

Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda

Lori Kowaleski-Jones Nicholas H. Wolfinger
Editors

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With 31 Figures

 Springer

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Preface

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Marriage has become part of America's political agenda. President Bush promised "unprecedented support to strengthen marriages" (Ooms 2002). Numerous states have recently passed pro-marriage legislation, including financial incentives for marriage and provisions for marriage education (for an overview see Gardner et al. 2002). Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas have attempted to limit the availability of divorce via "covenant marriage" laws; similar legislation has been considered in more than 30 states. Many of the reforms to the welfare system included in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act were designed to increase marriage and reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing. For example, time limits on benefit receipt were enacted in part to increase the cost of remaining single for low-income women (Edin 2000a). More recently, the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families announced that it will support various new research projects for helping couples develop the skills necessary to form and sustain successful unions (Health and Human Services News 2004). Inherent in all of these marriage promotion policies is the premise that marriage is better for children and adults than are single parenthood and cohabitation.

Many people see government involvement in family policy as a response to the American family "crisis." Some point to the large number of non-

traditional or “fragile” families, generally defined as unmarried women with children. Primarily on account of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, there were ten million single mothers in America in 2000; more than one and a half million of these women had unmarried live-in partners (Fields and Casper 2001). One of the primary concerns with these non-traditional families is their precarious financial status. In 2003, 28% of female-headed families were poor, compared to only 5% of two-parent families (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2004). Economic deprivation while growing up increases the risk of various adverse outcomes, including poor physical health and reduced academic achievement (McLoyd 1998). Not all of the deleterious effects of non-traditional families can be linked to poverty: irrespective of economic well-being, children growing up without both biological parents have lower rates of high school completion and higher rates of premarital fertility (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Some contend that marriage is the solution to many of the problems faced by single-parent families (Waite and Gallagher 2000). Unwed mothers who get married indeed experience substantial gains in income (Lichter et al. 2003). Others suggest that government programs designed to raise marriage rates may cause more problems than they solve (Solot and Miller 2002). It has been argued that poor socioeconomic prospects for lower-class men have driven down marriage rates in this population (Lichter et al. 1992; Lloyd and South 1996; Wilson 1987). Consequently, marriages resulting from governmental interventions may well fail to solve the social problems that have inspired much of the pro-marriage agenda. Furthermore, such marriages may be plagued by high levels of domestic violence and divorce (Edin 2000b). These issues, at the center of the controversy over governmental efforts to promote marriage, highlight the need for more information about the causes and consequences of non-traditional family forms.

CONTENTS AND GOALS OF THIS VOLUME

This volume explores issues related to fragile families. It is based on a collection of papers presented at the 2003 Rocco C. and Marion S. Siciliano Forum, an annual lecture series at the University of Utah on the state of American society. Past participants have included David Gardner, former president of the nine campus University of California system, Alejandro Portes, Howard Harrison and Gabrielle Snyder Beck Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and former president of the American Sociological Association, and Karl Rove, Special Assistant to President George W. Bush.

The keynote speaker at the 2003 Forum was Sara McLanahan, Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University and former president of the Population Association of America. Her address, "Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda," provides the cornerstone of this volume. McLanahan's paper articulates many of the issues surrounding the current controversy over the state of marriage. Eight other original papers on a variety of topics related to fragile families provide the balance of the volume.

The book begins with McLanahan's address. She observes that governmental programs to promote marriage make assumptions about people's willingness to participate, the programs' efficacy, and their potential benefits to children in fragile families. Using data from a national sample of new parents and their children, McLanahan offers qualified evidence that the government's marriage promotion programs may indeed succeed in their goals.

The second part of the book presents theoretical, public policy, and legal perspectives on the value of marriage. Dawne Moon and Jaye Cee Whitehead explore the discursive links between public images of and policies toward marriage, and the prevailing feminist and sociological views. Their analysis suggests that marriage is a political construction that consecrates and sanctifies particular forms of intimate life. By contrasting popular culture representations contained in the 2003 television show *Married by America* with government efforts to promote marriage, Moon and Whitehead suggest that the state uses marriage to avoid its own responsibilities to poor families.

