

## **Is the Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full? Perspective on the “Building Strong Families Early Impact Report”**

Much attention and some very heated controversy have surrounded the *Building Strong Families Early Impact Report* recently released by the Administration for Children and Families. With a great deal weighing on whether this report gives evidence that Relationship Education programs do work or don't work—including a decision about the continuation of Federal funding for Marriage and Relationship Education programs now being offered in thousands of locations across 46 states—California Healthy Marriages Coalition's (CHMC) perspective is that the glass is definitely half-full, and perhaps a lot more than half-full.

California Healthy Marriages Coalition President Dennis Stoica recently submitted testimony to this effect to the Congressional Committee on Ways and Means—Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support. His testimony, presented in the letter below, represents a careful analysis of the BSF Report that reflects a scrutiny of the data that is much more thorough than the work of many others. And, his findings which indicate that even moderate doses of Relationship Education show beneficial results, are matched by our experience in California.

As the recipient of two significant Federal grants for Healthy Marriage work, including the largest one ever granted by the Federal government, CHMC has five years of experience offering Marriage/Relationship Education programs throughout California. Through the work of our network of Partnering Organizations and their Marriage and Relationship Education instructors, we have taught these programs to more than 44,000 Californians, many of which have been willing to participate in our pioneering statewide, multi-program, multi-site Outcome Evaluation study.

CHMC will release its first formal report on the Outcome Evaluation study within the next year, but we already know from our in-house analyses—as well as many deeply-felt positive testimonials from participants around the state—that these skill-based programs make a great deal of impact on people's lives. They help couples develop tools that equip them to form strong and stable marriages and families and raise kids whose lives get off to a strong start. *We know they work!*

And, this matches Dennis Stoica's findings from the *Building Strong Families Early Impact Report* that Relationship Education yields surprisingly positive results even if participants receive relatively small dosages.

Half-full or more than half-full? Decide for yourself.



June 30, 2010

Committee on Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support  
N-318 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC. 20515

**Re: Subcommittee Hearing to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Responsible Fatherhood Programs**

To Whom It May Concern:

I write to express my concern that ACF's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hansell's testimony in your June 17<sup>th</sup> hearing regarding the Building Strong Families Project (BSF) Early Impact Report no doubt, inadvertently, misrepresented several salient factors of the report and thereby presented to the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support findings that, without reexamination, could have several unfortunate consequences.

Specifically, after citing a few findings from the BSF Early Impact Report, Mr. Hansell, in his oral testimony concluded: "All of this evidence suggests the kinds of programs funded through existing Healthy Marriage, Responsible Father grants are not sufficient to produce improvements in child well-being, and that's the basis for the President's new Family, Marriage and Innovation Fund." (<http://waysandmeans.house.gov/Hearings/Testimony.aspx?TID=8678>).

Members of the Subcommittee, it is my firm conviction that the evidence from the BSF Early Impact Report does not provide a definitive basis for an inference of this sort, especially for one with this potential magnitude. These assertions are based upon the following six factors:

- 1) **The BSF Early Impact Report did not directly assess the impact of Relationship Education on participant couples, e.g.,**
  - Because these were "intent to treat" impact estimates, non-participants were included in the BSF group: "The analysis sample included all couples who applied for BSF irrespective of whether they actually participated in the program" ("Early Impacts Report," p. 7).

- The majority of couples surveyed received little to no curriculum: Over 60% of couples surveyed in the “experimental group” received less than 20% of the curriculum. At four out of the eight program sites, over 50% of the participant couples never attended even one group session. Yet these nonparticipant couples were included in 15-month follow-up surveys. (See chart on page 5 of this letter, from the BSF “Implementation Report”)

➤ Thus, it seems appropriate to conclude that while the BSF results may be a legitimate reflection of ineffective recruitment and retention strategies, they are not a measure of the impact of Relationship Education on couples who did not participate in Relationship Education at any meaningful dosage level. This would be analogous to a research study on the effectiveness of a particular pain medication that ignored whether or those who had obtained the drug had ever actually taken it. While we recognize that “intent to treat” is often a valid design approach, it makes little sense to attempt this approach in a situation where 41% of participants did not receive any treatment.

## 2) **The BSF Early Impact Report provides strong evidence that moderate participation in Relationship Education does work:**

- “The Oklahoma City BSF program had a consistent pattern of positive effects on couples’ relationships” and achieved “positive effects on multiple relationship outcomes...” **including the two key outcomes that BSF was designed to affect, the “stability and quality of the couples’ relationships”** (“Early Impacts Report,” pp. 1, 2, 15, 16).
  - Areas in which the Oklahoma BSF project achieved statistically significant results when compared with its control group included:
    - **Better Relationship status/stability**: higher percent of couples still romantically involved;
    - **Better Relationship quality**: When measured across **all 5 of those measures**, namely: relationship happiness, support and affection, use of constructive conflict behaviors, avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors, and fidelity.
    - **Better Quality of co-parenting relationship**;
    - **Greater Father involvement**: when looking at both the percent of fathers who live with their child and the percent of fathers who provide substantial financial support – two key focal areas of Fatherhood programs.
  - These positive effects may be tied to two factors:
    - Oklahoma City posted the highest participation rate: 45% of couples in the BSF group received 80-100% of the curriculum, compared with only 9% of couples at the other sites receiving this amount. (See chart, “Percent of Curriculum Received by Couples,” on page 5.)
    - Successful recruitment and retention: The Oklahoma City couples achieved the highest percent of all sites for participants’ attending at least one group session (75.7%) (“Technical Report,” p. C.50). These couples also achieved the highest average number of hours attended (20.4 hours) (“Technical Report,” p. C.50).
- It is no coincidence that the site with the highest levels of participation in Relationship Education had such strong positive results in the above key

measurement areas, thus providing compelling evidence that, when implemented properly, Relationship Education is a highly effective intervention for this target population.

