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Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions and Involvement With Children

Men's pregnancy intentions (i.e., wanting or not wanting a pregnancy) have been found to have important implications for the quantity and quality of fathers' later involvement with their children and partners and for child well-being.

Definitions

Pregnancy intentions refer to men's feelings about their partners' pregnancies. Such pregnancies can either be *intended* (planned at the time of conception), *mistimed* (not wanted at the time of conception, but wanted eventually), or *unwanted* (not wanted at the time of conception or ever in the future).^{8, 10}

Importance and Implications of Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions

The relatively small body of research on fathers' pregnancy intentions has found that men who report that a partner's pregnancy was unintended are likely to exhibit lower levels and poorer quality of involvement with their children following birth. In addition, men's pregnancy intentions are associated with the quality of the father-mother relationship and with children's cognitive and socioemotional well-being.

Implications of Pregnancy Intentions for Fathers' Later Involvement with Children

Little research exists that directly examines the link between male pregnancy intentions and father involvement, but existing evidence suggests that men's pregnancy intentions do have important implications for the quantity and quality of involvement that fathers exhibit with their children following birth.

- Studies examining men's pregnancy intentions generally find that men whose relationships result in unintended pregnancies show lower levels of subsequent involvement with their children, compared with men who report that the pregnancy was planned and wanted.^{8, 9, 10, 29, 34}
- Parents who experience an unintended pregnancy are less likely to invest their time and emotional resources on that child, compared with parents who wanted the pregnancy.⁴
 - Men may be especially unlikely to invest in a relationship with a child resulting from an unintended pregnancy. They may feel little or no responsibility for a child that they did not plan to have, especially given their perception that they have less control over contraception and birth planning than do women.^{2, 7, 21}
- Unintended pregnancies may also negatively impact the quality of fathers' involvement with their children. Children resulting from unwanted pregnancies may experience less positive parenting behaviors, such as reduced parental support, poorer quality parent-child interactions, more authoritarian parenting styles, and parental rejection.^{1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 20}
- Studies find that fathers who report that a pregnancy was unintended exhibit lower levels of involvement with the resulting children in a number of areas, including caregiving, warmth, and nurturing behaviors, compared with fathers who wanted the pregnancy.^{9, 13, 15, 27}
- Men whose partners experience unintended pregnancies also exhibit lower levels of prenatal involvement (e.g., discussing the pregnancy with their partner; attending childbirth classes; being

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present at child's birth), suggesting that the diminished levels of involvement associated with unintended pregnancy begin even before a child is born.⁹

- The negative effects of having an unintended pregnancy may be more pronounced for pregnancies that were unwanted than for pregnancies that were merely mistimed.^{25, 30, 35, 38}

Implications for Fathers and the Coparental Relationship

Men's pregnancy intentions are associated with fathers' mental health and the quality of the father-mother relationship.

- Unintended pregnancy is linked to problems with fathers' emotional well-being and identity development.
 - Men who report that a pregnancy was unintended may experience increased strain on their mental health, which can result in higher rates of depression and other negative outcomes.^{6, 10}
 - Unplanned pregnancies are associated with men's identity development. During the transition to fatherhood, men reorganize their personal identity and reestablish themselves in their existing roles and in their new role as a father.³⁷ Unplanned pregnancies can lead to negative transitions into fatherhood, which may have adverse repercussions for father's role and identity perceptions.³⁷
- Unintended pregnancy is also associated with the quality of the mother-father relationship.
 - The father-mother relationship has been found to decline in quality following the birth of a child,^{18, 24} and this decline may be especially pronounced following a pregnancy that is unintended.³¹
 - Unplanned pregnancy is linked to less happiness and satisfaction in the father-mother relationship, which can lead to coparental relationships that are marked by low levels of supportiveness and high levels of conflict.^{8, 10, 17, 19, 31}
 - Couples with mistimed or unwanted pregnancies have been found to have increasingly negative interactions over time, beginning during the last trimester of pregnancy and extending throughout the child's first year.¹⁷
 - Men's readiness to assume an active coparenting role after a child's birth can be a function of whether or not the pregnancy was planned. Couples that plan to have a child may have a greater sense of control over the transition to parenthood and may be more able to develop successful coparenting strategies, to renegotiate their new roles as coparents, to support one another, to share responsibilities, and to resolve childrearing differences.^{16, 22}

