



Relationships
For Real Life

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Building Healthy Marriages and Family Relationships: A Collaboration for Boston Families

Final Report on Relationships for Real Life

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Insights From Prior Research.....	3
The Rise in Unmarried Births	3
The Reasons for Unmarried Births.....	3
Reasons for Concern Over Unmarried Births.....	4
Healthy Marriage Programs.....	5
The Massachusetts Relationships for Real Life Contribution.....	8
III. Description of the Relationships for Real Life Program	10
RRL Lead Agency	10
RRL Program Components: Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families.....	10
Other RRL Program Components	14
IV. Evaluation Methodology.....	16
Information at Intake.....	16
Information at Program Completion	17
Interviews.....	17
Child Support Records Review.....	18
Focus Groups and Interviews.....	19
Summary of Quantitative Data	19
V. Recruitment.....	21
Partner Agencies	21
Recruitment Issues and Case Volume	23
VI. Description of Program Participants	26
Demographic and Economic Profile	26
Demographic and Economic Profiles by Relationship Status at Entry to RRL	30
Relationship Profile.....	31
Parental Status of RRL Participants.....	35
VII. Attitudes Toward Marriage and Relationships at Program Entry.....	39



Relationships For Real Life

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Friendly
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VIII. Program Participation and Ratings	42
Attendance Patterns	42
Reasons for Participating	43
Materials Covered and Helpfulness	44
Overall Ratings of RRL.....	46
IX. Comparing Patterns Pre- and Post-Participation	49
Changes in Relationship Status Following RRL.....	49
Changes in Relationship Ratings Following RRL.....	50
X. Longer Term Outcomes	55
Follow-Up Telephone Interviews	55
XI. Child Support.....	64
Case Status in the Child Support System	64
Child Support Orders for Obligated Cases.....	66
Paternity Establishment.....	67
XII. Reactions to the Program	70
Reactions of Participants.....	70
Reactions of Program Staff	73
Reactions of Collaborators	75
XIII. Summary of Findings and Discussion.....	79
Collaborating Partners and Recruitment Sources.....	80
Program Format, Enrollment, Participation, and Expectations	80
Description of Participants.....	81
Marital and Parental Status Reported by RRL Participants	82
Relationships and Attitudes About Marriage at Enrollment.....	82
Ratings of the RRL Program	83
Changes in Relationships and Attitudes Following Program Participation	83
Longer Term Outcomes.....	84
Child Support Patterns	84
Reactions to the Program.....	85
Discussion	86



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Initiative

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Many people have been involved with this project over its five-year life.

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- The child support information for this evaluation was supplied by Nora Hudock of the Massachusetts DOR, Child Support Enforcement Division. She manually searched the automated child support records to see if RRL participants could be located and extracted information about their case history and payment behavior.

"Thanks to all for hard work, commitment, and endurance!"



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Executive Summary

The Boston Health Marriage Initiative is a five-year demonstration project funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (2004-2009). Known as Relationships for Real Life (RRL), the project was conducted by the Father Friendly Initiative (FFI) of the Boston Public Health Commission. RRL consisted of facilitated classes for low-income, single individuals and couples that aimed to improve the quality of their relationships, build support for marriage, and boost paternity establishment and child support payment.

Program Format, Recruitment, Enrollment, and Attrition

RRL recruited a population frequently missed in healthy relationship and marriage programs: single, low-income men and women, many of whom were living in crisis and did not have romantic relationships. Key format, recruitment, enrollment, and attrition patterns included the following:

- During the project, 46 RRL groups were held. Each group participated in eight, two-hour sessions that used the curriculum, “Exploring Relationships with Fragile Families (CFWD).” To the CFWD curriculum that deals with healthy and committed relationships, marriage, conflict, and communication, RRL staff added a session focusing on paternity and child support.
- The project enrolled 364 participants (196 women, 168 men) who attended one or more RRL session. This fell short of the 300 couples (600 individuals) that the project hoped to serve.
- Most men (77%) and women (80%) attended as individuals. Only about a fifth of participants attended as couples. Attendance patterns for couples and individuals were identical.
- Women attended an average of 6.3 of the eight sessions, while men attended 5.5. More than three-quarters of women (78%) and nearly two-thirds of men (60%) attended six to eight sessions and “graduated.”
- In addition to offering RRL classes to FFI’s current and past client base, project architects developed referral and service-delivery relationships with organizations that serve low-income men and women in Boston, including residential and out-patient programs for substance abuse, homelessness, and other forms of crisis; conventional schools programs and those offering GED classes; criminal justice programs for adolescents and adults; public housing programs and neighborhood service centers; and prenatal and post-partum care programs for adolescents and adult women.



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Description of Participants

RRL served a wide age group. Participants were primarily unemployed or low-income African-American men and women, many of whom have a criminal justice and substance abuse history, live in unconventional settings, and receive public benefits.

- Although the average age of female and male participants was 27 and 30, respectively, a third of the women and 19 percent of the men were 17 years or younger and more than a third of both men and women were over age 32.
- A majority of program participants was African-American (56% women and 72% men). Just over a quarter of women participants were Latina, and 13 percent of the men were Latino.
- Among men, over a third had less than a high school education, and only 21 percent had any education beyond high school. Three-quarters of the women had completed high school or their GED, and a quarter had attended some college.
- Almost a quarter (22%) of men were living in unconventional housing arrangements including institutions, group homes, and shelters and 4 percent said they were living on the street.
- Nearly all the women under the age of 32 were unemployed at program entry, and approximately a quarter of women above age 32 were employed on a full or part-time basis. Only one-third of the men in most age groups reported any employment activity, with the exception of men ages 18 to 24, 60 percent of whom reported holding full- or part-time jobs.
- Among working men, the average annual wage was \$18,000.
- Between one-half and two-thirds of men over the age of 18 reported being convicted of a felony. Half the men ages 25 to 31 and a third of the men over the age of 32 reported having a substance abuse problem. At least a quarter of the men age 25 and older reported having been diagnosed with mental health problems.

Marital and Parental Status Reported by RRL Participants

Most RRL participants were unmarried men and women who were not in a romantic relationship when they enrolled.

- Few project participants were married. Women and men over the age of 32 reported the highest rates of marriage, 14 and 18 percent, respectively. This age group was also most apt to be divorced, with a third reporting a previous marriage and divorce.



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- Among unmarried men and women, only about a quarter reported being in a romantic relationship when they enrolled in RRL.
- Nearly all women and most men had children when they enrolled in RRL. The incidence and the number of children increased with the participant's age.
- Relatively few mothers were married to the father of their children, although the incidence of marriage also increased with age.
- Close to 30 percent of the women age 17 and younger and those age 18 to 24 reported being pregnant at the time of their entry to RRL.

Relationships and Attitudes About Marriage at Enrollment

Participants who were in a romantic relationship when they enrolled in RRL tended to characterize those relationships in positive ways, but few had plans to marry in the immediate future.

- Approximately two-thirds of the men (62%) and women (68%) in relationships when they enrolled in RRL characterized them as “excellent” or “good.”
- Although only 14 percent of the women and 16 percent of the men who were unmarried but were in relationships, said that they planned to marry within a year, over a third of both groups indicated that they planned to marry at some point.
- Women over the age of 32 were more likely than their younger counterparts to say that they expected to marry within the year.
- While few men or women viewed marriage in a negative light, about a quarter were uncertain of the impact of marriage on personal happiness and financial well-being. The remainder was evenly divided between those who said marriage made no difference and those who said it made things better.
- While over 80 percent of men and women agreed that it is better for children if their parents are married, 85 percent of women and 59 percent of men agreed that single mothers can raise children as well as married couples.
- Over 70 percent of men and women agreed with the statement that few people have happy marriages. The view was significantly more likely to be endorsed by African-American men and women and Latino men and women, as compared to White men and women.



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- A third of the men and women who entered RRL in a romantic relationship said they did not want to marry their romantic partner based on financial reasons such as unemployment, a lack of saving, not having the money for a wedding, and not having a place to live.

Ratings of the RRL Program

RRL participants were extremely complimentary about the program and particularly appreciated the sessions dealing with communication, conflict, and the elements of a healthy relationship.

- Nearly 80 percent of men and women cited the sessions on disagreements with a partner, talking to a partner, and the components of a healthy relationship as being very helpful.
- Approximately 70 percent of participants said that the session on money problems was very helpful, and an identical proportion of the women and 60 percent of the men rated the session on child support as very helpful.
- Nearly all women (77%) and men (75%) gave the program and overall rating of “excellent.”

Changes in Relationships and Attitudes Following Program Participation

Participating in RRL produces little immediate change in relationships and marriage plans although those involved in romantic relationships are more apt to characterize them as “excellent”

- The proportion who report being in a committed, one-on-one relationship remained stable after program participation and was 62 percent for women and 58 percent for men.
- The proportion who reported planning to marry within a year remained stable at 16% for women and 15 percent for men.
- RRL had different effects on the women and men who entered the program feeling unsure about their marriage plans. Following RRL, the proportion of unsure women dropped from 26 to 16 percent. RRL classes had the opposite effect on men, with the rate of uncertainty rising from 15 to 31 percent.
- The proportion who rated their relationship as “excellent” rose from 17 percent to 35 percent among women and from 25 percent to 40 percent among men.
- Approximately 80 percent of participating men and women characterized their chances of having a good relationship with a partner as “better,” and their feelings about life and the future as “better.”



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Longer Term Outcomes

In telephone interviews with 158 project participants conducted approximately three months after the conclusion of RRL classes, most reported improvements in their life circumstances:

- Nearly three-quarters of interviewed men and women characterized their life as “somewhat” or “much better” than it had been six months ago. High proportions also said they had a better relationship with the person they had been seeing before attending RRL and were seeing their children more often.
- In the months between RRL and the interview, 28 percent of interviewed women had a baby, 15 percent broke up with a romantic partner, 18 percent started a new romantic relationship and began cohabiting, and 2 percent married.
- A comparison of participant reports about relationships at three points in time (prior to RRL, immediately following, and three months later) reveals an increase in the proportion of men reporting being in a committed, one-on-one relationship, an increase in the proportion of men and women reporting that they plan to marry within a year, and among young men, an increase in the proportion rating their relationships as “excellent.”

Child Support Patterns

One objective of the project was to increase rates of paternity establishment and child support payments among those with orders. To assess this, a child support worker searched the automated child support database to see if project participants could be located in the system and the status of their cases.

- About half (58%) of project participants appeared in the child support system as either the obligor or obligee on an existing case.
- Cases for project participants were evenly divided between those that needed orders to be established (41%) and those with established orders (42%). The remainder (17%) had at least one pre- and one post- obligation cases.
- The mean and median order level for cases with child support orders was \$241 and \$204 per month, respectively, with an additional average arrears payment of \$98 per month.
- The percentage of ordered child support that was paid did not change during the 12 months prior to and following enrollment in the project, with payments averaging 36.8 and 37.2 percent at both time periods.



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- Paternity had been established for at least one child for 42 percent of the parents with cases in the child support system at enrollment in RRL. When the child support records were checked at the end of the project, the rate of paternity establishment increased to 55 percent. Twenty percent of women participants reported being pregnant at program enrollment, so the increase might reflect paternity establishment activity for this population.

Reactions to the Program

Focus groups with RRL participants, program staff, and representatives of partner agencies that hosted RRL programs and assisted with participant recruitment revealed strong support for the program and perceived benefits for the targeted population.

- The program was viewed as beneficial for a diverse population including individuals in crisis and recovery who are at risk of relapse due to bad relationships.
- Participants liked the fact that RRL classes were highly interactive, there was “no classroom atmosphere,” and everyone had an opportunity to talk about “how we feel” in a non-judgmental setting.
- The mix of singles and couples appeared to work, with participants enjoying the different perspectives that each brought.
- Participants noted that the major things they learned from the program dealt with communication and relationships, which could be applied to all types of relationships and was not limited to romantic ones.
- Staff, partner agencies, and participants alike identified the goal of RRL to work on promoting healthy, stable relationships and avoiding bad ones rather than focusing on marriage.
- Program staff and partner agencies identified the need for housing and other basic services as barriers to stable relationships and marriage among many program participants. They attributed the low rate of child support payment among RRL participants to their lack of jobs and low incomes.
- Although there is a strong desire to continue RRL classes after the termination of the grant, architects and program partners are doubtful they will be able to generate the funds needed to coordinate the program and retain facilitators given their own tight financial circumstances.



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Conclusions

- Although RRL encountered some difficulty with enrolling and retaining program participants, it did better than many other relationship and marriage education programs for low-income populations. Part of RRL's success may be due to its outreach through agencies already serving the target population. Placing programs for low-income populations in settings where they already receive services, and locations where participants will feel comfortable, is an approach that is gaining favor among program administrators and policy makers.
- Since most participants entered the program with positive attitudes towards marriage and commitment, the program could do little to show improvements in the percentage of men and women viewing committed relationships and marriage as desirable.
- The RRL program did little to change the social norm among low-income men and women that marriage is not a prerequisite for childbearing. Although many RRL participants endorsed the view that growing up in a married family was "better for children," most felt that single mothers could raise children as well as two-parent families,
- The major barriers to marriage and committed relationships cited by RRL participants were a lack of stable employment, housing, savings, and money for a wedding, and mental health problems. This is consistent with the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which found that unmarried fathers had higher rates of unemployment than their married counterparts did, and unmarried parents of both sexes had higher rates of mental health problems.
- The RRL program had no impact on child support payment patterns among participants with open child support cases. Many research studies have shown that payment behavior is tied to employment and wage withholding orders.
- Although RRL may not have served unmarried couples who would appear to be good candidates for marriage promotion programs, it did serve a "hard to reach" population of troubled individuals who proved to be open to the information presented to them on improving relationships, and saw ways to generalize what they learned to a wide array of relationships, including relationships with children.
- The program was appreciated and viewed as beneficial by virtually all RRL participants, including couples, singles, and men and women with and without romantic relationships.



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- Over time, positive assessments of the program persisted, and there were increases in the proportions that reported being in a committed, one-on-one relationship, planning to marry within a year, and rating their relationships as “excellent.”



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I. Introduction

This chapter:

- *Describes the purpose of the Relationships for Real Life program*
- *Presents an overview of what is included in this evaluation*

The Boston Healthy Marriage Initiative, known in Massachusetts as Relationships for Real Life (RRL), is funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) under a section 1115 research and demonstration grant to the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Division of Child Support Enforcement that was in effect from September 2004 to December 2009. RRL seeks to improve the emotional and financial well-being of children born out of wedlock through the promotion of healthy relationships and marriage among low-income parents. The key mechanisms to achieve these goals are classes for individuals and couples that build relationship skills. The intervention is rooted in research showing that the children of unwed couples are at greater risk of living in poverty and developing a variety of social, behavioral, and academic problems (Amato, 2001).

Key goals and objectives of Relationships for Real Life include:

- Improving the quality of relationships among low-income, single parents in inner-city settings and building support for cohabitation and marriage;
- Improving the life chances for children born to unwed parents through the establishment of paternity, child support orders, and child support payment; and
- Addressing the barriers to healthy relationships and supporting the creation and maintenance of stable relationships among low-income, unwed families by providing assistance with health care, employment, and mental health.

In the next chapter, the report documents what prior research says regarding services to enhance and maintain safe, stable relationships (both marital and non-marital) and specifically what research has been conducted with low-income populations similar to those served by RRL.

Chapter III of the report describes the RRL intervention and collaborators, and Chapter IV describes the evaluation methodology employed to assess the demonstration project. Chapters V covers recruitment strategies and discusses issues related to recruitment and retention of participants. Chapter VI describes the individuals who enrolled, including demographic characteristics, relationship history, parental status, and child support status.

Chapter VII reports on the participants' attitudes and views of marriage and relationships at program enrollment. Chapter VIII provides information on participation patterns and satisfaction with the program. Chapter IX explores attitudes and behaviors related to relationship formation, maintenance, and



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satisfaction following participation in the program. Chapter X reexamines the topics from Chapter IX, with data from interviews conducted with RRL participants approximately three months following their participation in the program. Chapter XI reports on child support situations and performance prior to and following program participation.

Chapter XII reports on the reactions and insights of program staff and collaborators, and Chapter XIII offers a summary of key findings and a discussion of what has been learned regarding recruiting, serving, and changing attitudes and behaviors of the targeted low-income population.



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II. Insights From Prior Research

This chapter:

- *Offers statistics documenting the rise in unmarried births*
- *Summarizes what research tells us about the underlying causes of unmarried births*
- *Describes previous studies designed to provide marriage and relationship education*
- *Focuses specifically on the unique needs of low-income individuals and couples*

The Rise in Unmarried Births

As the incidence of out-of-wedlock births has grown, so has the level of interest in the public policy implications of this trend. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics offers the following key findings from data maintained by the National Vital Statistics System to document the phenomenon (Ventura, 2009):

- There were 1,714,643 births to unmarried women in 2007.
- This represents a 26 percent increase over 2002.
- Approximately 4 in 10 births were to unmarried women in 2007.
- Teenagers account for less than a quarter of unmarried births in 2007, down from 50 percent in 1970.
- Non-marital birth rates are highest for Hispanic women (106 per 1,000 births), followed by African-American women (72 per 1,000 births). Rates for non-Hispanic White and Asian women were lower (32 and 26, per 1,000 births, respectively).

The Reasons for Unmarried Births

A number of studies have explored the reasons behind the increase in out-of-wedlock births. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study found that 82 percent of unmarried couples were in a romantic relationship at the time of their child's birth, and 75 percent thought their chances of marrying each other to be better than 50-50. Despite valuing marriage, the reality proved to be quite different: only 9 percent of the couples married in the first year and only 58 percent were still romantically involved at one year (McLanahan and Garfinkel, 2002).

There is some reason to believe that low-income Americans feel that financial security should precede, not follow, marriage (Roberts, 2007). As a result, with the reduced stigma of non-marital births, low-



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income parents may postpone marriage until they believe they are “ready,” both emotionally and financially. Some research also suggests that low-income populations are more likely than better off couples to see divorce as a failure, which leads to marriage avoidance (Fein and Ooms, 2005).

