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## Teen Dad: Young Fathers and Identity Integration

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## **Teen Dad: Young Fathers and Identity Integration**

Submitted by Emily E. Bade  
May 2012

### MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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## **Abstract**

Early parenthood is a topic of concern for social workers, researchers and policy makers due to the consequences for both young parents and their children. Despite declining rates of teen parenthood in the United States, teen birthrates remain high compared to other developed nations. Teen fathers have received less attention than teen mothers, but are an important component in the area of study. This study examines how five young fathers handled the transition from child to adult when faced with an off-time developmental event. Young fathers experienced drastically altered life paths, need for financial resources, complicated romantic relationships, and rapidly changing demands to fulfill new roles. They were motivated to grow into their new status by the support of others, including social services, and by a sense of duty to become good fathers. The fathers in this study are remarkably positive about their experiences, despite challenges, a range of situations with the mothers of their children. The findings of this study are limited by a non-representative population, non-probability sampling method and small sample size. Implications for social work practice, policy and research are outlined.

## Table of Contents

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
I. Introduction	3
II. Literature Review	5
III. Conceptual Framework	18
IV. Study Design	22
V. Findings	26
VI. Discussion	40
VII. Implications	48
VIII. Conclusion	52
IX. References	54
X. Appendices	58
A. Appendix A – Interview Questions	58
B. Appendix B – Consent Form	59
C. Appendix C – Recruitment Flyer	61
D. Appendix D – Mental Health Support Information	62

## Introduction

Although rates of teen pregnancy and births to mothers under 20 have decreased in the United States in the past two decades, interest in the well-being of young parents and their children among practitioners and policy makers has remained high, with large-scale initiatives such as the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (from 2007-2010). Rates of teen pregnancy have been steadily declining since 1991, with the exception of a brief spike in rates between 2005 and 2007 (CDC, 2011b). In 2010, the live birth rate for 15-19 year old women was 34.3 per 1000, the lowest rate reported since the Center for Disease Control started collecting data (CDC, 2011c). However, the United States continues to have very high rates of childbearing during adolescence, especially compared to other developed nations. The U.S. rate is more than three times the birth rate in Canada, and is also significantly higher than the birth rate for this age group in Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan and the U.K. (CDC, 2011a; Planned Parenthood, 2010). About 30 percent of women in the U.S. experience pregnancy before age 20 (Planned Parenthood, 2010).

High rates of teen parenthood are significant for many reasons. First, teen pregnancy leads to more than \$9 billion in annual costs to U.S. tax payers due to increases the cost of health care, foster care and incarceration associated with children of teen parents, as well as diminished earning potential for teen parents who have lower rates of educational completion (CDC, 2011a; Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Planned Parenthood, 2010). On a local level, public costs are also high, specifically as young families often need financial government assistance in the form of welfare, known in Minnesota as the Minnesota Family Investment Plan (MFIP) program. In 2010, the Minnesota Department of Human Services reported that, in Hennepin County, 53.6% of total monthly MFIP dollars went to families that started with

an adolescent birth, equaling \$4,121,841 per month. In Ramsey County, 54.1% of total monthly MFIP dollars went to families that started with an adolescent birth, equaling \$3,196,111 per month (Teenwise Minnesota, 2011).

Teen parenthood has many negative impacts on those who have children prior to age 20. Teen parents tend to struggle academically, are less likely to finish high school, earn less than those who wait to become parents, and are more likely to live in poverty (CDC, 2011a; Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Planned Parenthood, 2010). Children born to teenage parents also face negative outcomes, such as higher mortality rates, higher rates of abuse and neglect, risks associated with impoverished households, such as lack of proper nutrition and health care, and are more likely to experience social, academic and behavioral problems (CDC, 2011a; Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Planned Parenthood, 2010).

Teen fathers are of special interest to researchers and policy makers for several reasons. First, research as well as service provision has often been focused on teen mothers and has only recently begun to be more inclusive of fathers, leaving an information gap in the understanding of teen parenthood (Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011). Despite the lack of research and services, issues related to teen fathers are very important. Like teen mothers, teen fathers are more likely to drop out of school and often struggle to find suitable employment. Additionally, teens who become fathers are more likely to be incarcerated than their peers who are not fathers (Healthy Teen Network, 2004). Knowledge about teen fathers is also important because fathers have an important role in the lives of their children. Children with involved fathers have more success at school, fewer behavior problems and may have better economic situations than children with absent fathers, although the quality of the father's relationship with his child is an important variable

(Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011). Teen fatherhood is complicated by some young men questioning or denying their paternity for a variety of reasons, including wanting to avoid being involved in child support policies. When paternity is not acknowledged, the process of determining paternity is often arduous (Pirog-Good & Good, 1995).

As the topic of teen fatherhood is relevant to providing quality services for teen parents and their children, this study focuses on issues related to young fatherhood. This study examines perspectives on parenthood from young fathers in the Midwest. Individual interviews with these young fathers address father's experiences, perceptions and service needs both during the pregnancy and after the birth of the child to explore how young fathers transition from kids to adults in the parenthood role. Through their stories, this research identifies barriers that hinder this process as well as services and supports that aid in developmental transition for young men.

## **Literature Review**

### **Role expectations for fathers**

Before considering how young fathers adapt to their new paternal role, it is important to consider what expectations society holds for fathers in the United States. This gives a base understanding of the standards mothers, grandparents, professionals and even young fathers themselves set for fatherhood from conception onward. Cabrera et al (2000) identify four social trends that have shaped parenting roles for both mothers and fathers over the past half century: an increase of women in the workforce, an increase in the number of fathers who do not live with their children, an increase in involvement for those fathers who do have contact

with their children, and an increase in cultural diversity in the United States. These factors, along with technological advances that have changed the nature of relationships, have moved the role of father from the detached breadwinner role to a fluid, flexible myriad of new roles for fathers (Andrews et al, 2004; Cabrera et al, 2000).

The new roles for fathers vary by culture and subculture within the United States. and include providing financial resources, disciplining children, teaching and guiding children as a role model, protecting children, engaging in caregiving activities, spending fun time with children and nurturing children (Andrews et al, 2004; Cabrera et al, 2000). Roles often differ as nontraditional family structures have become more prevalent and many men find themselves becoming step-fathers, single fathers and/or nonresident fathers, thus blurring the lines defining appropriate fathering. Despite this variability, a high level of commitment to the next generation, including significant involvement with children, responsibility and a commitment to co-parenting “have emerged as idealized, generic goals for male parenting” (Cabrera et al, 2000, p. 132).

Although the concept of fatherhood is not considered fixed or easily definable, one model of assessing fathering has been widely cited in literature on fathers (i.e. Andrews et al, 2004; Cabrera et al, 2000; Saleh & Hinton, 2010). This model was developed by Lamb, Pleck, Charnov and Levine (1985, 1987) and examines three areas of fathering: interaction or engagement with children, physical availability of father and child to one another, and responsibility assumed for providing for the child in several dimensions. Using this model or an adaptation of the model, researchers have examined how various groups of fathers are involved in the lives of their children (i.e. Erkut et al, 2005; Saleh & Hinton, 2010). The



specifics of the studies are varied, but due to this research, the qualities outlined in Lamb et al's(1985, 1987) model emerged as a widely used definition of good fathering.

In research specifically focused on teen fathers, young men have identified similar ideals and standards regarding what it means to be a “good dad” such as “being there” physically and emotionally for children, providing financial and material resources, spending quality time with children, and raising children with hopes and dreams for themselves (Dallas et al, 2000; Erkut et al, 2005; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009). Thus, teen fathers appear to have similar standards for themselves as fathers, despite facing the challenges associated with early parenthood.

### **Developmental tasks of adolescence**

While fathers of all age groups strive for a similar array of ideals, many of these ideals sharply contrast with the developmental tasks and expectations of teenagers in the United States. This off-timing of early parenthood coupled with the often unplanned nature of teen pregnancy may lead to what Cabrera et al (2000, p.131) describe as a “crisis.”

Ashford, J. B., LeCroy, C. W. & Lortie, K. L. (2006) describe the primary developmental tasks of adolescence as achieving independence from the family of origin and establishing a personal identity. As teens begin navigating changes in their level of autonomy, a focus on the self and self-discovery becomes central, as does openness for exploration. Common self-reflective questions for adolescents include focus on determining what is important to a person, what plans a person will work toward (Ashford et al, 2006).

