



NAVIGATING THE FATHERHOOD LANE A DRIVER'S GUIDE FOR YOUNG DADS



National Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



FATHERS
INCORPORATED

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01

Note to Fatherhood Practitioners



Young fathers between the ages of 16 and 26 have not been studied extensively; however, limited research shows they often lack the necessary resources and support.

This Driver's Guide for Young Dads aims to engage teenage fathers and young adult fathers and support them as they strive to be good dads, adopt healthy lifestyles, and establish effective parenting practices.

Young fathers often face more and different challenges than older or experienced fathers in preparing for their new role as fathers. Not only are they still growing emotionally and intellectually as they transition into adulthood, but they also need to learn the ropes of parenting while weighing educational and employment options.

02

Welcome to Fatherhood: Tuning Your Engine



The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) Driver's Guide for Young Dads 16 through 25 is designed for young and expectant fathers as well as fathers raising a young child.

This guide has three primary goals:



TO HELP
young fathers
understand the
benefits of healthy
fathering and
how it impacts
their child's
development.



TO ADDRESS
the specific
challenges young
fathers face as
new parents.



TO EMPOWER
young fathers
to become
more nurturing,
responsible, and
active participants
in their children's
lives.

The guide also discusses social, emotional, economic, and educational challenges many young fathers face. It provides information to support the healthy development of young fathers and offers tips on managing relationships and skill-building.

Fatherhood can be one of the most rewarding endeavors a man experiences. Becoming a young father can be a joyous experience filled with twists and turns that come from learning your way. The gift of fatherhood can be life-changing. You get to witness your child's birth, celebrate all kinds of accomplishments with them as they develop their interests and talents, and teach them how to drive when they are eligible. You will remember these and many other fatherhood experiences for the rest of your life.

When asked about his fatherhood journey, future NBA Hall of Famer LeBron James said,

"My FAVORITE thing
about being a
FATHER
is just seeing
my kids
grow and do
some of the same
things that I did
when I was a
kid, man."

LeBron's comments speak to the hopes and dreams of generations of fathers raising children. LeBron became a teenage father at 19 years old and was raised by a single mother who gave birth to him at 16 years of age.

Expecting the birth of a new child can be an exhilarating experience. It also can be overwhelming to think about the responsibilities of loving and caring for a newborn when you are still a young man on your own journey toward maturity and development. However, like LeBron, many young fathers have been able to embrace and cope with their new realities of fatherhood.

Although new fathers of all ages experience challenges, **younger fathers are likely to face at least three significant challenges along the way:**

- 1. Managing relationships with the mother of their child.**
- 2. Coping with limited employment opportunities.**
- 3. Completing their educational goals.**

When young fathers lack family and community support, these challenges can significantly impact their ability to be involved with their children and coparent effectively.

(Assini-Meytin et al., 2015; Diaz & Field, 2016; Perper et al., 2010)

Ignore the Negative Stereotypes

Despite negative stereotypes often associated with young fathers, research tells us that most young fathers are interested in their children's lives regardless of their employment status or ability to provide financial support (Gavin et al., 2012).

03

**Before You Get
Behind the Wheel**



Here are a few critical questions to consider as you begin reading this driver's guide:

1. What essential lessons about fatherhood did you learn from your father and other men in your family and community?

2. What skills do you need to learn to be a loving, effective father?

3. How will you navigate challenges such as completing your education, acquiring work skills, identifying career opportunities, and managing relationships with your child's mother and other family members?

4. How can you and your child's mother, with help from other family members, raise your child with a team parenting approach (e.g., based on shared values, appreciation of differences in parenting styles, and flexibility)?

5. What are your hopes and dreams for your child and yourself in the future?

04

Registration and Title



**“A father’s
love is like a
lighthouse,
always shining
bright to show
us the way.”**

(Unknown)

As a new father, you are entitled to all the benefits of being an involved, loving, and affirming parent. Becoming a new father is like starting a new job. So, learn as much as you can about your new role as a father while you prepare for your baby’s arrival. You can research library books and free online resources for expectant fathers and fathers of young children on a range of parenting topics (from infant care and safety to ways to support the mother of your child).

As a parent, you may encounter potholes, accidents, and other hazards on the road. Please remember that you are not alone. Along with this Driver’s Guide, the NRFC National Call Center (877-4DAD-411) and website (www.fatherhood.gov) offer comprehensive information for fathers. *(See the “Resources” section at the end of this guide.)*

Please read through the guide, give us a call at the call center, or visit our website for more information on local resources or referrals for parenting and relationship issues advice.

