
Co-Parenting:

Resources and Best Practices for Service Providers



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Introduction

Fathers and mothers who interact positively with each other contribute to their child's positive development in several ways. Young parents can interact positively as romantic partners or as co-parents. While these two aspects of parents' relationships are related, co-parenting (e.g., the ability to support each other's needs as parents) is particularly important for children's positive development because it directly involves the child.¹ Program staff can help young fathers and mothers foster supportive and positive co-parenting interactions to promote children's well-being.

This resource is intended to help youth-serving professionals who support young parents. It begins with a description of the importance of co-parenting and its association with child well-being, and is followed by suggestions for how best to support young fathers and other caregivers in co-parenting programming services. It also includes resource spotlights that provide youth-serving professionals with additional information on these topics.

What is co-parenting?

Positive co-parenting is the shared responsibilities, goals, and collaboration between two individuals who work together to ensure the positive development of a child.^{2,3} Co-parenting can be characterized as either positive or negative. Within a positive co-parenting relationship, two individuals support one another's parenting efforts, share decisions regarding the well-being of the child, and communicate and delegate the responsibilities for the child.^{3,2} Conversely, negative co-parenting occurs when both adults undermine each other's authority, and there is hostility, conflict, and disagreements between both caregivers.⁴ Although often limited to two parents or caregivers, co-parenting may also involve other individuals (e.g., the child's paternal or maternal grandparent) who are responsible for the well-being of the child.²

Why is co-parenting important?

Co-parenting is important for both caregivers' and children's well-being. Positive co-parenting is associated with better romantic relationship quality among parents who are romantically involved.^{5,6,7} This likely reflects "spillover" from one relationship to another – if parents get along and have positive patterns of behavior in one domain of their relationship (e.g., romantically), they are likely to get along in others (e.g., co-parenting). Positive co-parenting is also associated with increased father involvement, particularly among nonresident fathers who are not romantically involved with their child's mother.⁵ This highlights how important a positive, supportive relationship with the mother is, especially when there is no romance, to support father-child involvement.

Co-parenting is also linked with a child's cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral development.⁸ When children are exposed to positive co-parenting, they are less likely to show externalizing problem behaviors (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity), and they have better social skills.^{9,10,11} Negative co-parenting is associated with increased problem behaviors, poorer social skills, and is negatively associated with a child's cognitive development.^{4,12,13,14} Children who experience negative co-parenting also tend to have slower language development and struggle with emotion management.^{13,14} Table 1 depicts the association of positive and negative co-parenting on a child and the parents by domain.

Table 1: Positive and Negative Co-Parenting Effects

| Domains | Positive Co-parenting | Negative Co-parenting |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Association with Child Outcomes | | |
| <i>Socioemotional Development</i> | + | - |
| <i>Cognitive Development</i> | + | - |
| <i>Language Development</i> | | - |
| Association with Parent Outcomes | | |
| <i>Romantic Relationship</i> | + | |
| <i>Father Involvement</i> | + | |

Best practices for programs that offer co-parenting services

OAH solicited feedback from Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) grantees who provide co-parenting services to share strategies that service providers should consider when working with young parents. Suggestions are clustered thematically and include resource spotlights that provide additional information and resources on the topic. Many of the suggestions are for engaging young fathers, who are difficult to recruit and retain, in co-parenting services. Others are strategies for engaging young parents together, especially when they have a highly-conflicted relationship.

