

CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Barriers to father involvement for unmarried parents

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Barriers to unmarried father involvement begin at childbirth

The powerful desire of unmarried fathers to be involved with their children is undermined by systems, policies, and procedures.

Unmarried fathers are looking for support in remaining involved with their children.

Unmarried parenthood is a common experience – and an equity issue

Births to unmarried mothers in Minneapolis:

- 40 % in 2014

Births to unmarried mothers in Minneapolis are more common among:

- low-income mothers,
- mothers under age 30,
- American Indian mothers, and
- mothers of color

Confusion surrounds what it means to be a “legal father”

Signing the acknowledgment of paternity form makes an unmarried father the “legal father.”

Signing this form is a prerequisite to unmarried parents being allowed to put the father’s name on the child’s birth certificate.

This status **does not** give the father any rights to:

- Legal custody (decision-making about school, religion, medical care)
- Physical custody or parenting time (visitation)

Focus on Fathers study: Community engagement

Interviews were conducted with:

41 unmarried mothers

40 unmarried fathers

36 institutional experts who provide services to unmarried parents, including

- Social workers
- Attorneys
- Child Support Office staff
- Hospital staff
- Advocates

Focus on Fathers study: Parent-driven interview topics

- Paternity acknowledgment
- Putting father's name on birth certificate
- Relationship with child support systems
- Parenting time and custody for fathers

Emerging themes

Current family support systems
exclude unmarried fathers

Within social service systems:

- “Family” really means “mom and baby”
- “Parents” really means “moms”

Emerging themes

Stereotypes of unmarried fathers are pervasive

Parents are painfully aware of assumptions regarding “deadbeat dads” that underpin policies:

- Dads have to be pushed into fatherhood
- Dads won't support moms without a court order
- Dad's major contribution to the family is financial

Emerging themes

Unmarried parents focus on the symbolism of the birth certificate

Dad:

“That was automatic —I’m going to be on their birth certificate because I am their father and it’s my responsibility and I don’t take that lightly.”

Symbolism to the father

Dad:

“I don’t want to be considered deadbeat ...

I gotta leave some type of trail like Dad tried, you know?”

I did what I could do to the best of my ability ... I never forgot about you guys. I take care of my responsibilities.”

Symbolism to the father

Mom:

“He was happy that he could finally be recognized and take that stand, as ‘I am the father.’

At first ... all the attention is on me and baby. But with this, he was able to be involved, and be recognized as the father.”

Symbolism to the mother

Mom:

“I think another benefit for the mother is just feeling that when you sign a birth certificate you’re signing this partnership that you’re accepting this as your child.

This is my child, and we know together that we can do this.”

Symbolism to the child

Dad:

“Suppose your kid is a pro football player and he goes to Yale College or Harvard, and you’re going to feel great about that because you’re on that birth certificate saying, ‘That’s my son.’”

Next steps

- Complete analysis of the interviews
- Return to community to share findings
- Generate possible solutions to concerns based on community input

For more information

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