This is not to say that economically disadvantaged individuals are less likely to marry than their more affluent counterparts. “Over their lives, economically disadvantaged people are just as likely to marry as non-disadvantaged people” (Fein and Ooms, 2005).

In part, the perception that poor couples are less likely to marry is due to “a tendency to attribute findings about African Americans — who do have substantially lower marriage rates and very high rates of non-marital childbearing — to the poor more generally” (Fein and Ooms, 2005).

Although low-income couples may ultimately marry at rates comparable to their more affluent counterparts, about half of all births in low-income families occur more than three years before marriage and the father of the baby is often not the eventual spouse (Fein, 2004). Studies have also suggested that low-income families not only have a high rate of out-of-wedlock births, they also appear to be fragile and prone to divorce and separation (Fein, 2004).

Reasons for Concern Over Unmarried Births

Out-of-wedlock births and high levels of marital disruption among the poor are of concern largely due to a number of studies documenting that children of single mothers fare more poorly on a number of economic and social measures than do children of intact households. Census Bureau statistics show that in 2008 the poverty rate for married-couple families was 5.5 percent, compared to 28.7 percent among female-headed households with no husband present (DeNavas-Walt, *et al.*, 2009).

Child support payments are positively associated with children’s educational success and negatively associated with children’s acting out (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Children of both sexes and all races whose nonresident fathers pay child support have higher school grades, fewer behavioral problems, and more years of school attainment (Marsiglio, *et al.*, 2000). Child support payments are also elusive for most never-married families. Although child support collection rates have more than doubled since 1996, with 58 percent of families in the program now receiving support, collection rates for never-married parents continue to lag. The proportion of never-married mothers reporting receipt of child support was only 22 percent in 1997 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). The problem stems from the fact that many enforcement tools such as automatic wage withholding are ineffective with noncustodial parents who frequently change residences and jobs. More to the point, fathers of poor children are often poor themselves, with 37 percent of nonresident fathers in the National Survey of America’s Families falling into poor and near poor categories (Sorensen, Mincy, and Halpern, 2000). Indeed, a recent assessment of arrears balances held by obligors in nine large states found that 70 percent were held by debtors with no wage record or with annual earnings of \$10,000 or less (Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement: OCSE (2008)



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Numerous studies find that children do best with two parents in a low-conflict marriage. According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), “Father involvement is associated with lower levels of delinquency, decreased likelihood of using some substances, and improved mental health for adolescents” (Carlson, 2006). In father-absent homes, children’s cognitive scores decrease and Behavior Problem Index scores increase (Argys, *et.al.*, 2001).

Compared to children of married parents, children of divorce and non-marriage are at greater risk for psychological and emotional problems, and are more likely to drop out of school. In a review of these studies, Parke (2003) concluded that:

Most researchers now agree that ... on average children do best when raised by their two married, biological parents who have low-conflict relationships.

However, Parke also conceded that it is difficult to disentangle the effects of income and family structure. She asks if single mothers are poor because they are single, or would they be poor even if married to available partners? She concluded “Clearly the relationship operates in both directions: poverty is both cause and effect of single parenthood.” But, she noted that economic simulation models suggest that two poor people who marry fare better than two poor people who cohabit, perhaps due to family and community support, or greater parental commitment to the family. As a result, she found that while marriage is not a guarantee of the factors that help children thrive, such as economic stability and attention from two loving parents, it helps to create these circumstances. Although these factors may exist in other family circumstances, “they are less likely to.”

Healthy Marriage Programs

The concept of marriage education is:

The provision of information designed to help individuals and couples achieve long-lasting, happy, and successful marriages (Ooms, 2005).

Such programs usually teach skills and tools, such as active listening, communication and conflict resolution, empathy building, and forgiveness, along with facts about the potential benefits of marriage to parties and their children. Newly developed programs have also dealt with domestic violence and identifying unhealthy relationships.

Healthy marriage programs are generally intended to help couples in relatively stable relationships to enhance the likelihood of them experiencing a long, satisfying marriage. Health marriage programs are less apt to be viewed as an intervention to be used in troubled relationships. The programs may run from a few hours to many weeks, and include a wide array of teaching techniques such as lectures and role playing (Ooms, 2005).



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Few healthy marriage programs have been the subject of evaluation, beyond general user satisfaction studies. However, there have been a few attempts to determine whether such programs create lasting improvements in couple communication, problem-solving skills, or satisfaction with the relationship. For example, a quasi-experimental evaluation of a program consisting of approximately 15 weeks of classes showed greater marital satisfaction and less conflict and unhappiness six to eight months following the program. Another 15-hour program showed higher levels of positive communication and less violence compared to a control group even five years following the program. However, only 50 percent of those assigned to the treatment group actually attended the program, which may introduce significant biases (Dion, 2005). A meta-analysis of 23 well-designed studies reached the conclusion that, even up to three years following the program, participants experience improvement in communications, conflict management, and overall satisfaction with the relationship (Ooms, 2005).

However, most of the evaluated programs were not designed for, or delivered to, low-income populations. More recently developed curriculum for low-income populations have begun to be the subject of evaluation.

Three large-scale studies on marriage education for low-income populations include the six-site study for Building Strong Families, which is evaluated by Mathematica; the Supporting Healthy Marriage project evaluated by MDRC in collaboration with Abt Associates, Child Trends, Optimal Solutions Group, and Public Strategies Inc.; and Community Healthy Marriages, evaluated by RTI with the Urban Institute, the Crider Group, and Betah Associates.

All three studies focus on providing services to low-income couples.

Building Strong Families (BSF) took place in Atlanta, Georgia; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Baltimore, Maryland; Florida (Orange and Broward counties); Indiana (Marion, Allen, Miami and Lake counties); Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Texas (San Angelo and Houston). By the time of the final report in 2007, BSF sites had enrolled 2,684 couples, randomly assigned to the intervention or control group. The evaluation relied largely on participation data maintained by the site personnel and qualitative data from focus groups with participants. The latter yielded the following conclusions (Dion, *et al.*, 2008):

- Prior to the start of BSF, many couples had difficulties with communication and managing conflict and anger, which often led to escalating arguments.
- Most couples had high hopes for the program, anticipating it would improve their relationship and parenting skills.
- Some couples were excited to start the program, while others were skeptical.



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- Couples were enthusiastic about most aspects of the group sessions, particularly the facilitators and interacting with other couples.
- Most of the reasons for occasional absences from sessions were related to work or personal situations, such as illness in the family.
- Couples had few suggestions for improvements to the program, and the suggestions given reflected their positive experience, such as extending the length of the group sessions.
- Focus group participants perceived that BSF helped them improve their communication skills, and ultimately, their relationships with their partners and their children.

Supporting Healthy Marriage is a nine-year project that operates in eight sites: Seattle and Shoreline, Washington; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Wichita and Kansas City, Kansas; Orlando, Florida; Bronx, New York; and Reading, Bethlehem, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The program will conclude in 2013. It aims to serve married couples with (or expecting) a child. The research intends to address the questions:

- Can marriage education improve marital quality, stability, and child well-being for low-income couples?
- Who benefits the most or the least from marriage education?
- What makes marriage education programs work best?
- What challenges do programs face?
- What are the lessons learned?

Community Healthy Marriages (CHMI) Projects have begun in several communities with funding through Section 1115 child support demonstration waivers. These projects are designed to promote child support enforcement objectives, including parental responsibility and the financial well-being of children. Fifteen waiver demonstrations were approved as of May 2006, including Relationships for Real Life in Massachusetts. Selected programs are participating in a cross-site evaluation being conducted by RTI International and its partners, the Urban Institute, the Crider Group, and Betah Associates. The projects began in September 2003 and will run through September 2011.

A few of the CHMI projects have at least preliminary data available. For example, the Nampa, Idaho, study, which began in 2003, has been the subject of an early implementation report (Bir, *et al.*, 2005) that describes the program, its collaborators, the participants, the services provided, the child support status at program entry, and initial reactions of participants.



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Results from the Grand Rapids program were published in 2008 (Manning, *et al.*, 2008). The research included semi-structured interviews with 84 percent of 57 participants (out of 3,000 enrollees) who were originally flagged for inclusion in the evaluation. The interviews took place approximately six to eight months following the end of the Healthy Marriages, Healthy Relationship Program. The evaluation concluded that:

- About half of the participants had no change in their relationship status prior to and following completion of the program. About a third were single at both time points, 8 percent were dating at both points, 2 percent were cohabiting at both points, and 13 percent were married at both points.
- Among those with changes in relationship status following the program, approximately 39 percent moved to less committed relationships (e.g., from dating to being single), while 48 percent moved into more serious relationships.

However, none of the interviewed participants married in the time period between the program conclusion and the follow-up interview.

The Massachusetts Relationships for Real Life Contribution

As noted above, the Massachusetts RRL program was one of several programs funded through Section 1115 child support demonstration waivers. The program is similar to many of the other healthy marriage demonstration projects, but it also has a number of unique characteristics:

- RRL offers Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families classes to adolescents. Determining if this is effective is important because, although birth rates are not rising for unmarried teens, 23 percent of all non-marital births are to teens, and most births to teens are non-marital (86% in 2007) (Ventura, 2009).
- The program is being offered to many single men and women who are not in romantic relationships and/or do not have children. Research shows that low-income individuals marry at the same rate as more affluent individuals (Fein, 2004) and will ultimately need information about recognizing healthy relationships and maintaining healthy marriages.
- Finally, the program is being offered to individuals in structured, substance-abuse recovery programs; those involved in the criminal justice system; delinquent youth; residents of halfway houses; and others living in crisis. These are troubled populations that are at high risk for non-marital births, formation of unhealthy relationships, and an inability to maintain healthy marriages.



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III. Description of the Relationships for Real Life Program

This chapter:

- *Describes the Father Friendly Initiative, the agency that ran the Relationships for Real Life program*
- *Describes the healthy relationship curriculum employed in the eight-week program*
- *Explains how the RRL program used the curriculum in novel ways*
- *Presents the other services that made up the RRL program*

RRL Lead Agency

The RRL program is conducted by Father Friendly Initiative (FFI), which is a program of the Boston Public Health Commission. FFI was established in Boston in 1997 as part of an OCSE-funded initiative to encourage low-income fathers to be emotionally and financially engaged in their children's lives. The mission of FFI is to "deliver a holistic approach to enrich the health and well being of men by providing a culturally sensitive environment and network of services."

Since its inception in 1997, FFI has achieved considerable visibility in Boston's low-income, African-American community, and in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2006, it served 519 men. FFI offers clients employment services including job readiness, job training, and intensive job search and assistance with parenting including a facilitated, 12-session, psycho-educational curriculum, child support advocacy, and counseling and mediation to develop a parenting-time plan. In addition to its case management and facilitated, instructional programs, FFI is a licensed, substance ambulatory service under the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and provides individual and group counseling, crisis intervention referrals, and groups dealing with a variety of issues including relapse prevention. With SAMHSA funding, FFI operates the Youth Offender Reentry Program, which offers substance abuse treatment and related re-entry services to sentenced juvenile and young adult offenders returning to the community from incarceration for criminal/juvenile offenses.

The staff at FFI includes a social worker and two certified substance abuse counselors who conduct screenings and assessments to identify issues involving domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health. Following the award of the Boston Healthy Marriage Initiative in September 2004, FFI assumed responsibility for implementing the grant and for creating the program that became locally known as Relationships for Real Life (RRL).

RRL Program Components: Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families

At its heart, Relationships for Real Life involves an eight-session series of facilitated classes for individuals and/or couples dealing with healthy relationships and marriage. After an extensive review of curriculum options, FFI staff and the ACF Regional Office personnel selected the curriculum Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families. Designed by the Center for Fathers, Families and



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Father
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Workforce Development (CFWD) for the State of Louisiana Department of Social Services, the curriculum targets low-income, never-married, African-American parents between 18 and 35 years of age and aims to promote among adults an understanding of what it takes to build healthy, mature relationships. According to its authors, the curriculum was developed with dual goals. The program is designed to help romantically involved parents gain the knowledge and skills that can strengthen their relationships and provide a practical way for them to explore the marriage option. For mothers and fathers for whom marriage is not a realistic option at present, the program aims to build greater self-awareness and the skills necessary to initiate and sustain healthy relationships, including marriage.

Relationships for Real Life includes the eight-session curriculum designed by CFWD. As shown in Table 1, the CFWD curriculum covers the elements needed for a healthy and committed relationship, attitudes and beliefs about relationships that participants bring to the group, tools to enhance communication and manage conflict, and planning for the future. The first series of Relationships for Real Life classes began in October 2006, and the last series of classes in the eight-session program ended in September 2009.

Table 1. Session Titles and Goals for Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families

	Session Title	Session Goal
1	Advanced Relationships Today	To create a safe welcome into the program that encourages participants to begin the process of sharing personal beliefs and feelings.
2	Healthy Relationships	To begin an understanding of basic qualities and values needed to sustain a healthy, committed relationship.
3	Mind on Marriage Mountain	To have participant couples reveal and discuss their differing beliefs and attitudes regarding relationships and marriage.
4	Conflict Control Room and Baby Smarts	To identify and explore tools that can help avoid the escalation of conflict in relationship communications and demonstrate language tools to manage relationship stresses. To educate unwed parents about the paternity acknowledgement process and its benefits for children, the relationship between the receipt of public assistance and child support, how the child support system works, and the enforcement remedies available to child support for those who fall behind on their payments.
5	Weather Storm Safe-Station	To recognize dynamics in couple problem situations and identify possible strategies for managing them.
6	Sweet Truth Talk Shop	To introduce and practice communication skills that can be used to identify harsh communication styles and replace them with more appropriate communication styles.
7	The Real Thing Spa	To explore different ways couples can express genuine love for one another, and to have the couples begin to share thoughts and hopes for the future.
8	Rings, Wings and Reason to Wait Center	To identify the factors required in making a decision to commit to a relationship, discuss commitment, and begin to plan their future.



Relationships For Real Life

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“Baby Smarts,” which FFI added to the CFWD curriculum, focuses on paternity and child support. In most RRL iterations, this material is covered during Session 4. An FFI staff member who specializes in child support advocacy comes to the session, and he provides RRL participants with information on the Department of Revenue (DOR) Division of Child Support Enforcement, the meaning of paternity and the different methods of establishing it, the legal right to visitation, the relationship between public assistance and child support, and the enforcement remedies that are used to collect back-due support. Class members with a child support case are invited to meet with FFI staff for one-on-one attention. After the client signs a release, the FFI staff member phones the DOR to obtain specific information about the client’s case, and this forms the basis for an individual consultation and relevant advocacy.

This additional material was added to the RRL curriculum because FFI staff feels that men and women of all ages are extremely misinformed about child support. Adolescent girls have wildly unrealistic expectations about the support they hope to receive. Many do not understand that the receipt of welfare leads to an automatic referral to the child support agency. Men and women are unaware of the cooperation requirement. Nor do they understand how a child support arrearage and the resulting credit bureau reporting, license suspensions, tax intercepts, and routine new-hire reporting can impede their lives for decades to come. Paternity issues are very relevant to pregnant women, especially when the father of the baby is in doubt. Some girls want to protect the father of their baby and avoid pursuing public benefits or child support, to the detriment of their baby. Facilitators report that some men who are not yet fathers are stunned by the financial and legal implications of child support and come away from the RRL session adamant about not becoming a divorced or out-of-wedlock father.

Facilitation is a key feature of the curriculum. Indeed, the authors of the Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families curriculum characterize the program facilitator as the “most important variable in determining the success of the program.” Accordingly, they recommend that facilitators be “highly skilled.” In addition to knowing how to manage the learning process and being comfortable using a variety of group techniques such as role play and values voting, facilitators need to have “positive, realistic and non-stereotyped attitudes about the parents with whom they will be working.” They have to use language and communication styles that engage participants who are highly urban and oriented to relevant youth subcultures such as hip-hop. The authors recommend that the sessions be co-facilitated by a married couple or minimally a man and woman who respect and trust one another. “It is very important for the co-facilitators to portray a mutually respectful relationship that models open communication and equality between spouses or partners” (CFFWD, 2004:10). CFFWD also strongly encourages the use of mentors to help deliver elements of the curriculum. Mentors are characterized as men and women who are older than program participants, who have experience with marriage and committed adult relationships, and can provide guidance and direction for younger couples.

FFI’s implementation of RRL follows some, but not all, of these proscriptions. All sessions are co-facilitated by both a male and female facilitator. RRL facilitators are also experienced in group process



Relationships For Real Life

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and facilitation, and all have worked extensively with the population being targeted for RRL classes. For example, one male facilitator has a long track record as a mental health counselor with a family services agency, as well as a relapse prevention program at an area jail. Several male and female facilitators have provided counseling in substance abuse for many years and have worked with men and women in crisis in a variety of residential and outpatient settings. Finally, RRL facilitators are racially and ethnically diverse and resemble the population being targeted and served. As the program director puts it, “We are committed to cultural competency and more than match our population.”

However, RRL deviates from the approaches recommended by the creators of Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families in several ways. For example, FFI does not use mentors in its RRL programs. Perhaps most importantly, FFI has targeted populations not anticipated by the curriculum architects. Although recruitment for the program and characteristics of the participants are dealt with in greater detail in other sections of this report, key ways in which RRL participants differ from those that the curriculum was originally designed for include the following:

- RRL offers Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families classes to adolescents who fall well below the recommended age group of 18 to 35.
- The program is offered to many single men and women who are not in romantic relationships and/or do not have children, rather than romantically involved couples and never-married parents.
- Finally, the program is offered to individuals in structured substance abuse recovery programs, those involved in the criminal justice system, delinquent youth, residents of halfway houses, and others living in crisis.

FFI defends these recruitment choices. According to staff, relationship issues are relevant to people who have many other compelling concerns and may even be in crisis. Staff point to the fact that many women in recovery make bad choices and get into relationships that trigger relapse and other “bad habits.” They note that no one is addressing the dual issues of recovery and relationships, or “how to maintain recovery and protect yourself when you get in a relationship.” Thus, a key goal of RRL classes with women in recovery is “learning the practice of relationships in the context of recovery from substance abuse.”

