

Improving Services for Expectant and Parenting Youth in Care

Entering and navigating the child welfare system can be stressful and confusing for young people separated from their families. It can be even more challenging for young people who are parents, are pregnant, or are expecting. Expectant and parenting youth have unique needs related to their physical, emotional, social, and financial health that require specialized support. Child welfare professionals must be well equipped to help expectant and parenting youth in care meet those needs and support them as they transition to adulthood and/or parenthood.

Lived experience leaders from FosterClub who have expertise as expecting or parenting youth in care worked in close partnership with Child Welfare Information Gateway to develop this bulletin. The experiences, insights, and advice of these young people shaped the content of this publication. When quoted, they are identified according to their preference—by name, State, or anonymous.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Background

Working with expectant and parenting youth

Casework strategies for improving services

Systemwide strategies for improving services

Improving two-generation outcomes

Conclusion

References

This bulletin provides strategies for caseworkers, agencies, and other youth-serving professionals to better support expectant and parenting youth and their families. It includes general information about working with these young people and case-level and systemwide strategies that may contribute to overall improved outcomes. This product focuses on all youth—including those who are pregnant, their partners, mothers, fathers, nonbinary parents, and other members of the LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, or other gender or sexual identity) community.¹

BACKGROUND

All teenage and young adult parents need support, regardless of their involvement with the child welfare system. The human brain continues to develop through one's mid-20s, and adolescent and young adult brains have yet to fully develop in the areas related to reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving. Young people expecting or parenting during this part of their lives need strong support networks and resources to become successful adults and—if they choose—parents.

Youth in foster care experience higher rates of pregnancy and parenthood compared to their peers who are not in foster care (Eastman et al., 2019). This includes both young people who become pregnant and their partners. Expectant and parenting youth in care also face unique challenges related to housing and foster care placements, completing their education, obtaining employment, understanding their parental rights, accessing health-care and mental health services, accessing child care, and more. Navigating these challenges requires specialized support from caseworkers and other professionals. However, expectant and parenting youth in care often lack the financial, emotional, social, and parenting support they need, which can lead to lower educational attainment, unemployment, homelessness, or their own children entering the child welfare system (Combs et al., 2018).

Despite the challenges and responsibilities that expectant and pregnant youth in care shoulder, they are also resilient. Being involved with the child welfare system, many of these young people are eager to give their children a childhood different from their own. Some may even benefit from the transition to parenthood as they commit to being good parents (Eastman et al., 2019). Many young parents have the resiliency and desire to succeed—they just need the help, guidance, and opportunities that every young person deserves.

WORKING WITH EXPECTANT AND PARENTING YOUTH

When working with expectant and parenting youth, caseworkers should practice meaningful youth engagement. Youth engagement occurs when caseworkers holistically partner with young people throughout their case planning and encourage them to lead discussions about their futures. It is crucial that caseworkers approach youth engagement with an attitude that values young people's

¹ This publication aims to use inclusive language when possible, and most information applies to all expectant and parenting youth. The term "expectant" applies to youth in a partnership where one individual is pregnant. Certain sections of this publication provide information that applies to specific subsets of expectant and parenting youth, namely (1) pregnant individuals, mothers, and others who can become pregnant or give birth and (2) fathers and partners of pregnant or birthing individuals.

active participation and inclusion. That means building relationships with youth, listening to them, and treating them as equals. To authentically engage expectant and parenting youth, caseworkers must empower youth to make their own choices and choose what goals they want to work toward as they navigate a pregnancy and/or raise a child. More information about youth engagement is available in Information Gateway's [Prioritizing Youth Voice: The Importance of Authentic Youth Engagement in Case Planning](#).

Caseworkers should also be conscious that young parents and expectant youth in care are often faced with reconciling two conflicting identities. On the one hand, they may feel that they are still young, and on the other hand, they may experience the pressure and adult responsibilities that come with expecting and/or raising a child of their own. They often experience a similar juxtaposition in how others view them. Caseworkers, caregivers, and others may take an "adults know best" perspective and inhibit the youth from making decisions. They may also view the youth as an adult who needs to take responsibility for their actions, essentially leaving them to cope on their own.