Brent Miller, Rayna Sage, and Bryan Winward observe that teenage pregnancy and childbearing in the United States have declined by about one fourth since 1991, but remain far more common than in other developed countries. Furthermore, teenage mothers have become less likely to be married. Miller and colleagues assess the evidence linking early childbearing to parental well-being and evaluate public policy proposals to reduce teen pregnancy.

Lynn Wardle reviews three effects of American family law on fragile families. First, he discusses how fragile families are often invisible to family law. Second, he reviews family law principles and reforms intended to help fragile families. Third, he considers family law doctrines that have been detrimental to fragile families, either by contributing to their proliferation or by exacerbating the plight of existing fragile families.

Next the book examines some of the causes and consequences of child well-being in fragile families. A large body of research documents that single parenthood is associated with behavior problems and reduced academic achievement among offspring. Rachel Dunifon and Lori

Kowaleski-Jones observe that little research has examined racial differences in the influence of single parenthood on children. They find that that growing up in a single parent family is associated with negative outcomes for white, but not black, children.

Many children who grow up in poverty do so in households headed by divorced mothers. Matthew McKeever and Nicholas Wolfinger explore how changes in women's human capital and labor market participation have affected the incomes of divorced women since 1980. Using newly developed statistical methods for studying income distributions, they find that improvement in family income for these women can largely be attributed to growing levels of human capital in conjunction with declining family sizes. Although the proliferation of mother-headed families has contributed to economic stratification, income polarization has not occurred within the population of divorced women.

Mikaela Dufur and Kelly Troutman focus on a specific adolescent risk behavior, high-intensity work, and theorize that adolescents in certain fragile families will work more hours because of financial need, while teens in others will extend their work hours to avoid unpleasant home environments. Their results suggest that scholars hoping to understand fragile families must take different family structures and processes into account.

The final portion of the book addresses a historically understudied group, fathers in fragile families. Renata Forste explores the family circumstances of unmarried fathers. Although many of these men are involved with their children, both interpersonal and economic factors have prevented them from marrying the mothers. Instead, most of the mothers and fathers have intermittently engaged in non-marital cohabitation.

Paul Florsheim and Le Ngu identify developmental factors associated with positive fathering among a sample of young men aged 15 to 19. Despite significant individual and social disadvantages, these fathers developed relational capacities associated with positive parenting. These capacities included a growth-oriented perspective on the co-parenting relationship, a commitment to shared responsibility for maintaining this relationship, and a willingness to empathize with their co-parenting partners. They conclude by discussing the importance of studying unexpected successes for the development of effective interventions.

The authors of this volume come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and employ both qualitative and quantitative data. The variety of analytic approaches has yielded a diverse set of findings about fragile families. We hope that they contribute to current political and academic debates over the value and viability of marriage in contemporary American life.

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Administering the Forum requires extensive support by the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Dean J. Steven Ott helped to bring this event to fruition. Becky Murphy did much of the behind-the-scenes coordination. Together, their efforts greatly enhanced the quality of both the Forum and this volume.

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Chapter 1

FRAGILE FAMILIES AND THE MARRIAGE AGENDA

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Abstract: The Bush Administration is proposing to spend 1.5 billion dollars over the next five years on programs to promote “healthy marriages.” The new programs are based on three assumptions: (1) that unmarried parents will participate in programs designed to promote marriage, (2) that participating in the programs will increase marriage, and (3) that children will be better off if their parents marry. This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to assess whether these assumptions are consistent with what we know about unmarried parents and whether the new marriage programs are likely to be successful. I argue that parents are likely to participate if services are provided around the time of the birth, that improving parents’ relationship skills is likely to increase marriage, and that we can be guardedly optimistic about the effects on children.

Key words: marriage, non-marital fertility, parental relationships, child well-being, social policy

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bush Administration is proposing to spend 1.5 billion dollars over the next five years on programs to promote “healthy marriages.” Some of this money will be spent on media campaigns to provide young adults, and the general public, with information about the benefits of marriage. Other money will be spent on programs to prevent divorce among married couples. And last, but not least, a major portion of the new funds is earmarked for fragile families, unmarried parents who are raising their child together (Garfinkel and McLanahan 2003). The term fragile family underscores the

biological and social ties between these parents and their child, and their precarious economic status.