Although the population being targeted for RRL is characterized as having a “counseling phobia,” staff and facilitators both attribute the appeal of RRL as being a “safe place to come and talk.” As one facilitator explained, “The many cuts in health care mean that the poor and the working poor have no place to ‘unload.’” Although the facilitators follow a structured curriculum, they readily acknowledge that “some sessions do become psycho-therapy sessions,” with some couples “spilling out their problems.” As one facilitator explained, “We followed some of the curriculum, but we went where the group wanted to go. And it went everywhere.”



Relationships For Real Life

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As the FFI director notes about RRL:

We are a program that serves low-income men. Marriage would be nice, but they have other needs. They have found a place with us where they can talk. This builds confidence and they want to feel good about themselves. It is not about selling a “product” like marriage.

Depending upon the composition, the groups take a different flavor: all-male groups or all-adolescent groups work somewhat differently than co-ed groups with adults or mixed groups comprised of couples and singles. Facilitators have found that singles like “watching” couples and that mixed groups of singles and couples work well. More critically, staff and facilitators have become comfortable with the program’s focus on relationships and marriage. “There is not one person in this room who thought that this would work. The marriage word put facilitators off at first. But we learned that people just want to work on their relationships.”

Other RRL Program Components

RRL participants receive a number of incentives for their participation in the program. RRL participants receive two bus tokens for attending each session. After completing three sessions, they receive an MBTA Bus Pass. After completing six sessions, participants are considered to have “graduated” and they receive a \$20 Target card. Those who complete a follow-up telephone interview are given a \$25 Stop ‘n Shop card. Many enrollees are in “dire need” and are very desirous of the incentives they realize through participation in RRL. While incentives may be critical in getting individuals to enroll in RRL classes, facilitators maintain that the group process has considerable appeal and becomes very rewarding. As one facilitator put it, “They go into groups thinking they are going to get some incentives. But the groups make them realize they need more work.” And in the words of another facilitator, “They come to FFI looking for food and housing, and they fall into RRL, and by week 3 and 4, they start to get it. And when it ends after 8 weeks, they want more.”

While relationship classes are clearly the heart of Relationships for Real Life, they are not the only services offered to participants. Since RRL is embedded in a multi-service program for men, FFI provides additional services and resources for interested male participants and provides relevant referrals for female participants.

Among the many services offered to interested, eligible men are health care and medical insurance through Mass Health and food stamps. Other common services accessed by RRL participants through FFI are those dealing with employment and child support advocacy. RRL facilitators refer interested individuals and couples to counseling and therapy resources in the community. They also identify individuals with more serious mental health issues, take them aside, and direct them to relevant services.



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IV. Evaluation Methodology

This chapter:

- *Describes information collected about RRL participants at program enrollment and completion.*
- *Describes the telephone interviews conducted with program participants approximately three months following the completion of RRL.*
- *Explains the review of child support records conducted for all program participants.*
- *Describes the telephone interviews and focus groups used to generate reactions of participants, program staff, and program collaborators.*

The Center for Policy Research (CPR) of Denver, Colorado, conducted an independent evaluation of Relationships for Real Life (RRL). The evaluation incorporated both quantitative and qualitative components and drew on a number of data sources including pre- and post-workshop assessments completed by project participants, a manual review of child support records, interviews with project participants, and interviews with referral agencies.

Information at Intake

Both male and female participants completed an initial “Pre-Workshop Assessment” upon enrolling in RRL. The pre-workshop assessment collected information on the participant’s background including race, education, and employment history. The assessment also collected information on the clients’ current and past relationships, a detailed history of their children, their marital status, and their feelings about marriage. It finished by asking a series of questions on their current general well-being and the types of services they may be interested in receiving. The pre-assessment also asked the client to consent to be contacted for a follow-up interview and to permit a search of the child support system for evidence of their participation in or experience with public assistance and child support.

In addition to completing the pre-workshop assessment, the male participants also completed the Father Friendly Intake form that is used with all FFI enrollees. The FFI intake form collected more detailed information on the background of male participants, including ethnic/racial history, education, living situation, employment history, and experience with the criminal justice and mental health system (including a detailed history of incarceration and substance abuse). The FFI intake form also collected a detailed account of the male participant’s relationship with his mother and father, including how good of a relationship the participant had with each parent, how involved each parent was with the participant, and the level of education completed by each parent.



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Information at Program Completion

Following completion of the RRL classes, each participant was asked to complete a post-workshop survey. The post-workshop survey was handed out at the sixth or a subsequent session, in order to ensure that all clients had an opportunity to complete the assessment. For those clients who did not complete a post-assessment, program staff attempted to make telephone contact with the client to complete the assessment by telephone. By targeting clients who had missed one of the final sessions for multiple contact attempts, it was possible to obtain completed post-assessment forms from the greatest number of clients possible.

The post-workshop assessment:

- Gathered information about the clients' experience with and feelings about attending the RRL sessions;
- Tracked clients' attendance at RRL sessions, asking clients if they attended as a couple or individual and reasons why they attended the sessions;
- Asked the clients what topics they remembered covering and how helpful the topics were to them;
- Invited the clients to rate the RRL program overall; and
- Included a series of questions meant to gauge the clients' feelings about marriage and their outlook on relationships and marriage in the future, and to provide an overall rating of their current relationship.

Many of the questions about marriage and relationships were asked at the initial intake session and collected on the pre-workshop assessment and again on the post-workshop survey that was administered at the conclusion RRL. This allows CPR to look at the clients' feelings about relationships and marriage both before and following the participants' attendance at RRL; a comparison of pre- and post-workshop attitudes is presented in Chapter IX.

Once participants completed or dropped out of RRL, the intake, pre and post-workshop assessments were sent to CPR. CPR entered the information into SPSS and analyzed the data for this and previous reports.

Interviews

Attempts were made to conduct follow-up telephone interviews with all RRL participants approximately three months following their completion of RRL. CPR developed a closed-ended questionnaire that asked participants about their experiences attending the RRL sessions. The interview also asked a few background questions about the participants, their employment situation, and marital and relationship



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status. The survey had a series of questions about their children and child support situation. Additionally, participants were asked to compare their life before and following their participation in RRL and provide feedback regarding child support, the amount of time spent with their children, and their relationship status. Participants were also asked a series of questions about life events following RRL: Are you in or have you begun a romantic relationship since attending RRL? Have you married or had a baby? Are you a better parent? Have you lost your job, or started working? Have you gone on or off of public assistance? Did you start or finish substance abuse treatment? Finally, respondents were asked to compare their life today to six months before, when they started RRL classes.

CPR contracted with professional telephone interviewers at Northern Illinois University's Public Opinion Laboratory to complete the telephone interviews with clients using their computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system. POL has conducted many prior telephone surveys with populations similar to the clients who participated in RRL. All respondents received a \$25 gift certificate to Stop 'n Shop, which was changed to Target midway through the interviewing timeline. Those clients who could not be reached by telephone were sent a postcard inviting them to phone POL at their toll-free number to complete a survey and receive their \$25 incentive.

Telephone interviews began in July 2006 and were finished at the end of October 2009. POL attempted to reach 338 class participants three months following their completion of the final RRL session. A total of 158 telephone interviews were completed with RRL participants—84 were female and 74 were male clients. Each interview averaged 21 minutes, and an average of 5.6 attempts were made to contact the client prior to completing the interview. A response rate of 47 percent was achieved.

Child Support Records Review

Clients giving consent for a review of DOR's child support system were checked to see if they appeared in the child support system. The final review was conducted in the summer of 2009 by an experienced DOR employee. An initial check was done to determine if the client appeared in the system. This was done using multiple identification sources including their name, Social Security number, and date of birth. Once it was determined if the client appeared in the system, the DOR employee completed an Excel spreadsheet listing each clients' status in the system. This included noting if they were found in the system and their status on the case in the system (*i.e.*, whether they were the custodial or noncustodial parent or a dependent in the case).

If a child support case was found, the DOR employee completed a detailed review of the child support case and compiled the information in a separate excel spreadsheet. If a case was found, collected information included the number of cases found, case status, order establishment date, public assistance status, obligation type, whether there was a verified employer on the case, and if a wage assignment was in effect at the time of the look-up. The amount of the child support order and arrears balance at the



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clients' intake date was recorded, as was information on the children in the case, including dates of birth, paternity establishment status, and date of paternity establishment, (if relevant).

Child support payment information was collected on a month-by-month basis up to 12 months prior to enrollment in RRL and up to 24 months following enrollment in RRL. Arrears balances were noted for the following time periods: 12 months prior to enrollment, at enrollment, and 12 months and 24 months following enrollment in RRL. For the same time periods, payments made by wage assignment, self-pay, and enforcement actions taken were also noted. If the case had been closed, a case closure date was recorded.

Focus Groups and Interviews

CPR personnel visited Boston on five occasions during the five-year project: September 2005, February 2006, September 2006, October 2007, and May 2008. During each visit, the project evaluator conducted interviews and focus groups with a wide range of individuals associated with RRL. This included program architects and project staff at the Department of Revenue, Division of Child Support Enforcement, and the Father Friendly Initiative of the Boston Public Health Commission; RRL facilitators affiliated with Father Friendly Initiative, Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Clinic, Entre Familia/MOMs, and the Boston Medical Center Adolescent Clinic; representatives of key partner organizations, including Smith Leadership Academy, the Log School, Project Hope and Catholic Charities Multi Service Center; and program participants and graduates. In addition, in October 2009, CPR conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of 14 partner organizations that hosted RRL and assisted with recruitment and program presentation.

Summary of Quantitative Data

Table 2. Types of Data Available for Analysis			
	Women	Men	Total
Pre-Workshop Data			
Pre-workshop assessments	196	157	353
Number of men completing FFI Intake	—	168	
Total with some pre-workshop information	196	168	364
Post-Workshop Data			
Post-workshop survey	161	122	283 (78% of those with pre-RRL assessments)
Interviews 3-months post-RRL	84	74	158
Child support system check	184	168	352
★ Found in child support system	101	81	182
★ For simplicity, we noted men as noncustodial parents and women as custodial parents.			



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V. Recruitment

This chapter:

- *Describes the 46 cohorts participating in the Relationships for Real Life program*
- *Presents an overview of the other agencies that helped recruit and present the RRL program*
- *Highlights issues related to recruitment*
- *Documents the numbers of men and women participating in RRL classes*

The evaluation focuses on 46 cohorts that took part in the eight-week program from October 2005 to September 2009. As previously noted, RRL is administered by the Father Friendly Initiative. Its initial recruitment attempts came from FFI clients. RRL classes were advertised to FFI participants and graduates. FFI also advertised RRL to voluntary “walk-ins” and mandated, court-referred individuals who come to FFI for one-time-only services, principally those dealing with child support, food stamps, and/or employment and work. Of the 46 RRL cohorts covered in this evaluation, 12 involved groups generated through FFI and held at the FFI office.

Partner Agencies

To expand the program, staff began to outreach to potential partners in the community. Establishing new partnerships and referral arrangements is time consuming. Each arrangement involves a separate negotiation. To ensure that the partner agency had facilities to offer RRL classes to their clients and the ability and enthusiasm to ensure successful promotion and publicity efforts, it was necessary for the collaborator to designate an “in-house” coordinator. This type of commitment is often hard to get. Nevertheless, FFI has collaborated with 13 agencies. These collaborators serve men and women with backgrounds that place them at risk of out-of-wedlock births and fragile families. The 13 collaborating organizations hosted a total of 46 RRL cohorts with a total of 364 participants.

Listed below are the collaborating agencies and brief descriptions of their clients and services.

1. Boston Medical Center’s Teen and Tot Program: This program serves pregnant and parenting adolescents in Boston’s principal low-income neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Hyde Park, the South End, and Jamaica Plain. The Teen and Tot program offers comprehensive prenatal and postpartum medical and psychosocial services to teen parents and their babies. The Program model calls for teen mothers and their babies to be seen by the same provider until the babies reach the age of three. Through a special initiative to reduce health disparities, two case managers provide case management services to up to 120 women of color over a two-year period of time. FFI’s classes on healthy relationships and marriage are viewed as natural extensions of the program’s existing offerings dealing with prenatal and parental education. Case managers also refer fathers to FFI for relevant services.



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2. Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center (HSHC): HSHC is one of the 15 community health centers operated by Boston Healthy Start Initiative. A nurse midwife at Harvard Street has been retained to co-facilitate RRL groups. She has recruited some pregnant and newly delivering women in her caseload and their partners to participate in RRL classes.

3. Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Division of the Boston Public Health Commission: The Boston Public Health Commission operates a variety of residential and outpatient programs to treat substance abuse and prevent relapse. One program with which FFI collaborates is the MOM's Project, which is a community-based outpatient treatment and services program for parenting, pregnant, and postpartum Latina and African-American women in recovery from substance abuse. In addition to substance abuse treatment, participating women receive help with finding shelter and food, accessing medical care, getting protection from abusive relationships, and receiving HIV and parenting skills education. Another program of the Substance Abuse Services Bureau with whom FFI collaborates is Entre Familia, which is a one-year, residential substance abuse treatment program for Latina women and their children that seeks to prevent relapse and promote substance-free and healthy living. Entre Familia provides a 12-month, community-living experience that includes many specialized services: relapse prevention; day care; education; job training; counseling; family therapy; and access to healthcare and prenatal and postpartum care.

4. Casa Esperanza: Casa Esperanza is the first substance-abuse program especially designed to help Latino men and women. RRL services are provided to the Women and Children's division.

5. Roxbury Youthworks, Inc. (RYI): Roxbury Youthworks provides community-based, non-residential services to area youth who are involved with the Department of Social Services because of a variety of behavioral problems. At various locations, RYI provides individual and family psychosocial and psychological evaluation, individual and/or group treatment, and intensive supervision services for youth who are transitioning from Department of Youth Services secure treatment facilities and residential placements back to their home in the communities of West Roxbury, Hyde Park, Roslindale, Mattapan, and Jamaica Plain. RYI seeks to help youth make a successful transition, reduce recidivism, and avoid engaging in delinquent behaviors. Participating youth attend group meetings dealing with life skills, substance abuse, and violent and sexual offenses. Staff provide intensive supervision, curfew checks, and advocacy in court and in employment settings.

6. Project Hope: Project Hope provides homeless women and children access to education, jobs, housing, and emergency services.

7. Log School: Based in a comprehensive community organization in Dorchester, the Log School offers a variety of youth programming and education programs including Adult Basic Education and General Educational Development (GED) classes.



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8. Smith Leadership Academy: The Smith Leadership Academy is a sixth- through eighth-grade middle school based in South Boston that has a college preparatory focus. The Academy is an Afrocentric charter school that sets high academic standards and requires extensive levels of parent participation.

9. St. Mary's Women and Children Center: St. Mary's is an alternative residential facility for low-income pregnant and parenting teen mothers and children who struggle with homelessness, child abuse and neglect, partner violence, addiction, and teenage pregnancy and parenting. It offers a full continuum of programming, from shelter to education and training to a variety of life supports.

10. Boston Health Community Resources for Empowerment and Wellness (CREW): This program, located at the Boston Public Health Commission, recruits and trains young men between the ages of 18 and 25 from Boston's inner city. Participants train for work as health outreach workers and peer educators to other young men in the community.

11. Franklin Park Development: Franklin Park is a subsidized public housing site consisting of 207 units with a mixed-age population. There is an active Tenants Association that coordinates the delivery of a variety of services on site.

12. Catholic Charities: This is one of the largest social services providers in Massachusetts, offering approximately 140 programs to people in all lifecycle stages, including teens.

13. Whittier Street Health Center: Provides primary, preventive care and social services to Roxbury and the surrounding community. The goal is to empower residents to take control of their health and to counter the effects of poverty, violence, unemployment, and other social issues.

Recruitment Issues and Case Volume

Project staff maintains that it was not hard to attract RRL attendees. The initial classes were readily filled by past participants of FFI programs and their partners. Strong FFI supporters, these individuals created a "buzz" about the program and generated some "word-of-mouth" referrals. For men in FFI, relationship classes are something they can do to help their baby's mother. The food and hospitality offered in the program, and the Christmas gifts for children given at holiday time, represent positive things that low-income men can "contribute" to their partner.

Staff believe other FFI clients responded to the program's promise to help them be the "guy their girlfriend fell in love with." Others cite the supportive and non-judgmental nature of the program to explain its appeal. According to one facilitator, while other agencies do "more finger pointing" or offer "discrete" and frequently coercive interventions like "mandated parenting classes," RRL is uniquely "holistic" and supportive. Still others cite the inherent "fun" and support that comes from being in a psychosocial group. According to a facilitator, "It is the support of the group and the interaction that grabs them and that's what they want."



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Staff say that they present the program to potential participants as an opportunity to work on relationships of all types and a way to avoid marrying or dating a “jerk” or “jerkette.” Potential participants are told that they will learn how to “go further” in their relationships with many people in their lives: romantic partners, as well as parents and children. Relationships are not viewed as synonymous with marriage, and staff say that if they put out a program flier that had the word “marriage” in the text, they would have a room full of “empty chairs.” As one staff member explains, “This is not just about romantic relationships. It is a catalyst for people to focus on a relationship that is important to [them].”

The RRL cohorts that participated at these sites ranged in size from 2 to 17 individuals. The first group began in October 2005, and the last group included in this evaluation began in July, 2009.

Table 3 shows the participants in RRL by the agency hosting the program.

