Engaging and Serving Young Fathers

Young Black Fathers in Foster Care: Rethinking Responsibility, Resources, and the State's Duty

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- **Education:** UIUC, UIC, UChicago
- **Practice:** Child welfare caseworker
- **Research:** Young fathers in foster care
- **Projects:** CalYOUTH & Dads Matter
- **Family:** Father to three daughters
- **Lived:** Child welfare involvement as a youth

Let’s start with a brief background

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Background

Young Black Fathers

- **Coming of age in constrained contexts:** Parenting while still in school, in unstable work, and in low-wage, racially stratified labor markets
- **Strong desire to be involved:** Many want to “be there,” staying emotionally and physically present even when money is limited
- **Relationships and families of origin shape access:** Romantic partnership and support from both families strongly influence father involvement
- **Provider role strain:** Pressure to be financial provider, many compensating through time, caregiving, and everyday support
- **Systems that constrain involvement:** Policies and practices often treat them as absent, while institutional gatekeeping and economic marginalization limit their ability to engage

Johnson Jr., W. E. (2001). Young unwed African American fathers: Indicators of their paternal involvement. In A. M. Neal-Barnett, J. M. Contreras, & K. A. Kerns (Eds.), Forging links: African American children clinical developmental perspectives (pp. 147–174). Praeger.; Johnson, W. E. (1998). Paternal involvement in fragile, African American families: Implications for clinical social work practice. Smith College Studies in Social Work, 68(2), 215–232. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377319809517525

Background

Young Fathers in Foster Care

- **Early pregnancy and fatherhood:** Many young men in care became fathers by ages 19 to 21, often reporting they wanted the pregnancy or partnership.
- **One child, one partner pattern:** Most who impregnated a partner had one live birth and one living child, not multiple children across many partners.
- **Shared risk factors with other poor outcomes:** Kinship care, early exit, substance use, mental health, school problems, and early sex were linked with becoming a father.
- **Structural barriers to providing:** Fathers in care had lower employment, more justice involvement, and housing instability, which limited their ability to provide.
- **Engaged but usually nonresident:** Many expressed pride and strong involvement, yet far fewer fathers than mothers lived with their children in late adolescence.
- **Children less visible to child welfare:** Children of fathers in care were less likely to be court dependents, often because they lived with the other parent.

(Combs et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2012; Courtney et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2018a; Leslie et al., 2010; Matta Oshima et al., 2013; Gordon et al., 2011; Sakai et al., 2011; Coleman-Cowger et al., 2011; Narendorf et al., 2013; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2015; Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Schelbe & Geiger, 2016; Manlove et al., 2011; Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009; Dworsky, 2015)

Let’s move on to theories that guide my work

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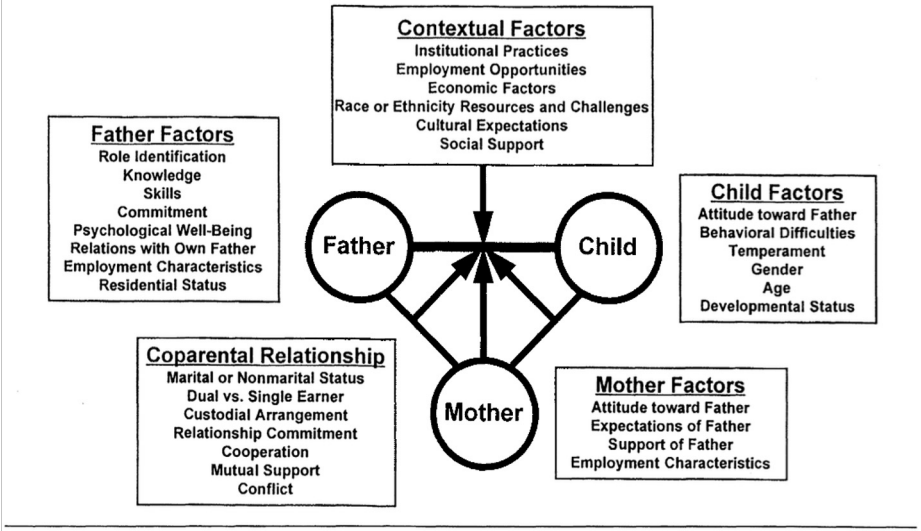
Theories

Responsible Fathering Framework

A man who "behaves responsibly" towards his child does the following:

1. He **waits** to make a baby until he is prepared emotionally and financially to support his child.
2. He **establishes his legal paternity** if and when he does make a baby.
3. He actively shares with the child's mother in the **continuing emotional and physical care** of their child, from pregnancy onwards.
4. He shares with the child's mother in the **financial support** of their child, from pregnancy onwards.

