



Serving Young Fathers in Home Visiting Programs

Highlights from a Research Study

Heather Sandstrom, Olivia Healy, Maeve E. Gearing, and H. Elizabeth Peters

OPRE Report #2015-105

November 2015

Young low-income fathers face a constellation of risks that make parenting challenging. In addition to handling the typical demands and expectations of transitioning to adulthood—such as finishing school and finding employment—these young men face the responsibility of caring and providing for their young children. Although home visiting programs have traditionally served low-income pregnant women and mothers with young children, home visits could reach young fathers and support their involvement with their children.

This brief summarizes findings from a qualitative research study that explored the strategies five home visiting programs use to engage fathers, as well as fathers' experiences with home visiting (see box 1 for a summary of study methods). According to interviews with program staff and clients, young fathers' motivations to participate are similar to those of older and experienced fathers, and they benefit similarly from the program. However, young fathers—especially minors—present unique challenges.

The brief describes these challenges and the strategies staff use to serve young fathers, based primarily on staff interviews in four of the five participating home visiting programs that serve a high number of teen fathers. Reports from a subgroup of interviewed clients who were young first-time fathers provide supporting evidence and highlight perceived program benefits. The lessons programs shared may help other programs that serve low-income families in their efforts to engage young fathers.

BOX 1

Study Methods

Findings are based on data collected from five home visiting programs in the United States in late 2014 and early 2015. Programs varied in home visiting model, demographics of the populations served, and geographic location. One program specifically targeted first-time mothers ages 13 to 19; the other sites included but did not limit enrollment to young first-time parents. Field staff conducted a week-long site visit to each program and interviewed program directors and supervisors (18 total), home visitors (20 total), and participating fathers (40 total; 8 per site) and mothers (10 total; 2 per site matched with two of the interviewed fathers). Eleven of the 40 fathers who participated in the study had become fathers at or before age 21 and were enrolled in home visiting as a first-time parent at the time of the interview. This brief uses data from this subset of fathers to support information provided by staff and illustrate the perceived program benefits.¹

Home Visiting Program Structure and Goals

In most of the home visiting programs, mothers enrolled first as primary clients. Program staff conducted outreach at local obstetricians' offices and other community settings and events to recruit pregnant women. In one site, the program received referrals for pregnant teens from the local high school nurse. Some parents were mandated by Child Protective Services to participate in the home visiting program.

According to staff and parent interviews, fathers of all ages usually learned about the program through their children's mothers. Home visitors would ask mothers to identify their child's father and determine whether he wanted to be involved in the program. Fathers could sign up as secondary clients and participate in home visits with mothers, or, in several study sites, they could enroll as primary clients and receive their own home visits. A few programs offered fathers other fatherhood-related activities, such as peer support groups, in addition to home visits.

In addition to targeting standard home visiting goals, such as promoting child health and development, positive parenting, and family self-sufficiency, the programs adapted to emphasize three goals for their young clients: preventing subsequent teen pregnancies, reducing child abuse and neglect, and acquiring early life skills.

Home visiting staff viewed high rates of teen pregnancy and child abuse and neglect as risk factors in participating communities. Staff discussed offering pregnancy prevention services to prevent further teen births. One program director cited statistics that show that "children born to teen parents . . . are

¹ Though the participating programs served parents younger than 18, we limited study enrollment to parents at least 18 years old. Interviewing minors requires parental consent, which would have been infeasible in some cases and would have added burden to program staff helping with recruitment. Given the relatively small sample of fathers, the modifications required to make interview protocols and training procedures appropriate for adolescents went beyond the study scope.

very high risk for abuse and neglect.” He reported that the majority of clients had a history of Child Protective Services involvement. Many had mental health issues and limited family support; some were participants in the foster care system themselves. Staff reported working with young parents to build early life skills in order to help them handle basic adult responsibilities.

The moms encourage the dad because they want to be the “forever family.” They envision that they’ll be the family that has a child that stays together forever. It does happen in some of the cases. The younger ones don’t realize how hard it is to have a family, keep a home, and work.
—Home visitor



What Motivates Young Fathers to Participate in Home Visits?

Fathers' motivations to participate in home visiting were broadly shared across ages. Young fathers, like older fathers included in the study, were motivated by their desire to become a better father, especially as many had grown up without a father themselves. Staff found that young fathers were especially eager to participate during prenatal visits and anecdotally reported that fathers who were involved with their children early on were more likely to remain involved. Staff also reported that when participating mothers were in a relationship with the father, regardless of age, they usually wanted fathers to be involved in the program. Mothers described encouraging fathers to participate in home visits and any available fatherhood activities.