877-4DAD-411 | fatherhood.gov

05

Getting Behind the Wheel



Most people remember the day they first got behind the wheel of a car. Similarly, most fathers clearly remember the day they learned they would be a father. They might have felt excited about bringing new life into the world, and they also might have been thinking about whether they were emotionally and financially ready for a baby. Many new parents feel overwhelmed when they think about the financial responsibilities associated with a new baby. Medical costs, daycare, car seats, baby formula, diapers, strollers, and various other expenses can occupy a new parent's thoughts. Expectant fathers often grapple with questions such as:

- **Am I ready to have a baby?**
- **How will I afford this baby?**
- **How can I support my child's mother and work with her to become effective coparents?**



To help calm the fears and anxieties you may be feeling at this time, here are some suggestions for developing an effective coparenting relationship:

- **Be available for your coparent and, if you are in a romantic relationship, be sure to show your affection.**
- **Support your coparent by bathing, dressing, feeding, and burping your baby.**
- **Take turns with tasks such as feeding and changing the baby.**
- **Talk with other dads you know to learn how they manage in their roles as father.**
- **Find and join a local dads' group to meet more dads, provide mutual support, and discover other available resources in your community.**
- **Take care of yourself. This means getting ample rest, eating well, and partaking in activities that help you relax (e.g., take regular walks, watch a movie, participate in your favorite sporting activity).**
- **Consider talking to a mental health professional who can help you navigate demanding situations and challenges.**

Research indicates that one of the greatest predictors of healthy fathering is the ability to communicate effectively with your partner. The two of you should learn and talk together about things such as:

- **The birthing process.**
- **Physical and emotional changes that you, mom, and baby are experiencing.**
- **How to work with and ask for support from other family members.**
- **How you will manage financial changes.**

If you and the mother live in separate households, it is even more important to communicate, develop mutual empathy for what you are both experiencing, and set clear expectations and boundaries for how you will work together as coparents. Other topics that are important to discuss before your baby arrives include bath time and feeding schedules, how you can help provide opportunities for mom to rest, and other ways you can support the care for your new baby.

**“A father is someone you look up to
no matter how tall you grow.”
(Unknown)**

06

Adjust Your Rearview Mirror

Prenatal Bonding

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Get the Right Gear

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Bonding with Your New Baby

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Bringing Your Baby Home from the Hospital

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Holding your new baby for the first time will be a one-of-a-kind experience. Bringing your baby home from the hospital will be one of your most joyous memories. But did you know that bonding with your baby actually begins when the baby is in the womb? Prenatal bonding is essential for helping fathers connect with their babies before they arrive. Take time to prepare for your new arrival and enjoy your new bundle of joy!



Prenatal Bonding

Attend Prenatal Doctor Visits

These visits are important for your new baby and a great way to support your partner. At these visits, you will hear your baby's heartbeat for the first time, see your baby on an ultrasound, and get important updates on their development.

Take Care of Mom

Caring for your pregnant partner is another way to care for your baby. Offer to help her run errands, schedule date nights, or do baby-proofing chores.

Massage Your Partner's Belly

This can relieve pain and help your baby recognize your touch.



Get the Right Gear

A **stroller** is one of the first major purchases you will make for your baby.

- ☐ Make sure you use an age-appropriate stroller.
- ☐ Check out this Consumer Reports webpage for helpful tips on selecting a stroller:
<https://www.consumerreports.org/babies-kids/strollers/buying-guide/>

A **car seat** is another major purchase you will need to make before your baby is born.

- ☐ Read car seat directions to make sure you install it correctly.
- ☐ Always put your infant in a rear-facing child safety seat in the back of your car.
- ☐ This Consumer Reports webpage has more helpful tips:
<https://www.consumerreports.org/babies-kids/car-seats/buying-guide/>

You may be able to get a free car seat.

Check with your local hospital, social service agency, or United Way to see if they can provide free car seats for new parents.

- Dial 2-1-1 (United Way). When you dial 2-1-1, your call will be routed to the 2-1-1 center in your state, and they may be able to help you locate a free or inexpensive car seat.
- Stand Up Wireless (Blog, 2024). Where to Find a Free Infant Car Seat for Low Income Families <https://standupwireless.com/blog-where-to-find-a-free-infant-car-seat-for-low-income-families/>
- Wealthy Single Mommy (Webpage, 2024) Where to find free and cheap car seats — 22 places near you. <https://www.wealthysinglemommy.com/rides/free-car-seats/#free-car-seats>

Find the best **diaper bag** for you and your baby.

It may be one of the pieces of baby gear that you use the most. The best diaper bags provide:

- ☐ Plenty of storage and space.
- ☐ Easy cleaning.
- ☐ Insulated space for storing bottles and snacks.
- ☐ This Babylist webpage has tips to help choose the best diaper bag for you:

<https://www.babylist.com/hello-baby/how-to-choose-a-diaper-bag>

Select a **baby carrier** that will be comfortable and durable.

- ☐ There are many options, ranging from simple fabric wraps to structured carriers to backpack-style frame carriers for hiking.
- ☐ Prices vary and you can always check your local thrift shop for cheaper options.
- ☐ This Good Housekeeping webpage provides some helpful information:

<https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/childrens-products/g4799/best-baby-carriers/>



Bonding with Your New Baby

There is no magic formula for bonding with your baby, but here are a few additional tips:

- ☐ Cuddle with your baby. Your baby may be soothed by feeling your touch and skin-to-skin contact.
- ☐ Carry your baby in a sling or in a front carrier when you take walks or go about your daily routine.
- ☐ Read to your baby daily or as much as you can.
- ☐ Talk and play with your baby regularly.

Don't be afraid to touch or care for your baby. Helping to care for your baby's basic needs is another great way to bond. Bonding with your baby often takes time. Sooner or later, your baby will become familiar with your touch and smell and get to know you as their daddy.

