

# Supporting Young Fathers in Michigan

## Michigan Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program Success Story

2020 Michigan Preventive Health and Health Services (PHHS) Block Grant

### Challenge

It is estimated that over 180,000 young men father a child each year, yet few support programs are designed specifically for them.<sup>1</sup> While being an adolescent father is associated with many of the same negative social outcomes experienced by adolescent mothers, most programs serving adolescent parents only focus on the mother.<sup>2,3</sup> Sexual and reproductive health promotion initiatives are no exception; interventions targeted at young men remain largely underdeveloped, particularly in relation to the prevention of teenage pregnancies, the promotion of positive parenting and sexual health.<sup>4</sup> Those programs that do exist often prove problematic when they negatively stereotype young fathers, or ineffectively address the difficulties young men may have in forming meaningful relationships.<sup>5</sup> As young fathers often adopt traditional notions of masculinity and avoid seeking or accepting help, their need for age-appropriate pregnancy prevention and parenting supports that challenge these ideas can fill a critical gap in our state's family planning efforts.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, even evidence based curricula currently available at the national level do not address improving sexual health decision making and reproductive intentions that align with the overall wellbeing of adolescents; Michigan's Supporting Youth Fathers project was designed to fill this void in information and support for young fathers.

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### Approach

This project provides tailored supports and prevention education to young fathers by implementing Son to a Father (STAF) and supporting young fathers to positively impact traditional ideals of masculinity, sexual risk tasking, and supportive parenting while fostering protective factors to reduce teen pregnancy. STAF is a 12 or 13 lesson curriculum implemented in five community and detention sites that promotes self-confidence and empowers fathers to discover a positive perspective on family engagement and healthy styles of communicating, resulting in a commitment to positive action in order to make healthy choices for themselves and their families. Implementation sites include the Berrien County Health Department (Benton Harbor), Saginaw Intermediate School District (Saginaw), Eaton Regional Education Service Agency (Lansing), Highfields Inc. (Onondaga), and the 17th Circuit Court- Family Division Detention Center (Grand Rapids).

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## Results

Berrien County Family Health Programs Manager Kyna King has seen the impact STAF has on teenage fathers. Ms. King notes, “I have seen dads step out of their comfort zones and seek therapy, increase their financial literacy, further their education, set and achieve other various...goals--and we have the STAF Program to thank for sparking that flame.”

Nineteen-year-old Austin, a father of two from Benton Harbor, has been a shining example of the success of the Son to a Father Program. Austin’s participation in this program has allowed him to tap into his own “superpowers” as a father and make the changes needed to improve the lives of his children. Self-identified superpowers include tenacity, resilience, fortitude, compassion and intuitiveness; he credits STAF with helping him identify his strengths and show up every day as his best self. Austin shares, “If it wasn’t for this program and the tools that Mr. Patterson [facilitator] gave to me, and the things that we worked out during the program, I wouldn’t be able to be the best father that I can be for my babies.” Since participating in the STAF Program, Austin has:

- Decided to further his education and is pursuing a career as a skilled tradesman.
- He has also offered to mentor any incoming new dads that may need assistance navigating the complexities of new fatherhood.

Case Manager and STAF facilitator Charlie Patterson raves about Austin and his own experience with the program. “Austin proved to be one of the top Son to a Father program participants. You could tell that each session sparked a new level of awareness for Austin. He would show up early, leave late, ask numerous questions, and openly participate in every conversation.” Mr. Patterson continued, “I have seen Austin’s confidence exponentially increase, as well as his communication and attention to active participation with his children. Austin is a true example of the necessity [for] and success of this program--something that has been needed for our area teen dads for quite some time.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kiselica, M., Kiselica, A. (2014). The Complicated Worlds of Adolescent Fathers: Implications for Clinical Practice, Public Policy and Research. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, vol 15, no. 3, 260-274

<sup>2</sup> National Association of City and County Health Officials. (2009). Meeting the needs of pregnant and parenting teens: Local health department programs and services. Retrieved from [www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/pub/dhs16\\_148996.pdf](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/pub/dhs16_148996.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Weber, JB. (2012). Becoming Teen Fathers: Stories of Teen Pregnancy, Responsibility and Masculinity. *Gender & Society*, Volume: 26 Issue: 6, page(s): 900-921

<sup>4</sup> Aggleton, P & Campbell, C (2000). Working with Young People- Towards an Agenda for Sexual Health. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Volume: 15 Issue:3, pages 283-296

<sup>5</sup> Trivedi, D; Brooks, F; Bunn, F & Graham, M. (2009) Early fatherhood: a mapping of the evidence base relating to pregnancy prevention and parenting support. *Health Education Research*. Volume 24 (6): pages 999-1028

<sup>6</sup> Kiselica, M. S., Englar-Carlson, M., Horne, A. M., & Fisher, M. (2008). A positive psychology perspective on helping boys. In M. S. Kiselica, M. Englar-Carlson, & A. M. Horne (Eds.), *Counseling troubled boys: A guidebook for practitioners* (pp. 31–48). New York, NY: Routledge