Teens are expected to gradually separate from parents as attachments to peers become more important. Relationships with peers offer what Ashford et al (2006, p.419) describe as

“a critical source for personal and social competence development” and a space to learn about “sexual relations, compassion, leadership, conflict, mutual problem solving, and more.” Although relationships become more important, many relationships, especially romantic relationships are brief compared to adult relationships, as adolescents are expected to explore dating roles and their likes and dislikes and are not expected to establish long-term commitments. This creates a challenge for young parents who may not be developmentally ready to sustain a life-long relationship that potentially begins when a couple accepts the challenge of parenting (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

In studies of young parents, participants identified common activities adolescents are expected to engage in as part of this developmental stage. Examples include spending time with friends, being “wild” (Frewin et al, 2007) and “free” (Paschal et al, 2010). These descriptions involve commitments to peer groups and social activities and contradict the responsibilities that come with fatherhood. Young parents are faced with a shortened period of development as they need to cut short the time typically dedicated to individual growth, exploration and freedom as they face expectations of responsibility, sacrifice and commitment.

### **Characteristics of young parents**

Although early parenthood can happen in a variety of circumstances, there are frequently common characteristics of young people for whom adolescent development is interrupted by parenthood. Research has indicated a variety of common risk factors (i.e. Dallas et al, 2000; Erkut et al, 2005; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Rhein et al, 1997; Weinman et al, 2002) and social, psychological and cultural features (Edin & Kefalas, 2005;

Erkut et al, 2005; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Robbers, 2009) that are present in most young parents.

Some risk factors that are present during childhood and early adolescence increase the likelihood that an individual will become a parent while in his or her teens. Living in poverty, living in a single-parent household, coming from parents with low levels of education, a lack of parental discipline and having parents who exhibit antisocial behavior are all predisposing circumstances (CDC, 2009; Fagot et al, 1998) that can occur very early in an individual's life. Additionally, many teen parents did not have positive relationships with their own fathers (Dallas et al, 2000). Interplay exists between these factors and race and ethnicity. The CDC (2009) reports that birth rates for 15-19 year old Hispanics, American Indian/Alaska Natives and blacks are more than twice as high as the birth rates for whites in this age group. Black and Hispanic youth are disproportionately involved in teen births – 60% in 2009 (CDC, 2009), despite making up only 35% of the teen population. Mollborn & Lovegrove (2011) also found higher percentages of minorities among teen fathers when compared to adult fathers. While these minority populations experience higher rates of teen pregnancy and birth, they also experience higher rates of the afore mentioned risk factors of poverty and single-parent households.

As children develop, other risk factors for early pregnancy come into play – perhaps as side effects of early situational risk factors. Children and young teens who struggle academically, engage in criminal or antisocial behavior, first engage in sex before age 15 and do not use contraception during early sexual experiences are more likely to experience pregnancy during the teen years (CDC, 2009; Fagot et al, 1998; Planned Parenthood, 2010).

As previously mentioned, early parenthood co-occurs with many other negative outcomes. Young fathers typically have lower levels of education and higher rates of unemployment or underemployment than older fathers. Young fathers often struggle as a result of lower rates of educational attainment and the resulting difficulties in obtaining employment to provide financially for a child. Young fathers are also more likely to engage in delinquent and/or criminal behavior, to use cigarettes, drugs and alcohol, to deal drugs and to inconsistently use contraceptives, thus often fathering multiple children, potentially with different partners (Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Planned Parenthood, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002). As many of these negative outcomes are the same or similar to previously discussed risk factors, it is difficult to ascertain causation for troubling behavior.

Research has found a connection between early parenthood and teens' perceptions that there is little to lose as a result of a pregnancy, largely related to lack of success in school and home environments (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagot et al, 1998). Young people who do not see it likely that they will complete higher education, find a meaningful career, develop healthy relationships, or even stay alive and out of jail are more prone to become parents at a young age. Many of these youth also identify parenthood as a positive role that they feel is readily available to them, while many other achievements seem unattainable (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagot et al, 1998; Mazza, 2002). For some, this may be a symptom of depression due to chronic life stress, as many young parents have described struggling emotionally and feeling hopeless prior to becoming parents (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Depression and effects of chronic despondency related to negative life situations may interact with risk taking behavior such as having unprotected sex, or pregnancy may be desired as

teens struggle to find meaning, love and hope in otherwise disheartening environments (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Either way, young parents may look at early pregnancy occurring in less-than-ideal situations differently than professionals and society at large. For many, “the decision to bring a child into the world under these conditions is not seen as a personal failure. Indeed, the very uncertainty and adversity involved transform the choice to bring a less-than-perfectly planned pregnancy to term into an act of valor,” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p.142).

Once the child is born, common themes continue to emerge in parenting situations. Fathers are most likely to be involved and to provide assistance to younger children, but overall provide only sporadic and informal financial support and engage in low-levels of caretaking behaviors such as changing the baby. These behaviors tend to decrease, and many fathers are completely disengaged from their children by the time the children are preschool-aged (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Robbers, 2009). Some of this disengagement may be due to circumstances in the relationship between parents. Young parents are less likely to be married or to get married and are also less likely to live together compared with older parents (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011), potentially making access and interaction with children less available for fathers. The volatility of teen relationships, made worse by the stress of early parenting often leads to conflict between parents. Also, the relationship often changes significantly and becomes adversarial when expectations on young men change as the result of fathering a child. Inter-relational discord is a factor in reducing father involvement (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Erkut et al, 2005).

Although much of this section is focused on negatives, there are positive characteristics of young parents. Most parents describe feeling loving and attached toward their children and hope to see their children achieve many goals. Parents also often are involved in services to help them better their situations and abilities to be good parents as this was seen as a very important role by the young parents, both mothers and fathers (Dallas et al, 2000; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Paschal et al, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009)

### **Young fathers' conceptualizations of fatherhood**

Young fathers often begin their paternal journey at a disadvantage based on developmental stage, risk factors, and other co-occurring difficulties. However, the expectations for these fathers are no less demanding.

“Expectant fathers are still supposed to provide, to ‘straighten up,’ and to deepen their commitment to the mother, even though they are not legally bound to her. Pregnancy forces these young men to confront their limited ability, and sometimes their lack of willingness, to pay the full price of parenthood.”(Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 69)

Demands not only come from those surrounding young fathers, but from the young fathers themselves. Young men consistently identified wanting to be involved in good, loving relationships with their children, which included providing for financial needs, caregiving, and spending quality time with children (Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Paschal et al, 2010; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009). These young men often contrasted their desired paternal role of “being there” to the idea of the absent,

“deadbeat,” abusive father, with whom many had experience in their own childhoods (Dallas et al, 2000; Wilkinson et al, 2009).

Fathers spoke of having a child as an accomplishment and something to be proud of. Service providers worry about the potential fallout if fathers are not able to live up to their own standards and experience another role failure. This may occur, as many of these young men are not prepared to meet the demands of fatherhood (Fagot et al, 1998; Frewin et al, 2007; Wilkinson et al, 2009). Oftentimes, young fathers recognize needing support and talk about wanting to be the “person I should be” (Parra-Cardona et al, 2006, p. 224), showing that being a good father is critical to their burgeoning identities, although they are still in the process of moving from “kid” to “father” (Frewin et al, 2007; Parra-Cardona et al, 2006).

### **Factors influencing involvement of young fathers**

Much of the research related to young fathers has to do with assessing levels of involvement and factors that contribute to how involved an adolescent father is in the life of his child (i.e Erkut et al, 2005; Fagan, 2008; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009). Themes that appeared in these studies were related to employment and access to resources, quality of social supports and relationships, impact of criminal and drug involvement, and skill and knowledge related to child development and parenting.

As previously stated, many young parents are already living in poverty when their financial needs are increased by the arrival of a child. Young fathers’ involvement often depends on his ability to provide resources. Many times, financial and material goods are required by young mothers as proof of responsibility and dedication to the child, and she may deny access if fathers do not meet her expectations (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Weinman et al,

2002). Adolescent fathers are more likely to provide material goods like clothing and diapers as opposed to cash, sometimes due to availability of these resources despite lack of employment, and sometimes due to difficulty trusting the mothers will use the money for their children (Weinman et al, 2002). Fathers who are employed are more likely to be involved in their children's lives, and young fathers often cite lack of material resources as a stressor in their ability to parent (Dallas et al, 2000; Erkut et al, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009).

In relation to financial resources and the provision of support to children is the issue of formal child support enforcement. In the past two decades, federal regulations have changed to require that custodial parents (often women) seeking assistance federal aid programs must seek child support from the fathers of their children. This has resulted in more fathers being involved in the child support system (Magnuson & Gibson-Davis, 2007). Fathers often struggle to handle these obligations due to difficulty maintaining employment or sentiments that child support is not enforced fairly (Kost, 2001; Magnuson & Gibson-Davis; Pirog-Good & Good, 1995). Additionally, child support laws do not often recognize in-kind goods as methods of child support although many fathers, especially young fathers, are more able and willing to provide this type of support (Kost, 2001; Pirog-Good & Good, 1995; Weinman et al, 2002).

