

15-Month Impacts of Oklahoma's Family Expectations Program

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Family Expectations is one of eight program sites participating in the Building Strong Families (BSF) evaluation. BSF is being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and its partners under contract to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This report, which focuses on the Family Expectations program in Oklahoma, was funded by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. A report of the 15-month impacts on all eight BSF sites is available at www.buildingstrongfamilies.info.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family Expectations (FE) is a program in Oklahoma City designed to strengthen the relationships of low-income couples who are expecting a baby or have just had a baby. For all families, this period is typically full of promise but also vulnerability. FE is one of eight sites that are participating in a large national evaluation of Building Strong Families (BSF), a federally funded program for unmarried parents. The underlying rationale for BSF is that relationship skills education and family support services provided to unmarried parents in a romantic relationship will help them learn how to communicate better, resolve conflicts constructively, and end up with a stronger, healthier, and long-lasting relationship. Stronger relationships, in turn, are expected to improve family outcomes and child well-being.

This report presents findings from both an analysis of the implementation experience of FE and a rigorous evaluation of program impacts on couple and family outcomes. As part of the evaluation, more than 1,000 unmarried couples volunteered for FE; roughly half of them were randomly selected and offered the opportunity to participate in FE (the “program group”), while the other half was assigned to a control group. Fifteen months later, FE couples showed significantly greater improvement compared with control couples in their relationship, father involvement, co-parenting, and maternal psychological well-being.

Design and Implementation of Family Expectations

FE was developed from scratch and implemented within a relatively short period. The program developers drew on their experience managing the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, which facilitates voluntary relationship education for other couples throughout the state. From 2006 to 2008, the FE model was designed and implemented, growing into a well-staffed program with clearly identified roles.

FE Program Model. To be part of the evaluation, all BSF programs were required to implement three components—relationship skills education, family support coordinators, and supportive services—but were given the flexibility to shape them in response to local needs, preferences, resources, and constraints. FE’s program model was implemented as follows:

- **Relationship skills education.** Group workshops were held weekly for up to 15 couples at a time, lasting from 3 to 5 hours each, for a total of 30 hours. FE chose to use a specially adapted version of the Becoming Parents Program, a curriculum developed by Dr. Pamela Jordan. The curriculum drew in part on the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP®), which focuses on communication, problem solving, friendship, and fun. Other topics include self-care (such as recognizing post-partum depression), infant care and development, co-parenting, communicating about money, trust/commitment, and considering marriage. Each workshop was led by a team of two or more curriculum-trained staff that included both men and women.
- **Family support coordinators.** Each couple in the program group was assigned a family support coordinator (FSC) whose role was to meet with each couple individually and provide assistance by assessing their basic family needs, reinforcing key curriculum concepts and skills, helping couples establish goals and track their progress toward them, and encouraging ongoing attendance in and completion of the workshop series.
- **Supportive services.** Based on their needs, couples in the program group were referred to a range of supportive services available in the community (and sometimes at the program facility). These include services related to housing, employment, education, transportation, child care, treatment for substance abuse or depression, and parenting education. FSCs used a structured tool covering 14 domains of family functioning to identify the couples' needs and make referrals.

Recruitment. Nearly half of the 1,010 unmarried couples who volunteered for the evaluation were identified through the state's Medicaid program or through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Brochures were mailed to potential prospects who could contact the program if they were interested. The remaining couples were identified through prenatal clinics, doctor's offices, other partner agencies, and word of mouth. Couples were invited to tour the program facility and meet the staff before committing to the intake process. They were also given help with transportation and a \$20 gift card as a thank-you for participating in the intake process.

Practices to Promote Participation. Like evaluation enrollment, participation in FE services by couples in the BSF program group was voluntary—attendance was not mandated by any public or private agency. The FE program developers created and refined multiple procedures to encourage participation:

- Emphasized recruitment during early pregnancy so that participation in the relationship skills component would be less likely to be interrupted by the baby’s birth.
- Aimed to minimize participation barriers by providing assistance with child care during workshops, transportation to and from the facility, and family meals before each workshop.
- Created a warm and inviting facility staffed by friendly and supportive people, and including such amenities as reclining loveseats so that pregnant women could elevate their feet.
- Designed a generous package of incentives to both support the couples’ achievement of participation benchmarks and reinforce positive changes in behavior.
- Implemented an abundance of on-site extended activities and social events for couples to create a fun and interesting backdrop for the program.