	Hosting Agency	Men	Women	Total
1	Father Friendly Initiative	77	28	105
2	Boston Health Community Resources for Empowerment and Wellness (CREW)	15	8	23
3	Boston Medical Center’s Teen and Tot Program	4	18	22
4	Casa Esperanza	0	24	24
5	Catholic Charities	3	7	10
6	Franklin Park Development	1	6	7
7	Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center	12	10	22
8	Log School	9	27	36
9	Project Hope	0	10	10
10	Roxbury Youthworks, Inc.	23	2	25
11	Smith Leadership Academy	6	17	23
12	St. Mary’s Women and Children Center	14	25	39
13	Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Division of the Boston Public Health Commission (MOM’s Project, Entre Familia)	3	13	16
14	Whittier Street Health Center	1	1	2
	Total	168	196	364



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VI. Description of Program Participants

This chapter:

- *Provides basic demographic and economic data on the men and women participating in the RRL classes*
- *Highlights employment patterns and barriers by age of the RRL participant*
- *Documents how RRL participants describe their lives within the weeks prior to enrollment*
- *Summarizes demographic and economic patterns by relationship status at program entry*
- *Describes the relationship status of RRL participants, including variations by age*
- *Summarizes how RRL clients describe the quality of their relationships at program entry, including level of commitment and variations by age*
- *Presents a profile of the parental status of RRL clients at program entry*
- *Offers the explanations given by RRL clients who are not interested in marrying their current partner*

Demographic and Economic Profile

A demographic profile of the men and women participating in RRL classes shows the following:

- The average age of women and male participants is 27 and 30, respectively. Half of the women are over age 23, and half of the men are over age 26.
- During RRL groups 24 to 36, the program was offered in several schools and alternative programs for pregnant teens. This increased the number of adolescents who participated in the program. Ultimately, 33 percent of the participating women and 19 percent of the participating men were age 17 years or younger. On the other hand, 31 percent of the women and 38 percent of the men were over age 32 years.
- Although the majority of both women (56%) and men (72%) are African-American, the proportion of Latinas increased over the duration of the project due to the addition of participants from the MOM's Project, Entre Familia, and Casa Esperanza. These programs provide substance abuse treatment and other services for Latina women and their children. Overall, 27 percent of the women were Latinas, while 13 percent of the men were Latinos.
- Three-quarters of the women over age 18 had completed high school or their GED, and 27 percent had attended some college. In contrast, 64 percent of the male attendees over age 18 have at least a high school degree and 21 percent have some post-high school education.



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- Not surprisingly, the percentage of women who were enrolled in school at the time they entered the RRL varied considerably by age. Among those women age 17 or younger, 90 percent were still in school. In contrast, among those over 31 years of age, only 19 percent were in school at program entry. This information was not available for male participants.
- Most of the men (71%) were living in their own home or apartment at the time they entered RRL. However, the percentage living in a group home, institution, or shelter stood at 22 percent, and 4 percent of the men said they were living on the street.

Table 4. Demographic Information							
		Women (n=196)			Men (n=168)		
Age:	Mean	26.9			29.8		
	Median	23.0			26.0		
	Range	18-56			18-59		
	11-17	33%			19%		
	18-24	20%			27%		
	25-31	16%			16%		
	32-56	31%			38%		
Race:	African-American	56%			72%		
	Latina/Hispanic	27%			13%		
	White	8%			9%		
	Other	9%			6%		
Education Completed (those over age 18 years):		(n=94)			(n=91)		
	Less than high school degree	25%			36%		
	High school degree or GED	49%			43%		
	AA degree or some college	15%			17%		
	College degree	12%			4%		
Currently in school, by age:		≤ 17 (51)	18-24 (31)	25-31 (26)	≥ 32 (49)		
	★ Yes	90%	52%	35%	19%		
Current living situation:		<i>Not asked</i>			71%		
	House or apartment						2%
	Room/boarded house						8%
	Institution						5%
	Group home						9%
	Shelter/mission						4%
	On the streets/homeless						
★ Chi square significant at .00							



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The economic situation of men and women enrolled in RRL shows the following:

- The majority of the women up to age 32 were unemployed at program entry. Among those ages 32 and older, about a quarter were employed full or part_time.
- Levels of employment are somewhat higher for men enrolled in RRL. However, among most age groups, only a third report any employment. The sole exception is among the 18 to 24-year-olds, where over 60 percent report holding either full- or part-time jobs.
- Average annual incomes among the enrolled women are extremely low: half earn less than \$540 per year. Men fare much better, with median incomes of \$18,000.
- The number of benefits women reported receiving during the 12 months prior to program entry increases with the woman's age. The most common types of assistance for women are food stamps, TANF, medical assistance, and SSI. Among men, fewer benefits are reported. However, the most common forms of assistance to men appear to be food stamps and medical assistance.

Table 5. Economic Profile of Participants

	Women (n=194)				Men (n=128)			
Age, in years:	≤ 17 (53)	18-24 (32)	25-31 (27)	≥ 32 (51)	≤ 17 (18)	18-24 (24)	25-31 (17)	≥ 32 (43)
★ ▲ Current employment situation:								
Employed full-time	0%	3%	7%	22%	6%	21%	24%	28%
Employed part-time	6%	13%	4%	4%	28%	42%	6%	7%
Work at odd jobs off and on	2%	0%	4%	0%	0%	8%	6%	7%
Self-employed	0%	0%	4%	4%	0%	0%	6%	5%
Not employed	93%	84%	82%	71%	67%	29%	59%	54%
Annual wage for those working:	All ages employed (n=13)				All ages employed (n=63)			
Mean	\$542				\$20,328			
Median	\$540				\$18,000			
Benefits received in the past 12 months:	≤ 17 (53)	18-24 (32)	25-31 (27)	≥ 32 (51)	≤ 17 (18)	18-24 (24)	25-31 (17)	≥ 32 (43)
★ Food stamps	46%	78%	63%	65%	31%	16%	31%	46%
★ TANF	24%	27%	18%	8%	0%	4%	0%	5%
Unemployment insurance benefits	2%	3%	0%	2%	0%	4%	12%	0%
Worker's compensation benefits	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%
Veteran's benefits	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	8%	0%	3%
Medical assistance	24%	27%	22%	12%	39%	20%	44%	36%
★ SSI	13%	12%	31%	35%	8%	12%	19%	10%
★ Section 8 housing or public housing	4%	9%	15%	26%	-	-	-	-
★ Substance abuse treatment	4%	22%	31%	31%	-	-	-	-
★ Women: Chi square significant at .05.								
▲ Men: Chi square significant at .05.								
- Not asked.								



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Men who participated in RRL were asked about a number of factors that might impede their employment situation, and might also influence their ability to find and maintain a healthy relationship. As Table 6 shows:

- Young men age 17 or younger reported very few barriers, although 14 percent indicated that they were not interested in finding a job.
- Health issues are mentioned by approximately 40 percent of the men age 25 or older. Substance abuse problems are also more common among this population. Half of the men ages 25 to 31 years note a substance abuse problem, as do 35 percent of those over age 31.
- Literacy problems were barriers for about 20 percent of the 25 to 31-year-olds, and English problems were noted by a similar percentage of those age 18 to 24 years.
- Felony convictions were quite common and ranged from 27 percent among those aged 17 or younger to a high of 68 percent among those 32 and older. A conviction on a spousal abuse charge was common only in the age group of 25 to 31, at least based on self-report.
- At least a quarter of the men age 25 or older reported having been diagnosed with mental health problems.

Table 6. Self-Reported Problems That Complicate Employment for Male RRL Participants				
	≤ 17 (18)	18-24 (24)	25-31 (17)	≥ 32 (43)
▲ Health or disability	0%	23%	43%	39%
▲ Substance abuse problems	0%	15%	50%	35%
Problems reading or writing	7%	15%	21%	11%
Lack of fluency in English	0%	21%	7%	3%
Lack of Green Card	0%	5%	7%	0%
Lack of child care	0%	11%	7%	3%
▲ Not interested in employment	14%	0%	8%	0%
Convicted of a felony	27%	67%	55%	68%
▲ Convicted of spousal abuse	0%	0%	45%	13%
Diagnosed with mental health problem	13%	0%	25%	27%
▲ Chi square is significant at .05.				



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Finally, Table 7 shows that significant percentages of both men and women enrolled in RRL report recent problems with depression and anxiety.

Table 7. Life in the Past Week		
Percentage reporting feeling this “some or most of the time”:	Women (n=179)	Men (n=136)
So down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up	40%	33%
Full of energy	76%	77%
Very nervous	37%	34%
Downhearted and blue	39%	36%
Full of pep	52%	65%
Worn out	67%	51%
Have been a happy person	82%	83%

Demographic and Economic Profiles by Relationship Status at Entry to RRL

Tables 8 and 9 compare the profiles of female and male RRL participants based on their relationship status at program entry. As the tables indicate:

- Women who are married tend to be older than those in other types of relationships, more likely to have completed college, and more likely to be working full time, compared to other women in the program.
- Men who are married tend to be older than men in other types of relationships and somewhat more likely to have at least a high school education.

Table 8. Profile of Female Clients Based on Their Relationship Status						
	Women			Men		
	Married (N=18)	In a Committed Relationship (N=87)	Other Relationship (N=50)	Married (N=20)	In a Committed Relationship (N=57)	Other Relationship (N=45)
★ ▲ Average age:	35.9	26.9	24.5	37.7	30.5	26.3
Race:						
African-American	56%	57%	54%	78%	71%	79%
Latina/Hispanic	33%	24%	28%	11%	17%	7%
White	6%	13%	8%	6%	8%	7%
Other	6%	6%	10%	6%	4%	7%
★ ▲ Education:						
Less than high school degree	26.7%	28%	26%	31%	61%	39%
High school degree or GED	26.7%	60%	62%	56%	20%	50%
AA degree or some college	26.7%	6%	7%	13%	15%	8%
College degree	20.0%	6%	5%	0%	4%	3%



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Table 8. Profile of Female Clients Based on Their Relationship Status

	Women			Men		
	Married (N=18)	In a Committed Relationship (N=87)	Other Relationship (N=50)	Married (N=20)	In a Committed Relationship (N=57)	Other Relationship (N=45)
★ Employment Status						
Full-time	28%	5%	6%	19%	22%	19%
Part-time	6%	6%	4%	13%	24%	19%
Temporary/on-and-off	0%	1%	0%	6%	2%	13%
Self-employed	11%	1%	2%	0%	2%	3%
Not employed	56%	87%	87%	63%	50%	45%
★ Differences between women are significant at .05 or less.						
▲ Chi square for men is significant at .05.						

Relationship Profile

At entry to the RRL program, few of the women were married. Even among those women age 32 or older, only 14 percent reported being married.

Among the women who were not married at entry to the RRL program, most of the younger women had never been married. However, among those age 32 and older, about a third had previously been married but were now divorced.

Women who were not married at program entry generally reported they were not in a romantic relationship. Among those women age 17 or younger, only about a quarter were romantically involved (but not married) at program entry. Among those women age 32 or older, the figure was identical.

Age does correlate to current marital status among men. None of the men age 17 or less reported being married at project entry, compared to 18 and 21 percent, respectively, among those ages 25 to 31, and 32 and older. Among men who are not married, most of those age 31 and younger had never been married, while a third of those age 32 and older had been previously married. As with women, most men who were not married at program entry were also not in a romantic relationship. However, among those in romantic relationships, about a third reported living with a partner.



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Table 9. Participant Relationship Status Pre-RRL Classes									
	Women				Men				
	≤ 17 (53)	18-24 (32)	25-31 (27)	≥ 32 (51)	≤ 17 (18)	18-24 (24)	25-31 (17)	≥ 32 (43)	
▲ Currently married:									
Yes	4%	9%	4%	14%	0%	4%	18%	21%	
No	96%	91%	96%	86%	100%	96%	82%	79%	
★ ▲ If not currently, have you ever been married:									
Yes, but divorced	0%	3%	8%	36%	0%	0%	10%	35%	
No, never married	100%	97%	92%	64%	100%	100%	90%	65%	
If not married, are you in a romantic relationship:									
Yes	25%	14%	33%	25%	26%	11%	14%	18%	
No	75%	86%	67%	75%	74%	89%	86%	82%	
Living with this romantic partner:									
Yes	18%	28%	17%	26%	0%	24%	29%	31%	
Some of the time	9%	12%	11%	9%	9%	5%	7%	11%	
No	73%	60%	72%	65%	91%	71%	64%	58%	
★ Chi square is significant for women at .05. ▲ Chi square is significant for men at .05.									

Table 10 shows how women and men who were in relationships at entry to the RRL program rated these relationships. The table shows:

- Just over a third of the women and approximately a quarter of the men describe the relationship as only “fair” or “poor.”
- A quarter of the women and 15 percent of the men describe their fighting as frequent or continuous.
- Relatively few of the men or women report that fighting often escalates into shouting or hitting. On the other hand, relatively few say they often handle conflict by talking without yelling or shouting.
- Finally, most of the men and women reported their partner tells them they are loved and listens to and supports them.

There were no statistically significant differences in the ratings given to relationships or conflict styles based on the age of the responding man or woman.



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Table 10. Quality of the Relationship Pre-RRL Classes Includes Only Those in a Relationship Prior to the Classes		
	Women (N=155)	Men (N=118)
How would you rate your relationship?		
Excellent	17%	25%
Good	48%	37%
Fair	25%	29%
Poor	10%	9%
How often do the two of you fight or argue:		
A lot or all the time	26%	15%
Once in a while	41%	45%
Not very often	25%	26%
Never	8%	15%
Percentage reporting "often" to the following statements:		
When you disagree, how often do the following happen:		
Argue without yelling our fighting	17%	14%
Yell at each other	18%	1%
Hit one another	3%	0%
How often has your partner done the following:		
Told you he/she loves you	65%	57%
Listened to you when you need to talk	54%	48%

Table 11 shows the interests and plans of men and women regarding relationships. These participants were in relationships, but not married, when they began the RRL program. The table demonstrates:

- Over a quarter of the women and nearly a quarter of the men said they simply were "not sure" what the future would bring with respect to marriage or a future with their partner.
- Over a third of the women and men indicated that they plan to marry.
- Just over 10 percent of both men and women indicated that they would likely live together without marrying.
- Approximately 16 percent of both men and women indicated that one party wanted to marry, but the other did not.
- About 10 percent of both men and women indicated that they would probably not marry or live together, and some of these individuals felt the relationship would probably not last much longer.



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Table 11. Relationship Plans and Interests Pre-RRL Classes Includes Only Those in a Relationship and Not Married Prior to the Classes		
	Women (N=138)	Men (N=103)
He/She would like us to get married, but I'm not interested/not sure	12%	8%
I would like to marry him/her, but he/she isn't interested/isn't sure	4%	9%
We plan to marry within a year	14%	16%
We plan to marry, but not in the next year	23%	21%
We plan to live together, but probably won't marry	12%	13%
We don't plan to marry or live together	3%	6%
We probably won't be together for too long	4%	4%
I'm not sure	28%	23%

Table 12 presents the same information for the youngest and oldest participants. The table shows that very young women are no more likely than older women to say they are unsure where the relationship is going. Nor are the differences between older and younger men significant.

However, older women and men are more likely than their younger counterparts say they expect to marry within the year. By contrast, younger women were more likely than women age 32 or older to say they expect to marry, but not within the year.

There were no differences in relationship plans by the men's or women's race/ethnicity, children, or level of education.

Table 12. Relationship Plans and Interests Pre-RRL Classes Includes Only Those in a Relationship and Not Married Prior to the Classes				
	Women		Men	
	≤ 17 (37)	≥ 32 (25)	≤ 17 (11)	≥ 32 (23)
He/She would like us to get married, but I'm not interested/not sure	11%	20%	0%	4%
I would like to marry him/her, but he/she isn't interested/isn't sure	11%	4%	0%	9%
★▲ We plan to marry within a year	8%	36%	9%	39%
★ We plan to marry, but not in the next year	27%	4%	18%	22%
We plan to live together, but probably won't marry	13%	16%	18%	9%
We don't plan to marry or live together	5%	0%	18%	4%
We probably won't be together for too long	8%	0%	9%	0%
I'm not sure	27%	24%	27%	13%

★ Chi square significant for women at .05.
▲ Chi square is significant for men at .05.



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Table 13 shows that there are a multitude of reasons why RRL participants are reluctant to marry their current partner. Financial problems are cited by a third of the women and men. Approximately 15 percent of the men and women mention wanting to complete school before marrying, and 12 percent of the women and 7 percent of the men cite personal issues, such as substance abuse. Relationship problems were cited by 14 percent of the women and 17 percent of the men.

Table 13. Reasons Why Participant Might Not Want To Marry The Romantic Partner		
	Women (n=135)	Men (n=108)
Financial problems including: He/she is not employed We have not saved enough money We can't afford the kind of wedding we want He/she has money problems He/she has other children to support We don't have a place to live I/she would lose public assistance	33%	34%
Relationship problems including: I don't trust him/her to be faithful Sometimes I am afraid of him/her; he/she can be violent He/she does not want to deal with my other children We fight a lot; we don't always get along	14%	17%
Life problems including: He/she has a drinking or drug problem I have a drinking or drug problem Other person is in prison	12%	7%
School issues including: I want to finish school He/she wants to finish school	15%	19%
I don't want to be tied down to one person	7%	5%

Parental Status of RRL Participants

Table 14 shows the parenthood status of RRL participants at program entry. As the table shows:

- For both men and women, the presence and number of children increases with the participants' age. For example, while 24 percent of the women and 67 percent of the men age 17 or younger say they have no children, this figure declines to 4 percent of the women and 24 percent of the men who are 32 or older.
- Women who reported having children were asked how many different men had fathered these children. Among those 17 and younger, none of the women reported having children with more than one man. However, among those 25 and older, the figures were closer to half.



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- Marriage to the child’s father (for women) or mother (for men) was rare among the youngest participants. The likelihood of marriage increased with age. Thus, while 3 percent of the women aged 17 or younger said they had been married to a child’s father, this was true for 33 percent of the women age 32 and older. Similarly, none of the men age 17 and younger reported marriage to the mother of their child, but just over a quarter of the men age 32 and older reported having been married to the mother of one of their children.
- Finally, Table 14 shows that close to 30 percent of the women age 17 and younger and those age 18 to 24 reported being pregnant at the time of their entry to RRL. By contrast, few men of any age reported their partner was pregnant when they entered the program.

