



Healthy Teen Network

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES
OF TEENS AND YOUNG FAMILIES

A POLICY PLATFORM TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND SUCCESS AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CALL TO ACTION

In 2009, a new Administration, and a new Congress will take up the work of creating and implementing public policy for the U.S. This historic moment provides an opportunity for young families and advocates alike to appeal to elected and appointed leaders to make our voices heard – now is the time to engage this new government in the crucial work of ensuring health and success for these and all youth.

With that in mind, Healthy Teen Network – the nation’s leading organization on young family issues – offers this *Policy Platform to Promote Health and Success among Young Families*. It constitutes a set of federal policy recommendations aimed at establishing or reforming programs and systems that influence whether or not young families achieve health and success after a teen birth.

A POLICY PLATFORM TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND SUCCESS AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES

Healthy Teen Network calls upon the new Administration and Congress to advance this comprehensive policy platform to promote health and success among young families. These seven “Signature Recommendations” form the backbone of Healthy Teen Network’s policy platform to promote health and success among young families, defined as pregnant and parenting youth under age 25 and their children:

- **Young Families Resource Centers Program**—Healthy Teen Network recommends strengthening and expanding the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) Care Program by establishing a permanent care coordination and support services program targeted to young families [I. Health and Human Services].
- **Young Families Transitional Living Initiative**—Healthy Teen Network recommends increasing appropriations for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Transitional Living Program in order to expand supportive housing opportunities for young families, such as by increasing the supply of maternity group homes [II. Housing].
- **Young Parent Access to Education Program**—Healthy Teen Network recommends authorizing and appropriating funds for state educational agencies and local educational agencies to provide assistance to pregnant and parenting students in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in secondary school, to ensure school completion, and to prepare them for postsecondary education [III. Education].
- **Young Family Early Childhood Home Visitation Initiative**—Healthy Teen Network recommends increasing funding for and placing greater emphasis on young families within existing and forthcoming home visitation programs, through such means as the Education Begins at Home Act [IV. Child Welfare and Development].
- **Young Parent Workforce Investment Demonstration Program**—Healthy Teen Network recommends authorizing and appropriating funds within the Workforce Investment Act for an employment and training demonstration program targeted specifically to very young parents [V. Workforce and Life Skills Development].
- **Young Families Access to TANF Initiative**—Healthy Teen Network recommends removing barriers to young families accessing public income security assistance currently available through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program [VI. Income Security].
- **Young Families Research and Development Initiative**—Healthy Teen Network recommends authorizing and appropriating funds for national activities to advance knowledge and understanding of young families, including a periodic national needs assessment, a research study on service delivery models, and a national information clearinghouse [VII. Knowledge Development and Transfer].

WHO ARE YOUNG FAMILIES?

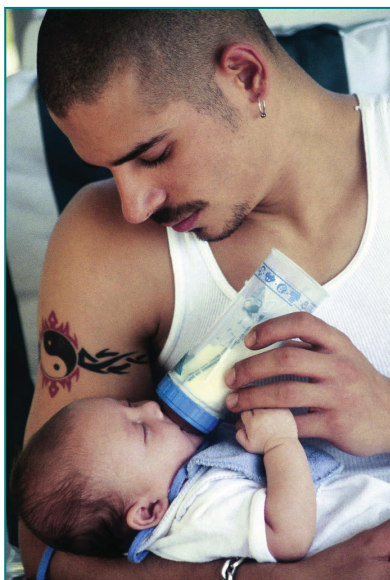
Healthy Teen Network defines “young family” as a family unit of at least one custodial parent under the age of 25, either female or male, and his/her child(ren). Research on brain development is conclusive that the human brain does not fully develop until around age 25³. Therefore Healthy Teen Network’s recommendations highlight the need for public policies intended to help adolescents transition successfully into adulthood that reflect the developmental reality of adolescence. This publication addresses families of which the custodial parent is under 25 or otherwise below the age of majority (i.e. “teen parent” or “minor parent”) as defined by state law.



THE “LIFE DOMAINS” OF YOUNG FAMILIES

Young families need access to the same types of supports that all youth and families need for positive development, yet they often need them in more intensity, for longer duration, and to be targeted to the developmental stage of the young parent. Healthy Teen Network organized its analysis of young family needs and gaps in resources and services among the following seven “life domains:”

- I. **Health and Human Services**—Young families benefit from pre- and postnatal health care that aims to prevent premature and low birth weight infants, promote maternal and child nutrition, ensure healthy child development, and reduce and/or delay repeated pregnancies, among other outcomes.
- II. **Housing**—Young families benefit from stable and supportive housing arrangements where they can live as an intact unit, whether with family members, in transitional, independent, or custodial living program, or independently.
- III. **Education**—Young parents benefit from completing secondary and postsecondary education, which allows them to attain stable employment and a living wage that will provide for themselves and their children.
- IV. **Workforce and Life Skills Development**—Young parents benefit from training for long-term employment that affords growth opportunities and that pays a wage on which they can support a family.
- V. **Child Welfare and Development**—The children of young parents benefit when they have access to early learning and development opportunities and when their parents learn parenting skills that ensure their safe and healthy, mental and physical development.
- VI. **Income Security**—Young families benefit from having available a temporary income safety net for times when other supports and resources are not readily accessible.
- VII. **Knowledge Development and Transfer**—Young families benefit from more focused attention on trends among the population and the identification of effective practices for supporting their health and success.