Another factor influencing young fathers' level of involvement relates to the quality of social supports and relationships surrounding these young men. Young fathers must navigate the often-rocky relationship with the mother of their child, their peer relationships, which may be focused on "kid" activities, and the relationships with their own families of origin who can hopefully provide some support.



Young fathers studied have often cited conflict with the mother of their child as a barrier to full participation (Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009). As mentioned earlier, teen relationships are rarely considered stable, even before the birth of a child as teens are still exploring their romantic preferences. The stress of a new child can either help a couple mature and work together for the best of the child, or can increase conflict that leads fathers to distance themselves. Fathers who remain romantically involved with the mother of their children tend to be more involved, however, relationships with lower levels of conflict, regardless of romantic status, are most conducive to father involvement (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009).

Relationships with peers also influence what behavior a father is likely to engage in. Some fathers struggle to disengage from criminal networks and drug involvement, despite recognizing they are putting themselves and their families at risk. These behaviors often significantly limited involvement with children, partially because young mothers may restrict access to children in these situations. Drug and criminal activity have been cited as one of the most distressing factors preventing fathers from fully accepting their paternal role. Young mothers, fathers and their families cited this as a major concern (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009).

On the other hand, fathers that have a supportive network of peers and kin are often more able to cope with the stress of fatherhood and may be pressured into living up to their new responsibilities (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Erkut et al, 2005; Fagan et al, 2007). However, as Erkut et al (2005) state,

“the life course is normatively patterned such that there is a widely shared timing and sequential order for important life events such as marriage and becoming a parent and

a set of formal and informal supports for these events. Deviations from this normative pattern can have negative consequences because the necessary supports such as peer and family approval many not be present or available.” Erkut et al, 2005, p. 716

Many young fathers express this difficulty in relating to their peers who want to spend time on normal adolescent pursuits and are not always encouraging toward a young man’s obligations to his child (Erkut et al, 2005; Frewin et al, 2007; Wilkinson et al, 2009).

Another identified barrier to participation is a lack of knowledge about child development and parenting. When fathers experience stress related to their ability to parent, they tend to disengage or have others, like the baby’s mother or their own mother handle these aspects of childcare (Fagan et al, 2007 Parra-Cardona et al, 2006). Fathers identify this as a significant stressor that inhibits participation even for those who are motivated to be involved with their child (Dallas et al, 2000; Erkut et al, 2005; Smith et al; 2002).

Thus, the factors influencing a young father’s involvement with his child are varied and often interrelated. Despite often high standards and expectations for being present in their children’s lives (Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Paschal et al, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009), young fathers are at the mercy of situational factors like availability of employment and prevalence of drugs and alcohol in their communities. They also must navigate relationships with their baby’s mother, friends and family, who may or may not be supportive, and must try to learn as much as possible about raising a child. The weight of these factors can be great for a teenager facing an important new role.

## **Interventions for young fathers**

In light of the identified difficulties facing young fathers, a variety of interventions have been used and studied to determine ways that professionals can help young fathers adapt to their new role. Young men and service providers alike have determined the importance of helping adolescent fathers with employment, education (Mazza, 2002; Smith et al, 2002; Weinman et al, 2002), stress reduction, social support (Fagan et al, 2007; Frewin et al, 2007; Mazza, 2002) and knowledge about parenting and child development (Fagan, 2008; Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Robbers, 2009 Smith et al, 2002;). Some interventions have also highlighted the importance of addressing issues young fathers may be carrying from their families of origin, especially related to their relationships with their own fathers (Mazza, 2002; Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Smith et al, 2002).

Research on intervention effectiveness indicates there are several factors related to making positive changes for young fathers. First, interventions that begin while the baby is still in-utero have been especially effective (Fagan et al, 2007). Second, interventions that helped young men feel more connected and less alone were identified as very helpful (Frewin et al, 2007; Mazza, 2002; Parra-Cardona et al, 2006). Additionally, research found that a variety of interventions produced similar results, indicating the specific curriculum or focus may be less important than providing some sort of formal support to young fathers (Fagan, 2008; Robbers, 2009).

With this information in mind, this research seeks to understand how a small group of young fathers have navigated, or are navigating, the untimely role transition, and the barriers

they have faced along the way. Additionally, this research seeks to better understand how social workers and other professionals can assist young men during this important transition.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study examines specific aspects of early fatherhood using several different lenses. The study seeks to better understand how young fathers incorporate the fatherhood role into their adolescent identity, and how this process is externally influenced. The primary research perspectives guiding this study are a developmental framework, the idea of self and identity, and ecological systems theory.

#### **Developmental theory**

One of the primary focuses of this research will be on how young men cope with a developmentally off-time event – that is, fatherhood occurring before young men are developmentally ready for this role.

Ashford et al (2006) describe the developmental, or life-course perspective as a process by which people pass through “age-differentiated life patterns” (p. 33). This process is flexible, as a person is constantly changing in response to environmental changes, but tends to follow specific patterns, whereby most individuals pass through the same stages at similar ages. For example, during the toddler years, young children begin developing a sense of autonomy, as they are less dependent on their parents than they were in the infant years. Most toddlers also learn similar skills at about the same age (Ashford, 2006).

During this process of maturation, people experience role transitions as important events, in this case, fatherhood, that assist in the process of moving from one developmental

stage to another (Ashford et al, 2006). Especially relevant to this research is the timing of role transitions. As Ashford et al (2006) write, “the timing of the event in relation to a person’s chronological age can have significant implications for the consequence of the event” (p. 35). The implications of events occurring earlier than expected are often negative as a the individual has not completed the developmental tasks of their life stage, which may leave them ill-prepared to handle challenges faced with a transitional event (Ashford et al, 2006). This research will examine those implications for young fathers.

Developmental stages are influenced by cultural expectations, and as previously described, the teen years and early 20’s are considered adolescence, which in American culture is categorized by freedom, identify formation, and experimentation (Ashford et al, 2006). Fatherhood is not expected until a later developmental stage of adulthood, when a person has achieved stability through a long-term relationship and career. Thus, this study starts with the assumption that the arrival of a child before a man has reached the appropriate developmental stage will cause stress and difficulty related to role transition.

### **The self and identity**

To understand how young men incorporate fatherhood into their identities, it is important to understand the constructs of the self and identity. The idea of the self is a social construct that begins to emerge in infancy and is shaped by experience and interactions with others (Ashford et al, 2006). Identity develops as a person begins to understand how they are similar and dissimilar from others. Although concepts of self and identity change as a person progresses through life and the accompanying developmental stages, people attempt to

maintain an integrated sense of self, and inability to do so is often distressing (Ashford et al, 2006).

Although different theories of identity exist, several concepts are relevant to this study. One is Erik Erickson's idea that during adolescence, a person forms a primary identity, basically answering the question, "who am I," in terms of self-beliefs and interactions with the community (Deaux, 2000). Identity is primarily expressed through the behaviors people use to present themselves to others, indicating parts of their identity, such as a student and professor behave in certain ways characteristic of their identities.

This research will use Erickson's perspective that a person attempts to form a relatively stable identity over time, although elements change as a person takes on new social roles and experiences new situations. When a person is faced with challenges to their identity, a psychological process ensues where the person attempts to fit the various pieces together into a cohesive sense of self (Deaux, 2000).

This knowledge is important to this research as it will examine how young fathers integrate the contrasting identities of adolescent and father, and how their interactions with others help or hinder this process. During this study, young fathers will be asked to discuss a feeling of "wholeness" in terms of themselves, or difficulty fitting different roles together.

### **Ecological systems theory**

Another key theoretical lens guiding this research is ecological systems theory, which maintains that individuals do not exist separately from their environments, but are in constant interaction with the systems in which they are embedded. In this perspective, "a system represents any set of elements that affect or influence one another" (Ashford et al, 2006, p.

116). The young fathers in this study will likely be involved in a variety of systems, including family systems, school systems, legal systems, neighborhoods and communities. The systems perspective maintains that a person is influenced by these systems and cannot be fully understood without also recognizing important ecological interactions.

Additionally, ecological systems theory maintains that systems are constantly influencing each other. When systems adapt to each other in a way that allows the participants to get their needs met, these systems are functioning together well. For example, when a family system includes expectations that children go to school and do their homework, the family system works well with a school system that expects families to support education. However, stress occurs when there is a mismatch between systems, such as when a family values children working over education and finds the demands of school systems to be burdensome (Rothery, 2001).

