

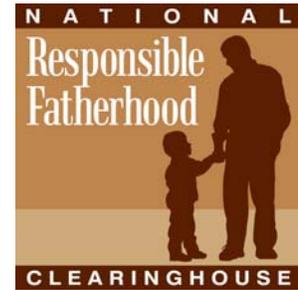


U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Fathers' Prenatal Involvement

Men's activities and behaviors prior to and around the time of a child's birth (i.e., prenatal involvement) have been found to have important implications for the quantity and quality of fathers' involvement with their children and partners following the birth.

### Definitions

*Prenatal involvement* refers to men's activities with their partners during pregnancy and activities during and around the time of the birth of the child. Prenatal activities for fathers may include discussing the pregnancy with their partners, visiting the doctor with their partners for prenatal care, attending childbirth classes, being present at the child's birth, and visiting the baby in the hospital.<sup>3</sup>

### Importance and Implications of Fathers' Prenatal Involvement

The relatively small body of research on fathers' prenatal involvement has found that men who are involved with their partners during pregnancy and around the time of birth are likely to exhibit higher levels and quality of involvement with their children following birth. In addition, prenatal involvement may hold benefits for fathers themselves.

#### *Implications of Prenatal Involvement for Fathers' Later Involvement With Children*

- Research shows that fathers' prenatal involvement is significantly related to a higher *quantity* of involvement following the child's birth.<sup>8, 18</sup>
  - Fathers who exhibit high levels of prenatal involvement show higher levels of engagement with their children following birth.<sup>5</sup>
  - Men who are supportive of their partners' pregnancies (e.g., by attending doctor visits, buying supplies, listening to the baby's heartbeat) are more likely to be highly involved with not only their children but also with their partners following birth.<sup>6</sup>
  - Prenatal involvement is associated with higher levels of subsequent father involvement in several areas, including cognitively stimulating activities (e.g., reading to child), physical care (e.g., feeding, diapering child), warmth (e.g., holding child), nurturing activities (e.g., soothing child), and caregiving activities (e.g., bathing, dressing child).<sup>3, 6</sup>
- Studies also find that prenatal involvement is associated with a higher *quality* of parenting following birth.
  - Men who are involved prenatally (e.g., by attending childbirth classes or being present at the birth) exhibit more positive postbirth fathering behaviors, compared with fathers who are less involved prior to their child's birth.<sup>1, 4</sup>
  - High levels of prenatal involvement are associated with more positive, better-quality postbirth parenting behaviors in several areas. Fathers who show such involvement are more likely to engage in cognitively stimulating, nurturing, and caregiving activities with their children, to act more warmly toward them, and to provide more direct physical care.<sup>3</sup>
- Men who are committed to the pregnancy and to their partners are more likely to be involved prenatally than are fathers who exhibit lower levels of commitment.<sup>16</sup>

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- Some studies suggest that fathers' prenatal involvement may be more important for unmarried fathers than for married fathers who live with their partners and children, likely because unmarried nonresident fathers have a greater risk of becoming uninvolved with their children.
  - Nonresident fathers who were involved with their children before birth are more likely to remain involved in their children's lives, compared with nonresident fathers who were not prenatally involved.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Implications for Fathers*

Men's prenatal involvement is associated with a number of positive outcomes for fathers themselves, including more positive perceptions of their roles and identities as fathers, more stable and positive relationships with their partners, better employment outcomes, and less engagement in risky behaviors.

