



Supporting Young Fathers' Engagement with Their Children

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Young males who become fathers during adolescence and young adulthood are simultaneously navigating the complex realities of parenthood and their own growth and development. Many young fathers have low rates of employment, limited opportunities to further their education, and few opportunities for economic stability. These demands and responsibilities often heighten stress and undermine their ability to solidify their own sense of identity while nurturing their child and maintaining a co-parenting relationship with their child's mother.

There is strong evidence that fathers' engagement with their children is associated with positive cognitive, social, academic, and emotional outcomes for children from infancy to adolescence (Cowan, 2009). Many resources are available to support fathers and build community support to increase engagement and attachment. This tip sheet focuses specifically on the program elements that have been shown to be part of successful integrated programs that support young fathers' ability to develop and sustain healthy, positive engagement with their children.

FATHER ENGAGEMENT RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

To understand how to best support young fathers in community programs, it is critical to understand the factors that affect their ability to engage and connect with their children. These include the following:

- **Relationship factors:** The quality of the father's relationship with the child's mother, including levels of conflict and cooperation—regardless of whether the couple is married, divorced, separated, or never married—has a strong influence on engagement with the child (Cowan, 2008).
- **Contextual factors:** The father's employment status and economic stability influence his relationship with his child.
- **Maternal factors:** The mother's attitude toward and expectations of the father's relationship with the child is a strong predictor of the father's involvement; mothers often are the primary caregiver and therefore the gatekeeper of access to the child.
- **Housing factors:** A teen father who lives with their child's mother at the time the child is born may be more committed to being involved in the child's life as well as in the lives of any subsequent children (Scott, 2012).

- **Legal factors:** Current policies often reinforce the idea that financial support defines being a good father; low-income or young fathers unable to contribute what they have been mandated to contribute may not engage in other forms of meaningful involvement for fear of getting in trouble with the system (Healthy Teen Network, 2006). Informal and in-kind support are linked to close father-child relationships (Waller, Emory, & Paul, 2018).

EFFECTIVE PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Interventions to support young fathers' engagement with their children are more likely to achieve the desired outcomes when they focus on addressing multiple risk and protective factors (Healthy Teen Network, 2006; Cowan, 2009; Rienks, Wadsworth, Markman, Einhorn, & Moran-Etter, 2011; Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012; Fathers Incorporated, 2016).

- **Self-sufficiency:** Build supports and resources to help young fathers develop basic self-sufficiency skills and life skills to promote independent living and access to supplemental programs and services (education, vocational skills, transportation, and life skills).
- **Physical and mental health:** Address physical and mental health issues affecting day-to-day functioning and long-term health (e.g., acute and chronic disease, nutrition, substance use); help young fathers and couples gain the motivation and capacity to plan and space any additional pregnancies.
- **Social integration:** Resolve unhealthy and antisocial behaviors (gang involvement, violent/aggressive behaviors, delinquency) that affect fathers' full participation in their child's life.
- **Housing stability:** Access supports and resources to facilitate attainment of affordable housing in a safe neighborhood, continued housing stability, and independent living.
- **Financial stability:** Integrate practical information to help young fathers work toward financial stability by facilitating educational attainment and employment at a livable wage, as well as financial literacy.
- **Parenting skills:** Deliver accessible and culturally relevant resources to facilitate effective parenting skills and positive engagement to foster attachment between young fathers and their children across the lifespan (prenatal health, childbirth, child development, child health, child care).



Program Spotlight

Teen Outreach Pregnancy Services TOPS DAD Program , Tucson AZ

"Your role in this new baby's life is huge and we want to help you be an awesome parent!"