FIGURE 1. INFLUENCES ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERING: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL



Doherty, W. J., Kouneski, E. F., & Erickson, M. F. (1998). Responsible fathering: An overview and conceptual framework. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 60(2), 277–292. https://doi.org/10.2307/353848

Theories

Why Responsible Fathering Expectations Are Hard for Young Fathers

Waiting to be “ready”

- Still in transition to adulthood, not extended emerging adulthood
- Incomplete schooling and unstable work make financial readiness unrealistic

Establishing legal paternity

- Limited legal knowledge and mistrust of systems
- Fear of triggering child welfare or child support involvement

Sharing daily caregiving from pregnancy

- School, work, and housing instability limit availability
- New, fragile co-parenting relationships and limited communication skills

Sharing financial support from pregnancy

- Delayed and unstable labor force participation
- Pressure to provide before education and earnings can develop

Theories

Resource Theory of Fatherhood

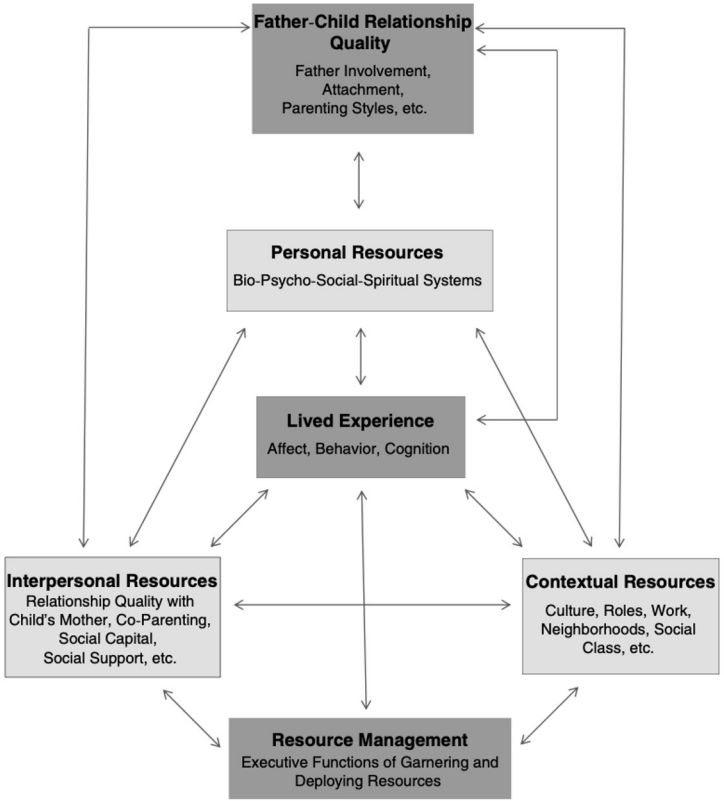
Fathers' involvement depends on

- **Resources** they can **access and use**

Table 1. *Dimensions of Diversity in Fathering*

Personal Resources	Interpersonal Resources	Contextual Resources	Father–Child Relationships	Resource Management
• Educational attainment • Income/wealth • Race • Ethnicity • Cultural background • Age • Religiosity • Spirituality • Sexual identity • Health status • Personality • Temperament • Attitude • Coping style and strategy • Incarceration record • Substance use/abuse • Conflict resolution style • Intelligence • Years of parenting experience • Sensitivity to interpersonal signal • Fathering identity • Role subscriptions: protector, provider, moral guide, friend	• Relationship quality with mother • Social support network • Relationship with neighbors • Extended family • In-laws • Work colleagues • Relationship history with own parents	• Number of children • Age of children • Children from other relationships • Residential status to child • Employment status • Social class • Cohort • Societal values • Gender roles • Timing of parenthood • Neighborhood characteristics • Parenting status: step, biological, social, adoptive, legal guardian	• Father involvement: engagement, accessibility, responsibility • Attachment: secure, insecure • Parenting style: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, disengaged • Goodness of fit with child • Relationship quality with child	• Executive function • Time management • Planning • Maintenance • Monitoring • Reflection • Evaluation • Setting goals • Scheduling • Organization • Setting priorities

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL MAP OF A RESOURCE THEORY OF FATHERING.



Palkovitz, R., & Hull, J. (2018). Toward a resource theory of fathering. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*(1), 181–198. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12239

Theories

Why the Resource Theory of Fatherhood Fits Young Fathers

Focusing on resources instead of checklists

- Recognizes that involvement depends on what supports fathers can access, not just effort
- Fits young fathers who are still building education, work experience, and stability

Matching developmental timing

- Aligns with young fathers' transition to adulthood, not a finished adult status
- Accounts for unfinished schooling and delayed, unstable entry into the labor force

Centering lived experience and barriers

- Includes housing instability, school and work strain, and system mistrust as core factors
- Attends to fragile co parenting relationships and limited access to father friendly services

