

Through the Eyes of a Child

Overview

This lesson offers a unique approach to strengthening pregnancy prevention. It reinforces the sliding versus deciding concept of Lesson 8, and the pacing and planning concepts of sexuality in Lessons 11 and 12. Sliding into an unplanned pregnancy, or having a second child too soon, is surely avoidable. But, it takes more than knowledge of, and access to, contraception. It takes motivation and active planning to delay sex, or to put the health tool kit to use to prevent a first or second unplanned pregnancy. And that is a goal of this lesson.

Young people might be more motivated to avoid an unplanned pregnancy if they were encouraged to step outside themselves and look more deeply at the consequences of an unplanned pregnancy for children whose parents are young, not finished with school or employed, nor in a healthy marriage. Examining unplanned pregnancy through the eyes of a child—to see and feel the challenges for children—may provide additional motivation to have a proactive plan to prevent a pregnancy. The unique approach in this lesson speaks to females and also to young males. It taps their own honorable, protective instincts for children. It may prove more powerful and empowering than messages that focus primarily on self-interest (e.g. support payments, loss of freedom, stressful, etc.).

In the first activity, participants create a fictitious ad placed by a soon-to-be-born child looking for a family. This activity helps youth consider what helps a child thrive. Through the activity and discussion, youth are able to discern the advantages for a child of having parents who are a bit older, more settled, on track with education and employment, and in a healthy marriage partnership.

The next set of activities addresses the role of males in family formation. What does it mean to be a good father? How can fathers positively contribute to their child's

development? Using media and music, youth explore the meaning of positive fathering as well as the negative impacts of father absence and father neglect and abandonment. Youth explore the connection between involved fathers and healthy relationships. Indeed, the winning ticket for a young man who desires to be a positive father is to finish school, be employed, and form a healthy marriage before having a child—and then take care of that relationship. And if a young father is not with the mother, healthy relationship skills are needed for co-parenting and to reduce the potential relationship troubles that create barriers to father involvement. Included as an optional resource is an important discussion and resource, *Child Support*.

Addressing the role of males in regards to fathering is important for all youth, including LGBTQ youth. The LGBTQ teen pregnancy rate is higher than that for heterosexual youth. Adult LGBTQ couples who choose to have children deliberately use adoption, reproductive technologies, surrogacy, or other options. But teens of all sexual orientations who experience a pregnancy do so as a result of an encounter between a male and a female. This lesson speaks to the point that teenage boys may end up being a father, even if that was not the plan. And, whether a teen is LGBTQ or heterosexual, they may have their own issues related to father absence or abandonment. The strategy of “through the eyes of a child” is meant to motivate all youth toward deliberate planning as to when and if to start a family.

The capstone activity, *Child Speak*, is designed to connect a lot of dots to strengthen motivation to avoid a first or second unplanned pregnancy and to employ the relationship skills they have learned. Starting with advice collected from former teen parents, *Babies Have Brighter Futures If...*, the activity, *Child Speak*, helps participants understand the importance of parents making clear decisions about their relationship as well as parenting. *Child Speak* reinforces many of the goals of *Love Notes*. Deciding when to have sex, and in what context, and to plan for one’s sexual choices, really matters, not only to the health and wellbeing of a young person, but potentially to a child. Exploring that larger picture helps youth to truly understand the benefits of planning, and not sliding or drifting into unplanned parenthood.

This lesson is as relevant to primary as it is to secondary pregnancy prevention. For young parents, it deepens their awareness of the importance of making clear decisions about their relationship, in addition to learning about nurturing their child. It may help

young parents identify the skills (especially the communication skills they have learned and practiced in *Love Notes*) to co-parent effectively, whether they are together or apart. The lesson also includes a special discussion of the handout, *When Parents Aren't Together*. And, the program may help a single young parent go more wisely into their next relationship.

Finally, there is a short section on findings from recent research on cohabitation to help inform young people as they make decisions about living together—to know when it's least risky and when it carries more risks.

Looking towards the future, participants will begin to create their final success plans for education and employment, as well as for their love lives.

Please note that all stories, narratives, poetry, and pieces of advice for the *Child Speak* activity were written by teen parents. Music selections were chosen by youth.

Background Information for the Instructor

Overall teen pregnancy rates have gone down (although significant disparities exist). But unplanned pregnancy has not gone away—it is simply going up the age scale. Today, fully 40.6% of all babies are born outside of marriage, (29% of White, 53% of Hispanic, and 72% of African-American children).¹ These high rates of non-marital births (one-quarter are to teens and 55% of all births to mothers in their twenties are non-marital) are contributing to more gender, racial, and income inequality, and are producing unequal outcomes for children. For example, children born to teens as well as to unmarried mothers over 20 are between four (overall) and nine times (teens) more likely to live in poverty.²

Today there is considerable research on the fragility and instability of the relationships of unmarried parents. Indeed, some couples and their children live happily ever after without marriage; but most break up. According to the largest study, The Fragile Family and Child Wellbeing Study (a joint project of Princeton and Columbia University), two-thirds of unmarried parents have split up by the child's 5th birthday and about 60% of the mothers have been in three relationships by the 5-year mark.³ Serial cohabitation and having children with multiple partners is a growing trend, especially among those

with less education. It is resulting in increased child poverty, greater family instability and complexity, and poorer child outcomes.⁴

Unfortunately, this information has not filtered down to youth. Many young people (73% of 18- to 19-year-old females) see unmarried childbearing as a lifestyle choice with little understanding of the disadvantages to children or to themselves.⁵ Youth's acceptance and tolerance of all people and family forms is admirable—and all babies are welcome, regardless of situation. Educating youth about the Success Sequence is particularly critical. The order in which they might do some of life's biggest things really matters.⁹

Unplanned pregnancy and birth (whatever one's sexual orientation) is linked with an increased likelihood of relationship turbulence of which many young people are unaware. Too often, just as some young parents are making progress in getting their lives on track, they are derailed by yet another pregnancy with the wrong partner or another failed relationship.

