

Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) Podcast Series

Engaging Fathers

TISH HALL, OAH: Welcome to the Office of Adolescent Health Podcast Series. Today we will be talking to Andrew Levack from MenEngage, a global alliance of organizations that seek to engage boys and men to achieve gender equality. Mr. Levack is also the Director of Gender Matters and formerly the Director of the Men as Partners (MAP) program at EngenderHealth, an international reproductive health organization, where he continues to serve as a Senior Technical Advisor. Mr. Levack is an expert on the topic of engaging fathers and will be speaking to us today about why it is important to engage fathers, how programs can work to redefine masculinity and fatherhood, and the challenges and opportunities associated with developing programs for teen fathers.

ANDREW LEVACK: I think anyone will intuitively understand why it is important to work with teen fathers, and any teen parent for that matter. Teen parents face major challenges in the spheres of economics, education, family life, and social life. When faced with raising children at an early age, young men and women both need extra attention, resources and support that will ultimately benefit them and their children. What's interesting to me is that we sometimes observe very different societal expectations for how teen fathers should face the challenges of parenting compared to teen mothers. Expectations for young men are often limited to ensuring that fathers establish paternity and provide some level of financial support. And those are really the only expectations we sometimes have. In fact our expectations are sometimes so low, we are often surprised when young men don't embrace these limited roles – much less a more comprehensive role as a father. I'd really like to see expectations change about what it means to be a father at an early age. Yes, we need young men to take responsibility, but we also need them to care for their children, to nurture their children, to manage their relationship with their child's mother and her extended family, and to manage the complicated competing demands of school, work, family, and social life. If that was the expectation, I imagine MTV would be able to produce a compelling counterpart show to "Teen Mom" that would be called "Teen Dad." There are great teen fathers doing all of those things I mentioned. I believe we need to raise that expectation for every young dad and provide more support to help them realize this ideal.

TISH HALL, OAH: Mr. Levack goes on to explain how ideas of masculinity influence fatherhood and how programs can work to redefine harmful norms of masculinity and fatherhood.

ANDREW LEVACK: Some of the more innovative fatherhood programs make a conscious effort to examine the societal messages that young men receive about masculinity. From birth, young men are told to be strong, to be tough, to be independent, and to be a provider. Young men are also given a lot of potentially harmful messages – for example, to be dominant over women, to withhold their emotion, to use violence to resolve conflict, to have a lot of sexual partners, and to take risks. It's important that all young men, including young fathers, have a chance to

critically analyze these messages, consider where they come from, question them, and define for themselves what it means to be man and what it means to be a father. This often results in young men creating new expectations for how they should raise their children. It helps them understand that they can move from a limited notion of fatherhood being simply the role of a provider to a more fulfilling notion of care-giving for their child in all spheres of life. These new expectations include a father being connected to his children and being able to express his emotions to his children. New expectations also include the idea that partners should share roles, responsibilities, and duties, that men should respect women and treat them well, and that it is okay and important for men to seek help and support when they need it. Indeed, running fatherhood groups with young men models an environment where young men can rely on each other to provide help and support. As young men grow together in a program, they also begin to create new group norms about the type of men and fathers that expect each other to be.

TISH HALL, OAH: Mr. Levack explains that programs working to engage teen fathers may face some challenges, but that there are ways to overcome these challenges.

ANDREW LEVACK: Developing programs to challenge male gender norms and engage young fathers requires a significant amount of time, effort and support. Unfortunately, there are few examples of this work being taken to scale within the public sector, and very little work that has been done to address the broader socio-economic conditions that young fathers face. At the end of the day, the first thing young men are going to want is an opportunity to provide economically for their children, and we can't diminish that legitimate need. Even if a program has a difficult time addressing the economic pressures on teen dads, it can at least find ways to address some of their immediate needs. Incentives for participation are helpful, especially when the incentives include something that contributes to the care of their children such as diapers, clothing, toys, or a paid family outing. Programs also have to take into account the challenges that teen dads face with transportation, competing schedule demands and childcare. In terms of staffing programs, it obviously helps to have staff who are experienced, empathetic, enthusiastic, and well-connected to the communities that they serve. Staff who run fatherhood programs also need to model the progressive norms of masculinity that we are trying to promote. Staff also need to see young fathers as potential partners capable of playing a positive role in the health and well-being of their partners, families, and communities.

In summary, a growing number of innovative fatherhood interventions give men an opportunity to challenge their notions of what it means to be a man and see the benefits of taking on new progressive models of masculinity. Given the opportunity, skills, and support, many young fathers are eager to embrace new norms that promote care for their children, respect for women, connection with other fathers, and active, engaged parenting.

TISH HALL, OAH: Thanks for joining us for today's podcast about engaging fathers. To access more resources related to engaging fathers, please visit us at <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/>.