Bringing Your Baby Home from the Hospital

- Ensure your home is a safe and clean environment for you and your baby. As your baby gets older and starts walking, you must look out for potential hazards and childproof your home.
 - Advice from the U. S. Consumer Product Safety Commission on Childproofing Your Home: <https://www.cpsc.gov/safety-education/safety-guides/kids-and-babies/Childproofing-Your-Home>
- Install a car seat for your baby. Most states have laws requiring that newborns ride in a properly fitted car seat.
 - Refer to the Consumer Reports webpage that we mentioned on page 22, it includes tips for installing a car seat correctly: <https://www.consumerreports.org/babies-kids/car-seats/buying-guide/>
- Arrange routine, preventive medical appointments. Contact your baby's pediatrician to schedule follow-up appointments for weight checks and other vitals within their first few months.

07

Buckle Up



Congratulations, your baby has arrived – you are a new dad!

You are joining a brotherhood of men who have become new fathers. Becoming a new dad can be challenging, but raising a child may be the most rewarding thing you do! On this journey, you will watch your child crawl, walk, eat, and occasionally make a mess at the kitchen table. Fatherhood will be filled with a variety of emotions, from extreme happiness to sadness and everything in between. And you will wonder at times, “Am I a good father?” Don’t worry. We all feel like that sometimes! As your children age, they will test your patience and remind you of when you were their age. Along your fatherhood journey, you will learn many life lessons about parenting. You will learn all the essentials of taking care of your child’s physical, intellectual, and emotional needs; finding time to rest and take care of yourself; scheduling family activities; and balancing your work/family life. You will learn the nitty-gritty practical things, such as good feeding practices, how to change a diaper, and how to care for your children when they are sick.

Tips to Help Start Your Fatherhood Journey

- Enjoy precious moments with your newborn.
- Create a routine – consistency is key.
- Be patient and take your time – bonding may not occur instantly.
- Spend plenty of time holding and cuddling with your new baby.
- Communicate with your partner to establish a time to take breaks and get sleep.

08

Reduce Speed Ahead: A Few Tips for Unmarried Fathers



What's All This Talk About Paternity?

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Benefits of Establishing Paternity

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Know your Rights — and the Types of Child Custody

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Child Support

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Visitation

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What's All This Talk About Paternity?

If you and your child's mother are married, your name will automatically go on the birth certificate.

You will have legal rights to work with her to make decisions about your child's life, including where your child lives, attends school, and religious practices.

If, at some time in the future, you and your child's mom separate and are not living together, you will still be able to make decisions together, including how often you get to spend time with your child.

If you are unmarried, establishing paternity is crucial to ensure your legal rights.

We have all heard stories of fathers questioning paternity and feeling uncertain whether a beautiful new baby is theirs. Establishing paternity is a necessary legal step to settle these kinds of questions. Once paternity is established, fathers are legally responsible for their children until they are 18 years old, and they will have legal rights to make decisions with the mother.

Did you know...

If you do not establish paternity, you will not have access to your child's medical or school records, and you won't be able to make important decisions about your child's well-being.

Benefits of Establishing Paternity

- ☐ Your name can be added as the father on the birth certificate.
- ☐ You will be able to establish other legal rights (such as custody, visitation, and shared decision making for you child).
- ☐ Your child will know you are the biological father.
- ☐ As they grow older, your child will be able to obtain information about their genealogy and health history from your side of the family (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, mental health, substance abuse, Alzheimer's). This knowledge is truly a gift for your children!



Know your Rights — and the Types of Child Custody

1. Establishing paternity is the first step in ensuring your legal rights to custody and visitation if you and your child's mom break up. You can file with the courts to exercise your legal rights as a father.
2. The four main types of child custody are as follows:
 1. **Legal custody** means a parent has the right to make major decisions about raising a child. Legal custody may be awarded solely to one parent or jointly to both parents, in which case both parents will have an equal say in all aspects of the child's upbringing.
 2. **Physical custody** refers to who the child lives with. One parent is often awarded physical custody, and the other is granted visitation rights.
 3. **Joint custody.** Some parents may decide upon joint physical custody, whereby the child lives with each parent approximately 50 percent of the time. In other cases, a judge may award joint legal custody and/or physical custody to each parent. When parents are awarded joint legal custody they must agree on various aspects of how the child will be raised.
 4. **Sole custody** is a form of child custody granting one parent both legal custody and physical custody of the child.

If neither parent is able to care for the children, another party such as a grandparent, other relative, or foster parent may be given custody.

Child Support

For unmarried couples, child support can become a source of major conflict. Young fathers should take time to research and understand the child support laws in their state. This website summarizes child support laws in every state: <https://www.findlaw.com/family/child-support/child-support-summaries-of-state-laws.html>



Visitation

A father has the legal right to visitation, as does the child's mother. Just because your child lives with the mother does not mean that you do not have the legal right to visit your child. Yet, unmarried fathers can still find it tricky to navigate visitation if they have a poor relationship with the mother or do not establish paternity. Here are a few helpful tips:

- **Maintain a civil relationship with mom:** Showing her respect and showing up on time will make it easier to gain her trust and come to reasonable decisions about visitation.
- **Do your homework:** Learn your rights and responsibilities by researching the laws in your state or attending workshops for unmarried parents.
- **Seek advice from legal counsel:** Most states offer pro bono legal services for parents if their income level qualifies. Family law attorneys specializing in fathers' rights can provide essential advice and recommendations for navigating any legal issues related to your child.
- **Stay involved:** Stay involved regardless of the situation between you and your child's mom. Tell her you want to attend medical appointments, school events, and other activities related to your child.
- **Support your child's mom:** Even if there is tension between you and your child's mother, figure out ways to support her. Be respectful, validate the work she does as a mom, and offer to help out with child care tasks such as bathing and changing diapers.
- **Keep good records of your involvement:** you may need this information if you must go to court to resolve any issues related to custody or visitation.
 - Document everything—conversations with your child's mother, including discussions about money, visitation, health issues, education, and other parental responsibilities.
 - Keep all receipts related to spending on your child. Even if you purchase cough medicine from the store, save the receipt.

