

**Helping Low-Income Parents Raise Children More Effectively**  
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**Introduction**

Hank Johnson\* is a single father who, in the fall of 2012, found himself living in his 2001 Dodge Caravan with his four sons, ages 11, 9, 4, and 3. Desperate for help, he called a local ministry to request help with his housing needs. He and the boys had been living in his grandmother's home; when she died, his sister, who inherited the house, demanded that they leave. He had nowhere to stay except in his van. Although he had fathered his four sons with the same woman, Beth, their relationship had been tumultuous. She used drugs extensively while she was pregnant with the two younger boys, both of whom struggled with ADHD and behavior issues. Beth's drug use had landed her in prison for two years, and Hank had no help from his extended family to provide care for their sons and was therefore unable to work. Hank, who is quite resourceful, was offered a mobile home. He had to move it, however, to another site, and he had no funds to do so. When he called the Christian Assistance Network [CAN], he was very discouraged, frustrated, and admittedly overwhelmed.

Members of CAN met with Hank and agreed to pay to move the mobile home. It needed a lot of work to be made livable. Fortunately, Hank has very good mechanical skills, and he was able to pass the township's inspection requirements. Since Hank had nothing with which to furnish his home, CAN also found donors to provide furniture, appliances, and a variety of other household items for the family. Various community members donated clothing, food, and other items to help Hank and his boys. Altogether Hank received about \$2,000 in assistance in addition to furniture, appliances, and clothing.

Soon after moving into his mobile home, Hank found a job working as a mechanic at a local gas station. He graduated from high school, but he has no additional education or

vocational training. Nevertheless, his mechanical skills and work experience were sufficient for him to obtain this job. His employer agreed to allow him to work from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. to coincide with the hours his older boys were in school. Care for the other boys, however, presented a major problem. Beth's parents agreed to provide a home for their three-year old for a limited time. Hank cobbled together a group of family members and friends to watch his four-year old son while he was at work. None of the caretakers was willing to watch him consistently, however. He frequently missed work and eventually had to leave his job.

Hank's sons experienced numerous problems adjusting to their new school and were regularly getting into trouble. CAN arranged for two students from a local college to serve as big brothers to the two older boys. They met with them for most of an academic year to talk, play games, and take them to college events—both to give Hank a break from parenting and to provide positive role models.

At CAN's urging, Hank applied for and received \$1,100 a month in Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for his two older boys because of their learning disabilities. This, coupled with his income when he was working, gave him an income of about \$1,700 per month—enough to cover his lot rent, utilities, food, car insurance, cell phone, and other expenses as long as he had no major problems with his car or mobile home. He also received assistance from LIHEAP [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program] to help pay his heating bills.

In the fall of 2013, Beth was released from prison. For several months, she participated in a local ministry that helped formerly-incarcerated women readjust to society. After a two-month stay in this organization's apartment, she found a job at a local fast food restaurant and moved in with Hank and their sons. Hank and Beth's relationship, though, remained very troubled. Because of their previous history, Hank was very suspicious of Beth. She had always been

flirtatious and had been occasionally sexually unfaithful. Hank feared a recurrence of her promiscuous behavior, and Beth resented his efforts to monitor and control her actions. Their communication was poor, and they often either argued or ignored one another. Hank complained that Beth paid little attention to their sons, did not cook or clean, and did not contribute financially to the family. According to him, she also spent a lot of time on the phone and in person with other men. He and Beth met with a counselor at a local church, but both of them maintained that she did not understand their life circumstances and problems. Hank also met with a private Christian counselor by himself to discuss his jealousy and anger issues, but he could only afford one session. Within six months of being released from prison, Beth began to drink heavily and constantly threatened to leave, which caused emotional upheaval for Hank and the boys.

Hank's problems, unfortunately, are far from unique. He deeply loves and is very committed to his children, but his story is illustrative of the barriers and problems that low-income American parents encounter as they strive to raise their children. Hank's mother abandoned the family when he was seven and his father, who drank heavily and used drugs, mistreated him, and Hank had no model for providing consistent discipline and loving nurture. He also struggles with self-esteem issues. His relationships with his parents and siblings involve substantial conflict and supply little support. Many people look down on Hank because of the clothes he wears, the car he drives, and his personal demeanor. He has a hard time trusting others and tells many stories about how employers, family members, alleged friends, welfare employees, and business and repair men have taken advantage of him. Hank needs to find consistent employment to better provide financially for his family and to bolster his self-worth.

His work history during the past five years is very spotty, however; and he still has no way to provide safe, affordable childcare for his children.

His older sons struggle academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. Their learning disabilities, their somewhat chaotic home life, the minimal assistance they receive to do their homework, and the way their peers treat them at school all contribute to this. The boys have frequently been reprimanded at school and sometimes have received detention. A security camera captured footage of Hank's oldest son stealing a brand-name duffle bag. When the principal asked why he did it, he responded that he was tired of being called a loser because he did not have a nice bag.

How can we help Hank and others in similar situations parent more effectively? What do such families most need? Classes to strengthen their marriages or improve their parenting skills, good role models, better daycare, more financial resources, or more mentors for their children?

### **The Challenges of Parenting**

Pundits correctly call parenting “the most important—and difficult—job in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Parenting in the United States today is very challenging for all who have children, but it is especially demanding for low-income families. Societal support for childrearing has waned significantly in the last fifty years. The larger culture no longer highly values motherhood or fatherhood or views raising children as a critical and laudable task. Many women face both social and economic pressure to work outside the home. The media often belittles conventional moral virtues, exalts hedonism, materialism, and sexuality, and demeans family life. Television shows and movies often portray parents as doofuses who mistreat their children. Expressive

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, “The Way to Beat Poverty,” *New York Times* database, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-way-to-beat-poverty.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=c-column-top-span-region&region=c-column-top-span-region&WT.nav=c-column-top-span-region>.

individualism prods people to pursue their own goals and achieve personal success and acclaim, rather than serve others, contribute to their communities, or nurture children.

Low-income parents, especially single mothers and fathers, face nearly insurmountable problems in raising their children. High rates of unemployment, low hourly wages, and substandard housing make it very difficult to provide safe homes. Inadequate transportation, few models of success, and a lack of suitable marriage partners also contribute to their inability to parent effectively and provide stable family lives.<sup>2</sup> Many low-income parents live in neighborhoods where crime and drugs are prevalent and schools are inferior. They often struggle with alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and medical problems. Many of them have been or are in prison or have an incarcerated partner. They frequently complain that welfare agencies inhibit them from properly disciplining their children and harmfully interfere in the lives of their families. Many households of low-income parents who are married or cohabiting include children from previous partners. This often produces problems and tension about decision-making, who pays which expenses, and who the child has to obey.<sup>3</sup> Unwed low-income parents especially have trouble getting good jobs, forming stable families, and functioning successfully as parents. Unwed mothers are only half as likely as married ones to graduate from high school and only one in 15 as likely to graduate from college. On average they earn half as much as married mothers, and their poverty rate is three times as high (43%) as that of married mothers (14%).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Frank F. Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teenage Childbearing* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 116. See also William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Theodora Ooms, "Strengthening Couples and Marriage in Low-Income Communities," in *Revitalizing the Institution of Marriage for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Alan J. Hawkins, Lynn D. Wardle, and David Orgon Coolidge, 88 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Sara McLanahan, Ron Haskins, Irwin Garfinkel, Ronald B. Mincy, and Elisabeth Donahue, "Strengthening Fragile Families," *The Future of Children*, Policy Brief Fall 2010, 2.

