for marriage. Many Head Start families include step-parents or others who help care for children. Through the Initiative, parents can learn relationship skills directly linked to the well-being of their children. They also are able to build important networks within the community and with other parents who face similar challenges and struggles. Building an infrastructure to support and nurture children is the focus of Head Start; the Initiative is a key to strengthening the foundation at home.

“Parents are the primary nurturers, educators and advocates for their children and parents deserve opportunities for meaningful family development experiences that support parents’ involvement in their children’s learning.”

~ Yvette Sanchez Fuentes
Director of the Office of Head Start

Defining a Healthy Marriage

Every marriage and relationship has a different personality, so there is no “formula” for what a healthy marriage or relationship should look like. Every couple endures difficult periods that test the strength of the marriage or relationship. However, researchers have identified the following core characteristics that most healthy marriages share:

- commitment to each other over the long haul
- positive communication
- ability to resolve disagreements and handle conflicts nonviolently
- emotional and physical safety in interaction
- sexual and psychological fidelity
- mutual respect
- spending enjoyable time together
- providing emotional support and companionship
- mutual commitment to their children



PROGRAM Summaries.....

AVANCE Inc., Houston Chapter

Houston, Texas

In AVANCE Houston's 22 years of service to the city, its staff has focused every new program on the same core mission: parent and child education modeling. When the Head Start/Early Head Start program was expanded to include healthy marriage curricula, it was a natural fit with its overall dedication to parent and child educational development. "We understand the benefits that a healthy relationship has on a child's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. When children see parents communicating well, they not only learn to communicate with their parents but also with teachers, peers, and the rest of the community," says Nilia Jimenez, Senior Director of Marketing and Healthy Marriage Programs.

AVANCE's Head Start Healthy Marriage Program (HSHM) offers five core curricula for the entire family. "The primary goal of our program is for people to see the benefit of a healthy marriage and family," notes Antoinette Ball, Head Start Healthy Marriage Coordinator.

In family strengthening classes, Avance Houston's staff includes children by offering age-appropriate classes that mirror the materials taught in the adult sessions. Children learn the speaker/listener techniques taught in the adult class, and depending on their age, recognize

expectations they feel their parents place on them, ranging from chores to roles as a family member. For adults, the speaker/listener technique gives parents the skills to incorporate their children into family decisions by talking about issues and respecting their responses.

"We try to remember that we aim to break cycles one family at a time, and that we as a staff are learning and being impacted by the material alongside the families enrolled," Jimenez observes.



"A parent working two jobs doesn't have time to talk to their children, just to command them – 'get in the car,' 'clean your room,' – so we give parents the tools to have more dialogue and less monologue."

~ Antoinette Ball, Head Start
Healthy Marriage Coordinator



Catholic Healthcare Doing Business As Medical Center

Los Angeles, California

California Hospital Medical Center in downtown Los Angeles is owned and operated by Catholic Healthcare West, a non-profit, 42-hospital system providing a wide range of services in California, Nevada, and Arizona. The California Hospital Medical Center takes a holistic approach to medicine by providing social services well beyond immediate healthcare needs, including fatherhood and child welfare programs, mental health for children, afterschool programs, continuation of high school instruction, family literacy and Early Head Start.

The Medical Center treats a large number of families from Central and South America living in the low-income neighborhoods of Pico Union. In addition to extreme poverty, varying acculturation levels between parents and children are a growing issue faced by these families. A child who is attending a public school and is immersed in a new environment has a higher level of acculturation than a mother who stays home with a younger child all day. Likewise, a father

working eight hours a day outside the home may acquire a higher acculturation level than his wife. "This causes a lot of problems because two parents will have a different understanding of the child, so addressing this issue is key for us," says Tania Benacerraf, Program Director for the Program.

Recognizing that a preponderance of child abuse and neglect results from poor parental relationships, staff began offering classes to strengthen relationships in both English and Spanish. The response has been so positive that many families return to the same class two or three times to see the perspective of a new facilitator or to reinforce what they've already learned. Many parents say they no longer feel alone in their struggles. "These

"We help these families learn how to cope with stress when they have nowhere to get away, and help them find how to relieve their stress in a healthy way that doesn't involve buying beer on the streets."

~ Tania Benacerraf, Healthy Marriage Program Director

families put such a focus on their kids that they forget about their own importance to the family. Through this program, we show them that they matter," Benacerraf states.

The people who participate in the classes are "so destitute and their access to resources is so minimal, but there is such a sense of perseverance and beauty in how these families work to survive and give their children a life better than before," Benacerraf notes. "I don't know what we would do without this Healthy Marriage and Family Program."



Central Missouri Community Action

Columbia, Missouri

Central Missouri Community Action's Connecting for Children program upholds a fundamental belief that a child's behavior is directly related to what they see at home. Children who frequently watch their parents fight and engage in unhealthy confrontations are often those who have the most behavioral problems in the Head Start program, said Tera Rogers Assistant Administrator of Connecting for Children. This repeated observation motivated the agency to provide family and marriage strengthening services to Head Start and Head Start-eligible parents within the community.

The Connecting for Children program offers several relationship courses for married couples, single parents, and youth. The initial eight-hour course is delivered to participants in the form of a weekend retreat where couples are given an opportunity to focus on the material and interact with each other while being taught valuable skills by knowledgeable facilitators.