09 Rules of the Road



Focus on Learning and Practicing

Throughout your fatherhood journey, focus on learning and practicing ways to work with and support your coparent as it relates to your child's daily care.

Be patient with your coparent.

The birthing process is exhausting and mentally draining. It can take mothers several months or longer to recover from childbirth.

Your ability to listen to your coparent, empathize, encourage her to share her feelings, and help her with household responsibilities will help reduce family stress.

During early childhood, healthy fathering includes feeding your child, changing diapers, bathing, playtime, soothing them when they are crying or upset, and continuing to learn about your child's development.

Often, the best thing you can do is just be there and spend time with them.

Here are some tips for good fathering practices that will help your baby:

- ☐ Talk and sing to your newborn to help them identify your voice. Babies as young as one week can recognize voices.
- ☐ Hold your baby close, put them on your chest, rock them to sleep. Touching and sharing the warmth of skin-to-skin contact will promote bonding and help regulate your baby's temperature and heart rate.
- ☐ Change your baby's diaper. This is an excellent opportunity to bond and play with your new baby.
- ☐ Feed your baby and support your partner while she is breastfeeding. This is also a great way to bond and spend quality time with your family.
- ☐ Bathe your baby. The first time you do this can be frightening, but bathing your tiny bundle of joy over time will be rewarding – and it's another great way to bond with your child.

Additional Tips for Safe Care

- ☐ Be patient. Newborns require around-the-clock care. Being a new father means getting ready for many sleepless nights, crying, and late-night feedings.
- ☐ Handle your baby with care. Becoming a new father can come with frustrations and there may be times when you feel overwhelmed. The constant crying can drive most people crazy. But always remember, **it is natural for your baby to cry!** Take a deep breath and think about how much you love your baby.

Avoid this DANGER ZONE

When it feels like your baby is inconsolable, your first reaction may be to shake your baby to get them to stop crying.

Don't do this!

It will only make them cry more and can be dangerous and even life-threatening.

Babies are very fragile and shaking them hurts their necks and spine.

Each year, thousands of babies die from Shaken Baby Syndrome.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

“There is a lot of anxiety for a new dad that comes from not only not knowing much about babies, but also not knowing how mom will fare through the whole process.”

Bernie Dorsey (founder of the Conscious Fathering Program)

10

Right of Way



You must understand the impact fathers have on their child's development and prepare yourself to care for your child.

- Being an involved, nurturing, and supportive father will help build your children's social and emotional development, self-esteem, and confidence.
- Talking, singing, and reading to your children from a young age will boost their language development, build a solid framework, and enhance their communication skills as they get older.

New fathers have extra responsibilities requiring more planning, organization, and time management than before they became parents. So be prepared before you hit the streets with your new baby. Even running out for a few small errands requires packing your baby bag in case your baby requires a quick diaper change or feeding. Whether you take an Uber, a bus, walk, or drive you must be prepared to respond to all your baby's needs.

Ensure your Baby's Needs are Covered When you Leave Home

- If you are traveling by car, check the positioning of your baby's car seat and make sure your baby is buckled in properly.
- Be sure to pack your stroller if needed. Always secure your baby in the stroller with fastened buckles. Even tiny newborns can wiggle around and get themselves into unsafe positions.
- Don't forget to pack your baby bag. Here are a few ideas of essential items to have with you:
 - ☐ **Diapers – at least 3 or 6** (depending on the age of your child and how long you plan to be out of the house)
 - ☐ **Baby wipes**
 - ☐ **Diaper changing pad**
 - ☐ **Change of clothes for baby** (pick an outfit you can put on quickly)
 - ☐ **Plastic bags** (for dirty diapers)

Always pack extras!

*(Your plans may change,
and you never know
how long you will be out).*

11

Obey All Traffic Signals



STOP. Think about the consequences of your actions. Your child needs you to be careful as you make decisions that may impact your life and their future.



GREEN. Go with your child's mother for "well baby" doctor appointments and check-ups.

YELLOW. Be prepared to slow down, stop, and think about your life (career, finances, and your relationship with your child's mother).

RED. Seek professional help to manage your fears, anger, and frustrations so that they don't have a long-term impact on your baby's health and your relationship with the child's mother.

12

Keep Your Eyes on the Road



Young fathers may find it stressful to meet the demands of completing their education and gaining skills to advance in the job market while parenting.