There is a need for innovative prevention approaches that tap deeper motivations, speak to aspirations. A majority of teens and young adults say that having a good marriage and family life is important to them personally.⁶ A recent Gallup survey shows young singles (between ages 18–34) across income levels very much hope to get hitched—only 9% say they don't want to ever be married.⁷

Certainly there are difficulties for many youth to follow the success sequence of completing a college education or training, obtaining stable employment, and forming a healthy marriage before having a child.⁸ Vigorous public policy action is needed to open up educational success to all—starting with early childhood education on to quality K–12 schools and free or low-cost college or apprenticeships. We need to invest in jobs for the future with better wages and benefits to ensure youth have access to stable employment. And, we also need to educate and build skills to help young people navigate their love lives more wisely. Young people can make positive choices in their own lives that will make a difference. It is especially important to educate, empower, and to support youth to make decisions for their love lives that will help them achieve rather than add more obstacles to them reaching their goals.

Goals

- Examine unplanned pregnancy through the eyes of a child.
- Consider ways in which a healthy, stable relationship helps parents do the job of parenting.
- Analyze the role of fathers in family formation and key barriers for father involvement, especially when teens/young adults are involved (even if they are LGBTQ youth).
- Learn from former teen parents about the decisions and steps young parents can make to ensure bright futures for themselves and their child.
- Examine research on cohabitation to inform decision-making.
- Review the benefits of deliberate planning to avoid a 1st or 2nd pregnancy until one is more settled with education and employment and in a healthy union.
- Apply the learned concepts and skills for developing a success plan.

Lesson at a Glance

13.1 **Child Looking for a Family** (15 minutes)

Activities: *Parents Wanted*; Optional: *Jessie's Thoughts Today*

13.2 **What about Fathers?** (10 minutes)

Activities: *Being a Good Father Means*; *Contributions of Fathers*; Music video: *Dance With My Father*; Optional: *Ten Ways to Be a Good Father*

13.3 **Father Absence, Relationship Troubles** (10–20 minutes, depending)

Activities: Popular music and discussion on father absence; *Connecting Dots: Healthy Relationships & Fathers*; Music video: *When I'm Gone*, by Eminem; *What's in it for Guys?* Optional: *Young Fathers, Custody & Child Support*

13.4 **Child Speak: Brighter Futures** (20 minutes)

Activities: *Child Speak*; Brief visual on early child development; Read Aloud: *Lily's Letter*; Optional: *When Parents Aren't Together*

13.5 **Decisions about Living Together** (5 minutes)

13.6 **Planning for Success—Wrap-Up** (5 minutes)

Activities: *Creating My Success Plan*; Wrap-up



Materials Checklist

Resources:

- 13a. *Jessie's Thoughts Today* (optional handout) (pgs. 353–354)
- 13b. *Ten Ways to Be a Better Father* (optional handout) (pg. 355)
- 13c. *Sample Music Lyrics* (instructor resource) (pg. 356)
- 13d. *Child Support* (optional handout) (pgs. 357–360)
- 13e. *When Parents Aren't Together* (optional handout) (pgs. 361–362)
- 13f. *Lily's Letter* (pgs. 363–365)

Materials:

- Lesson 13 PowerPoint slideshow and all duplicate masters for handouts are digital downloads that come with the curriculum. Easy-to-follow directions are found at DibbleInstitute.org/LN4.
- Flip chart paper and markers
- Music videos hyperlinked in PowerPoint slides: Luther Vandross: *Dance With My Father*; Good Charlotte: *Emotionless*; Eminem: *When I'm Gone*; Ed Sheeran and Beyonce: *Perfect*. More music videos are hyperlinked at the end of the slideshow.

Workbook Applications:

- *Parents Wanted: Child Looking for a Family* (pg. 49)
- *Being a Good Father Means* (pg. 50)
- *Success Planning* (pgs. 51–54)
- *Child Speak* (pg. 55)
- *Babies Have Brighter Futures If...* (pg. 56)



Preparation

- ✓ Carefully read through the introductory overview and background information, lesson, and preview PowerPoint slides to gain familiarity with the concepts, flow and activities. This lesson is a robust capstone to the program. It alone may be the ultimate motivator for preventing an unplanned pregnancy (1st or 2nd) and for becoming a planner, not slider, in life.

