



Advocacy Resource Guide



Making a Difference . . .

Supporting Young Fathers

ISSUE IN BRIEF

While the fields of adolescent reproductive health and teen pregnancy prevention have actively pursued research and developed resources addressing the needs of young mothers, public attention has not traditionally focused on young fathers as a group that stands to benefit from supportive services and policies. Like young mothers, young fathers navigate both the stress of adolescence as well as new responsibilities that come with early parenthood. However, young men and especially young fathers in our society face unique challenges that impact their ability to achieve their life goals while simultaneously providing for their children.

One of the major challenges many young fathers face is knowledge about or understanding of the role of a father. As rates of single parent households increase, many children grow up with little or no contact with their biological fathers. Many young men who grow up without a father or a positive male figure in their lives, when they have children, struggle to fulfill the father role.

Currently no standard of best practices for supportive teen father programs exists. However, one strategy that shows promise toward improving young fathers' ability to be there for their new families centers on first helping them to develop as individuals.¹ This includes providing support to continue with their education, assistance with obtaining employment, as well as fostering their emotional development with the goal of adopting a positive, male parent identity. Only when program administrators, social service agencies, and policymakers direct efforts toward supporting this underserved population in a thoughtful manner will young fathers be able to reach their potential as both parents and citizens.

Putting Healthy Teen Network's Advocacy Resource Guides to Work

You can use Healthy Teen Network's Advocacy Resource Guides to:

1. Urge local and state policymakers to address issues that are important to the health and success of today's youth.
2. Educate school administrators or health care officials about unique issues facing adolescents.
3. Engage with the media (e.g., in a letter to the editor or an interview) using effective language to frame an issue facing youth.
4. Present to funders on why they should invest in your work with or on behalf of youth.
5. Connect to more information on youth issues and other organizations advocating for youth.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Concern

In the early to mid-1990s, the responsible fatherhood movement brought national attention to the importance of fostering fathers' involvement in the family in order to ensure the welfare of their children. The children of teenage parents tend to exhibit poorer health, educational, and behavioral outcomes than children born to older parents.² Research tells us that the absence of a father negatively impacts their children's academic achievement, general behavioral adjustment, and anger management, especially among male children.³ While less research has been conducted on the benefits of father presence, fathers, whether living with their children or not, can assume caregiving responsibilities and provide emotional and economic support for their children.⁴ If we want to improve the chances of children born to adolescent parents, we must help these young men be good fathers.⁵

However, many policy initiatives focused on strengthening the enforcement of child support payments from non-custodial fathers place additional burdens on low-income fathers. With the Family Support Act in 1988, the US government tightened paternity acknowledgment, child support, and paycheck withholding procedures.⁶ Policies such as these are often criticized for reinforcing the idea that to contribute financially is to be a good father. Without exceptions for low-income or young fathers unable to contribute the required amounts, these policies can effectively discourage other forms of meaningful involvement in the lives of their children for fear of getting in trouble with the system.

Later, with the influx of research on fatherhood spearheaded by emerging national organizations, the government began to recognize the potential of fathers as resources to healthy families. Policies began to reflect this shift, with President Clinton's 1995 Executive Memorandum calling for "all federal agencies to engage and meaningfully include fathers," to modify programs designed to serve mothers and children to actively serve fathers as well, and to incorporate fathers into government research and evaluation efforts.⁷

Today, it is imperative to continue these trends. We must forge a space for young fathers' voices within the fatherhood movement so that practitioners and policymakers may comprehensively and effectively support young families.

Prevalence

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the birth rate for teenage males (ages 15-19) has been declining. The rate for teen parenthood peaked in the early 1990s at just over 24 per 1000. Since then, the birth rates for teen fathers have declined by 29 percent to 17.4 per 1000 in 2002. However, missing information for the father's age on birth certificates of babies born to women under the age of 25 and of unmarried women make these data unreliable.⁸

Longitudinal studies of urban youth yield rates of teenage fatherhood ranging from 12 to 28 percent, and these rates differ by race as well. Although this study reports higher rates of teen fatherhood among Hispanics and African-Americans versus Whites (48 and 31 percents, respectively, versus 8 percent), race is not the only risk factor for becoming a father at an early age since many factors contribute to young fatherhood.⁹ It is important for professionals working with youth to recognize cultural influences that significantly impact how different young men make their decisions whether or not to become sexually active and to be involved as a co-parent.

