



**policy
report**

KIDS COUNT

OPENING DOORS FOR YOUNG PARENTS

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OPENING DOORS FOR YOUNG PARENTS

INTRODUCTION

Young people are the workers of today and tomorrow. But those who become parents in their teenage years and early 20s, just as they are getting started in the world of work, are often confronted with a harsh reality: odds stacked against their ability to earn, learn and raise a family, which can threaten their children’s future as well as the strength of our communities.

Children don’t come with a handbook, and the transition to parenthood is a huge learning curve for even the most economically stable adults. Yet we know from decades of research, as well as experience, the long-term difficulties faced by children born to teens and other parents who are ill equipped to provide the financial stability, sustained nurturance, guidance and support children need to realize their full potential. We also know that we cannot change these odds by solely focusing on children when their lives are indelibly shaped by the adults raising them. Policies and programs must take the entire family into account to equip young parents and children with the tools and skills necessary for both to succeed.

For the past 20 years, the public health, education and human services sectors have focused on preventing pregnancy among teenagers using evidence of what works to help delay their childbearing,¹ and those efforts have been broadly successful. The share of teens and young adults who have children is 42 percent lower today than in the early 1990s.² These efforts to

reduce unplanned pregnancy for teens have been critically important and should continue to ensure both parents and their children are best positioned to achieve their full potential.

But even as our nation continues to focus energy and resources on preventing unplanned pregnancy among teens and young adults, we cannot afford to ignore the need to help young people who do become parents to support their children, especially in a rapidly changing labor market. This policy report focuses on opportunities to invest in ensuring these young families find pathways to success. By helping young parents navigate the difficult transitions to both adulthood and parenthood, we can change the odds for both them and their children — truly an investment that will pay double dividends for many years to come. The nation can’t afford to have these young people sidelined from the economic and civic life of our country, and we can’t afford to have their children deprived of a strong start in life.



TARGETING SUPPORT TO THE MOST VULNERABLE YOUNG FAMILIES

Today, 3.4 million children in this country live with parents ages 18 to 24 (see table on page 10).³ Thirty-seven percent of them, mostly babies, toddlers and preschoolers, live in poverty — nearly twice the national child poverty rate — and 69 percent live in families with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.⁴ In Georgia, Kentucky and Maine, more than 80 percent of children with young parents live in low-income families.

In many cases, public systems and programs are not designed with the special needs of young parents in mind. Fortunately, we have learned a great deal about how to help young parents succeed. Common-sense, effective programs and targeted policies can help set them on the right path and help them realize their dreams for themselves and their children. These existing strategies and some fresh thinking about additional approaches can address the most common obstacles young parents face, including financial insecurity, disrupted education, lack of employment and career growth, lack of access to quality child care, inadequate and unstable housing, health challenges and lack of knowledge and experience as parents.

The balance of this report provides research, data and examples of ways to nurture the strengths and talents of parents ages 18 to 24. We include recommendations for how state and federal policymakers can help young parents develop the skills they need to contribute to their children's well-being, their communities and the economy.

Before presenting these recommendations, it is important to note some core assumptions and research findings. First, there is evidence that parenthood can be a positive and powerful motivating factor for young people to achieve their goals.^{5,6} The latest neuroscience shows that young parents are still developing and maturing cognitively, making them quite capable of change and success despite any early missteps.⁷ This research confirms that public policies should not perpetuate or institutionalize harmful myths about young parents. Instead of locking them out of opportunity, the nation can invest in young parents at this critical time and ensure that the doors of educational and career advancement are open for them.

Second, although childbearing during the early 20s is more culturally accepted than during the teen years, outcomes for many young parents ages 18 to 24 and their children are similar to the outcomes of the even more fragile families headed by teens,⁸ fueled by a lack of employment and financial stability. Young parents face today's new and rapidly changing labor market without the years of education, experience and perspective that older parents often have gained.

This financial instability compounds the stress any new parent would experience while reducing resources available to nurture their child's well-being and development, producing a vicious cycle. Most young parents work, yet their median family income hovers just above the poverty threshold.⁹ They have



attained less education than peers,¹⁰ leaving them inadequately prepared for today's well-paying jobs and yet too young to access certain key public benefits and services. Jobs that pay a family-supporting wage are increasingly limited and require some postsecondary education or training, arenas often closed to young parents because of the associated costs, coupled with unaffordable or inflexible housing arrangements, lack of child care, rigid hours and other barriers.¹¹

Across all human services, solutions are most effective when they are informed by the insights and experiences of the people served. More than half of young parents are people of color, and efforts to support them should engage them directly while addressing the systemic discrimination and inequities they face.¹² Those focused on shaping policy and improving services need to consider redefining roles that allow young people to simultaneously be champions of change as well as service recipients.