Additionally, good functioning requires that the demands on a system and the resources available to meet these demands are adequate. Adequate support allows systems to cope with challenges and to continue functioning properly. However, if resources and support are not adequate to meet demands, a system will experience stress and may cease to function (Rothery, 2001).

This study will focus not only on the development and identity of individual fathers, but on how their environments influence this process. The study will examine strengths and barriers in families, communities and societal institutions interacting with young fathers on a constant basis, and will examine how different systems interact in a way that is helpful or stressful to young fathers.

## **Study Design**

### **Sampling and recruitment**

The subjects for this qualitative study were five young men who were at least 18 years old, who had at least one child or had a child on the way. In all their cases, the child was before the father's 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday. This research used purposive, non-probability sampling and availability sampling (Berg, 2009) as the participants were recruited from a known group of young fathers and through individuals who personally knew young fathers. Due to these sampling methods, the sample does not necessarily represent all members of this population.

The staff at a local agency serving young fathers recruited participants for the study. These staff distributed flyers (see Appendix C for a copy of the flyer) to participants inviting them to participate in the study with contact information for the researcher and an explanation of requirements to participate in the study. Additionally, participants were recruited through friends and acquaintances of the researcher who gave flyers to potential participants they knew personally. Participants who completed the interview for this study were given a \$10 gift card to Super America, which was also explained on the flyer. Five young men participated in the interview.

### **Data collection**

Data for this study was collected during individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the young fathers. The interview (see Appendix A for a list of interview questions) consisted of open-ended questions to encourage expression by the young fathers (Berg, 2009). Three of the interviews were face-to-face interviews, one was conducted via Skype,



and the final interview was done over the phone. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, and then transcribed. Additionally, a journal of field notes was kept about the specifics of each interview. Two interviews were conducted in a private area in the agency assisting with recruitment. A third interview took place in a private area at the participant's place of employment. These locations were chosen by the interview subjects.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

To protect the privacy of the subjects for this study, several precautions were taken. First, participants received information about the purpose, methods, risks and benefits of this study. Additionally, potential participants were verbally informed that participation in this study is voluntary and they could chose not to participate, or could chose to skip any questions during the interview. This information was be presented in an informed consent document that was be covered verbally by the researcher (see Appendix B for a copy of the consent form). Participants indicated their understanding of this information by signing a consent form.

Face-to-face interviews occurred in a private area, such as an office space at one of the agencies, that allowed privacy for the research participant. Skype and phone interviews were conducted when both the researcher and participant were in private places. In each case, the participant chose the location and indicated comfort with the location. The researcher used measures to protect the confidentiality of subjects by removing identifying information from transcripts of interviews and any published content. The interview recordings were stored on the recorder and later on a computer to which only the researcher has access. These recordings were deleted following the completion of this study.

Lastly, participants of this study were notified that some questions during the interview would be about sensitive information. Participants were able to choose not to answer questions, and were given contact information for mental health professionals who could be contacted should the participants experience emotional distress following the discussion of sensitive information (see Appendix D for mental health support information).

### **Data analysis**

Using grounded theory, analysis of interviews began with examining the interview transcript to inductively identify themes present in the raw data (Berg, 2009, p. 340). The researcher focused on identifying themes that were meaningful to the subjects, based on their responses to interview questions. This inductive method allowed the outcomes to be grounded in the data. Content analysis – the process of systematically examining the data to look for patterns and themes (Berg, 2009, p. 338) – was used to analyze the data. In keeping with grounded theory, the researcher allowed codes to emerge from the data before going to the literature to look for verification of themes. First, the researcher went through the transcript line by line, identifying themes found in the transcript. As themes emerged, properties of axial coding were used to combine similar themes among the five interviews, and to relate themes to principles found in the literature. These final codes were used to determine the important ideas gathered from the interviews (Monette, Sullivan & DeJong, 2008 p. 424-425).

## **Strengths and limitations**

There were both strengths and limitations related to the methodology of this study. Strengths of this study included the qualitative interview process and data collection and analysis components. Limitations included the use of non-probability sampling, a small sample size, and limited recruitment.

Qualitative research methods are beneficial in understanding individual experiences, emotions and meanings, which are salient in their day-to-day lives. Understanding the non-quantifiable qualities of social issues helps researchers and practitioners best conceptualize the issue through the minds of those affected. This allows policies and programs to develop with a better understanding of the needs, goals and desired outcomes surrounding a social issue. Quantitative strategies are often unable to capture the subjective intricacies so important to human life (Berg, 2009). Additionally, there are benefits to using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. These interviews allow researchers to explore beyond the surface of participant answers and allow for modifications of language and question order to best meet the needs of individual subjects (Berg, 2009).

Despite these strengths, there were also limitations to this study. The non-probability sample and small sample size limited generalizations between this population and the large, more diverse population of young fathers in the U.S. The limited recruitment techniques also constrained the ability of this study to draw firm conclusions about young fathers and the process of identity integration.

## **Findings**

After analyzing the interview transcripts, several themes emerged as components of identity development from youth to fatherhood. The fathers discussed having their life plans drastically altered, the need for employment and increased financial responsibility, learning to fill many roles as fathers, feeling a sense of duty and deep bonds with their children, feeling the need to develop as a person, the importance of support systems, and the often complicated relationships with the mothers of their children. The fathers also discussed barriers to parenting and services they used or wished existed to help them in their journey from youth to father.

Five fathers were interviewed in this study. The fathers ranged in age from 23 to 34, and became fathers between the ages of 18 and 22. Three of the fathers were white, one was African-American and one was Native American and Hispanic. Two fathers were currently married to the mothers of their children. One had divorced after a ten year marriage to his children's mother. The other two fathers were separated from the mothers of their children and had never been married. Demographic information for these fathers appears in Table 1. All five fathers saw their children regularly, ranging from daily contact to sporadic but frequent weekend visits. Through their stories, these fathers shed light on the sometimes-bumpy path from youth to parenthood.

Table 1

*Demographic Information for Study Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Age at birth of first child</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Relationship with mother of child(ren)</b>
Jon	34	22	White	2	Divorced
Isaac	27	19	Native American/Hispanic	4	Separated
Patrick	32	22	White	3	Married
Kyle	23	18	White	2	Married
Darnell	23	19	Black	1	Separated

**Drastically altered life paths**

The young fathers interviewed spoke of their life changing significantly when they became fathers. Several of the young men spoke of the need to put their own plans aside to focus on their child. Jon, the 34-year-old white father who now has two children, a stepson and a baby on the way, said everything changed when he learned his girlfriend was pregnant.

*So, when I, like prior to that I was pretty much dropped out, I was, I was dropped out of college, slowly was dropping classes and finally dropped my last one.*

*And...was about to go, was planning on going to Africa...I had financial aid all ready to go, so I was ready to split, which, you know, wasn't uncommon for me to do at various stages, I'd take off. And then, so once, so when I found out, then it was like, I reenrolled in school, um, you know, more than full time, picked up more, you know, then I was working three jobs and going to school full time.*

Isaac, a Native American and Hispanic father of four says the birth of his son when he was 19 was instrumental in changing his lifestyle from spending time in the streets, to being a more responsible person.

*It got me, definitely, it got me off the streets too. I used to be uh, in the streets you know, per se, and that definitely veered me away, made me come home earlier at nights...it, just the responsibilities are very broad, a lot of things changed, from simply, me not just worrying about taking a bath or a shower, I got to give my son a bath or a shower, and food, food and um, shelter. I can't just go choose to sleep outside or whatever you want to call it.*

Patrick, a white father who now has three children, also saw his plans change dramatically when he learned his now wife was pregnant.

*I guess the first, the first thing that changed was my wife and I, our plans for the future. We kind of had a, we actually didn't know what we were going to do...we knew that when we were both done with what we were doing that we'd like to be together, but we didn't know where that was going to be. She didn't know if she was going to go off to graduate school um, uh, out East somewhere, and you know, so um, I was just getting out of the military and didn't have a degree...so, we had been wrestling with that, for a long, for a long time, so then, when we got pregnant, it actually in a strange way it actually put us on the same path, instantly, um, so all of a sudden, you know, our individual plans which we couldn't line up, um, because, you know, one, just absolutely, you know, one plan.*

Jon also spoke of undergoing a radical change. He said that as his plans changed with fatherhood, so did his lifestyle.

*I mean, I drank a lot, I mean, that was kind of my thing, and...so I mean, I was going, I was dropping out, I was going nowhere good and nowhere fast... It was funny because my buddy, we had this place and we decided we wanted a nine*

*month lease because we didn't want to be, ya know, tied down in the summer, and ya know, if we wanted to split, we could split, and so...what happens, so yeah, my lease was up so I could move in...with my new wife. So, that's how...yeah, it was instant.*

Although many of the fathers spoke about positive changes, many of the fathers also made sacrifices when they became fathers. Patrick, Darnell and Isaac all postponed educational aspirations when they became fathers, as the demands of working and raising children were time consuming. Darnell recently dropped out of school and said that he was not able to fit it into his busy schedule with work and parenting. Patrick and Isaac are both pursuing higher education currently, but were not able to work toward these goals earlier as their young families and jobs did not allow time.