Policy makers care about fragile families for several reasons. First, these families have been growing at a rapid rate (Figure 1-1). In 1960, non-marital births accounted for six percent of all births; today, they account for one of three births. Children are a public resource and thus any major change in their living arrangements merits our attention. Some people argue that the increase in non-marital childbearing is not a serious problem insofar as it is occurring in all western industrialized countries (Figure 1-2). The Scandinavian countries, as well as France and the U.K. have higher percentages of non-marital births than we do. However, whereas in Sweden over 90 percent of non-marital births are to cohabiting parents, in the U.S. only 40 percent fit this description (Figure 1-3). Further, the dissolution rate of cohabiting unions is higher in the U.S. than in other countries. By the time American children reach age 15, over half of them will have lived in a lone-mother family, defined as a family in which the mother and child are living alone (Andersson 2002) (Figure 1-4). Thus a second reason for concern is that fragile families are likely to be (or become) lone-mother families. These families have high poverty rates and poverty is not good for children. Moreover, while lone mothers are worse off than married mothers in practically all the industrialized countries, relatively speaking, their poverty rates are highest in the U.S. (McLanahan and Carlson 2001) (Figure 1-5).

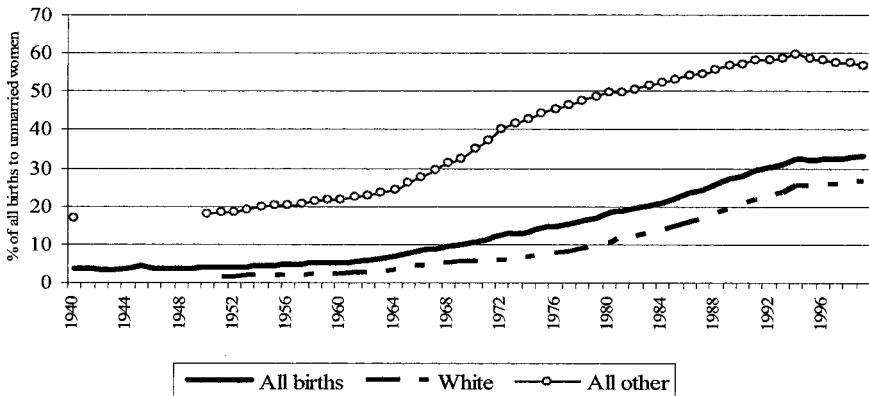


Figure 1-1. Percent of Non-Marital Births in the U.S.

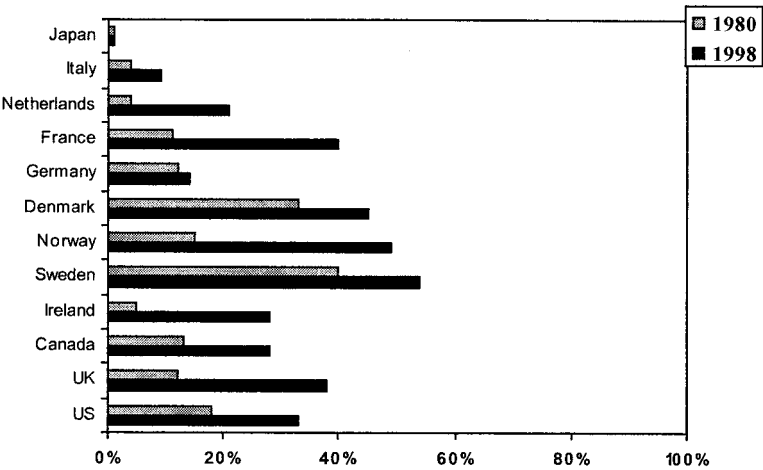


Figure 1-2. Percent of Non-Marital Births in Other Countries.