- ✓ Preview the music videos for Section 13.2 and 13.3, as well as the final wrap-up music video by Beyonce and Ed Sheeran. They are hyperlinked in the PowerPoint slides. Look at *Sample Music Lyrics* (Resource 13c, pg. 356) for other father songs in contemporary music or add your own.
- ✓ Prepare for the centerpiece activity, *Child Speak*, by reviewing the workbook pg. 56, *Babies Have Brighter Futures If...*, and *Child Speak*, on workbook pg. 55.
- ✓ Review all other workbook applications that are vital to the activities: *Parents Wanted: Child Looking for a Family* (pg. 49), *Being a Good Father Means* (pg. 50).
- ✓ Practice reading aloud *Lily's Letter* (Resource 13f, pgs. 363–365).
- ✓ Review the capstone workbook application, *Success Planning* (pgs. 51–54). Determine the due date for completion. It is strongly suggested to find a way for participants to discuss their completed success plans with a trusted adult.
- ✓ If you have young parents, review and determine if you will use *Child Support* (Resource 13d, pgs. 357–360) and *When Parents Aren't Together* (Resource 13e, pgs. 361–362).
- ✓ Duplicate any handouts you select to use.

SECTION 13.1

Child Looking for a Family

- Resource 13a: *Jessie's Thoughts Today* (optional) (pgs. 353–354)
- Workbook: *Parents Wanted: Child Looking for a Family* (pg. 49)
- Or flip chart paper and markers

15 minutes

(PP) This is the first of a series of pregnancy prevention activities to explore the link between unplanned pregnancy, parental relationships, and child well-being by looking *through the eyes of a child*. To start, participants will work in groups to produce an ad. It serves as a springboard for a discussion about what helps children and how healthy and stable parental relationships can help parents provide for those needs.



Lesson Thirteen
Through the Eyes of a Child

Introduce the lesson with these points:

- ❖ *Love Notes has been about helping you plan for your future. Being a planner instead of a drifter or slider in life can help you reach your goals.*
- ❖ *Pregnancy is what we're going to focus more on today.*
- ❖ *Even though teen pregnancy has been going down, there still are a lot of unplanned pregnancies among teenagers and also among young adults.*
- ❖ *This is why we're going to spend some time looking at life through the eyes of a child and what an unplanned pregnancy means to a child.*

Activity: Parents Wanted: Child Looking for a Family

Announce that they will work in small groups to create a Craigslist ad placed by a soon-to-be-born child who is looking for a family.

- ❖ *Of course, we do not get to choose our families, but let us suppose for a moment that we do. What would a child want, ideally?*
- ❖ *In this activity, you are to pretend you are the soon-to-be-born child who is identifying the characteristics of parents and home life you want.*

Directions: Divide into small groups. Have groups either use workbook pg. 49, *Parents Wanted: Child Looking for a Family*, or go to flip chart papers on the walls. Offer instructions:

1. *In writing the ad, think about what would help a child grow up healthy and well-adjusted. Consider: (PP)*

- ❖ *The kind of home situation a child might want?*
- ❖ *The characteristics or qualities a child might want in each of his or her parents?*
- ❖ *What helps or makes a person ready to be a parent?*
- ❖ *Consider anything that would help parents to nurture and raise their child:*
 - *Job, education*
 - *Finances, money*
 - *Maturity, personal characteristics*
 - *Relationship status and relationship quality of parents*
 - *Material things that help (living situation, etc.)*
 - *Family and community supports*
 - *Parenting skills*

2. *Groups have four minutes to come up with what would be included in the ad.*

Processing Ads: When finished, ask volunteers to read their ads, with each group simply adding what other groups have not mentioned. Listen in an open and supportive way.

Then ask this question: *Do you think most teenagers have the characteristics you all said you would want from a parent?*

Ad Activity: Parents Wanted

- Consider:
 - Education
 - Job
 - Finances/money
 - Maturity/personality characteristics
 - Relationship status
 - Material things that help
 - Parenting skills
 - Family & community supports



How Do Healthy Relationships Help?

(PP) With the list of qualities and characteristics they have identified, use the following prompts to engage discussion on how a healthy and stable parental relationship would help parents provide these things:

- ❖ *You have done a great job identifying some important needs of a child!*
- ❖ *I have a question for you. Let's focus on this list and think about the parents' relationship.*
 - *How would a healthy relationship help parents be able to offer these things to their child (whatever their genders)?*
 - *Which items on the list would be easier to achieve if parents had a commitment to each other? A healthy relationship? Were a bit older? Think on this for a moment and see what you come up with.*

To prompt them, ask the group to consider the **emotional and social benefits** of having parents in a healthy relationship. Listen before adding these ideas, if needed: (PP)

- ❖ *Because two is more than one, there may be more time and energy between two parents to nurture and care for the baby.*
 - *And later, as the child grows, more time and energy to care, play, read, discipline, do homework, and provide for the family.*
- ❖ *There might be less stress, as parents can share caring for the baby—especially as babies can fuss and cry a lot in the early weeks and months.*
- ❖ *Also, a parent who feels loved, supported, and secure about his or her partner's love and commitment may be in a better place emotionally to give to a child.*
 - *Contrast that with a parent who is scared, isolated, alone, and with little security or support from a partner. It might be harder to meet a child's needs if the parent is stressed and anxious.*

How would a healthy relationship help parents offer these to a child?



