A Summary Report Prepared for
the Annie E. Casey Foundation

More Than Jobs

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Providing Disadvantaged Teens and Young Adults with Healthy Relationship Skills as a Strategy to Reduce Poverty and Improve Child Well-Being

The ability of young people to forge and sustain healthy relationships can affect almost every aspect of their lives — school and work success, physical and mental health, and the overall health and well-being of their own children.

Helping young people thrive and overcome barriers to economic and personal success requires more than ensuring they complete their secondary education and workforce development. Providing youth with the necessary skills to form and sustain healthy intimate relationships is also an essential part of their future success.

Troubled, unstable or dangerous relationships and unplanned pregnancies typically thwart, or even derail, the progress young people may otherwise make in school, work or parenting. These relationships also can endanger the young person and their children.

The Issue

Single parents face significant challenges in their efforts to raise successful, financially secure children. Teen and young adults (16-24 years old) have the highest rates of unplanned and nonmarital births in the United States and the rates are rising.[1] A consensus exists among researchers that nonmarital childbearing, particularly among this age group, has profound negative social and economic consequences for both the young parents and their children, including the persistence of poverty for the mother and the child, lack of father involvement, and poor developmental and educational outcomes for the children.[2,3] A conservative research estimate is that approximately one in five of all nonmarital births are "rapid repeat" births—births to already disadvantaged young mothers who have had their first child within the past two years, which only compounds the negative consequences for these already disadvantaged families.[4]

Because the increasing trend of births outside of marriage in recent decades has contributed to a widening income gap and negative consequences for children, the 1996 welfare reform law placed marriage and childbearing squarely in the center of federal welfare policy. Programs established by the law specifically addressed family composition with two goals: to reduce nonmarital births and promote marriage among low-income populations. These mandates sparked considerable controversy and fueled partisan politics. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's work to reduce child poverty and promote child well-being prompted the organization to enter the conversation about marriage and family formation to keep child well-being as the central focus of federal and state efforts, and to ensure the cultural competence of the strategies used with low-income families with children.

Background

The Annie E. Casey Foundation recognizes the complex set of issues that have led to the decline in marriage—particularly among low-income populations. The Foundation's work in healthy relationships and healthy marriage draws on empirical research and data, and is firmly situated within its broader focus of strengthening relationships within families and local communities. The Foundation's desire to reverse these negative trends led to investments aimed at supporting the formation of healthy, two-parent family relationships and, when appropriate and desired, marriage. This involved a three-pronged approach:

1. Increasing the share of stable relationships and marriages of young, first-time parents;
2. Improving the capacity of non-custodial fathers to responsibly care for, engage with and provide financially for their children; and
3. Increasing the share of single mothers with jobs that have benefits, adequate income, savings and assets.

Examples of the Foundation's early investments in this area include:

- **Knowledge development via support for the Baltimore Building Strong Families (BSF) Study.** Baltimore Building Strong Families is one of seven sites participating in a major national study to determine the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs in helping young, low-income couples with children strengthen their relationships and/or choose marriage. The Baltimore program is administered by the Center for Urban Families. The hypothesis of the demonstration is that if healthy relationships, marriage education and supportive services improve parental relationships, and/or if healthy marriages are formed, parents will be able to provide a better environment for their children and, ultimately, produce better child outcomes.
- **Building the capacity and sustainability of a national healthy marriage clearinghouse.** The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) is a national resource and clearinghouse for information and research relating to healthy marriages. NHMRC provides training and technical assistance for federally funded healthy marriage grantees and has launched a website that provides information and resources on marriage research, healthy marriage curricula, state marriage laws and regulations, and other information for the general public.
- **Advancing awareness of, and knowledge about, how to address domestic violence among vulnerable families with children.** The Foundation has supported several key organizations, such as the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, in their efforts to improve the safety and life chances of women and children exposed to domestic violence. Advocacy among federal and state policy-makers, meetings with maternal and child-health advocates, meetings with advocates of domestic violence prevention and responsible fatherhood leaders have resulted in "big tent" collaborations, and the incorporation of domestic violence protocols and resources in healthy relationship and marriage programs.