Patrick and Kyle also talked about how relationships with friends changed when they became fathers and were no longer free to spend as much time with friends. Patrick mentioned not being able to make last minute plans like many of his friends could at 22. Kyle laughed when discussing how his life was now very different from his friends who spent a great deal of time “partying” and going out to bars. Both men said these sacrifices were worth it to spend time with their families.

### **The need for employment**

Each of the five fathers interviewed discussed needing to find a job as their financial responsibilities increased drastically when they became fathers. In fact, four of the five fathers cited increased financial responsibility as one of the first things that changed when they learned they were going to be fathers. Kyle, a 23-year-old white father of two children,

was 18 when his first child was born. Kyle said that he got his job working in a factory as soon as he learned his now-wife was pregnant. He said the constant stress of financial responsibility is one of the difficulties of being a young parent.

*Working, at lot, um, in a factory – I'm getting off, or I'm getting laid off, uh, the paycheck's never the same...that's hard.*

Patrick, now 32, first became a father at 22. He remembered feeling that finding employment to support his family was one of the most important things in his adjustment to a fatherhood role.

*I wanted to do the right thing, so I ended up, I uh, I worked at uh, there was a church that uh, I was going to, or that I attended when I was in high school, and they had property where there was a house, and they hadn't done anything to the house, but they offered me a job to work as a custodian at the church, and um, and they would let me and, um, my family stay uh, this house. So I worked for the church for a time in order to have a little place to live.*

Jon, a 34-year-old white father recalls working three jobs when he found out he was going to be a father at 22. He said he got the jobs as soon as he found out he was going to be a father and was away from home for long hours working to provide for his family. Twenty-three year old Darnell and 27-year-old Isaac also spoke about the immediate financial responsibilities that came with fatherhood. Darnell discussed how different his life had become since having his daughter when he was 19. He compared his current situation with that of other young men who aren't fathers.

*They um, they don't hafta, have ta provide for a child, you know, their responsibilities ain't the same, their mentality's not the same, um, they might have*



*more money than I do, ya know. Like, me, I'm working to take care of my child, so you know, they might not even have to work.*

### **The many roles of fathers**

In addition to rapidly shifting plans, the young fathers interviewed spoke of the rapidly evolving roles that came with fatherhood. These young men described themselves taking on new responsibilities as their children grew.

Darnell listed several qualities that characterize him as a father. Darnell laughed and smiled as he listed his qualities.

*Kind, playful, caregiving, loving, um, fun...wild, I don't know... uh, everything a good father should be I guess you could say.*

Jon also described being loving and supportive, but also mentioned the important roles of disciplining and preparing children to succeed in the world.

*I joke and say, if my kids like me then I'm not doing my job. Um, so, um, like with, like when I come to work I'm not going to pick every battle, but I think like with my kids I do. Um, so, um, like I look at it as it's my job to make sure they go out into the world with the skills they need... you know, I guess its my job to ya know, give them the the skills to...get in the world...social skills, really, its not the school's job.*

Patrick echoed the need to impart skills and wisdom on his children as an important part of being a father. He described modeling integrity and helping his children learn important values that he learned from important male figures in his life, such as his own father and men in his community.

*Just I guess, just teach them be a good person, help out, help others, um, uh, just listen to them, listen to your kids and try to teach them, um, the right thing to do, and help them, to make the right decisions.*

Similarly, Isaac talked about important values to teach his children. For Isaac, these values were learned in a spiritual setting, and from the few contacts he had with his largely absent father. He said that growing up without his father as a regular part of his life made him realize how important it is to have a positive father figure.

*I think I want to teach them, love and happiness, and uh, by example, and uh, to learn to, to be happy in life. To...that be a success, happiness, to intertwine those two together.*

In addition to the role of teacher, Isaac mentioned many other roles he learned to play when he became a father.

*Being a father, its like playing roles too, you're playing roles, and you're having to do jobs. A lot of jobs. You know, you could be chauffer, maid, a cook, you'd be all these things, you have to be all these things in order to be a good father, and help, and change all the time throughout the days.*

### **A sense of duty**

Many of the fathers talked about a sense of duty to father their children in the best way possible. They also spoke of feeling deep connections to their children, which furthered the desire to accept the father role.

Isaac spoke about this feeling when his son was born.

*I had responsibility over another human being, and that was pretty powerful, um, no longer responsible for just me, know what I mean? Um, and uh, it did, it changed me um, made me think different, something inside of me, I think at the time it was attachment, I got attached to another human being, my son, um, and uh, it made me happy, put a smile on my face.*

He cited this change as a motivator for doing the difficult work of parenting and for making the lifestyle changes required to be a good father. Patrick also talked about feeling motivated by bonds with his family.

*I guess I really kind of embraced being a dad, and didn't...I mean there are times where I wished I could hang out with my friends, or wish I had friends to hang out with, but it just is what it is. I don't know, I guess I enjoyed hanging out with my wife more than I enjoyed hanging out with the guys as bars, so that was one of those things... I love my kids more than anything, I think, uh, I can tell, I can tell that they love me and they love spending time and we just, uh, have a very, uh, very good relationship.*

### **Growing as a person**

Several fathers mentioned experiencing personal growth as a result of becoming fathers, but this concept was especially important to Isaac. Recently separated from the mother of his children, Isaac was pursuing education and personal goals during the time he was away from his children. He discussed feeling that maybe early fatherhood and the demands of parenting had initially taken away from his personal development.

*I think I got lost in it, in, uh, when I had my kids, just liked focused, maybe too much on them, where I lost the balance of myself and them and I think maybe I look, maybe right now I think, uh, a part went wrong, because now, when I'm, without them, I was able to focus, now I'm able to focus on myself, and when I fix myself and I heal myself and myself grows, I can help them more. I'm more useful, more helpful to them. Um, I spent too much attention to them, and it may not have been all...good, you know, but, uh...I kinda lost myself, I think.*

In this way, Isaac had to put his own development on hold to focus on his children. Now, with time to focus on himself, Isaac said he was confident that time for personal development was helping him become a better father. He also included hopes that his children would take the time to build themselves before becoming fathers.

*When I don't have them, I'm able to focus on myself more and make myself grow, in all ways, spiritually, emotionally, physically, education-wise, money-wise, and uh, to, I'm able to help other people, you know, and the focus goes less on my children, I don't know if that's good or bad, but I believe in some ways it was good for me and my situation, because like I said, I was able to grow a lot more, and so now when I have them, times I do have with them, they're more quality, so, so, uh, I would uh, one thing I would teach my, my children too, is to, is to wait to have children, definitely wait. Build yourself up, build your character, build your spirit, build, build you know, everything about you, so that when the time comes, when you do have children you'll be able to give a lot more to them, show them a lot more, and uh, be stronger for them and show them better ways, or more quality ways*

## Support systems

Patrick and Isaac both spoke of the importance of support systems in helping them become good fathers. For Patrick, family support was instrumental.

*The option was on the table for me to continue on to another 4 years in the military, um, but um, decided not to do it because its, you know, far away from family, so we really thought that, um, you know, having, having kids early on, and even though, even though we had our feet kind of firmly planted on the ground and she had her degree and ... it would be a lot, a lot easier just to be around, uh, a support system I guess, they could help us out, because there was no doubt that it was going to be tough for a few years.*

Isaac talked about friends and community members bolstering his spirit and belief in himself as a good father.

*But by, learning and watching other people and talking to other people who are fathers, or even mothers, you know, people who have some insight on being a parent, and listening to them and, and thinking about things maturely, and uh, I think I'm, I'm doing good. And I, I have doubts sometimes, but I get reassurances thru life now, that people say "man, you're", you know, that see things in me that I don't see, and they'll tell me, like, "hey you're this and you're that", and I'm like "for real?", and they're like, "yeah", so that reassures, me, like the pat on the back you could say.*

Both Darnell and Isaac found some support through an agency helping young fathers. At the agency they were able to connect with other fathers who shared insights, information and experiences and gave these young fathers a sense of positive community.

## **Relationships with children's mothers**

When it came to relationships with the mothers of their children, Kyle and Patrick found parenting and personal support in the relationships with their now-wives, but for the other three fathers, the relationships with the mothers of their children had ended in the years since the births of their children.

