

Expectant and Parenting Youth Inclusivity Toolkit

A guide for adults - **service providers, teachers, relatives, and others** - about how to make their environments and interactions welcoming and supportive of young parents



Thank you for supporting expectant and parenting youth!

Our goal with this toolkit is two-fold. First, we hope to increase awareness about the unique challenges that young parents face. Some of these difficulties are listed in the following sections. Often in our society, these young people are pushed out of sight or deemed unequal to the task of parenting; however, our experience (and a whole host of data) shows that with additional strengths-based support, they are quite capable of achieving their personal goals while building happy, healthy, and thriving families.

Second, we'd like to provide strategies and resources for adults who may work with expectant and parenting youth to ensure they're being supportive, effective, and affirming in their work - whether that's in the classroom, at home, at a job site, or at a community agency. To this end, we include general principles as well as concrete strategies, like altering your language choices related to young parents and interrupting common myths and stigma about teen parenthood.

Lastly, we want to thank you for caring and seeking information to better support the expectant and parenting youth in your life.



Common needs and challenges for expectant and parenting youth

Expectant and parenting youth (EPY) face many challenges. This brief list is included to give supportive adults a baseline understanding of their needs.*

However, it is important to note that many of these concerns may be reduced or eliminated when EPY are provided with assistance and guidance from caring adults in their lives.

The Michigan Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program is one example showing that, with support from others, young parents and their families can thrive. **For more information on the success of the MI-APPP program, visit bit.ly/MIAPPPinfographic.**

**Most of the current data on young parents has focused on women and mothers, and therefore we are including the numbers we have. However, we know that many young fathers face the same struggles, and it is essential to engage dads in our supportive efforts.*

EDUCATION

Pushing back on school pushout

30% of females who drop out of school cite pregnancy or parenting as the reason, and young fathers face a similar risk of dropping out.

Many young parents report feeling discouraged from continuing to attend class or participate in activities, and school policies may make it difficult for them to take absences or make up work they missed due to getting pregnancy care or caring for their child.

FINANCES

Housing, work, transportation, and childcare

Expectant and parenting youth have higher rates of homelessness than their peers. About 48% of US young mothers live below the poverty line, and many receive little or no child support. Quality childcare services can be difficult to find, access, and afford, which can be a barrier to young parents continuing their education or maintaining a steady job.



SOCIAL SUPPORT

Fighting isolation and stigma

Much of our current messaging in the media, as well as some health campaigns, frames young parenthood as a problem and a drain on resources. This shame and stigma only serves to isolate young parents from vital social support systems, and contributes to young mothers being nearly twice as likely as older moms to struggle with depression (including postpartum depression), loneliness, and fearfulness. Young dads may also struggle with stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns.



General guidelines for working with expectant and parenting youth

If ever you feel lost or not sure what to do, you can always return to these few principles to guide you.

01

Treat them with the same respect that you'd have for any parent.

Parenting is a tough job and a difficult role transition for anyone, not just young parents. Things like talking down to young parents, talking to their parents instead of directly to them, adopting an attitude of "they need to figure it out on their own," etc. do not serve to help them develop their strengths and skills. Don't take over and don't take off. Assume they are parenting the best way they know how and ask permission before giving them advice. Ask them what they want and need, and help them problem solve if they request help. Steady encouragement and gentle guidance works best.

02

Be positive about their strengths and their goals, both as parents and as individuals.

Unfortunately, many young parents receive too many negative messages suggesting that they have "ruined their lives" and cannot achieve their own personal dreams because they have had a child. This is inaccurate, and if left unchecked, can be very damaging to young parents. Instead of adding to this stigma, be a mentor who can show them what strengths and competencies they have. Help young parents feel capable and included in their communities. Celebrate their successes, and also be there through rough times. Encourage them to go to school, seek employment, and be great parents.

03

Include young fathers in your programs and conversations.

So often, efforts to support young parents focus solely on the mother of the child and neglect the needs of young fathers. Many young dads want to be involved parents in their child's life, and they also need to support with navigating school, work, finances, mental health concerns, and more. Reach out and make efforts to engage with young fathers, and include them in planning and decision-making with their families.

04

Familiarize yourself with young parents' specific needs.

It's difficult to be an effective support if you're unaware of some of the unique challenges that expectant and parenting teens are dealing with. Some of these include: needs for childcare and transportation, limited financial resources, developing financial literacy/money management skills, inconsistent methods of contact (text, phone, social media), developing strategies and techniques for self-care, limited availability for appointments/events due to multiple commitments, etc. It is important to be aware of their needs and flexible when working with young parents and their families.

