

Fathers benefit from seeking help as parents

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Men are sometimes criticized for being unwilling to ask for directions when they travel, but they can benefit from looking for help as they begin their journeys as fathers, according to a researcher on fatherhood at the University of Chicago.

Along the way, they should not shy from asserting their roles, said Jennifer Bellamy, an Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration.

“Sometimes dads feel like they don’t get the same level of support that moms do when they become parents, but I think dads should seek opportunities from the beginning to be involved with their children,” said Bellamy, who worked on a research project in Texas on fatherhood and has published on the subject.

“Fathers should, for instance, try to go to visits with the pediatrician and ask questions about their child’s development,” she suggested.

She also said fathers should seek out groups in their communities that provide support and encouragement for fatherhood and visit websites devoted to fathering for tips on their role. Such resources can help fathers develop their distinctive strengths as parents.

“We know that fathers play with children in a different way than mothers do, they are more physical, and that benefits the children. That physical activity actually helps the children’s development,” she said.

The 2010 U.S. Census showed that there were 70.1 million fathers across the country and 25.3 million of those are in married couple families with children under age 18.

The Census also showed some dramatic changes for fathers; 1.8 million fathers head a single-parent household. The 2010 Census showed that men headed 15 percent of single-parent families, three times the percentage reported in 2000. In contrast, the 1970 Census showed that men headed only 1 percent of the single-parent households.

The School of Social Service Administration is a leading research center for the study of fatherhood. It provides field placements for its students in social service agencies serving young fathers, and the school's faculty is among the nation's leading scholars in family and fatherhood issues, particularly among fathers who need help from social workers.

Some of Bellamy's fieldwork, for instance, has been done with low-income never married parents and their children. In her work with the Texas Fragile Families Initiative program, Bellamy and her colleagues have been able to show how effectively interventions help young fathers.

"Birth was often a 'magic moment' for the young fathers, many of whom reported becoming more responsible individuals in response to the feeling of attachment they had for their children," she said.

Successful programs were able to help connect young fathers with training and employment programs. The study found that school-focused programs, team-parenting programs, and community-based fatherhood programs were most useful in helping young dads develop.

Young fathers in effective programs were less likely to face criminal or substance abuse problems and were more willing to ask for parenting help. An evaluation of successful programs also showed they seemed to

reduce repeat teenage births.

Working in the Texas program was something of an eye-opener for Bellamy. “I had never really thought about [fatherhood](#) issues. The literature I was exposed to as a master’s student in social work did not really discuss fathering, but working in the program made me realize what an important field it is,” she said.

Terence Simms, who received a master's degree this spring from SSA, worked on a fathering research project with Bellamy and also knows first hand about the challenges of early fathering. As a college student, he became a father at age 22 and appreciated the support he received from his family. He has since gone on to have three more children and enjoys his role as a dad.

His research with Bellamy showed that fathering programs can be effective, particularly when couples are involved together and men lead support groups for fathers. As a volunteer in 1996, Simms worked with young [fathers](#) in a community-outreach service-based program at a Chicago South Side church, where he found that men look for and are receptive to suggestions about fathering from mentors and others. “I still see some of the men I worked with, and many of them have gone on to be successful, both as parents and in their jobs. They did appreciate the advice they received and put it to work. That makes me feel like I accomplished something,” he said.

Provided by University of Chicago

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