Emotional and Social Advantages of a Healthy Relationship

- Two the time and energy of two to provide nurture and care
- Less stress than if alone
- Better emotional health if loved and supported by partner; feel more secure with commitment
- Two to help with care, play, discipline, school work, and providing
- Married couples are more likely to receive support from both extended families



- *And, if the mother is in a troubled or abusive relationship, that can affect her emotional state and even lead to depression. Depression makes it hard for a mom to respond to her baby.*
- *If the couple has a good relationship with a strong level of commitment, they may be more likely to receive support—financial, emotional, and social—from both sides of the family. That support from both sides can really help a young family.*

Next, focus on the financial benefits:

- ❖ *Let's focus for a moment on finances. Two parents means the possibility of two incomes.*
- ❖ *If they are committed to a future together, they are likely to pool income for their family. If one is not committed they may be less likely to pool their money together for the family.*
- ❖ *It is true that money doesn't buy love or a great kid. We all know there are messed up rich kids. But, money does buy things that can give a child real advantages. What might these be? Let's brainstorm the kinds of things money can buy that might help a child.*

Pause for responses. Add the following if not mentioned. (PP)

- ❖ *Money can pay for rent/housing in a safer neighborhood with better schools, parks, and community resources which give a child real advantages.*
- ❖ *Money pays for food and medicine and transportation—like to the health clinic when the child is sick.*
- ❖ *Money can also pay for childcare. Childcare center costs (2016 figures) range from \$4,600 a year (Mississippi) to \$13,000 a year (California).²⁷*
- ❖ *When a parent is stressed about finances or about his or her relationship, this stress can negatively affect his or her parenting.*
- ❖ *Just consider for a moment that the median income in the U.S. is \$87,005 for married parent households with children and \$41,000 for single parent, female-headed households.¹⁰*

Financial Benefits

- 2 incomes can mean greater financial resources for the family
- Money buys housing in safer neighborhood with better schools and parks
- Money buys quality childcare, food, healthcare and medicine
- Money buys a car for transportation—to doctors, to grocery store, for sports, activities
- When stressed about finances, it can make it hard to focus on parenting.

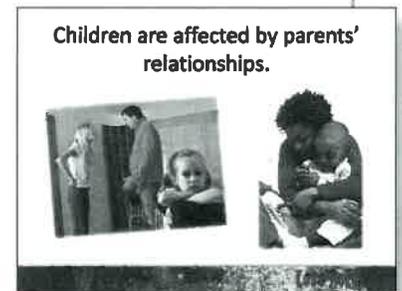


Conclude this discussion with these essential points:

1. *When parents have a healthy marriage, it offers real benefits to a child—financial, social, and emotional.*
 - *When that relationship is healthy, committed, and stable, it gives a child advantages in life.*

2. *But the take-home message is not to stay in a destructive or dangerous relationship—or run out and get married if a person is pregnant. (PP)*
 - *Destructive and dangerous relationships harm children. So does going from one relationship to another. That instability is not good for kids.*
 - *A stable, single parent is better than an abusive relationship.*

3. *Thinking about it through the eyes of a child is a big reason to be a planner. It means following the Success Sequence. It means deciding, not sliding, when it comes to relationships and sex.*
 - *9 out of 10 sexually active teens that are not using some form of birth control will get pregnant in a year.*
 - *For those who are teen parents already, it's important to focus on being the best possible parent. And, to take the steps to avoid a second unplanned pregnancy until he or she finishes school, is more settled, is employed, and married with a good partner.*



Instructor note: Why use the word marriage? Today there is considerable research on the fragility and instability of the relationships of unmarried parents. Indeed, some couples and their children live happily ever after without marriage; but most break up. According to the largest study (Fragile Family and Child Wellbeing Study) two-thirds of unmarried parents have split up by the child's 5th birthday and about 60% of the mothers have been in three relationships by the 5-year mark. Serial cohabitation and having children with multiple partners is a growing trend, especially among those with less education. It is resulting in increased child poverty, greater family instability and complexity, and poorer child outcomes.

Another reason to talk about marriage is that youth themselves say they highly value it for their own lives. If it is valued by youth, we can help them learn about healthy relationships and the skills needed, as well as a sequence to follow to put them on a path towards their goals.

Optional: *Jessie's Thoughts Today*

(PP) Announce you have a letter written by Jesse, a young mother, to her friend who is facing decisions about an unplanned pregnancy. This letter goes back in time to say what she wishes she had said to her friend back then. Jessie had an unplanned pregnancy herself. She writes about the challenges she has faced, but especially about how her unstable life has affected her child, Emily.

Jessie's Thoughts Today



Make copies of *Jessie's Thoughts Today* (Resource 13a, pgs. 353–354) available for those interested. It is very powerful.

SECTION 13.2

What about Fathers?

- Resource 13b: *Ten Ways to Be a Better Father* (optional) (pg. 355)
- Workbook: *Being a Good Father Means* (pg. 50)
(or flip chart paper & markers)
- Music videos: *Dance With My Father*

10 minutes

This section offers positive ways to address the role of males in family formation. The activities are upbeat and encourage young people to identify the qualities of positive fathering. The first activity is a short free-write on what it means to be a good father. The second activity asks participants to brainstorm the unique contributions good fathers can provide for their sons and daughters.