Rogers attributes the power of the retreats to the program's success. Once participants understand the classes are skill-based rather than therapeutic, they generally enroll in additional programs when

they leave the retreat, she said. "As the fathers participate in the program, they become the ones that talk the most, and this seems to make permanent strides in helping families develop healthy habits," Rogers said.

"We now know how to talk about stuff that normally made us fight. Just by using these skills we were able to find out the real reason for the problem (the thoughts, feelings, concerns, and desires) and not just the event. That's big."

~ Program Participant, Connecting For Children



Central Vermont Community Action Council

Barre, Vermont

Vermont Family Matters is a statewide partnership under the Head Start Healthy Marriage and Family Initiative led by parent agency Central Vermont Community Action Council (CVCAC), and supported by seven Head Start providers. “Vermont is one of the most rural states in the U.S., so it was important for us to spread out our services to reach isolated families,” said Mike Chater, Director of Vermont Family Matters, explaining why CVCAC pursued a statewide partnership for the grant.

Vermont Family Matters offers family relationship courses to all parents upon enrollment in the Head Start program. The courses are offered during an eight-hour weekend retreat for parents only, where parents develop conflict resolution skills, learn new communication techniques, and have opportunities to build unity with other participants. After the retreat, families continue enhancement activities for four additional months, Chater explained. “We have two overarching goals for all



participants: to provide fun with a serious purpose, and make the participants’ worlds larger.”

Content of the weekly workshops that follow the retreat is based on the specific needs and concerns of the local groups. Topics can range from financial management to training in parenting skills. “Participants are able to work in a group where they can identify with one another and comfort each other. Couples will bond over a shared experience about fighting with their spouse over how to load a dishwasher,” explains Elizabeth Zinno, a Regional Coordinator for Family Matters.

Vermont Family Matters also offers a variety of services to the entire family based on their individual needs as assessed through family action plans. “The Fatherhood Group” provides dads support and encouragement in their roles as fathers, and a “24/7 Dads” class helps prospective fathers prepare for their new role. “Rocking Horse” is also offered by Vermont Family Matters to assist parents recovering from alcohol and drug abuse. Supported by a multitude of community partners, Vermont Family Matters refers participants to medical, dental and mental health providers if necessary. “If families have a need, we connect them to the right resources,” Chater said.

The continued long-term investment in families after the four-month program is the strength of Vermont Family Matters, Zinno notes. The organization puts together fishing trips, offers additional workshops, sets up electronic communication among families, and sponsors festivals so the local groups can continue supporting one another beyond the life of the program. “We don’t just say goodbye after four months. We continue to offer resources and keep families informed about things that are going on. We want to keep these families connected,” Zinno stresses.

“Once these couples attend the retreat, they are surprised by how well they adjust and are resilient to change. They discover how important alone time can be for their relationship.”

~ Ronette Daniels, Regional Coordinator

Children's Home Society of Washington

Seattle, Washington

Children's Home Society of Washington serves two very different communities with unique issues. The agency reaches out to families living in the noise and rush of King County, a very urban area, as well as those dwelling in the quiet, rural, farm country of South East Washington. For families living in King County, there has been a rise in domestic violence in response to the economic crisis. In addition, transportation issues abound, keeping families from social services available to them. This urban community is the most diverse county next to Los Angeles and is made up of many immigrant families. In rural areas, seasonal migrant workers harvest crops that were once widely exported. In recent years exports have dwindled, leaving many migrant families unemployed and in desperate financial situations.

"Its pretty amazing the feedback we get from families about how this program has affected their families and children, and some say it saved their relationship."

*~ Mike Fitzpatrick,
SPARK Program Director*

Since 1896, Children's Home Society of Washington has had a dedicated history of serving children and families. In alignment with its mission to build the whole family, the organization's Strong Partners and Relationships for Kids (SPARK) program includes classes to strengthen family ties and build healthy marriages. "We have always been aware that relationship issues are always present, and we have a strong philosophy of family support here

that looks at the whole family, not just one member," said Mike Fitzpatrick, Director of the SPARK program.

Many parents who complete healthy marriage and relationship classes say they improved communication with their partner, are much calmer and happier, and are better able to strategize as parents. "It has been amazing and a lot of fun to watch people grow. As the couple attends more classes, they begin to act differently toward each other, and they reach out to each other and report having fewer arguments," Fitzpatrick said.

Fitzpatrick described a Native American couple that had been together since grade school. The couple felt that one particular class about addressing old wounds didn't apply to their relationship. As they dug deeper, however, a "light bulb went on" when they realized that they had never talked about how old traumas had affected them as partners and parents. Fitzpatrick commends this component of the class because he says it brings up issues couples have suppressed for years whether consciously or not. Parents begin to realize how significantly old wounds affect their current relationship and their children.



