

Unmarried dads' involvement with child secured during pregnancy, study says

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Critical family bonding begins during pregnancy. Credit: University of Maryland

The best chance of "reeling-in" an unmarried father and building the foundations for a stable family life are the critical months of pregnancy, says new research from the University of Maryland.

"Unmarried dads are less likely to drift away if they are involved with their partner during this vital period when a family can begin to bond," says University of Maryland human development professor Natasha J. Cabrera, the principal investigator and a researcher at the school's Maryland Population Research Center.

The study, published in the December *Journal of Marriage and Family*, is the first to explain the importance of the pre-natal period in the formation of non-traditional family patterns. The researchers analyzed data drawn from an ongoing project – the Fragile Families Child Well Being Study – which mostly involved unmarried couples, a total of 1,686 couples in all.

In their analysis, Cabrera and her colleague, Jay Fagan at Temple University, found that fathers involved during pregnancy were significantly more likely to remain involved in raising their child at age three.

"The unmarried father is much more likely either to maintain or move into a more committed relationship if he's involved before the birth, and that's the critical difference," Cabrera says. "As you might expect, research has consistently shown that creating a stable home life predicts whether a father will be an active participant in raising the child, but what we've learned here is that the pre-natal months are when that kind of family structure is most likely to coalesce."

The study found that marital status is not a critical predictor of a father's involvement. "It is the decision that couples make to strengthen commitment and move in together that is important, rather than marital status per se," Cabrera said. "You don't need much imagination to see that a live-in dad is likely to be more involved in child care and family life. It's the personal investment in the child's and the mother's future that counts the most, not the paperwork."

Source: University of Maryland

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