

A Win-Win Partnership: MRE and Child Support Enforcement

Improving child outcomes through education and enforcement

The nation's Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program is a federal/state/tribal/local partnership to promote family self-sufficiency and child well-being. In most states, approximately half of all child support orders are established and enforced by a federal and state financed child support enforcement entity known as the IV-D program (from Title IV-D of the Social Security Act). About one-third of all children in the United States will receive some assistance from CSE and approximately 58 percent of CSE cases involve never-married parents. Services are available to a parent with custody of a child (or the "custodial parent") whose other parent is living outside the home (or the "non-custodial parent"). Services are available automatically for families receiving assistance under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

CSE has traditionally been a legally-driven program; within the past decade the program has begun to explore the preventative and family-focused approach. CSE programs are evolving as the reasons why some parents do not pay their court ordered child support—even with enforcement activities such as wage assignments and suspension of professional and driving licenses in place—are becoming better understood. The reasons that have emerged seem to revolve around the parents' relationship, not the legal aspect of the child support order.

Improving child outcomes is common ground between CSE and Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) programs. Parents who maintain a healthy relationship with one another, even if they are



not romantically involved, are typically better able to co-parent. In fact, a strained relationship between co-parents is the primary reason why many parents fail to pay child support. Relationship education services can be an excellent intervention for families who are struggling with co-parenting and child support payments. This Tip Sheet provides ideas to help MRE practitioners create and sustain partnerships with CSE.

The following objectives have been identified for MRE practitioners who wish to create and sustain working relationships with CSE:

1. Understand the goals of child support

If you are initiating contact with a local CSE program for the first time, understand that the primary purpose of the program is to assure that both financial and medical assistance is available to children. This is accomplished by locating parents, establishing paternity and support obligations, and enforcing

those obligations. You probably want to refer to MRE as “relationship education” as opposed to “marriage and relationship education.” When you first approach someone at a CSE office about relationship education, expect to spend time talking about what it is, what it is not, and how it works. Invest time before the first meeting to understand CSE services (see text box “CSE Services”). Learn from the CSE staff about the challenges the families they work with face and what strategies, if any, have been tried to date.

Marriage and relationship education has been identified as an effective way to enhance communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills. Share with CSE employees how relationship skills can make their jobs easier: parents in their caseloads will learn to communicate better with each other and with the CSE staff person assigned to their case. These abilities learned in relationship education can help parents who are no longer romantically involved work together for better child outcomes. Researchers have found that the relationship between the mother and non-custodial father (in other words, the father without custody of the child) is the number one indicator for the father’s involvement in the child’s life. For many couples who are separated or divorced, the non-custodial parent has to negotiate with the primary caregiver to have access to the child(ren). Thus, improving communication skills and conflict resolution skills between parents can directly increase and support long-term father engagement with his child(ren).

2. Determine who to talk to about MRE services

Identify a champion or supportive point of contact within the CSE program. A champion might be someone who has experience with relationship education, a caseworker who has had a client participate in MRE, etc. The most direct path to

Child Support Enforcement Services

- ◆ **Locating non-custodial parents** – Officials use computerized state and Federal Parent Locator Services (FPLS) to locate parents and their income/assets.
- ◆ **Proving paternity** – The process of legally identifying a child’s father so a court order for child support can be created. Paternity also can provide a child with access to benefits and facilitate the child’s relationship with both parents.
- ◆ **Establishing support orders** – Caseworkers partner with the courts to establish child support as determined by state guidelines.
- ◆ **Collecting support payments** – Caseworkers help collect overdue child support from non-custodial parents by working with the appropriate entities to withhold income tax refunds; put liens on property; revoke driver’s licenses and other professional/recreational licenses; deny passports; and/or seize bank accounts, among other tactics.
- ◆ **Services for non-custodial parents** – Non-custodial parents can use the CSE program to establish paternity and request a review of their support orders if circumstances have changed. The Federal Parent Locator Service is available through state CSE programs to locate a child whose whereabouts has been hidden in violation of a custody or visitation order.

obtaining a point of contact is to request the CSE manager for a person who has interest in working with community partners. When you connect with someone, talk about ways you can help them. For example, you can educate couples in your MRE workshops about CSE and how its goal is to create fair and positive outcomes for both parents involved in a child support case.