Considering Fathers and Noncustodial Parents

This report relies on data from an analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, which found that there are about 3 million parents ages 18 to 24.¹³ This estimate does not include parents who do not live in the household. An analysis of the Survey of Income and Program Participation¹⁴ estimated that, in 2013, about 1 million additional parents in this age group, many of them fathers, were living apart from their children — though trends suggest that number may have fallen since that year.

Despite the advances of the Responsible Fatherhood movement¹⁵ and other efforts to recognize their needs, fathers are often left out of programs to support young families¹⁶ — even though they have a critical influence on the development of their children, whether or not they live together.¹⁷ The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which followed a large cohort of births from unmarried parents, found that unmarried fathers are often closely connected to the mothers of their children when the child is born.¹⁸ But when fathers are not supported, the parenting relationship can become distant or filled with conflict, affecting the child's bonding and development.

Fathers should be included in solutions for young parents to ensure they can support their children financially and emotionally. For example, a study of a home-visiting program showed that “families whose fathers participated in at least one home visit were

enrolled nearly seven months longer than families whose fathers did not participate in any home visits.”¹⁹ Involving young fathers in mentoring also can help them succeed. For example, an evaluation of the STEP-UP program in Phoenix, Arizona, found that 73 percent of successfully mentored fathers were employed at the end of the project period, compared with 48 percent of the dads who hadn't been mentored, and that mentored fathers were more likely to strengthen their relationship with a spouse or significant other.²⁰

Ariel Ventura-Lazo was working 55 hours a week for an armored car service when his son was born. As a 19-year-old, first-generation American who hadn't completed his first semester of community college, Ventura-Lazo feared his job wouldn't support the dreams he had for his new son.

“When I saw my son grow and take his baby steps, I could see my job wasn't going to do it,” remembers Ventura-Lazo, who lives in Alexandria, Virginia. That realization, he says, “really changed the trajectory of my life. But mostly, it was for the trajectory of his life.”

When Ventura-Lazo's girlfriend, whom he later married, began taking classes at Northern Virginia Community College with the help of a program called Generation Hope, he decided to try college again. “My first semester, I earned my first 4.0 in my life,” he says. “I didn't even know what that felt like.”

TWO OPEN WINDOWS FOR BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Young parents and their children are in two critically important developmental periods — a phenomenon researchers call “two open windows.”²¹ The young child is developing rapidly from infancy to age 3: learning about relationships, acquiring language and creating a million new neural connections per second.²² At the same time, young mothers and fathers are developing skills vital to success in both work and parenting — the second most important phase of human development. The simultaneous occurrence of these two growth periods means young parents face distinct challenges and opportunities. For example, because the brain’s capacity for empathy is still developing, research shows that young parents often require extra support in recognizing the developmental stages and needs of their children.²³

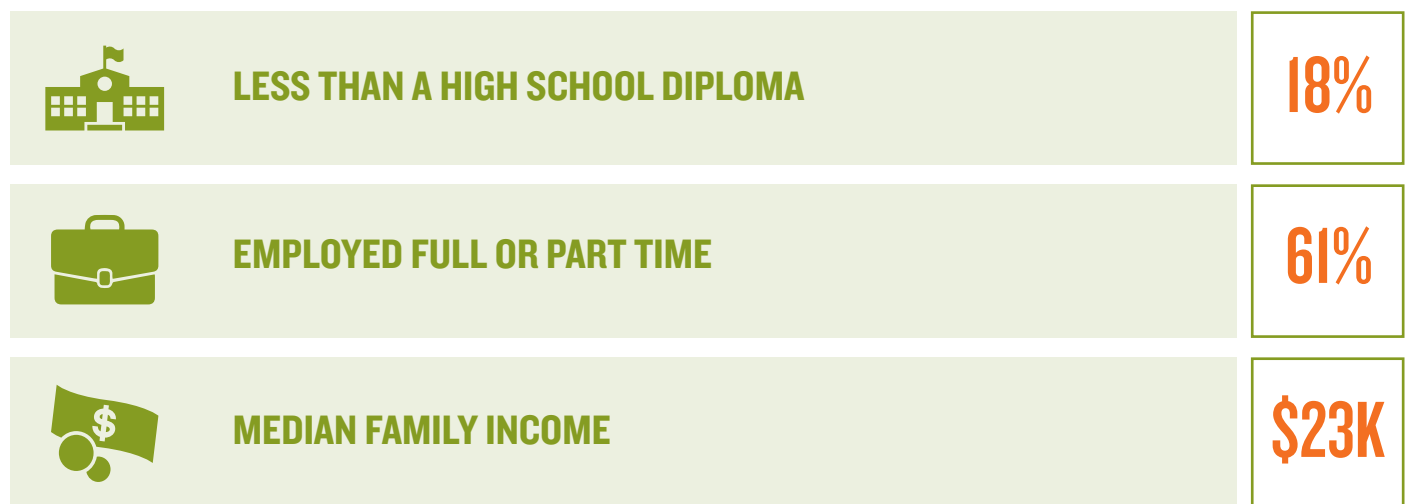
While young parents are undergoing these internal changes, many factors in their external lives can have a significant influence. A lack of financial resources and time to bond