Caseworkers need to find the right balance between treating young people as youth who need help at times and as adults with the right to make decisions. They should empower youth to take the lead in their case planning while providing the support and guidance they need to reach their goals and navigate different programs and systems. Without the right support, youth may feel overwhelmed by responsibility and feel they are left to fend for themselves. With too much input and/or oversight, youth may feel as though they are not trusted or that someone else's beliefs are being imposed upon them. Caseworkers should play a balanced role, providing support and guidance as needed while respecting a young person's wants, needs, goals, and ambitions. Caseworkers should also practice empathy and compassion, as expectant and parenting youth often experience a lot of judgment from outsiders. It is important to recognize that caseworkers cannot be the sole source of support for youth in care, so they must connect youth with peers and other supportive individuals. More information is available in this publication's Help Youth Develop Support Networks section.

The [rights of expectant and parenting youth in care](#) can be another challenge caseworkers face when working with these young people. Caseworkers should familiarize themselves with agency, county, State, and/or Tribal policies and laws related to the rights of these young people and make every effort to ensure those rights are respected. This includes their right as a parent to keep their baby in their physical and legal custody. More information about reproductive rights is available in this publication's Planning and Preparation section.

Additional guidance and resources for working with expectant and parenting youth are available on Information Gateway's [Supporting Expectant, Pregnant, and Parenting Youth in Foster Care](#) and [Supporting Young Parents](#) webpages.

"That whole dichotomy of being a youth in care while also being a parent. . .My workers didn't know how to interact with me. At times I was punished for being a child that talked too much, and other times I was punished for being a mother that didn't do enough."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

"Most people treat you like, 'Oh you're pregnant so you're grown now.' . . .They treat you like an adult. There is no mom figure, someone you can talk to like, 'Okay you're pregnant, let's walk you through this, blah blah blah.' It wasn't like that at all."—Jsheema, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

"At the end of the day I'm still a child and I need to be treated like a child in certain aspects. I still need you to hold my hand a little bit and show me, and once you see that I can ride the bike myself, you can let go."—Makaelah, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

CASEWORK STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SERVICES

This section provides strategies to help caseworkers provide personalized, informed support for youth and young adults, including information about planning and preparation, accessing and connecting to resources, and developing support networks.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Pregnancies come with many unknowns and uncertainties, especially for first-time parents and even more so for teens or young adults. When a first-time parent learns they are expecting, they might not know what a pregnancy and/or birth entails. They might not know about infant stages or child development. Young expecting parents also may feel uncertain about their future in and out of care. Establishing plans and helping young people prepare for these unknowns may help ease anxieties and set them up for success. There are various types of plans that can benefit young people: planning during pregnancy, parenting education/preparation, general case planning, and transition planning.

When a youth discloses that they are expecting, it is important that their caseworker helps them work through all their options, which usually are—and not necessarily in this order of preference—(1) proceeding with the pregnancy and raising the child, (2) proceeding with the pregnancy and arranging for the child to be adopted, or (3) terminating the pregnancy. (More information about reproductive rights, including abortion resources for those living in States where it is illegal, is available on the [Planned Parenthood website](#).) For fathers and nonpregnant partners, caseworkers should be prepared to discuss their role in making these decisions or supporting their partner in

making these decisions. Caseworkers should ensure that youth are fully informed and support them as they decide what *they* want to do. It is important that caseworkers and others who are substantially involved in the youth's life (relatives, foster caregivers, etc.) do not impose their personal beliefs and that they support the young person in their decision.

"When I first became pregnant, I was very adamant to go to college and keep my baby. . . I had a plan. Unfortunately, my case manager and the other professionals on my team didn't agree with my plan. They didn't think it was possible, and they thought adoption was better. They were pushing me towards that direction, and that's what I ended up doing with my first child. And it's something that I still regret to this day."—Young person from Virginia who experienced pregnancy and parenting while in foster care

If they choose to proceed with the pregnancy, the young person will need prenatal care and may need help accessing affordable health care; finding an ob-gyn, midwife, or doula; and traveling to and from appointments. Other planning during a pregnancy may include the following:

- Establishing a birth plan that outlines their preferences for labor and delivery
- Signing up for pregnancy, childbirth, and/or parenting classes
- Figuring out postbirth placements

Some youth may face challenges regarding the custody of their child shortly after giving birth. Caseworkers should be knowledgeable about their State's laws—including what paperwork may be required—to prevent unnecessary separation.

When making plans during a pregnancy, it is important to ensure that both partners are actively involved in planning and decision-making, regardless of whether they are the one to give birth. The nonpregnant partner will also need support and information related to affordable health care, doctor appointments, etc. If the couple is not together, the nonpregnant partner may need legal information on their rights, including custody, child support, placement decisions, and more. Paternity testing may also be required to establish or have a written record of the child's paternity.