Yet some young fathers (as well as some older ones) expressed their initial hesitation to enroll. One young father mentioned that he was initially wary of being told how to raise his child. Another young father was scared to bring someone into the home to see his child because of his lack of trust in authorities. However, young fathers' desire for parenting information and advice eventually led them to agree to receive support from home visiting staff. Young fathers involved in prenatal visits described wanting to learn to be prepared for parenting and to support pregnant partners through labor and delivery. Young fathers who had no experience with young children were particularly drawn to the program.

Incentives such as free diapers, wipes, and other baby items offered in one site designed to serve young parents also motivated them to participate. Once they began participating in home visits, fathers realized the value of the information and support provided; the incentives got them in the door, but the content of the home visits kept them engaged.

My focus for being here is I want to be able to give her a family. I want to be able to show her I could be a good father, because a lot of African American children have just a single-parent home, and I don't want to bring her up in that kind of home. I want her to have both parents. Coming to these kind of events brings me and the mother closer together in our relationship.
—21-year-old expectant father

Challenges Engaging Young Fathers in Home Visiting

Home visitors across sites discussed broad challenges to engaging fathers in home visiting (see the companion brief “Engaging Low-Income Fathers in Home Visiting: Approaches, Challenges, and Strategies” for more details), but they also discussed how young fathers posed specific challenges.

- **Instability of teen relationships.** Staff reported that young parents are more likely than older parents to be in unstable relationships, with dynamics changing from week to week. As one home visitor said, “I feel like a lot of the girls we work with, they’re like, ‘We’re so good,’ and then the next week they hate the dads.” Female clients often do not want fathers to participate in home visits when they are no longer dating. It is often difficult for home visitors to consistently include fathers in the visits because of frequent changes in young parents’ relationship status.

A lot of my participants can't juggle too many tasks at once. I would say the teen fathers—it gets harder. They're also struggling with the relationship piece. They might start bowing out because the relationship isn't healthy and they don't know what to do, so they shut down and run away.

—Home visitor

- **Family resistance.** Most clients who are minors live with their parents rather than together as a couple. Staff reported that the parents of some young mothers do not get along with their daughters’ boyfriends. They do not want these young men involved with their daughters and grandchildren because of concerns about bad influences. Although most young fathers we interviewed had supportive families who encouraged program participation, home visitors reported that this is not always the case. Sometimes, grandparents have not accepted that the grandchild is theirs. Others distrust authorities and the program’s intentions. Grandparents may feel that they know best for their children and grandchildren, and that they are being undermined by home visitors. Minors must have parental consent to participate in the program, which can be an additional barrier. One home visitor was meeting a young father at a library to continue visits because the father’s mother did not want them meeting in her home.
- **Logistical challenges.** Although logistical challenges are common regardless of a father’s age, young fathers’ circumstances are more complicated. Young fathers usually live separately from their children, and many lack access to either personal or public transportation. Although home

visitors in one site reported providing transportation to certain clients so fathers could participate, transportation was not possible in all programs. As one home visitor explained,

Our agency's liability insurance changed so we can't transport anyone anymore. Unless dad is a primary [client], we can't do solo visits. If dad really wants visits and they live separate, we encourage dad to be a primary. The transportation piece is so huge.

In most cases, mothers are enrolled as the primary client who receives home visits and related program services, and fathers are secondary clients. This particular program encouraged nonresidential fathers to sign up as primary clients so they could also receive visits.

Further, young parents' school and work schedules make arranging home visits with both parents difficult. Home visitors described young fathers who juggled high school, college, or GED programs with part-time or full-time work; this is a lot of responsibility to handle.

- **Developmental immaturity.** Staff described how many young fathers are not developmentally ready or able to handle certain discussions about parenting and responsibility. Home visiting activities often require parents to solve problems and communicate their thoughts with one another. Young parents sometimes struggle with these tasks. Home visitors described the challenge most simply as trying to teach children to parent their own children.

Sometimes their age can really be a challenge. We had one dad who was 15, and we'd get there for the home visit and he'd be playing outside with his friends. When they're really young, they're so immature still. Developmentally, their brain isn't ready for what's happening.
—Program supervisor



Strategies to Engage Young Fathers in Home Visiting

To overcome the challenges of recruiting and working with young fathers, home visiting staff identified multiple fundamental steps. These steps may be grouped into three areas: relationships with mothers and grandparents, staffing, and content and flexibility of home visits.