Jon described the stressful relationship he had with the mother of his children and how that impacted his ability to parent. Jon says he and the mother of his oldest two children dated “tenuously” for three months before she became pregnant. They married shortly thereafter, but the relationship was often troubled.

*The relationship with my um my kids mom was never on solid ground, ever.*

*Um, so I mean that was a big, a big stress. Like we were always on the outs, ya know, throughout the entire marriage, um, and so, I mean, that's a distraction, um, and probably, to the, um, um, took the focus away, I guess we didn't really, we spent more time talking about our relationship than we did talking about the kids, um, where with their mom now, I mean, that's what we're talking about, were talking about the kids. I mean, we're actually parenting, together.*

Isaac was going through the challenges following a separation from the mother of his children about five months ago. In addition to emotional stress, Isaac was trying to navigate custody arrangements and had not been able to see his children regularly following the separation. Darnell was also struggling to co-parent after ending the relationship with the mother of his child. Although Darnell was able to visit his child regularly, he said his baby's mother got in the way of him being the father he wanted to be.

*I don't know I guess when we separated it went south, you could say, um, we still work, work at, work things out as far as the, my daughter's concerned, um, as far as us, I wouldn't say we interact with each other too much... She's...I mean, um, I don't know, when she was livin in Hennepin County I wasn't even on child support. And then she moved to Ramsey county, soon as she moved to Ramsey county, boom you're on child support. Wasn't nothing wrong with that, but she, ya know, instead of her looking for a job or trying ta, ya know what I'm saying, do what needs to be done, she just, kinda took the easy way out.*

### **Barriers to parenting**

In addition to difficult romantic relationships, the fathers interviewed faced additional barriers to parenting the way they hoped to parent. For Darnell, his girlfriend filing for child support became a large stressor. He viewed the police as a significant barrier as they tried to enforce his child support contributions.

*I got my license suspended for child support right now, so I guess I'm driving and duckin' 'em and I don't know, its like, its like they, I don't know, its like they just come from nowhere sometimes and like to pick on you or whatever. I don't necessarily be driving all the time, but, you know, they just, its just crazy how the police be when they stop you, its not like they're trying to, ya know, they say protect and serve, but they're, they're doing more harm than good, taking you to jail, towing your car, just ya know what I'm sayin', I mean, its all a part of life or whatever, you could say, but if you don't, ya know, have the things necessary to*

*do what you need to do, you caint take care of that, so they're faulting you for that or whatever the case may be, but they're a big problem.*

He also expressed dislike of navigating the formal child support system and indicated that he was not trying to deny his daughter support, but found the system to be an imposition.

*I mean, its not even that I caint pay child support, I am paying child support, I take care of my daughter, its just that I'm not sending them the money or whatever, so that's, I don't know, I'm trying to get it worked out with the courts. I gotta wait on the court date, so that's what that's about.*

Isaac discussed sometimes feeling burdened by the expectations others had for him as a father.

*Having illusions...um, you know, stories in your mind or labels, that uh, you think you should be doing something in a certain way, people have expectations, could get in the way... but uh, I guess, this, expectations people have had, uh, expectations of you to be this and that, and then you, you start to feel bad, or inadequate about it, and it, you're, uh, you're only human.*

## **Services**

To handle the difficulties of early fatherhood, most of these young men relied on services to help them navigate their new role. Interestingly, many of the fathers initially struggled to identify services they used, or thought would have been helpful. Eventually, however, four of the five fathers discussed services. The services they identified as helpful were food supports such as food stamps and Women, Infants and Children (WIC), medical assistance, housing assistance, Alcoholics Anonymous, and cultural and spiritual supports.



Isaac and Darnell both participated in a program for young fathers that provided parenting groups, support for attaining educational goals and assistance navigating the child support system. Darnell also said talking to older fathers at this program helped him feel prepared for what was to come. Isaac had recently engaged with an agency that was helping him sort out the process for getting custody of his children. Although Isaac indicated that these programs were helpful, he focused his discussion of services or programs he wished existed. He talked about wishing something existed in high schools to help young men see that early fatherhood should be avoided.

*You could go with child support lets say, something that basic to say that, hey if you have a child and you separate from your kids' mother you're going to pay child support the rest of your life, and when you don't pay it you're going to lose...what do they take away....you're going to lose your driver's license and you could go to jail and this and that, and you know, and to you know get into that a little more, I think that would deter some children, yeah, children cause they'd be in high school children at the time, not to have unprotected sex or sex period. Or to, have uh, some type of classes to...teach you about fatherhood, like have fathers come in there and give speeches from experience, about their, like, I can think about that, me being able to come in there and talk to other children in high schools about, um, my experiences, that's all I can really speak for, I don't want to say theories, cause that's just a theory, I could say this is how it was for me, um, I think that is like, more solid than a theory, um, just to be able to tell you, to wait, and uh, you got a whole lifetime.*

## **Summary**

During the interviews, Patrick, Kyle, Darnell, Jon and Isaac shared their experiences of dealing with early, often unplanned fatherhood. As they navigated the transition from youth to the adult role of fatherhood, these young men experienced drastically altered life plans, often by the need to pause their own development to meet the needs of their new families. For these men, their life plans were significantly impacted by the need to find employment to meet their financial responsibilities. As the fathers worked to acknowledge their new roles and navigate challenging relationships and other barriers, they relied on a variety of services and supports and felt motivated by the deep bonds with their children.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how five young men handled the off-time developmental shift from youth to parent when they became fathers during adolescence. Each of these young men discussed the need to grow up quickly to meet the expectations of the fatherhood role. In their comments, these fathers shed light on obstacles and successes they experienced along the way. The young men in this study spoke of feeling a sense of duty and a need to quickly adjust and alter their life plans when they learned they were going to be fathers. They spoke of the challenges of financially supporting a young family, and of navigating sometimes-rocky romantic relationships. The fathers spoke of the importance of support systems and the gap they often felt between formerly supportive peers who were no longer able to fully understand their experiences. Although the information gathered from these young men provides insight into the identity integration process for young fathers, the implications are limited by a small sample size, inexact sampling procedure and a sample that was not

representative of the larger group of young fathers in terms of demographics. Despite these limitations, information from this study can contribute to the knowledge base guiding social work policy, practice and research.

### **The duty to adjust**

All of the young men interviewed for this study talked about the important and necessary shifts in their life that occurred when they became fathers. They spoke of putting plans for education on hold, focusing on employment, and distancing themselves from the “partying” and young lifestyles of their childless friends. The fathers described this as drastic shift, but one that was motivated by a sense of duty and the desire to be good fathers. As the literature suggests (Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Paschal et al, 2010; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009), many young fathers are proud to become fathers and have high expectations of themselves in this role. They also experience high expectations from families and the mothers of their children. For the fathers interviewed in this study, the desire to be good fathers was a significant motivation to make drastic life changes that allowed them to accept the fatherhood role, which was congruent with information with the literature (Parra-Cardona et al, 2006; Paschal et al, 2010; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009). Additionally, all of the fathers talked about feeling a sense of duty to fill certain role as fathers. For some, such as Isaac, no one had explicitly shown them how to be good fathers, as their own fathers were absent or disengaged. The fathers seemed to gravitate toward a societal construct (Andrews et al, 2004; Cabrera et al, 2000; Saleh & Hinton, 2010) that they may or may not have ever seen in action.

Remarkably, all the fathers in the study view parenthood in a positive light. Although they readily identified challenges and changes, none of the fathers spoke of wishing they had not become fathers, or even wishing it had happened years later. Some of this positive outlook may come from the fact that for all the fathers, it has been several years since the birth of their children. For Jon and Patrick, ten years have passed since the birth of their first child. Even Kyle and Darnell, who are fewer years away from the event of becoming parents, have spent four years adjusting to parenthood. This time gap may have given the fathers some perspective on the event and may influence how they view parenthood compared with someone who has just recently become a father.

Interestingly, while many of the fathers indicated their lives had been drastically changed, three of them were not able to articulate firm plans as to what they would have been doing had they not become fathers. Darnell, Isaac and Kyle talked about having to find jobs and become more stable. They did not, however, specify that had they not become fathers, they would have been engaged in a different activity. Their lack of plans suggests that fatherhood may have been a life change in that it necessitated more planning than living a teenage lifestyle did. This need to solidify plans may have been a developmental milestone itself.

### **The ability to provide**

One component of fatherhood that came up frequently was the ability to provide financially for their children. Each of the young men described immediately feeling the need to find employment to provide for their young families. Literature indicates that this is a common occurrence for young men when they become fathers, and that the ability to provide

often influences the level of involvement young fathers have with their children (Dallas et al, 2000; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Erkut et al, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009). All of the young men in this study were currently employed, but spoke of the difficulty of finding appropriate employment. The fathers spoke of working multiple jobs, or long, irregular hours in attempts to meet the needs of their families. Needing to work was one of the major lifestyle changes the young men identified.

