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Center for the Study of Social Policy

# PolicyMatters

Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies

# Encouraging Strong Family Relationships

*A Discussion Paper for the Policy Matters Project*

# POLICY MATTERS:
# Setting and Measuring Benchmarks for State Policies

## Encouraging Strong Family Relationships: Recommendations for State Policy

A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR THE *POLICY MATTERS* PROJECT

Center for the Study of Social Policy

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# Preface

## About the Policy Matters Project

*Policy Matters* is an initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy. The *Policy Matters* project is designed to develop and make available coherent, comprehensive information regarding the strength and adequacy of state policies affecting children, families, and communities. The project seeks to establish consensus among policy experts and state leaders regarding the mix of policies believed to offer the best opportunity for improving child and family well-being. A series of policy briefs, policy papers, guides for self-assessment, and 50-state comparative reports is envisioned. The project focuses on six core results: school readiness, educational success, family economic success, healthy families, youth development, and strong family relationships. Together, these six core results and the policies designed to achieve them make up a state-level family-strengthening policy agenda.

## About This Paper

This paper puts forth an approach to setting benchmarks for a state policy agenda to encourage stronger family relationships. Given current policy concerns for the well-being of families and the hardships some families are experiencing, an examination of state policy efforts and trends to strengthen families is timely. The current paper offers a beginning statement on the importance of solid, evidence-informed recommendations to help states encourage the development of stronger family bonds and resilience in the face of economic and social pressures.

Section I of the paper provides a brief introduction to some current family policy issues and questions in the U.S. Section II reviews data and research on the impact of family structure, economic conditions, and the quality of familial relationships on the well-being of family members. This section also includes a brief look at the growing diversity of American families sometimes overlooked in U.S. family policy debates. Section III suggests a state-level policy framework focusing on the formation, maintenance, stability and safety of families. Section IV recommends a series of policies with potential for improving child and family relationships. This section details the policy options and preliminary benchmarks that research and practice evidence suggest can promote successful family formation and maintenance outcomes.

While other policy remedies are possible, and are discussed in other *Policy Matters* volumes, this paper attempts to limit its focus to those policies that promote the relational success of families and to those policies with greater research and practice evidence in support of their effectiveness. Over time, the recommendations and benchmarks will be improved as more research and practice evidence is available. Thus, this paper presents a preliminary set of benchmarks.

This paper is an invitation for further deliberation and action regarding policies leading to stronger family relationships. Moving forward, the project aims to expand this initial statement to a national bi-partisan consensus on policy directions for those interested in promoting positive family outcomes.

## About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) is a non-profit, non-partisan policy organization located in Washington, D.C. The Center's mission is to promote policies and practices that support and strengthen families, build strong communities, and produce better and more equitable outcomes for children, young people, and adults.

# Encouraging Strong Family Relationships

## INTRODUCTION

1

Throughout its history, American welfare and safety net policy has been concerned with the relationship between family structure and family well-being. During the 1930s and the Great Depression, public policy in this regard focused on supporting widows, orphans and the country's poor families. Later, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program was designed to provide economic support to children whose parents were not able to economically sustain a household because of disability, inability to find work, or a need to remain at home as primary caregiver for their children. During the 1980's and early 1990's, concern over rising rates of teen pregnancy and childrearing, coupled with growth in AFDC rolls, forced increased attention on teenage mothers. And today, welfare reformers and policy advocates are returning to questions about the relationship between family structure and child well-being.

Passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996 (Welfare Reform) resulted in a dramatic shift in the focus of the welfare system from economically supporting "dependent children" to providing "temporary assistance to needy families" (TANF) and helping those families to transition from welfare to employment. The principal goals of the reform effort were to:

1. Provide temporary assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
2. End the dependence of these parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
3. Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Purposes 3 and 4 of the welfare reform law focus explicitly on family formation and family maintenance. Moreover, purposes 1 and 2 are predicated upon assumptions that family and marriage are integral aspects of successfully supporting "needy families." In short, welfare reform helped to make family formation and family structure a prominent domestic policy issue and the subject of widespread, often heated public discourse in the United States.

In the wake of welfare reform, states have experienced dramatic declines in their welfare rolls. In addition, a few states have attempted to address family formation. As states have experimented with supporting families and encouraging marriage, questions regarding the legitimacy of government involvement in family life surfaced. Specifically, two broad questions surround state policy discussions regarding families:

1. What is the appropriate role for state governments in promoting and supporting marriage and family?
2. What policy decisions hold promise for improving the emotional, social, and relational well-being of all families, particularly those raising children?

Before answering these questions, the following section details some policy relevant demographic trends concerning family relationships and the quality of family life.

# Background:

## FAMILIES MATTER

## 2 Family Structure and Family Well-Being

The American family has undergone significant changes in the past several decades. One way of summarizing these changes is to reflect on trends in family structure, where two general patterns are observable.

### *Trends in Family Structure*

First, the traditional U.S. household comprised of the married, two-parent biological family is statistically on the decline in the United States. The proportion of married family households with own biological children dropped from 40 percent of all households to 24 percent between 1970 and 2000.[1] Several factors contribute to this decline in the proportion of traditional households.

1. **Individuals are increasingly choosing to delay first marriages.** This choice to delay first marriages results in mixed effects. On the one hand, data show that people who wait until age 30 or older often stay married longer, with fewer divorces. However, delays in first marriages may be related to higher rates of single-parent families.[2] On the other hand, those who do not delay first marriages but marry young have alarmingly high divorce rates. Assuming continuation of recent divorce trends, as many as five out of ten young married couples may eventually divorce.[3]

2. **Increasing numbers of individuals are choosing never to marry, and never marry and raise children.** Single-mother families rose from three million in 1970 to ten million in 2000. The growth of single-father families, while a smaller number in absolute terms, rose at an even higher rate during the same time period – from 393,000 in 1970 to two million in 2000.[4] The rise in single-parent families is not without economic costs to those families, however. Married couples with children are far less likely to live in poverty than are single-parent families. According to U.S. Census Bureau Data for 2002, 26.5 percent of single-female headed households lived in poverty as compared to 5.3 percent of married couple families with children.[5] In addition, there is a strong relationship between educational achievement and never-married childrearing, with women who are high school dropouts more likely to become single parents, have children at an early age, and have more children than their college educated peers.[6]

3. **Cohabitation among couples is on the rise.** In 2000, nearly 5.5 million couples chose to cohabit without marrying. This figure represents about 9 percent of all married and unmarried coupled households and about 5 percent of all U.S. households.[7] In addition, 40 percent of these households included children under the age of 18 – slightly less than the 46 percent of married-couple households with children under 18.[8] Although nearly 40 percent of nonmarital births are attributable to cohabitation,[9] cohabitation tends to be a short-lived arrangement. Nearly 50 percent of cohabiting couples enter marriage or end their relationship within one year and 90 percent within five years.[10] Many couples appear to be choosing cohabitation instead of marriage for a number of reasons, including: sharing the costs of living expenses, weak preferences for marriage, and testing a relationship before marrying. However, some 75 percent of children whose parents cohabit will see their parents break-up, while 33 percent of children in married families will do so, suggesting that cohabitation is not a route for achieving stable and long-term families or marriages.[11]

4. **Divorce continues at high levels.** While the sharp increase in divorce rates that began in the 1960's leveled off during the 1990's, divorce remains at very high levels and at rates nearly two times higher than any other developed nation.[12] While most people will marry at least once in their lives, approximately one-half of all persons who marry are projected to divorce at some point in the future. The typical first marriage now lasts about seven to eight years among those couples that eventually divorce.[13] In 1996, the last year for which detailed marriage and divorce statistics were published by the National Center for Health Statistics, 20 percent of men and 22 percent of women had been divorced.[14]

One result of high divorce rates is increased rates of remarriage and blended families, making this the second general trend in family structure. Nearly half of all U.S.

marriages represent a remarriage for at least one spouse. Approximately one-third of all children will live in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily before adulthood.[15] Of the 20 percent of men and 22 percent of women who reported being divorced at some point prior to 1996, more than half were remarried. As of 1996, 12.6 percent of all men and 13.4 percent of all women had been or were in their second marriage.[16] Most of those remarrying usually did so within about three years following a divorce. However, approximately 60 percent of second marriages are likely to end in divorce.[17]

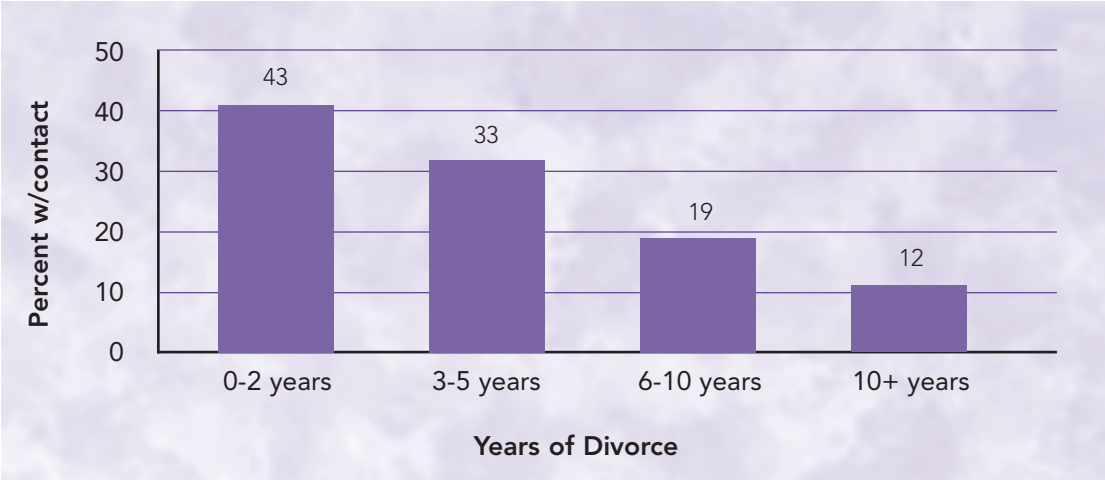
### *Family Structure and Child Well-Being*

There is substantial research evidence that family structure and family climate matter for the well-being of children. A recent literature review published by Child Trends summarizes several significant ways in which family structure affects child outcomes.[18] Children in two-parent families with low levels of parental conflict – especially two-parent biological families – exhibit the highest levels of well-being when compared to children in other family structures (e.g., single parent families, two-parent stepfamilies, divorced families, and cohabiting parents). Other family structures may introduce varying levels of family instability that influence a range of outcomes. For example, research indicates that families headed by unmarried mothers are more likely to experience higher levels of poverty, housing instability, teen and non-marital childbearing, and lower educational attainment. In the case of divorced families, there is greater prevalence of depression, antisocial and impulsive behavior, and school-related behavior problems.[19]

Remarriages often result in "blended" families with one or more stepchildren. Children in stepfamilies often face challenges in maintaining positive relationships with their non-custodial parent and integrating family life in the second marriage. While differences in outcomes between children in stepfamilies and first-marriage families are modest, children in stepfamilies do tend to exhibit poorer academic performance, lower socio-emotional adjustment, and more behavior problems. These differences appear to be most acute during the first two to three years of a remarriage and to diminish over time.[20]

When parental separation or divorce occurs, there usually is a strong benefit to both parents remaining involved in the child's life. Separation or divorce, however, jeopardizes the stability of parent-child relationships. This is especially true for fathers, who are not typically the custodial parent during times of family instability or changes in family structure. Non-custodial father contact, while it may take many forms, appears to diminish over time (see Figure 1). Only 12 percent of fathers maintained contact when they had been divorced longer than ten years. Along with these declines in parent-child contact come parallel declines in frequency of mother-father contact, father's influence on decision making, and child support payment after the fifth year of divorce.[21]

Figure 1. Percentage of Fathers Maintaining Contact with Children by Years of Divorce




### *Family Structure and Parental Well-Being*

Research also indicates that family structure is related to the well-being of adult parents in the family. For example, divorce and other marital disruptions are linked to mental health problems for young adults and non-custodial fathers. Such mental health problems include depression, psychological distress, chronic stress, and suicide. Many non-custodial fathers feel a loss of control, anxiety, guilt, sadness, and emptiness associated with estrangement from their former spouse and children.[22]