Program Management. During the evaluation period, there were more than 50 full-time staff, 25 part-time contract workers, and a number of volunteers. FE developed a culture of rigorous self-monitoring and scrutiny, with senior administrators responsible for tracking ongoing progress and continually developing ways to improve performance. Administrators created a two-week training system. In the first week, all staff were introduced to the program’s philosophy and practices, and in the second, position-specific trainings were offered within two weeks of hire. Performance management also involved the development and tracking of numerous key benchmarks, such as conducting the initial FSC meeting with 75 percent of couples within two weeks of enrollment. Underperforming staff were subject to corrective action, such as pairing them with more experienced staff, engaging in role-playing, or increasing the frequency of supervisor observation and feedback.

Impact Evaluation

To assess whether FE achieved its goals, the rigorous random assignment evaluation addressed two overarching research questions:

1. **Did FE change the amount of services received?** Did couples enrolled in FE attend and complete the relationship skills education sessions? Did the family coordinators meet regularly with enrolled couples, and what family support services were received?
2. **Did FE improve outcomes?** What was the impact of FE on couples' relationships, family outcomes, and child well-being? Did FE work better for some couples than for others?

From June 2006 through March 2008, 1,010 couples applied for FE services. Roughly half of the couples were assigned to the FE program group (503 couples), and the remaining couples were assigned to the control group (507 couples). The impact analysis presented in this report is based on data collected from two sources: (1) a baseline information form completed by each person applying to FE and (2) a telephone survey conducted with mothers and fathers enrolled in the study about 15 months after they applied to FE. At least one parent in 877 couples (87 percent of all couples) responded to the 15-month survey. This includes 82 percent of mothers and 73 percent of fathers.

FE couples participated in significantly more relationship skills education than did couples in the control group. About 76 percent of FE couples attended a relationship skills session at least once, compared with slightly less than one-quarter of control group couples. Moreover, FE couples attended an average of 20 hours of group sessions on relationship skills education (including those who attended no sessions), compared with only 2 hours for control group couples.

FE led to a consistent pattern of significantly positive effects on the quality and status of the couples' relationships. The primary outcome domain for the 15-month impact analysis was relationship status and quality. Measures in this domain included relationship status, fidelity, attitudes toward marriage, and four primary measures of relationship quality: (1) relationship happiness, (2) support and affection, (3) use of constructive conflict behaviors, and (4) avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors (Table ES.1).

Table ES.1 Impact of Family Expectations on Couple Relationships at 15-Month Follow-Up

Outcome	FE Couples	Control Couples	Estimated Impact	Effect Size
Relationship Quality				
Relationship happiness (range: 0 to 10)	8.49	8.18	0.31***	0.21
Support and affection (range: 0 to 4)	3.50	3.43	0.06**	0.16
Conflict Management (range: 1 to 4)				
Use of constructive conflict behavior	3.33	3.22	0.11***	0.19
Avoidance of destructive conflict behavior	2.80	2.71	0.09**	0.14
Fidelity				
Neither reports infidelity (%)	82	77	5.00*	0.18
Intimate Partner Violence (%)				
Mother: no severe physical assault past yr	90	87	3.00	0.16
Father: no severe physical assault past yr	92	91	1.00	0.09
Relationship Status (%)				
Romantically involved	82	76	5.00*	0.19
Living together, married or unmarried	70	66	5.00	0.13
Married	25	25	0.00	-0.01
Attitudes Toward Marriage (range: 1 to 4)				
Mothers' attitudes	3.11	2.97	0.14***	0.18
Fathers' attitudes	3.22	3.12	0.11**	0.15
Sample Size	435	442		

Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.
 ***/**/* Significantly different from zero at the .01/.05/.10 level.

- FE significantly improved the following dimensions of relationship quality:
 - Relationship happiness
 - Support and affection
 - Use of constructive conflict behaviors
 - Avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors
- FE significantly increased the likelihood that couples would remain romantically involved (82 percent of FE couples versus 76 percent of control couples). FE did not significantly affect the rate of living together (70 percent versus 66 percent) or marriage rates (25 percent in both groups).
- Significantly more FE couples reported that they remained faithful (82 percent of FE couples versus 77 percent of control couples), and FE couples expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward marriage than did control group couples.

