

When does a man say 'I'm the father'?

February 15 2017

American men much more readily acknowledge that they are the legal father of a child born out of wedlock when the woman involved is more affluent, educated, and healthy. It also helps (slightly) if the baby is a boy, says Kermyt Anderson of the University of Oklahoma in the US, after scrutinizing data from 5.4 million births in a study published in Springer's journal *Human Nature*.

The US system emphasizes that a child's legal father should be named at birth. This is because establishment of legal [paternity](#) reflects how committed and involved a man will be in the future upbringing, support, and development of a child. The husband of a married woman is usually indicated as the father of her children on her baby's birth certificate. Two out of every five babies born in the US (40.6 percent of births in 2013), however, have unmarried mothers. In these cases, legal paternity is established when a man is formally named as the father and he signs an Acknowledgment of Paternity form. This guarantees his rights as the father and also makes it easier for the state to collect child support.

Despite concerted policy efforts, legal paternity is not established in a significant number of cases. To investigate the reasons behind this, Anderson analyzed data from births to unmarried women in the US between 2009 and 2013. This totaled 5,427,689 births recorded in the National Center for Health Statistics natality files. He found that legal paternity is established in the hospital for 69.7 percent of children born to unmarried mothers. Although paternity will be established for some children after they are discharged from the hospital, roughly three quarters of a million babies each year leave US hospitals with no legal

father.

According to Anderson, most results were consistent across the board, although some variation occurred between different racial or ethnic groups. He found that paternity establishment was more likely when women were not teenagers, had [private health insurance](#) or at least a college education, and did not have any chronic or [sexually transmitted diseases](#) or health issues during pregnancy. Establishment of paternity was also more likely when the children were male, or when singletons were born. Second-born children were more likely to have paternity established than firstborns (except in African-American families), while the likelihood of paternity establishment dropped in the case of later-born children (except among Asian families).

Anderson found that paternity is more likely to be established when the mother takes better care of herself during her pregnancy. This has subsequent benefits to her offspring. In such cases, babies are more likely to be carried full term. They have a higher birthweight and higher Apgar scores (except for American Indians/Alaskan Natives) and are less likely to experience complications requiring medical attention. Babies were also more likely to be breastfed if a legal father was established.

"If cases where the father may be less likely to sign the Acknowledgment of Paternity can be identified in advance, interventions may be designed to increase the likelihood of the father being involved in the pregnancy," says Anderson, reflecting on how his findings could inform policy. "It might be prudent to line up additional social and medical support for women and infants when the father is unlikely to voluntarily acknowledge paternity to help prevent deleterious birth outcomes, or to prepare additional resources in anticipation of the need for involuntary establishment of paternity."

*An Apgar score is a quick method to summarize the health of newborn children, invented by anesthesiologist Virginia Apgar: Appearance, Pulse, Grimace, Activity, Respiration.

More information: Kermyt G. Anderson, Establishment of Legal Paternity for Children of Unmarried American Women, *Human Nature* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s12110-017-9284-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-017-9284-0)

Provided by Springer

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