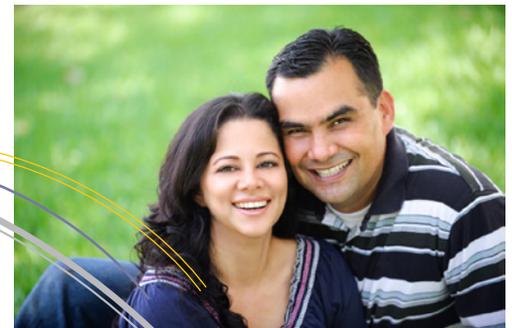
Community Action Corporation of South Texas

Alice, Texas

The Community Action Corporation of South Texas (CACOST) serves seven counties, each with their own unique culture and needs. But these diverse communities have at least one thing in common – they all share a deeply rooted machismo attitude which weaves itself throughout the primarily Hispanic population served by the agency. Initially we work with women “because the men see the classes as a woman’s gathering,” said April Anzaldua, Manager of the organization’s Healthy Marriage and Family Program. But when these women go home and share what they have learned with their husbands, “the men are hooked.”

The Healthy Marriage and Family Program of CACOST is unique in that it provides one-on-one assessments of every family before the family attends classes. During a home visit, a case manager assesses the unique structure of a family so the classes can properly address their specific needs. For example, if a case manager sees a larger number of step-parents than usual, the classes will be tailored to the specific issues faced by step-parents. The home visits also influence the topics raised during “booster” or follow-up classes which take an in-depth approach to addressing topics such as financial planning, parenting and discipline and anger management.

Anzaldua tells a powerful story of the transformation of one volunteer’s family. For some time, CACOST staff encouraged this volunteer to bring her husband and children to one of the family classes, but she always resisted. One tragic day, her youngest son passed away. “She stopped communicating with her husband, and her youngest son was having problems as well. Communication was not happening within the family,” Anzaldua said. Unexpectedly, the volunteer attended one of the family programs by herself, and every week she reported that she felt better and better. Finally, her husband joined her on a day the class watched the movie about relationships. “By the end of the movie, they were holding hands,” Anzaldua explained. The couple began to attend classes together and improved their communication with one another. Over time, their son began to open up, and they now have the tools to communicate with one another as a family.



Community Action Agency of St. Clair County

Port Huron, Michigan

Port Huron is near the “Motor City Capital” of the nation. Because most of its residents were employed by the automobile industry, its collapse has caused families to lose their jobs on a massive scale. “There used to be some part-time work here, but now there are no jobs at all,” says Dana Boggia, Healthy Marriage Director for Community Action of St. Clair. Unemployment has hit a terrifying 26 percent, and the majority of families served by the agency’s Head Start program live below the poverty line. In order to bring income into the home, one parent will move to another state to find a job, separating families and imposing a single-parent lifestyle.

“Stress is the number one issue for our families, and many don’t know how to communicate through that stress,” Boggia says. The impact has not missed the children, who are deeply affected by the tensions between parents. “We are seeing a lot of aggressiveness in classrooms, kids clinging onto their mothers, and mothers losing patience because they don’t know how to cope with these behaviors,” Boggia states.

Responding to these issues, Community Action of St. Clair Healthy Marriage and Family Program offers relationship and parenting courses to teach fathers and mothers how to handle stress. The classes give parents the tools to respect each other and their children. As parents begin to communicate better with one another and spend more quality time with their families, anxiety levels are reduced and everyone in the house becomes happier. “I see that children whose parents have taken these courses have stopped acting out by hitting and throwing, and are laughing, smiling, and interacting more with their peers and teachers,” Boggia said. “Children are getting the role models they need and it will trickle down into the relationships they have when they are older.” The class has been so successful there is a waiting list to enroll. Last year, 48 parents completed the course, more than double the number expected.

To strengthen the healthy marriage and family program, Community Action of St. Clair has leveraged the assets of community and faith-based organizations. Through partnerships, the program has gained a diverse network of facilitators, including male leaders and married couples. “Our married trainers provide role models for families to see what a healthy relationship looks like,” Boggia said. “It is powerful for our couples.”



Douglass Community Services

Hannibal, Missouri

The nation's financial crisis has had overwhelming consequences for the agricultural towns served by Douglass Community Services. Unemployment in the region has skyrocketed, putting pressure on families and their bank accounts.



For many couples who participate in Douglass Community Services, their multi-layer issues seem impossible to overcome. The marriage and relationship classes taught by the organization as part of the Healthy Marriage and Family Initiative address the need to set specific goals and work toward them one step at a time, says Linda Bleything, Director of the organization's Head Start/Early Head Start Healthy Families. Couples learn to communicate effectively and to respect each other and listen to one another. And they're able to continue to work on the unique needs of their families by taking additional classes on parenting, budgeting, anger management and home buying.

Because teen pregnancy is becoming an increasingly prevalent issue in the areas of Macon and Hannibal, Missouri, the organization offers relationship classes at local schools in three different districts to pregnant teen mothers and teen fathers. The students attending the classes range from age 12 to 18, and benefit from the informal, conversational setting of the curriculum. "The students try to test the facilitator with a 'shock factor' of being completely open, but it always leads to very honest discussions," Bleything said. In these classes, facilitators teach students how to take control of their own lives so they don't repeat mistakes. Young parents are given tools to help them recognize partners who will work with them to build healthy relationships.

Family Enrichment Network (FEN)

Johnson City, New York

The Family Enrichment Network's Head Start families have experienced circumstances that have proven to be challenges to healthy marriages and strength-based relationships. Because FEN is experienced in developing and implementing programs that serve low-income individuals, leaders developed a Nurturing Fatherhood Program. This program is designed to empower fathers so they can take a more active, positive role in their families. Because some fathers are non-custodial parents due to many different issues, FEN offers supportive services to enhance the unique bond a father shares with his child and improve the parent/child relationship.