## Economic Stability and Family Well-Being[23]

### *Making Ends Meet in Low-Income Families*

Many families are having a difficult time making ends meet, a fact that is only partially reflected in official federal poverty figures. Several organizations analyze the needs of families in terms of "self-sufficiency standards" or "basic family budgets"—more realistic measures than the federal poverty level of how much income is required for a "safe and decent standard of living." These standards are adjusted for different communities and types of families.[24] This research indicates that the typical amount needed to support a family of four is almost twice the national poverty line ($17,463), and that 29 percent of families nationwide fall below this basic budget threshold. Nearly 30 percent of families with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line confronted at least one critical hardship (e.g., missing meals, facing eviction, having utilities cut off, lacking access to health

care, or overcrowded housing) and over 72 percent of these families suffered from at least one serious hardship (e.g., stress over providing meals, inability to pay a month's rent or mortgage, reliance on the emergency room for health care, and lack of adequate child care).[25] In addition, the poor and the near-poor experience these hardships despite significant increases in the number of hours worked during the last decade.[26]

Even people with full-time, year-round jobs are not guaranteed an escape from poverty. In 1997, individuals working full-time year-round jobs made up 10.3 percent of the country's poor population. This is a higher percentage than in 1979. The trend is similar for poor families with children, with the proportion of working families that are poor increasing during the past two decades. In 2001, 2.8 million Americans were classified as working poor.[27] Approximately 32.2 percent of non-elderly persons live in low-income (e.g., up to 200 percent of the poverty level) families and 16.3 percent of these live in such families even though they have at least one full-time, full-year worker.[28]

## Other Resources

A more complete discussion of the economic challenges facing families is available in another Policy Matters publication, *Improving the Economic Success of Families: Recommendations for State Policy*. Several policy recommendations are explored in this publication, including:

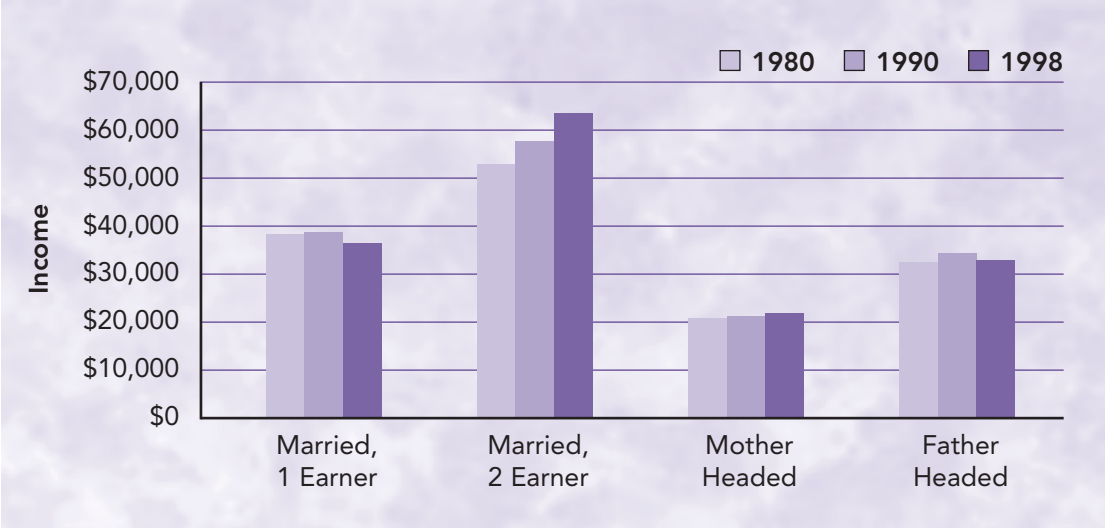
- State TANF Options
- Workforce Investment Act (WIA)
- Health Insurance Coverage
- Child Care Subsidy
- Affordable Housing
- State Tax Policy
- Minimum Wage
- Child Support
- Food Stamps
- Asset Promotion
- Home Ownership
- Predatory Lending
- Unemployment Insurance

*This publication is available at www.cssp.org or by calling CSSP at 202.371.1565.*

Families with young children also appear to have the greatest difficulty making ends meet. For example, families with children under six have greater needs for child care, higher basic budget needs, and are more likely to have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level than are families with older children. Nationally, about 40 percent of all families with at least one child below age six have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, compared to 29 percent of families with children ages 6-17.[29] And although families of young children, particularly lower-wage families, have increased their workforce participation in order to provide for their families, they often have not realized substantial increases in earned income. One study found that a two-parent one-income family earning $18,000 per year and choosing to add $12,000 per year through spousal income from work only

gained $2,000 per year in disposable income. Lost benefits, increased taxes, and new childcare costs (estimated very conservatively at $4,500 for the two children) erased most of the spouse's supplemental earnings, leaving this family unable to meet their basic family budget despite increased work effort.[30] This disparity in low-income status among families with children suggests that special attention must be paid to providing economic relief to families with young children.

Figure 2. Changes in Family Income by Family Structure, 1980-1998




**Source:** U.S. Bureau of the Census.

### *Economic Stability and Family Structure*

During the 1990's, the link between family structure and family economic outcomes remained strong (see Figure 2). As might be expected, two-earner families fared better than single-earner families. Real (inflation adjusted) median income rose from 1980 to 1998 for two-earner married families due largely to increased participation of both parents in the workforce, while single-earner married and father-headed families experienced small declines.[31]

While female-headed families experienced some slight income gains between 1980 and 1999, their average earnings lagged well behind their male counterparts and overall economic well-being appears to have worsened for these families. The benefits of economic expansion between 1993-1999 were offset for working single mothers by contractions in public safety net and benefits programs. Rather than escaping poverty through work and improving economic opportunities, more families led by single mothers found themselves in deeper poverty in the latter half of the 1990s than was the case between 1993 and 1995.[32]

### *Economic Stability and Family Well-Being*

On the whole, available research conducted in recent decades supports the premise that economic success is associated with better family outcomes, including more marriage, less divorce, greater marital happiness, and higher levels of child well-being. However, broader definitions of economic stability (e.g., educational attainment, wealth, career stability and progression, and home ownership) appear to better predict positive family well-being than a more narrow definition like family income alone.[33] One large-scale comparative research project demonstrates narrow effects for income alone on child behavior, mental health, and physical health outcomes, but consistent effects on ability and achievement.[34] The most generous estimate attributes approximately one-half of poor child outcomes in school performance, graduation, teen pregnancy, and young adult idleness to income; most studies estimate that income accounts for about 30 percent of changes in outcomes.[35] These findings suggest that policies aimed solely at improving income will benefit a significant number of families, but are likely to be insufficient for addressing the complex needs of all families.

Focusing on *economic success* is one conceptual approach to considering the effects of income and class on family outcomes; considering the costs of *economic disadvantage* is another. The combination of poverty and one or more socio-demographic risk factors like single parenthood, low educational attainment, and four or more children poses significant risk for negative behavioral, emotional, and school outcomes for children in such families.[36] For most children in poverty, multiple socio-demographic risk factors are likely to co-occur, creating serious economic and social disadvantage. Family "turbulence," dramatic changes created in part by changes in family structure and family living arrangements, also impacts these outcomes.[37] If economic advantage is associated with well-being, it is as clear that economic and social disadvantage are associated with a host of negative child and family results.

## The Quality of Family Relationships

Americans strongly value family life and parenting. For instance, most Americans believe that raising children is "life's greatest joy" and nearly one-half of men and women believe that marriage without children is incomplete.[38] Both African-American and white families report that loving family relationships are either extremely (91 percent) or somewhat (8 percent) important to them.[39] Ninety percent of married persons, nearly 75 percent of divorced persons, and over 50 percent of unmarried single Americans report finding their greatest joy in family life.[40]

Despite this overwhelmingly positive attitude toward family life, the quality of family relationships remains determinative of whether individuals actually find fulfillment

and support in families. Among the many factors that may define whether family relationships are high quality, three factors – work-family balance, time together as a family, and the presence or absence of abuse in families – are explored here.

### *Work – Family Balance*

One factor affecting the quality of family relationships is the ability of parents to balance the demands of work and family life. With the increasing pressures and expectations associated with work during the last several decades, adults are working significantly more hours and are at risk of being overwhelmed by work responsibilities. Nearly one-half of respondents to one national survey reported that they "often" or "very often" felt overworked, overwhelmed by the amount of work they had to do, or did not have time to process or reflect on their work, with women and adults ages 36-54 being most likely to exhibit overwork. Only 28 percent of respondents reported rarely or never experiencing any of these feelings.[41] Moreover, low-income families are particularly vulnerable to work–family imbalance given they are more likely to have family members with special needs and less likely to have adequate job flexibility or substitute care.[42]

An improper balance between work and family impacts *both* the workplace and the home. In the workplace, overworked employees are more likely to report making mistakes, anger toward employers, resentment toward coworkers, and intentions to find another job.[43] Regarding family life, overworked parents report more work and life conflicts; less successful relationships with spouses, partners, or children; self-neglect; loss of sleep; higher stress levels and poorer coping ability;[44] higher rates of chronic illness; and more work-related sanctions.[45] Work schedules have significant effects on marital stability – especially in families with children. For example, one national study found that married fathers working fixed nights are six times more likely to divorce or separate when compared to similar fathers working days. Mothers who worked fixed night shifts were three times more likely to divorce or separate than mothers working days.[46]

### *Time Together as A Family*

The amount of time parents spend with their children is critical to a range of cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for children. Many parents are finding it increasingly difficult to invest significant amounts of time with their young children. Much of the differences in average daily time spent with children can be attributed to the increasing work pressures on single-parent families and the residency status of the parents. For example, fathers in two-parent families spend on average four times the amount of time with their children than do fathers in single-parent families. Mothers in two-parent families spend on average two times the amount of time with their children than do mothers in single-parent families.[47]

Because involvement of both parents in caregiving produces the most positive developmental outcomes for children, the absence or lack of involvement of any parent is cause for concern. For example, fathers who undertake 40 percent or more of the family's caregiving responsibilities have greater impact on their children's cognitive performance than fathers who are less involved.[48] While mothers spend more overall time than fathers with their children, mothers and fathers tend to spend time engaged in different activities with their children. Over their child's school career, mothers are far more likely to be highly involved than are fathers.[49] Mothers are more likely than fathers to spend time looking at books, playing board games or puzzles; fathers are more likely to participate in playing sports or outdoor activities. Mothers and fathers spend roughly equal amounts of time talking to children about family.[50]

### *Domestic Violence*

Significant numbers of adult family members continue to be abused by other adult family members, though overall rates of reported intimate partner abuse appear to be declining. Reported violence perpetrated against intimate partners declined 21 percent between 1993 and 1998, from 1.1 million to roughly 900,000.[51] By 1999, the reported number of intimate partner victimizations declined to roughly 792,000.[52] Eighty-five percent of reported spousal abuse cases in 1998 were committed against women – with four in ten abused women living in households with children under twelve. On the whole, younger and poorer women appear to be abused more frequently than older, more affluent women. Women aged 16-24 accounted for 40 percent of intimate partner violence against females. Women with incomes of $7,500 or lower were victimized by their intimate partners at seven times the rate of women with incomes over $75,000 – 20 per 1,000 and 3 per 1,000, respectively.[53]

Using data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that women currently married at the time of the survey reported the lowest intimate partner violence rate at 2.6 per 1,000 persons. Never married women reported a rate of 11.3 per thousand, and divorced or separated women reported an alarming 31.9 per thousand.[54] Younger women ages 16-24 are victimized most often by cohabiting or non-resident boyfriends while women ages 25-34 were victimized in roughly equal percentages by spouses and boyfriends. Spouses most often victimized women ages 35 and older.[55] While the rates of reported abuse are lower for married women, a simple comparison of married to divorced or separated women is misleading. Given the survey methodology employed, determining whether the abuse of divorced or separated women followed an ended marriage or began during the marriage was not possible. Neither was it possible to include in the rates women who are homeless or who live in institutional settings because of abuse since the survey only targets households.

