



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Family Assistance



## Helping Young Fathers Make Decisions: A Discussion Brief for Practitioners

Men who become fathers during their teens or early twenties face many important decisions. Practitioners can empower these young fathers to make the best decisions for themselves and their families by providing them with accurate research-based knowledge. This NRFC brief for fatherhood practitioners considers some of the topics that young fathers may need to think about and offers tips on how practitioners might help them make informed decisions about these topics.

One important topic not addressed in this document is whether and how to establish paternity, and the implications of that decision for noncustodial fathers' relationships with their children and future child support obligations. For more information and to help young fathers make informed decisions about this, see [Paternity Establishment: Information for Practitioners Working with Unmarried Fathers](#).

### Involvement with Children

#### Young fathers may need help to:

- Understand the importance of early bonding and quality time together, and how these influence their children's physical, mental, and emotional development.
- Think about ways in which they can bond and spend time with their children from an early age.
- Find ways to be involved on a consistent basis, even if they do not live in the same household as their children.
- Understand how their connection with their children can also have positive benefits for themselves.
- Understand both their own and their children's emotional and developmental needs.

#### Important information for young fathers

- When fathers spend time with their children it is beneficial for the children and their fathers.
  - For example, holding their new baby or reading to their one-year-old helps fathers feel good, but it can also help them feel more confident in their abilities as a father and in their life generally.<sup>i,2</sup>
  - Fathers who are involved with their children also have stronger social support networks than fathers who are not involved with their children.<sup>2</sup>
- It's not just the amount of time a father spends with his children that matters; the quality of that time is even more important.<sup>3,4</sup>
- There are many ways that fathers can be involved in their children's lives, even if they don't see them on a regular basis.
- As children grow up, they move through different developmental stages that influence what they can do, how they feel, and how they behave. These stages generally coincide with the age of the children, but each child develops at a different pace. Fathers can help their children succeed by understanding the different developmental stages and learning how to use positive parenting skills that match each stage.
  - For example, as their child begins to speak, fathers can ask them questions about what they are saying. This has been shown to promote language development and is something that fathers tend to do more than mothers.<sup>5</sup>
- It is normal for new parents to experience a wide range of emotions about parenting (for example, happiness, acceptance, anger, sadness, and helplessness).<sup>6</sup> It can be hard for parents to understand and respond to these changing emotions in ways that are appropriate for their children, and it is particularly hard for young parents who are still developing themselves as they move from adolescence to adulthood.
- Women are not "naturally" better at caring for children than men; parenting skills are learned and fathers can learn as quickly as mothers.<sup>7</sup>

### Take Time to Be a Dad Today

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### Tips for practitioners: Sharing this information with young fathers

- Share information about the benefits of early “bonding” between parents and their children.
  - Research shows that when children are securely attached to either parent (which means they feel confident that the parent will respond to their needs in a predictable way), they tend to have better social relationships, are more willing to explore their environments, and are less reactive to stress.<sup>8</sup>
- Talk about ways in which fathers can bond with their child during the first weeks and months of the child’s life.
  - For example, fathers can talk or sing to their baby, look into their eyes, change their diaper, or just hold them.<sup>9</sup> Reading to their children from an early age, or just talking to them, also helps with bonding and can help their children develop their reading and language skills.
- Help fathers think about ways to share warm, caring moments and interactions with their children. For example, rather than just suggesting that they read with their child, connect them with a local library that hosts storytelling groups for parents and children.
- Suggest some fun activities that are good for indoors or outdoors, such as singing age-appropriate songs and coordinating dance moves. This can be purely for fun or educational purposes – songs and games can be a great way to teach children new concepts, and children learn to talk, read, and write through interactive experiences.<sup>10</sup>
- If a father is not living with his child, talk about ways that he can stay involved.
  - For example, as their children get older, fathers can talk with them on the phone or use video apps such as FaceTime. They can also offer to provide transportation for the child or the child’s mother, and coordinate with others to ensure that their children are always cared for.<sup>11</sup>
- To help young fathers navigate the emotional ups and downs of parenting, validate the range of emotions that they may be experiencing; help them recognize, accept, and take ownership of their emotions; and teach them healthy strategies for dealing with a range of feelings.
- Remind young fathers that they can never “spoil” an infant, and make sure that they understand that they cannot “discipline” a baby.