The Nurturing Fatherhood program teaches men positive parenting and guidance techniques, how to build healthy relationships, and the impact conflict has on children. Participants also discuss communication, self-sufficiency, problem solving, anger and time management. In addition, they play the card game Habitudes, which reveals a person's attitude about money and teaches how to communicate about the subject with someone who has different views. Guest speakers specializing in fathers' rights, custody issues, parenting and other relevant topics also visit classes to answer specific questions. In addition, participants have the opportunity to bring their children to the center, where facilitators give fathers ideas for engaging in developmentally appropriate activities.

A few participants in the Nurturing Fathers program have a history of domestic violence. To address this concern, the program offers a "booster" class led by their Domestic Violence partners from the Crime Victims Assistance Center called "Keeping Your Family Safe." This booster class aims to teach men about domestic violence and child abuse in a non-threatening and non-accusatory manner.



"I would recommend this program to other fathers because this program can increase parenting skills and values and can change views on parenting style."

~ Program Participant, Marriage Program

Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners

Tampa, Florida

Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners (HCBC) has had a long and active history as a community partner, providing family and child services to Tampa, Florida since 1965. HCBC manages 26 Head Start centers throughout the city. Each center offers its own family strengthening program, serving more than 3,000 individuals. Imbedded into Head Start, the marriage and relationship classes are considered a standard component of the program. "This component provides a holistic approach to our work by providing family and marriage strengthening classes to fathers, mothers, and the entire family," notes Marie Mason, Assistant Director of Family Outcomes for the HCBC.

HCBC primarily serves the African American community, of which 78 percent are single parents. The great need for healthy marriage and relationship programs became apparent when staff observed single parents having children with multiple partners, and rarely maintaining a committed, monogamous relationship. The Healthy Marriage and Family Initiative created an opportunity to teach parents how to build healthy and lasting relationships with future partners. "Some parents told us they are comfortable working together with their child's other parent to solve problems, and couples told us that the classes improved their commitment to each other," Mason said.

"This workshop might have saved my life as well as my relationship."

~ HCBC Program Participant,
HCBC Healthy Marriage Initiative

To meet the gender-specific needs of every member of the family, HCBC offers "His Involvement Matters," a program for any male family member of a Head Start child, including fathers, uncles, and grandfathers. In this program, men are encouraged to take a more proactive role in the lives of children, and engage in healthy activities, including cooking, bowling, and movies. "Ladies Interested in Life," a similar program, is offered to women.

"The trainers were perfect. They kept it real and made us feel like we could open up. They gave good advice on relationships that people were probably wondering how to get out of or what to do about. After the meeting, we knew we had choices."

~ Program Participant,
His Involvement Matters Program



Holyoke Chicopee Head Start

Springfield, Massachusetts

Extreme violence is increasing in the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, which is putting the community under immense stress. In addition, the area's number of teen mothers and young fathers is increasing. In fact, 52 percent of parents served by Holyoke Chicopee Head Start have not graduated from high school. The Teen Prevention, Lifelong Partner Education, and Couples Enrichment Program (TLC) Healthy Marriage Program was established to help Holyoke Chicopee Head Start achieve its goal to create a safe refuge for families where they can find supportive friendships and grow as parents and spouses.

TLC staff are facing these community-wide problems by leveraging the city's resources, using a collaborative approach to address the unique needs of low-income families. The TLC program has fourteen community partnerships, including Putnam High School, YMCA, a women's shelter, the Salvation Army, and local colleges. These partners provide venues for classes, referrals for extended services, and input on ways to better address community issues.

To oversee this community program, leaders of TLC established the Healthy Marriage Advisory Board, a fifteen-person council comprised of representatives and experts

"After they (participants) attend a workshop with us, they're 'in' because the trust has been established among the facilitators and the rest of the class."

~ Lori Chaves,
Director of TLC Program



in higher education, family court systems, mental health clinics and other social services. "We try to evolve with the community, and want to receive input from diverse community members," says Lori Chaves Director of TLC, Holyoke Chicopee's Healthy Marriage Program.

TLC offers relationship and parenting classes to Head Start-eligible families. The organization also focuses heavily on engaging the presence of fathers in family life. Chaves explained that many single fathers feel society views parenting as a woman's role where they do not belong. Through a fatherhood workshop, men are encouraged to play an active role in the lives of children, as a father, grandfather, uncle, or boyfriend.

At the end of each ten-week class cycle, participants, staff, and guest speakers spend an evening together sharing their stories about the experience. "Listening to the real testimonies of our participants in front of a room full of strangers is incredible. It's the most moving part of the entire night," Chaves asserts.

Kings Community Action Organization

Hanford, California

In contrast to Hollywood's depiction of California, Kings Community Action Organization (KCAO) serves an area of the state often forgotten by tourists and television viewers – the migrant and rural Hispanic population that relocates all across Kings County with the changing agricultural seasons. This transient community is small, but undergoes the immense economic stress that follows seasonal work. Families living in Kings County are suffering from an 18 percent unemployment rate, and foreclosures have become a growing dilemma. The long-distance nature of seasonal work puts additional strains on marriage and families, and has become the catalyst for a devastating divorce rate.