	Women (n=189)				Men (n=108)			
	≤ 17 (53)	18-24 (32)	25-31 (27)	≥ 32 (51)	≤ 17 (12)	18-24 (18)	25-31 (14)	≥ 32 (41)
★ ▲ Number of children:								
Mean	0.8	1.3	1.9	2.8	0.4	0.9	1.9	1.5
Percentage with no children	24%	12%	11%	4%	67%	50%	7%	24%
Of those with children...					<i>Not asked</i>			
★ Number of fathers								
Range	1	1-3	1-3	1-5				
Percentage with one father	100%	18%	50%	41%				
Number	(39)	(27)	(24)	(46)				
★ Ever married to any of the other parents:								
Yes	3%	8%	8%	33%	0%	11%	23%	26%
No	97%	92%	92%	67%	100%	89%	77%	74%
★ You and your partner expecting a child:								
Yes	30%	27%	12%	5%	6%	12%	6%	5%
No	70%	73%	88%	95%	94%	88%	94%	95%
★ Chi square is significant for women at .05.								
▲ Anova is significant for men at .05.								

A final few questions related to relationships and parenting were asked of men who enrolled in RRL. Specifically, these men were asked to describe their relationships with their parents when they were growing up. As Table 15 shows, among those men age 17 and under, 80 percent described having a good relationship with their fathers and only 14 percent said they did not really spend time with their father while growing up. Among those age 32 and older, only 47 percent reported a good relationship and 26 percent said they did not spend time with their fathers while growing up. Regardless of their ages, most of the men reported good relationships with their mothers, and reported frequent contact with her while growing up.



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Table 15. Male RRL Participants

	≤ 17 (18)	18-24 (24)	25-31 (17)	≥ 32 (43)
▲ Percentage reporting a good relationship with his father when growing up	80%	67%	17%	47%
Did not spend time with father when growing up	14%	33%	33%	26%
Percentage reporting a good relationship with his mother when growing up	85%	67%	82%	81%
▲ Did not spend time with mother when growing up	0%	0%	0%	17%
▲ Chi square is significant for men at .05.				



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VII. Attitudes Toward Marriage and Relationships at Program Entry

This chapter:

- *Provides the assessments of RRL participants at program entry on the importance of marriage and effects of marriage*
- *Highlights similarities and differences in assessments of marriage by the age and race of the participant, and parental status*

At their entrance to the RRL program, participants were asked whether they felt marriage made financial well-being and general happiness better, worse, or had no effect. As Table 16 shows, very few men or women felt marriage had a negative impact. However, 20 to 25 percent of men and women said they simply did not know if marriage changed these things. The remainder of the men and women were fairly evenly divided between those who said marriage made no difference and those who said it made these things better.

There were no differences in the ratings shown in Table 16 based on participant's age, race, education, or whether she or he had children.

Table 16. Participant Perspectives on Marriage Prior to Attending RRL Class		
Does marriage make these things better or worse?	Women (n=176)	Men (n=133)
Having enough money:		
Better	38%	54%
Same	37%	20%
Worse	5%	5%
Don't know	21%	23%
Making women happy:		
Better	38%	58%
Same	37%	20%
Worse	3%	3%
Don't know	22%	19%
Making men happy:		
Better	33%	48%
Same	40%	24%
Worse	3%	7%
Don't know	25%	22%

Table 17 shows that most men and women agree that it is better for children if their parents are married. However, most women and about half of the men also agreed that single mothers can raise children as well as married couples. Just less than 60 percent of both men and women said it is better for a couple to marry than to live together. Over 70 percent of the men and women agree with the statement that few people have happy marriages.



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Percentage agreeing:	Women (n=161)	Men (n=127)
It is better for children if their parents are married	81%	88%
There are very few people who have good and happy marriages	71%	72%
A single mom can bring up her child as well as a married couple	85%	59%
It is better for a couple to get married than to live together	57%	58%

Further analysis shows that there are some differences among subgroups, specifically by age, race, presence of children, and education level.

- Latinas were less likely than African-American or White women to endorse the view that children are better off if their parents marry.
- Women with children were also less likely to say children are better off if their parents marry compared to childless women. On the other hand, age and education were not associated with specific views on whether children benefit from marriage.
- The item “There are very few people who have good and happy marriages” was significantly more likely to be endorsed by African-American men and women and Latino men and women, when compared to White men and women.
- Women age 32 or older were far more likely than younger women to agree with the statement “It is better for a couple to marry than to live together.”

Percentage agreeing:	Women			Men		
	African-American (86)	Latina (45)	White (15)	African-American (84)	Latino (16)	White (12)
★ It is better for children if their parents are married	87%	65%	85%	88%	81%	92%
★ ▲ There are very few people who have happy marriages	76%	78%	20%	80%	70%	46%
	No children (21)	One or more children (107)		No children (24)	One or more children (58)	
★ It is better for children if their parents are married	95%	79%		88%	90%	
	≤ 17 (18)	≥ 32 (43)		≤ 17 (10)	≥ 32 (31)	
★ It is better for a couple to marry than to live together	46%	74%		40%	68%	

★ Chi square is significant for women at .05.
▲ Chi square is significant for men at .05.



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VIII. Program Participation and Ratings

This chapter:

- *Provides patterns of attendance at RRL classes by participant gender and relationship status*
- *Highlights the reasons given by RRL participants for enrolling in the class*
- *Reports on the ratings given of the program and considers differences in ratings by participant gender, age, race and relationship status*

Attendance Patterns

As shown in Table 20, women reported attending an average of 6.3 sessions out of the 8 sessions offered. For men, the average was 5.5 sessions.

Table 20. Participant Attendance for Individuals Attending at Least One RRL Session		
	Women (n=192)	Men (n=168)
Percentage attending 1 to 2 sessions	7%	15%
Percentage attending 3 to 5 sessions	15%	25%
Percentage attending 6 to 8 sessions	78%	60%
Mean number of sessions attended	6.3	5.5
Median number of sessions attended	7.0	6.0

Table 21 provides a breakdown of client attendance at RRL based on their relationship status. Just under one-quarter of all participants (23% of men and 20% of women) attending RRL attended as part of a couple. The remainder, 77 percent of men and 80 percent of women, attended as individuals. As Table 22 indicates, relationship status did not affect the average number of sessions attended by either men or women.

Table 21. Number of Couples and Individuals with Initial Assessment Forms Returned for Analysis	
Men attending as part of a couple	23% (38)
Men attending as individuals	77% (130)
Women attending as part of a couple	20% (40)
Women attending as individuals	80% (156)



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Table 22. Attendance Information of Female Clients Based on Their Relationship Status

	Married (N=18)	In a Committed Relationship (N=87)	Other Relationship (N=50)
★ Attended as part of a couple	28%	32%	6%
Percentage attending 1 to 2 sessions	12%	11%	4%
Percentage attending 3 to 5 sessions	6%	19%	10%
Percentage attending 6 to 8 sessions	82%	71%	86%
Mean number of sessions attended	6.8	5.8	6.4
Median number of sessions attended	8.0	6.0	7.0

Reasons for Participating

The women and men who enrolled in RRL report that their primary goals for the program were to learn more about healthy relationships, to make their current relationship better, and to learn more about marriage in general.

Table 23. Participant Goals in Attending RRL Class

Percentage reporting they “definitely” attended RRL to:	Women (n=161)	Men (n=117)
Learn more about healthy relationships	80%	79%
Make her/his current relationship better	59%	65%
Have a healthy pregnancy	27%	17%
Get her partner more involved with the pregnancy	13%	11%
Learn about co-parenting	35%	35%
Get his/her partner to know more about caring for children	33%	29%
Learn more about marriage in general	53%	60%
Talk about marriage with partner	33%	41%

The data presented in Table 23 were reanalyzed controlling for age, race, those attending alone or as couples, and the number of sessions attended. There were few significant differences.

- The youngest men and women were most likely to say they hoped the class helped them achieve a healthy pregnancy and helped their partner to become involved with the pregnancy.
- For men, age was also related to the goal of making the current relationship better. Over 80 percent of the men age 32 and older cited this as a goal, compared to 39 percent of the men under age 18. Age was also related to men’s interest in co-parenting. Of those men age 32 and older, 59 percent cited learning about co-parenting as a goal, compared to 7 percent of those under age 18. Similarly,



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79 percent of the men age 32 and older cited learning about marriage in general as a goal, compared to only 15 percent of those under age 18.

- With respect to race and ethnicity, African-American women were more likely than Latinas and Whites to express the hope that the program would improve their current relationship. Only 8 percent of African-American women said this was not a goal for them, compared to 32 and 20 percent of the Latinas and Whites, respectively.
- Those women who attended all of the classes were more likely to mention the goal of learning about co-parenting, compared to those who attended fewer classes.
- Those women who attended alone rather than with a partner were least likely to mention learning about marriage as a goal. Among both men and women, those attending alone were less likely than those attending with partners to say that talking to a partner about marriage was a goal.

Materials Covered and Helpfulness

The topics that men and women remember being covered thoroughly in the RRL classes include how to talk to a partner, what constitutes a healthy relationship, and how to handle fights and disagreements with partners. At least three-quarters of the women and men said this material was “definitely” covered by RRL.

When asked how helpful they found various components of the class:

- Nearly 80 percent of the men and women cited the sessions dealing with how to handle disagreements with a partner, how to talk to a partner, and what makes for a healthy relationship as being very helpful.
- Approximately 70 percent of the men women said the sessions on money problems were very helpful, and 70 percent of the women and 60 percent of the men said the session on child support was very helpful.

There were few differences in ratings of the helpfulness of various components by subgroups of participants. Among women, age was related to the ratings of the helpfulness of information on pregnancy and care of infants. There were no differences by race/ethnicity in the ratings that women gave to the various components, and only one item was rated differently based on the marital status of the woman at the time of the RRL classes: the helpfulness of the program in teaching them how to talk to their partners. Among married women, 18 percent said this material was not helpful, compared to 2 percent and none of the women in committed relationships and other types of relationships, respectively.



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Table 24. Helpfulness of Materials Cover in RRL Class

	Women (n=196)		Men (n=78)	
	Percentage reporting this was definitely covered	If covered, percentage saying it was very helpful	Percentage reporting this was definitely covered	If covered, percentage saying it was very helpful
How to deal with disagreements/fights with your partner	75%	79%	79%	86%
How to really talk to your partner	81%	82%	81%	80%
Dealing with your partner's other children and past relationships	52%	59%	57%	56%
Dealing with your partner's relatives and your relatives	52%	63%	51%	52%
Money problems and relationships	67%	73%	68%	71%
Child support information	65%	70%	60%	59%
Raising children and how to discipline	49%	60%	53%	58%
How to be healthy during pregnancy	33%	50%	34%	46%
How to take care of infants and babies	33%	51%	31%	49%
What makes for a healthy relationship	82%	83%	85%	79%

Marital status among men was related to helpfulness ratings on several items. Married men were more likely than other men to say the units dealing with raising children, past partners and children from prior relationships, a partner's relatives, and child support were very helpful.

Men in married and committed relationships were more likely than other men to say the unit on talking to one's partner was and the information on healthy relationships in general were "very helpful."

Table 25. Helpfulness of Materials Cover in RRL Class by Relationship Status of Participant

	Women			Men		
	If covered, percentage saying it was very helpful			If covered, percentage saying it was very helpful		
★How to really talk to your partner	Married	Committed Relationship	Other	Married	Committed Relationship	Other
Very helpful	82%	84%	79%	93%	93%	61%
Somewhat helpful	0%	14%	21%	7%	7%	39%
Not helpful	18%	2%	0%	0%	0%	4%
	(11)	(50)	(33)	(14)	(27)	(23)

★ Chi square is significant for women at .05.



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Overall Ratings of RRL

The overall ratings given to RRL by men and women are quite high. Over three-quarters of the men and women say the program was “excellent.”

Table 26. Overall Ratings of RRL Classes		
Percentage reporting RRL was:	Women (n=161)	Men (n=133)
Excellent	77%	75%
Good	22%	24%
Fair or Poor	1%	1%

Further, these high ratings continue to hold when controlling for the participants’ age, race, and relationship status. There were no differences in the rating given to RRL by women or men based on whether they attended the classes alone or with a partner. Nor did ratings differ based on whether they were married, in a committed relationship or not in a committed relationship at the time of the RRL classes.

To the extent that there were statistically significant differences, the data show:

- Older women and men were somewhat more positive in their assessments relative to the youngest men and women.
- White women (relative to African-Americans and Latinas) and Latino men were somewhat more critical of the program.

Tables 27 and 28 show these statistically significant differences.

Table 27. Overall Ratings of RRL Classes by Age of Participant				
	★ Women		▲ Men	
	≤ 17 (46)	≥ 32 (39)	≤ 17 (11)	≥ 32 (31)
Excellent	70%	92%	55%	87%
Good	30%	8%	36%	13%
Fair or Poor	0%	0%	9%	0%

★ Chi square is significant for women at .05.
▲ Chi square is significant for men at .05.



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Table 28. Overall Ratings of RRL Classes by Race of Participant

	★ Women			▲ Men		
	African-American (86)	Latina (45)	White (15)	African-American (71)	Latino (13)	White (10)
Excellent	77%	79%	70%	76%	46%	90%
Good	23%	21%	20%	24%	46%	10%
Fair or Poor	0%	0%	10%	0%	8%	0%

★ Chi square is significant for women at .05.
▲ Chi square is significant for men at .05.



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IX. Comparing Patterns Pre- and Post-Participation

This chapter:

- *Compares the relationship status of men and women prior to and following the RRL classes and their marriage plans.*
- *Compares ratings by women and men of their current relationship prior to and following the RRL classes*
- *Considers RRL participants' assessments of changes in their relationships and prospects for a healthy relationship following the program*
- *Explores changes in relationships and attitudes for various types of participants*

Changes in Relationship Status Following RRL

Table 29 shows the responses of women and men to questions about the nature of their romantic relationships prior to and following their participation in the RRL classes. Table 29 shows no significant differences in the way men and women describe their relationships before and after the program. Those who described themselves as in a committed relationship at the start of the program chose this same description at the end of the program.

Table 29. Relationship Status Prior to and Following Participation in RRL Classes				
Among those parents in a relationship:	Women		Men	
Relationship status (in a relationship, but not married):	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Committed, one-on-one relationship	64%	62%	56%	58%
A steady relationship, but one or both of us also date other people	5%	9%	6%	11%
It's an on-again, off-again relationship	10%	11%	9%	13%
A casual relationship	7%	6%	16%	6%
Really just friends	14%	13%	13%	12%
Number	(151)	(102)	(104)	(78)

Table 30 looks at levels of interest in marriage among unmarried women and men prior to and following the program. All of these individuals described themselves as in a relationship at the time of the survey.

Among women, there are no statistically significant differences in marriage plans following the program. Before starting RRL, 23 percent of the women said they planned to marry, but not in the immediate future. Following the program, the comparable figure was 24 percent.

For both women and men, the primary differences lie in the percentage who say they are uncertain about how they feel about marriage. For women, 26 percent were unsure about marriage at program entry; this dropped to 16 percent following program participation. The classes had an opposite effect on the men. Prior to the RRL classes, the percentage of men feeling uncertain about marriage was 15; following the program, it more than doubled to 31 percent.



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Table 30. Description of Participants Relationships Pre and Post Participation in RRL Classes

Among those in relationships, (excludes those already married):	Women		Men	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Interest in marriage:				
He/She would like us to get married, but I'm not interested/not sure	11%	10%	7%	6%
I would like to marry him/her, but he/she isn't interested/isn't sure	5%	8%	12%	9%
We plan to marry within a year	14%	16%	17%	15%
We plan to marry, but not in the next year	23%	24%	27%	14%
We plan to live together, but probably won't marry	15%	21%	10%	15%
We don't plan to marry or live together	2%	2%	7%	5%
We probably won't be together for too long	5%	4%	7%	5%
I'm not sure	26%	16%	15%	31%
Number	(119)	(86)	(60)	(65)

Changes in Relationship Ratings Following RRL

As Table 31 indicates, RRL participants generally offered more positive assessments of their relationships following the program. However, the differences were only statistically significant for men. For example, while 17 percent of the women described their relationship as “excellent” at entry to the RRL, by the exit survey 35 percent chose the option of “excellent.” Similarly, the percentage of men describing their relationship as “excellent” rose from 25 percent at program entry to 40 percent at the close of the program.

Table 31. Rating of Current Relationship Prior to and Following Participation in RRL Classes

	Women		Men	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
How good is this relationship: (all parties in a relationship)				
★▲ Excellent	17%	35%	25%	40%
Good	48%	41%	37%	35%
Fair	25%	19%	29%	21%
Poor	10%	5%	9%	4%
Number	(155)	(121)	(118)	(84)
★ The increase for women is <u>not</u> statistically significant when those respondents who answered at both points in time are compared through a paired T-test.				
▲ The increase for men is statistically significant when those respondents who answered at both points in time are compared through a paired T-test.				

Table 32 shows responses to six items on which participants were asked to rate their lives as better, the same, or worse following their participation in RRL. The results show that both male and female participants generally perceived improvements post-program in their “chance of having a good relationship with a partner,” “getting, or staying happily married,” the way they “feel about marriage,” and their feelings about “life and the future.”



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Table 32. Perceptions of Changes in Their Lives Post-Workshop Survey Results

Since going to RRL classes, the following are:		Women (n=61)	Men (n=119)
My chance of having a good relationship with a partner:	Better	76%	80%
	Same	22%	19%
	Worse	2%	1%
My chances of getting or staying happily married:	Better	59%	64%
	Same	38%	33%
	Worse	3%	3%
The way I feel about marriage:	Better	51%	60%
	Same	44%	38%
	Worse	5%	2%
My feelings about life and the future:	Better	79%	79%
	Same	20%	20%
	Worse	1%	1%
My confidence:	Better	84%	77%
	Same	15%	23%
	Worse	1%	0%

The patterns in Table 32 above do not vary based on the relationship status of the men or women at the time of participation in RRL. Those who were married, in a committed exclusive relationship type, or no relationship, all give similar evaluations showing that things are generally “better” following program participation.