Domestic abuse and high levels of destructive conflict have negative effects on adults and children. Recent research examining the effects of marital conflict makes some important distinctions between "constructive" and "destructive" conflict, the former having little to no negative consequences for children and beneficial effects on children's ability to handle interpersonal conflicts. In contrast, destructive forms of conflict like overt marital conflict, physical aggression and violence, hostility, and withdrawn behavior are more strongly related to child maladjustment and poor outcomes in later adolescence and young adulthood.[56] In a summary of four reviews of research on the effects of domestic violence on children completed between 1989 and 1998, two writers found consistent adverse impacts of spousal physical abuse on a range of child outcomes (e.g., aggressive behavior and conduct problems, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, academic performance, social development, and physical health). Poor outcomes were observed across different ages and increased the risk of child abuse, poverty, and substance abuse.[57]

## Family Diversity: Families with Immigrant, Special Needs, Incarcerated, and Gay/Lesbian Members

Thus far, this paper's discussion of family well-being took a general look at American families. However, at least four types of families often are overlooked by general discussions of families in America: immigrant families, families comprised of either adults or children with special needs, families with an incarcerated parent, and families headed by gay or lesbian adults. Each is discussed below.

### *Immigrant Families*

The foreign-born population of the U.S. rose dramatically between 1970 and 2000, with Latin American and Asian immigrants contributing most to this growing diversity. In 2002, 14 million children, or 19 percent of all children, lived with at least one foreign-born parent. Of these, 2.7 million children were themselves foreign-born, 7.8 million were Hispanic, and 2.5 million were Asian or Pacific Islander. These children were more likely to live in families with incomes below $30,000 per year and to be poor, particularly if both their parents were immigrants.[58]

Approximately one in ten Americans is an immigrant; however, members of immigrant families represent one in four low-wage workers. And contrary to the picture often painted of poor families in the U.S., parents of poor immigrant families more often are employed full time and married rather than headed by single females. Despite nearly full employment among many immigrant groups, poverty is nearly 50 percent higher among immigrants than among U.S. born workers. For many immigrant families, full employment is insufficient for climbing out of poverty.

Consequently, immigrant families are in need of supports like healthcare coverage, English proficiency classes and other work supports, food stamps, and temporary cash assistance.[59]

### *Families and Disability*

Families with members with disabilities also are an often-overlooked family type. An estimated 5 to 7 percent of children have some impairment, limitation, or other delay that prevents them from engaging in age-appropriate activities,[60] with children in low-income families facing a 40 percent higher risk of having a disability.[61] Research estimates that 16 percent of families receiving cash assistance have at least one child with a functional disability. In addition, the economic and emotional needs in these families can be pressing. For example, women in families with children with disabilities are less likely to enter the labor force, more likely to earn less than other women, and are often available to work fewer hours due to care concerns for the child.[63] One California study found that some 20 percent of families incurred unreimbursed medical and out-of-pocket childcare expenses of $100 or more in a month. These expenses were most prevalent among the poorest families and in cases where the child's disability was more severe.[64]

The direct and indirect economic costs of living with certain disabilities are also high.[65] In a study conducted by the Research Triangle Institute and Centers for Disease Control, the average lifetime costs per person were estimated for persons with mental retardation at $1,014,000, for persons with cerebral palsy at $921,000, for persons with hearing loss at $417,000, and for persons with vision impairment at $566,000. The total inflation-adjusted societal economic costs for these four disabilities alone were estimated at nearly 67 billion dollars, underscoring the need for effective early intervention and treatment services.[66]

The stresses of parenting with a disability or rearing a child with a disability can be overwhelming at times. Such families need on-going supports and respite in order to avoid burnout. Often, families with members with a disability require specialized therapies and assistive technologies to enable every family member to fully participate both in the family and in the larger community.

### *Families and Incarceration*

With the increase in incarceration rates over the last twenty years, 10 percent of all children (7.3 million) have a parent in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole. Two percent of all minors – more than 1.5 million children – have a parent in state or federal prison.[67] Of the children with incarcerated parents, 58 percent are younger than ten years old. Compounding the youthfulness of the child population affected by adult incarceration is their dependence upon their adult caregivers. Forty percent of fathers lived with their children before incarceration, and two-thirds of

incarcerated mothers were not only living with the children at the time of their incarceration but were the sole caregiver. In addition, 71 percent of parents in state prison were employed either full- or part-time in the month prior to their arrest, with these wages providing the primary source of family income.[68]

Incarceration disrupts a child's life and family dynamics in a number of ways. Studies show that incarceration-related disruptions in parent-child relationships place children at risk of multiple developmental difficulties and a range of socio-emotional problems.[69] Long distances, high telephone costs, lack of transportation, humiliating visiting procedures, and changes in relationships often hinder consistent contact with children while parents are incarcerated. To make matters worse, parents returning from prison often must adjust to community and family life without the benefit of services and supports either during imprisonment or upon community re-entry. These parents face many barriers to community re-entry, including: new relationships, relocation, limited finances, mounting child support arrears, feelings of resentment, finding employment and housing, peer group pressure, and emotional detachment from family.[70]

### *Families with Gay or Lesbian Parents*

The 2000 Census recorded 105.5 million total households in the United States. Of those households, married couples comprised 52 percent (54.5 million). Unmarried partners registered just over 9 percent (5.4 million) of coupled households,[71] up from 3.7 million in 1994.[72] Gay and lesbian partner households accounted for approximately 1 percent (594,391 households) of all coupled households and about 9 percent of unmarried-partner households.[73] Children were present in just over 34 percent (100,000) of households headed by lesbian partners, and 22.3 percent (67,000) of all households headed by male same-sex partners.[74]

Research on the well-being of children and parents in gay and lesbian families is scant compared to the larger body of literature on families in general. During the 1990's, two reviews of the available literature and one meta-analysis were conducted.[75] In general, these studies found no significant differences in gender identity, self-concept, intelligence, personality characteristics, emotional adjustment, behavior problems, or peer relations between children reared by homosexual parents and those reared by heterosexual parents. However, the available research is consistently limited by its reliance on small samples of white, middle-class, previously married lesbians and their children. Consequently, any generalizations made to children parented in gay and lesbian families with other characteristics (e.g., low-income gay and lesbian headed households, children reared by gay or lesbian racial minorities, or children parented by gay fathers) may be inappropriate or should be made with caution.[76]

## Summary: What Can or Must Be Done?

In summary, the American family has undergone fundamental changes in the last several decades. These changes are wide-ranging, including variations in family structure and living arrangements, increases in the costs of raising children, and attendant effects on children and parents. While not all families are doing poorly as a result of changes, those who are struggling – typically poorer, less educated, and minority families – face serious challenges to maintaining healthy relationships and creating opportunity for their members.

Potent advances must occur if the challenges to successful family life are to be overcome. First, individuals choosing marriage or other forms of family life must be supported and equipped for success in family relationships and responsibilities. While families and community play the major role in this preparation, there are supportive roles that government can play. Second, support must be provided to families who are struggling to make ends meet and raise their children. Third, appropriate support must be provided to families with special challenges (e.g., immigrant families and families with special needs).

While there may be some degree of consensus about these objectives, there is less agreement (or at least more vocal debate) on the role government and public policy should play in meeting these objectives. Differing conceptual points-of-view abound and foster many disparate solutions. A unifying framework for guiding policy decisions intended to strengthen families is needed. Ideally, such a framework would:

- Focus on the positive outcomes desired for all families,
- Clearly delineate boundaries for the role of public policy in strengthening families,
- Be sensitive to specific differences and needs of varying ethnic, racial, gender and religious groups in its analysis and in the targeting of resources, and
- Offer a galvanizing vision and direction for future policy efforts.

Section III offers one attempt at providing such a framework. Section IV recommends a specific set of state policies to strengthen families.

# A Beginning Framework for State-Level Policy

3 A framework for a state-level policy agenda to strengthen and maintain families should begin with a definition of what is meant by "family" and particularly, "strong" families.

## Defining Key Terms

### *Definition of "Family"*

For the purposes of this paper, "family" is broadly defined as a group consisting of at least one adult acting in a parenting role and at least one child. The term "family" refers to both biological families and those formed through adoption. Except for policies with a specific income focus, like TANF and food stamps, this definition of family is inclusive of families at all income levels. An inclusive definition of family seems appropriate given (1) there are many activities for which all families either need support or are responsible for completing in order to be effective, and (2) there is tremendous diversity in the types of American families, militating against a one size fits all approach.

### *Definition of "Strong" Families*

"Strong" families are characterized by a set of relational, functional, and "virtue-related" strengths. Relationally, strong families exhibit low levels of conflict, high levels of caring and nurturing behaviors, and high levels of involvement from and interaction between all members of the family. Relationally healthy families also

maintain social networks with others in their neighborhood, in their workplaces and schools, and in community, social, and religious organizations. Relationally healthy families generally are either intact or preserve relationships between children and both parents when the parents separate or divorce.

Functionally, strong families are able to carry out primary caregiving and caretaking responsibilities on behalf of their members. Such functional activities include securing basic needs like housing, food, employment, health care, child care, and other services necessary to the well-being of their members. Other domestic functions like cooking, cleaning, bill-paying, and childrearing responsibilities are delineated clearly, mutually agreed to, and completed in well-functioning families. In addition, the family functions to transmit family and cultural identity to its members.

Strong families also impart qualities that are implicit in relational and functional notions of a good family life. Among those qualities is a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of other family members, maintain fidelity between spouses and loyalty to other family members, engage in genuine acts of charity, and cultivate hope, perseverance, and resilience amid difficulties. Without these and similar positive virtues, the ability of families to be functionally and relationally strong is diminished.

### *Definition of "Policy"*

The term "policy" refers to those formal statements and decisions reflected in state statute, executive orders, and judicial rulings. The policies recommended in this paper represent a beginning set of state policies for framing a policy agenda for improving and supporting family relationships. They also establish the basis for both a self-assessment tool for states and a report comparing state policy efforts to strengthen families. The recommendations are not exhaustive but attempt to define a select set of policies whose cumulative impact may improve the quality of family life. The recommendations meet a number of criteria that guided the deliberations of an interdisciplinary work group asked to give input and expert opinion on a select number of policies with the best potential for achieving results. These general criteria include:

1. Demonstrated effectiveness in the research and evaluation literature;
2. Support by collective wisdom of practitioners from the field;
3. Address disparities between groups of children and families;
4. Have sufficient scope and scale to address the outcome; and
5. Are politically and administratively feasible.

### *Definition of Benchmarks*

A "benchmark" is a point of reference from which measurements may be made and/or something that serves as a standard by which others may be measured. Benchmarks convey not only the general idea of measurement but also set explicit standards for performance. Where indicators measure a change in a result or condition (i.e., increases in age-appropriate child immunization rates), benchmarks make it possible to measure such changes against an established standard. Benchmarks make possible judgments about the success or failure of a measured change that indicators alone do not. For example, increasing immunization rates from 80 percent to 85 percent in a given period is an important indicator. But, comparing such progress against a benchmark immunization rate of 95 percent communicates the inadequacy of such progress and informs future actions. Here, this definition of and approach to "benchmarks" is applied to policies rather than outcomes or results.

## Policy Logic Model

A compelling framework must make explicit its results-focus and the theory of change proposed for achieving those results. Figure 3 presents an illustrative logic model for fostering strong family relationships. While depicted in linear terms, the relationships between state policy decisions, implementation activities, and achievement of both positive and negative results is highly interactive. For the purposes of this paper and the *Policy Matters* project, the policy logic model is used to (1) more clearly delineate and represent the recommended aims of public policy vis-à-vis strengthening families, and (2) narrow the scope of the paper and the project to focus on the policies believed to offer the best opportunity for strengthening families. Given other assumptions and a different set of desired outcomes, other models are quite feasible. Each section of the logic model is briefly discussed below.

### *Result and Outcomes*

Three long-term outcomes operationalize the long-term result, "strong family relationships." They are: (1) healthy family formation and maintenance, (2) active parent participation and support, and (3) family stability and safety. These outcomes are representative of the optimal conditions, activities, and pursuits of family life from the formative stage of new families to the ongoing success and perseverance of mature families.

### *Indicators*

The indicators in the logic model correspond to the three stated outcomes. They are illustrative measures of family well-being, containing both positive and negative aspects of family life. For example, some indicators focus on overcoming challenges that confront families:

- Reducing rates of social isolation,
- Reducing divorce rates,
- Reducing rates of domestic violence and child maltreatment, and
- Reducing unplanned and out-of-wedlock births.

Other indicators are measures of positive improvements or conditions among families, including:

- Increasing rates of non-custodial parent involvement,
- Increasing rates of children remaining with biological parents,
- Increasing rates of children in foster care who are placed in family settings and in their own communities,
- Increasing rates of timely and permanent adoptions where reunification is not possible,
- Increasing child support payment rates, and
- Increasing rates of housing and food security.