"One of the young women is 17 and has a young son. She finally went on birth control and is now able to see that she doesn't have to have sex to show her boyfriend she loves him."

Chadron YouthBuild facilitator

A Targeted Strategy: Supporting Healthy Relationships and Healthy Choices Among Youth

Research points out that teens and young adults, and their children, suffer the most negative outcomes associated with unhealthy relationships and nonmarital births. Often, this is just one step in a cycle of unstable and troubled serial relationships and subsequent pregnancies.[5] The negative consequences associated with the unplanned births to these young parents stands in the way of two major outcomes of concern for the Annie E. Casey Foundation: family economic success and increasing the proportion of children who grow up in stable, two-parent families. This reality has underscored the need for the Foundation to target healthy relationship skills and resources to teens and young adults, when possible, prior to the birth of their first child or a rapid repeat birth.

This strategy is one that addresses the social development of youth—young men as well as young women—encouraging a broad range of healthy behaviors, fostering sound decision-making and providing knowledge for the successful sequencing of life events; that is, postponing parenthood until finishing school, achieving career goals and forming a positive, stable relationship.

In 2007, the Annie E. Casey Foundation identified two key partners in its strategy to work with young adults around this issue: the National Crittenton Foundation and YouthBuild USA.

The National Crittenton Foundation (NCF)

The National Crittenton Foundation is the national umbrella organization for Florence Crittenton Services organizations around the country, which provide services and life-skills classes to at-risk and system-involved girls and young women, particularly those who are pregnant or parenting. With Foundation support, NCF published the Rights & Resources Guide for young women who are pregnant and/or parenting while in foster care, to explain their rights and responsibilities with regard to their child while they are in care. NCF has recently accepted a grant from the Foundation to pilot a healthy relationship curriculum for their residents in two pilot sites, Southern California and Charlotte, North Carolina. The NCF is still in the preliminary stages of the work, and has worked closely with the curriculum developers to train staff in each site and make modifications as they learn what resonates most with their clients. Given that NCF is currently focusing on serving clients who are referred to the agencies via child welfare or juvenile justice, the clients often have multiple acute needs and varying lengths of stay. The facilitators strongly believe their clients need this type of formal curriculum; previously they addressed relationship issues on an individual, case-by-case basis.

Young women of color are disproportionally represented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Moreover, they are disproportionally represented among the ranks of young women involved in these systems who become pregnant. Nowhere are the intergenerational cycles of system involvement, engagement in destructive behaviors and poor outcomes more consistent than for these young women and their children.

▶ The National Crittenton Foundation

Based on a 2007 survey completed by 17 of the Florence Crittenton agencies, clients have multiple acute needs. The top reasons girls and young women are referred to a Crittenton agency are:

- Mental health services
- Pregnant or parenting teens or young adults
- Pregnant or parenting teens or young adults in foster care
- In foster care
- Substance abuse treatment
- Involved with juvenile justice and pregnant or parenting

Gender
79% of the total clients served were females and 21% were male.

Income
94% of clients served are at or below the federal poverty guidelines.

Race
White 39%
African American 38%
Hispanic/Latino 20%
American Indian 5%
Asian 2%
Multiracial 4%

The Foundation's initial conversations with YouthBuild leadership revealed that their students overwhelmingly report that obtaining a good job, getting married and having a family are their most important life goals.

YouthBuild USA Developing Healthy Relationships Initiative

In 2007, the Foundation pursued a strategic opportunity with YouthBuild USA. YouthBuild is a federal project of the Department of Labor, in which low-income young people between the ages of 16 and 24 work toward their GED or high school diploma while learning job skills through building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people. This includes a youth development program where young people participate in personal counseling, peer support groups and life planning processes that provide an excellent opportunity for education about healthy relationships and family economic success.

The Foundation's initial conversations with YouthBuild leadership revealed that their students overwhelmingly report that obtaining a good job, getting married and having a family are their most important life goals. Unfortunately, the profile of the typical YouthBuild student shows that they face multiple challenges to achieving healthy relationships and economic success.