For the participants, the issue of child support was related to concerns about obtaining financial resources. For one of the young fathers, difficulty providing child support had become a significant issue, and he was dealing with the legal ramifications of providing child support. One of the other fathers was currently meeting child support expectations, but was well aware of the difficulties he would face if he could not pay. Kost, (2001), Magnuson & Gibson-Davis (2007) and Pirog-Good & Good, (1995) discussed child support expectations as often stressful for young men who may not always be able to meet the economic expectations outlined by the courts, which at times led to disengagement from families, legal ramifications, and at times increased participation in criminal activities that produced money for their children. Additionally, research has shown many young men prefer to offer material goods over formal arrangements requiring cash contributions (Kost, 2001; Pirog-Good & Good, 1995; Weinman et al, 2002). For some, this is based out of difficulty trusting the mothers of their children with the money (Weinman et al, 2002), but for fathers who have difficulty finding and maintaining employment, contributions of in-kind resources may be a more attainable request (Kost, 2001). At least one of the young fathers interviewed found it easier to contribute in-kind goods and resources as a form of child support.

## **Romantic relationships**

The relationship status between the young fathers and the mothers of their children was important, as the literature would suggest (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009). The fathers who had the most contact with their children were the fathers who were married to the mothers of their children, clearly, as these fathers lived with their children. Living status aside, the ability to get along with the mothers of their children was an important component in the father's involvement. Three of the young fathers were navigating custody arrangements, and Jon, the father with the most stable arrangement out of the non-custodial fathers, had managed to forge a conflict-free relationship with the mother of his children, although he spoke of times when relational conflict interfered with his fathering ability. Two of the other young men were still dealing with the fallout from the end of the romantic relationships with the mother of their children. Although these men were interested in spending time with their children, they reported conflict with the children's mother as a primary barrier, which is supported by literature on young fathers (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009). Although these findings are similar to the literature, the fathers in this study differ in that all of them have regular, if sporadic, contact with their children. The research (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009) indicates that a difficult relationship with the mother of a child often results in the father disengaging from the child. Even Darnell and Isaac, who are currently struggling with the relationship with the mothers of their children have seen their children within the last month and plan to see them again soon.

## **Support systems**

The young fathers interviewed for this study had varied experiences with support systems. Two of the fathers spoke of the importance of their supports, which came from family members who helped them through the difficult early years, to spiritual communities that bolstered them throughout their journeys. Edin & Kefalas (2005) Erkut et al (2005) and Fagan et al (2007) found social supports to be an important component in young fathers' ability to accept new roles. As Patrick and Isaac found, when those around them, including family and friends, expected them to be good fathers and gave them support and encouragement, it was easier to adjust to new duties, responsibilities and stressors.

On the other hand, Joe, Kyle and Darnell spoke about the distance that grew between them and their peers when they became fathers. Patrick also mentioned losing connections with friends who did not have similar responsibilities. Although none of the fathers interviewed had negative input from support systems, they lost connections to peers who were involved in more developmentally normal adolescent activities of spending time with friends, traveling, and living with few commitments. The literature supports this challenge as a difficulty of early parenthood (Erkut et al, 2005; Frewin et al, 2007; Wilkinson et al, 2009). Thus, support systems were both buffers to the difficulties of early parenthood, while parenthood significantly impacted relationships between the fathers and the members of their social circles from prior to fatherhood.

## **Strengths and limitations**

There are several strengths and limitations to this study. The strengths are related to the detailed perspectives shared by the young fathers, which provide some insight into the experience of early fatherhood. The open-ended questions in the interviews allowed the young fathers to speak freely of their experiences. Although the questions asked were based in the literature on young fathers, the interview design allowed fathers to truly offer their insights as opposed to choosing from predetermined answers. This creates more authenticity and allows for better understanding of the actual experience of young fatherhood (Berg, 2009).

Some issues, like the importance of finding a job, were very apparent in the data and have implications for social work policy, practice and research. Each of the five fathers talked about the need to find employment, and of the difficulties associated with not being able to meet their financial obligations. As each father independently discussed this issue, it is clear that this is a very important subject for young fathers. The fathers were also very clear that their lives changed completely when they became fathers.

However, there are several limits to this study. The small sample size and non-probability sampling method negatively impact the generalizability of the findings. Also, the sample is not characteristic of the larger population of young fathers in several ways. First, a sample of five people is much too small to be representative of the entire population of young fathers. Many more interviews would need to be conducted to be able to generalize the findings of this study to all young fathers.

Also, the sampling method is not appropriate for generalizing outcomes (Berg, 2009). The data in this study may be skewed as the fathers interviewed were either participating in a



program for fathers or known by acquaintances of the interview. None of the men recruited for the study were men who were not actively engaged in being fathers, as disengaged fathers would not be likely to participate in a fathering program, and would not be likely to want to participate in a study about fatherhood. Research indicates many young men are far less involved and may not even fully acknowledge their paternity (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Pirog-Good & Good, 1995; Robbers, 2009). These fathers likely have very different perspectives than the young men that participated in this study. Along similar lines, the fathers in this study had higher levels of relationship stability – with several of the young men currently married – than the larger population, which likely impacted their high level of involvement (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). To better represent the wider experiences of young fathers, researchers would need to find ways to identify and engage fathers who may be less easily available and less interested in participating in a study.

Finally, the sample for this study was not demographically similar to the greater population (CDC, 2009; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011). Due to the age restrictions of this study, the data does not represent the portion of young men who become fathers in their earlier teens. Out of the participants in this study, the father who became a parent at the earliest age was 18 when his child was born. This does not account for the experiences of the fathers who begin parenting earlier and are even less developmentally mature. This is a significant factor in understanding the implications of this study, as the experiences of the participants is likely radically different from the experiences of men who become fathers in their young teens and have an even larger developmental gap to overcome. These very young fathers are also likely to experience greater difficulty with changes of plans, financial opportunities and relationship barriers.

The fathers in this study also were not racially representative of the larger population. Three of the five fathers were white, one was African-American and one was Native American and Hispanic. Data on young fathers indicates minority populations comprise much larger percentages of young fathers (CDC, 2009; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011).

## **Implications**

### **Policy needs**

The findings from this study indicated several policy needs related to young fathers. The young men interviewed, and the literature on young fathers, indicated needs related to child support policy, employment and prevention of young parenthood.

First, difficulty with child support emerged as an issue for young fathers. The current child support system is fairly punitive, with significant consequences for fathers who do not meet the requirements (Kost, 2001; Magnuson & Gibson-Davis, 2007; & Pirog-Good & Good, 1995). For some men, including the men in this study, lack of payment does not result from lack of willingness to support their children. Young fathers who are unable to provide financial assistance due to difficulty maintaining employment may not meet expectations. Additionally, some young fathers are uncomfortable with providing money that they cannot prove goes directly to their children. In these cases, policies that allowed fathers to meet their obligations by providing in-kind goods (supplies, childcare, etc.) may result in increased provisions from young fathers (Kost, 2001; Pirog-Good & Good, 1995).

An important issue related to child support is the ability of young fathers to find and keep lucrative employment (CDC, 2011a; Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Planned Parenthood, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002). All of the fathers in this

study talked about the stress of finding jobs that would appropriately meet the needs of their families. This is especially critical during times of social and economic difficulty, such as the present. Many young fathers have low levels of education and job skills and are likely to struggle in the labor force (CDC, 2011a; Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011; Planned Parenthood, 2010; Weinman et al, 2002). Policy initiatives that support education and employment would be helpful to young fathers who are willing to engage with their families, but struggle to fulfill this role. Policy outcomes could provide funding for these programs, and could provide incentives, such as child support benefits, wage support, or in-kind goods could be offered to fathers who chose to improve their education levels and employability.

Additionally, policy initiatives could focus on preventing young parenthood by increasing teen awareness of the true difficulties of young parenthood, as study participant Isaac suggested. If young people were aware of the vast lifestyle changes they would experience by becoming parents, they might be more likely to wait. Also, prevention efforts should focus on increasing options for teens who may feel parenthood is the only positive role they have to look forward to (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagot et al, 1998; Mazza, 2002).