Children who grow up in low-income families confront many problems. Their home life is often unstructured and even chaotic. They are more likely to see their parents heatedly argue and to be physically abused. They receive substantially less cognitive stimulation and educational enrichment than middle- and upper-class children; they have fewer books at home and are read to significantly less. Many low-income parents would like to read to their children, but some of them have very poor reading skills, and many low-income parents are unable to help their children with homework.<sup>5</sup> These children often attend inadequately financed schools with poorly qualified teachers. They (especially boys) score much lower on standardized and teacher-created tests than middle- and upper-class children and have many more behavioral problems at school. They generally spend less time with their parents than their middle- and upper-class peers because of their parents' work schedules, substance abuse issues, and apathy or because they have only one parent in their home or lives. Their parents are more likely to employ harsher and more punitive forms of discipline. They are also much more likely to have an incarcerated parent and to be placed in foster care.<sup>6</sup> Children in low-income families have worse physical health and have less money for clothing, books, and extra-curricular activities than middle- and upper-class children. The mental health of their parents has a strong influence on children's well-being, and single mothers experience substantially more depression and other psychological

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<sup>5</sup> Susan D. Holloway, Bruce Fuller, Marylee F. Rambaud, and Costanza Eggers-Pierola, *Through My Own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Cultures of Poverty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Gary W. Evans, "The Environment of Childhood Poverty," *American Psychologist* 59 (February/March 2004): 78-86; Pia Rebello Britto, Allison Sidle Fuligni, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Reading Rhymes, and Routines: American Parents and Their Young Children," *Child Rearing in America: Challenges Facing Parents with Young Children*, eds. Neal Halfon, Kathryn Taaffe McLearn, and Mark Schuster, ed., 138-39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

problems than married mothers.<sup>7</sup> Poverty is also often associated with lower levels of parental affection and responsiveness to children.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, children who are raised by married parents typically have better physical and emotional health, experience less physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, receive more education, engage in less delinquent behavior, and as adults, have more stable marriages and career successes. Children who live in well-functioning neighborhoods have parents who support, encourage, and appropriately discipline them, and attend well-structured schools that furnish high quality instruction and substantial emotional support. They are much more likely than low-income children to develop the personal and interpersonal traits that enable them to succeed as spouses, parents, and employees.<sup>9</sup>

### **Promoting Marriage**

So what can we do to improve life for children in low-income families? Churches, businesses, schools, community organizations, the government, and academicians all have an important role to play in helping low-income parents raise their children. We need to increase the number of low-income parents who marry, help strengthen the relationships of those who do as well as those who cohabit, and discourage couples from divorcing. Our society also needs to provide more instruction in, and examples of, positive parenting practices and prod fathers to be more involved in the lives of their children. Finally, we must improve government and business policies and practices to aid low-income families, increase the number of community and church

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Waldfogel, Terry-Ann Craigie, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing," *The Future of Children* 20: 2 (Fall 2010): 98. See also Paul Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children* 15 (2) (2005): 75-96.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer M. Threfall, Kristen D. Seay, and Patricia Kohl, "The Parenting Role of African-American Fathers in the Context of Urban Poverty," *Journal of Children and Poverty* 19:1 (2013): 46.

<sup>9</sup> See Sara McLanahan, "Fragile Families and the Reproduction of Poverty," *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 62: 1 (2009): 111-31 and Sara McLanahan and Christine Percheski, "Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 257-76.

programs that assist them, especially when their children are under age two, and provide better childcare. These goals can best be accomplished by increasing the income and economic security of these parents and families, publicizing the benefits of marriage, supplying more high quality premarital counseling, and offering a wide variety of programs to help couples strengthen their relationships and parent more effectively.

We can strongly encourage parents with low incomes to marry and make it easier for them to do so. Substantial evidence indicates that married individuals are healthier, happier, and have greater incomes than individuals who are single or cohabit.<sup>10</sup> The quality of the relationship of couples who live together affects their ability to parent effectively and how involved fathers are with their children.<sup>11</sup> Improving the relationship of parents who live together, therefore, increases their involvement in parenting.<sup>12</sup>

In America today, however, 40% of all children are born out of wedlock; this includes 70% of black children, 50% of Hispanic children and almost 30% of white children. By comparison, in 1960, only 5% of children were born to unwed parents, and in 1980 only 18% were. Half of the children born out of wedlock today live with single mothers. Children who grow up in homes without fathers are much more likely to commit crimes, be adjudicated as delinquents, have sex at a young age, earn low grades, not finish high school, experience depression, abuse alcohol, use illicit drugs, and become low-income parents as teenagers or in their twenties.<sup>13</sup> Many other children born out of wedlock live with cohabiting parents, but more

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<sup>10</sup> L. J. Waite and M. Gallaher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Rebekah Coley and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, "Stability and Change in Paternal Involvement among Urban African American Fathers," *Journal of Family Psychology* 13:3 (1999): 416-35.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, Marsha Pruett, Kyle Pruett, and Jessie Wong, "Promoting Fathers' Engagement with Children: Preventive Interventions with Low-Income Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71:3 (2009): 663-79.

<sup>13</sup> David Popenoe, *Life without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: Free, 1996).



than 60% of cohabiting unions end within five years of their child's birth.<sup>14</sup> "When poor biological parents of children marry and stay together," one scholar reports, "it produces better outcomes for children, but this rarely happens." She found that 64% of single mothers who married had divorced by the time they became ages 35-44.<sup>15</sup>

To increase the marriage rate of low-income individuals, we must help change the factors that prompt them not to marry. A recent survey found that three-fourths of unmarried fathers and two-thirds of unmarried mothers agree that "it is better for children if their parents are married."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a large majority of low-income mothers of all races report they want to marry someday. Even in their late 20s, however, many of them feel poorly prepared to do so. Unlike previous generations, they do not believe that marrying will make themselves and their children financially or emotionally secure.<sup>17</sup> Many of them choose not to marry because they consider their prospects for achieving a stable marriage dismal. "Successful marriage—at least a successful first marriage—" sociologist Frank Furstenberg argues, "is elusive and increasingly rare for the great majority of low-income couples, and for almost all African-Americans of modest means."<sup>18</sup> Many low-income parents are reluctant to wed because of their financial circumstances. They believe that they should have more income and financial security before marrying. They think that men should have a stable job, earn a respectable income, and have some savings and the money to pay for a modest wedding. Many low-income individuals are also deterred from marrying by fear that their partners may be sexually and emotionally

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<sup>14</sup> Sara McLanahan and Audrey N. Beck, "Parental Relationships in Fragile Families," *The Future of Children* 20 (Fall 2010): 21.

<sup>15</sup> Belinda Luscombe, "Why Marriage May Not be the Answer for Low-Income Single Moms," *Time*, Jan. 6, 2014, <http://healthland.time.com/2014/01/06/are-single-moms-better-off-single>.