Impact on Behavior

Adolescence is a time for personal development. Having a child disrupts a young man's natural transition from adolescence to adulthood, often impacting his ability to foster healthy and supportive relationships with both his child and the child's mother.

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Many young men also struggle with unhealthy behaviors that complicate this transition to adulthood. So-called “delinquent” behavior early in life – including substance use, gang involvement, and/or violent behavior – has been shown to contribute to teenage fatherhood. That is, young men who exhibit anti-social behaviors may be more likely to father children at an early age.¹⁰

However, many young fathers transition from adolescence into adulthood and play an active and positive role in their children’s lives. In order to help them avoid adverse and/or health-compromising behaviors that could lead to early parenthood, it is imperative that these, and all, young men receive positive youth development and prevention messages early in their development.

Given these trends, professionals who work with youth must assess for all signs of unhealthy behaviors that may increase young men’s susceptibility to early fatherhood. Supportive programming must address the constellation of issues associated with young fatherhood – the need to build life skills; resolve unhealthy and antisocial behaviors; learn effective parenting; as well as learn the legal issues that may impact their experience of fatherhood – in order to be effective in fostering healthy families.

Without changes to governmental policies, broad economic reform, and perhaps most importantly, a change in how society perceives teenage males and young fathers, programs will remain limited in their impact.¹¹ Policy makers, the media, and the public should cease stigmatizing young fathers who may be unable to financially support their children immediately after birth as “deadbeat dads.” Instead, we must ensure these young fathers have every chance to succeed.

ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Healthy Teen Network makes the following recommendations in order to increase awareness about ways in which society can support young fathers. We strongly encourage the creation of supportive services and funding sources that promote the individual development of young fathers and their positive involvement in young families.

Awareness

- ✓ HTN encourages efforts to increase awareness among young mothers and/or co-parents, professionals who work with young families, as well as the general public of the potential benefits of positive father involvement in the lives of their children.
- ✓ HTN recommends and encourages widespread efforts to increase awareness about the unique needs of young fathers and the creation of programs that support them.
- ✓ HTN recommends increasing awareness among professionals and the public of how certain policies at the state and national level impact young fathers, both minors and legal adults.
 - Nationally and statewide, minor fathers under age 18 have different rights and are subject to different legal statutes with regards to public assistance, child support, and statutory rape laws.
 - Often these statutes play a significant role in how involved a young father is in the life of his child and co-parent.

Education

- ✓ HTN recommends that all young men, including young fathers, receive developmentally and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education and opportunities to build their decision-making skills regarding their sexual behavior, prevent (further) unintended pregnancies, and avoid STIs, including HIV.
- ✓ HTN believes that in order for young men to be effective parents, they must be given the opportunity to develop individually, including:
 - Build life skills (education, job and career skills, and financial literacy)
 - Resolve unhealthy and antisocial behaviors (substance use, gang involvement, violent/aggressive behaviors, other delinquency)

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- ✓ HTN believes that young fathers need to learn effective parenting, including:
 - Prenatal health and childbirth
 - Child development, child health, and child care
 - Relationship skills (father-child and father-mother)
- ✓ HTN recommends that young fathers learn the legal issues that may impact their experience of fatherhood, including:
 - Paternity acknowledgment and/or legitimation
 - Child support, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Workforce Investment Act (WIA)
 - Visitation (for non-custodial and non-cohabitating fathers)
 - Custody (legal and physical; joint and non-joint)
 - Statutory rape