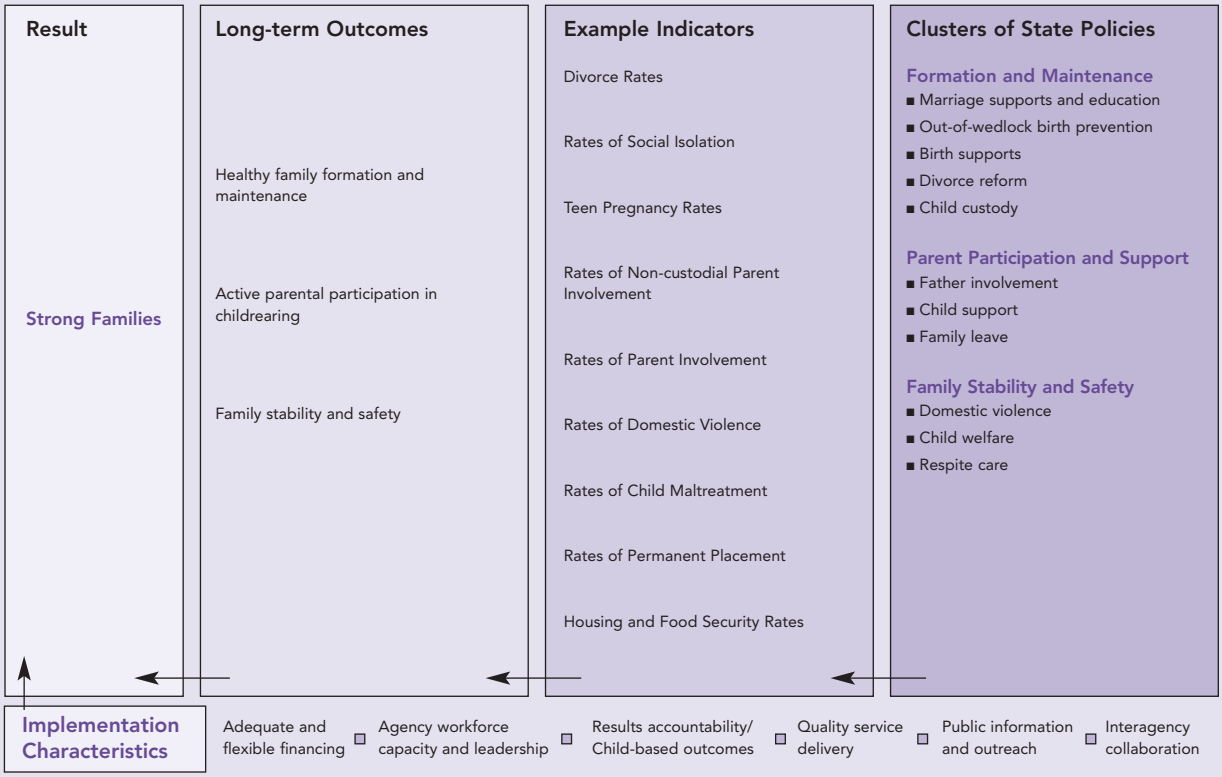
Many of the measures are indicative of more than one long-term outcome. For example, rates of domestic violence indicate both family instability and the absence of positive supports among members. Conversely, increased parental participation contributes to stability, nurturance and maintenance. Again, the list of indicators included is not intended to be exhaustive but instructive for narrowing the potential policy focus to a set of policies with potential to demonstrably impact family outcomes.

### *Clusters of State Policies*

The aim of the *Policy Matters* project is to identify a combination of state policies with the best collective potential for producing a set of desired results. To that end, a mix of 11 policies are proposed as a possible policy agenda for strengthening and maintaining strong families. The policies are organized into three categories or clusters of policies with a common set of objectives.

- **The family formation and maintenance category** of policies aims to provide meaningful and tangible supports to two-parent families, reduce the incidence of unplanned and out-of-wedlock childbirth, and support families during difficult transitions like new births and divorce.

Figure 3. Policy Logic Model for Forming, Maintaining, and Stabilizing Strong Families




- **The active parent participation and support category** of policies aims to foster the active involvement of both parents and to expand the amount of time families have with one another during important and often difficult situations (e.g., birth of a new child, major illness).
- **The family stability and safety category** aims to ensure that all family members are protected from abuse and that risk factors and crisis situations do not disrupt or hinder family functioning.

If states can achieve the collective objectives addressed by the policies in each cluster, a sizable advancement in the strength and well-being of all its families will be made.

### *Implementation*

Several general implementation strategies are necessary if state policies are to be effective at achieving outcomes for children and families. In particular, state financing, agency workforce and leadership, service delivery quality, public information and outreach, results accountability, and interagency collaboration strategies are important for successful policy implementation. These strategies,

in combination, have the potential for improving the overall ability of human service systems to fulfill their missions, track progress, and improve the capacity of communities and families to address social issues.

Given the various ways that states can implement policies and the need to track implementation in simple ways, these strategies are put forth as one possible qualitative method of tracking state policy implementation. In addition, a system of setting benchmarks for state implementation efforts might consider using select performance measures or outputs like enrollment figures in key programs.

## Recommended Policies by Category

### Family Formation and Maintenance

- Out-of-wedlock birth prevention
- Marriage promotion policies
- Birth support policies
- Divorce policies
- Child custody policies

### Active Parent Participation and Support

- Father involvement policies
- Child support policies
- Family and medical leave policies

### Family Stability and Safety

- Domestic violence policies
- Child welfare policies
- Respite care policies

# Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Benchmarks

4

The preceding policy logic model outlines the conceptual relationships between the core result ("strong family relationships") and a mix of policies designed to impact that result. The logic model also presents, in general terms, the specific policies and implementation characteristics that are believed to contribute to desired family outcomes. If, however, the project is to translate the general list of policies and policy implementation characteristics into a system usable for comparing state efforts, these general listings must be transformed into specific, scaleable criteria. These criteria then become the basis upon which specific policy benchmarks can be set.

The remainder of this section outlines the key policy recommendations and benchmarks for each of three policy clusters. Tables 1-3 present the three policy clusters and their recommended policies. The first column in each table lists the recommended policies. Column two lists critical policy decisions that should be addressed for the greatest likelihood of success. Column three lists for each key policy feature one or more measurable criteria that could be used to evaluate state policy. In some cases, a simple "yes" or "no" is used to describe whether a policy feature exists in state policy. In other places, a greater level of detail is possible and hence a range of specific options is listed. Bold items represent the desired or acceptable benchmark against which to assess state policies.

The remainder of this paper details the policy recommendations and benchmarks for improving the strength of American families.

## Family Formation and Maintenance Policies

Family formation is a period where state policy can significantly affect the well-being of families. Family formation encompasses at least three potential events: marriage, the birth of a child, and adoption. During the period leading up to any of these three events, the opportunity exists to (1) ensure that newly forming families begin with the best possible advantages of family life, (2) foster more two-parent families, and (3) strengthen the family's ability to form strong relationships (e.g., closer parental bonds, healthy parent-child interactions, and parental understanding of the needs of adoptive children). Seizing this opportunity is the primary objective for policies included in the family formation category. Table 1 summarizes the policy recommendations and key features addressing family formation and maintenance.

### *Policy 1: Out-of-Wedlock Birth Prevention*

Out-of-wedlock birth, especially among teen parents, is an important correlate of future need for government services, poverty, and emotional stress for single parents. Early, unplanned births result in the premature formation of families, most often single female-headed families. Preventing early and unplanned births could allow young women to acquire higher levels of education, obtain better quality employment, and form more stable relationships with intimate partners.

**1.1 Teen Pregnancy Prevention.** There is a measure of good news to consider regarding births to teen mothers. Since 1991, the teen birth rate has fallen 22 percent to a record low.[77] The decline seems to be due in large part to better economic opportunities in the 1990's, changes in teen attitudes and behaviors, and community and government investments in teen pregnancy prevention programs like the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Plain Talk Initiative.[78] Building on the success of the last decade, states should continue investments in teen pregnancy prevention programs. Specifically, states should invest in longer-term interventions and programs that seek to: reduce risky behaviors related to teen sexual activity; develop abstinence values; improve parental monitoring; promote participation in sports and volunteering; strengthen parent-child relationships and communication about sex; and provide supports for maintaining intact families or married households.[79]

**1.2 Contraception Coverage in Private Insurance Plans.** One effective measure states can take to prevent out-of-wedlock and unplanned pregnancy among adult women is to require health insurers to cover prescription contraceptives. Since 1973 states have been required to cover family planning services through Medicaid; however, many private insurers do not offer coverage of Food and Drug Administration approved contraception resources. One study found that every state using federal approval or waivers to extend Medicaid-

covered family planning services to more families for longer than the required 60-day postpartum period saved federal and state money during the evaluation period while simultaneously increasing access to and receipt of both public and private services. Of the 13 states operating Medicaid waivers as of 2001, 12 provided contraceptive services. Two of the states achieved measurable reductions in unintended pregnancies among eligible women.[80] According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 23 states have laws requiring health insurers to cover prescription contraceptives; 13 states exempt religious employers from including contraceptive coverage in their plans if it violates the employer's religious convictions; and three states exempt insurers affiliated with a religious organization.[81] One state offers an exemption to both religious and secular employers.[82] Except in cases where religious exemptions are granted, states should require insurers and employers to provide prescription contraception coverage to employees.

### *Policy 2: Marriage Supports and Education*

There is a clearly established research consensus indicating that healthy marriages are associated with significantly better outcomes for both children and parents. Moreover, research evidence indicates that the economic advantages of marriage (1) surpass that available to cohabiting couples, (2) can accrue to low-income couples, and (3) lower poverty among children and women.[83] Consequently, state policy to strengthen families should have as one of its aims supporting strong marriages among adults who consider marriage an option. Such supports and promotion activities should be one part of a multi-pronged strategy to encourage stable and reduce the risk of unstable relationships.[84] Specifically, state policy can support the healthy formation of families by (a) setting public goals and measures of improvement, (b) providing marriage skills training and education opportunities, and (c) minimizing or eliminating marriage disincentives for those who opt to marry.

**2.1 Public Education on Marriage.** Many states are enacting laws to support the healthy formation of marriages, and many of these efforts provide some funding for public education and marriage promotion activities. General marriage promotion efforts include public endorsement of marriage promotion, divorce reduction goals, and media campaigns. Some researchers question whether public messaging campaigns promoting marriage are likely to further increase the already high desire to marry among most people.[85] While this is a legitimate concern, especially given that investments in public campaigns could be spent in direct supports to some low-income families, other research indicates that the normative climate concerning marriage and premarital sex are important for preventing out-of-wedlock births.[86] And while there is not much research on the effectiveness of *specific* marriage promotion campaigns

given their recent advent, the research on the effectiveness of media campaigns to address other complex health-related behaviors like smoking, sexual behavior, domestic violence, racism, and crime prevention is quite extensive.[87] That research indicates that mass media campaigns meeting best practice standards are likely to be effective if they are: (a) combined with community-based supports, (b) feature messages based on research, (c) target both individuals and social expectations involving complex behaviors, (d) reaches 70-80 percent of the target group over long time periods, (e) conveys novel information or old information in new ways, and (f) includes a reliable evaluation and modification design. States considering or funding general public education campaigns to promote the positive benefits of marriage should at minimum ensure that the campaigns are: combined with community-based supports, based upon solid research, funded well enough to reach target audiences, and include an evaluation component. Currently, campaigns exist in Oklahoma, Louisiana, Florida, and Arizona.

**2.2 Premarital Education and Marriage Skill-building Services.** One method for fostering healthier marriages, and for reducing marital conflict leading to harmful relationships and divorces, is to offer premarital education and marriage skills supports to couples. Because marital distress negatively impacts physical health, mental health, work productivity, child outcomes, and quality of life,[88] state investments in marital education and skill development programs are important for the health and well-being of families and communities.