One of the most effective ways to access the skills you need to secure employment paying a living wage is to connect with reputable educational and employment organizations. Begin by searching the internet for programs within your local community. You may wish to explore community-based programs that offer the following services:

- ☐ Academic training (help with completing high school, obtaining a GED, and applying to trade school and college).
- ☐ Workforce development and career planning.
- ☐ Housing assistance.

Job Training and Career Exploration

- Many well-regarded organizations across the nation provide workforce training and employment referrals. Funded by the Department of Labor, Job Corps and YouthBuild are two reputable programs that have an outstanding history of working with young males ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and out of work. Both organizations provide intensive life skills, employment training, and job placements.
- For more information and to make an appointment, visit
 - **YouthBuild USA** <https://youthbuild.org/our-programs/>
 - **Job Corps** <https://www.jobcorps.gov/about>

13

Changing Lanes



Becoming a father can be one of the most worthwhile experiences of your life, but it's best to try to avoid having more children for a few years. That's because having another child too soon can dramatically impact your ability to achieve your educational, financial, and career goals. So, it is important to think about your future goals. Here are two important questions you should ask before you plan to have another child:

- 1. Can you afford to take care of a second child?**
- 2. As a father of a young child, are you emotionally stable and ready to raise another child?**

If you are not ready to parent another child, your thoughts should focus on sexual health and ways to **avoid** additional unplanned pregnancies. Here are a few tips to help you have healthy conversations on this topic:

- Discuss with your partner how both of you are equally responsible for contraception since it takes two people to make a baby.
- Talk openly about sex and ways to prevent future pregnancies with your partner.
- See a health care provider to learn about the most effective types of birth control for your situation and ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. Agree with your partner about the type of birth control you will use and use it as directed.

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Tune-Ups and Regular Maintenance



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Hormonal Changes

Did you know that men's bodies change when they become fathers? While men may not carry the baby for nine months or be able to breastfeed, their bodies experience hormonal changes, making them more sensitive and emotional.

Young fatherhood presents its own set of challenges,

from dealing with the new emotional commitment of being a parent to balancing work, school, and leisure activities. Self-care for fathers is seldom discussed but it is as important as self-care for moms.

As a new father, you should strive to live a healthy lifestyle. Here are a few tips to maintain a healthy lifestyle:

- Schedule an annual physical with your primary care physician.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, with plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Eliminate or reduce the use of alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drugs.
- Get 7 to 8 hours of sleep nightly.

The busy demands of fatherhood cause many young fathers to neglect their physical and emotional health. Depression and anxiety can be difficult to recognize and deal with.



“The best thing we can do is lead by example and follow a healthy lifestyle.”

Dr. Jesse Mills, Director of The Men’s Clinic at UCLA

Postpartum Depression

Like mothers, many fathers also experience postpartum depression. Symptoms of this type of depression may include feeling overwhelmed or sad and/or experiencing changes in eating and sleeping patterns. Fathers need to recognize that what they are experiencing is normal. There is no shame in feeling different or experiencing depression or anxiety after the birth of a child. Becoming a dad is a huge lifestyle change that brings extreme emotional changes. Studies show that 1 in 10 fathers struggle with postpartum depression and anxiety (Paulson & Bazemore 2010).

Treatment options to consider include therapy, medication, or alternative methods such as acupuncture. Also, do talk with family or friends and reach out to a professional mental health counselor immediately if you feel symptoms of postpartum depression are becoming extreme or overwhelming.

Be a Healthy Role Model for Your Kids

One of your greatest responsibilities as a father is to be a good role model for your children. Children learn most from what they hear and see within their environment. Tips for how to be a good role model:

- Demonstrate good manners and respect for all.
- Show your love for your children and partner.
- Exercise self-control and find ways to manage anger & frustration.
- Be honest and loyal.
- Maintain a positive attitude.
- Follow a good work ethic and work hard.

Time Management

Time management and juggling multiple responsibilities can be overwhelming for a young father. Focus on prioritizing all the responsibilities and tasks you have in front of you and decide realistically what you can and cannot do. Effective time management will help you create and manage a healthy work-life balance. Technology can be your friend. Use Google Calendar alerts, Google tasks, and other apps to help you schedule appointments, remember your children's events and activities (don't miss their first Little League game!), note times for visits and outings with your children, and other task reminders.

Fine Tune Your Mental Health

Many young fathers experience stress or depression because of the numerous lifestyle changes associated with being a young father. Look for professional resources such as fatherhood programs and other support groups to help manage the stress and frustrations you encounter as a young father. Identify a trained mental health professional to talk with about the challenges you face and the pressures you feel. To find a fatherhood program or mental health professional near you, check out the NRFC Program Map at <https://www.fatherhood.gov/program-map>, call our Help Center at **1-877-4-DAD-411** or email **Help@FatherhoodGov.Info**.

Finding Affordable Child Care

The rising costs of child care can create major challenges for many families. Ask extended family members if they are available to help provide child care on some days and be a part of your parenting team. You also might wish to consider working fewer hours so you can be home more to care for your children. This latter strategy will allow you to save on child care costs.

Check out this child care website for information on programs that may be able to help you cover the costs of child care: <https://childcare.gov/consumer-education/get-help-paying-for-child-care>

15

Avoiding Road Rage



Young fathers can get frustrated easily with the new stressors of being a father and needing to learn all the stages of child development. However, understanding your child's development is essential knowledge for fathering in a healthy way. Young fathers with children under 4 years of age need to know that behaviors like crying, kicking, stomping, and tantrums are a normal part of child development.

