

# CFRP POLICY BRIEF

## Understanding the Needs of Young Parents and the Best Approaches for Serving Them

Becoming a parent is a challenging transition for any new parent, but it can be especially difficult for young parents—those between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. To better understand the unique needs and challenges of this population, CFRP conducted a series of focus groups in three locations throughout Texas with young mothers, young fathers, and service providers who work with young parents. Our findings show that young fathers and young mothers struggle to balance school, work, and family life, and that they need mentors to help usher them into adulthood and parenthood. Young parents need mental and emotional support, as well as support in their relationships with their partner, parents, and peers. Young fathers specifically need assistance in developing expectations about their new role as father, especially because many lacked father figures growing up. Additionally, information sharing and service delivery to young parents can be more effective by addressing gender biases and age assumptions about this group of parents. These findings can help service providers better align their services with the needs of young parents and understand what approaches work best in serving this population.

### Introduction

Parents play an important role in the lives of their children, families, and their communities. The transition into parenthood may be a challenging time for any new parent, but it can be particularly difficult for young parents between ages 18 and 24 years old.<sup>1,2</sup> In contrast to older parents, young parents are at an important nexus in their life where they are transitioning from being a child to an adult, a student to having a career, and a single person to a parent. Parents often struggle during this transition to overcome financial instability<sup>3</sup> and to maintain strong co-parenting relationships.<sup>4</sup> They are also still developing emotionally and figuring out their goals in life.<sup>5</sup> Although there are many services already available for parents under the age of 18, services for young adult parents are scarce.<sup>6</sup> This transitional phase in a young parent's life can be an important turning point in their ability to successfully contribute to their family financially and emotionally. This period of time is also a critical window of opportunity for service providers to provide support for young parents that can help usher them into adulthood and parenthood simultaneously.

Despite the strong influence that parents have in their children's lives, there is limited research about how services and programs can best support young parents, especially young fathers.<sup>7,8</sup> To learn more

about this population, the Annie E. Casey Foundation partnered with the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) at the University of Texas at Austin to conduct focus groups with young fathers, young mothers, and services providers in Texas to develop a better understanding of 1) the unique needs of young parents and 2) the best approaches to serving them. The present brief summarizes the unique needs and challenges of parents aged 18 to 24 years old, highlights the different challenges that young mothers and young fathers face, and identifies best practices for serving this population.

## Methodology

CFRP conducted a series of focus groups in Austin, Houston, and the Dallas-Fort Worth area throughout June 2019. In each location, CFRP held three one-hour focus groups—one with young fathers, one with young mothers, and one with service providers who work with young parents. The goal of the focus groups was to better understand the unique needs of young parents and the best strategies to serve them. The focus groups were held in various locations to collect different opinions across the state. The number of participants in each focus group is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Focus Group Participants**

	Young Fathers	Young Mothers	Service Providers
<b>Houston</b>	5	11	3
<b>Austin</b>	2	7	6
<b>Dallas/Fort Worth</b>	3	13	8

Our primary objective was to talk directly with young fathers and young mothers about their experiences. The goal in interviewing young fathers and young mothers separately was to learn about barriers that may be specific to each group and to assess how serving fathers may differ from serving mothers. The focus groups were guided by an interview outline, but they were semi-structured and allowed the participants’ responses to shape the discussions. We spoke with a total of 10 young fathers and 31 young mothers in all of the focus groups. Additionally, we interviewed 17 service providers in total. Our intention was for the service providers to provide a complementary perspective that would paint a fuller picture of young parents’ experiences, and to gain insight into how providers are currently serving young parents.

To recruit participants for the focus groups, we first targeted key service providers. CFRP drew on its existing relationships with state and local agencies for participation in all three locations. We emailed service providers directly asking them to participate in our focus groups and also asked them to share a flyer with other service providers who may be interested and eligible for the focus groups. We also shared the flyer with state and local agencies who included the details in newsletters and emailed the flyer to other agencies. CFRP also assisted the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services in hosting a Regional Fatherhood Summit in all three locations. We contacted service providers who registered for the summit in each area to see if they would be willing to participate in the focus group. We also used these relationships to help recruit parents for the focus groups, asking service providers to invite young parents who receive their services. Additionally, we used Facebook ads to boost participation among young parents. At each location, we allowed partners to participate in separate

focus groups if they wished (i.e. both parents could participate separately in the mother focus group and the father group).

The young fathers who participated in the focus groups ranged in age from 19 to 23, and the young mothers ranged from 18 to 25. The average age for both young fathers and young mothers was 21 years old. The participating parents had between one and four children, with two children being the average. Three of the young fathers were single, and seven were partnered. Eleven of the young mothers were single, two did not share their relationship status, and 18 had partners; however, their current partners were not necessarily the biological fathers of their children. The vast majority of the young parents were Hispanic or African-American. The service providers who participated in the focus groups work for various organizations in Texas whose services include housing, counseling, workforce development, domestic violence and sexual assault, child abuse and neglect prevention, home visiting, early child care and education, fatherhood classes, and case management for teen parents in high school.

All nine focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded according to key themes and subtopics, informed by a review of the literature on the unique needs of young parents.

## Key Findings

Our findings highlight the unique challenges of young parents and the key areas where young mothers and young fathers face different barriers. Our aim is for these findings to help pave the way for service providers to better understand the best strategies to serve young parents. The sections below highlight the following key points in serving young parents:

1. Most young fathers need help learning what it means to be a father because they lacked father figures growing up.
2. Most young parents struggle to balance school, work, and their family roles. Young parents often assume traditional gender roles—in general, fathers are more engaged in financially providing for the family, whereas mothers are more focused on child rearing.
3. Young parents need mentorship to navigate adult situations because they are at the nexus of so many transitions at once.
4. Young parents need support in their interpersonal relationships, especially in co-parenting. Young mothers feel more pressure to grow up quickly, feel as though they cannot ask their parents for help, rely more on social networks, and feel more socially isolated. Young fathers, on the contrary, do not necessarily feel as much pressure to grow up quickly and do not feel as reluctant to ask their parents for help. They are also less engaged in building social networks and discuss stress and mental health less often.
5. Information sharing and service delivery to young parents can be more effective when considering the differences in how young mothers and young fathers access and use services. Young mothers are more proactive in finding parenting resources and programs than young fathers. Young fathers are more difficult to recruit and retain in parenting programs. Implicit biases among service providers could further contribute to the way fathers access information—mostly through their child’s mother.