Special note: This curriculum is aimed at building healthy selves and healthy relationships and encouraging youth to make sexual choices that are meaningful to them and then to plan for those choices. This lesson focuses on reinforcing pregnancy

prevention. According to the 2017 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, LGB youth have higher sexual risk behavior rates than heterosexual youth.²⁹ In the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescents, bisexual females were found to have significantly higher pregnancy rates than heterosexual teens.³⁰ And in a study on students in New York City, they found that LGB teens also had higher pregnancy rates than heterosexual teens.³¹ While LGBTQ adult couples deliberately choose to have children through adoption, in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, or other options, teens of all sexual orientations who experience a pregnancy do so as a result of an encounter between a male and female. LGBTQ youth may have sex with a person of the opposite sex for any number of different reasons, i.e. exploring or questioning and some are exploited.

Thus, this curriculum speaks to the point that young males may end up being fathers, even if that was not the plan. This thread ties back to the notion that in today's society, most children want to know who their biological parents are, even if the people who are raising them are not their biological parents. And many mothers will invite the father of their children to participate in the life of their child. Whether a youth is LGBTQ or hetero, they may have their own issues related to father absence or abandonment.

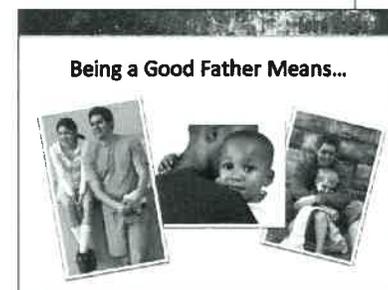
So this section helps youth—both boys who may become fathers and girls who may have not thought through the role that a father can play in the life of a child, besides financially—to think about it from the perspective of a child who may wonder about their father. Again, qualitative and quantitative research finds that children want loving adults to provide certain things for them. Many will identify fathers as people they want in their lives.

Activity: Being a Good Father Means...

Announce that they're now going to turn some attention to fathers. Many parenting resources are focused on mothers. But children want their fathers to be a great parent too.

(PP) Have teens turn to pg. 50 in the workbook, *Being a Good Father Means*, or have groups go to large papers on the walls. Ask them to think for a moment how they would finish that statement.

- *Think about what it truly means to be a good father. You may want to consider your own father if he has been a positive force in your life—or someone that has served as a father figure or male role model.*



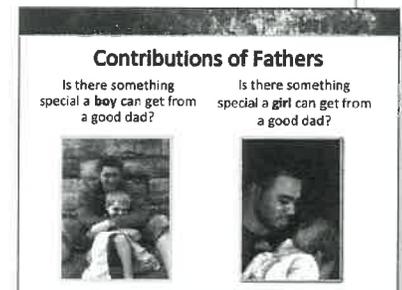
- *If you did not have a father in your life—or a positive father presence—think about what a good father should be like. Maybe you have two great mothers. Consider what a great father should be like.*
- *Take a couple of minutes to jot down anything that comes to mind and then we'll pool our ideas.*

Processing activity: Ask volunteers to share items from their list. Applaud their efforts.

Discussion: Contributions of Fathers

The questions below encourage youth to reflect on the contributions positive fathers can make to their children. Even if your group is all same gender, ask them to respond to both questions.

- ❖ **(PP)** Ask the girls: *Is there something special that a girl gets (or should get) from her father? What advantages might a good father give a girl? What disadvantages might a girl face who doesn't have a positive father or male figure?*
- ❖ Ask the boys: *Is there something special that a boy gets from a father? What advantages might a good father give a boy? What disadvantages might a boy face with a negative father or male figure?*



Listen to their responses first. Draw on the points below, to add if needed:

- ❖ **A girl's self-esteem and expectations for a partner:** *A girl who has a loving and positively involved father/father figure may gain the experience of being valued and treated well by a male who is closely involved in her life. This treatment may serve as a powerful imprint for her expectations as she later ventures out into the world of romantic relationships. She may expect to be treated well and valued by friends and partners. Through being loved and cared for by a father, she may learn that she is love-worthy. Also, her father can provide a model for non-sexual relationships with males; in other words, being valued for things other than just looks or her sexuality. If her father or father figure*

has a healthy marriage, she can see a model for how a person treats his partner. This is important for any sexual orientation.

- ❖ **Impact of negative fathering for a girl:** *What is a girl learning about herself if she has an abusive father, a father who devalues her, or a father who has abandoned her and/or treats her mother badly? She might be more at risk to get involved with an abusive partner (whatever her orientation) and may generally expect to be put down and treated poorly by partners. Research shows that children who witness and experience domestic violence are at greater risk of experiencing abuse in their own intimate relationships and at greater risk for a teen pregnancy (boys and girls).¹³ (Remember: Risk is not Destiny.)*

- ❖ **Fathers can provide positive models of manhood for boys:** *We know that boys who do not have the involvement of their fathers or positive male/father figures—and especially boys who live in fatherless communities—have higher rates, on average, of aggression and violence than boys with involved fathers. One challenge faced by boys is figuring out how to channel or harness their energy in positive ways. In other words, how do boys learn to express themselves in a positive way? For example, male strength can be used in positive ways for protection and to help people in the sense of “might for right.” On the other hand, it also can be used destructively to harm others. Every culture throughout history and time has developed elaborate rites of passage for boys to deal with this issue. Boys need to learn the true meaning of courage, how to be a real hero and how to be kind and caring.*

