

Understanding &
Working with
Young Fathers

Authors:

Bill Anderson, Paul Masiarchin
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Minn. Fathers & Families Network

161 Saint Anthony Ave. Suite 845

Saint Paul, MN 55103

info@mnfathers.org

Visit us online at:

www.mnfathers.org

InfoSheet 4: Young Fathers

What image comes to mind when you hear the term “teen parent”? Chances are, you visualize a young mother holding an infant in her arms. While considerable resources and research are available regarding teenage mothers raising children, fewer resources exist about teenage fathers. Before beginning any program intended for young fathers, it is crucial that staff members understand the difference between *the perceptions versus the reality* of young fathers.

All too often, **it is assumed that young men do not want to be involved in their children’s lives.** This perception can prevent young fathers from being involved in decision making regarding the young man’s baby. The reality is that most teen fathers do want to be involved in their child’s life and are concerned about their child’s future; they just need to be given a chance to grow in the role as a father. According to a researcher at UC San Francisco, “Young fathers who are left without resources or social supports struggle to sustain a positive presence in their child’s life, as well as maintain a supportive relationship with the child’s mother.”² Programs should understand that, at birth, fully 99 percent of fathers and 96 percent of mothers want the dad to be involved in the child’s upbringing.³ Due to a number of factors, many young dads will never receive adequate support or opportunity to develop a relationship with his child.

Another perception exists that young men believe it is *macho* to father a child. Indeed, 6 in 10 teens believe a double standard tells teen girls to abstain from sex while it tells teen boys that “sex and pregnancy are not a big deal.”⁴ Despite this double standard, young men perceive pregnancy as a negative event that could prevent achievement of specific life goals.⁵ Many teen fathers are in the process of trying to find their place in the world at the same time they are trying to learn to become responsible fathers.

Parents underestimate their influence and overestimate the influence of peers when it comes to teen sexual decision making. Notably, teens say that their parents are the strongest influence on their decisions about sex while parents believe that friends are the most influential factor in sexual decision making. However, teens are clear in their belief that parents matter in their sexual decision making.¹ Young men often look to a father or father figure when making his decisions about sexual activity. For programs working with young men, the value of positive adult male role models cannot be overstated.

Another false assumption is that young men do not want to attend social services programs. It is critical to involve young fathers in any pregnancy prevention or parenting program. Young men need to be aggressively recruited in the community and introduced to people who can help them succeed. Malls, coffee shops, libraries, schools, gyms, community centers—these local hangouts of teenagers have to be visited for recruiting purposes. School administrators, teachers, caseworkers, local clergy, community education personnel or even hospital personnel should have information regarding teen

“Those concerned about adolescent pregnancy must expand their efforts to reach boys and young men and parents must be direct with their male children about respect for girls and women, responsibility, and expected standards of behavior.”¹

pregnancies. As young mothers and fathers are identified, it is also worthwhile to reach out to their immediate families. However, the recruitment of young men must also address the reluctance that men may have about entering programs traditionally identified as women’s programs. “Some fathers may need to be persuaded or personally invited to use services; some may need to be convinced that caseworkers will not report them to child support agencies.”⁶ (For further information about working with fathers, see MFFN’s *InfoSheet: ECFE* which has details about creating a father-friendly program.)

Young fathers may have multiple barriers to parenting. Programs aiming to serve teen fathers cannot focus exclusively on his needs as a parent. Fathers of all ages cite good intentions to be involved with their children; however, factors preventing their involvement include: lack of money, poor relationships with mothers and their families, incarceration, substance abuse, and their own lack of involved fathers.⁶

“There are many instances in which existing services are so clearly designed for women that whether or not men are eligible, they would never apply.”⁶

Together, these factors often prevent a father from achieving the positive involvement he aspires to maintain. Often, young fathers’ involvement in the juvenile justice system is a dominant barrier to his ability to develop a positive relationship with his child. “While there is no single explanation or decisive risk factor for teen fatherhood, early delinquency is one of the most significant risk factors for becoming a teen father. The impact of becoming a teen father may in turn spur even greater delinquency.”⁷

Often, the infant’s grandparents may hold a negative image of the young father and may not understand the reality of his intentions. Indeed, young fathers who are not involved with their children are more likely to attribute their lack of involvement to resistance from mothers and maternal grandmothers than to other factors. This implies that programs that target the birth-mom and her mother will increase their chances of keeping the birth-father involved in his child’s life.⁸

Young fathers do not have the same needs as young mothers. Successful programs take into account young fathers’ learning styles and parenting styles. These programs include hands-on activities, real-world lessons, and active participation in games, group discussions, role playing or father-focused activities that can be practiced within a comfortable environment. Practicing techniques related to feeding, holding and changing a newborn are all recommended to ease some of the young father’s nervousness about parenting. Information regarding the stages of child development is also useful. To encourage regular program participation, incentives can be developed to provide high school or college credits. It can’t be stressed enough how important high school graduation is for the future of the young father as well as the future of his child. Programs that attempt to use a generic “parenting curriculum” will soon find that mothers and fathers are distinct in many ways. Fathers, for example, tend to encourage more active, physical play and higher levels of exploration.

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Fathers that help with early child care and have a strong social support system ultimately feel more satisfied as a parent and are inclined to stay involved over a longer period of time. No doubt those are important factors for anyone raising children today. Young fathers also have to face false perceptions and inexperience. Ensuring that young fathers have the necessary lines of communication and support cannot be overstated. They will need help with school, work, daycare—even growing up. After all, it takes a community to raise a child.

Sources:

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- ³ “Promoting Responsible Fatherhood in California: Ideas and Options,” Social Policy Action Network, 2002, www.span-online.org.
- ⁴ “American Opinion on Teen Pregnancy and Related Issues 2003,” National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003, www.teenpregnancy.org.
- ⁵ “Where Does Reproductive Health Fit into the Lives of Adolescent Males?” Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, July/August 2003, www.gutmacher.org.
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- ⁷ “Teen Fatherhood and Delinquent Behavior,” Juvenile Justice Bulletin, January 2000, U.S. OJJDP, www.ncjrs.org.
- ⁸ “The Parent Trap: Forgotten Fathers,” Deborah Cohen, Education Week, 1993, www.edweek.org.

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