Table 33 shows that 61 percent of the women and 87 percent of the men who were in relationships at the time they attended RRL say the relationship is better following the program. Among those who were in relationships with individuals who had children from prior relationships, 61 percent of the women and 54 percent of the men say the partner is more involved with those children following the program. However, only 44 percent of the women and 42 percent of the men in relationships while they attended RRL and who have children report that their partner spends more time with these children following the program.

Finally, 48 percent of the women and 46 percent of the men with children say their children’s behavior is better post-RRL. More surprisingly, 29 percent of the men with children report the child’s behavior has declined since they participated in RRL.



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Table 33. Participants' Perceptions of Changes in Their Lives Post-Workshop Survey Results Includes Only Those in a Relationship			
Since going to RRL classes:		Women	Men
My current relationship with my partner is:	Better	61%	87%
	Same	36%	13%
	Worse	3%	0%
		(146)	(53)
My partner's involvement with my children is:	Better	61%	54%
	Same	36%	18%
	Worse	3%	26%
		(33)	(26)
The time my partner spends with the children is:	Better	44%	42%
	Same	53%	31%
	Worse	3%	27%
		(62)	(26)
My children's behavior is:	Better	48%	46%
	Same	48%	25%
	Worse	4%	29%
		(103)	(48)

Table 34 shows that for women, but not for men, there are statistically significant differences in perceptions of future relationships and marriage based on the individual's relationship status while in RRL. In general, compared to those in committed relationships or other types of relationships, married women are the most positive about:

- Their chances of getting or staying married;
- Their general feelings about marriage; and
- Their general feelings about the future.



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**Table 34. Participants' Perceptions of Changes in Their Lives
Post-Workshop Survey Results By Relationship Status**

Since going to RRL classes, the following are:	Women			Men		
	Married (N=15)	In a Committed Relationship (N=38)	Other Relationship (N=32)	Married (N=9)	In a Committed Relationship (N=45)	Other Relationship (N=58)
My chance of having a good relationship with a partner:						
Better	100%	84%	72%	100%	82%	78%
Same	0%	16%	25%	0%	18%	22%
Worse	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%
★ My chances of getting or staying happily married:						
Better	94%	67%	55%	100%	68%	60%
Same	6%	33%	39%	0%	29%	37%
Worse	0%	0%	6%	0%	2%	3%
★ The way I feel about marriage:						
Better	100%	69%	39%	89%	69%	52%
Same	0%	29%	58%	11%	29%	47%
Worse	0%	3%	3%	0%	2%	2%
★ My feelings about life and the future:						
Better	100%	76%	67%	100%	82%	75%
Same	0%	22%	33%	0%	16%	25%
Worse	0%	3%	0%	0%	2%	0%
My confidence:						
Better	87%	78%	70%	75%	86%	72%
Same	13%	22%	30%	25%	14%	28%
Worse	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
★ Chi square is significant for women between groups at .08 or less.						



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X. Longer Term Outcomes

This chapter:

- *Describes the methods used to conduct follow up telephone interviews with participants and selected characteristics of the subgroup that was interviewed*
- *Describes the relationship status of men and women, assessments of the RRL program, and life changes that occurred in the three to six months following completion of the RRL classes*
- *Compares the relationship status and the marriage plans of men and women prior to, immediately after, and approximately three months following the RRL classes*

Follow-Up Telephone Interviews

To gauge longer term reactions to RRL classes, telephone interviews were attempted with all project participants approximately six months after enrollment in RRL (or three months after completing the curriculum). Respondents were asked about changes in their life situation since attending RRL, including changes in their relationships, the amount of child support they provided or received, and the amount of contact the noncustodial parent had with nonresident children.

Interviews were conducted with 158 RRL participants. Of these 158, 84 were with women and 74 were with men. The response rate for women was 44 percent, while the rate for men was 50 percent. Nearly a quarter (23%) of targeted parents could not be reached because of wrong numbers (n=56) or phone disconnections (n=33). A total of 63 respondents (16%) could not be reached after more than 10 phone attempts per number. Only 9 targeted respondents declined to be interviewed, which translates into a hard refusal rate of 2 percent. Another 5 percent of respondents were unavailable because there was a language barrier, the respondent was in jail, or the respondent was unable to complete the phone interview.

The interviews were conducted during August 2006 through October 2009. Eighty-one percent of the interviews took place three to six months after completing the last RRL class, while 13 percent were completed more than six months past program completion. Only a few interviews were conducted less than three months (3%) or more than a year (3%) past the completion of the final RRL class, or at an unknown time point (3%).

The 22-minute survey was conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory (POL) of Northern Illinois University. POL placed 2,458 calls to the potential 338 respondents to generate 158 completed interviews. The number of phone attempts placed per completed interview ranged from 1 to 27, with the average number of calls per completed survey being 5.6 and a median of 4.0. To improve the response rate, CPR mailed pre-notification postcards to prospective respondents at their last known address and



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offered a \$25 Stop 'N Shop or Target gift card upon completion of the interview. The postcard indicated POL's toll-free number and mentioned the incentive.

Table 35 compares selected characteristics of the men and women interviewed by POL's telephone interviewers with the total population of men and women who enrolled in RRL. It shows relatively few differences. Like all participants, the subgroup of men and women who were interviewed were apt to have attended RRL on their own, without a romantic partner. Roughly equivalent proportions of both groups had no children, and a small number of both groups were married. Unemployment rates were somewhat lower for interviewed women (60% versus 79%) and interviewed men (34% versus 48%).

Table 35. Breakdown of Respondents Interviewed by Gender and Relationship Status				
	Women who were interviewed	All women in the study	Men who were interviewed	All men in the study
Total	84	192	74	168
Relationship Status				
Attended RRL with a partner	30%	20%	31%	23%
Attended RRL alone without a partner	70%	80%	69%	77%
Percentage with no children	8%	15%	35%	34%
Percentage currently married	13%	10%	10%	11%
Percentage unemployed	60%	79%	34%	48%

In response to a series of questions about events that might have transpired since attending RRL, respondents were most apt to report positive developments. Among interviewed women, 92 percent reported becoming a better parent, 66 percent said they were seeing their children more often, and 61 percent said they had a better relationship with a person they had been seeing before attending RRL. These were the most common life events reported by male respondents, too, with 84%, 54%, and 78% reporting improvements in parenting, parent-child contact, and relationships, respectively. While 28 percent of interviewed women reported having a new baby, only 2 percent said they had married. Nearly a quarter of interviewed men (24%) and 15 percent of interviewed women reported breaking up with a romantic partner and identical proportions of men and women (17% to 18%) reported starting a new romantic relationship and began cohabiting.

In the economic and legal realm, half of interviewed men (53%) and a third of women (30%) reported becoming employed, 27 percent of women reported going on public assistance, and approximately one-third of each group reported moving from one home to another. While 28 percent of men reported starting to pay child support, only 10 percent of women reported beginning to receive it. Nearly a fifth of interviewed men (19%) and 13 percent of women reported going to court for a legal problem. As for



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substance abuse treatment, 19 percent of men reported beginning treatment while 27 percent reported finishing.

Table 36. Life Events Since Attending RRL

Percentage Responding "Yes" to the following questions regarding life events since attending RRL:	Women (N=84)	Men (N=74)
Broke up with a romantic partner	15%	24%
★ Have been looking for someone to have a romantic relationship with	18%	33%
Started a new romantic relationship	17%	18%
Began living with a romantic partner	17%	16%
★ Have had a better relationship with the person you were seeing before attending RRL classes	61%	78%
Got married	2%	0%
★ Had a baby	28%	4%
Started seeing your children more often	66%	54%
★ Started paying child support	0%	28%
★ Started receiving child support	10%	0%
★ Became a better parent	92%	84%
★ Started working	30%	53%
★ Changed jobs	9%	23%
Lost your job	11%	12%
Went on public assistance	27%	18%
Went off public assistance	12%	13%
Moved from one home to another	33%	37%
Got arrested	4%	8%
Went to court for a legal problem	13%	19%
Started substance abuse treatment	10%	21%
Finished substance abuse treatment	15%	27%
★ Chi square is significant between male and female respondents at .06 or less.		

As was the case when RRL participants were asked to compare the status of their lives at the start and end of RRL classes, interviewed men and women continued to be extremely upbeat about developments in the months since they had enrolled in the program. Nearly three-quarters of interviewed men and women characterized their life as "somewhat" or "much better" than it had been six months ago.



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Table 37. Respondents Report of The Status of Their Life Today Compared to Before Attended RRL

	Women (N=84)	Men (N=74)
Compared to six months ago, before you started classes, life today is:		
Somewhat or much better	71%	74%
About the same	12%	14%
Somewhat or much worse	1%	0%
Some parts better, some worse	16%	12%

While nearly all interviewed men and women reported being “changed as a person” and learning how to deal with anger following the conclusion of RRL, only about half said that they were “less afraid of marriage.” Nearly all respondents with a current spouse or partner reported improvements in communication and the treatment they give and get in their relationships. In a similar vein, nearly all interviewed men and women with children reported doing a better job of communicating with their children and substantial proportions reported doing a better job of disciplining them.

Table 38. Respondents Report of Life Since Participating in RRL

Percentage responding “True” to the following statements about life since participating in RRL:	Women (N=84)	Men (N=74)
I am less afraid of marriage	58%	54%
I have changed as a person	90%	82%
I have learned how to deal with my anger	84%	88%
For those with a current spouse or partner:		
My partner is less afraid of marriage	53%	57%
I am more patient with my partner	93%	93%
My partner is more patient with me	90%	80%
I do a better job of talking with my partner	95%	98%
I do a better job of listening to my partner	89%	84%
My partner does a better job of listening to me	95%	98%
My partner does a better job of talking with me	85%	87%
I treat my partner with more respect	96%	98%
My partner is more respectful of me	96%	96%
My partner has changed as a person	87%	73%
My partner has learned how to deal with his/her anger	81%	81%
I can talk to my partner about my feelings	91%	94%
If the respondent has children:		
I am doing a better job of communicating with my children	92%	92%
I do a better job of disciplining my children	78%	81%



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Asked about the factors that might impede their ability to initiate or improve their relationship and/or marry, interviewed women were most apt to identify emotional problems (30%) and housing issues (25%). The top two barriers noted by male respondents were housing (32%) and jobs (28%).

Table 39. Respondent Report of Problems Limiting Their Ability to Have or Improve a Relationship		
	Women (N=84)	Men (N=74)
Percentage reporting the following problems are standing in the way of strengthening or having a relationship or marrying:		
Jobs	18%	28%
Health care	8%	8%
Education	12%	16%
Housing	25%	32%
Child care/parenting	9%	10%
Substance abuse	6%	10%
Emotional barriers	30%	18%
Other	23%	23%

More specific questions on changes in the amount of formal child support paid and received shows that most respondents reported no change. Men were more apt than women to report making more child support payments and giving informal support, although the differences were not statistically significant. There was a statistically significant difference between male and female reports about the amount of time spent with the children, with most women reporting that their contact level was unchanged and significantly larger proportions of men reporting small and big increases.

Table 40. Respondent Report of Child Support Paid and Amount of Child Contact Compared to Before Attendance at RRL		
	Women	Men
Compared to before you went to RRL, the amount of child support paid has:		
Decreased a lot	3%	5%
Decreased a little	10%	0%
Stayed same	81%	74%
Increased a little	7%	5%
Increased a lot	0%	16%
Number	(31)	(19)
During the past six months, informal support has been given:		
Yes	36%	46%
No	64%	54%
Number	(56)	(41)



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Table 40. Respondent Report of Child Support Paid and Amount of Child Contact Compared to Before Attendance at RRL

	Women	Men
★ Compared to before you went to RRL, the amount of time spent with the children has:		
Decreased a lot	16%	8%
Decreased a little	0%	0%
Stayed same	52%	32%
Increased a little	14%	24%
Increased a lot	18%	37%
Number	(44)	(38)
★ Chi square is significant between male and female respondents at .07 or less.		

Overall, interviewed RRL participants continued to rate the classes favorably, with men being significantly more likely to characterize them as “excellent” (70% versus 64%). An identical 93 percent of men and women said the program was worth their time. Women were significantly more likely than men to say that the program was too short and needed more time (50% versus 33%), and nearly all respondents thought it would be helpful to have follow-up meetings with their RRL class and teacher (93 to 95%). Overall, the program received an “excellent” rating by 80 percent of interviewed women and 72 percent of men.

Table 41. Rating of Relationships for Real Life

	Women (N=84)	Men (N=74)
★ Overall Rating of RRL Classes		
Excellent	64%	70%
Good	31%	18%
Fair	5%	12%
Poor	0%	0%
Felt RRL was worth your time		
Yes	93%	93%
No	7%	7%
★ Think RRL goes on for the right number of weeks		
Right number of weeks	44%	64%
Too long	6%	3%
Too short/not long enough	50%	33%
Think RRL should have more classes		
Yes	85%	77%
No	15%	23%
Feel it would be helpful to have follow-up meetings with your class and teacher		
Yes	93%	95%
No	7%	5%
Overall rating of the program		
Excellent	80%	72%
Good	17%	24%
Fair	2%	4%
Poor	1%	0%
★ Chi square between male and female respondents is significant at .06 or less.		



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Is participation in RRL associated with any change in the views of men and women about marriage? To answer this question, we compared the responses of all RRL participants at intake with the responses of the subset that was interviewed three months after completing RRL. Because the two groups are not limited to the same individuals, it is impossible to perform statistical tests of significance. As a result, we cannot be certain that any observable differences are significant. However, the patterns in Table 42 suggest that male participants were the only ones to change their views of marriage. When interviewed three months after completing RRL, higher proportions of men indicated that marriage made women and men happier than they had reported prior to enrolling in RRL. Women’s assessments of marriage at both points in time were less favorable and relatively stable.

Table 42. Attitudes Towards Marriage At Intake and Three Months Following Completion of RRL				
	Women		Men	
	Pre-RRL (N=176)	Interviewed Post-RRL (N=84)	Pre-RRL (N=133)	Interviewed Post-RRL (N=74)
Does marriage make these things better or worse?				
Having enough money:				
Better	38%	45%	54%	55%
Same	37%	52%	20%	34%
Worse	5%	2%	5%	8%
Don't know	21%	0%	23%	3%
Making women happy:				
Better	38%	38%	58%	78%
Same	37%	57%	20%	16%
Worse	3%	1%	3%	3%
Don't know	22%	4%	19%	3%
Making men happy:				
Better	33%	37%	48%	61%
Same	40%	56%	24%	27%
Worse	3%	6%	7%	11%
Don't know	25%	1%	22%	1%

An analysis that compares the responses of men and women to identical questions about their relationships at three points in time—prior to, immediately following, and three months after completing RRL—reveals some promising improvements. As with the previous analysis, we cannot use statistical tests of significance because the three groups are not identical in their composition. Nevertheless, it appears that there is an increase in the proportion of men reporting being in a committed, one-on-one relationship; an increase in the proportion of men and women reporting that they plan to marry within a year; and, especially among men, an increase in the proportion rating their relationships as “excellent” or “good.”



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Table 43. Relationship Status Prior to and Following Participation in RRL Classes

Among those parents in a relationship:	Women			Men		
Relationship status:	Pre-RRL	Post-RRL	Interviewed Post-RRL	Pre-RRL	Post-RRL	Interviewed Post-RRL
Committed, one-on-one relationship	64%	62%	73%	56%	58%	80%
A steady relationship, but one or both of us also date other people	5%	9%	2%	6%	11%	3%
It's an on-again, off-again relationship	10%	11%	7%	9%	13%	5%
A casual relationship	7%	6%	13%	16%	6%	8%
Really just friends	14%	13%	4%	13%	12%	5%
Number	(151)	(102)	(45)	(104)	(78)	(39)
Description of the relationship:						
We plan to marry within a year	17%	20%	47%	20%	21%	61%
We plan to marry, but not in the next year	28%	26%	7%	27%	20%	5%
We plan to live together, but probably won't marry	15%	26%	22%	17%	20%	11%
We don't plan to marry or live together	4%	5%	0%	7%	5%	8%
I'm not sure	36%	22%	24%	29%	34%	16%
Number	(110)	(76)	(45)	(82)	(61)	(38)
How good is this relationship:						
Excellent	17%	35%	29%	25%	40%	41%
Good	48%	41%	46%	37%	35%	46%
Fair	25%	19%	23%	29%	21%	13%
Poor	10%	5%	2%	9%	4%	0%
Number	(155)	(121)	(56)	(118)	(84)	(46)



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XI. Child Support

This chapter:

- *Describes the child support status of RRL participants at project enrollment*
- *Payment patterns in the 12 months pre-enrollment, 1-12 months post-enrollment and 13-24 months post-enrollment*

The RRL program did not focus on issues related to child support or paternity. These topics were only covered during a portion of one program session. The limited attention accorded to child support issues and/or employment in RRL makes it unlikely that the program would have any significant impact on the child support status of participants or their payment behaviors. On the other hand, since the program did stress responsible co-parenting as well as marriage, it might have encouraged those who entered the program with child support obligations to do a better job of payment. To gauge the potential impact of the program on child support behavior, women and men who enrolled in RRL were reviewed in the automated child support system at the close of the project. The search process was used to determine whether they could be located in the child support system and if so, the history of their involvement.

Case Status in the Child Support System

As Table 44 indicates, about half of the enrollees (58%) with enough identifying information to be searched were located in the child support system as either the obligor or obligee on an existing case. Of those in the system, 45 percent were identified as a noncustodial parent and 65 percent were determined to be custodial parents.

Table 44. Status of Child Support Cases of RRL Participants Found in DOR's System		
	Number	Percentage
Number (and percentage) of clients attempted to find in child support system	353	100% of cases in study
Number (and percentage) of RRL participants unable to look up, not enough information	39	11% of cases in study
Number (and percentage) of RRL participants looked up in the child support system	314	89% of cases in study
Number (and percentage) of RRL participants not matched as custodial and/or noncustodial parent in the child support system	132	42% of cases that could be checked
Number (and percentage) of RRL participants matched as custodial and/or noncustodial parent in the child support system	182	58% of cases that could be checked
Number (and percentage) of RRL participants matched as a noncustodial parent in the child support system	82	45% of those in the system
Number (and percentage) of RRL participants matched as custodial parent in the child support system	118	65% of those in the system



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Table 45 provides information on the child support status of program participants who had open child support cases when they enrolled in RRL.