- ❖ **When boys lack positive models of manhood:** *Having a father who abandons his children can hurt. So is a father who is a destructive role model. How many boys who witness domestic violence are put in the terrible position of feeling they have to physically protect their mothers? Boys who witness violence by fathers, stepfathers, or their mothers’ boyfriends are more likely to be abusive with their own partners. A lot of what children do comes from imitation and identification. It may be easier for a boy to figure out how to be a good man if there is a man or men he interacts with on a regular basis who treat him and his mother with respect and kindness. Single mothers are often interested in providing positive male role models for their sons. Young men with poor access to good fathers or father/male figures in their lives often run amok as they turn to other boys or the media to figure out how to be a man. For too many boys without access to good men in their lives, brute force, sex and money become the indicators of masculinity. The gang becomes the family and provides the protection they lack; the player model of sexuality and sexist behaviors toward women often rules.*

Media Opportunity: Dance With My Father

(PP) To conclude this section, consider playing the music video *Dance With My Father*, which is hyperlinked to YouTube in the PowerPoint slide. It is an inspiring way to tap into aspirations and spark discussion on positive fathering.

Optional: Pass out *Ten Ways to Be a Better Father* (Resource 13b, pg. 355).

Dance with My Father – Luther Vandross



www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmDxJrggie8

SECTION 13.3

Father Absence, Relationship Troubles

- Music: *Emotionless*—Good Charlotte; *When I'm Gone*—Eminem
- Resource 13c: *Sample Music Lyrics* (pg. 356)
- Resource 13d: *Child Support* (optional) (pgs. 357–360)

10–20 minutes, depending

The first activity consists of listening to a song about father absence (*Emotionless*) followed by a discussion. The second is a short discussion “connecting the dots” between father absence and relationship quality / status. Next, the music video *When I'm Gone* will be used to discuss sliding, relationship instability, and fathering. It is a poignant portrayal of how a father’s relationship with the mother affects his ability to be a good father. The section adds some food for thought for young males. There is an optional discussion and robust handout on child custody and support issues.

As a whole, the activities connect the dots between a guy’s relationship life and ability to be an involved father. It reinforces the benefits for guys of learning to choose partners wisely, and to forming a healthy marriage before becoming a father. It shows that employing relationship skills to keep relationships healthy and safe is a guy’s issue as much as a girl’s.

Instructor Note: There are many popular songs about fathers, some positive and others about father absence and family breakup, that are found in various genres of music, such

as hip-hop, heavy metal, rock, punk, and country. Music is a significant part of young peoples' social and private lives, and a number of songs express the emotional realities they experience. Yes, strong and explicit language is common, but it may be worth it to listen to the messages. Themes of abandonment, betrayal, sadness, anger, and pain reverberate through many of the songs on this subject. There is a palpable longing for missing fathers and for a functioning family. Sample songs (and lyrics) positive and negative are provided in *Sample Music Lyrics* (Resource 13c, pg. 356). More music videos are hyperlinked at the end of the slideshow, but we invite you to add your own.

Activity: Music Activity

- ❖ **(PP)** *As you know there are many popular songs about fathers.*
 - *They express what fathers mean to kids, positively (as in *Dance With My Father*), but also negatively.*
 - *There are many songs about father absence and father abandonment.*

Fathers and Families In Music



Announce that you will play one now.

- ❖ *As you listen, make a mental note of any lines that stand out to you, or jot them down. Which lines do you think ring true for how some kids feel?*

(PP) Play *Emotionless*, by Good Charlotte. Song is hyperlinked in PowerPoint slide

Discuss the lines they pulled out.

Connecting Dots: Healthy Relationships & Fathers

- ❖ **(PP)** *Many wonder why so many dads are absent from children's daily lives. It seems logical that if a dad loves his child, he will stay involved physically, emotionally and financially.*

Why are some dads absent?



- Many kids are born to parents who haven't made a commitment
- Relationship instability & troubles make it hard

- *Of course fathers should stay involved, but it may not be easy to do so in certain situations.¹¹*
- *For one, it's hard to stay connected when a father does not live with his child.*
- ❖ *Many children today are born to parents who have not yet made a commitment to a life together. 40% of all children are born to unmarried parents. The majority of those relationships break up.¹²*

Point out that after a breakup, children typically live with the mother.

- ❖ *Without being present for the daily rhythms of life, it's harder to stay connected to a child. With daily contact, a parent can stay in tune with the child's daily triumphs and setbacks, experiences and emotions.*
- ❖ *Also, if the father has a troubled relationship with his child's mother, and the two cannot communicate, being an involved father is hard.*
- ❖ *On the contrary, if he has a good, or at least cooperative relationship with the mother of his child, his involvement is likely to be welcomed and encouraged by the mom.*
- ❖ *Healthy relationships and healthy marriages are positively associated with more positive, involved fathering.*

Activity: Music Video Opportunity

Instructor note: The purpose of using this music video is to help draw the connection between unstable and troubled relationships and the difficulty of being a positively involved father. Most youth are familiar with Eminem. This music video, *When I'm Gone*, contains powerful visuals and messages on Eminem's desire to be a good father, despite his difficulty in doing so while his relationship with Kim remains troubled and unstable. Eminem has a number of autobiographical songs on this subject that are well-known to most young people. They express his desire to be the father he never had to his daughter, Haley, and the pain he feels because he's not there for his child. This music video reinforces two key constructs of this curriculum: the risks of sliding

into relationships and seeing the impact of unplanned pregnancy and relationship turbulence through the eyes of the child.