The vast majority have left high school without a diploma and have weak employment skills. One third have been found guilty of a criminal offense, and at least one in 10 has been in foster care. Half of the females and one quarter of the males have already had at least one child.

YouthBuild has worked for 30 years to break the cycle of poverty by engaging out-of-school, unemployed, and economically disadvantaged youth and young adults, helping them transform their lives and develop meaningful, sustainable livelihoods.

With 226 agencies nation-wide, YouthBuild USA is in a unique position to combine its long-standing and proven history of helping teens and young adults gain financial success, with building healthy relationships that can lead to healthy marriages, healthy co-parenting in the absence of marriage, successful parenting for current and future parents, and responsible fatherhood skills. Over the years, YouthBuild USA has offered one-time training workshops in its national and regional training events. However, until a grant from the

▶ YouthBuild USA

YouthBuild USA serves low-income young people between 16 and 24 years:

- 90% have left high school without a diploma
- 33% have been adjudicated
- 26% are already parents
- 10%+ have been in foster care
- Many have been victims of abuse
- Most have weak employment skills
- 72% are male, unemployed and unmarried
- 37% of the males have been convicted of a crime

Annie E. Casey Foundation, the organization did not have the capacity to help sites develop a comprehensive and systematic approach to supporting healthy relationships that could take root at the local level. In 2007, the Foundation approached YouthBuild USA to pilot a healthy relationship curriculum with six of its sites.

In the project, YouthBuild USA:

1. Tested the adaptation of a nationally recognized healthy relationships curriculum in six pilot programs in the YouthBuild network.
2. Offered healthy relationship training to YouthBuild staff.
3. Worked with national partners and other nonprofit organizations, specifically regarding domestic violence and other conflict management issues, to forge the outlines of a more comprehensive approach to supporting healthy relationships that can be implemented widely in the YouthBuild network in a future expansion of this initiative.
4. Conducted a formal evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the pilot.

The selected programs for the Developing Healthy Relationships Initiative included: Chadron YouthBuild, Chadron, NE; Metro Atlanta YouthBuild/AmeriCorps Program, Atlanta, GA; YouthBuild Just-A-Start, Cambridge, MA; Latin American Youth Center, Washington, DC; Schenectady YouthBuild, Northeast Parent and Child, Schenectady, NY; and YouthBuild Fall River, Fall River, MA. A kick-off training was held at the YouthBuild USA office in Somerville, MA on Sept. 8 and 9, 2008, for the facilitators as well as the team.

Based on findings from the pilot project just completed with the six YouthBuild programs, the Developing Healthy Relationships Initiative evaluation showed that participants improved in their attitudes, knowledge and perceived skills associated with healthy relationships. Participants showed increases in: perceived knowledge gained across the different topics addressed in the curriculum (more than doubled from pre- to post-program); healthy attitudes about sexual behavior; knowledge about healthy relationship building; perceived conflict management and assertiveness skills; and relationship assessment skills. They also showed decreases in endorsement of aggression in relationships and potential influence on relational behaviors.

With the additional support of the Foundation, YouthBuild has expanded its successful Developing Healthy Relationships Initiative in 2009 to 10 new local YouthBuild programs. Together with the six programs that recently concluded the initiative, these sites begin to form a nexus of programs throughout the YouthBuild network that can champion the need for the approach to assist young adults to form and sustain healthy relationships—a foundation for success in their work lives, future education, intimate relationships and parenting.

Conclusion

Turbulent, serial relationships for young people and their children are not part of the life goals of youth. In fact, multiple surveys show that the vast majority of young men and women—regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic background—want to be married and to stay married for a lifetime. More than three-quarters of young adults support the idea that love, fidelity and a life-long commitment are essential components of a healthy relationship.[6,7]