Highlighting strengths and growth

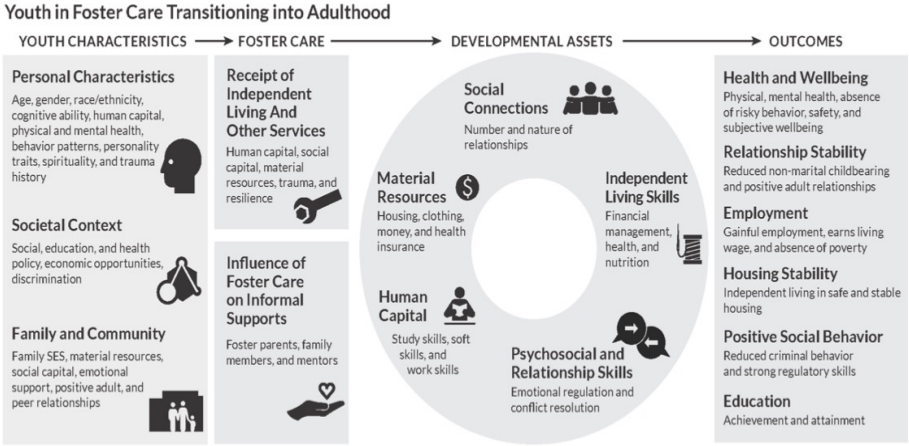
- Identifies personal, relational, and community resources young fathers already bring
- Sees fathering capacity increasing as resources and supports grow over time

Theories

Conceptual Framework of the Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care

A developmental model for understanding transition out of care:

- **Unique challenges** shaped by trauma, maltreatment, and experiences in care
- **Individual characteristics** shape readiness
- **Resources** and **supports** vary widely
- **Social context** matters
- Multiple **pathways** to adulthood
- **Developmental assets** drive outcomes



McDaniel, M., Courtney, M. E., Pergamit, M. R., & Lowenstein, C. (2014). Preparing for a “next generation” evaluation of independent living programs for youth in foster care: Project Overview [OPRE Report No. 2014-71]. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED559342.pdf

Theories

TTAYFC Compatibility with the Resource Theory of Fatherhood

- **Shared focus on resources:** Both see outcomes as driven by personal, relational, and contextual resources, not just effort.
- **Individualized development:** Both recognize that youth and fathers differ in trauma histories, skills, and readiness.
- **Central role of social context:** Policies, placements, and labor markets shape both fathering and transition outcomes.
- **Multiple pathways for young fathers in care:** Formal services, informal supports, or gaps in both shape how they parent and how they exit care.
- **Shift from blame to capacity building:** Emphasis on building assets and resources instead of judging young fathers against rigid checklists.
- **Integrated lens for practice:** Together, the frameworks guide tailored supports that develop young fathers and their fathering at the same time.

Let’s end with some key resources

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Resources

What Would a Reasonable Grandparent Do?

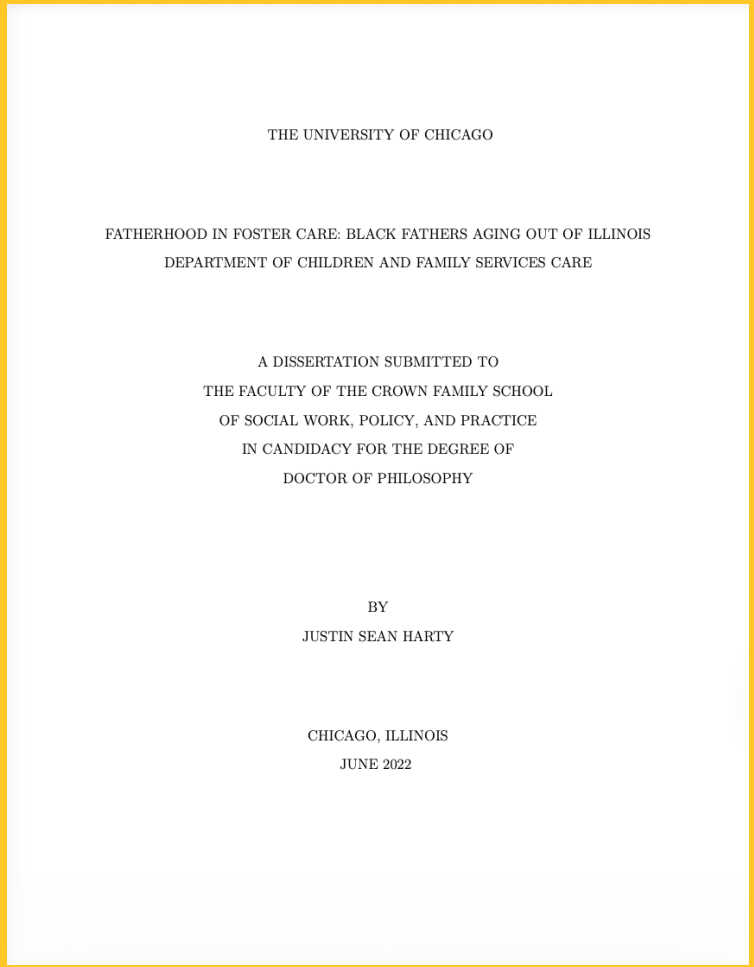
- **What corporate parenting means:** When the state takes custody, it has a duty to act as a reasonable and prudent parent, providing care, stability, advocacy, and preparation for adulthood.
- **Three transitions at once for young fathers in care:** They are becoming adults, becoming fathers, and losing foster care supports at the same time, with high demands and limited resources.
- **Reasonable and prudent parent test:** Would a reasonable parent respond to the birth of their grandchild by questioning their responsibility, or by preparing them with resources and support?
- **Resource deployment, not withdrawal:** Corporate parenting should focus on deploying resources and building capacity, not stepping back when needs peak.
- **Does the state stop at corporate parenting:** Once youth in care have children, the state effectively becomes a grandparent, raising the question of ongoing obligations to both generations.
- **Reasonable and prudent grandparent test:** A good grandparent offers continued emotional and practical support to the young parent and the baby, and the state should mirror that role in policy and practice.