## Young Parents Experience Unique Needs and Challenges

Young parents are in the midst of an important transformational phase in their lives—transitioning from teenage years to adulthood, from being a student to having a career, from living with their parents to living alone or with their family, and from caring only for themselves to caring for their children and partner. Parents at this age are still growing and learning to develop long-term goals for their lives. Their focus must shift from short-term necessities to long-term planning. It is at this time period that young parents need the most help, but too often, they lack the resources and support that are necessary for parenting.

Throughout our focus groups, young fathers, young mothers, and service providers painted a clear picture of the complex challenges young parents face. Many young parents we interviewed were finishing high school or college, while also maintaining a job or caring for their children. Young fathers tended to be the provider for the family, and young mothers often stayed at home to take care of their children. Mothers took pride in staying home with their children, but they also contributed to the overall financial wellbeing of the entire family by offsetting the cost of child care, locating resources such as housing, and identifying programs that provide free supplies to the family. Because of their age, many young parents were learning how to have a healthy relationship with their partner, in addition to learning how to co-parent. They were also dealing with the conflicting pressures of growing up quickly, yet wanting to interact with their peers. Many of them were still living with their parents or relying on their parents for financial and emotional support in raising their children. Most of the young mothers were very active in seeking parenting information and resources. Although the young fathers expressed that they appreciated parenting information, they were often more reluctant than young mothers to ask for help, or they were unsure about who to ask. The following sections describe in greater detail some of the key barriers that young parents face.

### Most Young Fathers Need Help Learning What It Means to be a Father

One of the most salient findings among young fathers specifically, as compared to young mothers, is that the majority of the young fathers we interviewed lacked fathers growing up. During the focus groups, young fathers expressed an eagerness to be there for their children—as a protector and provider, and to give their children everything they did not have growing up. Despite their motivation to be there for their families and provide for their families, many young fathers did not have engaged fathers growing up and thus struggle to learn how to be the father they want to be. Young fathers often turn to extended family members, community members, and peers to learn how to be a father. Although many fathers in their communities grew up without a father, the absence of a father role model is particularly pertinent to young fathers because this factor may further confound and exacerbate other challenges they face as young parents.

When asked what it means to be a good father, many young fathers stressed the importance of “giving your kid what you didn’t have” and being present in their children’s lives. For many fathers, being there for their kids was their ultimate goal because they did not grow up with a father: “just make sure I stay in their life. My dad was never there for me.” The majority of young fathers said that they wanted to be “anything but” their own fathers. One of the service providers said the fathers he serves “want to be totally different from what they experienced growing up. They’re differentiating themselves from their father of origin. I’ve seen that they’ve kind of latched on to our guidance. It’s that past trauma that they’re trying to overcome.” One of the young fathers who participates in a fatherhood program

stressed the importance of needing a male role model to help him learn parenting skills: “I wouldn’t listen to a female if you ain’t my mother. I need a father figure.” Several other young fathers said that they valued the guidance they received through fatherhood programs because of the fact that other fathers were willing to speak about their own problems and how they had overcome them.

Some of the service providers said that young fathers find role models on social media or TV. One service provider said: “Social media parenting is what I’ve seen. It’s a lot that they get from social media or just internet.” Another service provider said that “these young guys, we look at what they’re watching, the YouTube videos. A lot of times it’s rap music, the rap videos who they say sell dope. School? What? I’m going to do this, because it looks so glamorous.” Another service provider agreed, saying that “cable TV is one long reality show of bad behavior in most cases.” Another service provider described how the portrayal of young fathers on TV leads to unrealistic expectations, “Everybody can play a cool, single, 17-year-old dad on TV and make it look cool. But in real life, a 17-year-old dad is not cool.” Another said that young fathers often watch reality TV and that they’re “intrigued by pregnant mothers on MTV.”

Because many young fathers grew up without father figures, they said “you learn as you go” or through “trial and error.” Many young fathers said they also learned how to be a father from extended family members or their peers with children. According to one father, “(You) can’t learn how to ride a bike by yourself.” One young father described how his uncle taught him “what a man should actually do, what actually should become of a man.” Another father said he learns from his peers: “I’d rather talk to my friends that have kids like me. They seem more understanding. They’ll help me out on how to better myself on things I’m not good at.” Another father said that he learned from his partner: “She helped me and molded me into a father.” According to one of the service providers, “A lot of guys don’t have a father, so they end up learning from their uncles, friendly fathers in the community.” She said that many of them will say that they learned from “such and such down the street. Them saying they didn’t have their fathers, that was one thing that hurt them the most.”

### **Young Parents Struggle to Balance School, Work, and Family Roles**

Young parents often face the unique challenge of simultaneously finishing high school or college, establishing a career, co-parenting, and raising children. Most of the young fathers we interviewed described themselves as the family’s provider, and many of their partners were stay-at-home mothers, despite the financial and social barriers this family dynamic often creates. Young fathers often described their job as their main priority, whereas the young mothers were focused more on child rearing. Young mothers offset child care costs by staying home with their children, but they also contribute to the family in other ways by accessing resources, such as Medicaid, WIC, or other programs. Because of so many competing demands, young fathers often have to maintain stressful schedules, and young mothers spend most of their time at home with their kids, which often creates social isolation. In our focus groups, working mothers were in the minority. Mothers were more likely to work if they were single or if their parents were heavily involved in helping raise their children. Both young fathers and young mothers who work expressed that they often feel trapped at a point in their career where they are required to have enough skills to obtain a job capable of supporting a family, despite the fact that they are young and may not have completed their education or have much work experience yet.

Research shows that when fathers are unable to achieve financial stability, they are more likely to disengage from their families.<sup>9</sup> A service provider succinctly described this situation: “A man who can’t take care of his child (financially), he feels bad.” To earn an income, many of the fathers we interviewed were required to follow stressful routines, which did not allow a lot of time to sleep, much less engage with their families. Thus, it is often difficult for fathers to achieve financial stability and also spend time with their families. One father said he spent two years with his son, but “I didn’t feel like a dad. I just felt like a working man. It was hard.” According to another father, his biggest challenge was “trying to figure out balancing the working and family time, managing the hours of being with your family, and trying to have the right amount of sleep to go to work. And doing the same thing every day.” No matter how unhealthy or unrealistic their schedules were, fathers were determined to get it all done: “Once you get your schedule down, you gotta knock it all out.”

