



## SUPPORTING YOUNG PARENTS

### What Caregivers, Child Welfare Professionals and Other Caring Adults Can Do:

- Support young people in thinking about and planning for the opportune time for them to begin to create or expand their family.
- Make sure a caring adult who shares a young person's cultural background is available to provide support and context for talking about sex and family planning.
- Check your own biases about teenage and early pregnancy. Challenge yourself to set negative attitudes aside if they will prohibit healthy development and support of the young parent and their child. Communicate understanding and support, not judgment, about the fact that the young person now has a child.
- Prioritize legal permanence for the young parent in foster care. Remind the young parent that having grandparents and other extended family will help their baby thrive.
- Ensure parents and children stay together, even when parents are in foster care.
- Educate systems that children of young parents should not be automatically adjudicated and brought into foster care. This has long-term effects on young parents and children.
- Keep the young parent's future, goals and aspirations at the forefront of your work.
- Ensure that fathers are included in the emotional upbringing of the baby, contribute financially and participate in decisions.
- Support co-parenting resources and programs. Listen to what both parents need to have a successful co-parenting relationship. Both sets of grandparents, where applicable, should be encouraged to join the discussion.
- Create a week-in-the-life-of schedule with your young parent. Help identify ways to relieve pressure and stress in juggling work, school and child care responsibilities.
- Create a concrete goal for yourself to follow each time you engage with a particular young parent. For example, "When I see Jason next, I will \_\_\_\_\_"
- Identify a network of support each young parent can rely on when they need someone to talk to, help or provide a break, including reliable and affordable child care providers.
- Promote connections with caring and consistent adults who understand adolescent development, as well as friends, siblings and other young people who are important to them. This might also include peer support groups with other young parents. Building social capital, being social, sharing experiences and receiving peer support strengthen young people's well-being.
- Make sure young parents learn about their children's development and how to care for them safely. This knowledge will help children thrive while reducing stress for parents.
- Make sure young parents get enough sleep. It is especially important for adolescents to get 9 to 10 hours of sleep to promote patience, stable moods, impulse control and higher self-esteem.
- Understand and be mindful of the power that you have to make a positive difference. You may be one of the few sources of adult guidance, wisdom and security in a young parent's life.

Young parents in foster care have added challenges that can cause a cycle of system involvement.

By age 26, **14 percent of young adults** who experienced foster care and later drop out of post-secondary school cite pregnancy, and **37 percent** cite child care responsibilities as most recent reasons for doing so.

**More than 23,000** exit foster care without legal permanence each year.

To support young parents as the primary nurturers of their children, young people need mentors who genuinely care about them that can model or coach positive ways to nurture children.



Expecting and parenting youth in foster care may need positive role models for parenting.

Along with the substantial pressures facing every young parent, they have the added stress of navigating the child welfare system.



They may fear that the adults around them will take their baby away, and may not know their rights.

Without the right support for young parents in foster care, their children may enter the system, too.



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Learn more by downloading the full paper, *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice With Adolescent Brain Development*, at [www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood](http://www.aecf.org/resources/the-road-to-adulthood).

A University of Chicago Chapin Hall study found that

**49%**

of young men in foster care reported having gotten a partner pregnant by age 21, compared to about 20 percent of 21-year-old males nationwide.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative works to ensure all young people have the information and skills to make informed decisions about whether and when to become parents, and make sure that young people who are expecting or already parenting have resources, opportunities and supports to ensure well-being for themselves and their children.

Seeking Bonding and Connection

Young people experience rapid increases in dopamine, oxytocin and sex hormones estrogen and testosterone during adolescence that fuel risk taking, bonding and social and emotional behavior. These drivers surface when the prefrontal cortex — the thinking, planning and judgment center of the brain — is still under major construction. Oxytocin is a powerful hormone that plays a key role in social behavior and bonding. Dopamine, a pleasure chemical, floods the brain when people experience opportunities for thrill, excitement and reward. Knowing this helps us understand why adolescents often crave the physical and emotional rewards of romance and sex, sometimes without fully weighing the consequences.

Young people without permanent families, healthy connections and a sense of belonging may be more likely to seek romantic relationships and perhaps misinterpret sex as a way to get the love they are seeking or the family they’ve been hoping for. Young people who have experienced foster care are more likely to become pregnant before age 21. While some pregnancies happen accidentally despite the use of protection, others are fully planned, as a young person’s attempt to form a family. These young people need support from caring adults — ideally, within the context of a permanent family — that will help them make decisions about relationships, sex, protection and when to start their own families.

Still Need Support

Young parents and their children are both going through the two most critical periods of development **at the same time**. As a young child is learning to bond and communicate, adolescent parents often lack support in their own development. Many young people are suddenly seen as adults after becoming a parent, when in fact they are still growing. On top of that, young people also describe feeling shamed, punished, stigmatized and alone when they become young parents. Because the brain is a social organ, shaped by relationships, experiencing isolation as a young person or a young parent means more than feeling lonely — it can have a profound effect on development.

From Obstacles to Opportunities

Many young parents report feeling constantly overwhelmed by the weight of being a student, a parent and an employee while figuring out who they are and how to juggle their relationships and responsibilities. Ensuring that young parents have healthy support networks and access to reliable child care will provide both balance and stability as they navigate through unforgiving systems. Understanding the developmental journey and needs of young parents also provides insight into the important roles of teachers, caseworkers and others in supporting young parents. Functioning in this new and challenging role as a parent naturally increases the stress and demand on the developing brain; however, with knowledge and support, the experience of parenting can provide opportunities for young people to build resilience, focus on decision making, provide a reason to plan ahead and continue to promote optimal brain development. Caring adults can apply this knowledge to avoid overreporting young parents to child welfare authorities, keeping more young families together.



The Chapin Hall study found that 71 percent of young women who have experienced foster care became pregnant by age 21, compared to 34 percent in the general population.

 **DISRUPTING THE CYCLE:** Transforming Conversations to Support Young Parents

When a young person says:

Everyone just wants to know what my baby needs. **It’s like I don’t even exist.**

The young person may mean:

As soon as I became a parent, **everyone assumed I became an adult** overnight.

Or:

I know that my baby’s needs are important, but **I am still growing and need support too.**

Every interaction with a young person matters. **Make yours count!**

This is just one example of what a young parent in foster care might say about their struggles and pressures — and what they might really be thinking. You can respond in a way that keeps the conversation going and wires the adolescent brain for trust, possibility and healthy interdependence with others. **Have your own conversations with a young person.**

Instead of responding this way:

They knew the consequences of having a baby at their age. **Should the baby just come into foster care?**

Caring adults can say:

I see you doing your best to balance everything. You are responsible for a whole lot. **You do not have to do it alone.** How can I help? What do you need?

Or:

I can see how much this is bothering you. I want you to be able to enjoy being a parent instead of being super stressed all the time. **Let’s talk about everything you have going on and how we can support you.**