<sup>16</sup> McLanahan and Beck, "Parental Relationships," 19, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 129.

<sup>18</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 109.

unfaithful and that their marriages may not last because of their lack of maturity, commitment, and material resources.

Moreover, many low-income individuals feel psychologically unprepared to marry. They grew up in homes with single mothers (or fathers) or with parents who separated, divorced, or argued constantly. Consequently, they have witnessed few positive marital role models. In addition, many women, especially African-American ones, are reluctant to marry because few suitable partners are available because of high rates of male homicide, suicide, incarceration, and unemployment, low wages, irresponsible behavior, drug and alcohol problems, and poor financial prospects. After studying the lives of teenage mothers and their families in Baltimore over a 30-year period, Furstenberg concludes that many women do not want to marry because “the fathers and surrogate fathers of children are jealous, unreliable, controlling, and emotionally unavailable to their children; they failed to provide financial support and to show up for important occasions in their children’s lives.”<sup>19</sup>

Low-income individuals confront other barriers to creating successful marriages: extensive gender mistrust, complex households with numerous competing interests, little family and community support, and minimal social services. Many participants in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a study of about 5,000 children from their birth to age five and their unmarried parents in 20 American cities, reported that “their child’s fathers had children by other women, were in prison or involved in illegal activity, were incompetent caregivers, and were not marriage material.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the greater tolerance for and less stigmatization of having

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<sup>19</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 132; Karen Shiner, Francesca Adler-Baeder, Dawn Contreras, and Jodi Spicer, “Preparing Unmarried New Parent to Make Health Decisions about Marriage, Father Involvement and Family Formation,” in *Vision 2004: What Is the Future of Marriage*, eds. Amato and Gonzales, 93, (Minneapolis: National Council on Family Relations, 2004), Kathryn Edin, “Few Good Men: Why Low-Income Mothers Don’t Get Married,” *The American Prospect* 11 (2000): 26-31.

children out of wedlock places much less pressure on single mothers to marry. Most low-income individuals experience little family and community opposition to having premarital sex and becoming pregnant outside of marriage. In addition, most government programs that provide benefits based on family income—TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families], food stamps, Medicaid, childcare subsidies, housing assistance, and EITC [Earned Income Tax Credit]—discourage marriage by reducing benefits if a second adult joins the family.<sup>21</sup>

Providing models of healthy marriages and mentors can greatly benefit struggling couples. Many of them need guidance about how to integrate children from other relationships into their families. In The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, 43% of unmarried mothers reported having children with at least two men. Many low-income couples need assistance to overcome their mistrust, often connected with sexual infidelity, and to cope with the problems of substance abuse, physical abuse, and criminal behavior. To succeed, this study concludes, most fragile families must improve their relationship skills and receive such services as employment assistance, financial counseling, and substance-abuse treatment. Moreover, parents eventually must marry.<sup>22</sup>

We also need to help individuals choose more suitable partners and better prepare for marriage. If spouses are more compatible, they are more likely to be happy and stay together. Happily married couples generally have realistic expectations for marriage, a sensible concept of love, and a positive approach toward life. They espouse the same religious commitments and values, clearly and freely communicate their feelings, and make decisions and settle arguments

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<sup>21</sup> M. Robin Dion, Barbara Devaney, and Alan M. Hershey, “Toward Interventions to Strengthen Relationships and Support Healthy Marriage Among Unwed New Parents,” in Amato and Gonzales, eds., *Vision 2004*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson, “The Challenges of Offering Relationship and Marriage Education to Low-Income Populations,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 442.

effectively.<sup>23</sup> Helping individuals choose better partners, however, is difficult because parents, siblings, friends, and the mass media have the greatest influences on whom people marry and what qualities they look for in spouses.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, many things can be done. High schools and colleges could offer more classes on dating and marriage. Parents could play a more active and constructive role in the dating and mating of their children. The media could portray more contented, successful marriages.<sup>25</sup> More engaged couples could participate in premarital counseling sessions in churches, childbirth clinics, community health centers, schools, military facilities, and prisons. In these various venues, clergy, mental health professionals, paraprofessionals, teachers, and lay leaders currently offer premarital instruction that focuses on improving communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork skills.

Helping their parents remain married is crucial to improving the lives of low-income children because divorce often has numerous negative consequences for children. Before the 1960s, wives' economic dependency, spouses' religious commitments, the influence of their extended families, and societal approval, all of which supported reproduction and childrearing, helped hold marriages together. Major shifts in cultural and sexual values and gender roles have helped produce new views of marriage. Today the only major bond holding many marriages together is the psychological needs of the spouses, which often has not been a very effective glue.<sup>26</sup> Higher expectations for, and unrealistic expectations about, marriage, including the belief that one's spouse can fulfill all of one's needs, have also contributed to high rates of divorce.

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<sup>23</sup> Les Parrott III and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Marry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1995), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Norval D. Glenn, "A Plea for Greater Concern About the Quality of Marital Matching," in *Revitalizing*, eds. Hawkins, Wardle, and Coolidge, 54.

<sup>25</sup> David Popenoe, "A Marriage Research Agenda for the Twenty-First Century: Ten Critical Questions" in Hawkins, Wardle, and Coolidge, *Revitalizing*, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Popenoe, "Marriage Research," 199.

To reduce divorces, we need to motivate low-income spouses who are experiencing conflict in their relationships and problems in their parenting to want to improve their marriages and parenting skills and practices. This is difficult to do because many people do not want to face their problems or change their behaviors, and few programs and resources exist to help them. The skills that help people succeed in the workplace and in marriage are similar: self-discipline, self-understanding, effective communication, and concern for the interest and well-being of others. Many people acquire these skills through early family socialization and schooling, but they can also be taught through mentors, religious and civic organizations, and marriage enrichment programs, and learned from coworkers and friends.

If they are conceived outside of marriage or their parents' divorce, children face huge risks. Children who are raised by a single parent are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems in school, drop out of school, become teenage mothers, and have trouble finding a decent paying job than are those raised by two parents. Lack of income, inadequate parental supervision, and moving frequently all help produce these outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Judith Wallerstein contends that their parents' divorce affects "the character, attitudes, relationships, self-concept, expectations, and worldviews of children." As adults, many children of divorce still struggle "with residues of sadness, anger, and anxiety about the potential unreliability of relationships."<sup>28</sup> Other researchers argue that "most children are angry when their parents separate; many feel betrayed and abandoned by their fathers" even if the decision to separate was mutual or the

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<sup>27</sup> Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 144.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Wallerstein, "The Challenges of Divorce for Parents and Children," in *Parenthood in America: Undervalued, Underpaid, Under Siege*, ed. Jack C. Westman, 129, 138 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001). See also Judith Wallerstein, J. A. Lewis, and S. Blakeslee, *The Legacy of Divorce: A Twenty-five Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2002).

father did not want it. Many single mothers experience high levels of stress and become anxious and depressed, leading to inconsistent and inadequate parenting.<sup>29</sup>