In response to this strain on families, KCAO now offers a series of classes and programs to address issues related to single and teen parents, married and cohabiting couples, and families. Juan Martinez, the organization's Healthy Marriage Program Manager, explained how

“ These classes have created a bond among families in this community.”

~ Juan Martinez, Health Marriage Program Manager



the entire community has embraced the effort, enabling more participation than initially expected. Leaders of local faith-based organizations and the YMCA offer their facilities for classes and have completed training to become facilitators, broadening the program's reach throughout Kings County. “The biggest impact

the classes have had has been allowing participants to become stakeholders in their community,” Martinez reports. “They learn that if they can communicate with their family and establish rules inside their home, then everything else they do in their community becomes more of a possibility.” Martinez relates that giving families tools to improve their relationships has created a special bond within the community, and made people feel they are part of something larger than just their relationships at home.



Lake Cumberland Community Action Agency

Jamestown, Kentucky

The families served by Lake Cumberland Community Action Agency (LCCAA) live in some of the poorest counties in Kentucky, which can have a significant impact on families. In response, LCCAA offers a range of singles and couples relationship classes as well as financial literacy and parenting curricula. The program primarily targets Head Start parents served under Lake Cumberland Head Start, but also offers services to Head Start eligible families including inmates in the local jail systems. LCCAA has worked hard to establish ongoing relationships with local jails. A high percentage of participants report few positive role models for solid, stable marriages within their lives.

Pam Bivens, Program Director for the Healthy Marriage Program, explained the impact on children when one parent is incarcerated and they are raised by the remaining single parent. "First of all, one half of the income is stopped, so financial stress is immense for the remaining parent. The burden of raising a child by himself/herself affects the local economy, and the community as a whole suffers when single parents are forced to be sole providers," Bivens said.

Ninety-five percent of inmates say that attending classes is a positive experience and recognize that their relationship with their partner will have an impact on their children at home. "Many times the inmates talk to their spouses or partners about what they learned in class, and encourage them to take the class as well," Bivens said. The inmates are allowed to keep the workbook, and jailors have reported that inmates frequently review the workbook on their own after they have graduated.

Agency staff recently added a financial literacy component to the healthy marriage program. Bivens expressed her excitement over this addition to the program, and has high hopes for its future impact on families. "By covering these three core areas of relationships, hopefully, we'll be able to equip parents with adequate skills to sustain their relationship with their partners and increase the odds for their children to have healthy, stable relationships in the future."



Little Dixie Community Action

Hugo, Oklahoma

The lumber industry that largely fuels the economies of the counties surrounding Hugo, Oklahoma, has been hard hit by the economic crisis. The paper mills that employ the majority of McCurtain County households are shutting down, which has increased the unemployment rate in the region, and with it, the divorce rate. Most two-parent families are cohabiting, and married families are in the minority. In the last few years, Little Dixie Community Action has seen an influx of single fathers as well, says Pam Waugh, Healthy Marriage Specialist for the agency. Waugh points out that many people living in this region undergo a “generational pattern of singleness,” a cycle that negatively impacts children as parents demonstrate a lack of commitment by making and breaking relationships.

To address the familial issues faced in this rural community, the staff of the Head Start Program at Little Dixie Community Action began to offer classes to strengthen relationships, and established the Dad’s Day program which offers supplementary services for fathers.

“We are seeing, through our Dad’s Day program, just how important it is to have a committed father present,” Waugh observes. Children receive mixed messages on discipline and home structure when they experience different “fathers” coming and going with temporary relationships. This confusion often causes behavioral and learning issues for children.

Graduates of the classes are so changed by the program, they often eagerly become volunteers, and many become facilitators themselves, Waugh reports. In order to maintain long-term relationships with participants, weekend retreats are offered. Graduates of the programs stay at the Lakeview Lodge free of charge, and childcare is provided so parents can have the weekend to spend alone and review the skills they learned.



Maricopa County Zero-Five Head Start

Phoenix, Arizona

Maricopa County spans more than six cities, and serves a population that is 60 percent Hispanic and 40 percent Somali, Asian, North African, and Caucasian. For many of the families served by the Para Las Familias Healthy Marriage Program at Maricopa County Head Start, food is scarce and transportation is hard to come by. Debbie Wiseman, Family Community Partnerships Coordinator and Project Administrator for Para Las Familias, said the program is serving more and more two-parent homes at or below the poverty line without enough money for food.

Domestic violence is sometimes the result of stressful living situations, and has become a growing issue now addressed by the Para Las Familias program. "All of the stressors on families lead to stress on the family structure, and may or may not lead to domestic violence," Wiseman says.

The Para Las Familias program delivers relationship classes through its partnership with Pima Prevention Partnership, and is committed to being culturally relevant. Facilitators and staff frequently adjust the curriculum to fit cultural needs. "We hold workshops in beauty salons, apartment complexes, schools, inpatient/outpatient centers, substance abuse centers, the county jail and wherever else, in order to meet participants where they are," says Bonnie Ervin, Associate Director of Youth and Family Services for Pima Prevention Partnership.

To build on the mission of cultural relevancy, examples and names in the classes are adapted to fit smoothly into the specific community served. Facilitators are carefully chosen to lead specific classes according to their knowledge or experience with a culture or age group. "We are committed to enhancing the program by constantly going back and gathering more information," Ervin says.