with a new baby, along with the stress of the transition to parenting, regardless of age, can lead to postpartum depression, problems in intimate and other relationships and harsh or disengaged parenting.²⁴ These difficulties can keep young parents from graduating from high school, continuing education and gaining employment.

On the other hand, the fact that young parents are still developing presents significant opportunity. Their receptivity to positive emotions means that supportive services, such as mentoring and opportunities to build relationships with peers who are parenting, can promote success in both caring and providing for children.²⁵ What happens in this period will reverberate across the lifespan of both the parent and child, for better or worse.

Educational Attainment, Working Status and Income: 2015–2017

Young Parents Ages 18–24



DEFINITION: Family income is that of the young parent, his or her spouse and the child; it does not include income from other individuals who may live in the household.

SOURCE: Population Reference Bureau’s analysis of data from the Current Population Survey, 2015–2017 Basic Monthly and Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC). Retrieved from IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.



PROMOTING OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG PARENTS

While we must work to support young parents in building a stronger bond with their children, we must also ensure these young families are economically stable. Data show that, as a group, young parents are more likely than nonparents to be working full time between the ages of 18 and 24.²⁶ Yet a majority also face periods of joblessness.²⁷ Sixty-three percent of young parents are living with a partner — either married or cohabiting — and still the median family income for young parents is \$23,000, slightly above the federal poverty level for a family of three.²⁸ In a workforce landscape that increasingly requires postsecondary education and specialized skills for jobs that will support a family, young parents typically have less education than nonparents and are far less likely to be in school than their peers²⁹ who are not also raising and supporting children.

Education can make a significant difference in earning power for families. One study found that single mothers with associate degrees make an average of \$152,927 more over their lifetimes than those with only a high school diploma and single mothers with bachelor's degrees earn \$296,044 more.³⁰ An increase of \$3,000 per year in income to low-income families with children under age 6 has been associated with higher earnings and work hours for those children as adults.³¹ Without the ability to secure well-paying jobs, however, families with higher education could still have trouble making ends meet.

Modernizing policies and practices to address common barriers to education and earning for young parents will open doors to the opportunity and family stability critical for childhood development.



“These parents often struggle to picture a future for themselves. But for their children? They can describe their whole vision, down to the songbirds in the trees.”

— Cathe Dykstra, president and chief executive officer of Family Scholar House

Family Scholar House: A Place to Live and Learn

When Heather Glidewell of Louisville, Kentucky, became pregnant at 17, she was determined to keep her education on track. But, sent away from her family, she wasn't sure how she could pay for college while making ends meet and raising her young child.

Then she learned about Family Scholar House, a Louisville nonprofit organization that has served more than 500 single parents and their children with housing, support services and academic coaching on five campuses. Family Scholar House parents — about 40 percent are between ages 18 and 24, and all have been homeless or in unstable housing — earn an apartment by accumulating points for participation in activities such as goal-setting classes, toddler book clubs and family art therapy.

For Glidewell, now 19, Family Scholar House has provided a safety net during long hours of juggling courses at the University of Louisville with work, diapers and bedtime stories. “I like that, no matter what, I will always have somebody there for me,” she says.