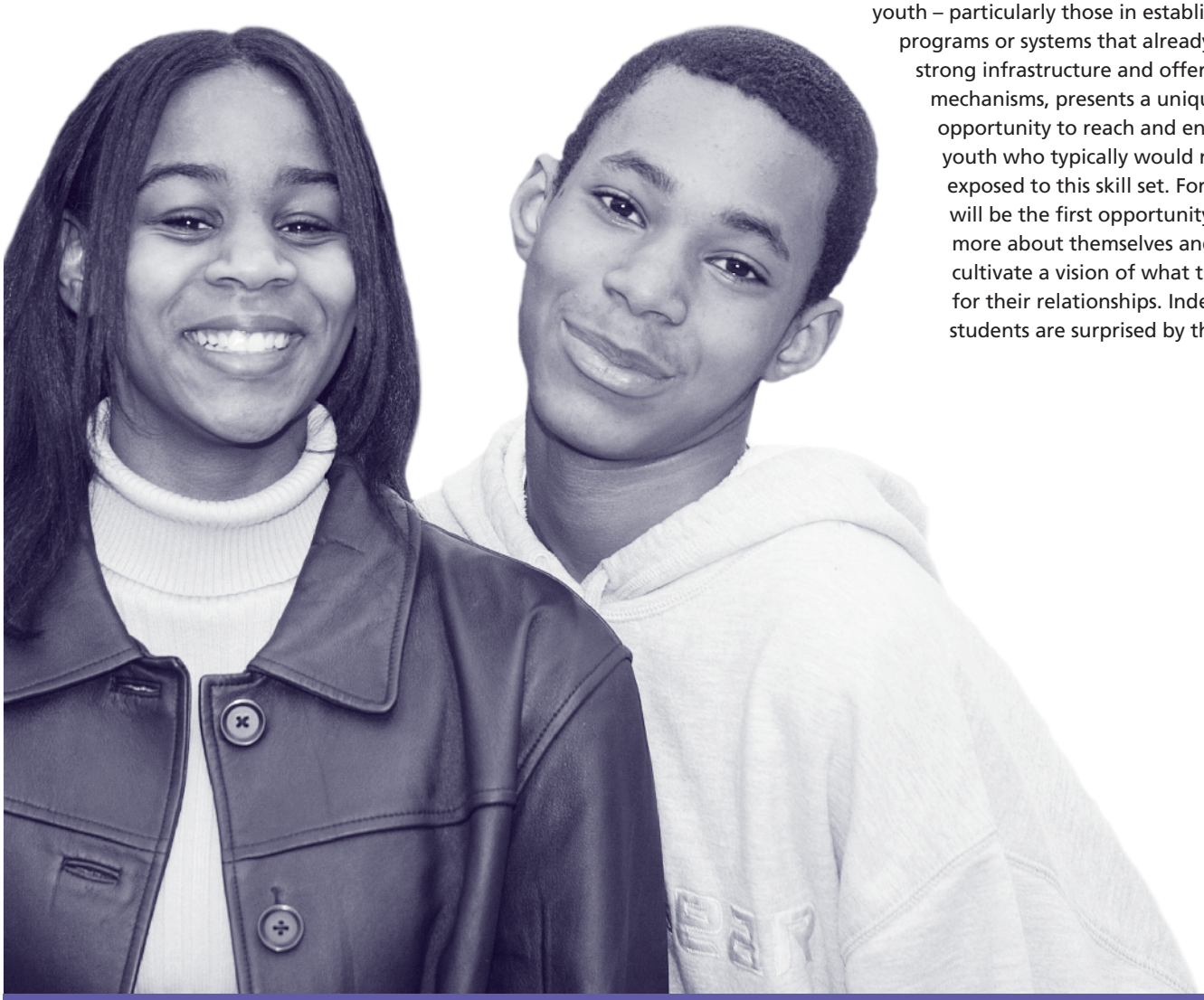
Why is it then that so many disadvantaged youth are unable to attain this goal?

Many of these youth have never had healthy relationships modeled for them, so they do not know what one looks like.

And while reproductive health and abstinence curricula abound, most youth lack access to the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the success sequence: finish high school or, preferably, college, obtain employment that provides adequate income and the ability to accumulate assets and wealth, move slowly in getting to know a potential partner, wait until your 20s to marry, and have children after you marry. People who follow this sequence are more likely to avoid poverty, do well economically and have longer-lasting, low-conflict relationships. Those who depart from this sequence are at a much greater economic risk. For example, a child born to an unmarried teen mother who has not finished high school is nine times more likely to be poor than a child born to an adult parent who is married and has graduated from high school.[8]

Unfortunately, there has been limited funding that would allow organizations serving youth to develop and incorporate healthy relationship education, training and support.