We should encourage couples to stay together for the sake of their children, help them improve their relationships, and work to lessen the negative effects of divorce. Other states could create a program similar to the Michigan Mediation Project that encourages couples considering divorce to work to reconcile and teaches couples how to manage conflict whether they stay together or divorce. *Before You Divorce* is a set of Christian videos which argue the financial and emotional costs of divorce for both adults and children are likely to outweigh the benefits the spouses perceive. Many states require couples with minor children who file for divorce to take a divorce education class that primarily focuses on how divorce affects children.<sup>30</sup>

Since a significant percentage of weddings take place in churches, pastors and their parishioners have a pivotal role to play in helping couples prepare better for marriage. Pastors can mandate that the couples they marry attend 8-12 counseling sessions that cover topics vital to marital success, including expectations and goals for marriage, the nature of love and commitment, gender differences, roles, responsibilities, decision-making, fulfilling needs in marriage, religion and spirituality, communication and conflict resolution, dealing with in-laws, finances, and sex. Other states could follow the example of Oklahoma where 800 religious leaders recently promised to provide premarital counseling, require a waiting period before performing weddings, and train their congregants to be marriage mentors.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Waite and Gallaher, *Case for*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Waite and Gallaher, *Case for*, 9. See also S.M. Stanley and H. J. Markman, "Community-based Premarital Prevention: Clergy and Lay Leaders on the Front Lines," *Family Relations* 50:1 (2001): 67-76. One nationwide survey found that 36% of couples who married in the previous five years had premarital counseling from a clergyman and 75% of them said that it was helpful. See Scott Stanley, "What's Important in Preparation for Marriage?" *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal* 1:1 (1997): 54.

Pastors can also help engaged individuals recognize factors that are most likely to create marital problems, especially having divorced parents, being divorced themselves, having children from a previous marriage, cohabiting before marriage, marrying before age 20, having a very short courtship, having different religious, racial, or social backgrounds, and responding defensively to disappointments and problems.<sup>32</sup> Clergy can encourage couples with major demographic, personality, or worldview differences not to marry or provide them with additional counseling and reading materials. Churches can also recruit couples who have strong marriages to serve as mentors for engaged and/or newly married couples. Numerous congregations use the Marriage Saver approach that requires a minimum of four months of marriage preparation and assigns mentor couples to work with engaged and newlywed couples to help strengthen their relationships.<sup>33</sup> In their premarital sessions, sermons, and counseling of spouses, pastors can urge them to regularly participate in religious activities together to help increase intimacy, respect, commitment, and a forgiving attitude. Studies show that faithful involvement in a church positively affects marriages. It helps couples develop a shared perspective on life and a greater sense of purpose, common values, and a similar approach to parenting and many other tasks. It also decreases behaviors that cause marital problems, including drug use, infidelity, and criminal acts.<sup>34</sup> Parents who share similar worldviews are generally more able to devise mutually acceptable marital roles, nurture and discipline children, and celebrate religious holidays.<sup>35</sup> Churches can also create small groups where spouses can share their challenges, concerns, and

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<sup>32</sup> Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage: A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions*, Final Report January 15, 2003, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 22.

<sup>34</sup> Frank D. Fincham and Steven R. H. Beach, "Marriage in the New Millennium: A Decade in Review." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (June 2010): 640; H. Wolfinger and W. B. Wilcox "Happily Ever After? Religion, Marital Status, Gender, and Relationship Quality in Urban Families," *Social Forces* 86 (2008): 1311-37; Annette Mahoney et al., "Religion and the Sanctification of Family Relationships," *Review of Religious Research* 44 (2003): 220-36

<sup>35</sup> Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, *Fighting for*, 299-306.

best practices, and pray for and encourage one another in their marriages and parenting. Black churches have a very important role in assisting black parents. Some black congregations have devised effective programs to help couples and families, including seminars for married couples, workshops for single parents, and classes on male responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

### **Improve Parenting Practices**

Parenting is multi-faceted. Good parents must provide physical care, love, and emotional security, set behavioral boundaries, teach and model appropriate social behaviors, help their children develop their talents, and promote cognitive development, both formally and informally.<sup>37</sup> Single-parent families often have few economic, parental, and community resources, which make these tasks more difficult. This, combined with a lack of positive role models, limited knowledge of good parenting practices, and troubled relationships with their partners, families of origin, and friends, inhibit the ability of many low-income individuals to parent effectively. To raise young children effectively, pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton contends, parents need to spend a combined total of three hours with them daily. It is nearly impossible for single parents who work outside the home to do this with one child, let alone with two or three.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, two parents can more readily provide “a system of checks and balances that both promotes parental responsibility and protects children from paternal neglect and sometimes abuse.”<sup>39</sup>

Experts argue that the best parenting style is an authoritative one that combines warmth and firm discipline. Low-income parents, however, tend either to be overly permissive and

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<sup>36</sup> Ooms, “Marriage in Low-Income Communities.” See also Willie Richardson, *Reclaiming the Urban Family: How to Mobilize the Church as a Family Training Center* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> David Quinton, *Supporting Parents: Messages from Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004), 26-28.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Evans, *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with the Crisis in Childrearing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 78.

<sup>39</sup> McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up*, 28.



provide too little discipline or to be overly strict and supply too little warmth.<sup>40</sup> Because of the financial and emotional stress they face, low-income parents are less likely than middle- and upper-class ones to use child-centered parenting practices that focus on nurture and positive reinforcement. Instead, they often “use ineffective, inconsistent, punitive and rejection-based practices.”<sup>41</sup> Substantial evidence indicates that the lives of children are better if their parents are warm and supportive; and that children have significant behavioral and emotional problems if their parents are either detached and neglectful or harsh and punitive. A parenting style that does not establish and consistently enforce family rules promotes aggressive, defiant behavior in children.<sup>42</sup> Low parental investment in their children, which involves little emotional warmth, inadequate monitoring of behavior, and frequent use of corporal punishment, often leads to aggressive behavior, poor self-discipline, weak impulse control, lack of ambition, and low career aspirations.<sup>43</sup> Children whose parents focus primarily on themselves are likely to be impulsive, to start drinking, smoking, or using illicit drugs at a young age, to have little interest in school, and to become delinquents.<sup>44</sup> Children who have negative early-life experiences tend to see the world as “hostile, threatening, and potentially exploitative, which contributes to low career aspirations, a lack of interpersonal trust, cynicism, antisocial behavior, and recklessness.” Moreover, if their parents are only minimally involved in their lives, children often engage in actions that “decrease their personal happiness and prospect for social and economic success.”<sup>45</sup> Many married and cohabiting low-income parents have conflict-ridden relationships. As a result, their children have

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<sup>40</sup> Evans, *Family Matters*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Mark W. Fraser and Mary A. Terzian, “Risk and Resilience in Child Development,” in *Child Welfare for the Twenty-First Century: A Handbook of Practices, Policies, and Programs*, eds. Gerald Mallon and Peg McCartt Hess, 64 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Nigel Barber, *Why Parents Matter: Parental Investment and Child Outcomes* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2000), 85-87.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Lempers, Dania Clark-Lempers, and Ronald Simons, “Economic Hardship, Parenting, and Distress in Adolescence,” *Child Development* 60 (Fall 1989): 26.

<sup>45</sup> Barber, *Why Parents*, 92, 95.