At the main Louisville campus, apartments face a common square to foster a sense of community, with brightly colored doors that even young children can instantly identify as home. The complex includes an academic service center, a child care center and a gathering place

for classes and café nights — free meals where families chat about goals and parenting, using icebreaker questions written on popsicle sticks.

Residents, required to be full-time students, attend 13 colleges and universities in the area, collaborating closely with academic mentors to navigate scholarships and financial aid, course credits, work-study options and accommodations for special needs. These coaches are critical to helping parents forge a path that, in many cases, no one in their family has taken. Parents stay an average of three years, working toward graduation from four-year colleges and a career.

Since the program began in 2008, every Family Scholar House parent has secured stable housing upon finishing the program. Eighty-one percent have achieved stable employment, and 65 percent have continued their education, many in graduate programs.

With anatomy textbooks covering her donated dining room table, Glidewell describes her plan for a master's degree and a career as a registered nurse. Her daughter, Khloe, is now a healthy 2-year-old who loves lollipops, dollhouses and wearing pink polka-dot rain boots on a clear day.



For example, many young parents lack access to some benefits that would increase their income, such as the federal or state Earned Income Tax Credit, because they are younger than the required age of 25. This limitation was designed to exempt students from middle-class families, but it unfortunately ends up excluding many of the vulnerable young parents who need it most.³² Just 5 percent of young parents receive child care subsidies, even though 63 percent require child care.³³ Because many communities do not have enough high-quality child care slots for infants and toddlers, and because young parents often work and attend school during irregular hours, they often have to rely on family members, if available, to help with child care.³⁴ Forty-one percent of young parents attributed jobless spells to challenges with child care.³⁵

Young parents are more likely to have insecure housing, often because of family rejection after the birth of their child and the high cost of housing.³⁶ About 1.1 million children have a young parent who experienced homelessness in the past year, yet relatively few homeless service providers serve young parents and their kids.³⁷ Their stage of development also makes them more susceptible to psychological distress, yet many young parents have limited or no access to mental health services. Studies have found that young adults have higher rates of simultaneously occurring mental health issues and substance use disorders than older adults.³⁸

These barriers compound the stress on young parents and affect outcomes for children. Homelessness during pregnancy and a child's early years can harm the child's development.³⁹ Children born to parents who are in their teens go on to have lower scores in math and reading, as well as on cognitive and behavioral assessments, and ultimately have high rates of unemployment compared with the children of older parents.⁴⁰

Effective policies and practices reduce these barriers and can help create a better future for both children and parents. For example, evidence shows that home-visiting programs can prevent rapid repeat pregnancies for young parents and improve developmental outcomes for their children.⁴¹ Parents who participate in Early Head Start were more likely to be employed and involved in education and less likely to use physical punishment or have a second birth at a young age. Their children had better cognitive and social development and fewer behavioral problems.⁴² While more research is needed to identify what works to improve outcomes for young parents and children together, programs that draw on these individual evidence-based approaches have shown promising results.

TABLE I | Young Parents and Their Children: 2015–2017

State	Young Parents (Ages 18–24)	Children With Young Parents	Children With Young Parents Living in Low-Income Families
Location	Number	Number	Percent
United States	2,877,000	3,432,000	69
Alabama	76,000	88,000	73
Alaska	10,000	11,000	54
Arizona	74,000	92,000	70
Arkansas	34,000	38,000	67
California	281,000	350,000	65
Colorado	43,000	48,000	67
Connecticut	17,000	22,000	70
Delaware	7,000	8,000	54
District of Columbia	5,000	6,000	78
Florida	148,000	183,000	78
Georgia	111,000	135,000	85
Hawaii	14,000	18,000	58
Idaho	22,000	25,000	62
Illinois	86,000	105,000	67
Indiana	84,000	89,000	67
Iowa	28,000	36,000	65
Kansas	29,000	36,000	72
Kentucky	50,000	57,000	81
Louisiana	69,000	87,000	76
Maine	10,000	12,000	85
Maryland	31,000	37,000	59
Massachusetts	28,000	35,000	66
Michigan	85,000	100,000	73
Minnesota	35,000	38,000	54
Mississippi	44,000	54,000	76
Missouri	67,000	67,000	67
Montana	12,000	13,000	63
Nebraska	21,000	26,000	67
Nevada	22,000	29,000	60
New Hampshire	7,000	7,000	63
New Jersey	44,000	55,000	67
New Mexico	33,000	41,000	77
New York	108,000	131,000	66
North Carolina	117,000	134,000	69
North Dakota	8,000	9,000	69
Ohio	123,000	144,000	73
Oklahoma	62,000	66,000	74
Oregon	31,000	33,000	72
Pennsylvania	91,000	96,000	65
Rhode Island	6,000	8,000	79
South Carolina	44,000	51,000	69
South Dakota	12,000	14,000	73
Tennessee	75,000	99,000	73
Texas	358,000	450,000	65
Utah	36,000	36,000	60
Vermont	3,000	3,000	53
Virginia	60,000	68,000	69
Washington	50,000	62,000	63
West Virginia	20,000	20,000	74
Wisconsin	38,000	54,000	75
Wyoming	7,000	8,000	59