Municipalidad de Mayaguez

Mayaguez, Puerto Rico

The Municipality of Mayaguez runs five different Head Start facilities throughout the entire island of Puerto Rico, and all five incorporate the Healthy Marriage and Family Initiative. The mission of the Program for this agency is for couples to improve their relationship with each other and their children, which then strengthens society as a whole. "If you have strong roots, then the fruits from your tree will be strong and you will then have a healthier, stronger society," said Elba Falto, Director of the Initiative for Municipalidad de Mayaguez.

Those served by the Healthy Marriage and Family Program here have very low levels of education, and often have health and nutrition problems associated with poverty. Alcoholism, violence, sexual abuse, and domestic violence are issues plaguing Puerto Rican society, and Falto's aim is for the Program to influence all of these issues through the values it shares with the communities. Through various classes tailored to Latino families, participants are given the opportunity to discuss machismo and patriarchal families. "The thought behind machismo is that whatever the father says goes, and the woman is just there to make the man happy," Falto explained. "With this program, we want children to see good communication between the mother and father, and see shared decisionmaking. If they have a problem, they need to figure it out together."

Falto said many female participants are afraid to talk to their husbands, but the classes help remove this feeling of intimidation. "Because of this class, the couple can decide together what is best for both of them and as a family." Falto also told the story of a couple who had lived together for 17 years and refused to marry. After completing the healthy marriage and family classes, they wanted to get married and become mentors for other couples.



"We are always involved in the community so families never feel they are alone and without support. If a family has a problem, we help them and give them the tools they need to solve it."

~ Elba Falto,
Healthy Marriage Initiative Director

Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission Inc.

Covington, Kentucky

Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission (NKCAC) serves eight counties in Northern Kentucky in both rural and urban communities. For those living in urban areas, spare time is difficult to come by. Many are single parents and have difficult schedules balancing work, children, and the heavy stress of paying bills. In the rural communities, transportation is scarce and services are far away. In both areas, families tend to focus on survival skills and getting through the day-to-day stressors. The NKCAC program partners with Catholic Charities and the Women's Crisis Center to offer four healthy relationship curricula to varying age groups within a diverse population.



Anna Phillips, Facilitator and Parenting Educator (Catholic Charities), explained that the agency offers a curriculum to help the entire family in a number of environments to meet the needs of diverse communities. The course is offered to homeless families at Interfaith Hospitality Network, a local organization partnering with churches to take in homeless families. Here families learn about relationships and parenting and then move on to a budgeting and financial literacy component.

“There are windows of opportunity from birth that are critical and can change the course of a child’s life, so if we can give them education early on as they grow they will have a better opportunity in life because they were exposed to these services.”

~ Tasha Wilder, Facilitator

Teenage mothers learn concepts of healthy dating and are given tools to help them recognize partners who will work toward strong relationships.

The NKCAC Stronger Together staff has held numerous successful family retreats which have become popular with Head Start families because of the opportunity to reconnect, practice communication skills, and participate in fun activities. “We are seeing more connectedness and a sense of community forming among Head Start families who participate in our classes,” notes Phillips. “In the rural communities especially, parents are vocalizing that they want to improve their home

environment and are actively looking for how to get their family life back on track,” says Carissa Coyle, NKCAC Rural Program Facilitator.

Ogden Weber Community Action Partnership

Ogden, Utah

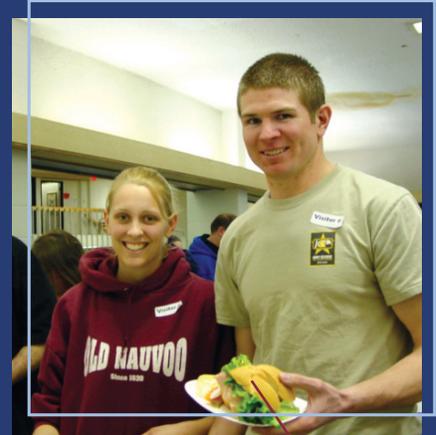
The Ogden/Weber Community Action Partnership offers marriage-strengthening classes based on the philosophy that healthy families lead to healthy and successful children, and stronger communities. “Fundamentally, people need hope,” says Jeff Tesch, Mental Health Specialist for the Healthy Marriage program at Ogden Weber. “Our classes provide hope and help participants see they can improve their relationships.”

Through seven-week workshops, couples and individuals understand the importance of skills that help them develop and maintain healthy relationships. Learning how to really listen, communicate, and resolve conflicts are fundamental skills taught in the classes, Tesch said. “We teach that every relationship has conflicts, but the key is to learn how to grow through the problems, rather than allowing the problems to tear the relationship apart.”

Finding employment is one of the greatest challenges for participants in the program, Tesch explained. “For many, the major problem is putting a roof over their heads and food on the table.” In addition, some face language barriers and healthcare problems, and many deal with the difficulty of being immigrants.

Whether married or single, Ogden/Weber Community Partnership offers Head Start families the opportunity to learn relationship skills, Tesch points out. “Sometimes individuals, and couples, come into the program discouraged about their relationships. They are skeptical about the prospect of ever being in a healthy relationship. But you can see the hope develop as they move through the course.”

Tesch said most of the classes are filled with people who have been referred by their friends. The organization offers classes in both English and Spanish.