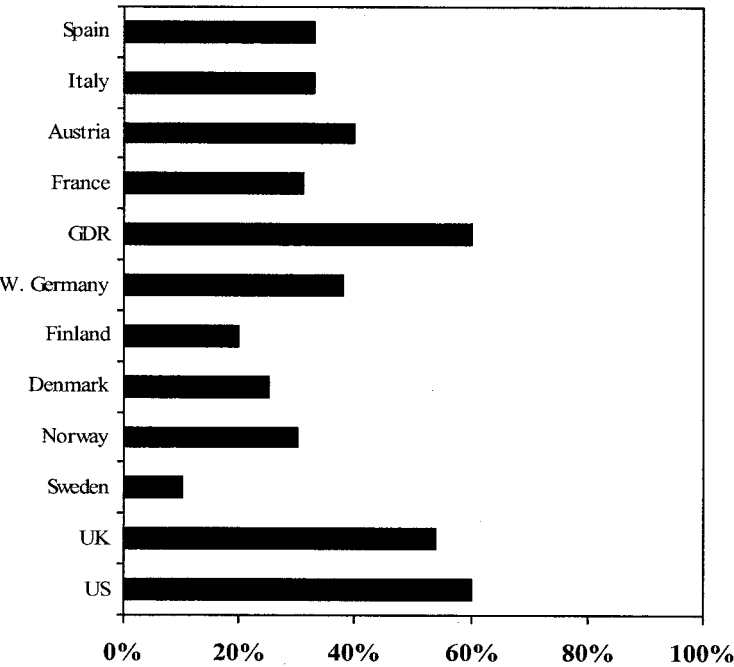


Figure 1-3. Percent of Non-Marital Births to Lone Mothers.

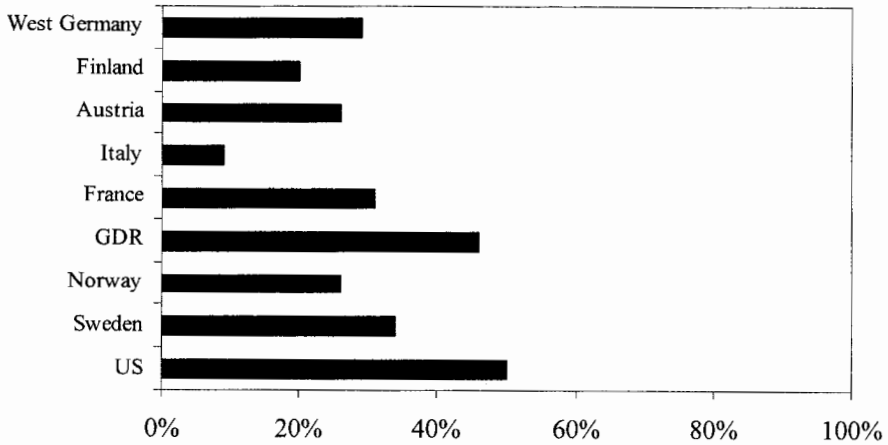


Figure 1-4. Percent of Children Exposed to Lone Motherhood.

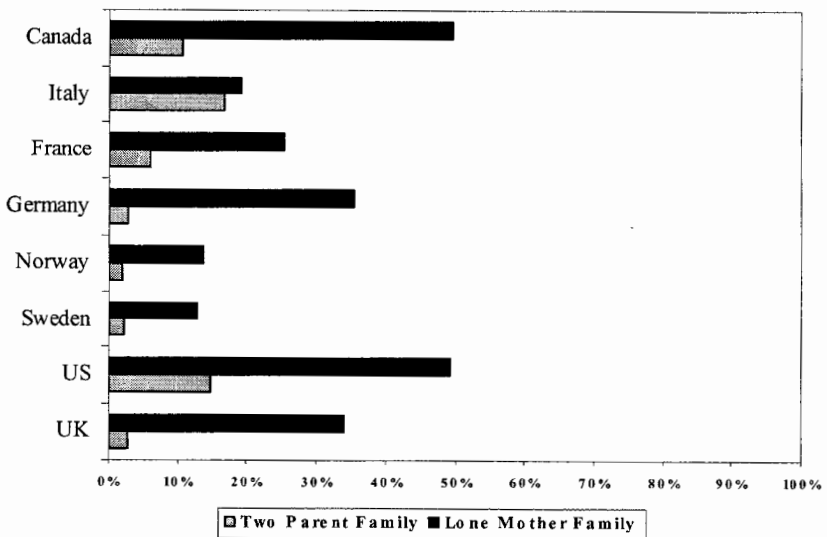


Figure 1-5. Poverty Rates by Family Structure.

