

## Healthy Family Relationships

*Three out of every four children who live apart from a parent are served by the child support program. When parents live apart, healthy relationships between parents and between parent and child are vitally important for both child well-being and stable child support payments.*

### Why should the child support program promote healthy family relationships?

The child support program can uniquely reach both parents, particularly fathers—in fact, three out of four children who live apart from a parent are served by the child support program.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not parents stay together, they are parents for life. Their children depend on them. Parents who have a healthy relationship with each other are better able to cooperate and work together for their child’s emotional and financial well-being. And noncustodial parents who have good relationships with their children may feel a greater commitment to providing for their needs, including paying child support consistently.<sup>2</sup> Poor relationships, however, can lead parents to withhold child support or block access and visitation. The child support program is uniquely positioned to reach both parents and help them form and maintain healthy family relationships—doing so will benefit their children and will likely lead to increased child support payments.<sup>3</sup>

Safety is the foundation of healthy family relationships and is therefore a core goal of healthy family interventions. Programs must screen and monitor for domestic violence and child abuse, enact procedures designed to keep participants safe, and provide education and skills to reduce family violence in close partnership with family violence service providers.



### How can supporting healthy family relationships improve child support outcomes?

Two studies have shown that improved child support outcomes are associated with receiving services that promote healthy family relationships, such as parenting education and mediation.

- According to the HHS Office of the Inspector General, the amount of visitation and child support compliance increased among noncustodial parents who participated in mediation programs in four states. The study estimated that monthly child support payments went up by \$56 per case after receiving mediation services.<sup>4</sup>
- Another study found that parents who were behind in their child support and received parenting education nearly doubled their child support payments during the 12 months following program participation.<sup>5</sup>

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#### What does the child support program do to support healthy family relationships?

The child support program can be an important information and referral source for programs aiming to strengthen family relationships. Family strengthening programs, marriage and couple education, parenting and co-parenting education, and related programs focus on communication, trust, conflict resolution, cooperative relationships between parents, and positive parent-child relationships. Improving these skills will benefit children and may lead to improved child support outcomes.

Healthy marriage and couples programs teach skills that help parents work together and successfully manage conflicts and challenges. The child support program has played a critical role in supporting healthy marriage and couples skill-building programs. Since 2002, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has approved 15 waiver demonstration projects and eight discretionary grants to allow child support programs and other organizations to pursue a variety of strategies to promote healthy marriages. As of May 2011, over 15,000 couples and individuals have received healthy marriage, couples skill-building, and child support education through these programs.<sup>6</sup> Also, in 2005, Congress enacted the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants program, administered by the Office of Family Assistance, which authorized \$100 million per year for five years for programs that promoted healthy marriages. Another \$75 million was authorized in 2011.

In addition, states receive \$10 million per year in federal funding to administer the Access and Visitation Program, overseen by OCSE, which supports and facilitates noncustodial parents' access to and visitation of their children. According to the latest data, 91,000 people were served by this program in fiscal year 2009.<sup>7</sup> Services funded by this grant program include mediation, counseling, education, development of parenting plans, supervised visitation, safe exchange services, and development of guidelines for visitation and alternative custody arrangements. Some states are coordinating these services with their child support program, while others use the services in conjunction with their child welfare program.

#### Examples of ways state child support programs are supporting healthy family relationships:

##### California—Magnolia Place

**What it does:** The Children's Bureau, a Los Angeles-based non-profit organization, partnered with over 70 entities, including the County of Los Angeles, to create the Magnolia Place Family Center. Magnolia Place is dedicated to improving education, parenting, economic stability and health of the 35,000 children and their families living in the 500-block area surrounding the center. The County of Los Angeles Child Support Services Department has co-located staff at Magnolia Place to provide case management services for the local neighborhood.

##### Georgia—Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

**What it does:** The Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Division of Child Support Services developed a single system of care to better serve the roughly 98,000 children in the state who do not live with their parents.<sup>8</sup>

**Results:** The system allows grandparents to obtain child support services for their grandchildren by walking into any DHS office and telling a worker their situation.

##### Minnesota—Co-Parent Court

**What it does:** The Hennepin County Child Support Division is working with the Family Court and community service providers to implement a pilot project that identifies barriers that unwed parents face to becoming successful parents and then makes appropriate referrals at the time of court-ordered paternity establishment. All participants must also attend a four-session co-parent education class.

**Results:** The Co-Parent Court became operational in June 2010, and had served approximately 100 families by the end of May 2011.

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#### New York—Parent Help

**What it does:** The New York Division of Child Support Enforcement supports Child Find of America in its operation of Parent Help, a telephone-based counseling and mediation service to address poor relationships between fathers and mothers, by serving on its advisory board, providing child support training for its staff, and referring parents who may benefit from its services.

**Results:** Begun in fall 2006, Parent Help received nearly 10,000 calls for assistance from custodial and noncustodial parents during its first four years of operation. Most parents sought its free and confidential assistance to resolve conflicts over child custody, visitation, child support and co-parenting.

#### Tennessee—Testing Approaches to Developing Amicable Family Relationships Among Unmarried Parents

**What it did:** The Tennessee Child Support Enforcement Division operated a program in three jurisdictions, from October 2005 to May 2010, which helped unwed parents create parenting plans. Child support workers referred noncustodial parents to project staff, who, in turn, contacted the noncustodial parents and offered them the opportunity to participate in a free, facilitated meeting with the other parent to complete a parenting plan.

#### Tennessee (continued)

**Results:** Participants reported that the program led to more frequent and regular contact with their children; it also increased compliance with their child support from 54 percent, on average, in the year prior to enrollment to 58 percent after enrollment.<sup>9</sup>

#### Texas—Collaborating with access and visitation providers

**What it does:** The Texas Office of Attorney General Child Support Division has integrated access and visitation resources and services throughout the child support process. Basic information on access and visitation is provided to all parents prior to order establishment. All child support workers and call center staff have a statewide map of access and visitation service providers on their computer desktops for direct referrals to parents with visitation or custody issues. Child support workers provide co-parenting resources (parenting plan calendars, co-parenting guide, and co-parenting video) to parents at court and in local child support offices. Child support call center staff also direct parents to the Texas Access and Visitation Hotline where more than 21,000 parents received assistance regarding custody and visitation issues in FY 2009.

**Results:** In FY 2009, 61 percent of the parents served by the Texas Access and Visitation Program were referred by child support staff. That year, Texas child support staff distributed approximately 90,000 copies of co-parenting materials; of the 57,000 newly established child support orders, almost all included an enforceable parenting plan, called a possession order in Texas.

## References

Examples provided in the *Promoting Child Well-Being & Family Self-Sufficiency* Fact Sheet Series are funded using child support program matching funds and other funding sources.

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6. John Langrock, Program Specialist, Office of Child Support Enforcement.
7. Office of Child Support Enforcement, FY 2009 Preliminary Child Access and Visitation Data.
8. Rita Lang. "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Referral and Outreach Define Georgia's Model to Address National Trend." *Child Support Report* 33:5 (May 2011).
9. Lanae Davis, Jessica Pearson, and Nancy Thoennes. *Tennessee Parenting Project*. CO: Center for Policy Research. 2010. For a summary of the findings, go to: [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/grants/abstracts/fy2005\\_1115\\_abstracts.html#90FD0108](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/grants/abstracts/fy2005_1115_abstracts.html#90FD0108)

