



Success Story: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services

Involving Young Fathers in the Healthy Montana Teen Parent Program

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services is implementing the Montana Healthy Teen Parents Project to provide support for pregnant and parenting teens in high schools and community service organizations across the state. Through the project, the Department is providing core services for pregnant and parenting teens, which include flexible schooling, case management, parenting and life skills education, and referrals and linkage to prenatal care and quality child care. In particular, this Project is undertaking an initiative to support young fathers.

Involving young fathers in the lives of their children can have positive effects on children's well-being – and the reverse is also true. For example, children whose fathers are not involved in their lives are twice as likely to drop out of school, abuse alcohol or drugs, or be incarcerated (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/why-it-matters/pdf/fatherhood.pdf>). Although no data are available to provide a clear picture of the number of adolescent fathers in Montana, it is estimated that nearly one in 10 teen boys between the ages of 12 and 16 will become a teen father before the age of 20. Several Healthy Teen Parents Project contractors across the state have hired male social workers who are experienced in working with at-risk boys, to help address the needs of young fathers. Across the state, approximately 84 young fathers have received services during the last grant year. One example of such a staffing initiative comes from the Flathead City-County Health Department in Kalispell (Flathead). Flathead hired a Father Support Specialist whose purpose is to support fathers and help them understand their role during pregnancy and the early years of their child's life. In addition to providing parenting information, the Specialist helps young fathers reflect on their own relationships with their fathers and determine what type of father they would like to be for their own children. The Specialist also works closely with schools to help young fathers finish their education and has contacts at local employment agencies and potential employers to help young fathers identify work opportunities.

Based on early experiences with this initiative, it seems that the Specialist's relationship with the young fathers is, in and of itself, an important component of this program. In a newsletter article, one Specialist wrote:

"I was a bit surprised by the response I got from each client. Prior to working with these fathers, I was of the opinion that teenage boys are incapable of such adult responsibilities and given the change would walk away. The image most see when talking about teen pregnancy is that of the teenage girl. The image for me has changed within the first few meetings. These young dads want to be involved and be an active parent in their child's life. They just need help knowing what this looks like."

Programs across the state are also referring young fathers to support services, such as substance abuse programs, therapy, parenting education, supervised visitation, and adoption services. Some programs are also encouraging increased contact between young fathers and their children by providing calling cards and access to Skype. This service is already showing promise; for example, one young couple reported that this service made an important difference in



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their relationship and in the young father's relationship with his child. The father was able to connect with his child by using the calling cards and by video chatting to regularly participate in his child's nightly bedtime routine, through reading stories and singing songs.

Contact Information

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