Program goals and messaging

- **Be consistent.** Staff need to be consistent in how they message the program to young fathers. At a minimum, program staff must provide services that were promised or offered to young men at intake. Program staff should be clear about what services fathers can expect to receive to help manage their expectations and ensure accountability from both staff and fathers. For example, one grantee mentioned that clearly articulating that young fathers can expect to receive free packages of diapers and formula during each home visiting session helps fathers know what to expect and keeps them engaged in programming. Several grantees reported that many of their participants do not have consistent or stable support systems at home. Program staff can build trust with their participants by informing them of the benefits of the program and other services in the community, and then providing the promised services to their participants. For instance, one grantee shared that they promised their client that they would provide home visits at a specific time every week, and every week at the designated time, program staff came prepared to deliver services. As a result, the father learned that they could take staff members at their word.
- **Provide referrals to agencies that provide services outside your program's ability.** Program staff should be aware of their limitations as service providers, and be aware of resources that young men and women can access within the community. This not only serves fathers and mothers better, but also builds trust by not overpromising what the program can do for young parents. For example, one grantee partners with local organizations within the community that provide employment and educational assistance. Staff should be sure to provide referrals only to reliable providers, as trust can be compromised when promised services are not provided, such as when a referral agency no longer provides services or no longer exists.
- **Emphasize that the program is designed to make young fathers and mothers better parents.** Program staff should emphasize that the case management meetings are about the child, and the child's overall well-being. Staff report that both fathers and mothers are more likely to stay engaged in programming when all services are linked back to how their child will benefit. Staff should also support young fathers and mothers both individually and collectively. For example, one grantee found great success delivering their home visiting program to mothers and fathers separately to provide them a space to address their parenting needs and educational goals. However, they also found that

Resource spotlight!

For more information on referrals and linkages, visit:

<https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/tpp-and-paf-resources/linkages-and-referrals-to-services/index.html>

providing programming to both fathers and mothers, simultaneously, created a space for young parents to discuss relationship maintenance and communication skills. Program staff should ensure that case management meetings are a safe space to discuss attachment and child development and how parents can help their children reach age-appropriate developmental milestones.

Program materials

- **Embed co-parenting lesson plans into your organization’s services.** Programs should use curricula that include materials that focus on responsible fatherhood, co-parenting, and relationship management. It may not be possible to include co-parenting services in PAF programming specifically, so providing additional services focused on responsible fatherhood topics, including co-parenting, is a great way to engage and retain fathers and offer important services that will benefit them and their children.

Evidence-informed programs.

The programs listed below are examples of programs designed to help couples positively co-parent to raise well-adjusted children:

Family Foundations for a Strong Start

<http://healthystartepic.org/resources/evidence-based-practices/family-foundations-for-a-strong-start/>

Young Parenthood Program

<https://www.childtrends.org/programs/young-parenthood-program/>

Create safe spaces and boundaries

- **Establish boundaries with young parents.** When working with both young fathers and mothers, establish boundaries by discussing up front what information will be disclosed about either parent during your individual or group meetings.
- **Provide a safe space for young fathers and mothers to participate together.** Offer opportunities for men and women to engage in the curriculum activities together. In doing so, program staff should be mindful about creating a program atmosphere that welcomes the opinions, thoughts, and beliefs of both young fathers and mothers. This space should allow young fathers and mothers to speak freely about their concerns regarding co-parenting, parenting, and relationship management.
- **Provide spaces for young fathers and mothers to engage in programming separately.** Provide space for young fathers to discuss among a group of fathers how to co-parent with young mothers. For example, program staff can create gender segregated support groups where young men talk with each other about how best to communicate with their child’s mother and vice versa. This space can also serve as a safe space to voice frustrations and brainstorm how to solve problems with the child’s other parent as they arise.
- **Assess the nature of the relationship between the father and mother to ensure the safety of the child and parents, and ensure staff are trained in trauma informed approaches.** Dating violence can be physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, and/or involve stalking, and occurs between two people in a close relationship. The CDC estimates that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men have experienced some form of sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking in their lifetime.¹⁵

The CDC finds that individuals who experienced childhood physical or sexual trauma are at a greater risk to be a dating violence perpetrator or victim.¹⁵ Other reported risk factors include witnessing violence within the home and low socioeconomic status.¹⁵ Victims of dating violence can experience depression, antisocial behaviors, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, high-risk sexual behaviors, and unintended pregnancy.¹⁵ Adolescent mothers may experience abuse before, during, or after their pregnancies, so staff should screen participants to ensure the safety of the child and the victim-parent.¹⁶ According to *Break the Cycle*, common warning signs of dating violence include: extreme jealousy and insecurity, desires to isolate partners from family and friends, possessiveness, and repeatedly telling someone what to do.¹⁷ When staff suspects dating violence, they should ask specific and direct questions in a private and safe setting, document all information, and report information to the proper channels, when appropriate. Staff should consider using trauma-informed approaches (i.e., an approach that considers adverse life experiences and their potential influence on sexual decision making to promote lifelong well-being) with all participants, but particularly when they suspect dating violence.