Parenting education is another important form of preparation that can set expectant and parenting youth up for success. All new parents need education on how to care for a newborn and be a successful parent. Youth in care may especially benefit from parenting education because of their age and background. More information about parenting education is available in this publication's Connecting Youth With Resources section.

General case planning will look different with expectant and parenting youth since placements, permanency goals, and other factors can be impacted by the youth having a child. During case

planning meetings, caseworkers should foster safe, open environments where the youth feel comfortable and have ample opportunities to ask questions and articulate their and their children's needs. The following are some questions to consider asking youth during case planning meetings to initiate important conversations:

- How will having a baby impact your placement in care? Do we need to make plans for a new placement after the baby is born?
- What role will your partner play in your child's life? Do you need to establish custody, visitation, or child support?
- How do you hope to achieve permanency? What questions do you have about reunification, guardianship, or adoption?
- What are your education and/or employment goals? What support do you need to achieve those goals?
- Do you need help obtaining child care, health care, or other support?
- How is your physical and mental health?
- How do you feel about being expectant/parenting while in care?
- Do you have a supportive adult you can talk to if you feel down or overwhelmed?
- Have you considered remaining in extended foster care after your 18th birthday (in States where it is available)?
- Have any of your goals, plans, or decisions changed since our last meeting? How can we adapt your case plan to meet your new needs?

Transition planning is vital for expectant and parenting youth who are on track to age out of the child welfare system to ensure they are prepared for independent living. Federal law requires child welfare professionals working with youth to develop transition plans at least 90 days prior to the youth turning 18. However, transition planning should be a holistic process that unfolds over several years as a young person in care approaches adulthood. For youth who are either expecting or parenting, it is especially crucial that workers put ample time and effort into preparing youth for independent living since they will be responsible for caring for and providing for a dependent. A comprehensive transition plan will address logistics such as housing, health care, education, and employment as well as psychological and emotional aspects, such as building resiliency and developing lifelong connections. In States that offer extended foster care, workers should emphasize the benefits of remaining in care after one's 18th birthday. For more information about successful transition planning, see Information Gateway's [Working With Youth to Develop a Transition Plan](#).

CONNECTING YOUTH WITH RESOURCES

A major element of working with expectant and parenting youth is helping them access the right resources and services. This means, first and foremost, being knowledgeable about what is available in one's State and community. It also means being able to provide referrals for organizations and programs that provide specialized support.

It is easy for youth in care to become overwhelmed by information, responsibilities, and decisions when they find out they are expecting or become a parent. If a young person does not know a resource exists, they will not be able to utilize it. It is a caseworker's job to know what resources are available, to inform the youth about them, and to help them apply for services and navigate programs. Caseworkers should work with other systems, such as health and juvenile justice systems, to take a coordinated service delivery approach when appropriate.

"It feels like you have to have street smarts to not only know about these resources at times but be strategic with how you utilize resources and all that good stuff. I really feel like processes need to be transparent. Transparent in how you can get to those resources, transparent how to receive those resources."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

"One thing I would say is missing from care. . . is the connection to resources. I shouldn't just hear things from word of mouth. My social worker should be equipped to be a social worker to a parenting youth. She should know what parenting classes are available to me, what cultural classes are available to me, because everyone's culture parents different."—Makaelah, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

Services and resources youth may need include pregnancy resources, financial assistance, health care, mental health support, child care, parenting education, education and career resources, resources specifically for nonbirthing partners, and resources to assist with the transition to independent living.

Pregnancy resources. Young people who are expecting will likely benefit from resources designed to help them navigate a pregnancy. First-time parents especially may need information about their options, prenatal care, timelines, foods and activities to avoid, etc. [Planned Parenthood](#) and [What to Expect](#) are helpful online resource hubs for pregnancy information. When connecting youth with pregnancy resources, caseworkers should include information about less common approaches to pregnancy or childbirth, such as working with a midwife or doula or having a home birth, which may be more prevalent in other cultures.

Financial assistance. Everything from hospital and medical bills to purchasing formula and diapers to paying child support can put a financial burden on expectant and parenting youth. In addition, youth in care are often teens and young adults still in school or working low-wage jobs. Federal financial aid resources include the [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants,](#)

[and Children](#) (WIC), the [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#) program, and the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#), formerly known as food stamps. Other programs may also provide financial support through scholarships, subsidized child care, etc.

