



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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# Do Good Partners Make Good Parents? Relationship Quality and Parenting in Married and Unmarried Families

## Background

The Bush Administration is supporting new legislation designed to improve relationship skills and increase marriage among low-income couples with children. The rationale behind the new legislation is that children would be better off if they were raised by their biological parents in stable and healthy marriages. Previous briefs have examined the likelihood that improving relationship skills will lead to increases in marriage among low income parents. [See Fragile Families Research Brief Numbers 16, 17, 20, 23, and 25.] In this brief we focus on another potentially important effect of the new marriage initiative: whether improving relationship skills will increase the quality of parenting.

Although past research has shown that marital quality is positively associated with 'good parenting' these studies have focused primarily on white, middle-income couples who are currently married. Thus, the link between improving relationship quality and improving parenting quality remains largely unexplored for unmarried parents and for minority and low-income parents. Yet these are the parents that will most likely be affected by the new services. At present, one-third of all births occur to unmarried parents. Among African-Americans, this figure is nearly 70 percent. In light of these statistics, it is important to understand the ways in which the quality of couple relationships influences parenting and child well-being among unmarried and minority parents.

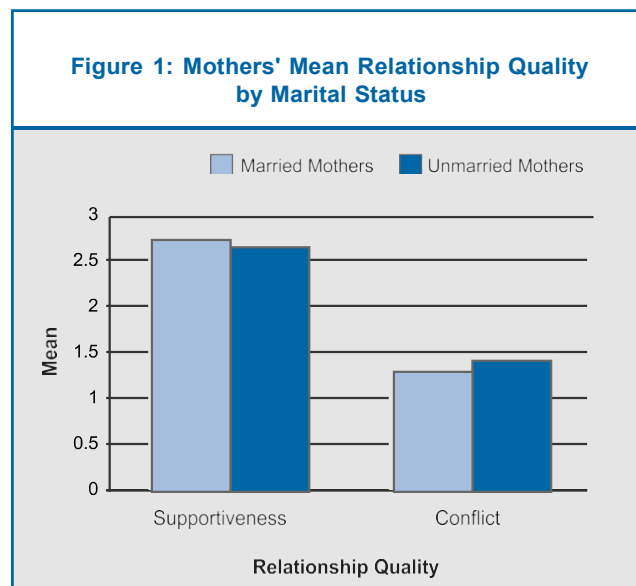
## Data and Methods

This brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the effects of relationship quality on parenting. [See Box.] The study collects data from both mothers and fathers and includes multiple measures of relationship quality and parenting. The current analysis uses data from the baseline and one-year follow-up interviews and focuses on parents who were in a romantic relationship at the time of their baby's birth. The sample includes 2,676 mothers and 2,303 fathers.

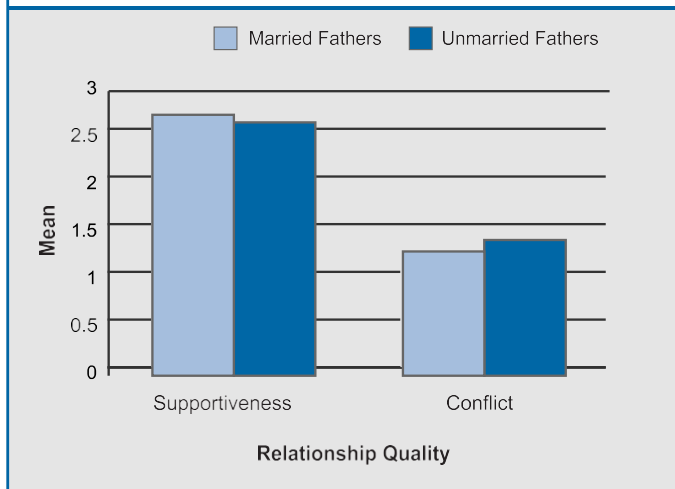
Parenting behaviors include positive engagement with the child and frequency of spanking at the one-year interview. Positive engagement is based on self-reports regarding how often in the previous week the mothers and fathers did the following five activities with their child: playing games like "peek-a-boo" or "gotcha," playing inside with toys, singing songs or nursery rhymes to the child, reading stories to the child, and telling stories to the child. Parents' relationship quality is measured in terms of their supportiveness toward their partner and the frequency of conflict at the baseline interview. Supportiveness is the mean score of four types of supportive behaviors (such as encouraging and listening), ranging from 1 "never" to 3 "often." The frequency of conflict about six topics (such as money, spending time together, and drug use) is also the mean score and is measured on the same scale of 1 "never" to 3 "often."

All statistical models control for a number of sociodemographic variables such as age, race, family background, level

**Figure 1: Mothers' Mean Relationship Quality by Marital Status**



**Figure 2: Fathers' Mean Relationship Quality by Marital Status**



of parents' education, and employment status, as well as parents' health, substance problem and religiosity, and the child's sex and temperament.

### Findings

Married mothers and fathers report higher quality relationships than their unmarried counterparts across both measures of relationship quality - supportiveness and frequency of conflict (see Figures 1 and 2). While the differences are statistically significant, the substantive differences by marital status are quite small, with the differences for conflict somewhat larger than those for supportiveness.

As shown in Table 1, both measures of relationship quality are significantly related to parenting quality in our regression analyses. Mothers and fathers who report higher levels of supportive behavior (from the other parent) show more positive engagement with their child. Also, supportiveness is linked to a lower frequency of spanking

by mothers, but not fathers. In contrast, the frequency of conflict is negatively related to engagement and positively related to spanking, but only for fathers.

We test for significance of the gender differences and find that relationship quality affects mothers and fathers differently depending on the measure of relationship quality and the type of parenting: mothers' harsh parenting is reduced in the context of a supportive partner relationship, while fathers' positive engagement is hindered by a conflicted relationship. Interestingly, while the level of relationship quality is higher among married couples as compared with unmarried couples, the association between relationship quality and parenting is similar regardless of marital status.

### Conclusions and Policy Implications

Well-designed pre-marital and post-marital programs have been shown to strengthen couple relationships, enhance marital stability and reduce divorce. Therefore, understanding how parents' relationship quality is linked to parenting among unmarried couples can provide useful information about the extent to which the intentions of current policy efforts may be realized. Our findings suggest that current initiatives to promote marriage by increasing parents' relationship skills could potentially yield benefits for parenting behaviors and by extension, children. They also have implications for other services aimed at low-income parents. Until recently, most parenting programs have focused primarily on the mother-child dyad, but our findings suggest that these programs would be most effective if they targeted fathers as well as mothers and if they focused on the parental relationship as well as the parent-child relationship.

**Table 1 - Regression Results: Association Between Relationship Quality and Parenting**

Relationship Quality at Birth	Mother's Parenting at One-Year				Father's Parenting at One-Year			
	Engagement		Spanking		Engagement		Spanking	
	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>b</i>	S.E.
Supportiveness	.15**	.03	-.21**	.05	.22**	.04	-.01	.05
Conflict	-.02	.03	.01	.04	-.11**	.04	.15**	.05

+*p*<.10 \**p*<.05 \*\**p*<.01

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## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how relationship quality influences parenting.

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The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies> or email the CRCW at [crew@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crew@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "Do Good Partners Make Good Parents? Relationship Quality and Parenting in Married and Unmarried Families" by Marcia Carlson and Sara McLanahan. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the Fragile Families link, click on Publications, then click on Working Papers Series.

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