Young mothers also described family difficulties with meeting life’s competing demands. One young mother said, “Our car broke down, and not having a car, you can’t get to work. You can’t get to places you need to be with your kids. It’s just like, ‘This is so hard.’ We have so much responsibility.” Another mother said that “It’s harder for (the fathers),” because “you’re expected” to know how “to hold the house down.” Another mother recounted a similar story: “Our car got totaled. It was a hit and run. He (her partner) had to go to the hospital, and because his job was forty minutes away, and there was no bus to get to his job, he didn’t have no way to get to work, so he got fired. He was hurt, so he was out of work, and I was pregnant.”

Although most young fathers identified themselves as the family’s provider, and mothers prided themselves on staying home with their children, mothers also discussed ways that they play an important role in contributing to the family’s resources. In many cases, if mothers were staying home, they were saving the family child care costs. Additionally, the young mothers we interviewed were actively seeking services and programs. Many mothers worked to enroll their families in programs that provide free children’s supplies and identify housing options for the family. Often, if parents were not married, but were partnered, the fact that the mother had no income meant that the family was able to access resources such as Medicaid, SNAP, or WIC, which the family would not qualify for if the father’s income were taken into account. Despite these contributions, young fathers often did not recognize the role that mothers play in supplementing the family’s resources.

The theme of fathers being the “provider” and having a sense of pride regarding their “stay-at-home” partner was especially salient throughout the focus groups. One young father said, “I learned that from my dad—You’re supposed to take care of your woman. It’s what you’re supposed to do.” Another young father said that when he found out his partner was pregnant, “I felt like I had to step up and start working and do my part. It made me want to do more hours at work, more overtime.” More research is needed to determine how pervasive these family roles are among young parents; it is possible that our sample of young parents is not representative of the broader population. Still, many fathers found it difficult to balance being present with being the provider. One father said that if he can’t be with his children because of work, he always lets them know that he would prefer spending time with them. He said, “Well, it makes me feel kind of sad sometimes because that’s my little princess, my first daughter. I grew up without my parents, so it’s kind of different for me. I don’t want them to live the same life like how I grew up. I want them to be different, be better.” Another father said, “You have to actually be there whenever they need you the most. As soon as (they’re) born, you have to be there every day. You

don't want to miss those moments when he starts to crawl or tries to walk. Jobs do get in the way, but it's the only thing you can do to provide for your own family."

Service providers believe that young fathers view themselves as the provider for the family because of "history—the dynamics they've experienced in the past," and because "teen dads are more susceptible to getting that gender stereotype" that they should be the provider for the family. According to another service provider, older dads do not always expect to be a provider: "It's not just like a mother and a father, it's two equals. But it also depends on culture, because for Hispanics, no matter what, the male will always have to provide." One service provider said, "I'm actually surprised by how many of my clients that are younger have that dynamic. They don't realize that they're taking similar steps that will eventually lead to that kind of family dynamic."

According to our focus groups, the mothers who did try to find work experienced their own struggles. One mother said she could not get a job when she was pregnant because she was 15 at the time and not legally allowed to work. Another young mother said that finding a job while pregnant was also difficult. A single mother who was employed said that her biggest challenge was "keeping a job. Doing it by yourself. When she (her daughter) has a doctor's appointment, I have to do that." She said that it is critical to find an employer that will "accommodate you." Another mother agreed, saying that she used to bring her young son to work with her if she did not have a babysitter on some days. Another young mother said that her biggest challenge was that her job "isn't going to be able to pay for child care, so I can't go back there." Another mother said that it was difficult to find a job at her age because "when you go looking for work, they want you to have experience. But then they don't give you the chances to actually get the experience. Where are you supposed to get the experience and actually start working at a job that allows you to actually pay for your children?" Young parents face the dilemma of needing an income that can support a family but not having the skills or experience to get a job that can sustain a family. Furthermore, mothers who are able to work full-time face similar struggles to fathers who feel as though they barely have enough time to engage with their children. One young mother said, "My mom has stayed home since I was young. She (her mother) does the majority of the work with (my daughter). I feel bad because I feel like I have to make this choice in order to give her (her daughter) what she deserves and what she needs, but then I'm not there."

Despite many of the challenges that young parents cited, a few young fathers, interestingly, described their age as beneficial for child rearing and said that they expected to be busier as they aged. One father said, "One of the advantages we have is being young. I was happy, because my daughter actually gets to see everything that we go through." Another father said he was happy to be a young parent because "just being a parent itself, sometimes it's just frustrating. It's better if you get it over with now that you're younger than when you're older, because when you're older, you're actually busier—more work. They (older parents) really don't spend time with their families or nothing. All they focus on is work." One service provider said that he tells fathers: "Time keeps running, and it's up to you what you do with it. Work, get a job, take care of your family. For a lot of these men, that's being a good dad. It doesn't matter if your 'presence' makes you absent because you're never really there. You never got to know your kids."

### Young Parents Need Mentorship to Navigate Adult Situations

During the focus groups, service providers highlighted the fact that most young parents do not know what to expect in parenthood or in young adulthood. Many young parents also do not have a clear sense of what their long-term goals may be, and if they did have long-term goals, they are unsure about how to take the first steps toward achieving them. Additionally, some young parents are also dealing with complex life issues, such as involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS) or citizenship issues. Young fathers, in particular, sometimes have a history of felonies or incarceration. It is important for service providers to treat each case uniquely and find the best methods to support young fathers based on their situation.

Throughout the focus groups, service providers highlighted the differences they experience when serving young and older parents. One service provider said that her younger clients do not have a lot of specific goals, “versus older folks” that are “more directive on the needs they want” to be met. She said, “The younger ones, it’s more preventive, versus when they’re older” and they have “specific needs.” According to another service provider, older parents feel more pressure to “know what I’m doing,” even though “it’s a new thing to have a baby, for anybody.” Another service provider said that “30-year-olds think they have it all in the box.” Young parents, on the contrary, are “more open to new things” and “willing to learn new things.” One service provider said: “They’re not afraid to make a mistake.” According to one service provider, “a teen dad really (doesn’t) know what to expect. They’re actually a baby as well, and you have to get on their level.” According to another service provider, her 19-year-old client was “excited” before the baby. Later, he told her: “This is not what I expected.” Another service provider said that young parents’ lack of knowledge often leaves them “emotionally discouraged.”

Service providers said that when young parents are able to articulate their longer-term goals, they are often unsure about how to achieve those goals or who to ask for help. Many said that their clients have a desire to go to school, but in their present life, they work fast food jobs, or jobs with a similar skill level, and find it “hard to get over that hump.” Another service provider said that many of her clients do not complete their GED or high school diploma because in their life “it was more important to work than it was to come to school.” According to service providers, there is also an emotional barrier when applying for school: They have “fears around going to school.” She said her clients say, “I want to do this, but not right now.”