**3) The BSF Early Impact Report provides strong evidence that Relationship Education has a positive impact on African American couples.** This is an important finding because of the low rates of marriage and high rates of couple distress in this community. Specifically:

- “BSF improved the relationship quality of African American couples across the six BSF programs that served substantial numbers of African Americans” (“Final Report,” p. 2).
- “Statistically significant improvement” for African American couples was found in many measures of relationship quality, and in relationship status (“Technical Report,” p. D.9).
- “The positive effects of BSF on the relationship quality of African Americans is the **strongest and most consistent subgroup result** that emerges from this analysis” (“Technical Report,” p. 49).

➤ These are promising results for the value of Relationship Education for this especially vulnerable population.

**4) The BSF Early Impact Report provides strong evidence that Relationship Education results in significantly positive impact across a wide range of high risk participants:**

- Re: Couples in the early stages of pregnancy—early-pregnancy entrance into BSF resulted in “significant positive impact on relationship happiness” (“Technical Report,” p. 50).
- Re: Young couples—more than 40 % had at least one member who was less than 21 years old” (“Final Report,” p. 9), and for these couples, “BSF had a significant positive effect on the relationship status index” (“Technical Report,” p. 50).
- Re: Couples lacking high school diplomas—“BSF had significant positive impact on three of the five main relationship quality outcomes” for these participants (“Technical Report,” p. 49).
- Re: Mothers and their children—BSF “led to a modest reduction in frequent spanking and parental stress” (“Final Report,” p. 28).
- Re: The 39% of couples experiencing psychological distress—BSF participants had reduced symptoms of depression along with “significantly reducing depressive symptoms, several months after most couples had stopped attending group sessions” (“Final Report,” p. 28).

➤ These key findings, from amidst a diluted sample (i.e., inclusion of nonparticipants in the experimental group) and where the dosage level in Relationship Education ranged from moderate to almost non-existent, in my estimation, are far from being a condemnation of Relationship Education and, instead, indicate a remarkable level of effectiveness.

**5) I believe there is an important alternative interpretation regarding data from one of the sites.** In his testimony, Mr. Hansell expressed grave concern about the negative results occurring at Baltimore, one of the eight BSF sites. Upon examination of the data, however, I am convinced that any negative results that might have occurred at that site were more likely the result of poor

program design and/or implementation than any negative impact from participating in Relationship Education. I say this based upon the fact that this site had the lowest participation rates of all the sites, with 78% of the so-called “BSF couples” from Baltimore completing either none or less than 20% of the curriculum – and only 10% of Baltimore’s BSF couples participating in at least 60% of the curriculum.

The contrast between the results in Oklahoma City and Baltimore are revealing in that Oklahoma City, which had the highest participation rates in Relationship Education of all the BSF sites, had overwhelmingly positive results while Baltimore, which had the lowest participation rates in Relationship Education of all the BSF sites, showed the worst results.

**6) Hundreds of published studies evaluating thousands of participants across a variety of Relationship Education curricula present compelling data on the positive impact of Relationship Education:**

- These research data are evaluated in seven meta-analyses all of which reveal significant evidence of the positive impact of Relationship Education.
- For a summary of these meta-analytic findings, see *Healthy Marriages, Responsible Fatherhood*, pp. 23-25. (Downloadable at [www.CaMarriage.com](http://www.CaMarriage.com), along with research summaries on the alignment of relationship outcomes on factors affecting Children, Society, Health, Mental Health, etc., along with research findings on the impact of Relationship Education on relationship outcomes.)

In consideration of all the above, I see convincing evidence of the effectiveness of Relationship Education programs within the BSF Early Impact Report itself—across a variety of factors, a variety of sites, and a variety of populations—and I believe it is evident that an inappropriate conclusion has been presented to this Subcommittee about the value of Relationship Education programs. For all of these reasons, I ask of the Subcommittee that before approving a fundamental shift away from Healthy Marriage/Relationship Education funding that you consider the interim BSF report in its proper perspective as one among hundreds of studies which demonstrate in various ways the importance of Relationship Education for helping couples form successful families within which children thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond,

Sincerely,



Dennis Stoica  
President, California Healthy Marriages Coalition

**Table III.2. Percentage of Curriculum Received by Couples**

	None	1 to 20 Percent	20 to 40 Percent	40 to 60 Percent	60 to 80 Percent	80 to 100 Percent
<b>Loving Couples, Loving Children: 42 Hours of Core Curriculum Possible</b>						
Atlanta	57	14	5	6	9	9
Baltimore	51	27	7	5	5	5
Baton Rouge	60	17	6	5	2	1
Florida	52	17	12	8	6	5
Indiana	38	12	6	11	6	27
<b>Becoming Parents Program: 30 Hours of Core Curriculum Possible</b>						
Oklahoma	27	5	8	6	9	45
<b>Love's Cradle: 42 Hours of Core Curriculum Possible</b>						
Houston	40	25	13	5	8	8
San Angelo	29	16	14	14	9	17
<b>All Programs</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>17</b>

Source: MIS data collected by BSF programs.

Notes: Percentage of the curriculum is the total number of curriculum modules received by the program group, divided by the total modules in the curriculum. Attendance data were matched with module topic data to capture instances where one meeting covered more than one topic. Attendance was counted only when both members of the couple participated.

Reports Cited (all available at

[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/build\\_fam/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/build_fam/index.html))

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