Health care. Caseworkers should ensure expectant and parenting youth have health-care coverage. The majority of youth in care are eligible for [Medicaid](#) (the joint Federal and State health-care program that provides coverage to low-income Americans) and can begin coverage at any time. If a young person is already enrolled in Medicaid by the time they give birth, their newborn is automatically enrolled and remains eligible for at least a year. Information Gateway's [Health-Care Coverage for Children and Youth in Foster Care—and After](#) provides indepth information about eligibility pathways that enable children and youth in care to receive Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or other health-care coverage. More information about health care for those who are expecting or who have recently given birth is available on HealthCare.gov's [Health Coverage If You're Pregnant, Plan to Get Pregnant, or Recently Gave Birth](#) webpage.

Mental health support. An important part of health care is connecting young people with therapy and other mental health services. Expectant and parenting youth in care face the dual stressors of raising a child and being involved in the child welfare system, both of which can impact their mental health. Adolescent mothers are also more likely than adult parents to experience some degree of perinatal mood and anxiety disorder and postpartum depression (Hackett, 2020). Even with this increased need, many adolescent and young adult parents do not receive mental health services because of logistical barriers, competing priorities, stigma, negative perceptions of care, or limited availability. Left untreated, mental health disorders and challenges can leave parents without the emotional capacity to care for, talk to, comfort, and support the healthy development of their infants. Therefore, it is crucial that caseworkers are knowledgeable about the mental health services in their communities so they can connect young people with the therapy and support they need. With access to mental health support, youth can also talk to a doctor about medications and which antidepressants and psychotropic medications are safe to take during a pregnancy. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a [services locator](#) to help find providers by zip code. In addition, the National Alliance on Mental Illness has a [Youth and Young Adult Resources](#) page with guides, factsheets, videos, and more.

"I feel like as a parenting youth, you suffer from so much trauma before you even become pregnant while in care, that's why you're in care, so I didn't really have an opportunity to have good therapy that actually taught me how to break those generational curses or cycles. I didn't have therapy that taught me not to be a toxic mom."—Makaelah, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

Child care. Accessing affordable child care can be a barrier for any parent that impacts their ability to continue their education or maintain employment. Most youth in care will be eligible for subsidized child care by meeting certain income and other criteria (e.g., the primary caregiver may need to work at least 20 hours a week or be enrolled in an education program). Caseworkers should know what options are available in their State and community and help young parents apply for these programs. The Federal Office of Child Care has a [locator tool](#) with contact information for State and Territorial child care subsidy agencies.

Parenting education. All new parents need help learning how to successfully care for a newborn and raise a child. Ensuring that youth and young adults in foster care have the tools they need to be good parents may also prevent their own children from entering the child welfare system. Parenting programs for expectant and parenting youth in care may be offered by a variety of providers, including the child welfare agency, a community program, a hospital, or a school. They may come in a variety of formats, such as group classes, individual mentorships, and home-visiting programs (such as [Nurse-Family Partnership](#), a Federal home-visiting program that connects young, first-time, low-income parents with registered nurses). Young people can often begin parenting classes during a pregnancy and continue them after their baby's birth. Effective family life education programs are typically research-backed, incorporate support from multiple sources, provide opportunities for active learning, and address the dual development of the young parent and their child (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Classes should be culturally responsive since different cultures parent differently. Parenting education programs should also be focused on support, not surveillance.

"There were times when if I was receiving parenting classes from the agency—or a resource from the agency that offered parenting classes—sometimes it felt directed at me in a way that criticized my parenting style instead of helping me out holistically."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

Education and career resources. Education and employment are key elements to setting young people on a trajectory to a successful future. However, expectant and parenting youth often face challenges (e.g., child care, finances) that make it difficult to attend classes, keep up with homework, obtain employment, and maintain a work schedule. Various education and career resources, such as scholarships, training programs, career counseling, and more, can help eliminate barriers so young people can meet their goals. Some programs, such as the [New Heights Program for Expectant and Parenting Students](#) in Washington, DC, simultaneously provide educational support and child care services so that young parents do not have to sacrifice their education to look after their children. When helping young people pursue education or a career, it is important to recognize that everyone has different goals. These may include finishing high school, attending college, completing a GED, going to vocational school, pursuing alternative schooling, or getting a job. More information about education and employment for expectant and parenting young families is available on [Youth.gov](#).