Despite the positive association of healthy marriages with higher work productivity and better physical and mental health, questions about the effectiveness of marriage education and skill-building for low-income adults have arisen. One nationally representative study of fragile families indicates that one-third of all unmarried parents face no serious barriers to marriage, and another one-third could benefit from premarital education and skill-building activities if they are coupled with employment and mental health supports. This same research found that approximately 13 percent of unmarried parents would be inappropriate participants in such programs due to a history of partner violence.[89]

Effective premarital education programs can contribute to more positive family outcomes by prompting more serious deliberations about marriage among couples, reducing impulsive or poor decisions to marry, and helping couples learn of resources and supports should they need help in the future. In addition, existing research examining some marriage preparation programs reveals significant positive outcomes. Specifically, couples completing

counseling and skills programs that focus on strengthening protective factors (e.g., friendship, commitment, spiritual or religious connection), lowering risk factors (e.g., negative interaction and unrealistic expectations), and decreasing marital distress by helping couples learn to communicate when in conflict are significantly more likely to communicate more positively and less negatively; avoid breakups and divorce; exhibit higher levels of marital satisfaction; and exhibit less relationship aggression than couples who did not participate in such programs. These effects are stable in some follow-up studies for up to five years.[90] In addition, positive outcomes are observable even when the programs are delivered in community-based settings and by clergy and lay leaders,[91] thus enhancing the prospects for more widespread implementation through public/private partnerships.

States should provide funding for multiple community-based marriage skill-building and pre-marital education services, resources, and activities to assist those adults and parents interested in marrying. Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wisconsin are among the states that support and provide funding for premarital education or relationship skills workshops.[92] Some states have funded these opportunities with unspent TANF funds.

**2.3 Removing Tax Disincentives for Married Families.** Establishing what constitutes a "marriage tax penalty" is difficult since it often depends upon the relative income of both parents. The federal income tax, for instance, taxes a married couple with a single income less than it would if that individual were a single tax filer. When both spouses have income, however, they may be taxed more than if they were not married. The more equal the earnings of both spouses the higher is this type of tax penalty. While state income tax systems are generally much less graduated than the federal system and, therefore, do not usually provide much of either a marriage tax benefit or penalty, eighteen states currently levying personal income taxes "penalize" two-parent, two-earner married families either by adopting income tax thresholds for married taxpayers that are less than twice the threshold for unmarried individual tax filers or by implementing state income taxes as a percentage of the federal liability.[93] Nine states have no income taxes, six have a flat tax, and eight have tax brackets for married couples that are two times the bracket for individuals.[94] At minimum, state tax thresholds for married couples should be equivalent to two times the threshold of single tax filers. States wanting to provide a "marriage incentive" to couples might consider an income tax threshold more generous than the tax rate of two individual taxpayers.

**2.4 TANF and Health Insurance Support for Two-Parent Families.** In addition to penalties in tax policies, some states maintain disincentives toward two-parent families in policies governing eligibility for TANF and Medicaid. The AFDC program restricted coverage of married couple families and two-parent families to only those who qualified under an "unemployed parent" provision. Under TANF, states have flexibility to change these rules and cover married couple families whether or not they meet disability or "unemployed parent" provisions. Thirty-five states make two-parent families eligible for TANF support without imposing stricter work requirements than those for single-parent families. Thirty-three of these states base TANF eligibility only on financial resources, without regard to family structure.[95] Thirty-six states base Medicaid eligibility solely on financial circumstances and at least six others have expanded state-funded programs and State Children's Health Insurance Programs (S-CHIP) to cover more parents.[96] Supports also should be extended to immigrant families.

### *Policy 3: Family Supports at Birth*

The birth of a new child offers an opportunity to positively impact the mother-father relationship and the caregiving skills of the parents. This is true for both married and unmarried parents, with some 80 percent of unmarried parents remaining intimate partners at the time of birth, 80 percent of fathers providing financial support during the pregnancy, and parents rating the chances of marriage at childbirth at better than 50/50.[97] At the same time, the birth of a new child marks a major transition in the life of families, often triggering new stress, depressive symptoms in some parents, and concerns about parenting ability.[98] State supports to newborns and their families can help with the transition to new family and caregiving roles. Specifically, states should enact policies that provide:

**3.1 Supports for New Parents at Risk for Bad Outcomes.** In the late 1970s, several hundred federally funded home visiting programs were in existence – nearly all of which were eliminated during the 1981-82 budget year.[99] In 1991, partly in response to public and political concern regarding child welfare practices, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect called for the federal government to phase in a national universal home visiting program for children during the neonatal period. The Board recommended that services be voluntary, generally available to families for up to one year, staffed by both professional and paraprofessional visitors, and focus on enhancing family interactions rather than exclusively on abuse and neglect prevention.[100] In large part, the Boards' recommendations were founded on the then-available research on home visiting services. For example, in a review of 31 randomized studies of home visiting programs, David Olds and Harriet Kitzman found

that programs with a comprehensive focus, frequent (e.g., four times per month) home visits, well-trained professional staff, and serving high-risk families were more likely to demonstrate success.[101]

Later researchers also found that home visiting programs were effective at improving some results and not others. Poor performance was observed for preventing pre-term delivery and low birth weight, and limited evidence of program impact on child health, child behavior, and child abuse was available. In 1993, there was strong evidence in support of home visiting approaches for children with chronic illnesses.[102]

Though the Board's recommendations were not implemented in the early 1990s, a number of states and national initiatives have made significant investments in home visiting supports since that time. Expanded research evidence for a number of home visiting models is also available, including Parents as Teachers (PAT), Nurse Home Visitation Programs (NHVP), Healthy Start, Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), Healthy Families America, and Comprehensive Child Development Programs. Evaluations of research studies as of 1999 indicate that the performance of home visiting programs has not significantly improved since 1993, despite attempts at improving many of the program models listed above. Specifically, the results of home visiting programs "are mixed, and, where positive, often modest in magnitude. Studies have revealed some benefits in parenting practices, attitudes, and knowledge, but the benefits for children in the areas of health, development, and abuse and neglect rates that are supposed to derive from these changes have been more elusive."[103]

Perhaps the best of these programs focus on narrower intervention goals or outcomes. For example, of the models reviewed in recent research, PAT produced positive child development benefits and NHVP yielded positive life course changes. But these results were limited to Latina mothers in the case of PAT and poor, unmarried, often teen mothers in the case of NHVP. Hawaii's Healthy Start Program led to more connections to regular medical providers, although this result did not lead to higher immunization rates or well-child visits. [104]

Given this evidence, state policymakers should approach home visiting initiatives with some caution. Two policy benchmarks are recommended. First, states considering home visiting programs as a method of providing supports to newborns and their parents must make sure the particular model of home visiting is well matched with the state's intended results. Second, states should take steps to be sure the particular model of home visiting is

appropriate and demonstrably successful with the families targeted for support – no home visiting program has demonstrated significant results across all types of families. However, home visiting support can be very effective with families who are vulnerable due to certain risk factors and who are aware of their risk status.[105]

**3.2 Work Exemptions for New Parents.** The time a mother spends bonding with an infant is critical to the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Stability in this newly forming relationship lowers stress and depressive symptoms for both children and parents.[106] State policy can support new mothers and fathers in their transition to parenting by enacting work exemptions and supports that allow parents more time with their children during the early years of the child's life. Specifically, states should pass TANF work exemptions that allow mothers or fathers to spend up to one year with an infant child.

In addition, states should support non-TANF families by enacting at-home infant care supports that allow parents more time with infant children. Minnesota pioneered such a program in 1998 when it recognized the importance of parenting by providing parents with incomes up to 75 percent of the state median income a small stipend in lieu of childcare subsidies while caring for children under the age of one year. Missouri allocates a percentage of riverboat gaming fees to a stay-at-home parent program for parents who: have children under three years of age, have household incomes below 185 percent of poverty, and participate in allowable education or work-related activities or work fewer than 20 hours per week. Parents participating in an approved parenting education program or with an economic hardship are eligible to receive an increased stipend. Montana launched a pilot program in 2001 to provide a stipend of $378 per month to low-income families (below 150 percent of poverty) who care for a child younger than 2 years of age at home. Participants in this program are allowed to pursue employment and education but are not eligible for TANF cash assistance.[107]

### *Policy 4: Divorce Statutes*

One indirect approach to fostering the maintenance of families is to reform current divorce statutes. The relationship between state laws regulating divorce and actual divorce rates has received some attention in the research literature. There appears to be some evidence that states adopting unilateral or so-called "no-fault" divorce laws inadvertently contributed to escalating divorce rates over the past three decades.[108] Some argue that no-fault statutes have inadvertently weakened family stability by further weakening cultural commitments to the social contract of marriage.

Proponents of unilateral divorce statutes assert that the rise in divorce rates that followed adoption of no-fault statutes is actually a fair reflection of the prevailing cultural sentiment and the number of people who were in bad relationships with only financially costly and emotionally embittering options for exiting such marriages prior to the law.[109]

Marriages end in divorce for many reasons. No matter the reason, however, state policy should attempt to help divorcing families end their marriage in as healthy and positive a manner as possible. The following are recommendations for meeting that objective:

**4.1 Unilateral Divorce Reforms.** In the 1970s, 37 states made legislative amendments or repeals to divorce statutes to implement no-fault divorce.[110] Given the association of "no-fault" divorce statutes with actual divorce rates, and the association of divorce with poorer outcomes for parents and children, it seems some re-examination of unilateral divorce is warranted – particularly in cases involving young children. Evidence suggests that states should modify their unilateral divorce statutes to require a more deliberate proceeding than no-fault divorce when children are involved – except in cases where child or domestic abuse is cited. Research on divorce education reveals a range of findings important for positive child adjustment following divorce, including positive impacts on communication between ex-spouses, lowered child exposure to parental conflict, fewer school absences, and reductions in re-litigation.[111] Currently, 23 states make such modifications, including requiring that parents complete an "effects of divorce" education class, mediation, and/or longer waiting periods when children are involved in the divorce.[112] A 1999 survey indicated that nearly half of all U.S. counties offer some form of divorce education supports to parents, triple the number in 1994. Of those not offering a program, survey respondents cite lack of financial and technical resources as the main impediments.[113]

### *Policy 5: Child Custody*

Child custody policies play a prominent role in the maintenance of family relationships and appear to be related to divorce outcomes. For example, divergence in parental perceptions about the father's ability to parent and the mother's willingness to be accommodating affect parental satisfaction with custody agreements.[114] In turn, satisfaction with custody agreements and the level of conflict over custody arrangements may impact the well-being of children. One major aim of state custody policies should be to maintain, where possible and healthy, relationships between children and both parents.

**5.1 Joint Physical Custody Options.** State child custody policy should, among other things, protect the child's emotional, social, psychological, economic and physical well-being while simultaneously safeguarding both the child's

and the adult's interest in maintaining past relationships, or possibly even affecting future ones.[115] Joint physical custody essentially establishes a shared parenting, decision making, and residency relationship between the estranged parents and the children. Such awards typically allow children to maintain at least 30/70, and up to 50/50, time arrangement with parents. State custody policies that emphasize joint physical custody appear to have the benefit of reducing the "win-lose" character of divorces and of making it difficult for angry parents to punish former partners by "taking the children." They also promote more contact between the child and both parents, and offer statutory visitation protections beyond those offered by joint legal custody. Joint physical custody laws may also help to discourage rushed divorces. States with higher levels (over 30 percent) of joint physical custody awards demonstrated declines in divorce rates four times that of states with low joint physical custody rates.[116]

In addition, empirical research studies reveal that joint physical and joint legal custody arrangements are significantly associated with better child adjustment outcomes following divorce when compared to sole-custody decisions, including time spent with non-custodial parents, closeness to the father, and benefits in emotional, behavioral and academic well-being.[117] Some research suggests that these positive effects persist even when there is some level of parental conflict,[118] although the measurement of conflict in most studies is inconsistent and the cause of conflict unclear.[119] Given the available evidence, state policy should seek positive child and family benefits by encouraging joint physical custody where possible and safe for the child and parents. To date, 43 states and the District of Columbia authorize joint custody arrangements. However, of the 43 states, only 11 have passed custody laws presuming or favoring joint custody agreements unless there is proof that joint custody is not in the child's best interest. Another eight states favor joint custody if both parents agree. Seven states do not specifically authorize use of joint custody.[120]

