



U.S. Department of Health  
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Administration for Children  
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Office of Family Assistance

[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions and Prenatal Behaviors

How men feel about a pregnancy and their support for partners during pregnancies have implications for their involvement with infants and children.<sup>i</sup> An understanding of this issue for fathers of infants is important because the transition to fatherhood represents an ideal opportunity to draw men more actively into parenting.<sup>ii</sup>

### Definitions

- **Pregnancy intentions** refer to men's feelings about the pregnancies of their partners or spouses. Pregnancies can be classified as *intended* (planned at the time of conception), *mistimed* (not wanted at the time of conception, but wanted eventually), or *unwanted* (not wanted either at the time of conception or ever in the future).
- **Prenatal behaviors** refer to fathers' activities with partners during pregnancy and activities around the time of the birth of a child. Prenatal activities for fathers may include: visiting the doctor with their partners for prenatal care, attending childbirth classes, being present at the child's birth, and visiting the baby in the hospital.
  - **Postbirth Involvement** refers to resident fathers' engagement in a variety of activities with their infants and young children. Some research shows that this involvement may include: participation in cognitively stimulating activities, physical care, warmth, nurturing activities, and caregiving activities.<sup>iii</sup>

### Importance of Fathers' Prenatal Behaviors and Pregnancy Intentions

#### *Implications for Fathers*

- The intendedness of a pregnancy has important implications for fathers, because fathers reporting unintended births are often less able to provide positive parenting and regularly report being in less stable relationships with the mothers of their children.<sup>iv</sup>
- Men who report that the births of their children were intended, and men who support their partners through prenatal involvement may view themselves as important to their child's development and be more interested in their children's well-being.<sup>v</sup>

#### *Implications for Children*

- Unintended fatherhood may adversely affect the quantity and quality of a father's involvement in a child's life.<sup>vi</sup>
- Children resulting from unwanted pregnancies may face reduced parental support, poorer quality parent-child relationships, more authoritarian parenting styles, and parental rejection.<sup>vii, viii, ix</sup>
- Children born to fathers who report that they wanted their partners to conceive sooner than they did tend to experience more nurturing from their fathers. Alternately, children born to fathers who report that the birth came too soon tend to experience less nurturing from fathers.<sup>x</sup>
- Fathers' prenatal intentions are related to the levels of warmth and nurturing that they provide to their infants.<sup>xi</sup>

*Take Time to Be a Dad Today*

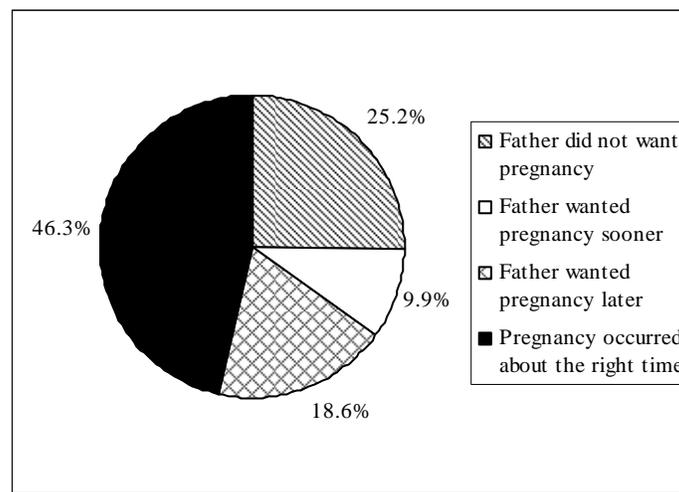
*Implications for Fathers' Partners*

- When fathers are highly involved with the care and nurturing of children, partners regularly report sharing more stable and happier relationships.<sup>xii</sup>
- Fathers' pregnancy intentions are related to their chances of sharing post-birth parenting responsibilities with mothers.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Overall Pregnancy Intentions for Fathers**

**Figure 1** indicates that one in four resident fathers did not want the pregnancy of their most recent child.

**Figure 1. Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions (2001)**



Source: Child Trends Analyses of ECLS-B, 9-Month Father Survey (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007)

**Differences in Fathers' Pregnancy Intentions by Subgroup**

*Differences by Father's Age.*

**Table 1** shows that teen fathers were most likely to report not wanting the pregnancy and least likely to report that the pregnancy occurred at the right time. Younger fathers (< 24 years) were more likely to report having wanted the pregnancy later (32 percent) than were fathers aged 25-34 and 35 and older (19 percent and 13 percent, respectively).

