



# Learning Tool 6

## Seven Core Learnings on Fatherhood

**T**he Seven Core Learnings, created by the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF), help to set a research, practice, and policy agenda and serve as a framework for the field of fathers and families. The Core Learnings represent the knowledge and experience of practitioners who confront complex problems facing fathers and families and are also consistent with fatherhood research conducted across multiple disciplines.<sup>1</sup> They offer an important lens through which policymakers might learn more about the implications and impact of legislation and policy decisions. And they capture salient issues experienced and felt deeply by many fathers and families — those who are financially secure as well as those who are the most vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

### Core Learnings

**Fathers care** — even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.

### Background

The fact that fathers care is documented in a variety of reports and studies. Fathers' caring may assume many different forms — from emotional commitment to children's development to hands-on support in the home and responsibility for child-care. The research in the area is constrained, however, by a narrow focus on fathers in middle-class, well-educated, white, intact families.

### Research Needed

What are the ways that fathers demonstrate that they care? What are examples of father attachment and support? What personal, familial, and social factors affect fathers' caring? To what degree do these factors revolve around social and developmental needs of young fathers or the problems encountered in making role transitions?

1. The Seven Core Learnings were distilled from primary and secondary research and practitioners' field experiences. NCOFF developed a library of information for each of these learnings. That information constitutes the FatherLit Research Database, accessible at [www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu](http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu).



## Core Learnings

**Father presence matters** — in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.

**Joblessness** is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.

## Background

Research on father presence is scant. Rather, the importance of father presence typically is inferred or generalized from research on the effects of father absence and information gleaned from practitioners' reports. Studies on father absence focus primarily on adjustment to divorce and the enduring effects of living in a single-parent, female-headed household. While not definitive, studies suggest that a variety of negative outcomes for children may be associated with father absence (poor school performance, low self-esteem, early sexual activity, and economic deprivation).

Research indicates that people in all ethnic groups in American society seemingly value work for similar reasons, including feelings of self-worth, survival, and support for children and families. When normal venues to work are unavailable or inaccessible, many fathers — particularly young fathers with few skills and few years of schooling — either avoid the responsibility of supporting their children or often turn to informal economies to provide necessary income.

## Research Needed

What effect does a father's presence in the home have on a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development? From the child's point of view, what difference does it make to live with or have access to one parent only? How does father absence affect family well-being?

What is the relationship between father involvement and joblessness, particularly among low-income fathers and fathers of color? How do joblessness and limited access to well-paying employment affect family formation choices and patterns, parenting activities, and decisions to marry? What types of policies are necessary to respond to unemployment among young fathers, particularly low-income fathers and fathers of color?

## Core Learnings

**Systemic Barriers** — Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. As a result, many men who are involved in their children’s lives resist legal acknowledgment of their paternity.

**Co-parenting** — A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills needed to share parenting responsibilities.

## Background

For many young fathers and mothers, systemic efforts to promote paternity establishment and child support enforcement are met with distrust and viewed as punitive, rather than supportive of family relationships. Many young fathers associate the courts with negative events — arrest, conviction, and imprisonment. Another significant disincentive to paternity establishment is the cost associated with the legal process, which not only inhibits fathers from declaring paternity but also deters women from initiating the process.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that issues faced by young fathers and mothers often are similar, e.g., few educational, social, and economic resources. Many children are growing up in fragile families and need to have access to two parents committed to sharing the responsibility of childcare and support.

## Research Needed

How do current and proposed initiatives such as welfare reform affect father involvement and support? How complex are the systemic barriers to father involvement at local and state levels? What are the specific policy changes necessary to ensure father engagement and to support young parents’ commitment to the welfare of their children?

What is the quantity and quality of social support available within families of origin, and how do these families influence the parenting behaviors of young fathers and their participation in co-parenting efforts? What are the effective models of social support for individuals and families, including innovative approaches, practices, techniques, and strategies, and what are the outcomes of program participation for parents and children?

### Resources

National Center on Fathers and Families

[www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu](http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu)

National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families

[www.npnff.org](http://www.npnff.org)

## Core Learnings

**Role Transitions** — The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant development implications for young fathers.

**Intergenerational Learning** — The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

## Background

The literature suggests that transitions that bring about new roles, such as high school graduation, marriage, and childbirth, are incomplete and problematic for a disproportionate number of young men. Inconsistencies in support and inattention to personal and family issues often impact young fathers' ability to make the abrupt transition to the adult role. Developing the responsibility required to be a responsive father is especially difficult.

Research on family development suggests that, across economic levels, families may serve as sources of strength or promoters of conflict. Families of origin are both framers of the experiences of the young parents, powerful forces in the young parents' decision to participate in co-parenting efforts, and sources of "family cultures." Parent roles, family functioning, and family structure all may be affected by family culture, and family cultures are affected by factors such as chronic poverty and inequity.

## Research Needed

What is the impact of peer mentors on the behaviors and attitudes of other young fathers? How does the presence of a baby and family change or affect the behaviors of young fathers? What is the nature of support to young men and women making the transition to parenthood?

How do some fragile families "make it," and why do others not? What strengths characterize these families, and what social supports are available to them? What hardships work against their resiliency?

What are the beliefs and practices that exist within families, and how are these beliefs, practices, and the values associated with them transmitted?



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