“more anger and anguish,” which often reduces their academic success and motivates them to leave home at a young age.<sup>46</sup>

Parents play a crucial role in helping their children reach their full intellectual potential and develop positive interpersonal relationships. Studies show that, by age three, a poor child in the United States hears 30 million fewer words in his or her home than does a child raised by professionals. Studies indicate that this discrepancy in language acquisition has negative and lasting impacts on a child’s development.<sup>47</sup> The availability and use of books in a child’s home is a greater predictor of later academic success than is wealth. Many economically-disadvantaged families, however, have few, if any, children’s books.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, children’s brains need to receive valuable stimulation during the critical period of their early development.<sup>49</sup> Parents should ask their children about their classes and ensure that they do their homework and use their time wisely. Parents can either enhance or harm their children’s physical and emotional health by how they arrange for health care, provide meals, encourage education and exercise, guide TV watching, and monitor safety issues.<sup>50</sup>

To help low-income individuals parent effectively, we must provide them with effective strategies and tools. “Public or community agencies that already provide services to low-income families—home visitation programs, fatherhood interventions, prenatal care initiatives, or early childhood development programs—could strengthen or add a relationship or healthy marriage component to their services.” Low-income parents need to learn how to cognitively stimulate children, support them emotionally, and use positive forms of discipline.<sup>51</sup> One successful

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<sup>46</sup> Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, “Fragile Families,” 98.

<sup>47</sup> Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, “The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3,” *American Educator* (Spring 2003): 4-9.

<sup>48</sup> Jeff McQuillan, *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Barber, *Why Parents*, 90-91.

<sup>50</sup> Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, “Fragile Families,” 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Helping Unwed Parents*, xix, xxi, 22.

program is Love's Cradle, which helps unmarried expectant parents prepare to raise their children. According to one study, couples who took its six-week course used less corporal punishment, gave their children more independence, and were more empathic than couples in the control group.<sup>52</sup> We must also alleviate the financial and parenting burden of low-income parents, especially single ones, by increasing their wages, providing better daycare, and giving them more church and community support.

### **Increasing the Involvement of Fathers**

To help children in low-income families, we must also increase the involvement of fathers, many of whom never marry their children's mothers. Experts predict that more than 60% of American children will live in a single-parent family at some point during their childhood and that more than 75% of children who live in a single-parent, female-headed family will have little or no contact with their biological fathers. One study of fragile families found that by the fifth year after couples separated, only half of the fathers spent time with their child even once a month.<sup>53</sup> The more time and better the quality of a father's involvement with his children, the more likely it is that his children will develop cognitively, acquire good language skills, and avoid behavioral problems.<sup>54</sup>

Scholars maintain that many "dads feel devalued in the workplace," deserted by the government (They have no safety net and many of them are not granted custody of their children

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<sup>52</sup> Colleen Clark, M. Scott Young, and Michael Dow, "Can Strengthening Parenting Couples' Relationships Reduce At-Risk Parenting Attitudes?" *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 21 (May 2013): 307.

<sup>53</sup> Roger T. Williams, "Fatherhood," *Parenthood*, 9. See also Marcia Carlson and Sara McLanahan, "Fathers in Fragile Families," in *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, ed. Michael Lamb, 241-69 (New York: Wiley and Sons, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, "Fragile Families," 92; Threfall, Seay, and Kohl, "Role of Fathers," 45.

or visitation rights.), and demoralized by negative media stereotypes.<sup>55</sup> Boys who fail to connect with their fathers because of their physical absence or emotional distance often experience “father hunger.”<sup>56</sup> Many noncustodial fathers do want to help parent their children, and some even have a major influence on the lives of their children. One study of African-American fathers found that they strove to help their children develop the skills they needed to survive in an inner-city neighborhood and to eventually escape that environment. They urged their children to resist the lure of gangs and encouraged them to stay in school and work hard to be successful.<sup>57</sup>

We also need to publicize and promote organizations, programs, and movements that strive to help men be better fathers and husbands. Promise Keepers, founded by University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney in 1990, has sponsored conferences throughout the nation to encourage men to play a more active role in their families and to build stronger marriages based on biblical values. The National Center on Fathering, also created in 1990, has conducted research and taught men how to improve their parenting. The National Fatherhood Initiative, which began in 1994, prods fathers to be more engaged in family life. The Wisconsin Fatherhood Initiative teaches men to fulfill their parenthood responsibilities. Since 2004 the Million Father March has enabled black men to show their commitment to their children’s education by taking them to school on the first day. This program encourages African-American

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<sup>55</sup> Williams, “Fatherhood,” 9. See also Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, *The War against Parents: What We Can Do for America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Samuel Osherson, *Finding Our Fathers: How a Man’s Life Is Shaped by His Relationship with His Father* (New York: Fawcett, 1987), 49ff.

<sup>57</sup> Threfall, Seay, and Kohl, “Role of Fathers,” 54, 56. See also Virginia Knox, Philip Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, and Elana Bildner, “Policies That Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 635 (2011): 216-39.

fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and other relatives to participate actively in the educational and social development life of black children.<sup>58</sup>

Helping male teenagers determine what it means to be a man in America today is also important. Is the essence of manhood drinking, sexual prowess, drug usage, physical strength, competitiveness, career success, nurturing one's children, or serving one's community? When boys are confused about their male identity, they often turn to drugs, become juvenile delinquents, join gangs, drop out of school, father children out of wedlock, and even commit suicide. Robert Bly and many others argue that boys need positive role models to become mature and moral men. Other adult males, therefore, need to play this role for boys who have no fathers in their lives.<sup>59</sup> Research demonstrates that adult mentors can help vulnerable boys and girls become mature adults.<sup>60</sup> Mentors can supply information, cultural and social enrichment, nurture, support, and wise counsel. They can help prepare youth for college, jobs, and adulthood and help them solve problems, make good career decisions, and accept personal responsibility. Hopefully more educational institutions will follow the example of the University of Wisconsin's statewide Boys to Men Project that recruits men to serve as mentors to help boys become caring, responsible adults.<sup>61</sup> The Big Brothers Big Sisters program, which has chapters across the country, has also been successful; children who spend time with one of its mentors for eighteen or more months are 46% less likely to begin using drugs and 52% less likely to skip school than children who do not.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Black Star Project Web site, <http://blackstarproject.org/action/index.php/our-programs/million-father-march.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, "Fatherhood," 63-64.

<sup>60</sup> See Marc Freedman, *The Kindness of Strangers: Adult Mentors, Urban Youth and the New Volunteerism* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

<sup>61</sup> Williams, "Fatherhood," 64. See also Paul Lewis, *The Five Key Habits of Smart Dads: A Powerful Strategy for Successful Fathering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>62</sup> Big Brothers Big Sisters Web site, <http://www.bbbs.org/site/c.9iILI3NGKhK6F/b.5962335/k.BE16/Home.htm>.