### **Practice activities**

This study provides insight into how social workers can best help clients who are young fathers. As indicated in this study, there are several areas in which young fathers need support. Fathers need assistance finding jobs and honing job skills. They also may need help furthering their education to open more employment opportunities. In addition to these practical supports, the young fathers in this study indicated early fatherhood was stressful,

suggesting social workers can provide important emotional support as fathers try to navigate the transition into the fatherhood role. Indeed, research on effective interventions highlights the helpfulness of connection with others, either in a one-on-one helping relationship or in a group setting (Fagan, 2008; Robbers, 2009). Also, young fathers in this study and in previous studies have identified the importance of positive social supports in helping them with the challenges of parenting (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Erkut et al, 2005; and Fagan et al, 2007). Social workers can help young fathers build relationship skills, can assist fathers in working through difficulties with support systems, and can help fathers find new peer supports as they face the loss of peers who are not fathers.

### **Future research**

Due to the limited nature of this study, future research is needed to confirm and add to these findings. Areas for ongoing research center around jobs, child support, supporting young fathers, and prevention.

Specifically, research should focus on the job prospects of young fathers. As employment was highlighted as an important issue in this study, future research should focus on the types of employment young fathers find, the suitability of this employment in terms of melding well with father's goals for their families, and barriers to employment faced by young fathers. This knowledge can help inform ongoing attempts to best serve young fathers.

Next, researchers should explore issues related to child support. Specifically, trials should be conducted to examine effectiveness of child support programs that allow for the allocation of in kind goods, as Kost (2001) indicated some such programs exist.

Additionally, more information is needed about why fathers struggle to pay child support, and what interventions might increase compliance rates other than the current punitive actions.

More research is needed to identify how to best connect fathers to social supports. Although the fathers in this study and others identified social supports as important, some fathers in this study, and in the larger population of young fathers, lack appropriate social support (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Erkut et al, 2005; Fagan et al, 2007). Research should examine how fathers would prefer to be connected to supports and methods to effectively engage young fathers in supportive programs.

### **Summary of implications**

This study provided valuable insight into the experiences of young fathers as they attempt to move from youth to adulthood with the arrival of a child. The study participants spoke of a sense of duty as a motivating factor as they experienced drastic realignment of their lives. Through this process, the fathers faced new expectations that they be financially responsible for families, sometimes through the formal child support system. The fathers identified intensified needs for social support, sometimes at a time when they were least connected to their peers and endured the challenges of rocky romantic relationships. Although the small and non-probability-based sample and a non-representative population limited this study, implications for policy, practice and research emerged from the data.

## **Conclusion**

Despite declining rates of teen parenthood over the past two decades, the United States continues to experience high rates of teen parenthood compared to other developed nations (CDC, 2011a; Planned Parenthood, 2010). Teen parenthood is correlated with negative outcomes for both the parents and their children, such as lower rates of educational success for parents, living in poverty and higher risks of abuse and neglect for children (CDC, 2011a; Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Planned Parenthood, 2010). Research and service provision for teen parents has historically focused on teen mothers, but this study focused on teen fathers for a number of reasons. Teen fathers face many challenges when they become fathers early, and their children are significantly impacted by their involvement or lack thereof (Healthy Teen Network, 2004; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011). Young fathers face high expectations for succeeding in the fatherhood role (Andrews et al, 2004; Cabrera et al, 2000; Dallas et al, 2000; Erkut et al, 2005; Saleh & Hinton, 2010; Shannon & Abrams, 2007; Weinman et al, 2002; Wilkinson et al, 2009), the need to quickly move through the developmental stage of adolescence (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Frewin et al, 2007; Paschal et al, 2010) and relationship difficulties (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Fagan et al, 2003; Paschal et al, 2010; Rhein et al, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 2009). This study was conducted from a developmental perspective that examined the concept of the self and identity in young fathers. The research also occurred through the lens of ecological systems theory. Five fathers participated in semi-structured interviews during this study. In their discussions, the fathers spoke of drastic lifestyle changes when they became fathers. They found themselves facing a variety of new roles, including a significant pressure to become financial providers. They experienced challenging romantic relationships and distancing from peer networks, in

addition to other barriers. These struggles were mediated by a sense of duty, the support of others, and helpful services. Although this study was limited by the small sample size, non-probability recruitment method, and non-representative sample, it highlighted important issues for social workers creating policies, practicing and researching in the area of teen parenthood.

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## Appendix A

### **Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Please tell me what your primary activity is during the day, such as school, work, or caring for a child.
3. Please tell me about your child(ren).

Now I'd like to know a little more about you as a father.

4. Tell me about the relationship with the mother of your child.
5. What, if anything, has changed since you first learned you were going to be a father?
6. Describe yourself as a father.
7. What do you think makes a "good father?"
8. Tell me about what gets in the way of being a good father.
9. How is your life different from someone your age who is not a father?
10. How is your life different from fathers who are older than you?

Finally, I'd like to know about services you have used or wanted during the process.

11. Tell me about any services you used, with or without you baby's mother.
12. Are there any services you have not used, but think would be helpful?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

## Appendix B

# CONSENT FORM UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

## Young fathers and identity integration

282602-1

I am conducting a study about the experiences and perceptions of young fathers who became fathers at age 22 or younger. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because a community member identified you as a young father who may be interested in sharing your story. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Emily Bade, advised by Katherine Hill, through the Master of Social Work program at the College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas.

### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine perspectives on parenthood from fathers of whom became parents at age 22 or younger. Individual interviews with these young fathers will address father's experiences, perceptions and service needs both during the pregnancy and after the birth of the child to explore how young fathers transition from youth to adults in the parenthood role. Through their stories, this research will identify barriers that hinder this process as well as services and supports that aid in this developmental transition for young men.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to answer questions during an interview with me. The interview will last between 30 and 60 minutes and will be audio taped. I may also take notes during the interview. After the interview, I will transcribe the interview to review the information gathered.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has several risks. Some of the questions in this study are sensitive and may cause some emotional distress or discomfort due to invasion of your privacy. If you agree to participate, you will have access to contact information for mental health professionals should this occur. Also, although I will remove all identifying information from any data viewed by other individuals, it is impossible to provide absolute assurance that others will not be able to identify you as a participant in this study.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

**Compensation:**

You will receive a \$10 Super America gift card if you agree to participate.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include audio recordings and written transcripts of these recordings, and notes that I may take during our interview. Additionally, I will keep this consent form. Audio recordings will be available only to the researcher and will be stored on a password protected computer. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts and written notes. Interview transcripts will be accessible to the researcher, advisor and peers in a research seminar for the purpose of analyzing data. The consent form and any written data will be kept in a secure location in my home. The recordings, consent form and the transcripts will be destroyed on June 1, 2012, following the completion of this project.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until one week following the interview. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you will be destroyed and will not be used in the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Emily Bade. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at ###-###-####. You may also contact my advisor, Katharine Hill, at 651-962-5809. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to being audio taped. I am at least 18 years of age.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

Appendix C

**Are you a father?  
Did you become a father before age 22?**

If so,

**You are Invited:  
To participate in a research study on young fathers.**

*Emily Bade, a graduate student in the School of Social Work at St. Thomas University/St. Catherine University, is researching young fathers, like yourself.*

*Young fathers are needed to share their story to help bring awareness and understanding to the experiences and needs of young fathers. Emily is interested in what you know about being a young father: your experiences, challenges, successes and needs. The study will specifically focus on how young fathers deal with being an adolescent and a father at the same time.*

*As a “thank you” for sharing your story, you will be offered a \$10 Super America gift card if you agree to participate.*

*Information from interviews will be confidential and Emily will protect your privacy through this process. Your participation is completely voluntary.*

**For more information, please contact Emily Bade.**

**###-###-####**

[bade9582@stthomas.edu](mailto:bade9582@stthomas.edu)

## Appendix D

### Counseling Resources

Crisis Connection  
24-hour phone counseling service  
**612-379-6363**

Catholic Charities Counseling Services  
651-647-3186

### **Hennepin County/Minneapolis Area**

#### **Walk-in Counseling Center**

No appointment needed. Simply walk in during clinic hours. Services are first come first served, so there may be a wait.

**612-870-0565**

2421 Chicago Ave South  
Minneapolis, MN 55404  
M, W, F 1-3 p.m.  
M-Th 6:30-8:30 p.m.

#### **Hennepin County COPE:**

(Community Outreach for Psychiatric Emergencies)

**612-596-1223**

### **Ramsey County/St. Paul Area**

**Ramsey County (Adult Mental Health) Crisis Unit: 651-266-7900**

#### **Family Tree Clinic**

**651-645-0478**

1619 Dayton Ave. #205  
St. Paul, MN  
Walk-ins Monday & Wednesday 5-7 p.m.



## **Counseling Resources**

If you experience any emotional distress following your participation in this study, please contact one of the following resources for help.

The Center  
902 Edmond, Suite 203  
Saint Joseph, MO 64501  
816-364-4300

Catholic Charities  
1302 Faraon  
St. Joseph, MO  
816-232-2885