TOPS DAD is a free program provided for young dads and dads-to-be by Teen Outreach Pregnancy Services in Tucson, Arizona. The program strives to give fathers the tools and confidence they need to be involved in their child's life and become the dad that they want to be. The program addresses multiple risk and protective factors for young fathers by providing opportunities for fathers to talk with other men about parenting through:

- Ongoing peer support
- Series of group class "24/7 Dad"
- One-time workshop "Boot Camp for New Dads"

Recent evaluations from the Boot Camp for New Dads showed participants were more confident:

- To care for their baby (97%)
- To effectively deal with their crying baby (93%)
- In supporting their partners after the baby comes (87%)

For more information go to

<https://www.teenoutreachaz.org/services/> or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/allan.stockellburg.7>



- **Healthy relationships:** Invest time to cultivate a sense of self-worth and value healthy relationships with partners, children, peers, family, and the community, as well as the skills to resolve conflict, solve problems, and negotiate (communication style, conflict resolution, problem solving, emotional regulation).
- **Awareness of legal issues:** Equip young fathers with accurate information about policies and laws that may impact their ability to participate and engage in parenting, including paternity acknowledgment, child support, federal financial assistance, and custody and visitation statutes and practices.

TIPS FOR PROGRAMS THAT WANT TO BEGIN WORKING WITH YOUNG FATHERS

- **Explore ideas for the program format:** Father-focused program models may be delivered in different formats. The most common are a single event (such as a workshop or meeting), a multi-session group focused on parenting (see Program Spotlight), parenting support in conjunction with other ongoing services (such as case management or HeadStart), and in-home interventions.
- **Consider the program timing:** Father-focused program models may be implemented at any time before, during, and after the birth of the child. Evidence suggests that the earlier the programs address father engagement, the more likely fathers are to remain engaged in their child’s life.
- **Think about who the program participants will be:** Father-focused program models may recruit young fathers, couples, or only the child’s mother. Evidence suggests that programs working directly with young fathers and with couples jointly are more effective than programs that rely on the mothers to relay parenting information to the father.

DEFINITIONS

What the experts say...	What young fathers say...*
Young father: A father up to age 21, or older if their female partner is an adolescent (Ross & Neville, 1987)	“Being a good father is always being there for your family and significant other as well. Family always comes first and you will know how to love and care for your children.”
Father engagement: The quantity and quality of time a father spends with his children	“My baby is the reason why I got my life straight and I want to buy her a car cuz with my parents they never had money and there would be months where we didn't have water and I don't want her to experience what I went through.”
Co-parenting: When at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have joint responsibility for a particular child’s well-being, including areas of physical, emotional, psychosocial, safety, and development (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012)	“Without her [teen mom] I don't think I would be able to do what I do cuz she supports me and takes care of my kids and they are so happy and that's because how she teaches them and she is an important part of my life and our children's lives.”
Pregnancy prevention: Young fathers are essential partners in decision-making related to contraceptive use to support intentional prevention, planning, or spacing of additional pregnancies	“It gets tempting not to use it [a condom] but I have my two kids and I'm done I'm not trying to have another and I learned my lesson.”

*Quotes from young fathers interviewed as part of the AIM 4 Teen Moms Study (Laris, 2017)

RESOURCES FOR YOUNG FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Resources from the Field	This resource from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse shares services that support fathers in their roles as major influences in their children’s lives. These programs help young fathers create nurturing relationships with their children and learn to be actively involved in their children’s lives. The toolkit includes lessons learned and resources from fatherhood programs across the country.
Supporting Young Fathers	This toolkit, provided by Act for Youth, includes resources to help efforts to understand, engage, and serve young fathers in the community.
Programs for Dads	These programs, designed and delivered by the Fatherhood Project, use their innovative curriculum centered on evidence-based practices. Although the Fatherhood Project works with all fathers, the project’s focus is on serving underserved, at-risk populations.
The Father Factor	These evidence-based program offerings by the National Fatherhood Initiative help programs to serve at-risk teen and young adult fathers and couples.
Program Development	Also from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, these resources help groups develop their own Responsible Fatherhood programs. The site includes information on general program development as well as performance management tools that are useful whether your program is a standalone or a collaborative and help ensure that program delivery is effective as possible.
Research-to-Practice Brief	This practice brief helps Responsible Fatherhood programs with recruitment and retention, which can often be barriers to effective program implementation.
Working with Pregnant and Parenting Teens	This tip sheet includes 10 steps that programs can take to incorporate evidence-based approaches for serving pregnant and parenting teens.
Evidence-Based Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs at a Glance	This site from the Department of Health and Human Services’ Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review provides a brief overview of the program models that have been reviewed and can be implemented and are intended to be used with other resources when selecting a program model for implementation.

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