Other young parents may be struggling to move forward because of other problems, such as involvement with CPS or citizenship issues that prevent them from getting certain jobs or opening a bank account. Some young parents may not have a driver’s license or a vehicle. One service provider said that one of her clients had gotten a felony and struggled to gain employment afterward. Every time a potential employer would conduct a background check, the employer would not offer him the job. She said, “That makes him mad and go out and do stuff, but I would say, ‘You have three little ones waiting on you.’” Another service provider said that most of his clients, who are all young fathers, have been referred by CPS: “They’ve been asked to do some form of parenting. They are dealing with their own past trauma, identifying for the first time how violence has impacted them from when they were younger. They are now operating in that same way that their family was operating.” These parents “don’t have the education that they need. Most of them are working, so it’s hard for them to get the education that they desire to have. But they’re stuck in the pattern of having to work. But they’re really

hungry and receptive to what we have to offer. So information that we're sharing with them, I feel like they really are receiving it well, but they just have a lot of challenges."

According to service providers, young parents need people who can help them navigate these situations. One service provider said that young parents are "hungry for somebody to lead them, to mentor them, to guide them in life." Another said that young parents need "a mentor or somebody that'll explain to them the realities of what they're saying. A lot of times they're the first of the people that they might know to want to do stuff like that—to have a secure job. It's very new for them, for their families, and for their culture. They know that it's good and successful, but they have had no examples of how (to do it)." Another service provider explained that young parents often have no "support system in place to help them walk that path, or the support system that they do have isn't interested in that at all. (These parents are) opting out of survival mode and not really having too many people that are speaking to them about how things can be different and how you can actually really access that." Another service provider said he often asks his clients, "Have you even talked to your supervisors to let them know about your situation that you've got going on with CPS and you're trying to improve your family?", but "some may not even think to ask." Another added: "I think it's the fear of opening up because they're so young. They don't know how to address it. There's this fear 'I'll be fired. I can't because I have to provide when the baby gets here.'" He said that he practices "role playing" of how young parents are "going to present it to their boss."

Service providers also said that providing resource education to young parents and giving them baby supplies also help parents feel more equipped to face life as a parent. One service provider said that his goal is to help parents gain "familiarity with resources. Resource education on how to navigate the system" and be able to understand it. He mentioned the specific example of how service providers should explain referrals to families, not just hand them a piece of paper. Another service provider said, "I think helping them set up with supplies like diapers, formula, clothes, those things. So when they do have their child, they feel equipped to take care of the child."

## Young Parents Need Support in Their Interpersonal Relationships

### Co-parenting Relationship

Research shows that positive co-parenting relationships enhance parent-child relationships and improve a child's well-being.<sup>10,11</sup> However, maintaining a positive co-parenting relationship may be difficult for many young parents with the competing demands they are trying to balance. Parents who have children when they are young are less likely to have a strong relationship with their partner before their baby is born.<sup>12,13</sup> They often face the situation of having to build a relationship with their partner while simultaneously learning how to parent. Furthermore, if the co-parenting relationship is fractured at an early stage of parenthood, it is much less likely that fathers, in particular, will continue to be involved with their children.<sup>14</sup>

Several young mothers discussed how their partners' work schedules affected their relationship and their ability to parent together. One mother said that something "that's important is spending time with your spouse. I take them (video game) controllers and hide them. All I be wanting sometimes is just to talk about our day, just let him know that I still genuinely care." Many young mothers stressed how tired their spouses felt after working so much: "My fiancé works so much, he just be like so tired, he just fall asleep. I'm just like, 'I've been doing this all day long by myself.'" Another mother echoed the same

sentiment: “He’s tired and then you’re frustrated. I think that’s how a lot of young couples, they don’t really last long.”

Importantly, young mothers described how caring for their children full-time also affects their mental health, which can further strain parents’ romantic and co-parenting relationship.<sup>15</sup> Not only do mothers feel socially isolated because they are at home with their children all day, but they feel like their partners do not always understand their mental or emotional needs. One mother said, “Scientifically, men don’t think like us. They don’t realize how we feel. For us, we feel everything that’s going on. They just don’t realize how stressed out we are or how much we have to deal with. They think, ‘Oh, she’s just home. It’s like nothing.’” Another young mother agreed, saying that her partner treated her “like you don’t do nothing all day.” One mother also said that her partner did not understand why she felt emotional postpartum: “They will never be able to understand the hormones” after having a baby.

The young mothers who did not have partners also discussed their difficulty with co-parenting, particularly because their former partners were not engaged in their children’s lives. One mother spoke about her ex-husband: “He wanted to work 24/7. It was to a point where the few times that he would hold her (their daughter) at six/seven months, she would scream because she didn’t know who he was. I was telling him, ‘You need to give me a break because I’m sitting around to do everything you want. You left me in a position where I didn’t have a job, because you told me, don’t work because I want you home to take care of her (their daughter).’ The few times he was home I’d be like, ‘Hey, let’s go do something. Let’s go to the park. Let’s go to the pool.’ He’d say, ‘No, I need to sleep because I have to go back to work in 10 hours.’ Then whenever he wasn’t sleeping, he was on video games. I was so scared of being a single mom, and I was like, honestly I was a single mom before this. I was just a single mom with an emotionally and abusive husband.” Another mother said that “This generation of fathers (aren’t) there for their kids when the mother is no longer with them. You gotta give them something (sex) to get something (father spending time with his kids). If you have a girlfriend, don’t try to come and talk to me. See your kid. You don’t have to just buy them something. At least spend time with them.” Despite being single mothers, many of them expressed the importance of co-parenting with their ex-partners. One mother said, “Regardless of my opinion” about her father, “I think you should be a superhero.”

### Peer Relations and the Pressure to Grow Up

For many young parents, there is an implied pressure to grow up right away, despite the fact that they still want to interact with their peers and also must balance school, work, and family life. One of the young fathers said, “It’s harder to grow up because you know you always want to be a kid. I’m 23. I still feel like I’m 16.” Young mothers also discussed how their partners desired to interact with their peers, despite the increased responsibility of parenthood. One mother said that her partner is “not ready to stop going out with his friends and having fun. He’s responsible though. He goes to work every day.” Although both fathers and mothers are expected to mature quickly once becoming parents, in many cases young mothers expressed that they felt as though they had grown up, but that their partners had not necessarily done so.