WHY YOUNG FAMILIES MATTER



Healthy Teen Network believes that all youth can make responsible decisions regarding their sexual, reproductive, and parenting behaviors when they have complete, accurate and culturally relevant age-, gender-, and developmentally appropriate information, resources, and support. In an ideal world, pregnancy prevention strategies would result in zero early and unplanned births to young parents. Young people would delay childbearing until after first attaining their educational, income security, and family relationship goals. Young people who choose to parent would obtain adequate supports and resources to ensure that their own hardships are not replicated in their children's lives. In an ideal world, youth who do become pregnant and give birth as well as their children would develop into healthy and successful adult members of the community and nation.

This is not an ideal world. Today, whether or not a young person becomes involved in an early or unplanned pregnancy depends on more than his/her knowledge about sexuality and his/her access to reproductive health services. The root causes of early and unplanned parenthood are embedded in the culture and systems that shape a young person's overall development, including relationships with familial and non-familial adults, educational and career prospects in his/her community, family and safety net supports to prevent poverty, and access to a range of developmental and health services and supports.

THE NEED FOR MORE THAN PRIMARY PREVENTION



Preventing teen pregnancy is something that we, as a nation, strive for. But regardless of our prevention efforts, a certain number of young people in the U.S. each year do become involved in a teen pregnancy, whether through failure to abstain from sexual activity or contraceptive non-use, misuse, or failure. Despite our nation's manifold efforts to reduce early and unplanned pregnancies, in 2006, 41.9 out of 1,000 females aged 15-19 gave birth in the United States, up from 40.5 per 1000 in 2005, reversing a 15 year decline¹.

Youth who live in unstable environments characterized by few resources may be at even higher risk for early pregnancy. For example, youth in foster care experience higher rates of pregnancy than their more permanently housed peers. According to one source, by age 21, nearly 71 percent of young women who had been in foster care report having been pregnant at least once; of these women, 62 percent had been pregnant more than once².

Teen pregnancy prevention, both primary and subsequent, must remain a major focus of public policy pertaining to child, youth, and family health and wellbeing. Yet the U.S. must also commit to its responsibility to provide equal opportunities to those young people who do become pregnant and who choose to become parents as well as their children. Many young families face multiple barriers to health and wellbeing not only because the parents are still youth themselves but because many are at a lower socioeconomic status than their non-parenting peers. The specialized service needs of young families are often overlooked in both family and youth policies and practices. This lack of attention must be reversed.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

A Policy Platform to Promote Health and Success among Young Families is the result of a yearlong process undertaken by Healthy Teen Network to identify the most pressing challenges facing young families today and the federal programs that are currently, or could be, responsive to those needs. We commenced our project by turning to our members, including our Young Families Committee and our Policy Committee, for input on the pressing challenges for young families. We also drew from a Behavior-Determinant-Intervention (BDI) logic model created by Healthy Teen Network that outlines interventions designed to achieve certain developmental goals for young families, including academic preparation, sexual health, job readiness, financial stability, healthy relationships, and parenting skills. Thirdly, we solicited input from a Young Families Policy Advisory Group (YFPAG) composed of experts in the fields of adolescent health and youth policy. *See Appendices for additional information about the YFPAG and Healthy Teen Network's Policy and Young Families Committees.*

Healthy Teen Network distilled input from these three sources into the seven "life domains" outlined above. We then matched these life domains with relevant federal policy and programs, identified gaps, and developed recommendations to create new law or amend current law or public policy. The results of our work are presented in the seven main sections of this publication.

To download the full report, "*A Policy Platform to Promote Health and Success among Young Families*," visit www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org.

For more information, contact (410) 685-0410 or info@healthyteennetwork.org.

(Endnotes)

¹ *Births: Preliminary Data for 2006*. National Vital Statistics Report, Volume 56, Number 7. 18 pp. (PHS) 2008-1120. Accessed on December 13, 2008, from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr56/nvsr56_07.pdf.

² Bilaver, L.A., & Courtney, M.E., (2006). *Foster Care Youth. Science Says #27*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

³ Beatrice Luna, PhD., "Brain and Cognitive Processes Underlying Cognitive Control of Behavior in Adolescence," University of Pittsburgh, October 2005.