Resources for nonbirthing partners. Adolescent and young adult fathers and other nonbirthing partners often do not receive the same support and resources as mothers and other birth-giving parents. Further, since there are no mechanisms enforcing child welfare agencies to track and report father involvement in their children's lives, it is difficult to determine what kind of father-focused resources young fathers in foster care need (Harty & Ethier, 2022). Regardless of these gaps in research and reporting, caseworkers should treat nonbirthing partners as equals who need the same support and resources as the birth-giving parent. They will likely also benefit from resources tailored specifically to fathers and the unique challenges they face, such as navigating biases, feeling left out of parenting decisions, experiencing pressure to provide financially, etc. The [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#) is a good resource to share with young fathers for information about coparenting, personal resilience, child support, custody, visitation, and more.

"There's a plethora of great information as relates to what moms need, but I think what I'm finding is that so much of what moms need, dads need, too. I find that any information that's educational around parenting, there should be something created specifically around language that supports dads. . .If dad doesn't have the things that mom has, dad can't really fully participate and engage in the rearing of his child."—Cole Williams, fatherhood practitioner and cofounder of the Delta Project, Grand Rapids, Michigan

"I had so many outside people telling me to stop going to school, man up get a job and start working for the kid. . .It was ridiculous that people had that mindset that I need to stop school, go work and go grind. I was like, I'm not going to give up on my education because in the long run this is better for me."—Young father from Indiana who was expecting and parenting in care

Resources to help with the transition to independent living. Discussing resources should be part of transition planning so that young people can continue accessing programs and support after they leave the child welfare system. Helping youth find stable, affordable housing after they leave care is one important piece of transition planning. This includes pointing them to information they need to learn about, such as credit scores, renter's insurance, tenant rights, etc. The [John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood](#) provides assistance to help young people who are currently or formerly were in foster care achieve self-sufficiency. Activities and programs include help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and more.

"I personally feel like it would be helpful if before a youth ages out, the social worker or the independent living worker can have a conversation with them or show them how to utilize and obtain those resources so when they get to be 18, they're not looking like, 'Oh my god, I don't know what to do, I feel so overwhelmed.' So it really starts before they age out."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

See the following online resources for more information about resources for expectant and parenting youth in care:

- [Resources for Expectant, Pregnant, and Parenting Youth in Foster Care](#) (Information Gateway)
- [Connecting the Dots: A Resource Guide for Meeting the Needs of Expectant and Parenting Youth, Their Children, and Their Families](#) (Center for the Study of Social Policy)
- [Resources to Help Young Parents Thrive](#) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation)

HELP YOUTH DEVELOP SUPPORT NETWORKS

All caregivers need people they can call upon when they need a supportive listener, advice, or concrete support. Unfortunately, it is common for expectant and parenting youth in care to feel isolated and alone. A lack of social support has been identified as a major issue for these young people (Eastman et al., 2019). Parenting, in general, can be isolating. The issue is exacerbated for expectant and parenting youth in care who may not have friends their age with kids or close connections with their families. In child welfare, social connection has been identified as a [protective factor](#) that makes it easier for parents to care for their children and reduces the risk of maltreatment and other negative outcomes.

Social support can come from many different avenues. It may include family, friends, partners, neighbors, teachers, coworkers, health care providers, child welfare staff, a guardian ad litem, a court-appointed special advocate (CASA), and others. When working with expectant and parenting youth in care, caseworkers should help young people identify the supportive people in their lives and facilitate regular contact so that they can develop lifelong connections that extend past their time in care.

Social networks may also include new connections with other parents formed through support groups, mentorships, or other programs. These peer-to-peer connections may be especially helpful by allowing a young person to connect with and learn from parents who are experiencing or have previously experienced a similar situation to their own. Peers who are young parents themselves can offer camaraderie, acceptance, and support. Older mentors can provide advice and coaching on parenting since many young parents in care lack adult role models. For more information, visit FosterClub's [Outreach and Peer Support](#) webpage.

