



# Promoting Involvement among Young, Unmarried Fathers

## Child & Family Issue Brief

Every year in Ohio, thousands of young, unmarried men become fathers to new children. Nearly 40% of births today occur to unmarried mothers, a disproportionate number of whom are young and poor. It has been suggested that children born to unmarried mothers are four times more likely to have an absent father than children born to married mothers. While many young fathers report a desire to participate in raising their children, father involvement often wanes over the first two years of a child's life. Lack of child involvement among young, low-income fathers is a concern in light of the research suggesting a number of problematic outcomes common in children of these men including lower academic achievement and cognitive development, a higher rate of health problems, problem behaviors, probability of living in poverty, and an increased risk of becoming an adolescent parent than among children born to older fathers. Additionally, social policy has largely focused on paternity establishment and assuring financial contributions from nonresidential fathers to children with a relative dearth of policy and programmatic interventions aimed at increasing patterns of nonresidential father involvement in child care, decision-making, and other meaningful areas of fatherhood. Such involvement has been shown to contribute to enhanced child outcomes and, consequently, fewer short-term and long-term societal costs.

### *The Many Dimensions of Father Involvement<sup>1</sup>*

Fathers fulfill many important roles in the lives of their children. Policies that facilitate a father filling each of the following critical roles are particularly effective at promoting father involvement that contributes to child well-being.

**Economic Provider:** Fathers are expected to be a primary provider of economic support and protection for children; whether they live with them or not. Failure to fulfill this role often compromises aspects of involvement and child well-being.

**Caregiver:** Research suggests fathers provide as much affection and comfort to children as mothers and that fathers engage in a wide range of child care activities that enhance child well-being.

**Teacher & Role Model:** Children benefit from fathers who engage in teaching and coaching activities related to school and other child interests. More importantly, children benefit by fathers who teach through modeling of prosocial behaviors, attitudes, and values.

**Disciplinarian:** Through positive discipline, fathers contribute to monitoring and regulating children's behavior.

**Protector:** Fathers ensure a child's safety by making a child's environment safer, teaching a child about risks and how to be safe when parents are not present.

**Advocate:** A father can serve as a primary advocate for their child's needs and well-being, especially as participants in school activities, through communication with teachers, and as volunteers in children's schools.

**Resource:** Children benefit when fathers provide various forms of "behind the scenes" support. These include providing support to mothers and facilitating links between children and their extended families.

<sup>1</sup>) *Child Trends (1999). The Meaning of Father Involvement for Children.*

### *Young, Unmarried Fathers and their Children*

- \* Children living with unmarried mothers are 5 times as likely to be poor and 10 times as likely to be extremely poor as children living with married mothers.
- \* Currently, 57.7% of African-American children, 31.8% of Hispanic children, and 20.9% of Caucasian children live in single-parent homes.
- \* 40% of all births in 2005 were to unmarried women.
- \* 33% of children in the general population have nonresidential fathers. This number jumps to 72% among children served by child welfare agencies (The Urban Institute, 2003).
- \* Over 26% of children under age 18 lived in a single-parent home. (U.S. Census Bureau).
- \* 39% of children in households with no father present live in poverty; 8% of children in two-parent households live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau).
- \* 52.6% of children under age 6 in households with no father present were in poverty in 2004, about 5 times the rate of their counterparts in married couple families (U.S. Census Bureau).

## **Recommendations for Ohio**

**Develop father involvement programs that more effectively meet fathers' basic needs, especially employment needs.** Employment status is a primary factor impacting father involvement with children. A man's ability to fill the good provider role is strongly associated with patterns of contact with children. Fathering programs should include content on job search skills and link fathers with employment opportunities by providing paid job training, transitional employment, and transportation resources.

**Better integrate fathers into family services and health care services to young mothers and children.** Many young, unmarried fathers report feeling marginalized by social service and health care providers that focus more directly on children and their mothers.

**Enhance connections between programs targeted to low-income men and child support programs.** Child support programs often fail to acknowledge the number of substantial barriers that may prevent fathers from complying with support orders. Ideally, the child support system should be family-centered rather than residential-parent focused, strengthening connections with nonresidential fathers, reducing barriers and increasing child support compliance and meaningful interactions. This includes setting child support orders and capping child support debt at reasonable levels that poor fathers may be able to address, especially if fathers comply with other conditions placed upon them.

**Provide stronger mechanisms to enhance fatherhood and fathering skills among incarcerated fathers about to be released from institutions.** Many poor, young fathers are presently incarcerated and, as a result, have not had the opportunity to assume a meaningful role in the lives of their children. As these men prepare to leave the prison system, both the prison system and local communities should endeavor to develop programs to assist them in re-integrating with their families.

**Make changes to legal processes and systems that may serve to discourage father contact with children.** Because of its adversarial nature, the present legal system for addressing child custody issues may result in heightened co-parental conflict and reduced motivation for contact between fathers and children. Revisions to parenting time schedules that maximize time with both parents, reducing the parent-against-parent focus of child custody and residential arrangement decisions, and providing incentives for cooperative co-parenting.

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### **False Assumptions:**

**Young, unmarried fathers do not want to be involved in their children's lives.**

**Teenage fathers are most influenced by their peers.**

**Young men believe it is manly to father a child.**

**Teenage fathers are unlikely to seek out and participate in support programs.**

**Teenage fathers have only casual relationships with the mothers of their children.**

### **Research Indicates:**

Most young fathers want to be involved in their children's lives and live with their children if possible. The danger in this assumption is that it may contribute to others' creating barriers to the fathers involvement with his children.

Teen fathers regularly express the belief that their parents hold the greatest influence over their decision-making about sexual activity, and their approach to fatherhood.

The majority of teen fathers view a partner's pregnancy as a negative event and believe that the pregnancy and fatherhood will hinder their ability to achieve life goals.

Teenage fathers are likely to access and participate in programs if those programs provide content that is relevant to their situation.

Many teenage fathers feel strong emotional commitments to the mothers of their children and desire an ongoing relationship with these women.



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