

SESSION 3: BENEFITS OF LEGAL FATHERHOOD

INTRODUCTION

When you establish paternity for a child born to unmarried parents, you're giving that child the benefits of having a legal father, which he or she wouldn't otherwise have. But it's not only the child who benefits from having a legal relationship with his or her father.

For the mother, it means she's more likely to have a partner in the rewarding but demanding task of raising a child. If the parents end their relationship, the father will still be legally responsible for helping with the child's living expenses and medical care.

For the father, it means he'll have parental rights. If he and the child's mother separate, he'll have the right to seek custody and child support from the mother. If he doesn't have custody, he can seek visitation rights, and will have the right to know the child's whereabouts. He'll have legal standing when decisions are made about the child. Fathers who acknowledge paternity gain the pride, satisfaction and self-respect that can only come from doing the right thing – taking care of their own children, and living up to their responsibilities.

For the child, there's the security of having two responsible caregivers, two adults contributing financial support, medical care and attention. The legal connection to dad increases the likelihood that the child will have a relationship with extended family on the father's side. The child will also have access to medical records on the father's side, which may be important at some point.

A child's parents – both mother and father – help form part of the child's identity. It's only natural for a child to want to know who both parents are. A child without a legal father may be left to wonder: What's he like? What does he look like? Do I take after him in some ways? It's only natural for a child to look to his or her father for love and a feeling of self-worth.

ACTIVITY: Mom Wasn't Ready for Me *by ANONYMOUS*

Read the story below and answer the essay questions at the end.

My mom was only 16 when she had me, her first child. By the time she was 23, she had three little girls. I don't think she was ready for any of us. She needed more time to deal with the problems she herself had while growing up. She didn't need the lives of three young girls adding to her own issues. But she went ahead and had us before she was ready. Now partly because of this, I'm in foster care.

My mom told me she had me so young because she wanted someone to love and to love her back. I understand the need to be loved, but a baby doesn't just give like that. A baby takes and takes and takes and takes. If you have a baby because you want to receive love, you're bound to be disappointed, and the baby will feel it.

I don't think my mom realized any of that. I don't think she realized how difficult it is to be a mom while you're still trying to grow up yourself. She hopped and skipped right over her childhood, and then she stumbled and we, her kids, struggled with her.

By the time I was about eight, I already had too much responsibility. My mom supported our family financially, but she had me supporting us in other ways. It's like she was the working wife and I was the housewife.

After school I would come home and do my homework, make sure my room was clean, and help my sister with her homework. Then after the other kids were asleep, I was still up doing my chores. I'd clean the dishes, scrub the bathroom, and iron my baby sister's school clothes. I would also get my grown mama's clothes ready for her to wear to work the next day.

Even the weekends weren't easy. On the weekends, I washed everyone's laundry. Now I didn't mind helping my mom out around the house but I feel like I missed my childhood. I didn't feel like I could say no, because if someone wasn't doing all the things I was doing, I might have gotten put into foster care much earlier.

So now I have strong feelings about teen pregnancy. I think people should wait to grow up before they have babies. If you wait, you have more time to learn how to deal with stress without resorting to violence or neglect. You also have time to save money for a child and get used to holding down a job. You're less likely to blame your children for opportunities you might miss out on.

When I was picked to attend a conference on urban girls, I figured we'd talk about teen pregnancy and how it had affected our lives. But that wasn't what happened. They talked only about the teen moms, and not about the children of teen moms. Some of them talked about how it was nonsense that teen moms can't succeed in life.

Of course teen moms can finish high school and work good jobs. My mom has a good job, and I'm proud of her for it. But what about the children of teen mothers? Will those kids get the love, care and attention they need while their teen parents are busy trying to grow up and be successful? Not once during the session did I hear anyone talk about what can happen to you when you're the child of someone who isn't ready to be a parent.

ACTIVITY: Mom Wasn't Ready for Me *Continued*

According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, children of teen mothers tend to do much worse in school than those born to older parents, and they are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade. Children of teen moms also have a higher rate of behavior problems. They suffer higher rates of abuse and neglect, and are more likely to go into foster care, like I did.

But the problems don't end in childhood. Young adult children of teen moms are 30 percent more likely to be neither working nor going to school. The sons of teen mothers are 13 percent more likely to end up in prison. Daughters of teen moms are 22 percent more likely to become teen mothers themselves (which won't happen to me!).

So how could anyone in good conscience have a workshop on teen pregnancy and spend the whole time talking about the teen mom and how she can still finish school and succeed?

My own mom truly loved me and wanted the best for me. She did not want me to grow up like she did, she wanted me to have things that she didn't have, and she wanted me to live a better life than she lived.

The only thing is, she wanted it too much and too soon. She had me before she was ready, and ended up giving me the same hard life she had.

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New York, NY

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ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. The author doesn't mention her father. He seems to have been totally absent. What are your reactions to the father's absence from this young woman's life?

2. How might her life have been different if she'd had a father in the picture?

ACTIVITY: Benefits of Legal Fatherhood

For each of the situations below, list some ways you would benefit from having a legal father.

You're very ill and need an organ transplant

Your parents separate and you live with your mom

Your father works for the federal government or a big corporation

Your father dies

Your mother becomes disabled and can't care for you