Implications for Child Well-Being

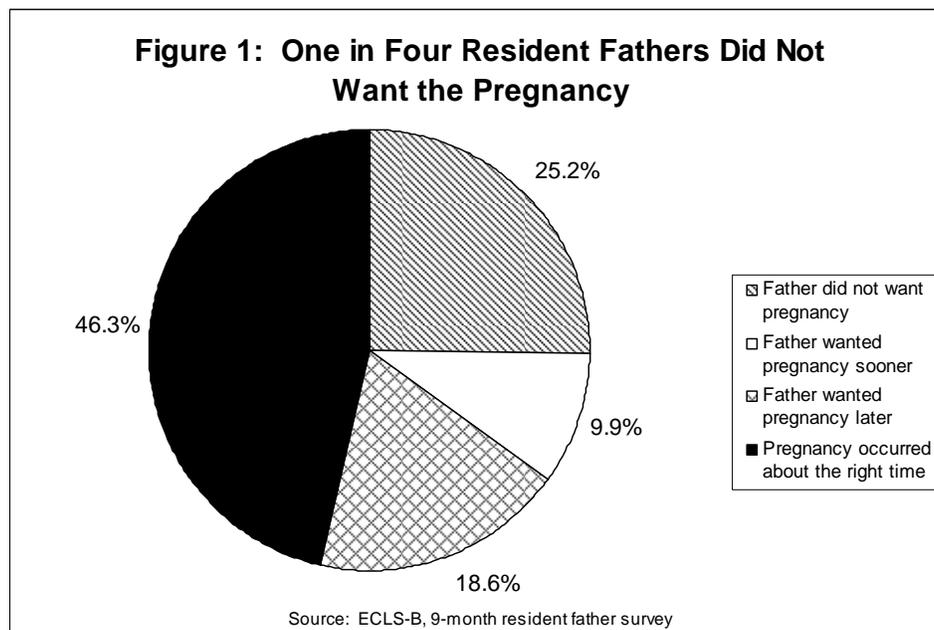
- Existing research examining mothers' pregnancy intentions has generally found negative associations between unintended pregnancies and children's later well-being.^{1, 3, 11, 12, 33, 39, 40, 41}
 - Adverse effects have been found to be stronger for unwanted than for mistimed children, and may depend on both parents' pregnancy intentions.²⁶
- Studies examining fathers' pregnancy intentions have found that when fathers report that pregnancies were unintended, children exhibit lower levels of mental proficiency and attachment security.⁸
- Furthermore, children's well-being may be affected adversely when unintended pregnancies result in low levels of father involvement, in that such involvement has been linked to a host of child outcomes. These include cognitive outcomes, such as problem solving, literacy, and mental proficiency at two and three years of age,^{5, 23, 32, 36} and socioemotional outcomes, such as sex-role identification, behavioral problems, and social competence.^{5, 14, 15, 28}

Resident Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions

The following estimates are for fathers of infants (nine-month-old children).

Figure 1 shows that one in four resident fathers did not want their partner's pregnancy to occur.

- Twenty-five percent of fathers reported not having wanted the pregnancy.
- Nearly one in 10 fathers (10 percent) reported having wanted the pregnancy to occur sooner than it did.
- Nearly two in 10 fathers (19 percent) reported having wanted the pregnancy later than it occurred.
- Almost one-half of fathers (46 percent) reported that their partner's pregnancy occurred at or about the right time.



Differences in Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions by Subgroup

The following estimates are for fathers of infants (nine-month-old children).

Differences by Father Age

Figure 2 and **Table 1** show the pregnancy intentions of resident fathers of different age groups. Adolescent fathers were most likely to report that they did not want the pregnancy and least likely to report that the pregnancy occurred at about the right time.

- Teenage fathers were more likely to report that they did not want the pregnancy (38 percent) than were fathers in any other age group.
- Teenage fathers were less likely than were other fathers to report that the pregnancy occurred at or about the right time (25 percent).
- Younger fathers (< 24 years) were more likely to report having wanted the pregnancy later (32 percent) than were fathers aged 25-34 and 35 and older (19 percent and 13 percent, respectively).

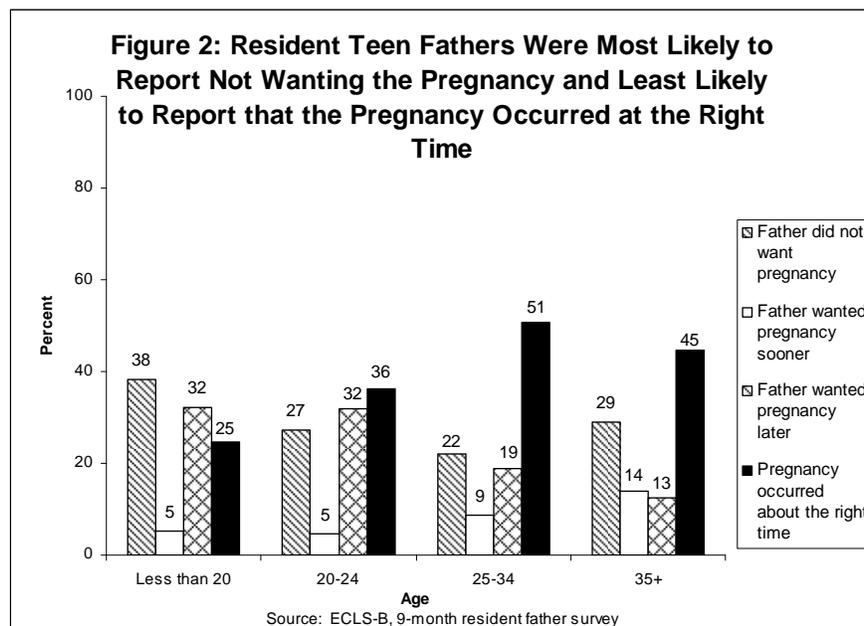


Table 1. Resident Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions by Age

Father Age	Father Did Not Want Pregnancy	Father Wanted Pregnancy Later	Father Wanted Pregnancy Sooner	Pregnancy Occurred at About the Right Time
<20	38%	32%	5%	25%
20-24	27%	32%	5%	36%
24-34	22%	19%	9%	51%
35+	29%	13%	14%	45%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

Figure 3 and **Table 2** show the pregnancy intentions of resident fathers by race/ethnicity. Among resident fathers, non-Hispanic black fathers and fathers of other ethnicities were most likely to report not wanting the pregnancy and least likely to report that the pregnancy occurred at the right time.