Some history: Eminem's father split when he was a baby and his mother went through a series of unstable relationships. His bitterness about this is expressed to his mother in his song *Cleaning Out My Closet*. Eminem had his daughter, Haley, in 1995 (example of sliding) and then married Kim, the mother of Haley, in 1999. They split up in 2001 and his ex-wife, Kim, then had a second child, Whitney, with a new boyfriend (sliding). Kim and Eminem remarried in early 2006 and divorced at the end of 2006. Eminem went into drug treatment and has remained clean. His music video, *Not Afraid* (on his album *Recovery*), focuses on that.

(PP) Play the music video *When I'm Gone* by Eminem and discuss afterwards. (The video is hyperlinked to YouTube in the PowerPoint.)

- ❖ *Let's watch this music video by Eminem. It's about his own life.*
- ❖ *He wants more than anything to be a good father, but how does his troubled and unstable relationship with Kim make that difficult?*

Debrief on the messages of the video:

- Ask the group how his experience relates to the concept of sliding.
- Also, ask about the connections they see between healthy relationships and involved quality fathering and how they see that played out in the song.
- Ask what the look on Haley's face when Kim and Eminem embraced at the end said to them.

Food for Thought: What's in it for Guys?

Conclude this section with these points:

- ❖ **(PP)** *When a young guy slides into sex with a girl, babies can happen. The risk is that a young guy may become an "accidental father" with someone he never really chose to be connected to.*



- ❖ *Even if he can't stand her, he will be connected to her for a long, long time because of the child.*
- ❖ *He will also be connected to the courts for a long time as they come after him for child support—whether he's able to see his child or not.*
- ❖ *Clearly, some "accidental" fathers shirk their fatherly responsibilities; but many have relationship troubles with the mother that create barriers to their involvement.*
- ❖ *It's smart for a guy to increase his relationship smarts—to choose carefully, to avoid sliding, to take responsibility for a mutual agreement on a pace for intimate involvement, and to follow through on plans for how he will do his part to prevent pregnancy and STDs.*
- ❖ *Following the Success Sequence—avoiding a pregnancy (or second) until he has his education, employment, and has established a healthy marriage—will help him be the father he may want to be.*

Optional: Young Fathers, Custody & Child Support

Point out that a lot of young fathers these days do want to step up. But many have no blueprint for what to do since they've never really seen a father in daily action.

Point out that many young fathers have themselves experienced fathers who left them. Some have seen fathers, stepfathers, or boyfriends mistreat their mother. Some have seen mother's partners come and go from their lives.

- ❖ *It's important to stay involved as a father even though it can be challenging if you are not with the mother anymore.*
- ❖ *Kids want their parents to love them and stay involved in their lives in positive ways whether they are together or separated.*
- ❖ *Let's watch a music video of this well-known song by Will Smith.*

(PP) Play *Just the Two of Us*, by Will Smith. Afterwards, invite discussion.

Child Support Issues:

Next, pass out and introduce the handout *Child Support* (Resource 13d, pgs. 357–360). Start by stating that parents that are not together face custody and child support issues that can often be difficult.

First, go through the basic facts on custody and child support and then discuss the benefits of paying one's child support. Be sure to review common misconceptions.

Finally, discuss the tips for dealing with high-conflict child support or custody disputes. There is a good website included on the handout.

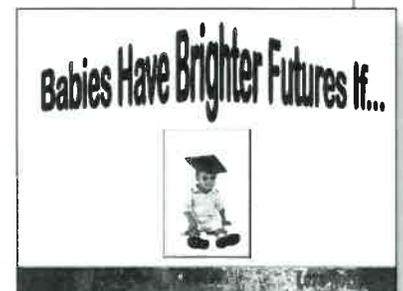
SECTION 13.4

Child Speak: Brighter Futures

- Resource 13e: *When Parents Aren't Together* (pgs. 361–362)
- Resource 13f: *Lily's Letter* (pgs. 363–365)
- Workbook: *Babies Have Brighter Futures If...* (pg. 56)
- Workbook: *Child Speak* (pg. 55)

20 minutes

(PP) Participants briefly review a list of recommendations collected from former teen parents based on what they wish they had known earlier. Next, the *Child Speak* activity utilizes these recommendations for role-plays that take the perspective of the child. The activities help young people become aware of the kinds of serious choices parents can make to provide a bright future for a child.



This activity is part of an innovative primary pregnancy prevention strategy that deepens awareness of how children are affected by unplanned pregnancy. This activity is also important for secondary prevention for young parents.