Table 1. Family Formation and Dissolution Policies, Key Features and Available State Options

| Policy | Key Feature | | Policy Options |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Out-of-Wedlock Birth Prevention | 1.1 | State funds teen pregnancy prevention program with documented success | **Yes** • No |
| | 1.2 | State requires that private insurers cover prescription contraception | • No<br>• **Yes, with exemptions for religious purposes;**<br>• Yes, with no exemptions or options extended to individuals working for employers with religious exemptions |
| 2 Marriage Promotion | 2.1 | State funds general public education campaigns to promote the positive benefits of marriage that are: (a) combined with community-based supports, (b) based upon solid research, (c) funded well enough to reach target audiences, and (d) include an evaluation component | • No campaign<br>• Campaign meets 0 of 4 criteria<br>• Campaign meets 1 of 4 criteria<br>• Campaign meets 2 of 4 criteria<br>• Campaign meets 3 of 4 criteria<br>• **Campaign meets 4 of 4 criteria** |
| | 2.2 | State provides funding for multiple community-based marriage skill-building and pre-marital education services, resources, and activities | **Yes** • No |
| | 2.3 | Income tax rate of married families compared to singles is: | • Greater than singles<br>• **Equal to singles**<br>• Less than singles |
| | 2.4a | Married and two-parent families are eligible for TANF and health insurance support with requirements comparable to those for single-parent families | • Not eligible for either<br>• Eligible for 1 program only<br>• **Eligible for both programs**<br>• Eligibility based on resources only |
| | 2.4b | Married immigrant families eligible for TANF support | **Yes** • No |

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Table 1. Family Formation and Dissolution Policies, Key Features and Available State Options

| Policy | Key Policy Feature | State Options |
|---|---|---|
| **3** Prenatal and Birth Supports | **3.1a** State funds home visiting services that are appropriate for the stated goals of the initiative | **Yes** • No |
| | **3.1b** State home visiting services are appropriately targeted to families with high risk factors | **Yes** • No |
| | **3.2a** TANF work exemptions for new mothers of children up to age: | • None<br>• Less than 1 year<br>• **1 year**<br>• 1 year or older |
| | **3.2b** State income supports to new mothers caring for infants at home include: | • None<br>• TANF mothers only<br>• **TANF and non-TANF low-income mothers** |
| **4** Divorce Reforms | **4.1a** State modifies "no-fault" laws to require divorce counseling, mediation, and/or custody planning when children are affected by divorce | • None required<br>• **Required when children are present**<br>• Required in all cases |
| | **4.1b** State law waives counseling and time limit requirements in cases where abuse is cited | **Yes** • No |
| **5** Child Custody | **5.1** State statutes include and encourage joint physical custody options | • Not included<br>• Includes as an option<br>• Favored when both parents agree<br>• **Favored unless child's best interest is threatened** |

**NOTE: Bold Policy Options** represent the proposed benchmark for each policy decision

## Active Parent Participation and Support Policies

Two additional objectives of state policy aimed at strengthening families are to (1) foster high levels of involvement from both parents, and (2) support families during important transitions and difficult family situations. Three key policies seem appropriate for stimulating and maintaining active parent participation and nurturance of children. Table 2 presents the policies and their key features.

### *Policy 6: Father Involvement*

Research clearly demonstrates that the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children produces significant benefits for both children and the fathers themselves. For instance, when fathers spend more time in caregiving, support, and parenting of their children, children demonstrate higher levels of cognitive development, personal mastery, social competence, and school performance.[121] Fathers are much more than just another source of income or an extra pair of hands. The presence of fathers in the lives of their children matters significantly.

**6.1 Father Involvement Campaigns.** States should enact father involvement efforts that support and encourage positive male parenting and acceptance of parenting responsibilities. Several states implement responsible fatherhood initiatives designed to equip fathers with more parenting information and to support them in caretaking roles with their children. These initiatives generally involve public education campaigns, parenting and home visiting services that include fathers, and programs that improve the financial contribution of fathers to their children.[122] Some research evidence suggests that improvements in the financial participation of non-custodial parents are possible. For example, in a study of responsible fatherhood initiatives administered by child support enforcement agencies in eight states, agencies offering employment services were able to significantly improve employment outcomes among non-custodial fathers and the percentage of parents making payments.[123] Less evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific fatherhood involvement media strategies is available. Consequently, states implementing public education campaigns to improve father involvement should be sure to observe the best practice principles established in public education campaign research and discussed earlier under the "public education on marriage" recommendation (for references, see endnote 87).

### *Policy 7: Child Support*

Second, states should consider the strategic importance of child support policy to the financial health of families and potentially to encouraging non-custodial parents to return to the workforce. The child support program is one of the largest human

services programs in the country. Its reach is extensive, with the majority of state child support caseloads being comprised mostly of those leaving welfare and low-income mothers, fathers, and children not receiving welfare. Only about 20 percent of state child support caseloads are current TANF assistance recipients.[124] Child support payments comprise nearly 26 percent of total family income among low-income families, second only to earnings.[125] State pass-through options and child support disregards hold promise for improving the financial health of children living with one custodial parent.

In addition to framing child support policy in ways that encourage payment and allow more money to reach custodial parents, states should enact child support policies that encourage out-of-work non-custodial parents to return to the workplace. Two policy decisions – "forgiveness" of child support arrearages and deferment of child support payments while participating in allowable TANF work activities – improve the financial capacity of non-custodial parents to pay child support and minimize disincentives to return to work.

**7.1 Child Support Pass-Through Allowances.** States should allow more child support money to reach custodial parents by enacting full pass-through options. Pass-through options provide better economic supports to children and their custodial parents by ensuring that child support payments are not kept by the state but forwarded to the custodial parent. Moreover, evidence suggests that non-custodial parents who pay child support and believe child support distribution rules to be fair – as is the case with child support pass-through options – are more likely to be involved in the parenting of dependent children and comply with child support orders.[126]

**7.2 Child Support Disregards.** States should disregard all child support income in determining eligibility for other benefits programs. Including child support income in eligibility determination effectively nullifies the benefits of pass-through options and may result in single-parent, single-income families being denied much-needed supports.

**7.3 Caps on Child Support Arrearages.** To encourage both workforce participation and child support compliance among non-custodial fathers, states should impose automatic caps on child support arrearages. Such caps keep child support requirements on poor parents within reasonable limits, avoiding the trap of ever-increasing uncollectible debt.[127] In addition to setting caps on arrearages, state arrearage policies can be tied to other positive parent outcomes. For example, arrearages can be suspended or forgiven when non-custodial parents seek job training or employment (see recommendation 7.4). In another example, Tennessee and Vermont "forgive" all child support arrears

in cases where the parents marry or reunite if previously married.[128] In addition, incarcerated parents would benefit from automatic caps on arrearages and adjustments to child support orders while incarcerated. Nearly one-quarter of all inmates have open child support cases, owing monthly payments between $225 and $313 per month and average arrearages of $23,000 upon leaving prison. One-half of the arrears owed by incarcerated parents are owed to the state, not the child and custodial parent. Many ex-offenders face state laws prohibiting employment in some sectors due to their criminal records, complicating their ability to resume support payments upon community reentry.[129]

**7.4 Reduced or Suspended Payments While Participating in Allowable TANF Work Preparation Activities.** Child support debts grow rapidly when non-custodial parents are out of work or improving their job skills. For many low-income fathers, the mounting debt of child support results in either the abandonment of child support payments or declining needed work preparation opportunities.[130] Recent evidence indicates that child support guidelines in some states require unreasonable proportions of a low-income father's income go to child support, and consequently, contribute to high rates of noncompliance.[131] Evidence from the experiences of child support enforcement agencies indicate that states should encourage father participation in child support by reducing or suspending the child support payments of low-income fathers participating in work preparation activities, including completion of high school, attending job training, and completion of substance abuse rehabilitation. Implementing this benchmark could serve the dual purpose of increasing child support collections and attaching low-income fathers to work opportunities.

### *Policy 8: Family Leave Policies*

The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 entitles employees to twelve weeks of unpaid work leave for family and medically related causes. The Act covers leave in the event of childbirth, adoption or foster care placement, serious health conditions for immediate family members, or health conditions making the employee unable to work. As a basic support to families during times of family transition or crisis, the Act represents an important step forward. However, significant numbers of working families do not benefit from the federal law, necessitating state action. States undertaking such efforts should consider policies that extend coverage to small employers and provide some level of wage replacement.

**8.1 Extend FMLA Eligibility.** FMLA falls short of extending basic family support to approximately 45 percent of the private and public workforce because it only applies to employers with 50 or more employees.[132] To ensure that more

workers benefit from leave policies, states should pass laws extending the basic intent of FMLA to employers with 26 or more employees. In a comparison of leave policies in 11 states to the federal Act, the Department of Labor found five states extending FMLA-type eligibility to employers with fewer than 50 employees. California legislation signed in September 2002 extends eligibility to all employers without regard to number of employees; however, those with fewer than 50 employees are not required to preserve a job for a worker taking paid family leave. Maine and Vermont extend family leave eligibility to employers with 15 or more employees, Minnesota to employers with 21 or more, and Oregon to employers with 25 or more employees.[133]

**8.2 Wage Replacement for Family Leave**. Many employees are practically ineligible because federal FMLA law fails to provide any wage replacement benefits to employees. Of the nearly 17 percent of U.S. employees who took work leave for medical or family reasons, only 7 percent designated the leave as FMLA leave.[134] While the percentage of U.S. employees taking leave remained essentially unchanged at 17 percent between 1995 and 2000, the percentage of workers who needed leave but did not take it because they could not afford to go without wages rose from 64 percent in 1995 to 77.6 percent in 2000.[135] Without wage replacement benefits, family leave policies are impractical and fail to support low-income working families needing temporary time off from work to care for family members. States have taken a number of roads toward creating and funding more effective leave benefits for those needing them, including creation of Temporary Disability Insurance systems with partial wage replacements, extending unemployment insurance to include FMLA-type leave, or enacting minor payroll taxes to fund medical and family leave.[136] For example, California's family leave policy replaces 55 percent of a worker's wages during their absence, up to a maximum of $728 per week. Efforts like California's cover more families and provide some wage replacement for families otherwise unable to afford leave. All states should enact wage replacement policies that cover at least 50 percent of wages for families needing to take family and medical leave.

Table 2. Parent Participation and Support Policies, Key Features, and Available State Options

| Policy | Key Feature | | Available Options |
|---|---|---|---|
| **6** Father Involvement | 6.1 | State provides supports to involve fathers in childrearing | • None<br>• Promotional efforts only<br>• **Promotion and funding for programs (i.e., work preparation)** |
| **7** Child Support | 7.1 | State enacts pass-through allowances of: | • None<br>• $1-50<br>• $51-100<br>• $100+<br>• **Full** |
| | 7.2 | Child support payments disregarded as income for TANF families | • No<br>• Partially<br>• **Fully** |
| | 7.3a | State imposes caps on arrearages and assesses no interest penalties for low-income non-custodial parents. | • No<br>• **Either caps or no interest**<br>• Both caps and no interest on arrearages. |
| | 7.3b | State imposes caps on arrearages and automatically adjusts monthly awards for incarcerated non-custodial parents. | • No<br>• **Either caps or adjustments**<br>• Both caps and adjustments. |
| | 7.4 | State reduces or suspends child support payments while participating in allowable work preparation activities | • No<br>• **Reduces support payments**<br>• Suspends support payments |
| **8** Family Leave | 8.1 | Coverage extended to employers with: | • 50 or more employees<br>• **26 or more employees**<br>• 25 or fewer employees |
| | 8.2 | State provides wage replacement to families choosing to take leave | • None<br>• 1-25 percent of wages<br>• 26-49 percent of wages<br>• **50 percent or more of wages** |

**NOTE: Bold Policy Options** represent the proposed benchmark for each policy decision

## Family Safety and Stability Policy

The policies contained in the family safety and stability cluster are intended to achieve three main objectives on behalf of families. First, these policies are intended to ensure that individual family members are protected – especially women and children, who disproportionately are the victims of physical and emotional abuse. Second, the policies contained here are intended to address risk factors that inhibit positive parenting and family life. Third, family safety and stability policies aim to provide tangible resources and supports to families in times of crisis. States should begin by reviewing their domestic violence, child welfare, and respite care policies to achieve these objectives (Table 3).

### *Policy 9: Domestic Violence*

Currently, the vast majority of state investments regarding domestic violence are targeted to criminal justice responses. While such responses are often warranted, for many families such an orientation is punitive and causes some unintended consequences. In principle and practice, states should pursue the integration of effective domestic violence treatment and intervention responses across health, education, child welfare and family support services. Moreover, states should seek to balance domestic violence investments between both a criminal justice response and prevention and treatment strategies. A more balanced investment approach would provide for:

**9.1 Supports to Children Witnessing Domestic Violence.** Research indicates that children who observe domestic violence exhibit behavior and social competence problems at 2.5 times the rate of children in nonviolent families. The more frequent and intense the episodes of violence the more likely children are to exhibit behavioral and social difficulties.[137] Despite these facts, only about 50 percent of community-based domestic violence providers in one survey supplied services to children witnessing violence.[138] Given this evidence, states should fund more community-based support and treatment services for children and their non-offending parents involved in domestic abuse.