Relationships with Mothers and Grandparents

- **Counseling mothers on the importance of father involvement.** Because mothers ultimately chose whether to include fathers in their home visits, staff emphasized the need to explain to mothers the importance of father involvement for child development, regardless of the parents' relationship. This discussion was most relevant to young parents not living together, since home visitors had less opportunity to connect with fathers not present in the home. With this information, mothers could make more informed decisions about how to include the father in both the home visits and the child's life.
- **Building rapport with young clients' parents.** As a first step to facilitating fathers' participation in home visits, staff across sites mentioned needing to communicate not only with participating mothers but with their parents and the fathers' parents to gain their trust and cooperation. The fatherhood coordinator in one site joined home visits with female clients to meet their parents

and discuss the services available to fathers. After making that connection, he found it easier to identify who the father was and to make contact with him.

Staffing

- **Developing the right staffing structure.** When possible, programs strategically paired clients and home visitors. The gender, age, background, and experience of home visitors were considered. One participating home visitor was an older woman who believed that her success with her clients stemmed partly from her age. She was viewed as a mother figure by many of the young parents. She believed this was especially true in the case of Hispanic clients, whose cultural norms emphasize respecting elders.
- **Connecting young fathers with male role models.** Male home visitors and fatherhood coordinators mentored young fathers. They taught fathers about life, how to be a good father and coparent, and how to better themselves. A fatherhood coordinator who worked with young fathers said, “How can you care for somebody if you’re not caring for yourself? I tell them you’re old enough now to respect yourself. I teach them a lot of respect.” Beyond one-on-one interactions during home visits, several programs had peer support groups in which young and first-time fathers had the opportunity to build a social network and receive advice from more experienced fathers. The strong sense of community within support groups helped encourage young fathers who might be overwhelmed by or struggling to understand their role as fathers. Fathers involved in support groups discussed how they were grateful to have a program exclusive to fathers where they could meet and learn from others.

So much [of my job] is just basic acceptance and support of these kids who are parenting. Even if they’re not kids and they’re 30 years old, they still need support. But these young families especially do—not judging them, meeting them where they’re at. . . . There’s so much in society stacked against them, especially minority or poor dads. We can’t change the economic system in the country, but we can help dads find the pathways to success.

—Home visiting supervisor

Content and Flexibility of Home Visits

- **Understanding adolescent development and needs.** Home visitors reported that young fathers required a different type of training and experience than older fathers. Staff working with young fathers in one site noted how different these clients are developmentally, and that a firm understanding of adolescent development is essential to their work. Home visitors mentioned

cases in which young fathers became overwhelmed by the amount and content of information, “shut down,” and exited the program. By staggering program intake procedures, for example, staff tried to avoid deterring young fathers from the program by asking them too many questions at once. Staff also tried to be more understanding of young parents’ lack of familiarity with formal programs and advocated for them to get access to what they needed.

You really need to understand adolescent development. . . . You can't have the same expectations of a 16-year-old boy that you have of an 18-year-old or 25-year-old boy. You can't have the same expectation of a 16-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl.

—Home visitor

- **Creating hands-on activities.** Home visitors designed fun games and activities to capture the attention of fathers, particularly young fathers who responded well to hands-on activities. Games included a couple’s race to assemble a portable crib, prenatal bingo with vocabulary related to labor and delivery, and using a toy doll to learn about infant massage. In one site, fathers assembled homemade toys for their children out of reusable household materials. Fathers also wore an empathy belly, a padded device that mimics the weight of a full-term baby. One program used lots of DVDs because the home visitors felt that their young clients responded well to visual aids and the use of technology.
- **Maintaining flexibility in scheduling.** Some programs—regardless of parents’ ages—offered separate home visits for fathers and mothers when scheduling together was not possible. One program serving teen mothers had previously offered a fathers’ peer support group but began offering individual home visits to fathers when very few fathers were able to participate in the group because of work schedule conflicts.
- **Providing transportation.** Home visitors in one program drove young nonresident fathers to mothers’ homes for visits. Another program serving many young parents gave gas cards as incentives and to help working parents pay for commuting costs.

We're really creative. We have to be with the population we serve. We're always trying to find new ways of having adult conversations with kids who aren't ready for that. It's challenging. You never know how it'll play out. We're those "safe" people—it goes back to the trust. Once that trust is there, those conversations can happen pretty organically.