"I had a really good CASA, bless her heart, Barbara, and she was literally like my White abuelita, my White grandma, and she came in and just poured into me and watched me grow. I literally wouldn't have become a good mom at all without her. She talked to me about parenting my son and other options that I would have, putting him into school and things like that."—Makaelah, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

"I look up [parenting examples] on YouTube and TikTok—I find myself wanting to see people's daily schedules—and if I had a mentor to ask those types of questions, I think it would have put in perspective for me, what it would look like, me being in college with a baby. It would make it possible for me, because I could see someone else actually able to achieve those day-by-day goals."—Young person from Virginia who experienced pregnancy and parenting while in foster care

"I found out about WIC and food stamps after I had my baby. When he was in the NICU [neonatal intensive care unit], the nurse who was taking care of him had told me about it and she helped me with the application and everything while I was there and before I went home. I loved my nurse."—Jsheema, experienced pregnancy and parenting while in foster care

SYSTEMWIDE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SERVICES

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for expectant and parenting youth in care to feel disappointed and let down by their experience with the child welfare system. As the system continues to evolve and improve, efforts must be made to find better ways to work with and support these young people.

Update policies and practices. A first step is updating old policies and practices and developing new ones specifically designed for expectant and parenting youth, rather than blanketing them under the same policies and practices used for the general foster care population. Because certain policies are not tailored to expectant and parenting youth, they may have unintended negative consequences. For example, work requirements to receive certain benefits may force many young parents to choose between furthering their education and working (National Crittenton & Katcher Consulting, 2020).

Partner with those with lived expertise. A crucial element of system improvement is engaging people with lived experience and shaping policies, research, and practices based on their expertise. Children, youth, and families who have experienced the child welfare system firsthand have valuable insights into how it can improve. The voice of lived experience is important when developing

policies and practices for marginalized and under-researched groups like expectant and parenting youth. Meaningful partnership goes beyond seeking input from these experts on initiatives or having them represented on committees—it involves giving children, youth, and families opportunities to be heard at all levels of policy, research, and practice and compensating them fairly for their time and expertise. More information about lived experience integration is available in the tipsheet [Building on the Lessons Learned From Division X Implementation](#).

Improve data collection and utilization. Knowing about the challenges and needs of expectant and parenting youth is difficult without regularly collected, indepth data. While expectant and parenting youth in care are increasingly getting more attention as a distinct population, data about them remains limited, which makes it difficult for systems to align services with their needs and improve their and their children's overall well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Even when data are collected, they may not be analyzed and leveraged for system improvement. Information to help systems leaders gather, assess, share, and leverage data on expectant and parenting youth is available in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Expectant and Parenting Youth in Foster Care: Systems Leaders Data Tool Kit](#).

Eliminate bias and stigma. Bias among child welfare professionals and service providers continues to be a systemic obstacle for expectant and parenting youth. The implicit biases of institutions and individuals based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, geographic location, and class impact many young people and families involved with the child welfare system, including young parents and those who are expecting. On top of these institutionalized biases that exacerbate challenges, expectant and parenting youth in care face negative stereotypes and stigma associated with their group identity. For many years and in multiple contexts, these young people have been unfairly labeled by others as sexually promiscuous, irresponsible, reckless, having poor decision-making skills, lacking the capacity to parent, being absentee parents, unmotivated, bad influences, etc. (Center for the Study of Social Policy et al., 2022). They are also often subjected to narrow gender role expectations that mothers are caregivers and fathers are providers. [Systems change strategies](#) to address bias and stigma may include reframing the causes and outcomes of adolescent pregnancy and parenting, amplifying young parents' voices and positive outcomes, supporting dual transitions to adulthood and parenthood, and building young parents' protective factors.

Coordinate service delivery. The institutions that serve expectant and parenting youth in care—including child welfare agencies, community organizations, workforce development groups, and other service providers—are siloed and often fail to coordinate their services. Coordinated service delivery across systems can help parents better navigate benefits and resources without becoming overwhelmed. One option could be online and in-person resource centers that serve as "one-stop shops" for information, services, and other support.

Improve placement options. More research is needed on placement challenges for expecting and parenting youth in care. However, anecdotal evidence from young adults with experience and other subject-matter experts suggests that housing remains a major issue for these young people. This

may result from placement instability, limited foster homes willing to take in a young person and their children, subpar experiences at residential home facilities, and judgment and oversurveillance from foster families and residential home staff. Systems change that could improve these challenges include increased [recruitment of foster families](#) willing to support young parents, training for families and facilities staff to reduce bias and stigma, and allocating funding for more high-quality residential home placement programs.

More information about system-level challenges that young parents experience is available in the paper [Young Parents Speak Out: Barriers, Bias, and Broken Systems](#) by National Crittenton and Katcher Consulting in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which is built on interviews with young adult parents.