**9.2 Extend Allowable Reasons for Employment and Family Leave.** Currently, most family leave policies provide support to families with newborn children, seriously ill members or workers, and families adopting children. Several states extend their family leave policies to also cover women experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Seventeen states include such protections in their unemployment insurance laws.[139] Such policies provide necessary relief and assistance to families experiencing serious turmoil and transition due to family violence and abuse. Similarly, states should exercise federal TANF family violence options (FVO) or comparable policies to exclude

battered women from their work and time limit requirements. Thirty-eight states currently provide such relief to women.[140]

**9.3 Emergency Financial Assistance.** Research indicates that as many as one-half of all women receiving welfare have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives, and as many as 32 percent are currently in violent relationships.[141] Many battered women remain in abusive relationships due to financial dependence on their partners. Consequently, states should act to ensure that women have financial resources to escape abusers and poverty. Twenty-seven states provide battered women with emergency payments to escape their abusers and to partially subsidize their housing or transportation costs.[142]

**9.4 Integrate Domestic Violence Services with Other Service Systems.** One approach to protecting women and children from domestic abuse, holding abusers accountable, and keeping children with their non-offending parent is to integrate domestic violence training and services into the responses of other systems. Several states have enacted laws requiring various systems to coordinate their efforts to prevent intimate partner violence and abuse. Alaska, Arizona, and Missouri, for example, implemented statewide training programs for child protection, court, law enforcement, and domestic violence personnel and providers. Vermont created a formal partnership between its child welfare and domestic violence agencies, while Utah requires its child protection workers to consult with domestic violence professionals when children are exposed to family violence, to assist non-offending adults with developing a safety plan, and to help find other appropriate supports.[143] At minimum, states should require and fund interagency training on domestic violence.

### *Policy 10: Child Welfare*

State and local child welfare agencies generally subscribe to the three-fold mission established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to achieve (1) safety from harm or predictable harm, (2) permanent and stable homes for both children and, to the extent possible, their families, and (3) higher levels of child well-being. To achieve these goals, state child welfare systems take on a wide range of service responses. For example, child welfare's official responsibilities for child protection include: reporting and substantiation; decision making about safety and permanency; interactions with juvenile and family courts; case planning and service provision; out-of-home placement; foster and adoptive family recruitment; court actions to terminate parental rights; and adoption and post-adoption services.

Addressing the entire spectrum of child welfare activities is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper focuses on "front end" child welfare services and policies with potential for promoting stable families and nurturing homes for children.

Accordingly, state child welfare policies should seek to maintain children in their original families, when safe to do so, in other family settings (preferably with kin), and in their own communities. To meet these aims, a number of specific recommendations are offered.

**10.1 Kinship and Guardian Care Subsidies.** Kinship foster care accounts for an estimated 30 percent of national out-of-home placements, with wide variance locally. Increasing demand for foster care, shrinking numbers of non-kin foster care providers, and changing attitudes regarding family care contribute to the rise in kin placements.[144] Despite this growing reliance on relative care, research demonstrates that children and caregivers in kinship foster care arrangements receive, request, and are offered fewer services and supports than non-kin foster caregivers.[145] Nearly all states give preference to kin in out-of-home placements, but only 22 states provide foster care payments to kin meeting foster care standards.[146] Absent such supports, kinship care providers often have fewer resources than out-of-family placements providing the same care. In 2001, several states improved their supports to kin and grandparents caring for children. These policy initiatives included authorizing subsidy programs for grandparents and other relative caregivers.[147] Available evidence suggests state policy should (a) provide subsidies and incentives for kinship care equivalent to those provided to non-kin foster care providers, and (b) make kinship care providers eligible for needed supports like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), State Child Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP) or Medicaid, and State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) benefits.

**10.2 Foster Parent Incentives and Supports.** States are facing declining numbers of foster parents as the demand for such services increase. Research indicates that foster parents tend to leave the system because they lack agency support, experience poor communication and treatment with child protection workers, have difficulty with a child's behavior, expect to adopt, or have no input into a child's future.[148] Turnover among foster parents is estimated at 30 to 50 percent per year in some places.[149] While evidence regarding the effectiveness of many strategies is still underdeveloped, states are implementing a number of promising efforts to improve retention and recruitment of foster parents. For example, seven states provide respite care to either all foster parents or those caring for children with special needs. Connecticut and Oregon are among states that extend public health insurance programs to foster parents and their dependents. Iowa helps finance and support the Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, which helps recruit, support, and train its members. Ten states offer some form

of reduced liability or liability protection to foster parents, and a number of states offer training and peer support.[150] To begin offering a range of adequate supports, states should meet an initial policy benchmark of providing three or more of these resources in order to reduce turnover and increase success among foster parents.

**10.3 Family-Centered, Community-Based Strategies.** In 1990, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect issued a report detailing a crisis in the child protection system. The Board concluded, "State and County child welfare programs have not been designed to get immediate help to families based on voluntary requests for assistance. As a result it has become far easier to pick up the telephone to report one's neighbor for child abuse than it is for that neighbor to pick up the telephone to request and receive help before it happens. If the nation ultimately is to reduce the dollars and personnel needed for investigating reports, more resources must be allocated to establishing voluntary, non-punitive access to help."[151] In response to this assessment, the Board proposed a child-centered, neighborhood-based approach to protecting children.[152]

Regarding community-based approaches, states should enact laws that establish systems to support those cases where abuse is not substantiated, but where support is needed to prevent potential future abuse. Some research evidence indicates that peer and family support are important to the psychological health and adjustment of physically abused children.[153] Community-based approaches can offer family-centered services that raise the level of social and emotional support available to families at risk of abusing their children, particularly when programs are individualized, multileveled, and intense.[154] Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, and Missouri are experimenting with community partnership approaches to child protection.[155] Colorado also created family resource centers to provide community-based services to vulnerable families.[156] States should fund community-based approaches to preventing abuse and neglect and fostering healthier relationships in families at risk of abuse or neglect.

### *Policy 11: Respite Care*

Families often face the need for respite care when they have one or more members with a disability. The stress of rearing a child with a disability can at times overwhelm families. Respite can occur in out-of-home and in-home settings for any length of time depending on the needs of the family and available resources. As a vital part of the continuum of services for families, respite can help prevent out-of-home placements, lower risk of abuse and neglect, preserve the family unit, and reduce

family instability. Several federal funding streams are available to support provision of respite support. Despite these funding streams, however, the need for such services is largely unmet.

**11.1 Respite Services.** Several approaches for making needed respite supports available are possible. For example, the Oklahoma Office of Child Care partnered with the Oklahoma Respite Resource Network to establish a respite provider registry and a pilot respite voucher initiative for children with special healthcare needs. The voucher initiative was funded with Title V Maternal and Child Health Program funds. The Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network provides respite care referral services to parents of children with disabilities. The Division of Developmental Disabilities provides funding for these services and 11 agencies in 13 counties provide respite care. In Iowa, officials used Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) quality set-aside funding to provide respite care training to childcare providers. In nearly one-third of the states, registered family day care providers have been trained and licensed to also provide overnight care to children with disabilities. Medicaid waivers finance this service. States should enact respite care legislation that supports families with children with disabilities and families in crisis.

Table 3. Family Safety and Stability Policy Recommendations, Key Features, and Available Options

| Policy | Key Feature | | Available Options |
|---|---|---|---|
| 9 Domestic Violence | 9.1 | State provides funding for community-based services to children witnessing domestic violence | **Yes** • No |
| | 9.2a | State extends range of covered reasons for family medical leave to include domestic violence | **Yes** • No |
| | 9.2b | State exercises TANF family violence options or comparable policies for low-income women experiencing domestic violence | **Yes** • No |
| | 9.3 | State provides emergency financial assistance to battered women attempting to leave violent households | **Yes** • No |

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Table 3. Family Safety and Stability Policy Recommendations, Key Features, and Available Options

| Policy | Key Feature | Available Options |
|---|---|---|
| | 9.4 State implements an integrated response to domestic violence | • None<br>• **Multi-disciplinary training efforts**<br>• Formal partnership between domestic violence, child welfare, and law enforcement agencies |
| **10** Child Welfare | 10.1a Kinship and legal guardians receive adequate subsidies and stipends | • None received<br>• Less than cash assistance<br>• Greater than cash assistance but less than foster payments<br>• **Equals Foster care payments** |
| | 10.1b Kinship care providers eligible for TANF, S-CHIP, and State EITC | • None<br>• 1 of 3 programs<br>• 2 of 3 programs<br>• **3 of 3 programs** |
| | 10.2 State provides support and incentives to foster parents, including (a) respite services, (b) health insurance coverage, (c) liability coverage, and (d) training supports | • 1 of 4 programs<br>• 2 of 4 programs<br>• **3 of 4 programs**<br>• 4 of 4 supports |
| | 10.3 State funds family-centered, community-based approaches to child protection | • None (Institutional responses only)<br>• Local pilots only<br>• **Statewide approach** |
| **11** Special Needs Supports | 11.1 State provides funding for respite care services | • None provided<br>• **For special needs only**<br>• For special needs and other at-risk groups |

**NOTE: Bold Policy Options** represent the proposed benchmark for each policy decision

# Conclusion

5

Many American families are struggling to maintain strong and healthy bonds under the pressures of economic uncertainty and the stresses of a rapidly changing social context. With growing work demands and pressures, families are faced with difficult decisions about family interaction and routines. Unfortunately, many families are not able to balance the competing demands of family and work.

This framework is offered as a tool for thinking about and guiding a public policy agenda to strengthen families. This paper advances a three-part approach for strengthening family relationships. First, this approach emphasizes the healthy formation of families through effective birth supports, out-of-wedlock birth prevention efforts, and two-parent and marriage promotion interventions. These interventions are intended to promote stronger family bonds and interactions at the crucial beginning period of family life. Second, the paper emphasizes the continuance and quality of family life by promoting policies that encourage active and supportive involvement from both parents and that create more balance between the competing demands of work and family. Third, this paper gives attention to supporting children and parents in high conflict situations and families with special needs. State policy strategies that protect children and survivors of domestic violence and other forms of abuse are considered. With each policy reviewed, recommendations and benchmarks are made based upon available evidence and offered for deliberation and use in state-level efforts to improve the relationship quality of all families.

## Future Considerations

In some places, this paper attempts to deal with sensitive issues in a forthright manner. In others, lacking the ability to articulate a compelling vision, this paper remains silent. On the whole, the ideas contained here are intended to be responsive to the wealth of data and research on these important issues. Choosing to deal as much as possible with what is known or knowable from research and practice wisdom, this report steers clear of some more speculative thoughts.

Several ideas were finally excluded from the list of specific recommendations in this report. Among them are some marriage promotion and responsible fatherhood activities (e.g., TANF cash assistance “bonuses” for marrying, teen father

interventions, and paternity establishment), family support and parent education efforts, ex-prisoner reentry programs, and policies addressing the rights of gay and lesbian families. Each of these efforts receives vigorous support from its advocates and practitioners who see compelling anecdotal evidence for their success. Given the high aspirations of these initiatives and the confidence proponents have in their effectiveness, additional research seems warranted.

In the future, as knowledge improves and experimentation continues, many of the currently excluded ideas will likely be included, and some currently proposed policies might be replaced with better ones. In addition, as knowledge about and concern for special populations increases, it will be possible to better tailor policy recommendations to families with differing needs for support. Until then, this framework is offered as a contribution to a public discourse already filled with possibilities.

# Appendix A

## POLICY MATTERS PROJECT OVERVIEW

State policymakers, whether they are governors, state legislators, executive agency managers or policy advocates, are concerned about the effectiveness of the policies and programs they develop. However, the ability to assess the success of existing and new policy initiatives to produce positive and lasting results for families and children is frequently elusive. Currently, there is no commonly accepted way to assess the degree to which state policies advance or detract from the goal of improving child, family, and community well-being.

While policies are often developed to address or produce a certain set of outcomes, the relationship between policy and outcomes is not well understood. Little investigation of the impact of policy on system improvement and on outcomes for children and families has occurred, leaving policymakers and administrators without the needed information to guide the development and implementation of policy that will produce results.