“We know that healthy families help build healthy and successful children. The services we offer provide more stable relationships which lead to happiness within the family.”

~ Jeff Tesch
Healthy Marriage Program
Mental Health Specialist

PathStone Rural, Inc.

Lehigh, Pennsylvania

In the rural communities surrounding Lehigh, Pennsylvania, many families have lived in the same house for generations, far away from jobs, hospitals, and other services. While bonded by strong familial roots, many individuals lack healthy role models and suffer in silence from domestic violence and other forms of abuse. Mary Gagliano, Director of PathStone Rural, Inc., says in her former job as a Family Service Worker for over five years she saw the great need for relationship classes. The Healthy Marriage and Family Initiative offers help to families already facing difficult problems. The classes PathStone Rural, Inc. now offers have triggered whole transformations in families with parents who are single, married, and cohabiting. The classes help all couples with communication and problem-solving skills. Single parents are taught to recognize the permanent effect of bringing home a “new mommy or daddy” every month for their children. The program gives them tools to pace their relationships and take time to assess the impact of a potential mate on their family.



To address the prevalence of domestic violence in the surrounding communities, the organization ensures that a professional attends every relationship class to refer individuals who want assistance in this area. Victims learn how to recognize signs of an abusive partner so they can avoid destructive relationships and protect their children.

To address the isolation many participants feel, Gagliano and her staff are dedicated to building communities of trust among PathStone Rural, Inc. participants. “After they finish our classes, our participants will have game nights and movie nights together to keep in touch with one another,” Gagliano said.

“These classes are transformational across the board. When we talk to couples about how much their love life affects their children, they have ‘ah ha’ moments.”

~ Mary Gagliano, Director

People Incorporated

Abingdon, Virginia

Families in the rural towns near Abingdon, Virginia, live in immense poverty largely due to the lack of resources in the Appalachian Mountains. These towns, driven by the coal mining industry, have higher poverty rates than the rest of the state, making it difficult for many parents to provide the basic needs for their children.

People Incorporated's Smart Marriage And Relationships Today (SMART) program offers courses to teach fathers and mothers how to build their relationships while handling the stress that goes with poverty and lacking resources. "Our whole mission is to offer opportunities for people to reach their goals and improve their own lives and their families," said Susan French, Director of Children and Family Programs for People Incorporated.

The SMART program consists of eight-week courses focused on teaching couples and individuals how to strengthen their families through open communication, conflict-resolution techniques, and other relationship skills. "We've had couples get married. We've seen individuals set goals to finish their educations. We've had dads become more involved with decisions about their child's behavior. And we've watched moms gain self-confidence and become more hopeful as they learn new skills to build their relationships," French said.

A key factor in the success of the program is the trust and support participants feel within the classes as they get to know other participants who face their same challenges. In one class, a woman who was reluctant to read in front of her group soon began asking for opportunities to read because she felt so supported by other individuals in her class, French said.

This becomes a group of people "who celebrate each other's successes and encourage each other to set and attain their goals. We see families and individuals transformed through the program."



Pinellas County Head Start

Tampa, Florida

If you live and work in Pinellas County, Florida, you may commute every day to the same factory where you have worked for ten years. Like any other morning, you may walk up to its familiar doors expecting to see the faces of your coworkers and friends. As you approach, you are shocked to realize that overnight, the factory has been shut down permanently. Without warning, you have no job or income to feed your family or pay the rent. Unfortunately, for inhabitants living in Pinellas County, this is a common story.

Pinellas County Head Start approaches this crisis by empowering families in every area of their lives, including budgeting, parenting, relationships, nutrition and home ownership. “With this economy, our participants have so many stressors in life. If we don’t take a holistic approach to alleviate these additional stressors, relationships will not work,” says Arlene Roig-Garcia, Deputy Director and Education Manager of the Healthy Marriage and Family Program at Head Start.

Roig-Garcia said facilitators in the Healthy Marriage and Family Program use a team approach during classes, and focus on meeting families where they are. Facilitators assure participants



that they are going to “go through it with them,” and prove that they will “walk the walk” alongside families as they immerse themselves in class material. “Because of our facilitators, classes become

a family affair and participants feel comfortable sharing,” Roig-Garcia said.

“When participants go on to booster classes, they bring back the information

learned from relationship classes and assimilate what they learned into other areas of their lives.”



The Healthy Marriage and Family Program at Pinellas County Head Start primarily serves single parents, and emphasizes open communication with children and partners. “Parents learn that everything they do or do not do has a direct impact on their children,” Roig-Garcia observes. When parents improve their ability to communicate with a cohabiting partner, a new significant other, or with a spouse, children feel more at ease. When communication is healthy, the family as a whole can work together and feel a sense of security.



Social Development Commission

Milwaukee, WI

The Social Development Commission (SDC) Head Start Healthy Relationship and Marriage Enhancement Program carries on the rich heritage of Head Start by offering relationship education designed to build and strengthen family connections (parent-to-parent as well as parent-to-child) with married, unmarried and single parents. The program offers a wide-range of research-based curricula, and it utilizes a model designed to enhance family dynamics. An added bonus is that it reinforces the Family and Community Services Area of the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Many of those who register for the program are eager to learn how to develop a healthy relationship which allows them to work with their partner to resolve conflict and communicate effectively. Since the inception of the Healthy Relationship and Marriage Enhancement classes, these individuals have come to achieve stronger bonds and a deeper commitment with their partners. In instances where a break-up occurred, the couple gained enough knowledge and skills necessary to experience a healthy separation. Most of these individuals continued attending classes as a couple in order to learn how to co-parent more effectively.