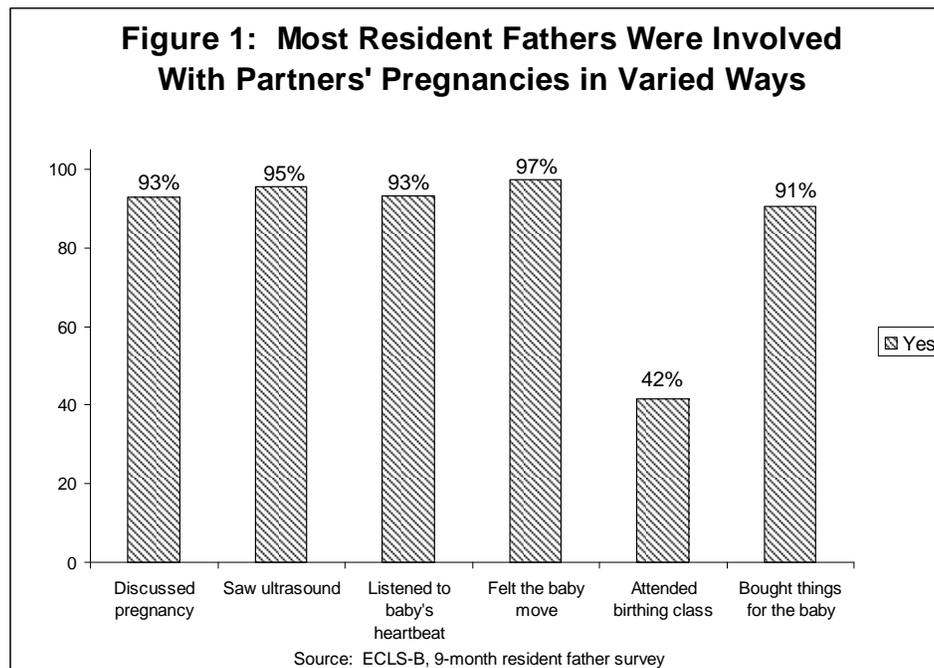
- Men who are involved with their partners and children prior to the child's birth may develop more positive perceptions of their roles and identities as fathers.
  - Prenatal involvement may lead men to develop a stronger commitment to the father role, which, in turn, may lead to a more positive self-identity as a father and perhaps to higher levels of motivation to remain involved following the child's birth.<sup>2, 4, 14, 15, 17</sup>
- Prenatal involvement is associated with more stable and positive relationships with one's partner.
  - Research has found that fathers who are prenatally involved develop higher levels of commitment to their partners and are more likely to remain with those partners over time.<sup>7, 16</sup>
  - Unmarried fathers who support the pregnancy and their partners prior to a child's birth may also be more likely to marry their partners than are fathers who are not involved prenatally.<sup>13</sup>
  - Fathers' early support for the pregnancy and their partners may also be linked to higher coparental relationship quality.<sup>10</sup> For example, one study found that fathers who attended their child's birth reported increased levels of closeness with their partners.<sup>9</sup>
- High levels of fathers' prenatal involvement have been found to be associated with better employment outcomes for fathers.<sup>9</sup>
- Fathers who are prenatally involved may also decrease their involvement with risky behaviors, such as substance use or engagement in criminal activities.<sup>11</sup>

## Resident Fathers' Prenatal Involvement

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

**Figure 1** shows that, overall, resident fathers are highly involved with their partners' pregnancies in a variety of ways, except for attending a childbirth class.

- More than nine in 10 fathers felt the baby move (97 percent), saw an ultrasound of the baby (95 percent), listened to the baby's heartbeat (93 percent), discussed the pregnancy with the mother (93 percent), or bought things for the baby (91 percent).
- Less than one-half of all fathers attended a childbirth class with the baby's mother (42 percent).



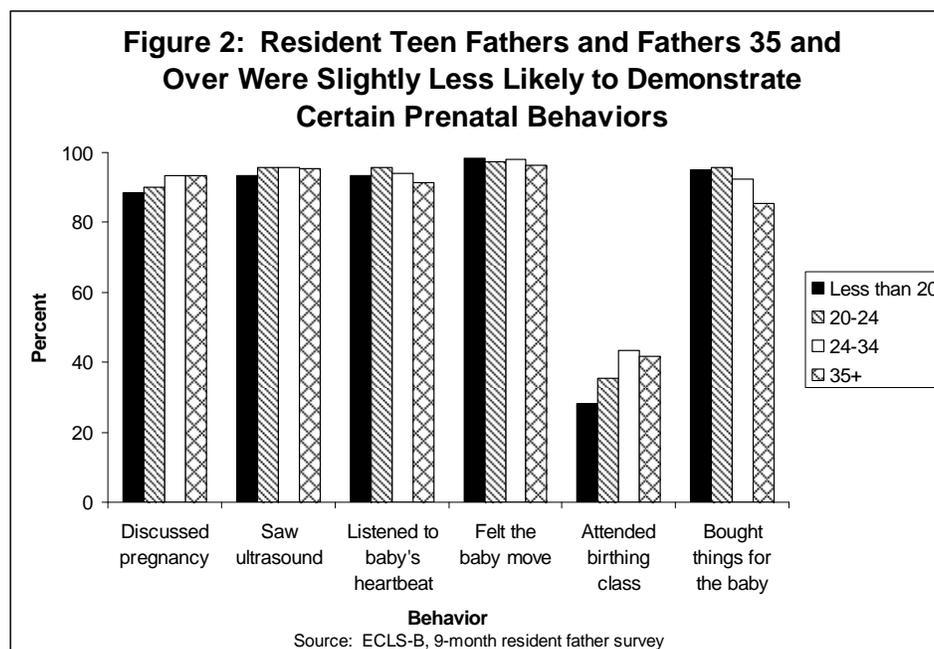
## Differences in Fathers' Prenatal Involvement by Subgroup

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

### Differences by Father Age

**Figure 2** and **Table 1** show that among resident fathers, adolescent fathers and fathers aged 35 and older were slightly less likely to be involved in prenatal activities than were fathers in other age groups.

- Adolescent fathers were less likely to discuss the pregnancy with their child's mother (88 percent), to see an ultrasound (93 percent), and to attend a childbirth class (28 percent) than were older fathers.
- Older fathers were slightly less likely to report that they listened to the baby's heartbeat (91 percent), felt the baby move (96 percent), and bought things for the baby (85 percent) than were fathers in their twenties and early thirties.
- Compared with older fathers, fewer adolescent fathers (86 percent) were present at the birth of their child. Ninety-two percent of fathers aged 20-24, 94 percent of fathers aged 25-34, and 92 percent of fathers aged 35 and older were present at the birth of their child. Adolescent fathers, however, were still highly likely to be present at their child's birth.