### Co-Parenting

#### Young fathers may need help to:

- Understand the importance of working together with the mothers of their children and other family members, whether they live together with their children or in different households.
- Deal with situations where the mother, or her parents, try to prevent the father from being involved with his children.
- Deal with situations where the mother is uninvolved and absent.
- Develop a functional relationship with the mother and other family members, especially if young parents are not together or have a conflicted relationship.<sup>12</sup>

#### Important information for young fathers

- Research has shown that when a father is there to support the mother during pregnancy and after the birth, the mother is more likely to eat a healthy diet, have better labor experiences, feel better about herself, enjoy a better relationship with the father, and be more loving and accepting of their children.<sup>13</sup>
- Determining a co-parenting relationship that works for both parents can reduce stress for mothers and fathers, and is linked with future involvement for nonresident fathers.<sup>14,15,16</sup>
- It is natural for parents to argue about some things, but only if they do so in respectful ways. It can be very upsetting for children if they see or hear their parents being mean or disrespectful to one another.
- If mothers and fathers work together as co-parents, their children are more likely to do better in school and are less likely to get into trouble as teenagers.<sup>17</sup>
- Communication between parents is key, particularly when dropping off or picking up children from one another.

### Tips for practitioners: Sharing this information with young fathers

- Encourage fathers to keep conflicts out of their children’s view or hearing, and find ways to stay positive in front of their children.
- Talk about ways in which parents can avoid giving differing messages to their children (e.g., parents could come to an agreement about what time the children should go to bed, how to respond if they ask for a favorite treat, and how much TV they can watch each day).
- Help young fathers learn communication and conflict management skills so that they can better work with the mother.
- If parents live in separate households, encourage them to share information about activities, such as when the child last ate; if they’ve been bathed; if they’ll need a diaper change soon; or, for older youth, whether they’ve done all of their homework.
  - Help the parents establish a parenting plan that includes ground rules to guide how and when they communicate. For example, they could agree to schedule regular phone calls and send a text message before coming to pick up or drop off children.
  - Note that some practitioners advise fathers to think carefully about what they want to say and how it might be perceived before sending a text message or talking on the phone.<sup>18</sup>

### The Co-Parenting Role of Grandparents

- Compared to older parents, young fathers and mothers are more likely to be living with their parents; therefore, grandparents can also play an important co-parenting role in a child’s life.<sup>19</sup>
- In some cases, children may live with their grandparents; in other situations, a grandparent may care for them while their parents are at school or work; and sometimes, if the grandparents are more financially stable, they may be able to help support the children financially.
- If the maternal grandparents have negative views about the father or his relationship with their daughter, they may adopt a “gatekeeper” role and try to limit his access to the child. In such cases, young fathers may need help to overcome these negative views and develop a functional relationship with the grandparents.
- Sometimes, a young father’s parents may try to discourage him from being involved due to financial or other concerns.

### Tips for practitioners: Helping young fathers understand and work with grandparents

- Help young fathers to understand and appreciate the feelings of others, and encourage them to be respectful of the grandparents.
- Advise young fathers to be patient and look for ways to show the grandparents their commitment to being involved fathers.
- If the grandparents continue to block a young father’s access to his child despite his best intentions, help him pursue legal avenues to assert his rights as the father.
- If the grandparents are helping financially or by spending time looking after the child, encourage young fathers to recognize that and show their appreciation to the grandparents.
- If a young, noncustodial father is a minor himself, he should also know that, in some states, his parents can be held legally responsible for paying child support (often referred to as “grandparent liability”).<sup>20</sup>

### Family Planning: Deciding When to Have Another Child

#### Young fathers may need help to:

- Think through whether and when they would like to have another child.
- Understand their role in family planning, especially if they and their partner choose a female-controlled contraceptive method.