According to one young mother, her partner “went out with his friends, and then I got mad because I’m like, ‘You don’t want me to do nothing,’ but he still expects to be young, like go out partying and all of that.” Another mother said that she feels “more mature” than her partner, even though she is younger than he is. One young mother suggested an explanation for why young fathers still want to go out: “It

just takes them (fathers) longer to kick in that they have a baby.” One of the fathers echoed this sentiment by saying, “After a couple months, I didn’t really know how to be a father either. I would still hit up my friends and see what they wanted to do. Get in a lot of trouble, legal stuff. Doing crazy stuff. Go out and not even usually be home. My girlfriend, she’d just be getting mad at me, that I can’t be doing that anymore cause now we have a kid and that he’s gonna need me and that I need to step up and quit acting like I’m younger than what I am, you know, I need to man up.” The same young father also said that having a child “made me grow up so fast. I would do illegal stuff. If I didn’t have my son, I don’t think I would be alive right now cause of what I used to do.”

Service providers discussed that young fathers may not always be held accountable in the same ways as young mothers: “When a teenage girl gets pregnant, who gets expelled from school? The girl. And the boy stays in high school and plays his football or his basketball. What we are saying, in effect, is ‘It’s okay, buddy, just carry on.’ Then we expect when he turns 19 to suddenly to want to be a dad? He did not face the consequences of his actions.” The same service provider also said that “we are moving in the right direction in that we are making the men accountable, and we are coming from the perspective, ‘We know you want to do the right thing, so let’s help you do the right thing.’ We are beginning to assume that they want to do the right thing.”

Other service providers also described the unique situation young parents are facing: They are “feeling like they have lost that time of being free. I have one client who’s waiting for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, but arranging babysitters for that night, and, ‘Yeah, I want to have time to be young,’ but then having a child” makes it difficult. She explained that for most of her clients, who are “folks that are transitioning from high school into the next phase of their lives,” there is a newfound sense of freedom, but also of greater responsibility. For many of them, there is “pressure from parents like, ‘Now you’re 18,’ and some supports might go away or lessen because of that age.” There is “more independence, but also more responsibility as well.” Many of the parents she serves are “waiting to turn 18 to then be able to make decisions on their own outside of their parents. (They) can sign up for certain school programs that they couldn’t on their own. If they’re going to a medical clinic and they’re 18, they can consent for everything.” Another service provider said: “We treat them as though, ‘Once you’re 18, you’re an adult,’” but “there isn’t the support system from the get-go.”

One service provider described his approach to working with young parents who are trying to strike the right balance: “I think that they have to mature quickly, and they know it. So they’re kind of like adolescents, but they’re speeding up to becoming mature. I meet them where they’re at—GED, high school, registering for college—and then researching it for them or encouraging them to look it up on their own. Parenting, it’s different when you’re older. (Young parents are) thinking, ‘Well, I have to finish school, *and* I have a baby. I still hang out with friends, but I have a baby.’ A common theme was the fact that young parents crave interaction with other young parents, but resources for their age group are scarce. According to one service provider, “There’s no teen parent group. No formalized groups. It’s just their peers.” One of the young mothers said that she has trouble finding young friends because “a lot of girls my age, they’re partying.”

Interestingly, after the focus groups in all three locations, most of the mothers exchanged phone numbers with one another, but the fathers did not. Fathers shared information about resources during the focus groups, but they did not actively seek to make social connections like young mothers did. One

of the service providers described how this is a challenge for one of the young fathers (age 18) he serves: There is a “lack of resources for that age group. I have a client, and he’ll go to this group, and he’s like, ‘I’m the youngest person there. I can’t relate to them.’ He feels excluded.” Another service provider said that young parents desire to engage with their kids and do more activities in the community, but there are not resources for them, or they do not know how to do it. She said that for many young parents, there are “too many barriers to be able to do that.” To engage young fathers, one service provider suggested having “simple things like fathers and fishing. We did hamburger cook-offs with their kids. Then that gave us a chance for them to see the need for them to be the hero. When you’re working, and in you’re in this vicious cycle, there’s a lot of simple things you just don’t get to do.”

### *The Role of Grandparents*

The role of grandparents is especially important for young parents. Many young parents still depend heavily on their parents while they transition into adulthood and parenthood. Often, young parents still live with their parents and rely on their parents for financial support, child care or transportation, or parenting advice when raising their children. This unique dynamic means that grandparents have a potentially powerful effect on their children’s parenting techniques and on the co-parenting relationships that older parents may not experience. However, when grandparents are not involved, it presents an additional emotional and financial obstacle for young parents. The role of grandparents in the lives of the young parents in our focus groups varied greatly. In some cases, young mothers said that they did not feel as though they could ask their parents for help. Young fathers, however, reported seeking parenting support from their parents. According to families in our focus groups, the role of the matriarchal grandmother in Hispanic culture is particularly strong.

An interesting finding from the focus groups is the role of grandparents in Hispanic culture. Some young parents said that their parents help them a lot—sometimes too much—while others said that “pride” in Hispanic culture made them unlikely to ask their parents for support, or made their parents treat them with a tough love approach to having children young. One young mother said that her mom “takes care of him (her son) when I have to go to school. I think in my case, it boils down to I didn’t get pregnant under her (her mother’s) roof. If not, she would’ve still been mad at me. She would’ve been like, ‘Oh, you do it on your own. You decided to have sex under my roof. Take care of the kid.’” Another Hispanic father described living with parents while going to school, and how his mother taught him to take care of his newborn baby. Several young mothers described how their parents put pressure on them to incorporate the grandparents’ “advice.” However, several of them felt conflicted about doing so because they felt as though “their advice is sort of outdated.” According to another mother, “If we allow them to intervene, they will. You have to put boundaries; otherwise, they will take care of your child their own way.” Another mother added: “They (grandparents) don’t let you parent. They always want to do things their way.”

In contrast to these examples, other mothers said that they did not want to ask their parents for help. One Hispanic mother said that her parents think, “‘You’re young. You made the choice.’ Because of that, they’re not going to help you that much.” According to another mother, “Culture affects that you don’t want to ask (for help). Hispanics are very proud. Even though your parents offer (to help), if you’re going to have a child young, then whatever needs to get done, you need to do it, because if you were old enough to have sex, then you’re old enough to take care of a child. They don’t expect anything less.”

Another young Hispanic mother said, “My parents, they have their own problems. They have their own struggles, and I help them pay (bills). How do I tell them that I'm going through this, when I know my mom's going through other things? And my dad's trying to figure out how he's going to pay the bills. It's very hard. They know (I'm pregnant), but it's just like we don't ever speak about it. To me, it's on me.” Another young Hispanic mother said, “My mom supports me with everything that she can, but at the same time, she has two other kids. She works a lot. She would love to (help me), but she is too busy with her kids and her job.”