In such an environment, how can state legislators and leaders know whether policies they implement are supportive of families? How can they discern whether the mix of policy improvements and legislative changes bring them closer to achieving better outcomes? How can policymakers and leaders make informed decisions about an array of policy choices for families? To answer these questions, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, has begun a project to develop a results-based framework that proposes benchmarks for state policies.

*Policy Matters* attempts to offer coherent, comprehensive information regarding the strength and adequacy of state policies affecting children and families. This is done by establishing consensus among policy experts and state leaders regarding the cluster of policies believed to offer the best opportunity for improving key child and family results. Further, the project puts forth benchmarks for gauging the strength of existing state policies aimed at these results.

## How the Policies Are Organized

*Policy Matters* attempts to examine six related results: school readiness; educational achievement; youth engaged in positive, productive roles; family economic success; healthy families; and strong family relationships. When viewed collectively, these six results and the policies designed to achieve them make up a state-level family-strengthening policy agenda. Included are results that focus on the entire family (family economic success, healthy families, and strong family relationships) as well as results that focus more narrowly on young children (school readiness), youth (educational achievement and youth engaged in positive, productive roles), and particular issue areas (education, health, and economic success). The mix of results and policies focuses on a broad life span, from birth to retirement (see Figure 1), and a broad range of potential policy categories (see Tables A.1 – A.6).

Each of the six results is guided by a working definition and focus:

- **School Readiness** is defined broadly as the preparedness of young children, ages 0-8 years, to enter school and the preparedness of schools to receive young children into public educational settings. The cluster focuses on young children and the major policies that support their social, cognitive, and emotional development and on child-serving systems and their capacities to deliver high-quality, developmentally appropriate care and education. The school readiness policy cluster includes: child care quality, affordability, and accessibility; Head Start, public preschool, and kindergarten quality and standards.
- **Educational Achievement** focuses on the public school and post-secondary educational attainment of students and the provision of quality public education services. The educational achievement policy cluster includes policies governing class size and school enrollment, school accountability systems, teacher quality and retention, alternative education, curriculum standards, testing, and post-secondary financial aid.
- **Youth Engaged in Positive, Productive Roles** is defined as the availability of healthy personal, civic, peer, family, and community options for young people, ages 8-24. This area focuses on the developmental needs of pre-adolescents,

adolescents, and young adults and the crucial transitions between each of these periods of increasing maturity. Policies in this cluster include those that encourage and support youth in meaningful civic roles, prepare young people for work and other adult roles, and make available quality child welfare, juvenile justice, after-school, school-to-work, and health promotion services.

- **Family Economic Success** refers to the ability of working age (18-65) adults and families (up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level) to earn enough pay and benefits to provide for their basic needs and to accrue long-term assets like homes and retirement benefits. This policy cluster includes policies that support the acquisition and retention of quality jobs (e.g., WIA and TANF), improve income and earnings (e.g., state-enhanced minimum wage, personal income tax thresholds, earned income tax credit, health insurance and affordable housing), encourage and protect the development of assets (e.g., Individual Development Accounts, anti-predatory lending), and create an economic safety net for families (e.g., unemployment insurance).
- **Healthy Families** refers to the physical and mental well-being of families and examines the availability, quality, and accessibility of appropriate healthcare services for low-income families. This policy cluster includes policies related to health insurance coverage and benefits, health safety nets, health support services like transportation and translation, and policies promoting healthy behaviors and environments.
- **Strong Family Relationships** is defined as the relational well-being of families. While the successful promotion of strong family relationships is clearly tied to ensuring family economic success and family health, this result focuses primarily on strengthening the formation of families, the interaction of parents and children, the connection of families to social networks, and the adequacy and quality of necessary family resources. This policy cluster includes father involvement, family formation, family support (e.g., home visiting, family and medical leave, and parent education), child welfare, and domestic violence.

The categorization of policy according to desired results is imprecise. For the purposes of this project, specific policies were assigned to a category either because the category offered the "best fit" for the policy or because the workgroup tasked with developing benchmarks for that result area was best suited to discuss the policy in question. Many policies appropriately apply to many of the desired results. Policies appearing in multiple result areas are likely to be "high leverage" policies because of their potential impact on multiple outcomes.

## How the Project Is Organized

Given the breadth and complexity of state policy, it is important to clarify what the *Policy Matters* project intends to produce. Specifically, *Policy Matters* is an attempt to meet the information needs of policymakers, advocates, administrators, and local leaders with four products. These products, while distinct from one another, are developed sequentially and build upon the successful completion of the previous product.

First, six policy papers will be developed and published during this project. Each paper, one for each of the six result areas, will offer a strategic policy framework for achieving a specific result and set of outcomes. The policy papers will include a short list of policies that collectively have: (1) evidence supporting their effectiveness at effecting the desired result, (2) the best chance of being supported by multiple constituencies, and (3) sufficient scale and scope for impacting the desired result. For each recommended policy, the papers also will posit the key attributes and interactions between policies that are thought to enhance the policy's effectiveness. Teams of state and national policy experts will review drafts of the papers and meet to reach consensus on specific policy recommendations. The papers could be a positive contribution to the strategic understanding of the link between policy and results for children and families.

Second, *Policy Matters* attempts to offer coherent, comprehensive information regarding the strength and adequacy of state policies affecting children and families by establishing benchmarks for a cluster of policies aimed at specific child and family results. The recommended policies and their benchmarks will be published for consideration.

Third, the project will develop the policy papers and policy benchmarks into a *self-assessment tool* useful for those involved in policy planning and advocacy. The self-assessment tool might include a range of policy options beyond the "core" policies recommended in the policy papers and benchmarks product. An easy-to-use tool that identifies strengths and weaknesses in a state's policy agenda that would have import for strategic efforts is envisioned. The tool will be widely available to state and local leaders.

Fourth, this effort could lead to a Kids Count-like product that compares state policy efforts. However, where Kids Count is concerned with *child* well-being, this effort is concerned with assessing policy. The effort to set benchmarks for state policy might be thought of as a *policy well-being* project that measures an individual state's policy against agreed upon benchmarks in critical areas. By measuring the strength of state policies against established benchmarks, the project hopes to provide further insight on the policy context of state success at achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

While the collection of products described previously could be useful to the field of policy analysis, this current project is not an attempt to track a wide range of possible policies related to a given topic. Nor is the project intended to be a policy clearinghouse or program "best practices" guide. Lastly, the project is not a well-being indicator, evaluation, or measurement project, though information from these activities helps to shape the policy focus. All of these activities are valuable contributions and services, and many organizations do an excellent job at one or more of them. However, these activities are beyond the scope of the current project.

Figure A.1. Overlapping Age Spans for *Policy Matters* Results

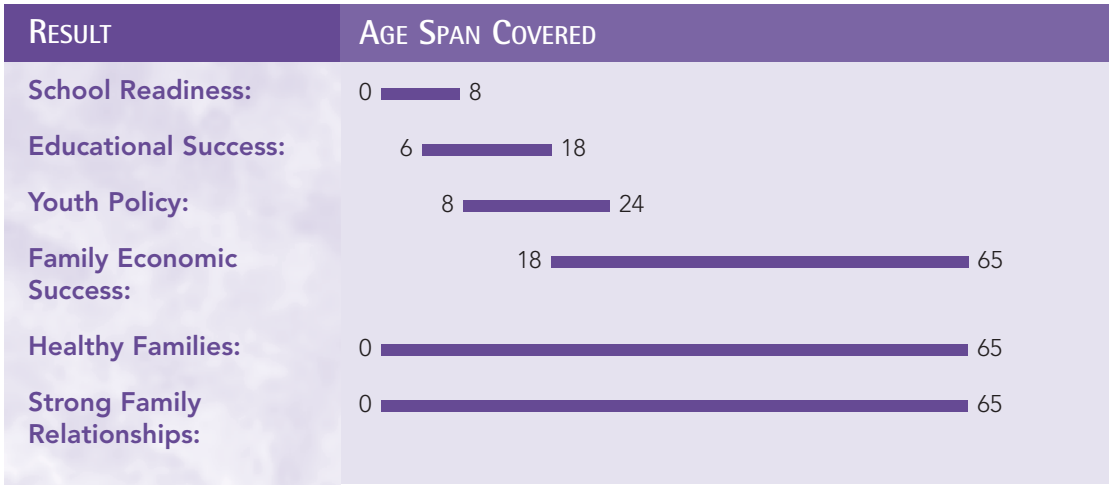

Table A.1. "School Readiness" Policies

| Cluster | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Ready Systems of Early Care and Education (ECE)** | • State-funded ECE Programs<br>• Child Care Subsidy Programs<br>• Child Care Tax Provisions<br>• Licensing and Accreditation<br>• Professional Development and Compensation<br>• ECE Systems Development<br>• ECE Standards and Assessments<br>• Facilities/Capital Investments |
| **Ready Schools** | • Kindergarten Quality |

Table A.2. "Better Family Health" Policies

| Cluster | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Health Care Services** | |
| • Affordability | • Health Insurance Coverage Caps on Out-of-pocket Expenses |
| • Availability | • Provider Incentives |
| • Accessibility and Appropriateness | • Streamlined Enrollment Procedures<br>• Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services<br>• Mental Health Services and Supports |
| **Health-related Behaviors** | • Tobacco Tax and Enforcement<br>• Alcohol Tax and Enforcement<br>• School Health Education and Nutrition Standards |
| **Health-supporting Environments** | • Lead-based Paint Abatement<br>• Firearm Safety |

Table A.3. *"Strong Family Relationships"* Policies

| Cluster | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Family Formation and Maintenance** | • Marriage Promotion<br>• Family Supports at Birth<br>• Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy Prevention<br>• Divorce Reforms<br>• Child Custody |
| **Active Participation and Support** | • Father Involvement<br>• Child Support Enforcement<br>• Family and Medical Leave |
| **Stability and Safety** | • Child Welfare<br>• Domestic Violence<br>• Respite Care |

Table A.4. *"Youth Engaged in Positive, Productive Roles"* Policies

| Cluster | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Universal Policies** | • Education<br>• Preventive Health and Health Education<br>• Health Care Services<br>• Civic Participation |
| **Vulnerable Youth Policies** | • Child Welfare and Transition to Independence<br>• Juvenile Justice<br>• Career and Work Preparation<br>• Runaway and Homeless Youth Services |
| **Youth-focused Policies** | • Youth Programming<br>• Coordination of Youth Programs<br>• Youth Representation on Boards and Committees |

Table A.5. *"Family Economic Success"* Policies

| Cluster | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Work Preparation** | • Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)<br>• Workforce Investment Act (WIA) |
| **Work Attachment** | • Health Insurance Coverage<br>• Child Care Subsidies<br>• Housing Location |
| **Income Support Policy** | • Income Tax Thresholds<br>• Sales Tax<br>• State Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC)<br>• Housing Subsidies<br>• Child Support<br>• State-Enhanced Minimum Wage Policy<br>• Food Security |
| **Asset Development and Protection** | • Homeownership<br>• Asset Promotion<br>• Anti-predatory Lending<br>• Unemployment Insurance |
| **Job Creation** | • Public Sector Employment<br>• Employer-based Wage Subsidies |

Table A.6. *"Educational Achievement"* Policies

| Cluster | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Student Achievement** | • Testing in Core Academic Subjects<br>• School Choice<br>• Graduation Requirements |
| **Quality Schools** | • Curriculum<br>• Inclusion<br>• Class and School Size<br>• Community Connections |
| **Teacher Quality** | • Teacher Education and Qualifications<br>• Hiring Incentives and Compensation |
| **Education Finance** | • Elementary and Secondary Funding<br>• Financial Aid for Post-secondary Education |
| **Post-secondary Education** | • Academic Supports<br>• Diversity<br>• Community College Offering Relevant Courses |

## Other Publications from the Policy Matters Project:

***Improving the Readiness of Children for School*** (September 2003)

***Improving the Economic Success of Families*** (September 2003)

***Engaging Youth in Positive, Productive Roles*** (September 2003)

***Promoting Better Family Health*** (November 2003)

***Raising Educational Achievement*** (November 2003)

***Policies that Strengthen Families Self Assessment,*** an online tool for examining the strength of state policies against recommended benchmarks. (www.cssp.org/policymatters) (October 2003)

## Mission

The Center's mission is to promote policies and practices that support and strengthen families, build strong communities, and produce better and more equitable outcomes for children, young people, and adults.

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