- Of the 182 men and women who were found in the system as either custodial or noncustodial parents, most (65%) had only one open child support case. The average number of cases was 1.5. The range ran from one to six cases, but only 1 percent had more than four cases.
- The total number of children covered by these child support cases ranged from one to eight. The average was 1.9 children across all the open cases.
- Over 90 percent of the cases involved two parents in Massachusetts. Only 9 percent involved an interstate case.
- Cases for project participants were evenly divided between those with orders and those that needed orders to be established. Thus, about 40 percent involved only cases that were pre-obligation at program enrollment, while another 40 percent involved only cases with established orders. Just less than 20 percent involved one pre- and one post-obligation case.

Table 45. Status of Child Support Cases of RRL Participants Found in DOR's System	
Of those located in the system:	(N=182)
Percentage with:	
One case	65%
Two cases	22%
Three or more cases	13%
Number of cases in the system	
Mean	1.5
Median	1.0
Range	1-6
Total number of children on these cases	
Mean	1.9
Median	1.0
Range	1-8
Interstate case:	
No interstate	91%
Yes, at least one case is interstate	9% (107)
Percentage with only pre-obligation cases	41%
Percentage with only post-obligation cases	42%
Percentage with both pre- and post-obligation cases	17% (107)

As Table 46 shows, most of the post-obligation cases require the payment of current support, but just over 20 percent of the RRL participants have arrears-only cases. Just less than 10 percent have both an arrears only and current support case.



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Table 46. Profile of Post-Obligation Cases of RRL Participants Found in DOR's System		
Order type for those with an obligation:		
	Arrears only cases	21%
	Current support order only cases	70%
	Both arrears only and current support only cases	9%
	Number	(107)

Child Support Orders for Obligated Cases

Table 47 shows that among RRL participants with one or more obligated child support case, the average monthly support order was \$241. On average, obligors were also required to pay an additional \$98 per month toward their child support arrears, which averaged \$13,559 and ranged from \$13 to \$83,824. At the time of the child support review, only 21 percent of the RRL participants with an obligated case had a wage withholding order in place.

Table 48. Description of Child Support Orders Held by RRL Participants		
		Across All Cases
Current Monthly Support Order Amount:	Mean	\$241
	Median	\$204
	Range	\$50-\$1,400
	Number	(75)
Current Monthly Arrears Amount:	Mean	\$98
	Median	\$52
	Range	\$8-\$1,080
	Number	(68)
Arrears Balance:	Mean	\$13,559
	Median	\$4,566
	Range	\$13-\$83,824
	Number	(76)
Wage withholding in place at data collection: (for those with an obligation)	Yes	21%
	No	79%
	Number	(98)

Table 49 compares payment patterns for cases that had orders for a full 12 months prior to RRL enrollment, and payment patterns in both the first 12 months following RRL intake and 13 to 24 months post-enrollment. The results show:



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- There were no significant differences over time in the amount of child support that was due.
- There were no significant differences in the percent of the obligation that was paid in the 12 months prior to enrollment and the 1 to 12 and 13 to 24 months post-enrollment. While the percentage making no payments decreased slightly over time, the differences were not significant, and at all three time points, obligors paid approximately a quarter to one-third of what they owed.
- There were no significant differences in arrears balances over time which averaged approximately \$13,000-\$15,000. Median arrears balances rose significantly over time going from \$5,197 to \$7,030.

Table 49. Child Support Due and Paid in the 12 Months Pre- and Up To 24 Months Post- Intake For Participants Across All Child Support Orders

		Up to 12 Months Prior to Intake	1- 12 Months Post-Intake	13-24 Months Post-Intake
Current support due:	Mean	\$3,070	\$2,654	\$2,475
	Median	\$2,596	\$2,493	\$2,380
	Range	\$57-\$9,932	\$160-\$9,257	\$160-\$7,685
	Number	(48)	(58)	(65)
Current support paid:	Mean	\$1,650	\$1,264	\$1,105
	Median	\$265	\$239	\$230
	Range	\$0-\$9,597	\$0-\$9,932	\$0-\$7,560
	Number	(48)	(58)	(65)
Percentage of current support paid that was due:	Mean	36.8%	37.3%	25.4%
	Median	18.0%	12.0%	20.0%
	Range	0-100%	0-100%	0-100%
	Number	(48)	(58)	(65)
Percentage paying nothing towards current support		41.7%	39.7%	33.8%
Arrears Balance:	Mean	\$13,420	\$13,105	\$15,191
	Median	\$5,197*	\$6,285*	\$7,030*
	Range	\$58-\$55,072	\$66-\$71,101	\$3-\$80,547
	Number	(46)	(56)	(57)

*Differences are statistically significant at .00.

Paternity Establishment

At enrollment, child support records showed that approximately 42 percent of the RRL participants who were in the child support system had established paternity for at least one child. Following the program, child support records show that 55 percent of the RRL participants in system showed had established



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paternity for at least one child. Of course, the increased percentage with paternity established cannot necessarily be attributed to the RRL program. Paternity establishment naturally occurs in the course of creating a child support obligation. In addition, 20 percent of the women reported being pregnant at RRL enrollment and paternity establishment in the hospital may have occurred for many of these children.

Table 50. Paternity Establishment for RRL Participants Found in DOR's System

	At enrollment	At data collection
Paternity established for any children	42%	55%



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XII. Reactions to the Program

This chapter:

- *Describes reactions of men and women participating in the Relationships for Real Life program*
- *Provides insights and reactions of program staff*
- *Summarizes the reactions of representatives of agencies collaborating with RRL*

The evaluation included the collection of qualitative information about what participants, program staff and facilitators, and collaborating agencies thought of the project using a combination of focus groups and in-person and telephone interviews.

Reactions of Participants

Focus groups and interviews with participants confirmed that none had been in an intervention designed to improve their relationships prior to enrolling in RRL. The RRL experience proved to be surprisingly pleasant, with participants appreciating the dialogue and open exchange.

The program is good, especially the open discussions. People put their problems out there. We'd start with the lesson plans, but it would lead to different things depending on the group.

Participants liked the fact that there was "no classroom atmosphere in RRL groups." Those who had been through psychological evaluations and assessments in the past noted that RRL was different and gave them an opportunity "to talk about how we feel." Participants also appreciated the accepting nature of the group. As one participant explained:

I don't feel any answer that comes up in a group is stupid. We are all basically dealing with life. We were building each other up and not putting each other down.

Many found the groups to be a "lot of fun," with one respondent observing, "This group was cool and we really talked honestly." There was a strong ethic of confidentiality that made participants willing to share. Indeed, one group bonded so much that parent participants and their children formed a "homework club" that met on a monthly basis after the conclusion of RRL classes.

The mix of singles and couples in different groups appeared to work. Singles enjoyed being in a group with couples, and visa versa. As one man who participated in a group on his own put it:

I looked forward to going. It opens your eyes. I liked having women in the group and some couples. I liked that it wasn't a room full of guys saying women were crazy. Girls



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give their perspectives. For me, it was putting yourself in someone else's shoes. When I heard their grievances, I saw things that I could do or not do with my relationship.

Asked what they had learned or taken away from the experience, participants emphasized the theme of communication.

I'm using things that I learned in the group. The biggest thing I got was, 'Talk to her. Don't sit and fume.' And I'm not playing as much PlayStation. I only do it when she isn't looking or she's in the shower or something. Communication is best. Don't let it build up. Without communication, you have no real relationship. That's what they taught me.

I learned to stop yelling. I've been talking calmer and trying to have a conversation. Not doing as much cussing.

It changed communication with my partner. I'm trying to communicate. I realize that he cannot read my mind.

I learned not to yell in front of the kids. I learned to sit down and talk with their father and not yell.

We used to talk *at* each other. We learned how to respect each other and how to have space. Now we sit down and talk.

For others, the curriculum and discussion produced some far-reaching realizations about how they respond in relationships and how other people experience relationships.

There are two major things I got out of the program. I realized that there will always be conflict in relationships, and I broke through the 'man thing.' It heightened my sensitivity to both sides of the coin. It helped with my ability to step out of my role and put myself in the shoes of other.

I learned the world doesn't revolve around me. Everyone looked so happy, I thought it was me. I learned that everyone had the same problems or worse.

It is hard to keep our families together in Latino and African American communities, so it was good to learn that we had a tradition of strong relationships before coming to America and that slavery and economics were the causes of our relationships deteriorating.

I am more aware of not jumping into loving before getting to know someone.

Still others noted that the groups offered an opportunity for "reflection," "tips and insights," and "fine tuning." RRL groups reminded them of things they had forgotten and re-established things that they "already knew but weren't using."



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It strengthened our marriage. We have been together for 14 years. RRL gave us a chance to think about things. Normally I yell and scream or not say anything when I'm upset. I learned to lower my voice. We both learned to calm our voices and talk.

Me and my partner have been working on the "sweet touch tongue." We had a serious conversation without yelling. We are learning how to be a little more "sugar." It changed my speech. My tone is sweeter.

According to the director of a shelter for homeless women, the program led one resident to realize that she was in an unhealthy relationship with a married man and that she needed to end it.

Despite the generally positive reactions, RRL groups were viewed as having a limited impact on marriage. Several participants observed that the groups are too short-lived to change fundamental views about marriage and that "we have a younger generation that doesn't think about marriage." One young male participant said that the only married couples he had ever seen were "in the movies." A facilitator reported having to go back "three generations" in her group to find someone who was married. In her view, this underscores the lack of examples of healthy, married relationships anywhere in the experience of participants.

While some participants acknowledged that they would like to marry some day, most reported feeling that they were not ready for marriage on an emotional or financial level and that they needed to do more work as individuals and couples before it could be a realistic possibility.

Marriage hasn't even crossed my mind. I've been in a relationship now for five months. Let's see how it goes. I know a few people who are married, but no one close, close. It's a big commitment. I have other things on my plate right now. I'm just getting a job after three months of looking. I'm not on solid ground yet. Maybe when I'm on solid ground and I have money put aside, then maybe I'll be ready for the "next step" — an engagement and a wedding.

I was always afraid of marriage. I run a lot. Attending the program made me realize I would flee when things became confrontational. I don't want to marry and get divorced. I'm working on me. I tend to walk when there is conflict.

I'm not going to rush anyone to the altar. If it comes, it comes.

Despite these limitations, several participants felt that RRL helped couples be more "realistic" about marriage and think about what they are doing. Others thought that the sessions had made marriage seem "less scary and abstract."

Relatively few participants viewed RRL as being only about romantic relationships. They readily generalized the benefits of the group and the lessons learned to a broader array of relationships with other family members. As the father of four daughters, one participant realized that he is the "blueprint for every relationship they have." In his view, the class improved his "communication with my kids." Another



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woman felt that RRL had helped her “build better relationships with my kids and understand what my kids are facing.” Still another participant said that the group helped him improve his relationship with his mother. “I used to blow up so fast. I approach situations with her and my relatives a lot better now.”

Participants consistently complain that the program is not long enough and that “we always run out of time and never get through a whole package in any session.” Asked how to improve the program, many respondents suggested additional sessions. Others recommended the addition of child care and scheduling the classes at more convenient times. With children at home, it was hard for some couples to come to the program together. Others suggested alumni meetings a few months after the classes end. And some of the women wished there were more services for women (including employment) and group interventions for women as well as those for women and their children.

Reactions of Program Staff

A focus group conducted with program staff and facilitators confirms that the groups are powerful vehicles for exchange, intimacy, and communication, conditions that many participants have not encountered in their personal lives and other social services settings. As one facilitator observes:

It is shocking what the level of disclosure comes out in an eight week program. Maybe it is the facilitators, or the curriculum, or the safety and trust of the group. I tend to think that it is just that their emotions are close to the surface. They are ready to boil over. They don't have any safe place to disclose.

FFI staff and RRL facilitators are adamant that the program is appropriate for all types of individuals with a wide variety of circumstances. Although they acknowledge that many of the groups they partner with for referrals serve “troubled” populations with many serious problems, they reject the notion that these individuals are “too disturbed” to benefit.

The curriculum can be run anywhere and works with all age groups and with all socio-economic categories. It works with recovery folks. Relationships fit with recovery because relationships can be a stressor and a cause for relapse. Women leave treatment because of relationships. We need to talk more about relationships and relapse. At AA meetings they say forget about relationships, it's all about you. But there is no way to help yourself without the help of others. Our people talk about how they damaged their relationships as a result of their abuse and how relationships lead to abuse.

Among the strengths that FFI staff and RRL facilitators note is the ability of FFI to perform its core goals of serving low-income men in a comprehensive manner while incorporating a new program on healthy relationships. FFI has also been successful in expanding its service delivery focus from men to couples and women-only groups. The shift from serving single men to serving women and couples has presented some challenges. The issue of domestic violence becomes very different when there are disclosures during the group sessions and the victim is in the room. FFI has worked closely with local domestic violence coalitions to develop appropriate resources for these women and couples.



Relationships For Real Life

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Like program participants, marriage is not a priority for RRL facilitators; they do not view their objective to be changing the incidence of marriage. The consensus is that the immediate goal is to work on “healthy, stable relationships,” and that marriage would be a “phase two.” Facilitators identify a variety of outcomes for program participation other than marriage. The following comments are typical.

What are the program outcomes we should look for? Stabilizing relationships, ending a bad relationship, staying sober, bringing families together. How well are they communicating? Everyone is looking for love and companionship, but marriage is so far from their reality. And people have a lot of milestones they want lined up before they marry, like education and a job.

Benefits we have seen? I have seen women take a good look at their relationships and say, “no.” I have seen them empowered to get therapy. I have seen them work out a relationship with their father. The program is an eye opener. They realize that an unhealthy relationship is not okay.

They are learning how to label a relationship. Is it a friendship? A baby mother? A romance? The program is a catalyst for people to focus on relationships that are important to them. Please realize that they have to do a lot of work by themselves on their addictions, etc. in order to have relationships.

Like RRL participants, program coordinators and facilitators agree that the program is too short for many and that more substantial outcomes would require a more intensive intervention. The limited availability of RRL facilitators who have multiple responsibilities and roles restricts the number of groups that can be conducted simultaneously and the number of clients who can be served. Some staff would also like to see a tiered RRL program, with the addition of other relevant therapeutic interventions dealing with counseling and substance abuse and the eventual addition of mentor couples and more peer support.

Another program weakness is the lack of day-care services for participants, which precludes the participation of many couples with young children. Researchers report that the Building Strong Families (BSF) pilot sites all found it absolutely necessary to provide child care during sessions (either on-site or with vouchers) to encourage couples to participate (Dion, *et al.*, 2006).

FFI staff and facilitators acknowledge the grave need for housing and other basic services that preclude the establishment of stable relationships and marriage among many program participants. Compared with enrollees in healthy marriage programs at BSF sites, RRL participants have much lower levels of education, employment, and earnings. Mindful of the fact that the RRL intervention is brief and that participants have many needs, facilitators and FFI staff place great emphasis on making appropriate referrals and linking participants up to relevant community services.

We try to find some resource or service for them. They feel like they can call us. It is a community. Nancy is a referral queen. She is like a yellow book. People come to us for services they can get elsewhere, but they trust us. We deliver. We don't just open them up and leave.



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The lack of employment, social services, and counseling resources for women is another perceived weakness. FFI remains an organization for men, and there is no parallel, comprehensive program for women in the Boston area.

Finally, program architects worry about being able to sustain RRL after the expiration of grant funds. Although the program “doesn’t require lots of resources,” it does need a coordinator to identify and cultivate partner agencies to host a series of classes and assist with recruitment and enrollment. In addition to retaining facilitators, effective programs must also offer food and assistance with transportation. And while it might be cost effective to operate RRL classes in a central location rather than decentralizing services and holding classes at collaborating agencies, this is not a practical option for programs that serve individuals in crisis and recovery. As one representative of a partner agency explained, “We need to serve our clients on site because they don’t get there if they leave our premises.”

Reactions of Collaborators

As previously noted, program architects have been effective in developing recruitment and service-delivery partnerships with a diverse array of groups and organizations. Interviews with representatives of 13 agencies that took part in the RRL program revealed that these entities are familiar with the program, appreciate the services it offers, and are receptive to exposing their client base to relationship classes.

Five of the programs had offered some kind of programming on healthy relationships before RRL began. These were either general counseling or parenting groups. Most agencies decided to participate because of active recruitment by RRL. Whether their focus was parenting, education, healthcare, or recovery, agency representatives agreed that the ability of their clients to have healthy relationships was an important component of their organization’s goals.

They all need it for relationships with a young lady, their sister, their mom, or their co-workers.

We work with a lot of young people with children. They need to know about responsibility to children.

We ran groups all the time about self esteem and healthy relationships; but there was benefit in having people outside our agency giving advice.

Few of the respondents indicated that participating in RRL took much time or effort from them or other agency staff. They credited the RRL coordinator with doing the lion’s share of the work and for engaging participants by being “friendly, warm, and welcoming.” Several agency representatives suggested that getting participants to the first class was challenging, but after that, “People wanted to go.” “Once they came to the first session, word of mouth spread about how good the class was.” Two representatives from non-residential programs serving young parents found that getting clients to attend did take extra effort. “We did a lot of phone calls and reminders to get them there, make sure they had transportation.”



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“We targeted those who could benefit. We had to remind them every week—they are teens.” In an all-male program, “It took time to find a group. It is hard to get guys to commit to groups.”

Most agency representatives felt that the most important features of the program for clients were getting a chance to talk and tell their stories, learning to deal with conflict without fighting or getting violent, learning things that will make them better parents, and feeling supported by the group.

They learned co-parenting without the drama.

They never before had the availability to discuss feelings.

They were afforded the opportunity to have open discussions.

They liked being able to vent in an open meeting.

It gave them a sense of how to deal with their personal problems.

They had no previous arena for discussing feelings or life ambitions.

They could sit down and deal with themselves, their families, and their children. They were able to open up.