A young African-American mother in our focus group told us that her mother is the “daddy” to her child, implying that she and her mother are the primary caregivers for her daughter. She explained how her mother helps to support her daughter: “My mom, she's the daddy. She's the one that I call if I don't have nothing or if we don't have no food, and we go eat over there. She takes (my daughter) to school for me every day.” Many other young parents agreed that their mother, father, siblings, and best friends were there to help them with their kids. Although some young parents rely on their parents for support, it is clear that grandparents can complicate the way young parents raise their children and interact with their partners.

Throughout the focus groups, many young mothers discussed that they felt like they could not ask their parents for help, but this theme was not prevalent among young fathers. One service provider described the situation: Moms “are running their sons' lives, so the sons never have to make a decision on what they need to do in life. Parents are quick to separate their daughters from the home to make them responsible, whereas they're more likely to solve things for their sons.”

Several other young parents said that they were estranged from their families for various reasons and that they could not count on their parents to support them at all. One young mother described what often happens when she applies for services: “The first thing they ask is, ‘Can you go live with your parents? Can your parents help you?’ Because I'm young. I'm like, ‘No. I can't. Why would I be here?’ My parents disowned me. It's really hard because I don't have my parents' support. When I got pregnant, they were like, ‘You need to have an abortion. You can't have a kid.’” One young mother said that people tell her, “‘Just go to family.’ But that's not an option for everybody. We have nobody to help us.” Another young mother said she does not have her mother because she's “put away.” A young father said “there's certain ones (family members) I've talked to, and there's certain ones I've let go of a long time ago.”

### Showing and Handling Emotions

Young mothers and young fathers had different discussions regarding emotional and mental health. Young mothers, especially those who did not work, were very open about feeling socially isolated. Mothers said that they took full advantage of the internet and all other resources available to socially connect. In contrast, fathers spent relatively little time discussing their mental or emotional needs. According to service providers, young fathers are more affected by gender norms that perpetuate the idea that men should not discuss or show emotions. However, many service providers who deliver programs or classes to fathers said that the fathers greatly benefit from their guidance on showing and handling emotions.

The lack of mental health support and the stigma surrounding the need for help was a particularly salient theme among young mothers, especially those who stayed at home full-time to take care of their

children. As one mother said, mental health is “not talked about enough. You’re expected to be happy after having a baby.” Another mother added, “You don’t want to admit that you need help.” Another said, “You feel when you say it out loud, they’ll be like, ‘You can’t do it? What’s wrong with you? Why are you being a bad mom?’” One mother said she often wanted to say: “I’m having a really bad day. I’m alone. My husband’s not here.” Another reiterated that, “if I ask for help, they’ll be like I’m an unfit parent. They’re going to take my kids.” According to one mother, if people find out that a mother is struggling with postpartum depression, “everyone’s like ‘Oh my God, you’re going to harm the baby.’ If anything, me telling you about it is me reaching out.”

Although young mothers were willing to speak openly about their emotional and mental health, young fathers barely acknowledged the issue, despite the stressors they experience. Service providers said that the young fathers they serve are often taught not to express their emotions or that they feel uncomfortable doing so because of gender norms. One service provider said that she wished fathers could “open up more. They have this wall because that’s how they were told. Open up to your child, your significant other—even if y’all (are) not together. When they don’t talk, they’re shutting everything down. Again, that’s going back to how they were raised. They have these barriers. One of our most powerful sessions (is) ‘Showing and Handling Emotions.’” Because of cultural norms that discourage men from communicating or being a primary caregiver, one mother said that when fathers try to parent and make a mistake, “They beat themselves up more if they do something wrong because they try so hard.” A few of the young fathers in our focus groups described how they struggled to with their emotions in the past. One said, “I didn’t know how to express myself. The way I expressed myself was by punching things, by being aggressive. I’ve learned to talk things out.”

According to service providers, young fathers, “want to know that somebody really cares about them, really loves them.” Another service provider said that “more African-American men have to step up to the plate, and say, ‘Hey, I understand. Go ahead, cry.’ A lot of them are hurting. They’re so afraid. A lot of them who may have issues with education, they’re embarrassed. So the way that they divert that is sometimes through violence.” Another service provider said that he works with fathers to “help them learn how to empathize, how to have empathy. Even though we talk about emotions, they can’t feel anything. Their ‘emotions’ are actually just thoughts. They’re very numb. We train them on how to start feeling emotions. We start with feeling empathy for yourself, and then that makes it easy to feel empathy for others. Once they start feeling and understanding the connections between themselves and others, then they start thinking, ‘I want to do this. I want to change this.’” One of the young fathers reiterated this point: “We talk about things like anger, emotions. It’s crazy, you don’t even know what emotions are.”

### **Young Parents are Resourceful in Finding Information, but Gaps Persist**

#### *Accessing Resources*

According to service providers, a unique attribute of young parents is that “they’re not inhibited or afraid of technology.” Young parents, in particular young mothers, were resourceful in finding new information, many relying heavily on technology and social media to find parenting advice, programs, and services. Although young mothers were proactive in researching resources, fathers were less likely to do so. The young fathers were receptive to the information they obtained—often through their partners—but they did not take as much initiative to find the information themselves, often citing time

constraints as a barrier. Mothers appeared to search for resources not just to learn more information, but also to build social connections.

During the focus groups, one young mother said that she practiced “self-taught” parenting skills that she learned through books and Facebook. Some of the young mothers mentioned being a part of a Facebook community that encouraged mothers to share information, clothing, and other children’s items among one another. Both mothers and fathers conducted online research, through sites such as kellymom.com and babycenter.com, as well as through phone apps, friends, and family about available programs and resources. Often, young mothers enrolled fathers to receive parenting text messages or emails from parenting websites. Young mothers often served as a funnel through which young fathers access information.

Young fathers and mothers alike were open to learning new skills taught in parenting classes. As one father described, “I know I’m a good father to my kids, but it’s always good to learn something new.” The vast majority of parents who participated in the focus groups were accessing programs that assist parents, such as WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, home visiting programs such as the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), Healthy Start, various parent-education programs, CPR classes, programs that provide help for domestic violence and drug abuse, and assistance programs for housing, child care, and finding jobs. It is important to note that we recruited several young parents from parenting classes for the focus groups, so it is likely that their participation in parenting programs is higher than the general population.