—Home visitor



Perceived Benefits of Young Fathers' Home Visiting Participation

Fathers who participated in the study described how they benefited from their home visiting experiences. Program staff and mothers also reported perceived benefits that aligned with fathers' reports. The benefits young fathers mentioned were similar to those of older fathers, with a few exceptions. Perceived benefits included the following:

- **Improved knowledge of child development and parenting skills.** Young, first-time fathers spoke about empowering feelings that stemmed from gaining knowledge about pregnancy, labor, and child development. They learned about developmental milestones and whether their children were on track, how to care for and positively interact with babies and young children, developmentally appropriate discipline strategies, and healthy eating, particularly the mother's healthy diet during pregnancy and child nutrition. Having a trusted source of information on these topics was the most frequently cited advantage of the program.
- **Better communication and relationship with partner.** Fathers reported getting along better with their children's mothers as they learned to coparent, work together to solve problems, and share caregiving responsibilities. They learned how to listen to another's perspective and better understood what their partner was going through. Fathers who participated in prenatal visits appreciated learning how to support their partners during pregnancy, labor, and delivery. Since young fathers were more likely to have unstable relationships, staff felt that they benefited from learning about coparenting and how to be more involved in their children's lives.
- **Anger management.** Fathers reported learning how to better manage their stress and anger and interact more positively with other people. They acknowledged struggling with aggression, particularly when their children would misbehave or when babies were difficult to console. Mothers also reported that fathers were more calm and caring with them and their children.

I thought at one point I had it the hardest because I'm working and she's at home. Then you start to realize that the kid is hard work too, so we take—I learned that I need to take turns. Maybe one night I'll take care of him during the night and she gets to sleep. The next night she'll do that so I can sleep. Then we just keep constantly taking turns for stuff. . . . Not always the same thing, same job, for the same person every time because that stresses people out.

—21-year-old father of a one-month-old

- **Meeting employment goals.** Forty percent of fathers interviewed were unemployed, including 5 of the 11 men who became fathers by age 21. Most had no more than a high school diploma or equivalent. Some young fathers described benefiting from the guidance and knowledge of home visitors who linked them to employment opportunities and provided hands-on assistance, such as résumé writing and interviewing skills. Although all fathers benefited from home visitors' individualized support, young fathers who were balancing school and employment, or who were seeking full-time employment for the first time, particularly appreciated it. Given their stage of development, teen fathers had little life experience. Home visitors acted as advocates to young parents and taught them how to advocate for themselves and their families.

[Home visitor] helps us just if there's something wrong with him, and we don't know [what to do] ... we just message and ask her if she would know, and she would inform us on what she thinks would be wrong with him and what she thinks we should do.

—20-year-old father of a 19-month-old

Conclusion

Young fathers are in a difficult position, facing the responsibilities of parenthood while still going through adolescence or transitioning to adulthood. Home visiting staff believe that if these young men can be engaged early, then they may become lifelong devoted fathers. By firmly understanding adolescent development; tailoring activities to be hands-on; and building relationships with fathers, mothers, and grandparents, these programs aim to help fathers build a solid foundation for their child's development. Fathers and staff alike perceive the results as better informed, active fathers and healthier families.

Although some of the challenges of serving young fathers are also seen with older fathers, including difficulties with logistics and family relationships and distrust of perceived authority figures, young fathers have particular needs and vulnerabilities that warrant special attention. Some challenges relate to their youth—their developmental stage and dependence on their own parents—and other challenges relate to their particular circumstances as young fathers, such as living apart from their children and not yet having a stable job.

These findings offer strategies for other programs attempting to engage young fathers in either individual or group-based services. Hiring qualified staff equipped to mentor young fathers and to address their unique needs and circumstances, as opposed to the needs of low-income fathers more generally, may be one promising approach.

About the Authors



Heather Sandstrom is a senior research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute. Her research focuses on early childhood development and public programs such as Head Start, child care, and home visiting.



Olivia Healy is a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute, where she contributes to research on publicly funded programs designed to support low-income families. She is interested in early childhood care and education, specifically in the dynamics of child care subsidy use and associated family well-being outcomes.



Maeve E. Gearing is a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute, where she specializes in qualitative and quantitative analysis of nutrition and obesity, particularly in children and other vulnerable populations.



H. Elizabeth Peters is the director of the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute. An economic demographer, her research focuses on family economics and family policy, specifically examining the effects of public policies such as divorce laws, child support policy, child care policy, taxes, and welfare reform on family formation and dissolution; inter- and intrahousehold transfers; father involvement; and family investments in children.

Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine our research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at www.urban.org/support.

We would like to thank our project officer, Anna Solmeyer, and our project coordinator, Amanda Clincy, for their ongoing guidance and input during the course of this project.

Submitted to

Anna Solmeyer, project officer
Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
US Department of Health and Human Services

Contract number HHSP23320095654WC

Project director

H. Elizabeth Peters
Urban Institute
2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

Photos are from Shutterstock.com. This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary.

Suggested citation: Sandstrom, Heather, Olivia Healy, Maeve E. Gearing, and H. Elizabeth Peters. 2015. "Serving Young Fathers in Home Visiting Programs: Highlights from a Research Study." OPRE report 2015-105. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the US Department of Health and Human Services.

This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation are available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre>.



2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.

Copyright © November 2015. Urban Institute.