## The Role of Government

Americans today debate what role the government should play in assisting low-income parents and children. Some maintain that the government should not establish or fund programs to promote marriage because it is a private matter that should be left to individuals, religious organizations, and community groups. Others counter that single parenthood typically has so many negative effects on children's well-being and has such large social and financial costs to society, that the government should encourage marriage and aid single mothers and fathers. Americans also disagree about whether taxpayer money is best spent on programs to promote marriage among low-income parents and cohabiting couples, or on trying to provide higher wages and better childcare, housing, and healthcare.<sup>63</sup>

The government at all levels—federal, state, and local—has a major responsibility to help improve the lives of low-income children and aid their parents in raising them. The government can do so by providing more resources and aid for single parents, working to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, changing its penal system so that fewer parents are incarcerated and for shorter periods of time, and creating more job training programs. The government can provide low-income parents with more assistance in training and searching for jobs. It can offer classes that focus on resumé writing, interviewing, respecting authority, and avoiding conflict in the workplace.<sup>64</sup> Furstenberg argues that most of the males he studied in inner-city Baltimore cannot establish “stable families without receiving a substantial and sustained amount of rehabilitation, training, and support; by their late 20s almost half had spent time in correctional facilities; only

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<sup>63</sup> Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson, “The Challenges of Offering Relations and Marriage Education to Low-Income Populations,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 440. See also S.M. Stanley, H. J. Markman, and N. H. Jenkins, *Marriage Education and Government Policy: Helping Couples Who Choose Marriage Achieve Success* (Denver: PREP, 2002).

<sup>64</sup> *Helping Unwed Parents*, xviii.

half had graduated from high school; most were either unemployed or working episodically; many had substance abuse problems; and many brought children from previous relationships into the marriage.”<sup>65</sup>

Imprisonment interrupts and damages fathers’ relationships with their children, requires them to make a difficult transition back to community life, and substantially reduces their chances of subsequent employment. Having “ex-convict” on one’s resumé is the contemporary equivalent of the Puritans’ scarlet “A” because of its negative impact on an individual’s opportunity for employment and the increased likelihood of recidivism. Programs that enable offenders to remain in the community, continue to work, and maintain relationships with their children cost considerably less and prevent subsequent crimes more effectively.<sup>66</sup> If a prison sentence is required by the nature of their crimes or to protect society, men should be taught a skill while they are incarcerated, such as truck driving, welding, or barbering.

The government could help low-income parents through various means. Some urge the federal government to provide jobs for all fathers and mothers, EITC for low-wage parents, a refundable childcare tax credit, a child allowance, and universal healthcare, and to ensure that all child support payments are collected.<sup>67</sup> Helping poor parents train for and find jobs will increase marriages because those who think they can afford it are more likely to marry.<sup>68</sup> Supplying a child allowance subsidy and making the current childcare tax credit refundable would equalize the benefit across families. Among Western post-industrial nations, only the United States does not have such an allowance. Our current child deduction greatly aids middle-class families but

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<sup>65</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 121.

<sup>66</sup> McLanahan, Haskins, Garfinkel, Mincy, and Donahue, “Fragile Families,” 4.

<sup>67</sup> McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up*, 152.

<sup>68</sup> Laurence C. Nolan, “The Limits of the Law and Raising a Sentiment,” in *Revitalizing*, Hawkins, Wardle, and Coolidge, 192.

does nothing to help lower-class ones.<sup>69</sup> The multi-billion dollar federal childcare tax credit for families that pay for preschool principally aids middle-class and upper-class households rather than poor ones.<sup>70</sup> We must also improve the ability of low-income parents to get an education. Few people can obtain a well-paying job today without post-high school education. The Congressional reauthorization of TANF in 2005, however, made it more difficult for individuals to receive financial benefits while attending school.<sup>71</sup>

More than 40 states created community-based programs to promote marriage and strengthen couple relationships in the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>72</sup> State governments can help their residents better prepare for marriage by charging couples who take a marriage education course less for their marriage license and making couples who do not wait more.<sup>73</sup> Louisiana provides a positive example. Its Office of Family Support issued a booklet titled *Raising Your Child Together: A Guide for Unmarried Parents* to help mothers and fathers work together to raise their children whether or not they marry. “No matter how you feel about each other,” it states, “your child loves and needs both of you.” The guidebook encourages couples to marry by pointing out the benefits it gives to children. The authors counsel couples to use employment bureaus to find jobs, have an inexpensive wedding, take a course on money management, devise a budget and follow it, and get free financial advice from the IRS or a community organization. They advise couples to engage in activities that preserve the friendship

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<sup>69</sup> McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up*, 146-47.

<sup>70</sup> Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, and Eggers-Pierola, *My Own Eyes*, 209.

<sup>71</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 157

<sup>72</sup> Fincham and Beach, “Marriage in the New Millennium,” 634-35. Studies have found that these programs work to improve marital communication and happiness. See M. R. Dion, “Healthy Marriage Programs: Learning What Works,” *Future of Children* 15 (Fall 2005): 139-56; S. M. Stanley, P. R. Amato, C. A. Johnson, and H. J. Markman, “Premarital Education, Marriage Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings from a Large Random Household Survey,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 20 (2006): 117-26; and A. J. Hawkins, V. L. Blanchard, S. A. Baldwin and E. B. Fawcett, “Does Marriage and Relationship Education Work? A Meta-analytic Study,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76:5 (2008): 723-34.

<sup>73</sup> Waite and Gallaher, *Case for*, 14.



and fun in their relationships and to protect themselves from being attracted to other people. The booklet also urges couples to adopt a “partners-in-parenting agreement” that includes keeping their own conflict from their children, not criticizing each other in front their children, not making promises they cannot keep, encouraging their children to love and respect both parents, and asking new partners and members of their families to adhere to these guidelines.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Role of Businesses**

Businesses can help low-income parents by providing more flexible and reasonable hours, paying higher wages, offering high-quality childcare programs, enabling more employees to work at home, and providing longer maternity and paternity leaves.<sup>75</sup> Some business leaders participate in tax-credit programs that subsidize the first-year wages of jobless adults, create on-site childcare for their employees, arrange more flexible working hours to accommodate family schedules, and offer part-time jobs with benefits.<sup>76</sup> Businesses need to make workplaces more inviting for single mothers and offer single mothers full-time jobs, job security, health insurance, sick days, and vacation days.<sup>77</sup> Single mothers are not likely to try to get off welfare unless their job earnings exceed their current benefit levels. This means that they need a job that pays significantly more than minimum wage as well as low-cost childcare.<sup>78</sup> Working Mother Media publishes an annual list of the 100 companies it deems most working-mother friendly. Many of the companies on the 2014 list subsidize or provide day care for employees’ children, provide

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<sup>74</sup> Office of Family Support: Louisiana, *Raising Your Child Together: A Guide for Unmarried Parents* (Office of Family Support, Department of Social Services, Louisiana), 2-7, 9, 11-12, 17.

<sup>75</sup> Jodi Kantor, “Working Anything but 9 to 5: Scheduling Technology Leaves Low-Income Parents with Hours of Chaos,” *New York Times* database, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/starbucks-workers-scheduling-hours.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=HpSumSmallMediaHigh&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>.

<sup>76</sup> Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, and Eggers-Pierola, *My Own Eyes*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> See Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, “Work, Welfare, and Single Mothers’ Economic Survival Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996):, 253-66.