The strategy of working with disadvantaged youth – particularly those in established programs or systems that already have a strong infrastructure and offer support mechanisms, presents a unique opportunity to reach and engage youth who typically would not be exposed to this skill set. For many, it will be the first opportunity to learn more about themselves and to cultivate a vision of what they want for their relationships. Indeed, many students are surprised by the idea



> "Having a mother with access to adequate financial resources and higher education, and being born into a household with two biological parents in a high-quality marital relationship and social support, lower the risks of problem behaviors and poor cognitive development in childhood."
>
> Logan, C., Moore, K., Manlove, J., Mincieli, L., & Cottingham, S. (2007)

that they can be active agents in the circumstances that affect their interpersonal relationships. Participants can gain not only self-knowledge, but also real skills for knowing what a healthy relationship is and isn't including:

- How to choose a partner wisely.
- Frameworks to help assess current or past relationships.
- Information and support on how to identify and leave dangerous relationships safely.
- Help identifying what might need to change or improve for a relationship they want to continue and deepen.
- How to handle break ups and how to go about their next relationship more wisely and cautiously.
- Acquisition of skills to improve communications and their ability to handle conflict. These skills are critical for all relationships: work, school, family and especially co-parenting.

As we have seen from the YouthBuild Developing Healthy Relationships Initiative pilot project, the curriculum, plus the ongoing support and guidance of YouthBuild USA, its resources and consultants, all provide a new tool and a unique opportunity to continue to serve a large cross-section of the teen and young adult demographic that would otherwise have limited prospects to access a comprehensive program of education, training and support in developing the assets necessary to form and preserve healthy intimate relationships. For many years, YouthBuild USA has recognized the need for a concentrated effort in programs to provide this skill development for young people in its communities.

This paradigm of a successful person, looking at not just the individual's accomplishments, but his or her ability to forge and sustain healthy relationships, is for many people a new kind of engagement. We recognize that many of these behavioral shifts will not happen overnight, and may take many years to see concrete results. It is the Foundation's hope that these pilot programs demonstrate the potential that exists within youth-serving organizations to create a culture of healthy relationships among the youth they serve and in their communities. At the core of all of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's investments is the premise that improving future opportunities for vulnerable children requires helping parents secure the resources, connections and skills they need to support, nurture and provide for them today. Healthy relationships are a vital resource to a young person's success and the success of their children.

Resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation
www.aecf.org

The National Crittenton Foundation
www.thenationalcrittentonfoundation.org

YouthBuild USA
www.youthbuild.org

A Guide to Low-Cost Curricula and Resources for Marriage and Relationship, Fatherhood and Parenting, and Financial Education. (2009). United States Administration for Children and Families. This guide offers a list of low-cost or free curricula to support efforts to strengthen relationships for singles, couples, parents or families.

https://hhsu.learning.hhs.gov/communities/downloads/0427EBD38838.doc

Adolescent Romantic Relationships as Precursors of Healthy Adult Marriages: A Review of Theory, Research and Programs. Karney, B., Beckett, M., Collins, R., & Shaw, R. (2007).

http://www.acf.hhs.gov (enter "adolescent romantic relationships" in the search field)

SCHOOL/YOUTH Marriage Education Programs.
National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org (enter "school/youth" in the search field)

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7 *Young Adult Attitudes About Relationships and Marriage: Times May Have Changed, But Expectations Remain High By Mindy E. Scott, Ph.D., Erin Schelar, B.A., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., and Carol Cui, B.S. July 2009.*

8 *Zill, N., & O'Donnell, K. (2004). Child Poverty Rates by Maternal Risk Factors: An Update. Unpublished manuscript. Rockville, MD: WESTAT.*

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for vulnerable children and families in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the foundation in honor of their mother.

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