So what is the Bush Administration planning to do to promote marriage, and how are the new marriage programs likely to affect fragile families? Wade Horn, the director of the Administration for Children and Families

(ACF), states that the mission of his organization is to “support activities that help those couples who choose to marry develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage” (ACF 2003). The primary components of the new marriage programs are education in communication and interpersonal skills. There are several approaches to building these skills, ranging from counseling to mentoring to role-playing exercises. Some analysts have argued that the new programs should also offer employment and mental health services while other analysts have argued that couples who marry be exempted from any existing tax penalties.

Mathematica Policy Research (MPR) has recently received a nine year contract from the ACF to offer technical assistance to local programs that want to provide relationship skills training (Building Strong Families Project). Eventually, MPR will select and evaluate six different sites, using random assignment. While it is much too soon to know whether the new marriage programs will work, it is not too early to examine some of the basic assumptions behind the initiative to see if they are consistent with what we know about fragile families and their attitudes and behavior.

As currently envisioned, the marriage programs are based on three assumptions. The first assumption is that unmarried parents will participate in programs designed to promote marriage. All social programs face the problem of whether prospective clients will participate. Unless people are sufficiently motivated, the program will fail and there is a long list of interventions that have failed for just this reason. Thus, knowing whether parents are likely to participate is fundamental to knowing whether the marriage programs will be successful.

A second assumption is that participation will increase marriage. The marriage programs are based upon a particular theory of why couples marry, and it is important to determine whether this theory applies to this particular population. Most theories of marriage assume that marriage comes before childbearing and that the decision to marry is closely linked to the decision to have a child. In the case of fragile families, the decision to marry occurs *after* the birth of a child. Thus, the factors that determine marriage may be different for these parents. Finally, and most importantly, the marriage programs assume that children will be better off if their parents marry. Clearly this is the most important assumption of all. If parents marry, but children are worse off, the initiative will have failed.

Each of these assumptions has its supporters and critics. First, there is some evidence (Brown 2000; Bumpass et al. 1991) that many unmarried parents desire to marry, which suggests that they will participate in the programs. Opponents, however, disagree. They claim that most parents will not participate because their relationships are casual or because they prefer cohabitation to marriage.

Regarding the second assumption, evaluations of the counseling and role-playing approaches provide some evidence that relationship enhancement programs increase marital satisfaction and stability. This evidence is impressive because it is based on experimental data (Cowan et al. 1998; Stanley et al. 1999). Critics point out, however, that these experiments have been conducted on married, middle class couples and that it is unclear whether the positive results can be generalized to other couples. Critics also question whether the focus on building relationship skills is merited. They argue that low wages and high unemployment pose much stronger barriers to marriage.

With respect to the third assumption, there is widespread disagreement among researchers about whether marriage will make children better off. On the one hand, a substantial body of evidence indicates that marriage has numerous benefits for adults. Linda Waite summarizes this literature in her presidential address to the Population Association of America (Waite 1995) and in her book with Maggie Gallagher (Waite and Gallagher 2000). Research also shows that, on average, children who grow up with both of their biological parents are more successful across a broad range of outcomes than children who grow up with only one parent (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). On the other hand, many analysts believe the benefits of marriage are overstated. They argue that the positive outcomes typically associated with marriage are due to pre-existing characteristics of the people who choose to marry (and not divorce) rather than to marriage itself. Finally, some critics point out that not all parents are suitable for marriage and that the new programs may increase children's exposure to drugs, alcohol and domestic violence.

Data from the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* can be used to examine these assumptions. The study has been following a cohort of approximately 4,900 new births, including 3,700 births to unmarried parents and 1,200 births to married parents for the past three years. Births were sampled between 1998 and 2000 in 20 cities and 75 hospitals throughout the U.S. (McLanahan et al. 2001). When weighted, the data are representative of all births in cities with populations greater than 200,000. To maximize response rates, mothers were interviewed at the hospitals shortly after giving birth. Sixty percent of the unmarried fathers were interviewed at the hospitals as well. Follow-up interviews with both parents planned for when the child is one, three and five years old. The three and five-year surveys include in-home child assessment. In addition to the core survey, qualitative data on 75 couples that participated in the larger survey also being collected. The qualitative as well as the quantitative interviews collect extensive data on parents' relationships, their attitudes and expectations as well as their

economic capabilities. These data are an excellent resource for examining many of the questions surrounding the marriage initiative.