<sup>78</sup> See Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 218.

flexible schedules that allow parents to take sick time to care for their children, and even offer options for telecommuting. ADP [Automatic Data Processing, Inc.], for example, subsidizes two childcare facilities and provides funds to use at other centers nationwide; it also offers dependent care-spending accounts, flex time and the potential to work from home for parents with sick children, and the option to use a sick day to care for ill family members.<sup>79</sup>

### **Programs that Aid Low-Income Parents**

To help low-income children, we need to create more programs and expand the use of already existing ones that provide mentoring for couples and children, marriage enrichment and counseling, medical services, peer support groups, and seminars to help couples improve their communication and conflict resolution skills. Low-income parents need the same programs and services that are available to middle-income couples through churches, schools, or community-sponsored marriage enrichment seminars. It is important that the poor be involved in helping create and shape the programs that benefit them. Thus far, few programs focus on the unique issues that beset marriages among the poor, including low levels of trust and commitment, lack of positive marital role models, and the effects of prior sexual abuse on their current relationships.<sup>80</sup> Four programs, however, have been successful with this population: the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP, the Survival Skills for Healthy Families Program developed by Family Wellness), the Catholic Church's FOCCUS [Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study] program, and The Building Strong Families project. Since its founding in East San Jose and Santa Cruz, California in 1980, Family Wellness has trained more than 10,000 instructors who have presented its program to more than a million families worldwide. The program uses an interactive, three-day workshop to train

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<sup>79</sup> Working Mother Web site, <http://www.workingmother.com/best-company-list/129110>.

<sup>80</sup> Ooms, "Marriage in Low-Income Communities," 93-94; M. Robin Dion, "Healthy Marriage," 139.

instructors to assist families in low-income, multi-cultural communities. Educators, ministers, mental health professionals, social workers, therapists, and community leaders have all taken these workshops. Also begun in 1980, PREP has been used successfully with many low-income black, Latino, and white military families.<sup>81</sup> PREP uses six two-hour sessions to teach couples how to develop intimacy, strengthen their commitment and friendship, deal with anger and frustration, and handle conflict effectively. Sessions focus on core beliefs, gender differences, how to listen effectively, the need for structure in the home, problem-solving skills, rules for resolving conflicts, “ways to increase friendship, sensuality, and fun,” and “danger signs of future problems.”<sup>82</sup> Created in 1986, FOCCUS has provided seminars to 500,000 engaged and newly married couples to help them strengthen their relationships.<sup>83</sup> The Building Strong Families project, sponsored by Mathematica, seeks to strengthen and stabilize the relationships of low-income couples. It features four main components: marriage education; family support services that help people find jobs, learn parenting skills, obtain health services, and find childcare and housing; family coordinators who help couples identify and use appropriate social services; and strategies for reducing disincentives to marriage.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, other programs that have been effective with middle- and upper-class couples could possibly be adapted to help low-income ones.

The Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy is a great example of how cities and towns can create programs to promote and strengthen marriage. Founded in 1997, the initiative’s extensive marketing campaign prods business, civic, minority, and health leaders to encourage residents to marry, tell marriage success stories, and accentuate the principles that

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<sup>81</sup> Ooms and Wilson, “Challenges of,” 442.

<sup>82</sup> Scott Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Michelle St. Peters, and B. Douglas Leber, “Strengthening Marriages and Preventing Divorce: New Directions in Prevention Research,” *Family Relations* 44 (October 1995): 393.

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.foccusinc.com/about-us-history.aspx>.

<sup>84</sup> Dion, Devaney, and Hershey, “Toward Interventions,” 89.

build strong marriages. It recommends that couples have at least a one-year courtship, abstain from premarital sex, and undergo extensive premarital counseling. The program trains married couples to mentor engaged couples, newlyweds, and spouses in troubled marriages, implores those in conflict-ridden unions to get counseling, and urges all couples to participate in marital enrichment seminars.<sup>85</sup>

Marriage promotion programs should also target specific racial and ethnic groups. Because of the high rates of their children who are born out of wedlock, such efforts are especially important in African-American and Latino communities. Black and Latino pastors, sports and media stars, singers, and professionals can promote favorable attitudes toward marriage in their respective communities by celebrating marriage and demonstrating its positive effects.<sup>86</sup> Black Marriage Day, an annual event that accentuates the importance of marriage in the African-American community, began in 2003 in 30 cities. By 2014 it had grown to encompass events in 300 communities across the nation.<sup>87</sup>

Home visits by social workers and support groups often provide more help to low-income parents than do classes or seminars. Home visits are more costly than classes, but they can meet the needs of the most vulnerable and needy families by being tailored to their schedules and more closely observing interpersonal dynamics, daily interactions, and living conditions. Support groups offer a safe place for low-income individuals to discuss sensitive topics and to express their frustrations and anxieties in a supportive peer environment.<sup>88</sup> One program that provides home visitors is the Los Angeles-based Bienvenidos. Its 150-member staff strives to treat clients with respect and to focus on what families are doing right rather than on what they

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<sup>85</sup> Waite and Gallaher, *Case for*, 15.

<sup>86</sup> Ooms, "Marriage in Low-Income Communities," 92.

<sup>87</sup> Black Marriage Day Web site, <http://www.blackmarriageday.com/>.

<sup>88</sup> *Helping Unwed Parents*, 77f.

are doing wrong. Another effective program is Community Services for Children, a nonprofit that oversees Head Start programs in Allentown, Pennsylvania. After eating a free dinner, participants listen to discussions on finances, household chores, and parenting. Once a week the leader of the program visits each couple at home. She helps them devise and follow a “relationship road map” that lists goals, such as marrying within two years or buying a home and records the efforts couples take to achieve them.<sup>89</sup>

All of these programs and strategies to improve the relationships and parenting of low-income individuals will have little impact unless we persuade indigent adults to take advantage of them. Sadly, individuals “who most need preventive programs are often the least interested or motivated to participate.”<sup>90</sup> One practical approach is to design child birth programs, which many couples take, to focus on parenting skills as well as maternal health, labor, delivery, and early infant care. After the birth of their first child, time pressures, new duties, and disagreements about childrearing often create marital conflict and decrease marital satisfaction, leading to divorce or one cohabiting parent moving out. Better preparing couples for the challenges children will bring can help them work together more effectively, have a happier relationship, and stay together.<sup>91</sup>

### **Childcare and Early Intervention Programs**

Yet another way to assist low-income parents in providing a better life for their children is to substantially improve the quality and lower the cost of childcare. Although a significant portion of low-income parents receive free childcare from relatives, many others struggle to pay for the cost of daycare, transport their children to facilities, and cope with the inadequate care

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<sup>89</sup> Rebecca Winters, “A New Marriage Proposal,” *Time* 164 (Nov. 8, 2004), 58-60.

<sup>90</sup> Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, and Leber, “Strengthening and Preventing,” 394, 400.