DEFINITION: Children in low-income families are children under age 18 who live in families with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

SOURCE: Population Reference Bureau’s analysis of data from the Current Population Survey, 2015–2017 Basic Monthly files and Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC). Retrieved from IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.



Building Parenting Skills With Head Start and Home Visiting

The Chicago Young Parents Program connects approaches shown to help young families succeed — a combination of Early Head Start and Head Start center and home-visiting models with mentoring — with an opportunity for parents to work just feet away from their children.

Using a federal Performance Partnership Pilot grant that leveraged existing funding to the city's Head Start and workforce efforts, the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) collaborated with the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership to create the program, which has served about 250 parents ages 16 to 24, mostly mothers, in three years.

Parents enter the program through their children's enrollment in Early Head Start or Head Start. With the help of 34 community partners, each receives a mentor, training and experience as a Head Start literacy coach, often working at the center their children attend. Young parents learn on the job about child development from experienced teachers — knowledge that helps them bond with their own children while building career skills.

“What you are learning to do for work is also the best practice for what you can do as a parent,” says Elizabeth Stover, assistant director of DFSS' Children Services Division.

Maira Lopez, 24, a literacy coach at a Head Start site on Chicago's West Side, works in a classroom just down the hall from her son Jacob, 3. She plans to continue pursuing a certification in child development when she leaves the program, eventually earning an associate degree in early childhood education.

Mentors lead Friday training and enrichment sessions and visit each parent at home twice a month, using the evidence-based Parents as Teachers program curriculum as a guide. But first, mentors simply ask how the young parent is feeling and what she or he wants to work on.

In preliminary findings, researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found children in the program gained significantly more competency in literacy and social-emotional development than those attending a Head Start program without the young parents' component. Parents were observed using more sophisticated vocabulary in describing early learning and literacy after completing the program. Parents also reported gaining confidence and the ability to manage stress while increasing work skills.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Young parents need what all young people need — educational and training opportunities that prepare them for today’s workforce; permanent connections with caring adults and mentors who promote their growth and well-being; and knowledge and tools to keep more of what they earn and save for the future.⁴³ They also need what all parents of young children need — access to affordable, high-quality child and health care; paid time off from their jobs to care for sick children; and scheduling policies that allow them to plan for family needs in advance.⁴⁴

For the past 10 years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has invested in building strategies that support parents and children together — a two-generation approach to human development.⁴⁵ These strategies recognize that efforts to build well-being are more effective when they advance the skills and

resources of parents and children simultaneously. At the same time, the Foundation has made substantial investments to address young people’s disconnection from work and school.⁴⁶ The intersection of these two bodies of work informs our thinking about young parents.

To equip young parents for success, federal, state and local policymakers should focus on combining and targeting resources available to parents of all ages and young people generally so that young parents don’t fall into the gaps between them. Just as the milestones of a young parent’s life (such as having a child, finishing school, earning and managing money, living on their own) are compressed into one critically important developmental period, policies should combine the already available support for those transitions into an accessible package that works for young parents.

Create more opportunities for young parents to pursue education and employment.

To equip young parents to compete for family-sustaining jobs, states must increase the availability of workforce programs that integrate positive youth development⁴⁷ — a framework for cultivating young people’s assets and competencies to prepare them for success in adulthood — while also enhancing outreach and retention strategies so young parents can acquire the skills sought by employers in high-demand industries. To address the unique barriers young parents face, especially those of color living in disinvested communities, these programs should pair education and training with other support services, including subsidies for high-quality, flexible child care and pre-K; transportation and housing assistance; counseling; and mentoring.