Be Aware
that children don't come
with their own
HANDBOOK.
What applies to one
doesn't apply
to the other.

What You Need to Know About Child Development

Knowing the answer to the following questions is vital for managing your stress and frustrations:

1. Why do babies cry?

2. What should I do when my baby is crying?

3. How do I know when my baby is hungry?

4. How do I know when my baby needs to be changed?

Managing anger, frustration, and disappointment can be a major challenge for many young fathers as they strive to understand their new roles and meet their new responsibilities.

While these emotions occur naturally, each can impact how we parent our children. Sadly, many children grow up fearing their fathers, and these fears can cause mental health challenges within the family over the years to come. Here are a few tips to help recognize and deal with these harmful emotions:

- **BREATHE.** When you feel angry (e.g., if you have been arguing with your partner), take a deep breath, reason, use “I” statements, and focus on what you can control right now.
- **Focus on practicing healthy habits** to reduce stress that can lead to anger.
- **Recognize that anger is a natural emotion.** But if it hurts the people around you, consider contacting a therapist or mental health professional for help.
- **Always focus on the needs of your child** and the ways your anger impacts them.

CYCLE OF CARE: YOUR BABY'S 5 BASIC NEEDS¹



- ① TO BE FED.** Babies are perfect feeding machines. Typical newborns require feeding every few hours, but every child is different, so your infant will teach you their schedule!



② TO BURP.

Breastfeeding infants have fewer problems with air in their tummies, but all babies must be burped sometimes. Besides the pat on the back, effective burping requires two actions: 1) holding your baby in an upright position (over the shoulder works for a lot of dads), and 2) applying light pressure on their tummy.



- ③ TO BE COMFORTABLE.** Perhaps because babies eat frequently, they also need to have their diapers changed as often or maybe more often. Always have everything you need within arm's reach, and never leave your baby unattended on a changing table.



- ④ TO BE RESTED.** Typically, you can expect your baby to sleep 12 to 20 hours a day during the first three months. Create memorable moments as you soothe them to sleep, and then you and mom can enjoy some well-deserved rest yourselves.



- ⑤ TO CRY.** This is how your baby communicates. It is their only form of communication. They are telling you they are hungry, need to be burped, uncomfortable and need their diaper changed, or tired. You will start figuring their cycle out pretty quickly. Sometimes, it will be frustrating. Remember what we said earlier about Shaken Baby Syndrome and have a plan to deal with this.



¹Adapted from Conscious Fathering, A program of Parent Trust for Washington Children.
<https://www.parenttrust.org/about/programs/conscious-fathering/>

Have a Plan

“Having a plan to deal with your inevitable frustration is what all good parents do. One suggestion is to gently lay your baby down on their back in a safe place. Take a break, calm down, and be proud that you knew what to do.”

*- Bernie Dorsey
(Founder of the Conscious Fathering Program)*

16

Avoiding Potholes



Healthy coparenting is the shared responsibility

between two parents who work together through their differences to ensure the well-being of children. For young unmarried fathers, managing coparenting relationships can be challenging. It is challenging for parents who do not live together to communicate respectfully and work together in their child's best interests.

However, your children absolutely need you to find ways to navigate the challenges of raising a child in two separate homes and manage disagreements. Here are a few tips to make this process easier:

- **Let go of the past.**
- **Set boundaries.**
- **Put the needs of your child first.**
- **Agree on the big things (religion, daycare, finances, etc.)**
- **Avoid power struggles (manage your ego – insisting that you are always right will negatively impact healthy decision-making).**
- **Focus on improving healthy communications with the mother of your child.**
- **Schedule regular visits with your child.**
- **Agree on how you will handle holidays and other important family events.**
- **Do not talk badly about your coparent – particularly to, or in the presence of, your children.**

Moving Violations

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), one in eight children under 17 years of age grew up with at least one parent addicted to substances (Park-Lee et al., 2016). Family conflicts, anger, and stress can lead many fathers down the road of substance abuse and alcoholism. Using alcohol and drugs may appear to be a way to escape and cope with the daily pressure of being a young father. Ultimately, however, it can lead to problems for fathers, children, and other family members. If you or a member of your family are struggling, here are a few helpful resources:

SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357), is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental or substance use disorders.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7 accessible and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals in the United States—dial 988. <https://988lifeline.org/>







NAVIGATING THE BACKROADS

A SPECIAL SECTION FOR RURAL DADS

(Sections 17-20)

17

Detours and Dead Ends: Finding Work Where the Roads Aren't Paved



Finding work where the roads aren't paved...

Living in a rural area can sometimes feel like you're stuck on a one-lane road with no GPS signal and no gas station in sight. Good jobs may be scarce, and training programs might require a long commute or internet access that you don't always have. But just because the path looks rough doesn't mean there isn't a way forward. It just means you may have to take a different route.

This section explores practical ways for rural dads to gain skills, earn income, and grow your careers starting right where you are. Whether it's learning a trade, exploring seasonal work, or tapping into remote job options, an opportunity exists for those who know where to look.

