

Briefly...

Policy Brief: Promoting Responsible Fatherhood through Pregnancy Planning and Prevention

More than half of pregnancies reported by unmarried men in their 20s are unplanned.¹ Although there has been growing recognition that responsible fatherhood is an important part of promoting child well-being and healthy families, there is still relatively little policy focus on delaying early or unplanned fatherhood in the first place. At a time when there is also increasing interest in improving the education and employment prospects of low-income young men, it is more important than ever to recognize that an unplanned pregnancy or the responsibilities of becoming a parent can derail a young man's education or training, making it harder for him to get the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century economy.

Reducing teen and unplanned pregnancy is closely connected to the goal of promoting responsible fatherhood. Research shows that involved and committed fathers are important to the well-being of their children. Unfortunately, children born to teen parents or as a result of unplanned pregnancy are often denied a close connection with their father because the relationship between their parents frequently dissolves over time.²

More must be done to help young men wait to become fathers until they are ready to shoulder the long-term responsibilities of raising a child. Those who are already fathers also need help to delay having more children until they are emotionally, financially, and otherwise ready to take on additional responsibilities of fatherhood (such as being in a stable, healthy relationship, including marriage). Doing so will improve prospects for this generation of young men, their partners, and their children.

Recommendation

Policymakers should intensify their focus on the responsibilities of men in preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy by (1) addressing pregnancy planning and prevention in federally funded programs serving significant numbers of men and (2) reaching men more effectively in family planning programs.

Pregnancy planning and prevention should be included as a component of such programs as responsible fatherhood, healthy relationships and marriage, education and workforce development, juvenile justice, and re-entry programs. This can be accomplished through language stressing how early and unplanned pregnancy affects the goals of these programs, accompanied by a modest investment of resources to develop and disseminate materials, support training and technical assistance, and encourage partnerships with relevant organizations. For young men who are not yet fathers, activities should focus on the full responsibilities of fatherhood and how to avoid becoming a father too soon. For those who already are fathers, programs should help participants think about how an unplanned pregnancy may affect their goals, their relationships, and the consequences for their children. They should also equip men with skills to communicate with their partners on these topics in order to avoid unplanned pregnancy. In addition, programs can help fathers talk to their sons and daughters about avoiding early pregnancy and teaching responsible parenting.

Steps should also be taken to increase the ability of federally-funded family planning programs— primarily Medicaid and Title X—to engage men. Future legislative or administrative actions related to Title X should include strengthening the focus on male involvement. Given funding constraints in Title X (see [Policy Brief: Title X](#)), additional resources are needed to support these activities without detracting from existing Title X services. More states could be encouraged to include eligibility for men in reproductive health education and services through Medicaid. Community Health Centers could also be encouraged to focus more intensely on engaging men in pregnancy prevention as part of preventive health services. In addition, given that research provides few clues for how to effectively engage men in pregnancy prevention and planning, funding could be provided for a major research and demonstration effort with a strong focus on innovative education and outreach beyond a clinic setting. Findings from such research could be used in social marketing campaigns and to improve service delivery.

Key Facts

- Thirty-three percent of all births (in the past five years) were reported by men to be the result of an unplanned pregnancy.³
- Approximately seven in ten pregnancies which resulted in a live birth in the past five years among never-married young men aged 20-24 were unplanned.⁴
- Both mothers and fathers who have an unplanned birth report less happiness and more conflict in their relationship compared to similar women and men who have a planned birth.⁵
- Parents who have an unplanned birth are more likely to be outside of a committed relationship, less likely to move into a more formal union with the other parent, and more likely to experience unstable relationships during the first 24 months after their child is born, compared to parents having a planned birth.⁶
- Boys and girls without involved fathers are at increased risk for early sexual activity and pregnancy themselves.⁷
- A large majority of young men report that it is very important to achieve financial security (88%), employment (82%), or education (76%) before having a child or another child. Eight in ten (82%) unmarried men ages 18–29 believe pregnancy is something that should be planned and 70% agree that unplanned pregnancy is an important problem among unmarried people in their 20s.⁸
- Healthy People 2010 includes an explicit goal to “increase male involvement in pregnancy prevention and family planning efforts.”
- To date, only eight states have expanded Medicaid eligibility for reproductive health services to include males.⁹
- The Office of Family Planning has encouraged Title X programs to reach out to men and has funded a limited number of demonstration programs focused on engaging men. A 2003 survey of publicly funded family planning clinics found that 28% of Title X funded clinics offered reproductive health programs or services designed for men.
- The proportion of sexually experienced boys declined 23% between 1988 and 2002¹⁰ and rates of adolescent fatherhood decreased 25% between 1990 and 2006.¹¹ In addition, child support collection rates have more than doubled over the past decade.¹²

Legislative Background

As part of the reauthorization of welfare reform, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 provided up to \$50 million to test promising approaches to promoting involved, committed, and responsible fatherhood. The DRA authorized activities to promote healthy relationships, mediation and conflict resolution, financial literacy and budgeting education, and employment services for low-income parents. While the legislative language does not prohibit grantees from addressing responsible sexual behavior or pregnancy prevention as one of many topics covered in a responsible fatherhood program, without a clear focus on these issues, activities to help young men delay early fatherhood, or delay becoming a father again until they are ready to assume additional parenting responsibilities, are likely to be a low priority.

The Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act was introduced in the 110th Congress by Senators Evan Bayh (D-IN) and Barack Obama (D-IL) and by the late Rep. Julia Carson (D-IN) and Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL). This legislation took an important step by including in the allowable uses of the responsible fatherhood grants established in the DRA “educating youth who are not yet parents about the economic, social, and family consequences of early parenting, and helping participants in fatherhood programs work with their own children to break the cycle of early parenthood.” There are opportunities to expand the focus on promoting male responsibility in pregnancy planning and prevention when this bill is reintroduced in the 111th Congress, as well as when Congress considers reauthorization of welfare reform in 2010.

Sources

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