Before examining these questions, Table 1-1 compares the basic demographic profiles of new unmarried parents with those of new married parents. Unmarried and married parents are different in ways that cannot (or are not likely to) be altered by a marriage program. And these differences are potentially important. For example, unmarried parents are predominately black, whereas married parents are predominately white. Unmarried parents are mostly in their early twenties, whereas married parents are mostly in their late twenties and thirties. Finally, unmarried parents are much more likely than married parents to have children by another partner. Multiple partner fertility can pose significant barriers to marriage and is something that program administrators need to consider in designing their programs.

Table 1-1. Parents' Demographic Profile.

| | Married (%) | Unmarried (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Race | | |
| White | 45 | 17 |
| Black | 13 | 44 |
| Hispanic | 32 | 35 |
| Other | 10 | 4 |
| Age | | |
| < 20 | 4 | 27 |
| 20-24 | 20 | 39 |
| 25-29 | 30 | 17 |
| 30 + | 46 | 18 |
| Multiple Partner Fertility | 26 | 62 |

2. ASSUMPTION # 1 – PARENTS WILL PARTICIPATE

The key issue of unmarried parents' willingness to participate in the new program is whether relationships are casual or committed; and, if committed, whether parents are interested in marriage. To shed light on this issue, it is useful to note how parents described their relationships at the time of their child's birth. The results are striking and strongly contradict the claim that these are casual relationships. Nearly 80 percent of parents were romantically involved at birth and over 50 percent were living together (Figure 1-6).

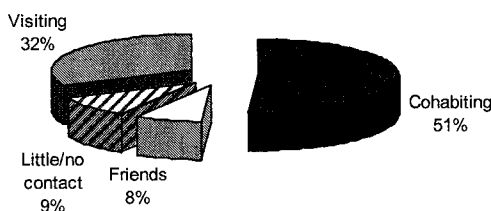


Figure 1-6. Unmarried Parents' Relationship Status at Birth.

Further, the vast majority of unwed fathers were committed to their children (see Table 1-2). Over 80 percent provided financial support during the pregnancy and a similar percentage helped out in other ways. In four out of five births, the child was taking the father's surname and 84 percent of fathers were planning to sign the birth certificate. Finally, over 90 percent of the fathers were planning to help raise the child.

Table 1-2. Unmarried Fathers' Commitment: Percent of Fathers that

| | Total (%) |
|---|-----------|
| Gave money / bought things for the baby | 81 |
| Helped in another way | 79 |
| Visited the baby's mother in the hospital | 77 |
| Child will take father's surname | 80 |
| Father's name is on the birth certificate | 84 |
| Mother says father wants to be involved | 92 |
| Mother wants father to be involved | 96 |

While the evidence presented thus far indicates that relationships are not casual, it does not answer the question of whether parents are likely to participate in the new programs. Table 1-3 shows the parents' response to a question regarding their chances of marriage. Most parents said their chances of marriage were either "good or almost certain." Fathers were even more optimistic than mothers, probably because the men interviewed were more committed than the men unavailable for interview. Some have suggested that parents' responses may have been affected by the "warm glow" associated with the birth of their child. The qualitative interviewers, however, found similar responses several months later, although they did note that parents' plans for marriage were very vague and distant. As a final

test of whether parents would participate in a marriage program, they were asked directly whether they would be interested in such a service (see Table 1-4).

Table 1-3. Parents' Expectations of Marriage: Percent Who Said Their Chances Were

| | Mothers (%) | Fathers (%) |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Almost certain | 37 | 50 |
| Good | 22 | 25 |
| Fifty/fifty | 16 | 15 |
| Not so good | 9 | 5 |
| No chance | 17 | 5 |

Table 1-4. Parents' Views of Marriage Programs: Percent Who Said They Were

| | Mothers (%) | Fathers (%) |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Very interested | 24 | 25 |
| Somewhat interested | 29 | 38 |
| Not interested | 47 | 37 |

Despite their “high hopes” for a future together, very few parents in the study had married by the time of their child’s third birthday (Table 1-5). Only 21 percent of the cohabiting couples and 11 percent of the “visiting” couples were married. Further, breakup rates were very high; 38 percent of cohabiting couples and 51 percent of “visiting” couples were no longer together three years after the birth. Breakup rates for married couples were much lower, about 10 percent.