05

Assume any group you work with is diverse.

In any group of young people you may find expectant and parenting youth, so it is essential to always be as welcoming and inclusive as possible. Additionally, it is important to remember that young parents may have intersecting identities (race, sexual orientation and gender identity, immigration status, religion, etc.) that also impact their needs and outcomes. It is important to recognize and respect the diversity of teen parents, and not make assumptions about their relationships, the circumstances of their pregnancy, or anything else.



More gender-inclusive language

Language that avoids judgment or assumptions

Changing your language: it makes a difference!

Instead of...

Try using...

Teen moms

✓ **Young parents, or young moms and young dads**

Getting away from "teen moms" can help change the misleading narrative that only young women are involved in teen pregnancy. Saying "young parents" or naming young fathers is more inclusive of teen dads who often may be overlooked by support programs.

You may have noticed that, throughout this toolkit, we tend to use "young parents" rather than "teen parents." This is to create some distance from the negative stereotypes that others may associate with "teen parents;" however, many do not hold these stereotypes. We also recognize that parents who are no longer teenagers but who have had children while young may benefit from additional support. Therefore, we offer "young parents" or simply "parents" as an alternative.

Boy/girlfriend or husband/wife

✓ **Partner or significant other**

Using gender neutral terms to refer to relationship partners is more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth, and avoids awkward and inaccurate assumptions that all young parents identify as heterosexual or exclusively date people of the opposite sex or gender.

It's also important to be aware of any assumptions you may be making about whether the two birth parents are in an ongoing relationship, whether the romantic partner of a young parent is or is not the father/mother of their child, etc.

Unwanted pregnancy

✓ **Unintended or unplanned pregnancy**

"Unwanted" sets a negative tone that a child is not welcomed and cared for by their parents, which is largely untrue. "Unintended" is a more neutral option, and may more accurately convey when a child's birth was mistimed versus not desired.

"Our goal is to prevent teen pregnancy."

✓ **"Our goal is to ensure future pregnancies are planned."**

Teen pregnancy is often lumped in with other negative sexual health outcomes like STIs and sexual violence, which may shame and stigmatize EPY who have gotten pregnant or had a child. It is important that we respect young people's choices, and work instead toward ensuring that any future pregnancies or births are planned.

Common myths and stigma about expectant and parenting youth - and how to respond

There are a lot of negative messages out there about teen parents, undermining their ability to parent effectively and pursue their academic and career goals. When young people receive and internalize these messages, they may become discouraged from seeking their dreams and opportunities. When people buy into these messages, they are more likely to reject and ostracize young parents from important networks of support.



Data from organizations like Young Women United has shown that these assumptions about young parents' competencies and futures are largely inaccurate. In order to flip the script about young parents, it's important to understand what myths are being perpetuated and know how to respond. Read the section below for some basic examples!

<p>MYTH Young parents are a drain on taxpayer resources.</p>	<p>MYTH Young parents can't raise children when they're still kids themselves.</p>	<p>MYTH Young parents have ruined their futures.</p>	<p>MYTH There's no hope for the children of young parents.</p>
<p>RESPONSE Due to systemic inequities, most young parents would follow the same economic trajectory whether or not they became parents.</p>	<p>RESPONSE 73% of teen mothers are over 18, making them legal adults. Many young people today take on adult responsibilities, like financial support and caretaking, whether or not they are parents themselves.</p>	<p>RESPONSE Many teen parents report feeling more motivated to finish school and seek job opportunities to provide for their family.</p>	<p>RESPONSE Data consistently shows that the age someone becomes a parent does not determine or predict their or their children's future.</p>

* Text and data pulled from Young Women United's 2016 report "Dismantling Teen Pregnancy Prevention," available at youngwomenunited.org/report-2016



Thank you for all you do to support expectant and parenting youth!

We hope this toolkit was useful, and we welcome any additional questions or feedback you may have. **Contact us at info@moash.org or visit our website, www.moash.org, for fact sheets, policy positions, and infographics related to young parent rights and programs.** For more information on working with young parents, check out the websites listed to the right.

MORE RESOURCES:



mihealthyfamily.org



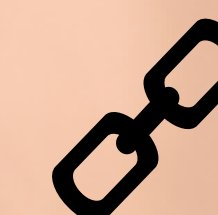
noteenshame.com



blackmamasmatter.org



youngwomenunited.org



forwardtogether.org