Because a high school diploma is critical for moving ahead, states should reengage young parents toward a credential with training and postsecondary pathways that offer tailored mentoring and wraparound support. These programs should include an introduction to the world of work along with specific skills. Job opportunities that promote positive youth development and are intentionally designed to offer valuable work experience to young adults who have never been employed can help them learn about workplace norms, practice conflict resolution and expand professional networks. For example, Our Piece of the Pie, a program in Hartford, Connecticut, pairs young parents and other young adults with a youth development specialist who offers personalized guidance as they train for careers in health care, insurance and manufacturing.⁴⁸ Flexibility is key to the success of all these programs. Allowing young parents to take a temporary leave of absence from the work or educational track being pursued — while continuing to provide case management and coaching support for urgent needs such as food and housing — can ensure they persist toward their goals.

Federal and state policymakers must also intentionally work to reduce educational disparities by race and ethnicity and improve the likelihood that young parents will complete college or postsecondary training, a priority of many governors. Congress should expand the recent increase in Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), the only federally funded program dedicated to providing child care to student parents on college campuses. States can blend and braid a wide variety of federal, state and local public funding sources, including financial aid and economic security programs, to provide young student parents access to quality, reliable child care and housing.^{49,50} One study found the use of campus child care centers was associated with substantially higher rates of student parents remaining enrolled through the next fall semester.⁵¹ States should increase grants and income-based financial aid to account for dependent children and designate young student parents as a target population in College Promise grants and emergency aid programs.

Arkansas, for example, draws on a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) state block grant for its Career Pathways Initiative, which provides case management and support services to students in education and training at all the state’s community colleges. The state’s Department of Higher Education has an agreement with the Department of Human Services, which administers child care subsidies, to enroll eligible students, many of whom are young parents. States can also fund expansion of programs like Keys to Degrees at Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts, which provides housing, a meal plan, child care and after-school support for young single parents.

To promote greater opportunity for success, lawmakers should ensure that young parents can count higher-education and vocational programs toward completing work requirements if their state benefit programs, including child care and income subsidies, have instituted them. Those programs should also lengthen the time limit for low-income students in skill-building programs and reduce the work-hours requirement, allowing young parents to more successfully balance work and education.

Invest in programs that help young parents achieve financial stability and keep more of what they earn during their children's early years.

Governments should help young parents keep more of what they earn during their children's early years, when basic income levels are directly linked to child outcomes. They should start by making sure benefit programs do not exclude young parents. Congress should lower the eligibility age for the childless worker's Earned Income Tax Credit to 21 to help nonresident fathers meet child support requirements and contribute to the child's economic stability. States should follow California and Maryland in expanding state EITC to all workers between ages 18 and 25. States and the federal government should also create or increase the Child Tax Credit for families with young children, which would disproportionately help young parents.

Public benefit programs available to young parents should incentivize them to gain skills and training to increase future earnings while maintaining their current economic stability. California's Cal-Learn program uses TANF dollars to provide child care and transportation assistance to help teen parents stay in school, with financial bonuses for good grades and graduating from high school before turning 19.⁵² Similar programs can lengthen the age of eligibility and expand allowable activities to increase young parent educational achievement.

Since young parents are less likely to have health insurance than nonparent peers or older parents,⁵³ states should redouble efforts to make sure young parents have access to comprehensive health care, including mental health services, so that unexpected health expenses do not create a family financial crisis. The 17 states that have not yet done so should expand Medicaid coverage to include more low-income parents, without imposing work requirements or other new restrictions. Evidence shows that increasing health insurance coverage for parents also increases coverage for children.⁵⁴ But work requirements create barriers that cause families to lose access to these vital supports even when they are working or should be exempt.⁵⁵ States should also cover screenings for maternal depression as part of home visiting and via well-child visits under children's health insurance plans.

States should modify or suspend child support collection from young incarcerated parents to prevent crippling debt when they are released and should adopt child support policies that balance the custodial parent's household needs with the noncustodial parent's ability to pay. For example, the Colorado Parent Employment Program is a two-generation child support initiative that helps young fathers address barriers to employment and be more involved in their children's lives.

States should pursue additional consumer protections for young parents while promoting access to safe, affordable products that can improve their financial well-being. This should include reducing or eliminating loan or debt-collection penalties that keep young parents from working. States also should integrate successful financial capability strategies into existing social services platforms such as home-visiting and employment and education programs.

States can better serve the many young parents who experience housing instability by prioritizing them for subsidized housing while incentivizing and funding more family shelters to serve young parents. States should follow guidance released by three

federal departments calling for screening for homelessness and housing instability in early care programs,⁵⁶ and they should broker partnerships between early care providers, early intervention programs, homeless service providers and schools.