Table 1-5. Relationship Stability.

| | 1 year | 3 years |
|----------------------------|--------|---------|
| Cohabiting at Birth | | |
| Married | 15% | 21% |
| Broken up | 21% | 38% |
| Romantic at Birth | | |
| Married | 11% | 15% |
| Broken up | 32% | 51% |

3. ASSUMPTION #2 – RELATIONSHIP PROGRAMS WILL INCREASE MARRIAGE

To examine the second assumption—that relationship enhancement programs will increase marriage—it is important to note what parents said about marriage and their relationships at birth (Figure 1-7). The idea is to see

if married parents and those who married after birth had more favorable attitudes and relationship skills at birth than parents who stayed unmarried. The results indicate that attitudes and relationship quality are associated with marriage. At birth, over 80 percent of married mothers and 90 percent of married fathers agreed with the statement “marriage is better for children.” Unmarried parents were less positive than married parents, but those who married later on were more positive at birth than those who did not marry. Parents were also asked whether their partners were fair, affectionate, non-critical and encouraging (Figure 1-8). These items are similar to the kinds of behavior the marriage programs are attempting to increase. Interestingly, unmarried parents who married after birth reported having higher quality relationships (at birth) than either married parents or parents who did not marry. Again, these comparisons indicate that relationship quality is associated with subsequent marriage among unmarried parents.

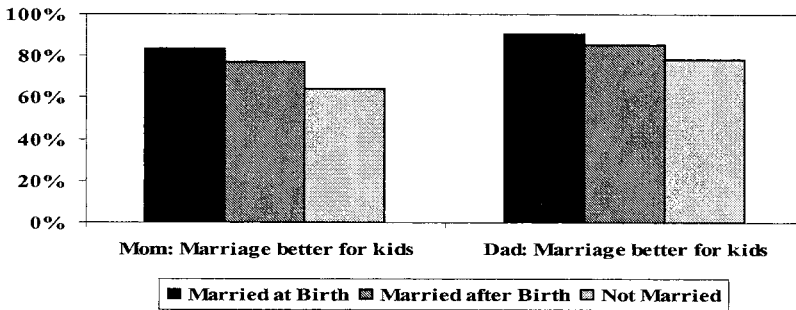


Figure 1-7. Attitudes toward Marriage.

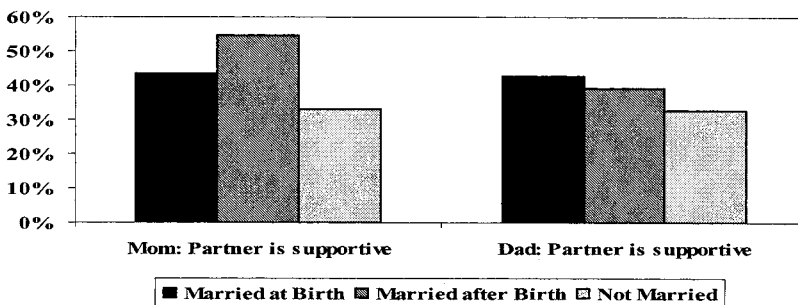


Figure 1-8. Partner Supportiveness.

Another dimension of relationship quality is conflict and trust (Figure 1-9). To measure conflict, parents were asked how often they and their partner disagreed about money, sex, friends and fidelity. Married parents and parents who married after birth reported less conflict at birth than parents who did not marry. To measure trust, parents were asked whether they agreed with the statement “Men (women) cannot be trusted to be faithful” (Figure 1-10). Again, the data show that, at the time their child was born, gender distrust was lowest among married mothers and highest among mothers who did not marry. The pattern was somewhat different among fathers. Men who married after birth reported higher levels of distrust at birth than men who did not marry.

