



\* See next page for narrative on this chart

This chart is designed to show why we shouldn't establish healthy relationships as the ideal goal even for at-risk, low income fathers and families and why we should continue to strive for healthy marriages. In the center column, you will find the four general categories of relationships. The bottom category, "no relationship," references a situation that was a sexual encounter that resulted in a child. The next category, "broken relationship," refers to a situation where there was some relationship initially, but then broke apart after the child was born. The next category, "healthy relationship," refers to a stable relationship outside the marriage commitment. Finally, "healthy marriage" is located at the top of the center column. It's important to understand that these categories are not static. A couple, for example, could move from a healthy marriage to a broken relationship. Or another couple could move from a broken relationship up the column to a healthy marriage.

The arrow on the left side shows how a couple moves from self centeredness towards selflessness as they move up the relationship column. When a relationship is built solely on a sexual encounter, self-centeredness is highest. In contrast, a healthy marriage requires each partner to put the other's needs before his or her own and think outside of him or herself. So, being married prior to having a child helps the couple raise empathy—a key ingredient in becoming a good parent.

This leads to the right side of the diagram where we see the "true north"—child well-being. Research shows, on average, that children's well-being increases the further up they are in the relationship categories. A child does best in a healthy and stable marriage. So, if that is the "true north," then we are selling our children (and families) short if we are not discussing marriage as an option and providing couples with skill building tools to attain healthy marriages.

Many fatherhood programs set their goals high in other areas such as job readiness, child support payments, and father involvement; however, avoid marriage because they don't think it is attainable for their clients. This is a double standard when they know that only a small percentage of the fathers that they serve will ever attain all of the goals their program hopes to achieve with them in these other areas.

So, what happens if a program sets healthy marriage as the goal and a couple falls short? Well, that program has still helped them achieve a healthy relationship. However, if healthy relationship is the goal, then the couple is just a sneeze away from a broken relationship. Bottom line is if higher child well-being is the ultimate goal, then we are doing a tremendous disservice to our clients if we don't at least put healthy marriage out on the table as one (and the best) possible paths for couples to pursue.