Surround young parents with services that reduce stress and promote child development and healthy parenting.

Comprehensive, culturally appropriate services must be available to support young mothers and fathers as soon as they learn they will become parents. To meet these needs, states should make sure their early-care and maternal health services incorporate evidence-based approaches such as home visiting shown to be effective with young parents. Massachusetts, for example, has seen success with its Healthy Families program,⁵⁷ a statewide home-visiting program for first-time young parents.

These services should prioritize resources that incorporate youth voice and leadership and help young parents determine their own future, including making decisions about their families. States should make family planning and reproductive care accessible to help young parents avoid repeat unplanned pregnancies and increase the preparation of home-visiting nurses and pediatric professionals to conduct screening and intervention for intimate partner violence. Steps to Success, a home-visiting program for young families in Texas that combines child development and parenting support with family-planning education and access to contraception, saw increased use of long-acting reversible contraceptive methods among participants and decreased incidence of unprotected sex.⁵⁸

States also should make sure young parents have access to high-quality, affordable infant and toddler care. A recent increase in the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) from Congress presents an important opportunity to build the supply of licensed care; family, friend and neighbor care; and

flexible hours care — types of child care that are more likely to meet the needs of young parents and accommodate their work and educational goals. Several states, including Maine and Missouri, pay higher rates under their child care assistance programs for care provided during nontraditional hours.⁵⁹

States should prioritize care that equips young parents to understand their children's developmental stages and builds their decision-making skills through relationships with experienced caregivers and mentors. California allocated \$158.5 million in one-time TANF funds to support an evidence-based home-visiting pilot initiative for first-time young parents through 2021.⁶⁰ Momentum is also building in Maryland with the state-funded Couples Advancing Together program, which combines a six-week peer learning course to help young people develop healthy relationships with home visiting and long-term follow-up. The program is operated by the Center for Urban Families, an organization focused on responsible fatherhood that's located in a disinvested, predominantly African-American community in Baltimore. As trauma, violence, isolation and instability are often part of the context of young parents' lives, states should prioritize services that incorporate trauma-informed approaches. When appropriate, programs should involve grandparents and other caregivers as sources of encouragement and support. The federal Office of Adolescent Health has a toolkit with a checklist for creating programs friendly to young fathers.⁶¹

Keep families together and promote success for young parents involved in public systems.

Young people in foster care are twice as likely as other youth to become pregnant or father a child by the age of 19.⁶² States should prioritize keeping families together, which starts with knowing the parenting status of young people involved in public systems. Although the update is currently on hold, a process was underway to require states to collect data on expectant and parenting youth in foster care systems.⁶³



States should use these data to craft policies to make sure babies are not separated from a parent solely because the parent is in foster care, to ensure parents have stable placements and to recruit and train foster parents who can support young parents and children.

States should take advantage of the new federal Family First Prevention Services Act to provide career and education opportunities for young parents in foster care until age 26.

Criminal justice systems should follow the science on brain development for youth and young adults and employ community-based alternatives to incarceration to keep families together while connecting young parents to mentoring and workforce pathways.

Public systems and policy should consider targeting matched savings programs to help young systems-involved parents save for basic assets and needs. Of all participants in the Casey Foundation's Opportunity Passport®, a program that has matched savings up to \$3,000 for nearly 4,000 young people who have been in foster care, young parents were the most likely to have saved enough money to purchase an asset such as a car, housing or education and training.⁶⁴ These purchases also were correlated with other positive outcomes, such as enrollment in school and securing stable housing.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The nation has made great strides in helping young people postpone parenthood until they have advanced in their education and job training. As a result, America's children are increasingly likely to benefit from the stability that can come from a family headed by parents who are more prepared for parenthood. We must continue these positive trends while strengthening efforts to support the young people who already have children.

These young people, like all youth, are still growing and developing their own potential, even as they develop the potential of their young children. The arrival of a child is a turning point in any parent's life. As young parents create a healthy foundation for their children, better programs and policies can help them realize the possibilities of that new beginning and build on the considerable strengths that new parents discover about themselves.

Approaches that incorporate young parents' perspectives, involve parents and children together, consider the needs of fathers as well as mothers, further racial and ethnic equity and meet the needs of young parents involved in systems will realize this vision and help young parents contribute not only to their children's success but also to the success of their communities.

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