Resource spotlight!

Intimate partner violence screening is essential to getting young parents the help they need. Get help here:

http://ipvhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Ado_To_olkit_LowRes-2.pdf

Staff should consider using trauma-informed approaches to complete their screening. For more information on trauma-informed approaches, visit: <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/tpp-and-paf-resources/creating-safe-and-supportive-environments/index.html#trauma-informed>

Foster opportunities for communication

- **Provide guidance for young men on how to effectively communicate with their child’s mother.** When working with young fathers and mothers, provide opportunities for both parents to learn what communication method works best for their relationship. For young men that are still involved with their child’s mother, PAF grantees recommend that young fathers learn how to communicate by understanding their partner’s “love language,” which will also improve the romantic connection. The five love languages outline how people experience and express love in romantic relationships.¹⁸ For nonromantic couples, PAF grantees suggest that staff teach young fathers how to resolve and/or diffuse conflicts. Staff should also model effective communication in all interactions they have at work; young parents not only learn from their own interactions with staff, but also when they observe staff interacting with others.
- **Effective communication ensures that young parents that do not live together are consistent in their parenting to their child.** Several grantees emphasized the importance of teaching young fathers how to effectively communicate with their child’s mother about their role in their child’s life when the romantic relationship ended. For

Resource spotlight!

For information on communication tools, tips, and techniques for co-parents, please visit:

<https://www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/PDF/AzAFCC%20Coparenting%20Communication%20Guide.pdf>

example, program staff should help young fathers and mothers come to an agreement on how they intend to parent their child to avoid conflicts that may arise due to differences in child-rearing beliefs. These agreements among non-resident parents can also help address differences in assumptions about roles and responsibilities, such as who will pick the child up from school, and help establish patterns that prevent one parent from being cut off from the involvement he/she wants with the child. A consensus on child-rearing ensures that children receive consistency in their home(s).

- **Nonresidential fathers and co-parenting.** Nonresidential fathers may be overrepresented as service recipients. Staff may find it particularly challenging to combine services for mothers and fathers when they do not have a romantic relationship. In these instances, staff should emphasize the importance of fathers and mothers learning how to communicate about the needs of the child to help turn the focus from the parents' relationship to the well-being of the child. For instance, young fathers and mothers should be encouraged to have discussions about the child and focus less on the failed romantic relationship. In addition, staff can encourage young fathers to attend support groups that discuss conflict resolution techniques.

Co-Parenting Resources

The following resources include guides, evidence-informed programs, and additional information on co-parenting when working with younger parents.

- Intergenerational Co-parenting: Supporting Young Parents (National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families) – <https://www.healthymarriageandfamilies.org/resources/media-gallery/webinars/intergenerational-coparenting-supporting-young-parents>
- Intimate Partner Violence Among Expectant and Parenting Youth: Prevention, Identification, and Intervention (Office of Adolescent Health) –
Slides: https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/ipv_webinar_slides.pdf
Audio: https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/ipv_webinar_audio.mp3
Transcript: https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/ipv_webinar_transcript.pdf
- Planning for Shared Parenting: A Guide for Parents Living Apart – <http://www.mass.gov/courts/docs/courts-and-judges/courts/probate-and-family-court/afccsharedparenting.pdf>
- Raising Your Child Together: A Guide for Unmarried Parents in Alabama (Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative) - <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/H/HE-0944/HE-0944.pdf>
- Together We Can: The Important Role of Co-parenting for Expectant and Parenting Teens and Young Adults (Office of Adolescent Health) –
Slides: <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/coparentingslides.pdf>
Audio: <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/coparentingwebinaraudio.mp3>
Transcript: <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/sites/default/files/coparentingtranscript.pdf>
- What does healthy co-parenting look like? (National Responsible Father Clearinghouse) - <https://www.fatherhood.gov/dadtalk-blog/what-does-healthy-co-parenting-look>
- Serving and Engaging Young Males and Fathers (Office of Adolescent Health) - <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/tpp-and-paf-resources/engaging-diverse-populations>

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