The only feature that more than one person found not important was getting more positive views about marriage: five respondents said this was not important. This response was influenced by the fact that in some settings, many of the participants were teenagers and marriage was not a significant topic for them. Respondents were divided about the importance of the child support and paternity information: some felt it was very important, while others said it was somewhat important, and one said it was not important (to pregnant teens who did not want to get their partners into trouble).

All the respondents agreed that making classes interactive and fun was an important feature. Offering food during the sessions was deemed very important. Many thought that the gift cards and other incentives were also very important.

They loved the food, gifts, being with each other.

It was fun. They have not had a lot of fun in their lives.

Almost all respondents strongly agreed that having a free program dealing with relationships was a big benefit to both their agencies and their clients. Most people agreed that it would be important for their clients to keep hearing about relationships. They would like to see further funding to continue the program and felt that all avenues that would allow the program to continue should be pursued.



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We need 10 more groups like that. You don't have many people pay for lunch, have speakers come in, and have fun and games; this was more than coming and talking about issues.

Pleased as they are, agency representatives were pessimistic about their ability to pay for RRL classes or assist with fundraising, given their own budgetary struggles. And although some respondents were interested in training someone internal to their organization to deliver the RRL curriculum to their client body, others were not sure that the program coordinator, who also co-facilitates most groups, could be replaced. As one respondent put it, "This is [her] specialty; our workers specialize in other things." Said another, "It has to be [her]. Those are big shoes to fill."



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XIII. Summary of Findings and Discussion

This chapter:

- *Reviews the structure of the program and the components of the evaluation*
- *Highlights the primary findings*
- *Discusses the implications of these findings for RRL and similar programs*

This report summarizes the organization, operation, and impact of the Boston Health Marriage Initiative, a five-year demonstration project funded by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (2004-2009). Known locally as Relationships for Real Life (RRL), the project was conducted by the Father Friendly Initiative (FFI) of the Boston Public Health Commission. RRL offered facilitated classes for low-income, single individuals and couples that aimed to improve the quality of their relationships, build support for marriage, and boost paternity establishment and child support payment.

The evaluation, conducted by the Center for Policy Research of Denver, Colorado, had both qualitative and quantitative components, with information drawn from multiple sources. They included:

- **A Pre-Workshop Assessment.** This questionnaire was completed by male and female participants upon enrolling in RRL. The pre-workshop assessment elicited information on demographics, relationships, marital status, and feelings about marriage. Pre-workshop information was obtained for 196 women and 168 men, or 364 individuals.
- **A Post-Workshop Assessment.** This questionnaire was distributed at the sixth or subsequent sessions of the eight-session programs. In addition to repeating many of the questions about marriage and relationships, this questionnaire asked participants to assess the helpfulness of the topics covered in the RRL classes and provide overall ratings of the program. Post-workshop data was obtained for 161 women and 122 men, or 283 individuals. This comprised 78 percent of those who supplied pre-workshop information.
- **Follow-Up Telephone Interviews.** This questionnaire was administered by professional telephone interviewers approximately three months following the completion of RRL classes. The interview included questions on life events since the termination of RRL, longer-term views about the utility of RRL, and changes in relationships and attitudes about relationships and marriage. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 84 women and 74 men, or 158 individuals for a response rate of 47 percent.
- **Child Support Records Review.** Child support records were reviewed for consenting RRL participants to determine whether they had an open case in the child support system as either a custodial or noncustodial parent. Information on open cases was extracted, including monthly support obligations,



Relationships For Real Life

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arrears balances, paternity establishments, and rates of child support payment. Child support checks were performed for 184 women and 168 men. Of these 352 individuals, 182 were found in the child support system and were the subject of more detailed data extraction efforts.

- Qualitative Information. Focus groups were held with project participants during site visits conducted in the first, second, and third year of program operations. During the third year of program operations, a focus group was also conducted with RRL facilitators and the coordinator. In November 2009, semi-structured telephone interviews were held with representatives of 13 organizations that collaborated with RRL on recruitment and program participation.

Collaborating Partners and Recruitment Sources

In addition to enrolling its current and past low-income male clients and their partners in relationship classes, FFI developed referral and service-delivery relationships with 13 entities that serve low-income men and women in Boston including residential and out-patient programs for substance abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, and other forms of crisis; schools programs with a college preparatory focus and those offering GED classes; criminal justice programs for adolescents and adults; public housing programs and neighborhood service centers; and prenatal and postpartum care programs for adolescents and adult women. In doing so, RRL targeted populations not anticipated by the developers of the CFWD curriculum

Program Format, Enrollment, Participation, and Expectations

The first RRL group began classes in October 2006. The last group ended in September 2009. During the 36-month operational phase of the project, 46 RRL groups were held. Each group consists of eight, two-hour sessions that used the curriculum, "Exploring Relationships with Fragile Families (CFWD)" which was designed by the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (CFWD) for use with low-income, never-married, African-American parents between 18 and 35 years of age. To the CFWD program that deals with healthy and committed relationships, marriage, conflict, and communication, program architects added a session focusing on paternity and child support. Some key enrollment and attendance patterns are as follows:

- The project ultimately enrolled 364 participants (196 women, 168 men) who attended one or more RRL session.
- Most men (77%) and women (80%) attended as individuals, with only about a fifth of participants attending as part of a couple. Attendance patterns for couples were identical to patterns for individuals.



Relationships For Real Life

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- Women reported attending an average of 6.3 of the eight session program, while men attended 5.5 sessions, with more than three-quarters of women (78%) and nearly two-third of men (60%) attending six to eight sessions and “graduating.”
- Participants’ goals and interests differed by age. Men over the age of 32 expressed significantly more interest in making a current relationship better, learning about co-parenting, and learning about marriage than did their younger counterparts.
- Program goals and interests also differed by race and ethnicity, with African-American women being significantly more likely than Latinas and Whites to express the hope that the program would improve their current relationship.

Description of Participants

RRL served a wide age group with participants consisting primarily of unemployed or low-income African-American men and women, many of whom have a criminal justice and substance abuse history, live in unconventional settings, and receive public benefits.

- Although the average age of female and male participants was 27 and 30, respectively, a third of the women and 19 percent of the men were 17 years or younger and more than a third of both groups was over age 32.
- A majority of program participants was African-American (56% women and 72% men). Just over a quarter of women participants were Latina and 13 percent of the men were Latino.
- Education levels were relatively low. Among men, over a third had less than a high school education, and only 21 percent had any education beyond high school. Among women, three quarters of the women had completed high school or their GED. Over a quarter had attended some college.
- Twenty-two percent of men were living in unconventional housing arrangements, including institutions, group homes, and shelters, and 4 percent said they were living on the streets.
- Nearly all the women under the age of 32 were unemployed at program entry, and approximately a quarter of those above the ages of 32 were employed on a full- or part-time basis. Male employment levels were higher, especially among 18 to 24-year-olds, 60 percent of whom report holding full- or part-time jobs. In every other age group, only one-third report any employment.
- Among working men, the average annual wage was \$18,000.
- Nearly two-thirds of women and one-third of men received food stamps within the past year. Between one-half and two-thirds of men over the age of 18 reported being convicted of a felony. Half the men



Relationships For Real Life

Father
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age 25 to 31 and a third of the men over the age of 32 reported having a substance abuse problem. At least a quarter of the men age 25 and older reported having been diagnosed with mental health problems.

Marital and Parental Status Reported by RRL Participants

The chief marital and family characteristics of program participants were as follows:

- Few project participants were married, with women and men over the age of 32 reporting the highest rates of 14 and 18 percent, respectively. This age group was also most apt to have been divorced, with a third reporting a previous marriage and divorce.
- Among unmarried men and women, only about a quarter reported being in a romantic relationship when they enrolled in RRL.
- Nearly all women and most men had children when they enrolled in RRL, with the incidence and the number of children increasing with the participant's age.
- Relatively few mothers were married to the father of their children, although the incidence of marriage increased with age.
- Close to 30 percent of the women ages 17 and younger and those aged 18 to 24 reported being pregnant at the time of their entry to RRL.

Relationships and Attitudes About Marriage at Enrollment

Participants who reported being in a romantic relationship when they enrolled in RRL tended to characterize those relationships in positive ways, but few had plans to marry in the immediate future.

- Approximately two-thirds of the men (62%) and women (68%) in relationships when they enrolled in RRL characterized them as “excellent” or “good.”
- Although only 14 percent of the women and 16 percent of the men who were in relationships, but were not married said that they planned to marry within a year, over a third of both groups indicated that they planned to marry at some point.
- Women who were over the age of 32 were more likely than their younger counterparts to say that they expected to marry within the year, while younger women had a longer time line.
- While very few men or women viewed marriage in a negative light, about a quarter were uncertain of the impact of marriage on personal happiness and financial well-being. The remainder were fairly



Relationships For Real Life

Father
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evenly divided between those who said marriage made no difference and those who said it made things better.

- While over 80 percent of men and women agreed that it is better for children if their parents are married, 85 percent of women and 59 percent of men agreed that single mothers can raise children as well as married couples.
- Over 70 percent of men and women agreed with the statement that few people have happy marriages—which was significantly more likely to be endorsed by African-American men and women and Latino men and women as compared to White men and women.
- A third of the men and women who entered RRL in a romantic relationship said they did not want to marry their romantic partner for financial reasons such as unemployment, a lack of savings, not having the money for a wedding, and not having a place to live.

Ratings of the RRL Program

RRL participants were extremely complimentary about the program and particularly appreciated the sessions dealing with communication, conflict, and the elements of a healthy relationship.

- Nearly 80 percent of men and women cited the sessions on disagreements with a partner, talking to a partner, and the components of a healthy relationship as being very helpful.
- Approximately 70 percent of participants said that the session on money problems was very helpful, and an identical proportion of the women and 60 percent of the men rated the session on child support as very helpful.
- Nearly all women (77%) and men (75%) gave the program an overall rating of “excellent.”

Changes in Relationships and Attitudes Following Program Participation

Participating in RRL produces little immediate change in relationships and marriage plans, although those involved in romantic relationships are more apt to characterize them as “excellent”.

- The proportion who report being in a committed, one-on-one relationship remained stable after program participation and was 62 percent for women and 58 percent for men.
- The proportion who reported planning to marry within a year remained stable at 16 percent for women and 15 percent for men.



Relationships For Real Life

Father
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Initiative

- RRL had different effects on the women and men who entered the program feeling unsure about their marriage plans. Following RRL, the proportion of unsure women dropped from 26 to 16 percent. RRL classes had the opposite effect on men, with the rate of uncertainty rising from 15 to 31 percent.
- The proportion who rated their relationship as “excellent” rose from 17percent to 35 percent among women and 25 percent to 40 percent among men.
- Approximately 80 percent of participating men and women characterized their chances of having a good relationship with a partner as “better,” and their feelings about life and the future as “better.”

Longer Term Outcomes

In telephone interviews with 158 project participants conducted approximately three months after the conclusion of RRL classes, most reported improvements in their life circumstances.

- Nearly three-quarters of interviewed men and women characterized their life as “somewhat” or “much better” than it had been six months ago. High proportions also said they had a better relationship with the person they had been seeing before attending RRL and were seeing their children more often.
- In the months between RRL and the interview, 28 percent of interviewed women had a baby, 15 percent broke up with a romantic partner, 18 percent started a new romantic relationship and began cohabiting, and 2 percent married.
- A comparison of participant reports about relationships a three points in time (prior to RRL, immediately following, and three months later) reveals an increase in the proportion of men reporting being in a committed, one-on-one relationship, an increase in the proportion of men and women reporting that they plan to marry within a year, and among young men, an increase in the proportion rating their relationships as “excellent.”

Child Support Patterns

One objective of the project was to increase rates of paternity establishment and child support payments among those with orders. A child support worker searched the automated child support database to assess whether project participants could be located in the system and the status of their cases.

- About half (58%) of project participants appeared in the child support system as either the obligor or obligee on an existing case.
- Cases for project participants were evenly divided between those that needed orders to be established (41%) and those with established orders (42%). The remainder (17%) had at least one pre- and one post- obligation case.



Relationships For Real Life

Father
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- The mean and median order level for cases with child support orders was \$241 and \$204 per month, respectively, with an additional average arrears payment of \$98 per month.
- Among cases with orders, the percentage of ordered child support that was paid did not change during the 12 months prior to and following enrollment in the project, with payments averaging 36.8 and 37.2 percent at both time periods. During months 13 to 24 following program enrollment, the average percentage of child support due that was paid dropped to 25.4 percent.
- Paternity had been established for at least one child for 42 percent of the parents with cases in the child support system at enrollment in RRL. When the child support records were checked at the end of the project, the rate of paternity establishment increased to 55 percent. Twenty percent of women participants reported being pregnant at program enrollment, so the increase might reflect paternity establishment activity for this population.

Reactions to the Program

Focus groups with RRL participants, program staff, and representatives of partner agencies that hosted RRL programs and assisted with participant recruitment revealed strong support for the program and perceived benefits for the targeted population.

- The program was viewed as beneficial for a diverse population including individuals in crisis and recovery who are at risk of relapse due to bad relationships.
- Participants liked the fact that RRL classes were highly interactive, there was “no classroom atmosphere,” and everyone had an opportunity to talk about “how we feel” in a non-judgmental setting.
- The mix of singles and couples appeared to work, with participants enjoying the different perspectives that each brought.
- Participants noted that the major things they learned from the program dealt with communication and relationships, which could be applied to all types of relationships and was not limited to romantic ones.
- Staff, partner agencies, and participants alike identified the goal of RRL to work on promoting healthy, stable relationships and avoiding bad ones, rather than focusing on marriage.
- All groups identified the need for housing and other basic services as barriers to stable relationships and marriage among many program participants. They attributed the low rate of child support payment among RRL participants to their lack of jobs and low incomes.



Relationships For Real Life

Father
Friendly
Initiative

- Although there is strong desire to continue to offer RRL classes after the termination of the grant, architects and program partners are doubtful they will be able to generate the funds needed to coordinate the program and retain facilitators, given their own tight financial circumstances.

Discussion

The RRL experience was both similar to and different from other relationship and marriage education programs. A number of efforts to provide relationship and marriage education to low-income individuals have found that there are significant problems in enrolling and keeping men and women in the programs. For example, Roberts and Gardner (2008) reported that 450 individuals were trained to provide workshops on healthy marriage in an effort to create large numbers of programs nationally. However, only 81 workshops were actually held in the ensuing 18 months. Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) also reported that recruiting for marriage education programs in general, and programs for low-income populations specifically, is extremely challenging. Dion and her associates (Dion, *et. al.*, 2006) noted that “projections of a large eligible population that might benefit from services do not translate into a correspondingly high flow of applications in response to program outreach.” They also reported that after recruitment, participation and attrition become significant problems. Roberts and Gardner (2008) speculated that many committed couples are reluctant to participate because they do not see themselves as being in need of services, despite evidence showing high rates of relationship termination among low-income couples.

RRL did experience some difficulty enrolling and retaining men and women. Over the 36-month operational phase of the project, a total of 364 individuals enrolled in one of the program’s 46 RRL groups, which translated into an average of eight attendees per group. When the 22 and 40 percent attrition rate for women and men, respectively, is taken into account, each group can be viewed as having served an average of four to six individuals who completed at least six of the eight classes. Although this enrollment rate fell below the original grant projection of 300 couples or 600 individuals in two years, it was well above rates reported in other programs for low-income populations.

Part of the success of RRL in enrolling participants may be due to its outreach through agencies already serving the target population. Texas Fragile Family program (2004) concluded that recruiting young fathers is challenging and recommended partnerships with organizations and agencies already serving young fathers. Theodora Ooms, a senior policy analyst of the Center for Law and Social Policy, has written extensively on healthy marriage programs. She believes that such programs should be offered to low-income couples in settings where they already receive services, and locations where male participants will feel comfortable (Roberts and Gardner, 2008).

Although RRL served substantial numbers and most participants expressed satisfaction with the program, the ability of the program to change attitudes and behaviors was more mixed. Many participants entered the program with positive attitudes towards marriage and commitment. A



Relationships For Real Life

Father
Friendly
Initiative

Fragile Families Brief (Number 14) concluded that “Programs aimed at convincing [low income, unmarried parents] that marriage is desirable are unlikely to be effective since they already appear convinced.”

Writing in an issue of *The Future of Children* devoted to marriage education and healthy relationships, Nock (2005) noted that offering programs to low-income families to convince them of the need to marry before having children assumes that current failure to marry is simply a personal choice of these parties, rather than a social norm. Other researchers also stressed that the social norm among poor Americans is that marriage is not a prerequisite for childbearing (Edin and Reed, 2005). Ultimately, Nock noted:

It may be possible to convince poor women that it is best to get married before having children. It may be possible to convince them that marriage is better than cohabitation. It may be possible to teach couples how to resolve problems that jeopardize their relationships....Evidence suggests that most poor women already understand many of these things.

Certainly many of the RRL participants felt that single mothers could raise children as well as two-parent families, even though they endorsed the view that growing up in a married family was “better” for children.

Finally, the barriers to marriage among low-income, unmarried parents are believed to be the lack of stable employment, mental health problems, and domestic violence. Research has confirmed this perspective. Fragile Families Research Brief Number 16 reports the results of research finding that 20 percent of unmarried fathers were unemployed at the birth of their child, compared to only 7 percent of married fathers. Mental health problems were 1.6 times as great for unmarried mothers as married mothers, and unmarried fathers had been diagnosed with clinical depression at rates 1.4 times as great as those found for married fathers.

The study concluded that “taken together, these findings suggest that about one-third of unmarried couples are not good candidates for marriage promotion programs.” RRL served many of these troubled individuals, and this may have limited the number of changes that were observed over time in relationship status and child support performance among the RRL enrollees. On the other hand, this “hard to reach” population did prove to be open to the information presented to them on improving relationships, and saw ways to generalize what they learned to a wide array of relationships.



Relationships
For Real Life

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Initiative

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Relationships For Real Life

Father
Friendly
Initiative

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Relationships
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Father
Friendly
Initiative

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