3. Gain support and work together

Once you have established a working relationship with your local CSE program's "champion," it is important to educate as many CSE staff as possible about what MRE is and how it can assist them in their caseloads. With the support of your "champion," schedule a short CSE caseworker training to address the importance of healthy relationships between custodial and non-custodial parents and how this relates to better child outcomes. Use stories to demonstrate your point (see text box "Case Example"). Include information on the importance of the father's role. Provide the research that shows when non-abusive fathers are disengaged, children spend more time in foster

care, have lower reunification rates, and experience more overall negative outcomes. Explain how relationship skills can benefit child outcomes and improve communication and conflict resolution with the caseworker. Caseworkers generally have a large caseload. Time spent in training means time away from their cases, so keep trainings concise. Trainings should be available on an ongoing basis, and caseworkers should be encouraged to return to further their knowledge and receive up-to-date tools. Utilize pre- and post-test evaluation data to enhance future trainings and demonstrate that you are responsive to their feedback. Focus on their needs and relay why these trainings are a good use of their time. If you do this well, CSE caseworkers can be an excellent referral source for your MRE program.

Create desk aids to remind caseworkers of when it is appropriate to refer parents to MRE programs. An example is a simple flyer from the MRE program that lists what services are provided and any upcoming events. Make sure the marketing tools are branded with "relationship education" as opposed to "marriage education" as this target audience is often divorced, separated, or never married.

Case Example

A non-custodial parent hadn't paid any child support to his family for over five years. The reason, as it turned out, was he was angry with the custodial parent for not letting him visit his son and for moving to another state without letting him know. He entered an eight-week MRE course with his new girlfriend and, through the course, began to realize how his past actions resulted in losing his ability to see his son. This realization encouraged him to begin making child support payments and to send letters, via the CSE worker, to the custodial parent stating he wanted to apologize for his behavior and see his son. After a period of time, he not only saw his son, but reached an agreement to have the son stay with him and his girlfriend in the summers. Both biological parents improved their co-parenting, visitation started, and child support obligations began being met.

Engage the courts. Some measure of success may be achieved by asking the CSE program to work with the courts to order parents to attend either a parenting class or a relationship education program. In coordination with CSE, educate family advocates and judges about your MRE program to make it an available resource in your community.

4. Ensure your MRE program meets the needs of CSE

Co-parents who attend your training must be informed why it is important to their children for both parents to interact and communicate effectively, regardless of whether they are a couple. Help participants develop the skills to manage conflict and improve communication. Demonstrate how these skills can improve the quality of their co-parenting relationship. Use examples in class that are relevant to their living arrangements. For example, when practicing communication skills, create a situation where the non-custodial parent is running late to pick up his/her child from the custodial parent. Whenever possible, keep this population together in one class as their situations and needs are specialized. Also, take the necessary steps to ensure your curriculum is culturally sensitive, that your MRE facilitator has worked with families in related capacities, and does not maintain any gender biases. Brand your curriculum, your tools, etc. as “relationship education.” Consistently hearing or seeing the term “marriage education” may bring up emotions (such as grief and loss) that may impair learning.

Encourage non-custodial and custodial parents to participate in MRE with new partners. Many relationship education classes are geared toward blended families (where there is one biological parent

and his or her romantic partner). These classes can help couples develop strategies to avoid potential areas of conflict while co-parenting and combining families. This can ultimately provide a sense of security and reduce fear and anxiety in children.

Offer workshops/classes in a comfortable setting and make them available on a frequent basis. Present workshops on days, times, and in locations that are accessible for CSE families. If CSE caseworkers refer someone who cannot attend or easily locate your MRE workshop, they will not continue to make referrals.

5. Celebrate your success stories

With each success, more follow. Success means that parents begin healthy communication patterns for the sake of their children. It could also mean that there is a reduction in the number of parents having children by multiple partners as individuals learn to build a lasting relationship with their current partner.

Recognize your CSE partners and caseworkers for their efforts and referrals. Praising a CSE worker to their supervisor or manager for a good deed has proven to be a great way to encourage future involvement. When employees are not recognized for their efforts in one area, they tend to focus on other areas that are more rewarding. But praise encourages them to keep going.

Working with the CSE program is like any relationship—it takes knowing how to communicate and understanding each other’s needs to create a win-win for all involved. This intervention can lead to one of the shared goals of both CSE and MRE: better child outcomes.

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