Support Systems

- ✓ HTN recommends that, to engage young fathers, programs must reach out to them wherever they are – which may or may not be where young mothers access services. In addition to schools and health clinics, programs may reach out to young fathers through:
 - Organizations and programs that work with young mothers and young men
 - Alternative educational institutions
 - Job centers
 - Youth and social groups
 - Athletic affiliations
 - Court or correctional systems
- ✓ HTN believes that social service agencies, health centers, and parenting programs must adopt more “father-friendly” practices so as to provide young fathers equal opportunity to be actively involved in the well-being of their child and family. This means:
 - Not waiting for young fathers to ask for help.
 - In a study of 95 young fathers, only two reported that they felt comfortable seeking services from a social service agency¹².
 - Reinforcing the idea that being there for a child entails more than just financial support.
 - Society often gives young men the message that being a father equals handing over a paycheck. Because teenagers who experience economic hardship are more likely to become fathers early in their lives¹³, this stereotype may discourage many young fathers from stepping forward.
 - Positively engaging young fathers *before* the birth of their child.¹⁴
 - A young man decides, usually near in time to the child’s birth, whether he wants to be involved in the life of his child and/or maintain a relationship with the co-parent. This is an important time to build on the existing relationship between the mother and father.

Behaviors

- ✓ HTN recommends fostering a positive, male parent identity among young fathers as a critical element of their adoption of healthy and responsible parenting behaviors. This means fully accepting the role of father as an equal partner to the mother of the child.

Funding

- ✓ HTN recommends allocating and/or increasing funding for:
 - Research into the effects of positive father involvement in the lives of their children.
 - Research into the unique challenges facing young fathers and their unique needs with the aim of establishing a standard of best practices for supportive programming.
 - Initiatives to bring the voices of young fathers to the forefront of the national fatherhood movement.
 - Policy initiatives to fully incorporate the needs of young fathers into the web of services provided by federal and state social service agencies.
 - While some funding has been provided with the Healthy Marriage Initiative, there must be funding, not specific to marriage promotion, available to address the complex issues that teen fathers face.

DEFINITIONS

Young Father: One national study identifies young fathers as teenage males ages 15-19¹⁵. However, males can both become fathers at younger ages as well as be involved in the pregnancies of teenage girls while in their twenties. The term “Young Father” encompasses all such young men who, because of their age and/or maturity level, tend to be vulnerable to the adverse parenting outcomes described in the literature surrounding teenage pregnancy.

For purposes of policy and programs, a clarification between minors and adult fathers needs be made. From state to state, minor fathers under age 18 have different rights and are subject to different legal statutes with regard to public assistance, child support, and statutory rape laws.

Responsible Fatherhood: Refers to the concept that fathers can play a positive role in families when they contribute responsibly. Also refers to the movement or “field” of organizations focused on fatherhood that formed in the early 1990s and pushed the agenda of increasing fathers’ involvement in families onto the national political stage. Seminal players included the National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF), and the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (NPNFF).

Paternity Acknowledgment: Refers to the process whereby a biological father takes legal responsibility for his biological child. This entails a legal obligation to support the child financially (if not cohabitating with the mother) and transferring the rights of inheritance upon that child. Voluntarily acknowledging paternity can serve as a symbolic gesture of a young father’s commitment to staying positively involved in his child’s life until the age of 18.

Paternity acknowledgment may be accomplished through various means such as genetic testing, signing a legal document, or court action. For non-cohabitating fathers, establishing paternity is usually separate from establishing custody or visitation rights. In some states “paternity acknowledgment” is achieved in one step, however in other states, it is two separate actions, involving establishing biological paternity through a DNA test and “legitimation,” establishing legal rights concerning a child “born out of wedlock.”

ABOUT HEALTHY TEEN NETWORK

- Healthy Teen Network (HTN) is a national membership organization that provides resources and services to professionals working in the field of adolescent reproductive health—specifically teen pregnancy prevention, teen pregnancy, and teen parenting. Healthy Teen Network believes youth can make responsible decisions about sexuality, pregnancy and parenting when they have complete and accurate information, resources, and support that are culturally relevant and appropriate to their age, gender, and developmental stages.

RESOURCES

National Fatherhood Initiative
<http://www.fatherhood.org/>

Center for Schools and Communities –
Resource Guide of Best Practices for
Pregnant and Parenting Teen Programs: Teen
Father Services
[http://www.center-
school.org/education/ppt/pptfather.htm](http://www.center-school.org/education/ppt/pptfather.htm)

The Prevention Researcher – Teen Fathers,
11(4), November 2004
www.TPRonline.org

Young Fathers: New Support Strategies –
ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Digest, Number 141
<http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-4/fathers.htm>

Center for Law and Social Policy - Child
Support and Low-Income Fathers
<http://www.clasp.org>

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