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Program Seeks to Fight Poverty by Building Family Ties

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

BATON ROUGE, La., July 14 — The agency approached Herman Porter and his girlfriend, Aswanni Dunn, in what sociologists call the “magic moment,” the period surrounding the birth of a child when romance and dreams tend to soar, even among unmarried couples whose futures may be statistically doubtful. Would they like to enroll in a class about relationship skills and commitment?

Mr. Porter, 25, has two children with two other women, but this time, he said, “I decided I’d try anything that might help us stay together.”

Ms. Dunn, 20, who has a 6-year-old with another man, said: “I knew Herman was a good person, but sometimes we had arguments. I was afraid he would go out too much and never spend time with us.”

The couple, who had a baby girl on July 7, are well into the class, a 21-week program at Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge, a nonprofit center that last year added classes on building strong families to its panoply of prenatal, parenthood and children’s services.

The course is a prototype in the Bush administration’s campaign to fight poverty and aid children by promoting marriage — an effort that, after years in the pilot stage, is about to get going in earnest this fall and has drawn surprising support from some liberal poverty experts.

In a little-noticed bill reauthorizing welfare reform this year, Congress earmarked \$750 million over five years for programs to promote “healthy marriages” and “responsible fatherhood.”

The administration is now sifting through more than 2,000 proposals and in September will award \$100 million to nonprofit groups, churches and local agencies around the country for marriage programs and \$50 million for related fatherhood programs. In what amounts to a large experiment, the grants should extend the reach of marriage education to tens of thousands of low-income couples, many in communities where stable cohabiting relationships, let alone lasting marriages, are rare.

When President Bush announced his marriage initiative four years ago, some liberal poverty experts were skeptical. They feared that conservatives were simply pushing their ideological agenda, portraying wedlock as a panacea for the deeply rooted social ills of the poor.

Bush officials and conservative poverty experts do tend to discuss the topic with a special zeal. Speaking recently at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative research group, [Michael O. Leavitt](#), the secretary of health and human services, put marriage promotion alongside stricter work rules as the “unfinished business of welfare reform.”

But nearly everyone agrees that the breakdown of families — to take one indicator, one-third of all births in the country and two-

thirds of black births are now out of wedlock — is feeding into a destructive cycle of poverty, educational and developmental deficits, and incarceration.

Poverty experts have also warmed in recent years to the idea of working with parents to promote workable bonds, if not always marriage, and of working with couples, rather than focusing only on mothers as many social programs have.

Liberals and conservatives both saw an opportunity in an unexpected research finding a few years ago that belied stereotypes of random sex and childbearing among the poor: at the time of birth, 80 percent of single mothers are romantically involved and in touch with the father, said Sara S. McLanahan, a sociologist at [Princeton University](#) and leader of a national study of birth couples called the Fragile Families Project.

“The fathers come to the hospital, and they practically all say they want to get married,” Dr. McLanahan said. But most parents in nonmarital births have low incomes and limited education, the study showed, and many have had children with other partners. Within a few years, many of the couples are estranged.

“The conservatives have picked up on the ‘high hopes’ part of the finding, the expressed desire to marry,” Dr. McLanahan said. “The liberals see all the ways these couples are disadvantaged.”

“I like the idea of teaching relationship skills and how to manage conflict, something middle-class people often pay for,” she said. “But if this is just about preaching marriage, then I don’t see any benefit,” she said, noting that programs should also offer things like job training and mental health services.

It is not yet clear what share of the new federal money will go to programs taking this broader approach. Nor has it been proved that relationship training — shown to help relationships and communications in experiments with middle-class couples — will make a long-term difference among the poor, who face multiple challenges. The government has sponsored three major studies to measure any gains. Officials also emphasize that participation in the programs will be voluntary.

“We hope to see impacts on the rate of marriage, but just as importantly on the quality of their relationships,” said M. Robin Dion, a researcher with Mathematica Policy Research, one of three research groups that have received federal money to evaluate model programs, including the one in Baton Rouge. This might help fathers stay closer to their children even if couples do not marry, Ms. Dion said.

For its relationship classes, Family Road has adopted the curriculum developed by Drs. John and Julie Gottman of the [University of Washington](#). Small groups of couples meet for 21 weekly lessons with topics like “prevent harmful fights,” “what kids do to relationships,” “prevent and recover from infidelity” and “considering marriage.”

The other night, three couples were working on the 19th class, on money problems. They watched a video of couples discussing money issues and then, with the help of a married couple serving as facilitators, discussed their thoughts about money and managing personal differences in spending and saving.

Whatever the topic, the emphasis is on managing conflict, not wishing it away. “The fights don’t decrease, but it’s just easier,” said Dominick Wilkins, 21, who recently married Jamie Wilkins, also 21, after they joined the course and had a child together. “We know how to fight and keep it from getting out of hand.”

Just how much these two are up against is suggested by their histories: Jamie was abandoned by her parents and raised by a grandmother; she was married once before; and each of them has a child with another partner. In their favor is steady employment: she is in the Army, and he works for a city recreation center.

Justin Knight, 21, and Megan Sibley, 19, who are expecting their first child next month, held hands as they navigated the money lesson. Mr. Knight has worked in heating and air-conditioning since he quit school after the eighth grade and said he dreamed of opening his own business. But in his time at Family Road, he said, he has realized that he should get his G.E.D., something the center offers at no charge.

The couple have been together two years. Marriage? "That's part of the plan," Ms. Sibley said, adding that they wanted to have the baby first.

Many of the people in the class have never had the experience of being friends, as a couple, with other couples, said Dena C. Morrison, the executive director of Family Road — one more sign of the strained families and communities they have endured. The chance to change that is another possible benefit of the program. "Some couples have formed friendships with each other during the course, and they aren't used to that," Ms. Morrison said.

Time will tell what good the course does, for these couples and thousands of others who may enter programs with varied approaches. For now, Herman Porter is a believer.

"If our tempers flare, we're able to deal with it," Mr. Porter said. "I work nights, so on weekends I liked to chill with friends. She was feeling that weekends were a time for us to be together, and I began to see how much she cared about that."

"If it wasn't for this class we probably wouldn't be together still," he said. "Now we're engaged."

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