Family Expectations improved co-parenting relationships and led to an increase in the proportion of fathers living with and supporting their children (Table ES.2). In addition to the central goal of strengthening couple relationships, FE was also intended to improve each parents ability to cooperate with his or her partner in parenting and to increase the involvement of fathers with their children. The co-parenting measure is based on 10 items drawn from the Parenting Alliance Inventory, is measured on a scale of 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), and includes such items as “(other parent) and I communicate well about (our child).”

- FE couples scored significantly higher on the co-parenting scale than did control group couples.
- Fathers in FE couples were significantly more likely than control group fathers to live with their child, and significantly more FE fathers contributed at least half of the cost of providing for their children, compared with control group fathers.
- FE significantly reduced depressive symptoms of mothers relative to mothers in the control group.

FE did not significantly affect most measures of family economic outcomes. One hypothesis tested in the impact evaluation was whether impacts on relationship status and quality would translate into indirect

Table ES.2 Impact of Family Expectations on Parenting, Father Involvement, and Parental Well-Being at 15-Month Follow-Up

Outcome	FE Couples	Control Couples	Estimated Impact	Effect Size
Co-Parenting (range: 1 to 5)				
Quality of co-parenting relationship	4.43	4.36	0.08*	0.12
Mothers' Parenting Behavior				
Engagement in cognitive and social play (range: 1 to 6)	5.10	5.05	0.05	0.07
Frequently spanked focal child in previous month (%)	11.1	11.4	-0.40	-0.02
Parenting stress and aggravation (range: 1 to 4)	3.53	3.49	0.04	0.08
Fathers' Parenting Behavior				
Engagement in cognitive and social play (range: 1 to 6)	4.70	4.68	0.03	0.02
Frequently spanked focal child in previous month (%)	9.6	8.6	1.0	0.07
Parenting stress and aggravation (range: 1 to 4)	3.52	3.54	-0.02	-0.04
Father Involvement (%)				
Lives with child	71	66	5*	0.15
Spends at least 1 hr with child daily	69	69	0	0.02
Provides financial support (at least half the cost of raising child)	80	72	8***	0.27
Depressive Symptoms				
Mothers' CES-D score (range: 0 to 36)	4.52	5.95	-1.43***	-0.22
Fathers' CES-D score	4.01	3.99	0.01	0.00
Attitudes Toward Marriage (range: 1 to 4)				
Mothers' attitudes	3.11	2.97	0.14***	0.18
Fathers' attitudes	3.22	3.12	0.11**	0.15
Sample Size	435	442		
Couples	435	442		
Mothers	411	413		
Fathers	362	373		

Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.
 ***/**/* Significantly different from zero at the .01/.05/.10 level.

impacts on parent and family economic outcomes, such as employment status and earnings. At the time of the 15-month follow-up, nearly the same percentage of FE mothers (54 percent) and control group mothers (53 percent) had worked for pay in the previous month. Similarly, nearly the same percentage of FE fathers (81 percent) and control group fathers (80 percent) worked for pay in the previous month. However, FE couples had significantly lower levels of TANF or Food Stamp receipt (49 percent) compared with control couples (54 percent), although about the same percentage of couples in each group had a family income below poverty and reported they had difficulty meeting housing costs.

FE had significantly stronger impacts on relationship status, relationship quality, co-parenting, and father involvement for African American couples than it did for other couples. Among couples in which both the mother and father reported being African American, FE led to large and statistically significant increases in the percentage of couples who were romantically involved and who were living together. Relationship happiness and the level of support and affection partners felt toward each other were significantly higher for African American FE couples than for African American control couples. FE also improved the ability of African American couples to use constructive conflict management techniques and avoid destructive conflict behaviors. Similarly, scores on the co-parenting scale, the percentage of fathers providing substantial financial support to their child, and scores on the scale measuring father engagement in cognitive and social play were significantly higher for African American FE couples than for African American control couples. On the scale for mothers' depressive symptoms, FE led to fewer depressive symptoms for both African American couples and all other couples.

Looking Ahead

Results from the impact evaluation suggest that FE achieved its goal of strengthening relationship quality and helping couples stay together. In an upcoming longer-term impact analysis, data will be collected from the program and control group couples and from assessments of their children when they are about three years old. Results from that analysis will indicate whether the 15-month impacts are sustained over time and whether they result in improved social, emotional, and language outcomes for children.

With funding from Oklahoma’s Department of Human Services, Family Expectations continues to operate beyond the evaluation, no longer assigning couples to a control group. Management staff continue to track performance, conduct programmatic reviews, and implement improvements and refinements as needed, and the program continues to support research through a variety of additional studies.