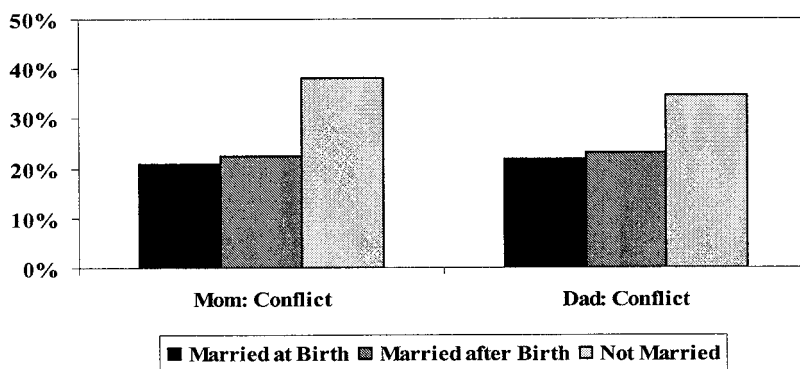


Figure 1-9. Parental Conflict.

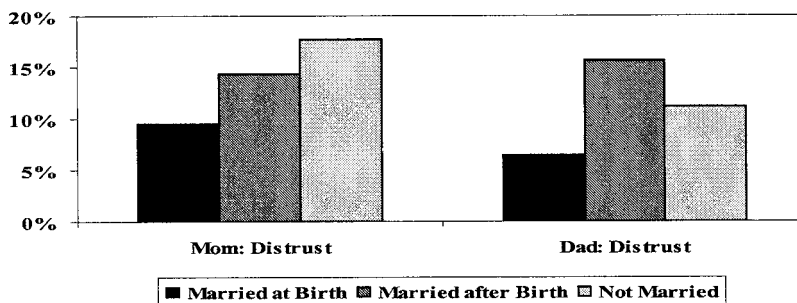


Figure 1-10. Distrust of Opposite Sex.

As noted earlier, many people believe that economic resources are more important barriers to marriage than relationship quality. Thus, as with attitudes and relationship quality, economic resources were measured at birth. Regarding education, unmarried parents were twice as likely as married parents to lack a high school degree (Figure 1-11). The reverse pattern was true for having a college education. Unmarried parents that subsequently married were better off than other unmarried parents, but the difference was small as compared with the differences between married parents and both groups of unmarried parents. Regarding employment, the mother was asked if she had worked in the year before she gave birth and whether the father was working at the time of birth (Figure 1-12). There were no significant differences among married and unmarried mothers, but fathers' employment status was related to marriage. Fathers who were married at birth and those who married after birth were more likely to be working than fathers who did not marry. The gap in hourly wages was also large (Figure 1-13). Whereas married mothers made about \$12.50 an hour, on average, unmarried mothers made between seven and eight dollars an hour. Married fathers also made more than unmarried fathers. As was true for education, unmarried parents that married after birth were more similar to other unmarried parents than they were to parents who were married at birth. Indeed, the difference between unmarried parents was not significant.

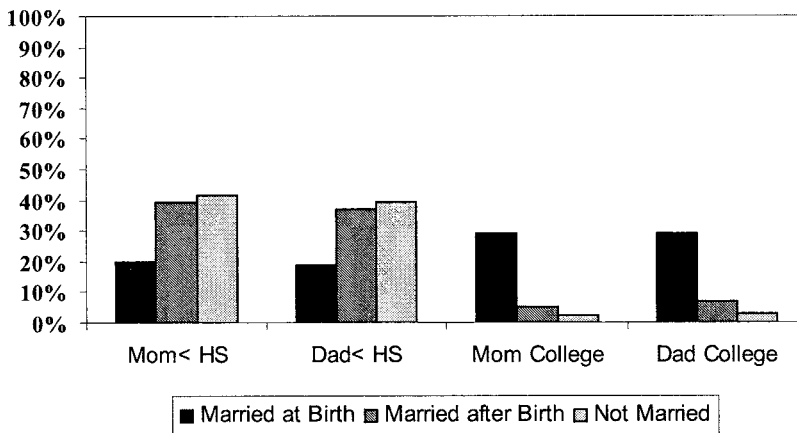


Figure 1-11. Education.