Bullock, R., Courtney, M. E., Parker, R., Sinclair, I., & Thoburn, J. (2006). Can the Corporate State Parent? Adoption & Fostering, 30(4), 6–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590603000403; Courtney, M. E. (2009). The difficult transition to adulthood for foster youth in the U.S.: Implications for the state as corporate parent. In Society for Research in Child Development (No. Social Policy Report: Vol. XXIII, No. I; Social Policy Report). Society for Research in Child Development. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED509761

Resources

Dissertation: Fathers in Foster Care

- Qualitative study of young Black fathers in extended foster care in Illinois' Teen Parenting Services Network, exploring what they learn about fatherhood, how they experience it, and what they still need.
- Fathers mostly learned parenting on their own, not from foster care services; they showed strong commitment to their children's safety, financial, and emotional needs, but faced systemic and racial barriers that limited their involvement.



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

FATHERHOOD IN FOSTER CARE: BLACK FATHERS AGING OUT OF ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES CARE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE CROWN FAMILY SCHOOL
OF SOCIAL WORK, POLICY, AND PRACTICE
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
JUSTIN SEAN HARTY

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
JUNE 2022

Resources

Review: Fathers in Foster Care

- Scoping review (1989–2021) of 94 empirical, practice, legal, and policy sources examining expectant and parenting foster youth, with specific attention to fathers in foster care.
- Research overwhelmingly centers mothers; fathers are rarely identified, often aggregated under “parents,” measured, and frequently excluded, leaving gaps on father involvement, needs, and support.

Harty, J. S., & Ethier, K. L. (2022). Fatherhood in Foster Care: A Scoping Review Spanning 30 Years of Research on Expectant and Parenting Fathers in State Care. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 39*(6), 693–710. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00848-2

Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal (2022) 39:693–710
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00848-2

Check for updates

Fatherhood in Foster Care: A Scoping Review Spanning 30 Years of Research on Expectant and Parenting Fathers in State Care

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Accepted: 18 April 2022 / Published online: 18 May 2022

Abstract
Over the past 30 years, there has been a surge of interest in understanding the experiences and outcomes of expectant and parenting foster youth. Despite the importance of understanding this unique population of foster youth, there remains a lack of research on fathers in foster care. Most studies of expectant and parenting foster youth focus on mothers in care, and studies that have examined fathers in care provide little insight compared to what we know about mothers. Furthermore, existing research on fathers in foster care is limited by underreporting, service engagement issues, lack of meaningful engagement data, and very little information on fathers' involvement with their children. There is very little published research on the experience of fatherhood in foster care or on related outcomes for fathers in care such as residency with children, father engagement with children, coparental relationship quality, or the health and well-being of their children. While there have been over 60 studies and three reviews on expectant and parenting foster youth spanning roughly 30 years, the articles have primarily focused on empirical findings relating to mothers in foster care. Information on fathers in foster care has received little attention and is restricted to empirical studies. This scoping review aims to fill this gap by examining the available information on fathers in foster care. To this end, our scoping review explores empirical findings and knowledge from practice-, legal-, and policy-related literature related to fathers in foster care from peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, dissertations, white papers, and grey literature published between 1989 and 2021. Findings from 94 sources of evidence on expectant and parenting foster youth suggest that mothers in foster care are consistently the focus of the literature. If fathers in foster care are included in the literature, findings or guidance are often provided in the aggregate (e.g., parents in care). However, when aggregated, literature still focuses on mothers in care, or female pronouns are used to describe the larger expectant or parenting foster youth population. Many of the studies excluded fathers, and the primary exclusion rationale includes a lack of identified fathers in care, unreliable child welfare data on fathers, or high attrition of fathers in parenting services. In terms of information on fathers in foster care by the source of evidence, research papers often provided quantitative descriptions of fathers, practice papers focused on rights of fathers, legal papers centered on paternity establishment or paternal rights, and policy papers largely discussed the need for improved data tracking and interventions for fathers. More research is needed to support fathers in foster care as they transition out of care into early adulthood and young fatherhood.