Tips for Finding Work and Training in Rural Areas

- ❑ **Check with your local One-Stop Career Center** (<https://www.careeronestop.org/>). They can help you apply for jobs, create a resume, get training, and even cover the cost of learning a trade.
- ❑ **Explore short-term job training programs** at local community colleges or technical schools. Many offer flexible schedules, weekend classes, or mobile training units that travel to rural counties.
- ❑ **Ask about apprenticeships.** These allow you to earn while you learn and often lead to full-time employment.
- ❑ **Consider seasonal and agricultural work** that may offer steady income and build your experience.
- ❑ **Look into remote work.** If you have a phone and a reliable internet connection, there are jobs you can do from home. Websites like FlexJobs.com or Upwork.com offer listings for customer service, freelance work, and more.
- ❑ **Take advantage of online resources** like Indeed.com, USAJOBS.gov, and others. Spend time researching. Be careful of unaccredited job training schools that promise excellent salaries once you have graduated. Beware: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

-
- ❑ **Visit a public library** if there is one in your area. Libraries can be one of the best-kept secrets in a community. They do more than lend books. Libraries often provide the public with social services, tutoring, and job referral guidance. They may also offer access to computers and e-books.
 - ❑ **Think about a service you could offer.** For example, members of your community may pay you to pick up groceries, garden, or do handyman work.

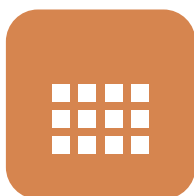


Activities



RESOURCES “MAP”

List all the community organizations, workforce centers, libraries, or colleges within a 30-mile radius. Make note of those you’ve contacted and what services they offer.



WEEKLY SKILL BUILDER

Choose one new skill to learn each week using YouTube, a free course (like Coursera.org or Khan Academy), or a library resource. Track your progress.



RESUME TUNE-UP

Create or update your resume and ask someone to review it. Tap free online tools or local job centers for support.

Your next job may not be down the road...

*It may be online,
in the next town over,
or through a training program
you haven't yet discovered.
Keep driving, keep learning,
and don't be afraid to ask for
directions.*

18

“Check Engine” Light: Dealing with Substance Use on the Road to Recovery



What happens when your life is making NOISE?

Every vehicle needs maintenance. When your engine starts knocking or your brakes squeal, you take it into the shop. But what happens when your life is making noise? Sometimes, the stress, isolation, or pain of being a young dad, especially in rural areas, can lead to unhealthy habits like drinking or using drugs.

This doesn't make you a bad father, but ignoring the warning signs can steer you off course.

This section helps you recognize when substance use is starting to take control and what steps you can take to get back in the driver's seat. Whether it's you, your coparent, or someone close to you, resources and recovery paths are available, even if the nearest support group is hours away.

Watch for These Behaviors

- ☐ Using alcohol or drugs to “take the edge off” every day
- ☐ Withdrawing from your child, partner, or family
- ☐ Having trouble keeping a job, managing money, or staying out of conflict
- ☐ Becoming short-tempered, easily frustrated, or angry
- ☐ Experiencing prolonged periods of feeling disappointed

Where to Turn

- **SAMHSA’s National Helpline:** 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- **The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988 (<https://988lifeline.org>)
- **Faith-based and community centers** with recovery support or 12-step meetings
- **Your primary physician**, who can refer you to a therapist in your area who specializes in substance abuse



Activities



WRITE IT OUT

Start a daily journal where you record your feelings, triggers, and small wins. This will help you monitor your emotional health.



IDENTIFY NEW HOBBIES

Boredom can be a big reason for relapse, but exploring hobbies like exercise, gardening, arts and crafts, and cooking can keep you on track.



TALK TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST

Choose someone you can talk with about what you're going through. Sharing the load is the first step in healing.



CHECK IN WITH YOUR RECOVERY

Call a support hotline or attend an online meeting. Even one small step can build momentum.

Recovery is not a straight line.

It takes time, patience, and support. Choosing to get better is one of the strongest decisions a father can make. You matter. Your child needs you well. Take the tune-up.

19

Long-Distance Driving: Staying Connected When You're Miles Apart



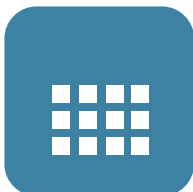
Sometimes, fatherhood means parenting across county lines, state borders, or even time zones. Being a dad from a distance isn't easy, but it's not impossible. Whether you work out of town, live in another household, or have limited parenting time, your presence still matters — even through a screen, a phone call, or a birthday card.

This section is for rural dads doing their best to stay connected. Your child doesn't need perfection. They need to know you care, that you're there in the ways you can be, and that you're not giving up on them.

Tips for Long-Distance Fathering

- ☐ Even a 10-minute check-in creates routine, shows you care, and builds consistency.
- ☐ Mail handwritten notes or drawings. These small acts make a big impression.
- ☐ Record short voice messages or videos your children can replay when they miss you.
- ☐ Get on the same page with your coparent about communication, schedules, and expectations. Agree on a detailed plan in advance — including dates, payment arrangements, and parenting time — to assist with travel arrangements and avoid conflict.
- ☐ Make the most of your in-person time. Be present. Put the phone away. Create memories.

Activities



CONNECTION CALENDAR

Create a simple monthly calendar with planned calls, notes, or special messages. Stick to it.



MEMORY BOX

Build a small keepsake box with items, pictures, and mementos you can share or give to your child on your next visit.