**Table 1. Pregnancy Intentions by Age of Father**

Age Group	Father did not want pregnancy	Father wanted pregnancy sooner	Father wanted pregnancy later	Pregnancy occurred about the right time
Less than 20	38	5	32	25
20-24	27	5	32	36
25-34	22	9	19	51
35+	29	14	13	45

Source: Child Trends Analyses of ECLS-B, 9-Month Father Survey (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007)

*Differences by Father's Race.*

**Table 2** shows that non-Hispanic black fathers and fathers of other ethnicities were most likely to report not wanting the pregnancy. Non-Hispanic black fathers and fathers of other ethnicities were less likely to report that the pregnancy occurred at the right time (36 percent and 43 percent, respectively). Non-Hispanic black fathers were the most likely across racial and ethnic subgroups to report wanting the pregnancy to occur later (22 percent).

**Table 2. Pregnancy Intentions by Race of Father**

<b>Hispanic</b>	26	7	20	47
<b>White</b>	20	11	19	50
<b>Black</b>	34	8	22	36
<b>Other</b>	34	9	14	43

Source: Child Trends Analyses of ECLS-B, 9-Month Father Survey (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007)

**Differences in Fathers' Prenatal Involvement by Subgroup**

*Differences by Father's Age.*

**Table 3** shows that teen fathers and fathers over age 35 were slightly less like to demonstrate certain prenatal behaviors. Teen fathers were less likely to discuss the pregnancy with their child's mother (88 percent), see an ultrasound (93 percent), and attend a childbirth class (28 percent), than were older fathers. Older fathers were slightly less likely to report that they listened to the baby's heartbeat (91 percent), felt the baby move (96 percent), and bought things for the baby (85 percent) than were fathers in their twenties and early thirties.

**Table 3. Prenatal Involvement by Age of Father**

<b>Discussed pregnancy</b>	88	90	93	93
<b>Saw ultrasound</b>	93	96	96	95
<b>Listened to baby's heartbeat</b>	93	96	94	91
<b>Felt baby move</b>	98	97	97	96
<b>Attended childbirth classes</b>	28	34	44	42
<b>Bought things for baby</b>	95	96	92	85

Source: Child Trends Analyses of ECLS-B, 9-Month Father Survey (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007)

*Differences by Father's Race.*

**Table 4** shows that among resident fathers, Hispanic fathers were slightly less likely to report certain types of prenatal involvement than were fathers of other races/ethnicities. Hispanic fathers were the least likely among fathers to report that they discussed the pregnancy with the mother (76 percent), saw an ultrasound (90 percent), listened to the baby's heartbeat (89 percent), and attended a childbirth class with the mother (32 percent).

**Table 4. Prenatal Involvement by Race of Father**

<b>Discussed pregnancy</b>	76	97	94	94
<b>Saw ultrasound</b>	90	98	95	95
<b>Listened to baby's heartbeat</b>	89	95	91	94
<b>Felt baby move</b>	97	98	97	97
<b>Attended childbirth classes</b>	32	45	33	45
<b>Bought things for baby</b>	94	90	89	91

Source: Child Trends Analyses of ECLS-B, 9-Month Father Survey (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007)

### Definitions and Measurement

Resident fathers in these analyses consisted of males living with children's mothers at the conclusion of the 9-month Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) data collection. These fathers or father figures included stepfathers, adoptive fathers, and foster fathers, although 89 percent of responding fathers were children's biological fathers.

### Data Sources

All data on fathers' pregnancy intentions, prenatal behaviors, and postbirth involvement are drawn from the 2001 ECLS-B, 9-month Resident Father Survey. The ECLS-B tracks a nationally representative sample of children from infancy to first grade. The full sample consists of more than 10,000 children born in 2001, and the primary methods of data collection are interviews and direct child assessments that occur during home visits at nine, 24, and 48 months after birth. The sample for these analyses includes 6,816 biological resident fathers who completed a 10-minute self-administered survey in the nine-month wave of the study.

### Data Limitations

It should be noted that fathers represented in these analyses are reflective only of resident, and in large part biological, fathers. Second, children of fathers represented in these analyses are very young, and past research has indicated that resident fathers tend to increase their involvement with children as they age, so these analyses may not be representative of father involvement throughout early childhood.<sup>xiv</sup> Finally, fathers in these analyses may overrepresent involved fathers and fathers who have positive relationships with the mother of the focal child.

### Resources

- **The National Fatherhood Initiative** provides information to fathers and educators about increasing fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. Access the organization's Web site at: [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)
- **The Child Welfare Information Gateway** (formerly the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, Child Welfare Information Gateway) provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families. This resource is a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and can be accessed at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/>

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