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Introduction

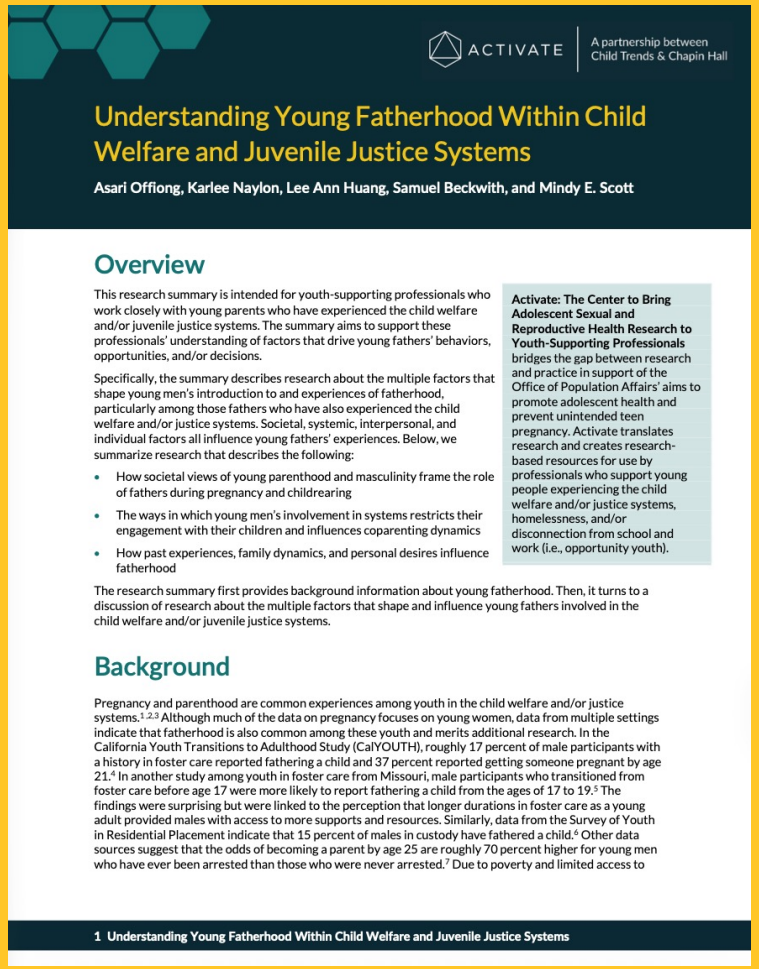
Youth in foster care have an increased likelihood of becoming parents as compared to their non-foster care peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Parenting while in foster care is associated with a variety of risk factors for young parents and their children, including adverse outcomes in education (Courtney & Hook, 2017), employment (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017), housing stability, mental health (Matta Oshima et al., 2013) and criminal justice involvement (Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2015), and intergenerational maltreatment (Dworsky, 2015). As such, young parents in foster care have garnered the attention and concern of scholars, policymakers, and

Resources

Consultant: Summary Research

- A research summary explaining how societal, systemic, interpersonal, and individual factors shape the experiences, barriers, and opportunities of young fathers involved in child welfare or juvenile justice systems.
- Young fathers often face stigma, restrictive system rules, strained coparenting dynamics, and limited supports, yet show strong commitment to their children; effective help requires multi-level, trauma-informed, father-inclusive approaches.

Offiong, A., Naylon, K., Huang, L. A., Beckwith, S., & Scott, M. E. (2025). Understanding Young Fatherhood Within Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems. Child Trends. https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/AR3-31_Understanding-Young-Fatherhood.pdf



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Understanding Young Fatherhood Within Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

Asari Offiong, Karlee Naylon, Lee Ann Huang, Samuel Beckwith, and Mindy E. Scott

Overview

This research summary is intended for youth-supporting professionals who work closely with young parents who have experienced the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems. The summary aims to support these professionals' understanding of factors that drive young fathers' behaviors, opportunities, and/or decisions.

Specifically, the summary describes research about the multiple factors that shape young men's introduction to and experiences of fatherhood, particularly among those fathers who have also experienced the child welfare and/or justice systems. Societal, systemic, interpersonal, and individual factors all influence young fathers' experiences. Below, we summarize research that describes the following:

- How societal views of young parenthood and masculinity frame the role of fathers during pregnancy and childrearing
- The ways in which young men's involvement in systems restricts their engagement with their children and influences coparenting dynamics
- How past experiences, family dynamics, and personal desires influence fatherhood

Activate: The Center to Bring Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Research to Youth-Supporting Professionals bridges the gap between research and practice in support of the Office of Population Affairs' aims to promote adolescent health and prevent unintended teen pregnancy. Activate translates research and creates research-based resources for use by professionals who support young people experiencing the child welfare and/or justice systems, homelessness, and/or disconnection from school and work (i.e., opportunity youth).

The research summary first provides background information about young fatherhood. Then, it turns to a discussion of research about the multiple factors that shape and influence young fathers involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems.