STORY TIME

Record yourself reading a children's book or sharing a bedtime story. Send it as a voice memo or video.



PHOTO COLLAGE

Gather your favorite photos of you and your children to create a collage. Canva is a user-friendly and straightforward app that can help with digital collages.

**Being apart
physically doesn't
mean you have to be
absent emotionally.**

*You can build a meaningful
connection from any distance
with effort and intention.*

*The road may be long, but how
you deal with the distance
matters most.*

20

Busting Myths: The Truth About Rural Fatherhood



**Let's bust a
few myths and
reclaim the
road ahead.**

Just because you live in the country doesn't mean you're not a strong, involved, and capable dad. Too often, rural fathers are portrayed as disconnected, unavailable, or uninterested. But you know that couldn't be further from the truth.

This section is all about clearing the air. Rural dads face real challenges — distance, limited resources, isolation, and more — but you also show up, love hard, and raise incredible children. Let's bust a few myths and reclaim the road ahead.

MYTH #1

Rural dads don't want to be involved.

TRUTH: Rural dads want to be present. You go out of your way to be involved despite jobs with long hours, difficult commutes, or inadequate services or support. Your dedication often shows up in quiet but powerful ways: teaching life skills, making time for family meals, or being a consistent presence and role model.

MYTH #2

Rural dads don't face the same pressures as urban dads.

TRUTH: Rural fathers face many of the same pressures as urban dads — financial stress, parenting struggles, and coparenting challenges — plus added barriers like limited job opportunities, transportation issues, and internet access gaps.

MYTH #3

If dads aren't under the same roof as their kids, they're not parenting.

TRUTH: Rural fathers face many of the same pressures as urban dads — financial stress, parenting struggles, and coparenting challenges — plus added barriers like limited job opportunities, transportation issues, and internet access gaps.

Tips for Standing Strong as a Rural Dad

- ☐ **Share your story.** Don't be afraid to talk about what you do as a father. You might inspire another dad to do the same.
- ☐ **Focus on presence over perfection.** Being there in whatever ways you can is what your child remembers most.
- ☐ **Build a support network.** Contact family, friends, or other dads and look for ways you can help each other with encouragement, guidance, and practical support.
- ☐ **Seek out fatherhood groups, even virtual ones.** Fatherhood groups are supportive, safe environments where men can share experiences and feelings. You're not the only one doing this work, and you don't have to do it alone.

Activities



TRUTH CHECK

Write down three negative things you've heard about rural dads. Then flip each one by writing what you know is true in your own life.



STORY SWAP

Call or text another dad in your area. Share one thing that worked for you this week as a parent.



FATHERHOOD MOTTO

Think of a phrase that reminds you of your purpose as a dad. Write it down and keep it somewhere visible.

**You are not just
“doing your best” —
you are setting the
standard.**

The myth is broken.

Rural dads show up.

And you matter.



Final Stretch: Keep Driving, Dad

No journey is without its bumps, and the rural road to fatherhood can be winding, quiet, and sometimes lonely. But remember — being a great dad isn't about where you live but how you lead. Whether raising your child on a farm, in a small town, or down a dirt road, your presence, effort, and love make all the difference.

You don't have to know every turn ahead. Just keep showing up, keep learning, and keep driving. You're not alone on this road, and your lane matters.

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Resources For More Information



NRFC Resources

- [Tips for Young Dads](#)
- [10 Tips for Young Dads](#)
- [Ten Tips for Being a Great Dad](#)
- [The Benefits of Reading to Your Children](#)
- [Healthy Fathers, Healthy Families](#)
- [Coparenting Tips for Dads](#)
- [Should you be worried about your screen time? What about your children's screen time?](#)
- [Mental and Behavioral Health Resources for Men and Fathers](#)
- [Tips for dads: Cook with your kids](#)

Tip Cards for Dads (series of seven based on age of child):

1. [Tip card for expectant dads](#)
2. [Tip card for new dads](#)
3. [Tip card for dads of toddlers \(ages 1-2\)](#)
4. [Tip card for dads of preschoolers](#)
5. [Tip card for dads of school age children](#)
6. [Tip card for dads of pre-teens](#)
7. [Tip card for dads of teens](#)

Safety Tips for dads (series of 4 based on age of child)

- [Safety Tips for Dads to Keep Babies Safe \(Infants Under 1 Yr\)](#)
- [Safety Tips for Dads to Keep Young Kids Safe \(Ages 1 to 4 Yrs\)](#)
- [Safety Tips for Dads to Keep School-Age Kids Safe \(Ages 5 to 14 Yrs\)](#)
- [Safety Tips for Dads to Keep Teens Safe \(Ages 15 to 19 Yrs\)](#)

Other Helpful Resources

- From Equimundo (June 14, 2024): [From catching leaves to discussing capitalism, Equimundo staff share their favorite memories with their fathers and father figures for Father's Day](#)
- From the Gottman Institute (June 14, 2024): [The Power of Playtime with Dad](#)
- From the New York Times (June 14, 2024): [The Best Advice for Dads \(According to Dads\)](#)
- From WPTV (June 18, 2024): ['First Time Dad' A.J. Allen uses Tiktok to offer parenting advice and guidance for new fathers](#)



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