<sup>91</sup> Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, and Leber, “Strengthening and Preventing,” 398.

many centers provide.<sup>92</sup> About one-quarter of American children live with single mothers who work full time and earn an income near or below the poverty line. As a result, they have about \$2,000 or less they can use for childcare that typically costs about \$10,000 a year. To help them, we could increase the funding for the current childcare programs supplied by the federal Child Care and Development Fund [CCDF] and for state appropriations. It is often difficult, however, to apply or qualify for state programs. In Pennsylvania, for example, the backlog of applications requires parents to pay up front for care for several months before receiving subsidies.<sup>93</sup> This is not a workable option for most poor parents. Some advocates call for providing free child care and educational enrichment for all children under age five as the United States does for children when they enter public schools. Because this program would cost billions, it is not likely to be adopted.<sup>94</sup> Almost 40% of infants and toddlers whose mothers are employed spend at least 35 hours per week in daycare.<sup>95</sup> Although high-quality daycare can benefit children intellectually and socially, many facilities are substandard and have constantly changing staff who are poorly trained and paid. Because of the costs of daycare, as many as 12 million children between the ages of six and 12 are not receiving any adult supervision for several hours a day after school. Fortunately, a significant number of public and private schools and YMCAs do offer low-cost after-school programs.<sup>96</sup>

To help low-income children, we must assist them before age two and preferably before they are born. We must dissuade pregnant women from engaging in behaviors, especially

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<sup>92</sup> Furstenberg, *Destinies*, 144.

<sup>93</sup> Department of Welfare – PA Web site,

<http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/forchildren/childcareearlylearning/childcareworkssubsidizedchildcareprogram/>.

<sup>94</sup> Suzanne W. Helburn and Barbara R. Bergmann, *America's Child Care Problem: The Way Out* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 24-26, 210-13. See also Diane B. Adams, "The Quest for Quality Childcare," in Westman, ed., *Parenthood in America*, 150-57 and Diane Adams, R. Foote, and Y. Vinci, *Making Child Care Work* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 1996).

<sup>95</sup> Jennifer Ehrle, Kathryn Tout, and Gina Adams, *Who's Caring for Our Youngest Children? Child Care Patterns of Infants and Toddlers* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2001), x.

<sup>96</sup> Evans, *Family Matters*, 73-75.

drinking and smoking, that are likely to harm their fetuses. Children whose mothers drank alcohol while they were pregnant frequently have fetal alcohol syndrome or other fetal alcohol effects. Researcher Ann Streissguth found that “by age 14, 60 percent of children born with fetal alcohol syndrome or effects have been suspended from school or expelled. Almost half have displayed inappropriate sexual behavior.” Jack Shonkoff of Harvard University has pioneered research on a hormone called cortisol which increases feelings of stress in people’s lives but is dissipated when parents hug their children. Single parents who have many demands on their time and much stress in their lives typically spend less time cuddling with their children. A University of Minnesota study that began in the 1970s and followed 267 low-income mothers for almost 40 years found that supportive parenting in a child’s early years was as significant as I.Q. as a predictor of whether the child would graduate from high school.<sup>97</sup>

Intervening in the lives of young children when their brains are developing and the foundation for adulthood is being laid is critical. Some poverty experts argue convincingly that money would be much better spent helping struggling children during their first five years of life than on improving high schools and helping to fund college education. Giving parents the tools they need to effectively nurture their infants, journalist Nicholas Kristof contends, will produce “more self-confident and resilient” adults. It is much less expensive to teach parents how to nurture their children than it is to pay for the welfare programs and prisons that will be necessary later.<sup>98</sup> Programs that aid young children include Reach Out and Read, which funds giving books to low-income children during visits to their pediatricians to encourage reading at home; Springboard Collaboration, which offers disadvantaged children an intensive summer school

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<sup>97</sup> Kristof and WuDunn, “The Way to Beat Poverty.”

<sup>98</sup> Kristof and WuDunn, “The Way to Beat Poverty.”

experience; and Save the Children, which helps at-risk children gain a healthy start in life by providing food, healthcare, and education.

His work in an inner-city daycare center in the early 1970s led David Olds, a professor of pediatrics, psychiatry, and preventive medicine at the University of Colorado, to found Nurse-Family Partnership [NFP]. After years of testing his program in Elmira, New York, Memphis, and Denver, Olds launched his program on the national level in 1996. The program has grown impressively, and today it assists low-income, first-time mothers and their babies in 43 states and six tribal communities.<sup>99</sup> Nurses visit clients frequently throughout their pregnancy and the first two years of their children's lives to provide medical advice and assistance, on breast feeding and children's physical development, and emotional support. They work to help women have good pregnancies and deliver healthy babies; help for children to develop properly; and families to become economically self-sufficient. Nurses urge pregnant mothers not to drink alcohol, smoke, or use drugs. Nurses strive to "instill a level of confidence in first-time moms that will help them and their children to [have] successful futures."<sup>100</sup> Research conducted in Memphis from 1990 to 2011 showed that Nurse-Family Partnerships substantially helped reduce preventable deaths among the first-born children of low-income mothers. Moreover, a national research study found that "the NFP program cuts the likelihood of child abuse and neglect almost in half."<sup>101</sup> Other studies report that the children of NFP clients have 79 percent fewer cases of state-verified abuse or neglect than the controls. A fifteen-year follow-up study reported that at age 15 children had fewer than half as many arrests and mothers have one-third fewer subsequent births and have spent 30 fewer months on welfare than the controls. Another study

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<sup>99</sup> "From a Desire to Help People, to a Plan that Truly Does: The Story of How Nurse-Family Partnership Became a Leading Model in Maternal-Child Health Programs," Nurse Family Partnership Web site, <http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/About/Program-history>.

<sup>100</sup> Jeannie Lancaster, "Nurse Family Partnership Strives to Build Positive Outcomes for Mothers and Babies," [http://www.reporterherald.com/lifestyles/health/ci\\_26265739/nurse-family-partnership-strives-build-positive-outcomes-mothers](http://www.reporterherald.com/lifestyles/health/ci_26265739/nurse-family-partnership-strives-build-positive-outcomes-mothers).

<sup>101</sup> Lancaster, "Nurse Family Partnership."



determined that “each dollar invested in nurse visits to low-income unmarried mothers produced \$5.70 in benefits.”<sup>102</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In trying to help low-income parents, we must keep in mind that poverty has a powerful psychological dimension as well as a material one. In an affluent culture, poor individuals often have low self-worth. Many poor parents blame themselves for not providing adequately for their families and experience depression or hopelessness.<sup>103</sup> “More than any other emotion, the poor feel overwhelmed. Without financial resources, shelter, food, education, justice, or skills to address their plight, they succumb” to a downward spiral that leads to despair and desperation. For many, the essence of poverty is feeling that they have no control over their life circumstances; they feel that they can do little or nothing to improve their circumstances; they see themselves as victims of poor socialization, limited intelligence, or bad luck.<sup>104</sup>

Simultaneously attacking the problems that make parenting difficult for low-income individuals on all these fronts can help them provide better nurture and support for their children. Congregations, community organizations, businesses and non-profits, and the federal, state, and local governments, all have a critical role to play in improving the lives of low-income families. We must publicize and expand programs that are effective in aiding our poorest citizens and create new programs that can assist even more indigent families. We must continually evaluate what the best practices are for raising children and teach low-income parents how to employ them.

\*Names have been changed to protect privacy.

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<sup>102</sup> Kristof and WuDunn, “Beat Poverty.”

<sup>103</sup> Threfall, Seay, and Kohl, “The Parenting Role of African-American Fathers,” 46, 51.

<sup>104</sup> Wess Stafford, *Too Small to Ignore: Why Children Are the Next Big Thing* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2005), 184.