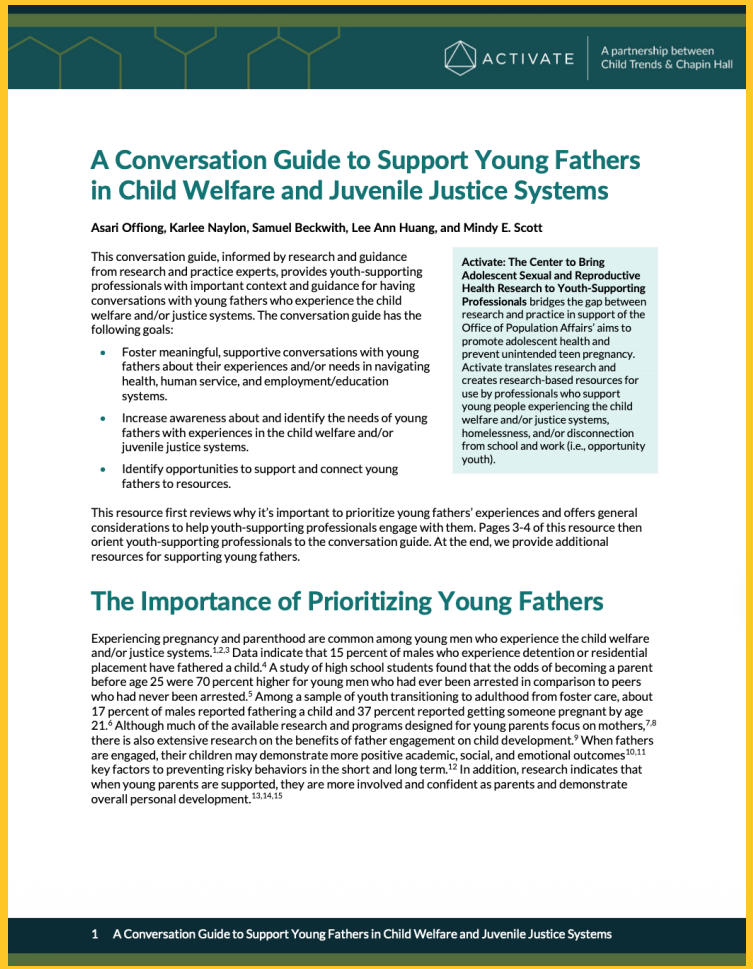
Background

Pregnancy and parenthood are common experiences among youth in the child welfare and/or justice systems.[1,2,3] Although much of the data on pregnancy focuses on young women, data from multiple settings indicate that fatherhood is also common among these youth and merits additional research. In the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH), roughly 17 percent of male participants with a history in foster care reported fathering a child and 37 percent reported getting someone pregnant by age 21.[4] In another study among youth in foster care from Missouri, male participants who transitioned from foster care before age 17 were more likely to report fathering a child from the ages of 17 to 19.[5] The findings were surprising but were linked to the perception that longer durations in foster care as a young adult provided males with access to more supports and resources. Similarly, data from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement indicate that 15 percent of males in custody have fathered a child.[6] Other data sources suggest that the odds of becoming a parent by age 25 are roughly 70 percent higher for young men who have ever been arrested than those who were never arrested.[7] Due to poverty and limited access to

Resources

Consultant: Conversation Guide

- A practical conversation guide that equips youth-supporting professionals to engage young fathers in child welfare or juvenile justice systems with supportive, needs-focused, and trauma-informed dialogue.
- Young fathers face stigma, system barriers, and limited support; effective engagement requires safe spaces, positive youth development framing, and tailored discussions across health, human services, education, and employment.



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A Conversation Guide to Support Young Fathers in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

Asari Offiong, Karlee Naylon, Samuel Beckwith, Lee Ann Huang, and Mindy E. Scott

This conversation guide, informed by research and guidance from research and practice experts, provides youth-supporting professionals with important context and guidance for having conversations with young fathers who experience the child welfare and/or justice systems. The conversation guide has the following goals:

- Foster meaningful, supportive conversations with young fathers about their experiences and/or needs in navigating health, human service, and employment/education systems.
- Increase awareness about and identify the needs of young fathers with experiences in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems.
- Identify opportunities to support and connect young fathers to resources.

Activate: The Center to Bring Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Research to Youth-Supporting Professionals bridges the gap between research and practice in support of the Office of Population Affairs' aims to promote adolescent health and prevent unintended teen pregnancy. Activate translates research and creates research-based resources for use by professionals who support young people experiencing the child welfare and/or justice systems, homelessness, and/or disconnection from school and work (i.e., opportunity youth).

This resource first reviews why it's important to prioritize young fathers' experiences and offers general considerations to help youth-supporting professionals engage with them. Pages 3-4 of this resource then orient youth-supporting professionals to the conversation guide. At the end, we provide additional resources for supporting young fathers.

The Importance of Prioritizing Young Fathers

Experiencing pregnancy and parenthood are common among young men who experience the child welfare and/or justice systems.[1,2,3] Data indicate that 15 percent of males who experience detention or residential placement have fathered a child.[4] A study of high school students found that the odds of becoming a parent before age 25 were 70 percent higher for young men who had ever been arrested in comparison to peers who had never been arrested.[5] Among a sample of youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care, about 17 percent of males reported fathering a child and 37 percent reported getting someone pregnant by age 21.[6] Although much of the available research and programs designed for young parents focus on mothers,[7,8] there is also extensive research on the benefits of father engagement on child development.[9] When fathers are engaged, their children may demonstrate more positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes[10,11] key factors to preventing risky behaviors in the short and long term.[12] In addition, research indicates that when young parents are supported, they are more involved and confident as parents and demonstrate overall personal development.[13,14,15]