"The biggest issue that pregnant and parenting youth face is agencies, partners, and other stakeholders not knowing how to interact with them in an equitable manner. There's a severe lack of policy that is specific to pregnant and parenting youth and what ends up happening is the default setting. . .The data that States gather for CQI (continuous quality improvement) and CFSR (Child and Family Services Reviews) processes are not adequate when it comes to reflecting pregnant and parenting youth and their needs and challenges."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

"Not many people want to take in someone with a child, so it's mostly group homes. And there's a lot of arguing, fights, and awkward vibes."—Young person who experienced parenting in foster care

"There was a huge stereotype of me being a single Black mother and being on government assistance. I made sure to do everything in my power to stay in my relationship with my children's father and to make sure to keep a job."—Makaelah, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

IMPROVING TWO-GENERATION OUTCOMES

The children of parents with foster care experience are more likely to be placed in care than children whose parents did not experience foster care (Wall-Wieler et al., 2018; Schachter & Kroll, 2022). This is often referred to as the "intergenerational cycle of involvement with child protection services." The cycle may be perpetuated by a number of causes, including oversurveillance of young parents in care, generational poverty, lack of support, untreated mental health conditions, and other risk factors for child abuse and neglect.

It should always be the priority of the agency to keep families together. Therefore, preventing maltreatment is an important element of working with parenting youth. Under the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act, pregnant and parenting youth are identified as a population that is eligible for Federal reimbursement for prevention services, including in-home, parent skill-based programs and mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment services. For example, [Promoting First Relationships](#) is a nationwide home-visiting intervention and prevention program that promotes healthy relationships between children and their parents over multiple weeks and sessions. Agencies should work to specifically address expectant and parenting youth in their prevention programs, and caseworkers should be knowledgeable about prevention programs in their community.

In addition to specific prevention programs, a two-generation (2Gen) approach to supporting youth in care and their children can improve overall family well-being. While many programs and policies focus solely on the child or the parent, 2Gen approaches build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with the children and the adults in their lives together since their needs are interconnected and interdependent (Ascend Aspen Institute, n.d.). These approaches often focus on improving a family's financial, social, mental, and spiritual health.

Implementing prevention strategies is important when working with expectant and parenting youth, but it is also important to recognize that sometimes intergenerational systems involvement is a result of oversurveillance, especially for families of color. Young parents in care often feel they are under constant scrutiny and need to prove their ability to parent (Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). Systemic change will require agencies and caseworkers to reevaluate the policies and practices contributing to the oversurveillance of young parents and refocus efforts on strengths-based strategies that support families before they require a child protective services investigation.

"They weren't really trying to help me when it came to parenting. It was just like we're supposed to watch you but when it comes to how you parent, it's like we're gonna pick and prod when you're doing something wrong but we're not gonna help you to make sure you're doing something right."—Young person who experienced parenting in foster care

"I honestly feel like it's really hard when you're in the system and you have a child because now you're walking on ice. It puts a magnifier on you. . .Especially as a minority, I feel like there are stereotypes and certain things that you have to do just to get by and just to make sure that you aren't upsetting the courts and it's like you're really walking on ice. To break the cycle, there needs to be some type of adjustment and bringing back not just going by the book, but looking at the situation as a human."—Young person from Virginia who experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

"One of the reasons why families continue to be system involved is because needs continue to not be met. Allowing people the tools to be self-sufficient and giving them the space to reach permanency and stability on their terms is important. . .If this cannot happen, then the cycle will repeat."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

CONCLUSION

Youth in care experience pregnancy and parenting at higher rates than their peers who are not involved with the child welfare system, but there is a lack of policies and practices specific to these young people. These youth deserve specialized support and equitable access to resources, especially as they face bias and stigma unique to their group identity. Improving services for expectant and parenting youth requires meaningful change at the system, program, and practice level and a commitment from child welfare professionals to better support these vulnerable, resilient young people.

"The most important thing is also creating space for healing and accountability. There are people who have a negative view of child welfare and agencies, especially people of color, growing up we were taught to hide from social workers because the department of social services was viewed as an agency that literally destroys families, so we have a negative viewpoint when it comes to agencies. What States can do is assess communities and areas that need improvement and create easier ways to rebuild relationships within the communities that they serve."—Lanitta, experienced pregnancy and parenting in foster care

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