#### Important information for young fathers

- The timing and spacing of additional children can affect the amount of time and money available for the children that fathers already have.
- Young fathers can talk with a partner to plan future pregnancies and reduce the likelihood of an unplanned pregnancy.



- Beyond just using condoms, fathers can provide support to a partner and work with her to make informed contraceptive decisions together.
  - For example, fathers can go with a partner to a doctor or clinic, look up information on different contraceptive methods online with a partner, remind a partner to use their chosen contraceptive method, and help pay for any prescriptions.

### Tips for practitioners: Sharing this information with young fathers

- Include family planning in case management conversations.
- Encourage young fathers to think through whether and when they would like to have another child.
- Share research information that shows how rapid repeat pregnancies (occurring within 1 year of each other) can have adverse consequences for young parents, such as a reduced ability to complete their education, attain economic self-sufficiency, and provide for multiple children.<sup>21</sup>
- Connect fathers (and their partners) to information about effective birth control methods.<sup>22</sup>
  - Resources are available from national organizations such as the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy](#), [Advocates for Youth](#), and [Planned Parenthood](#).
  - The National Campaign has a [Planning for Children](#) module that includes resources to guide discussion groups with fathers.
  - Local community reproductive health agencies could provide information for young fathers and their partners.
  - Note that the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends Long-Acting Reversible Contraceptives, which provide 3 to 10 years of contraception, as the first-line contraceptive choice for adolescents who choose not to be abstinent.

## Economic Self-Sufficiency

### Young fathers may need help to:

- Understand the importance of educational qualifications for gaining employment in the United States.
- Learn about the different types of jobs they can pursue with an associate's or college degree.
- Review possible pathways to economic self-sufficiency and make decisions to fit their circumstances.

### Important information for young fathers

- A high school diploma or its equivalent is a minimum requirement for most jobs.
- An associate's or college degree can greatly increase the range of job opportunities.
  - For example, a four-year engineering degree can lead to a wide variety of careers and a two-year criminal justice degree could be a great option for a career in law enforcement.
- Trades such as plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, or truck driving pay wages far above the minimum wage that most restaurants and stores pay.
- Finding a job with a stable schedule can help fathers plan consistent times to see their children and arrange child care while they are working. While a job's hourly wage or salary is important, sometimes a stable part-time position may be better than a temporary full-time position, especially if the part-time position has the potential to gain more hours over time.
- Looking for a job that includes health insurance may also be important, particularly if the child's mother does not have health insurance for the child.

### Tips for practitioners: Sharing this information with young fathers

- Talk about the pros and cons of getting a job versus completing high school or other educational or training qualifications.
  - Young fathers may feel pressure to contribute financially by looking for a job immediately. Point out the benefits with regard to future job opportunities and increased wages of completing education and training first.<sup>23</sup>
  - However, individual situations do vary, so forgoing more education for a job with good advancement prospects may be the best choice for some fathers who already have a high school diploma or GED.

- Alternatively, fathers who are currently without work could still find ways to contribute in nonfinancial ways as an active co-parent by caring for their children on a regular schedule, accompanying the mother to appointments with a pediatrician, and paying for essential items such as diapers or baby food when they can.
- Connect fathers with organizations that can help them finish school or get their GED.
  - If they feel that they have to work in order to provide for their child financially, explain that pursuing a GED can generally be done on a flexible schedule to fit around work or child care schedules.
  - Some high schools offer on-site child care or other resources for student parents, but these are often designed with only young mothers in mind and may not be father friendly. [Advocate on behalf of young fathers](#) to ensure that they receive the same resources that are available to young mothers. If only limited resources are available, leverage partnerships with schools to encourage schools to be more teen parent friendly.<sup>24</sup>
- Encourage fathers who already have a high school diploma or GED to pursue more education, such as an associate's degree, college degree, or job training classes. Explain the different types of schooling and training available, and make sure that they know that many colleges have family centers whose purpose is to help parenting students balance school and parenting responsibilities.
- When young fathers are ready to look for a job, encourage them to think through what is most important to them and the well-being of their child when selecting a job. A job that provides stable hours, even if they're overnight hours, may be better than one with inconsistent hours during the day.