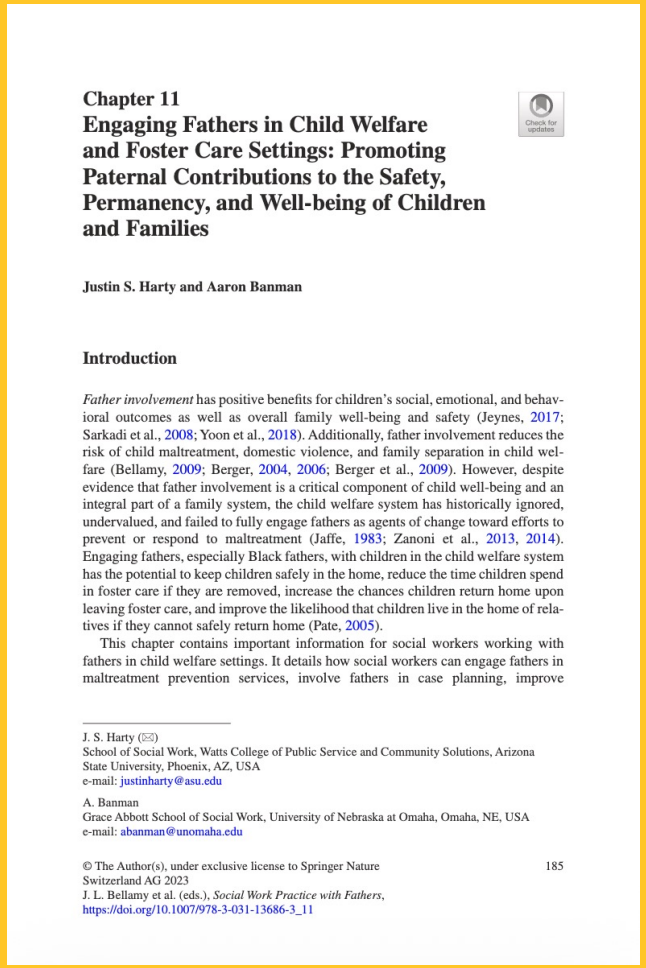
1 A Conversation Guide to Support Young Fathers in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

Offiong, A., Naylon, K., Beckwith, S., Huang, L. A., & Scott, M. E. (2025). A conversation guide to support young fathers in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Child Trends. https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/AR3-32_Conversation-Guide-to-Support-Young-Fathers.pdf

Resources

Chapter: Engaging Fathers in CW/FC

- Chapter on engaging fathers in child welfare and foster care, summarizing terms, system context, and strategies across prevention, paternity, preservation, permanency, young fathers, and data.
- Father engagement improves safety, permanency, well-being yet remains low; racism, gender bias, poor data, and limited services undermine fathers' involvement, especially for fathers of color.



Chapter 11

Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare and Foster Care Settings: Promoting Paternal Contributions to the Safety, Permanency, and Well-being of Children and Families

Justin S. Harty and Aaron Banman

Introduction

Father involvement has positive benefits for children's social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes as well as overall family well-being and safety (Jeynes, 2017; Sarkadi et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2018). Additionally, father involvement reduces the risk of child maltreatment, domestic violence, and family separation in child welfare (Bellamy, 2009; Berger, 2004, 2006; Berger et al., 2009). However, despite evidence that father involvement is a critical component of child well-being and an integral part of a family system, the child welfare system has historically ignored, undervalued, and failed to fully engage fathers as agents of change toward efforts to prevent or respond to maltreatment (Jaffe, 1983; Zanoni et al., 2013, 2014). Engaging fathers, especially Black fathers, with children in the child welfare system has the potential to keep children safely in the home, reduce the time children spend in foster care if they are removed, increase the chances children return home upon leaving foster care, and improve the likelihood that children live in the home of relatives if they cannot safely return home (Pate, 2005).

This chapter contains important information for social workers working with fathers in child welfare settings. It details how social workers can engage fathers in maltreatment prevention services, involve fathers in case planning, improve

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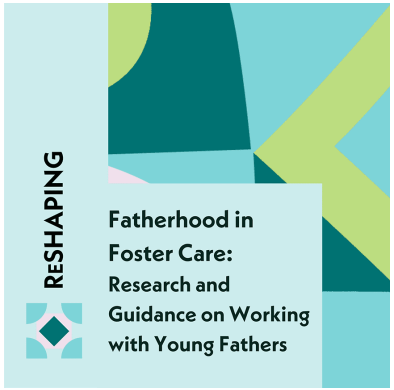
J. L. Bellamy et al. (eds.), *Social Work Practice with Fathers*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13686-3_11

Harty, J. S., & Banman, A. (2023). Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare and Foster Care Settings: Promoting Paternal Contributions to the Safety, Permanency, and Well-being of Children and Families. In J. L. Bellamy, B. P. Lemmons, Q. R. Cryer-Coupet, & J. A. Shadik (Eds.), Social Work Practice with Fathers (pp. 185–205). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13686-3_11

Webinars and Podcasts



Fatherhood in Foster Care

This webinar hosted by The ReSHAPING Network shares key information and valuable insight on fathers in foster care relevant to practice, policy, and research audiences.