“We want our participants to have a life-changing experience,”



stresses Debora Taylor, manager of SDC’s Healthy Relationship and Marriage Enhancement Program. “We don’t just skim the surface, we dig deep. We don’t just provide them with a few classes and a final retreat. We provide them with skills

and tools that will lead to positive outcomes and lasting changes in their lives and in the lives of their partners and children.” For over 19 years, Taylor worked directly with Head Start families and saw the desperate need for efforts to strengthen marriages and families. In all classes, a domestic violence professional is available to refer individuals who need assistance.

SDC staff work to combine skill building with a creative atmosphere. Recently, the organization conducted a series of classes for women and followed them up with a retreat where participants were able to interact with each other and solidify skills they learned in class.

“When the family structure is strong, you can basically survive anything.”

~ Debora Taylor, Program Manager

For men, SDC offers all-male classes focusing on relationship skill development and marriage readiness. Some of the individual topics addressed include the significance of fathers, blended families, infidelity, forgiveness, dangerous relationship patterns, communication skills and conflict resolution. The program’s domestic violence specialist is also on hand during these classes to increase awareness about resources available for individuals who want an understanding of domestic violence and how to get help. The men’s classes culminate in an all-male, rustic retreat focused on enhancing relationship skills and encouraging male bonding.

SDC staff have also used this program to leverage other resources within the community to strengthen a family’s economic well-being. For example, SDC partners with the courts to help men and women resolve child support cases in the best interest of their families.

Utah State University

Logan, Utah

Through its partnership with five Head Start centers throughout the state, Utah State University (USU) offers healthy marriage and family services to a vastly unreached community: stepfamilies. The partnership serves primarily Hispanic and Caucasian families, and offers services to a diverse community of rural, urban and migrant stepfamilies.

Abril Barrios-Bell, Project Manager for the Stepfamily/Remarriage Program, explained that USU staff noticed a lack of family education services for stepfamilies in their state. “There are usually ex-partners involved in the new family dynamic, and children might be living in two homes. Now stepparents have to figure out how much to be involved in certain areas like discipline and finances.”



adults, and then join in an interactive family activity during the last 30 minutes.

Four to six weeks after the classes, families reunite for follow-up sessions which may include a “straw activity,” where families have a time limit to build a self standing tower out of straws. “Some families find it difficult to get all the children involved, but it gives them an opportunity to apply the lessons learned from the class,” Barrios-Bell explained. After the activity, facilitators help families analyze and process the activity. They talk about the communication skills they used, or should have used, to better perform during the challenge. The goal is not to see who could finish first and have the best tower, it is to help families learn how to work together. This activity helps families realize that it takes time to strengthen a stepfamily, and that every family is different.

It also teaches that building a strong family is not a race, but a journey.

“ Learning I don’t have to be a parent to her, I can be just her friend and that has helped with our relationship... I feel like I’m actually a successful step-parent rather than a failure. “

~ Program Participant,
Stepfamily/Remarriage Program

Through a series of classes, parents learn how to appropriately strengthen the stepparent-child relationship and build a new romantic relationship, whether cohabiting or married. The curriculum is taught over a six-week period, with participants attending two-hour sessions weekly. Children and adolescents from age five to 17 also attend these classes, while children under five are provided with childcare. During the first hour-and-a-half, young children learn the same age-appropriate material as the

“I am learning to accept the way he does things so I don’t interfere anymore, and I let him know that I appreciate him for what he does. I also finally asked him to sit with me to discuss our family finances and take some of the responsibility off of me, and he has.”

~ Program Participant,
WCHS Healthy
Marriage Initiative

Wayne County Head Start

Westland, Michigan

Wayne County has the unfortunate distinction of having the highest unemployment rate in the nation. Domestic violence is a growing problem along with the unbearable economic stress and hardship of foreclosure, unemployment, and homelessness. Fifteen different ethnicities reside in Wayne County, with Dearborn having the largest proportion of Arab American families in the nation.

Carolyn Gray, Executive Director of Health and Family Services of Wayne County, explained the various relationship curricula Wayne County offers to meet the needs of this diverse population. Most focus on building positive communication and conflict resolution skills but vary in style and delivery. One curriculum focuses on individuals and couples with children, teaching them the skills to make healthy choices in parenting and relationships. A family workshop helps mothers, fathers and children appreciate their roles and work as a team to solve problems and discuss difficult or uncomfortable topics. Another class focuses on healthy dating and helps participants recognize the qualities of a potential mate. For individuals and couples on the marriage track, one workshop teaches about healthy expectations, commitment, and communication. Stepfamilies also are provided a class on the dynamics of blended families, remarrying, and parenting their children. This unique course helps couples learn their roles as stepparents and understand the legal and financial issues of stepfamilies as it provides methods for coping with children and adolescent behavior.

Wayne County also developed a partnership with the court system to help families access services and improve economic well-being through working closely with the local child support office. For example, a couple who participated in the healthy marriage and family initiative decided to marry, and received guidance in working with the courts to resolve a child support order in the best interest of their marriage and children.