## Support Networks

### Young fathers may need help to:

- Manage peer pressure, particularly from friends who do not have children.
- Balance time with friends and their responsibilities as a father.
- Develop a network of friends and family members who can help them make decisions and meet their responsibilities as a father.
- Overcome the idea that asking for help or joining a peer support group is not a “manly” activity.
- Overcome institutional biases that, although they are often unintended, may exist in school or health care settings.

### Important information for young fathers

- Being an involved and responsible father can be hard, particularly when friends don't understand the responsibilities of being a father. Young fathers can find ways to balance the time they spend with friends with their responsibilities as a father by talking with staff at a young fathers' program and developing a support network with other young fathers.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends support groups as one approach that can improve young fathers' parenting skills.<sup>25</sup>
- If young fathers feel excluded from conversations with their child's health care providers or others involved in caring for their child, they can talk with staff at their local fatherhood program about ways to deal with this.

### Tips for practitioners: Sharing this information with young fathers

- Develop a peer support group for young fathers so that they can benefit from discussing their lives with, and hearing from, other young fathers.
- Consider the impact of the terminology you use in program literature. For example, the word *support* may have negative connotations for some men who consider it “unmanly” to ask for help. Talking about a fathers' *group* or *club* may help young fathers get over the mental hurdle of accepting a support group format.
- Encourage the fathers to ask one another for advice and to stay in touch with each other outside of the group or when they graduate from the fatherhood program.
- Identify older fathers with personal experience in coping as a young father, and train them to mentor individual fathers or lead the support group.<sup>26</sup>

## Resources

- [Center for the Study of Social Policy: Changing Systems & Practice to Improve Outcomes for Young Fathers, Their Children & Their Families](#) – This document provides a wealth of information regarding young fathers' involvement and recommendations on how to engage and support young fathers.
- [The Characteristics and Circumstances of Teen Fathers: At the Birth of Their First Child and Beyond](#) – This research brief from Child Trends provides an overview of data on the characteristics of teen fathers.
- [Following Young Fathers](#) – This UK website offers a series of briefs on young fatherhood, covering topics that include transitions into fatherhood, co-parenting, and grandparent support.
- [Healthy Teen Network: Advocacy Resource Guide, Supporting Young Fathers](#) – This resource guide provides recommendations about actions that can be taken to support young fathers.
- [Office of Adolescent Health: Resources for Serving Young Fathers Toolkit](#) – This toolkit provides a comprehensive approach for working with youth fathers, as well as the resources needed to serve them.
- [Supporting Young Fathers in Their Parenting Journey](#) – This short article, published by Youth Today, explores the assistance and understanding that young fathers need while navigating the responsibilities of fatherhood. The article contains links to numerous resources for young fathers.
- [Supporting Young Fathers Network](#) – This webpage from the United Kingdom (UK) provides an annotated list of resources for practitioners working with young fathers.
- [Working with Young Fathers](#) – This section of the NRFC's Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field provides tips and resources for working with young fathers.
- [Working with Young Fathers: Tips from the Field](#) – Materials posted after this 2017 NRFC webinar include the presenter's slides, transcript, video recording, and a helpful resources list.
- [Paternity Establishment: Information for Practitioners Working with Unmarried Fathers.](#)

This brief was developed by Kimberly Turner and Heather Wasik at Child Trends, with assistance from Elizabeth Karberg and Mindy Scott at Child Trends and Nigel Vann and Stacey Bouchet at Fathers Incorporated, on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

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