https://youtu.be/q0XNkv5I0VI?si=GBSQLPYHYZzLqvdS

Fathers in Foster Care

Researchers and social workers Justin Harty and Kristen Ethier join us to talk about what they found when they tried to unearth anything about fathers and fathering while in foster care.

https://imprintnews.org/podcast/fathers-foster-care

Black Fathers in Care

In our first episode, I have a conversation with Justin Harty, LCSW about the needs Black fathers in foster care have and his current dissertation research exploring their lived experiences.

https://youtu.be/XGIEg6bvVug?si=aSg-teNqZD6xMQWM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Be the Solution

Serving Young Fathers in Responsible Fatherhood Programs

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Background

- Responsible Fatherhood programs, which focus on parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability are relevant for many fathers, but relatively few young fathers (i.e., younger than 30) participate.
- However, young fathers may be uniquely situated to benefit.
- We set out to answer three research questions:
    1. What are the characteristics of young fathers currently enrolled in RF programs and how do these characteristics compare with those of older fathers?
    2. What common challenges do programs face in identifying, enrolling, and serving young fathers?
    3. How have programs addressed these challenges?

Common recruitment challenges

1. Young fathers can be difficult to locate through traditional community partners.

   "I haven't seen any of our community partners…reach the younger dads, just from me also being [a young father] and seeing it now [as a recruiter]." – Program staff

2. Young fathers often mistrust services, perhaps due to negative experiences with other organizations or systems.

   "That was my concern. It sounded too good to be true. I thought it was just going to be another one of those programs that promise you this, promise you that…I was concerned that I was going to share my story and my past, my history…my criminal charges, my criminal history. It was going to somehow come up when I [tried] to go to court for custody…It might be used against me, and I was scared to share my story. But…it was completely different. A lot of times, some of the other fathers been through the same thing, as well as even some of the counselors." – A father

3. Young fathers might doubt they will benefit from RF services.

   "I had a couple of guys say, 'I don't need that.' And I tried to keep them interested. 'Hey, we've got some incentives. Hey, if you know anybody…' but they just kept walking. If they assume it's not for them, then it's a closed door." – Program staff

Potential strategies to overcome recruitment challenges

Embed program staff in the community and recruit from the places that young people frequent.

Use a range of recruitment sources and communication methods.

Engage past participants or program ambassadors.

Tailor the recruitment message to appeal to what young fathers need most without overpromising.

Common challenges related to engaging young fathers in services

1. Young fathers tend to have urgent needs and often juggle competing priorities.

> “I would just say sometimes with the younger dads, we’ve had dads [that are] all over the place. They’re working different jobs. They’re over here. They might be couch surfing, so they’re on the move a little bit more.” – Program staff

2. Many young fathers grapple with their identities as men and as fathers.

> “Now you’re shifting from thinking about yourself, you know, fresh 18, 19 and it’s me, me, me. Which is fine, it should be at that age. [But] now you’re trying to force your brain to switch into putting a child first or your co-parent first. That’s extremely tough… You kind of got to start flipping that mental switch. And if nobody is telling you to…lights don’t just turn on, on their own.” – Program staff

3. Young fathers might not be mentally or emotionally ready to participate in a fatherhood program.

> “Work, you know, like relationships, of course, transportation, self-doubt. I've seen that a lot. Guys would tell me something one week and then the next week they’ll say, ‘Yeah, I just wasn’t sure if this was for me,’ because the sessions get so deep sometimes that they’re not used to it. They’re not used to being able to share and have those conversations.” – Program staff

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4. Some topics covered in workshops might be less relevant.

> “What the curriculum does best is connect you with, you know, the experience you had as a child and address some of the issues or the strength that you might have as a father… the lived experience that a 20- year-old has compared with a 50-year-old is night and day.” – Program staff

5. Young fathers might hesitate to open up during workshop sessions because of more recent past experiences in classroom settings.

> “It definitely felt like a classroom setting, [so] I sat quiet as a church mouse.” – A father

Potential strategies to overcome engagement challenges

Create a welcoming environment that encourages young fathers' contributions.

Encourage fathers to keep notes so they can reference it in the future when it becomes more relevant.

Enlist older men in the groups to act as mentors.

Modify existing services to accommodate young fathers.

Takeaways

- Involving young fathers in RF programs, while challenging, is a chance to provide them with knowledge and skills to thrive as fathers and men.
- A better understanding of how to address young fathers' needs can enable RF programs to reach more young fathers and help them achieve their personal and parenting goals.

> "We're kids ourselves, you know, we're still young.… I feel like we just need this [program] for guidance, to help us before our journey starts with our kids." – A father

To learn more…

- Read the white paper: https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/OPRE_serving_young_fathers_nov2023.pdf
- Read the research brief: https://mathematica.org/publications/figuring-it-out-serving-young-fathers-in-responsible-fatherhood-programs
- Read about the FRAMING Research Project: https://acf.gov/opre/project/fatherhood-relationships-and-marriage-illuminating-next-generation-research-framing