However, both fathers and mothers cited barriers that prevented them from accessing more resources. One father complained that the burden is on the parent to search for help online. Young mothers also said that they were not aware of any existing resources before they had become pregnant. Mothers said that they wished the information were advertised more and readily accessible in places like the pediatrician’s office or pregnancy clinics. One mother even jokingly said she wished it was “on the box of the pregnancy test.” Other young mothers said they would enjoy parenting education classes at easily accessible locations such as libraries and civic centers. Many young parents also cited the need for child care and transportation to access services. Mothers specifically described their challenges with accessing breastfeeding support and information. Furthermore, although the internet can be helpful in finding resources, young parents, mothers in particular, still struggled with feeling socially isolated. They discussed the difficulty in finding mental health support and the stigma in discussing it with others.

### *Biases Regarding Young Parents and Young Fathers*

According to young parents and service providers, it is common for doctors and other professionals to address mothers instead of fathers during appointments, although fathers in our focus groups did not find it concerning that programs tend to focus more on mothers. The fact that young fathers are not addressed by professionals is consistent with previous research on fathers in general.<sup>16,17</sup> Young parents also discussed that home visitors and other program staff do not always include fathers in their sessions because they assume the father is at work, or they do not take the father’s work or school schedule into account when booking the appointment. By not engaging fathers during sessions and appointments, providers may perpetuate the fact that fathers are not as involved in important aspects of parenting. Young parents also noted that service providers often assume that because they are young, they do not have a partner. In general, mothers expressed that they felt judged for being a young parent, but fathers did not feel the same sense of judgment.

Young mothers discussed that fathers often were not included in parenting classes or sessions because “they’re expected to work all the time.” According to another young mother, “It’s harder for a dad. They (providers) don’t expect them to be as involved. They just (providers) leave it all to the girl.” She also said that some young fathers rely solely on the mother to find services, or it’s a matter of pride for the fathers. Another mother said that the WIC clinic gave her partner books, but he said “I don’t have time. I’m at work every day.’ I wish he would look into more of those things to get help himself, because I know it’s not easy. He would be more at ease on how to take care of him (his son).”

One of the service providers acknowledged this flaw within her own organization: “Doctors are talking to the moms when they’re in the NICU. We’ve had such a focus on moms that we’ve not asked moms to have dad present. ‘In what capacity would he like to be present?’” Other service providers said that “fathers do not get the respect from society that they deserve, so they feel like they don’t exist.” According to another service provider, “nobody celebrates fathers. They are just not seen as a viable equation in the relationship.” Another service provider said that service providers often assume that a father may not be involved in a child’s life because he’s “irresponsible.”

As previously discussed, young fathers are particularly susceptible to upholding traditional roles. This was evident throughout our conversations with fathers, where they acknowledged that doctors and other professionals often do not address them during their children’s appointments, but they were not bothered by this scenario. One father said, “That’s understandable because the mom is the one that spends most of the time with them, so she knows them better than I do.” Another father said that his partner gets all the information, and he receives it from her secondhand. Another young father explained that: “I wasn’t the one carrying the baby for nine months. It’s natural. It’s her time to shine.” Another father said: “Both my children are breastfed. They rely on her for life. I would understand if the pediatrician goes to her.”

Young mothers, in particular, discussed that they often feel that they are judged by the public for being young parents. One mother said that young mothers are “judged for being a young mom if they don’t see the dad around.” Another young mother agreed and remarked that she went to the pediatrician, and the first thing the doctor asked was “Is the dad around?” According to one young mother, her partner went to all her prenatal doctor appointments with her. She said: The doctor “was like, ‘Oh, he’s with you?’ Then he came again, and she’s like, ‘You’re back?’” Another mother said that she feels that people treat her as though she is naïve because of her age: “Don’t assume because I look young that I’m gullible, because I’ve been through a lot. I’m open to suggestions, but don’t treat me like I’m a kid.” Another young mother said that, “They think because we’re young, they can get over on us.”

Although many of the mothers expressed that they felt judged for being a young parent, the fathers we interviewed did not feel the same judgment. In fact, many of them were often praised for being a young father. One father said that everyone is respectful to him as a young father, “Everybody was happy, strangers just walking down the street. I got positive feedback.” Another father said that when his coworkers found out he was a young father that they said, “How old are you? I’m like, ‘I’m 18.’ They’re like, ‘Dang, dude, you’re young, bro.’ Then they say, ‘I’m proud. Congratulations!’”

### *Recruiting and Retaining Young Parents, Particularly Young Fathers*

Young fathers were less likely than young mothers to seek services, but when they did, they emphasized that it must come from a trusted and authentic source. Some fathers enrolled in programs because they were court ordered to do. Both young mothers and young fathers alike said they often join parenting programs because of incentives, such as free baby supplies, help earning a GED, job opportunities, credit restoration, or free child care.

Although many young parents join programs for the incentives, according to parents and service providers, young parents stay in the programs because of the emotional and parenting support they receive from the programs. One young mother said that for her family, incentives were “the catch,” but “they provide the education. They guide you. My nurse told me what to expect two weeks ahead or a month ahead, so I could be prepared.” This was especially true among young fathers, who were more difficult to recruit and retain than young mothers. One service provider explained that her program retains fathers by providing a gas gift card after each session if fathers complete certain program elements. Another service provider said the following about young fathers: “They’ll come for the incentives, but then as the sessions go on, I think we become more of an emotional support.” Another service provider described why fathers attend their programs: “What father is gonna open up and say, ‘Oh, I need this and I need this’? But usually once we go through our topics, they end up showing what they really feel. And all they want you to let them know is that you’re there for them, and you’re not trying to make fun of them.”

The importance of authenticity was reiterated by young fathers. One said, “I don’t need none of that snakey business, come acting two-faced. You be a straight-forward, honest person, then I’m there.” Another father said that the way the program specialist approached him convinced him to join a program he currently attends: “It was helping me to become a better father I already am. He didn’t go about it saying, ‘Oh, you’re not a good father.’” He focused on “helping you build upon yourself and not tear you down.” According to another father, his mentor is “a really smart, straight-forward guy. He’ll really tell you how it is.” Service providers acknowledged that young fathers are feeling “complete distrust,” but that they are “smart” and “just need to be shown and have the truth, the real truth. And uncut, because a lot of times, they’re getting things uncut. They can handle it. They don’t deal well with sugarcoating.” Another service provider added why this trusting relationship is so important: “It doesn’t matter how evidence-based it is, and how much research is behind it. Everything that is effective out there is based on relationships. It’s just about the relationship.”