**Table 1. Resident Fathers' Prenatal Involvement by Age**

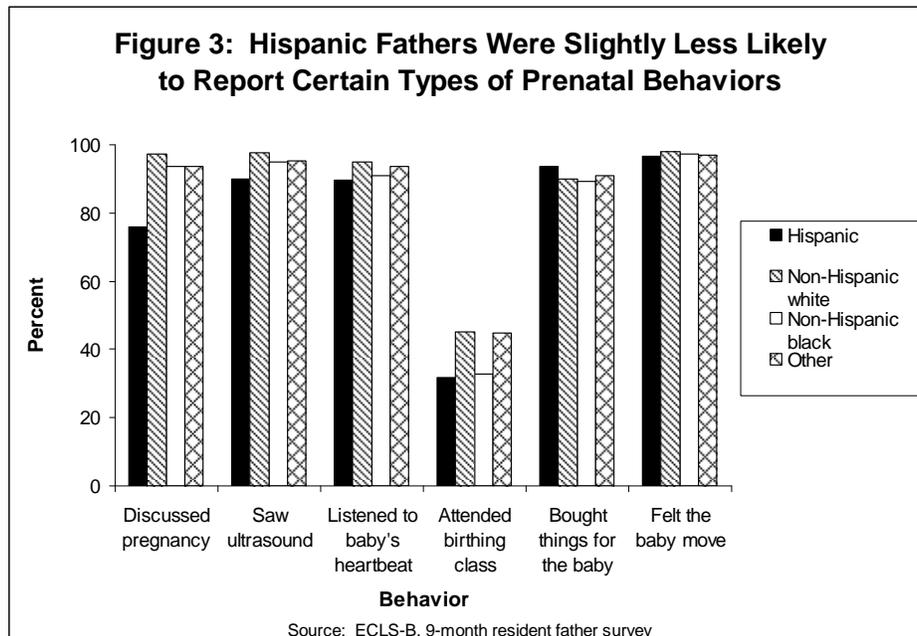
Father Age	Discussed Pregnancy	Saw Ultrasound	Listened to Heartbeat	Felt Baby Move	Attended Birthing Class	Bought Things for Baby
<20	88.4%	93.4%	93.3%	98.4%	28.1%	95.0%
20-24	90.0%	95.8%	95.8%	97.5%	35.4%	95.6%
24-34	93.4%	95.6%	94.0%	98.0%	43.5%	92.5%
35+	93.5%	95.3%	91.2%	96.3%	41.8%	85.5%

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

*Differences by Race/Ethnicity*

**Figure 3** and **Table 2** show that among resident fathers, Hispanic fathers were slightly less likely than were fathers of other racial/ethnic groups to report certain types of prenatal behaviors.

- Hispanic fathers were the least likely to report that they discussed the pregnancy with the mother (76 percent), saw an ultrasound (90 percent), listened to the baby’s heartbeat (89 percent), and attended a childbirth class with the mother (32 percent).
- Non-Hispanic black fathers were less likely to be in the delivery room during the baby’s birth than were fathers of other racial/ethnic groups.
  - Eighty-seven percent of non-Hispanic black fathers were present at the time of their child’s birth, compared with 91 percent of Hispanic fathers, 95 percent of “other” fathers, and 95 percent of non-Hispanic white fathers (analyses not shown here).
  - Black fathers, however, were still highly likely to be present at the time of their child’s birth.



**Table 2. Resident Fathers’ Prenatal Involvement by Race/Ethnicity**

Father Age	Discussed pregnancy	Saw ultra-sound	Listened to heartbeat	Felt baby move	Attended birthing class	Bought things for baby
Hispanic	75.8%	90.1%	89.5%	96.7%	31.8%	93.6%
Non-Hispanic White	97.4%	97.6%	95.0%	97.9%	45.2%	90.0%
Non-Hispanic Black	93.6%	94.9%	91.0%	97.2%	32.9%	89.3%
Other	93.5%	95.2%	93.6%	97.1%	44.7%	90.9%

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

### Definitions and Measurement

Fathers' prenatal behaviors were measured using a six-item index assessing whether the father discussed with the mother how the pregnancy was going, saw a sonogram or ultrasound of the baby, listened to the baby's heartbeat, felt the baby move, attended childbirth classes or Lamaze classes with the child's mother, and bought things for the child. For these items, fathers indicated whether they did or did not do these things (*yes/no*). Additional measures of prenatal behaviors include categorical variables that capture whether the father was present in the delivery room at the birth and whether the father saw the baby in the hospital.

### Data Sources

The tables and charts in this brief documenting resident fathers' prenatal involvement 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 prenatal involvement 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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