

Strengthening Low-Income Families: A Research Agenda for Parenting, Relationship, and Fatherhood Programs

MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs. As part of our “Looking Forward” series, we provide policymakers with memos that suggest ways to make progress on critical issues.

Bottom line: Policymakers need to decide how to invest in strengthening the most basic foundation for early childhood development: family relationships. The challenges: 1) help parents provide the responsive and stimulating environments that will prepare young children for school, and 2) support fathers’ engagement with their children regardless of whether they live with them. The federal government has previously addressed these issues through a variety of approaches — economic supports for low-income families; programs for noncustodial fathers (“responsible fatherhood programs”); reforms in the welfare and child support systems; maternal and child health programs; and parenting, relationship, or marriage skills programs. While evidence continues to build from current studies, policymakers should prioritize the investigation of new and innovative approaches based on the importance of a child’s earliest years of life and the unique role of fathers in early childhood. Decisions about funding and expanding such programs should hinge upon accumulating evidence about how best to scale up and sustain the most promising ones.

What Do We Know?

A child’s early years are critical for both brain development and building a foundation of emotional security. Parents play a central role in both of these facets, but there is more to learn about the most effective ways to build parents’ capacities. Two federal programs that directly aim to help parents improve disadvantaged children’s early development between the ages of 0-3 are Early Head Start and the new Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV). Rigorous evidence suggests that Early Head Start benefits disadvantaged children, although these programs should continue to innovate as the effects are relatively modest. The federal government recently prioritized evidence-based policymaking in early childhood development with the launch of MIECHV and provided funding over five years for disadvantaged communities to operate early childhood home visiting services that have shown benefits for families and children. As these initiatives are scaled, reliable evidence will be critical to inform how best to sustain their effectiveness.

Fathers play a unique role in the lives of children. Experts have found that fathers’ sustained involvement and financial support throughout their children’s lives can depend in part on the quality of their relationship with the child’s mother and the fathers’ employment prospects and financial well-being. But interventions that aim to improve fathers’ relationships with their children reveal the complexity of the situation. For example, Parents’ Fair Share (PFS) was a program that targeted noncustodial fathers of children receiving public assistance with the goal of increasing their employment, child support payments, and child involvement. Child support payments increased, but not earnings and father-child involvement. In contrast, Career Academies, a high school reform initiative, produced substantial increases in earnings, a greater percentage of people living independently with their spouse/partner and children, and increases in marriage and custodial parenthood among young men in the sample. These findings suggest that we need a deeper understanding of the complex linkages among earnings, the mother-father relationship, and father involvement to develop effective future strategies in this area.

Children benefit from policies that increase parents' employment and income. Earlier lessons from MDRC's work on family well-being and children's development demonstrate that mandatory welfare-to-work programs that "make work pay" through earnings supplements can benefit young elementary-age children's school achievement, though those gains are relatively modest.

Regardless of whether parents are married, children benefit from living in stable, low-conflict families. When parents experience less conflict with each other, parent-child relationships are more supportive and nurturing, and children fare better on a range of social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. The Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood Grants Program of 2010 allocated \$150 million for programs that support two-parent families and encourage father-child involvement, including supports for high-quality relationships between parents, for parent-child relationships, and for improving the economic circumstances of families, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children. Further expansion should be informed by the growing body of reliable evidence about the programs' effectiveness.

What's Next?

Inform future family strengthening programs with results from studies already underway. Current demonstration programs funded by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provide critical knowledge about preventive strategies for strengthening the relationships of parents. Recent evidence from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Project indicates that family-strengthening programs can indeed be effective at bolstering parents' relationships. Yet we are still learning about whether these early effects will translate into broader improvements in the longevity of parents' marriages and outcomes for children. If found effective, programs aimed at bolstering parents' relationships could be integrated into other support systems for families, such as employment programs, Early Head Start programs, home visiting programs, or neighborhood family resource centers.

Develop new approaches to supporting fathers, whether residing or not with their children. HHS is currently examining the effectiveness of programs to strengthen both residential and nonresidential fathers' involvement in their children's lives. HHS and the Department of Labor are also both investing resources to study how to improve employment and other economic outcomes for disadvantaged parents. Future research demonstrations can provide evidence about the effects of innovative measures to strengthen families, such as improving transitions into the labor force for young adults to improve their likelihood of forming stable family relationships; requiring that child support funds go to children's custodial parents instead of the welfare system; improving Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and employment policies for noncustodial fathers; and rethinking the treatment of incarceration as "voluntary unemployment" for the calculation of child support arrears.

Continue investing in parents' capacity to promote their children's early development, using rigorous evaluation research to identify promising strategies. Well-structured programs targeting parenting skills, such as the evidence-based home visiting programs mentioned above, the Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up home visiting program, the Triple P parenting program, and Carolyn Webster-Stratton's *The Incredible Years*, have shown promise in experimental studies. A national evaluation of the MIECHV program will also provide new insights into the effects of evidence-based home visiting programs for families with infants when scaled up across the country. The continued development of local systems of early childhood services would benefit from additional research to test other promising strategies on a large scale for parents of 0- to 5-year-olds.

For more information, contact JoAnn Hsueh at 212-340-8644 or joann.hsueh@mdrc.org.

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