Service providers said that it is difficult to recruit and retain fathers in their programs. According to one provider: “We are ready to make a connection, but the other side (young fathers) has to be willing also. What we believe is that the majority of that age group is willing. But here’s the problem, we just don’t know where to find them because they’re so elusive. If we knew how to find them, we would help them. They want the help. We’ve seen it. That’s the biggest problem—how to find them.” Young fathers described ways to better recruit and retain them in parenting programs. One father succinctly commented, “Work on my schedule.” Others suggested recruiting fathers at the places that they visit with their children—the movies, gyms, or the YMCA. Still, many admitted that they attended programs because their partner signed them up: “It don’t hurt to be a good parent. It was for both of us, because we’re a team.”

## Service Providers Can Use Creative Strategies to Serve Young Parents

Based on the findings from our nine focus groups, we recommend the following strategies to better serve young parents:

### 1. Assist Young Fathers in Learning What It Means to be a Father

Many young fathers grow up in homes without father figures. The absence of a father role model is particularly important for fathers because this factor further exacerbates other challenges they face as young parents. Service providers can help fill the gap by assisting them in learning how to be fathers and by connecting them with peers and mentors who can model what healthy fatherhood looks like. Additionally, service providers can help young fathers develop realistic and achievable expectations of being a father.

### 2. Support Young Parents in Balancing School, Work, and Family

Young parents are at a nexus in their life where they are transitioning out of high school or college and establishing a career, also while learning how to co-parent and raise their children. To work around some of these competing demands, service providers can deliver programs according to parents' work and school schedules, provide child care during sessions, or subsidize transportation to classes. Additionally, if service providers link parents to resources that help them access housing, jobs, and child care assistance, it can alleviate the burden of meeting some of their basic needs while they also pursuing an education and raising young children.

Furthermore, because many young fathers uphold traditional gender norms that focus heavily on being the “provider” for their family, it is essential that providers help fathers achieve financial stability through career services, but also that they offer mentorship to young fathers that can help them understand that being the family’s provider is not the only way to be a good father. Young mothers, in particular, would benefit from reliable and affordable child care. Stay-at-home mothers also need access to peer support and mental health assistance to alleviate the stress and social isolation.

### 3. Usher Young Parents into Adult Life and Parenthood

Most young parents do not know what to expect in parenthood or in young adulthood. They often do not have a clear sense of what their long-term goals may be or how to achieve those goals. Assessing parents' level of knowledge and meeting them at that point is a key first step to serving this population. Additionally, the parents who are able to articulate their longer-term goals may often be unsure about how to achieve those goals or who to ask for help. Assisting young parents in understanding the systems that will allow them to accomplish their goals—such as finishing high school or college—and providing them with emotional support as they navigate that process is essential for young parents. Furthermore, providing young parents with resource education and supplies will help them feel more equipped for their future as a parent and an adult.

Given that most young parents need to earn an income, it is essential that they not only receive career services, but also that they have mentorship on how to juggle employment in the midst of finishing high

school or college. Mentors can coach young parents on talking with their employers to inform them of their school schedule and help parents find employers who are open to flexible scheduling. Young parents also would benefit from assistance finding paid internships or paid training opportunities that can help them gain experience in the workforce, since many of them have not yet had a chance to gain employment at their young age.

## 4. Help Parents Manage Relationships with Their Partners, Parents, and Peers

For many young parents, maintaining a positive co-parenting relationship may be difficult as they balance several competing demands. Young parents are often learning how to build a romantic relationship with their partner while learning to be a parent. Parents who are not in a romantic relationship are even less likely to have a positive co-parenting relationship.<sup>18,19</sup> Co-parenting classes can help young parents learn how to communicate with their partners and manage their stress in healthy ways. If service providers can help parents work together, even if they are no longer in a relationship, it may help improve family functioning in the long run.

Many young parents also still rely on their parents while they are transitioning into adulthood and parenthood. Young parents may still live with their parents, count on them for money, or depend on them for help raising and watching their children. This dynamic allows grandparents to affect the romantic relationship between partners and how they co-parent. When grandparents are absent, it creates an additional financial and emotional hurdle for many young parents. It is important that service providers learn about the dynamic their young clients have with their parents and help them manage that relationship.

Finally, young parents need peer support and mental health assistance to help them be better parents. Hosting activities for young parents and specifically helping young fathers build their social networks will help them access support from their peers. Additionally, providing mental health support to young mothers and helping young fathers learn to acknowledge their mental and emotional needs is likely to improve their interpersonal relationships and help young fathers feel empowered to access vital support that may be needed in their stressful lives.

## 5. Improve Information Sharing and Service Delivery

Young parents frequently use technology and social media to find parenting resources and programs. An important first step in understanding the best way to serve young parents, compared to older parents, is to study ways that they are using the internet and other forms of technology to learn about parenting.

Young fathers are also more difficult to recruit and retain in parenting programs than young mothers. Furthermore, young fathers often obtain information through their partners and are not as proactive in searching for resources themselves. Engaging fathers at places that they already visit with their children, providing them with incentives, and offering services around their work schedule could help boost participation and retention. Service providers also need to prioritize engaging both parents in conversations and lessons regarding their children. Organizations should work to recognize implicit biases by training their staff about gender stereotypes and encouraging them to actively include fathers in program components by inviting them to participate and directly addressing them during sessions.

It is also important for service providers to be aware of their biases regarding young parents, particularly young mothers, who often feel judged for being a young parent. One service provider said that his organization is aware of these biases and works toward "being more inclusive in the language that we use when we address them. When I engage them, it's more, 'I'm your peer, and I'm at your level.'" He also emphasized the importance of treating young parents "with respect all the time."

## Conclusion

Our findings highlight the unique challenges that young parents face, and the different barriers that young fathers and young mothers experience. Young fathers and young mothers alike need help balancing school, work, and their family roles. They also need mentorship in navigating adult situations as they face multiple life transitions simultaneously. Young fathers, in particular, would benefit from more guidance on what it means to be a father and how to develop realistic expectations about this role. Young parents need mental health support, as well as support in their interpersonal relationships with their partner, parents, and peers. Additionally, information sharing and service delivery to young parents could be improved, especially considering the differences in how young mothers and young fathers access and use services. Addressing gender biases and age assumptions about young parents will also help service providers serve young parents more effectively. Our findings can help service providers better align their services with the needs of young parents and understand what approaches work best in serving this unique population.

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*The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.*

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