- Non-Hispanic black fathers and fathers of “other” ethnicities were most likely (34 percent for both) to report not wanting the pregnancy.
- Non-Hispanic black fathers and fathers of “other” ethnicities were less likely to report that the pregnancy occurred at the right time (36 percent and 43 percent, respectively).
- Non-Hispanic black fathers were the most likely across racial and ethnic subgroups to report wanting the pregnancy to occur later (22 percent).

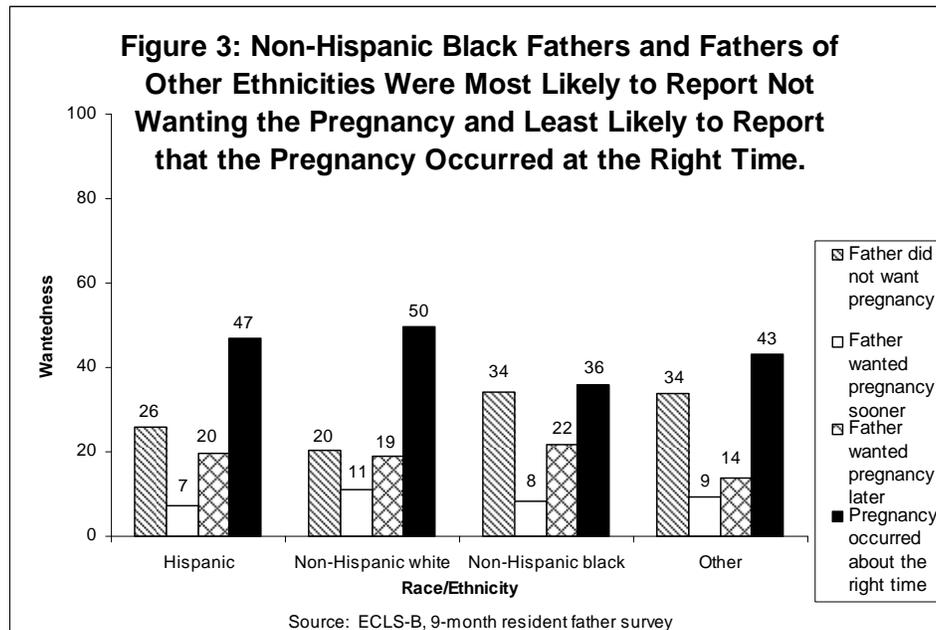


Table 2. Resident Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions by Race/Ethnicity

Father Race/ethnicity	Father Did Not Want Pregnancy	Father Wanted Pregnancy Later	Father Wanted Pregnancy Sooner	Pregnancy Occurred at About the Right Time
Hispanic	26%	20%	7%	47%
Non-Hispanic White	20%	19%	11%	50%
Non-Hispanic Black	34%	22%	8%	36%
Other	34%	14%	9%	43%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

Definitions and Measurement

Fathers' pregnancy intentions were measured using a single item asking fathers whether a pregnancy was a) unwanted; b) wanted, but at a later time; c) wanted sooner than it occurred; or d) wanted and occurred at the right time. The survey directly asks respondents if they felt that the baby was wanted and if the birth was properly timed or was mistimed. These measures are obtained directly from men and probe feelings at the time of conception, as recalled when the baby was nine months old.

Data Sources

The tables and charts in this brief documenting resident fathers' pregnancy intentions are based on Child Trends' analyses of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) 9-month surveys. The ECLS-B is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of American children born in 2001. The ECLS-B includes 10,688 children and their caregivers, and it follows these children from infancy until the time that they enter first grade. Data were collected through parent interviews, direct child assessments, birth certificate data, and interviews with children's caregivers and teachers. The National Center for Education Statistics collected the data.

Data Limitations

Because fathers are asked about their pregnancy intentions nine months after their child's birth, data presented here represent fathers' retrospective reports of prenatal involvement, which may be biased due to distortion and recall error. In addition, these questions were asked only of resident fathers and therefore may not be representative of the prenatal involvement of fathers who do not live with their children.

Resources

- The **Healthy Marriage Resource Center** provides research-based information about marriage in the United States and about programs designed to improve relationship quality: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/>
- The **U. S. Department of Health and Human Services** supports programs and research about fatherhood development and the importance of fathers for children: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>
- The **National Center on Fathers and Families** provides research-based information on father involvement and child well-being aimed at improving children's lives through the positive participation of their fathers: <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>

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