Activity: Child Speak

- ❖ *Most of you do not have a child at this time, but focusing on how things affect a child might bring home how important it is to avoid a pregnancy until you finish your education, are employed, and in a healthy marriage so you are in a better place to meet the needs of a child.*
- ❖ *It's true that we see many people today (family members to celebrities) having babies at a young age, or before being stable, married, or able to support themselves.*
- ❖ *Because it's so common, it may seem like no big deal. But it is a big deal for a child.*
- ❖ *Young people who have an unplanned pregnancy have important decisions to make. They can take steps to provide a bright future for their child.*
- ❖ *And many of those decisions and steps involve applying much of what we've learned in Love Notes.*
- ❖ *We're going to do an activity that plays out, from the child's experience, what it is like if his or her parents **do not** take certain steps and make certain decisions.*

Directions:

1. Ask participants to locate *Babies Have Brighter Futures If...*, workbook pg. 56. Point out the list of recommendations made by former teen parents. These are things they wish they had known earlier and would like all youth to know. **(PP)**
2. Ask volunteers (who like to read) to take turns reading each point aloud.
3. Break into pairs or small groups and assign each group one of the pieces of advice.
4. Each pair or small group will be writing a script from the perspective of a child whose parents are NOT following that piece of advice. **(PP)**

Advice From Former Teen Parents

p. 56



Child Speak Activity

- Pretend you are a child experiencing the opposite of what is advised.
- What is your life like?
- Pretend you are speaking to someone who will listen and really cares.

Workbook activity, p. 55

- ❖ *Pretend you are a child experiencing the opposite of what is advised.*
- ❖ *What is your life like?*
- ❖ *Pretend you are speaking to someone who will listen and really cares.*
- ❖ *You can give your child a name and an age. Describe what life is like and how it feels using "I," "me," and "my" statements.*

5. Read aloud the example found in the workbook, on pg. 55, before they begin.

Allow groups four or five minutes to write their scripts. When finished, ask for volunteers to read their *Child Speak* script. (First read the piece of advice it corresponds to from pg. 56). Invite discussion.

In conclusion, state that these are ways for a parent to decide and not slide. Also ask teens to say what the take-home message is for those who have never had a pregnancy. Listen to responses.

(PP) Optional: Pass out *When Parents Aren't Together*, Resource 13e (pgs. 361–362). Begin a discussion with participants by asking them to think about their own childhoods or those of close friends. Ask if they have any examples of situations where parents either did or didn't do what is advised here. Discuss each point, as time allows.

**Do's & Don'ts:
Parents Not Together**



Mini-Presentation: Early Child Development

Briefly present some of the research findings on the importance of early life experiences.²⁸ Point out we know a lot today about what babies and little children need to help them grow up healthy and happy. **(PP)**

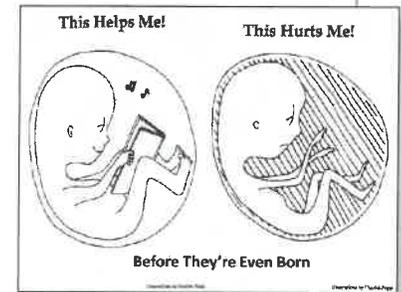
- ❖ *Much has been learned about what happens from the time of conception through the first few years of life.*

**The First Few Years
We Know So Much More Today**



Before they're born: (PP)

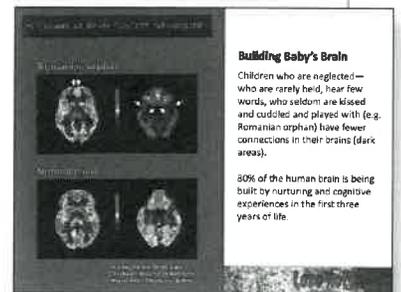
- ❖ *Toxins (e.g., alcohol, illegal drugs, some prescription drugs, and other substances), stress (like being alone, unsupported, abuse from a partner), and poor nutrition can all damage the developing fetus. Even minor neurological (i.e. brain-related) birth defects may translate into learning disabilities or attention deficits that can make life more difficult for the child.*
- ❖ *A woman who looks forward to having a child, is emotionally and socially supported by a committed partner, eats well, and has good prenatal care (i.e. medical visits during pregnancy) is more likely to give birth to a healthy baby than an isolated mother who is unsupported, lacking in good nutrition and prenatal care, and under stress.*

**Attachment bond: (PP)**

- ❖ *After birth, babies need to develop a secure attachment bond. Babies become securely attached to parents who lovingly respond to them—who pick up, hold, cuddle, comfort, coo, talk, smile, play, read, dance and gaze into a child's eyes.*
- ❖ *Without secure attachment, many things can go wrong for a child. The child's ability to trust and form and have healthy relationships with others can be compromised.*

**Building a baby's brain: (PP)**

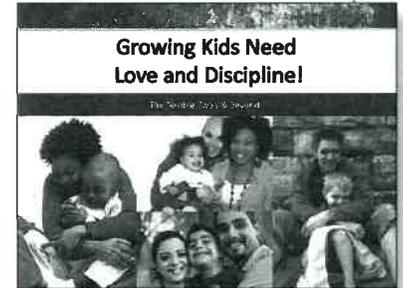
- ❖ *It takes years of experiences to build the brain. Through nurturing and stimulating interactions, parents literally build their child's brain.¹⁴*
- ❖ *Every time a parent talks, plays, cuddles, reads, sings, and exposes the child to any kind of stimulating experience, a connection is made in the brain. The more experiences, the more connections are made and the more brain power the child will have.*



- ❖ Notice the difference between the PET scans of a neglected child and those of a normally nurtured child. A foundation for learning is laid down in those first years. Parents are truly the first and most important teachers.

As children grow, they need limit-setting and guidance: (PP)

- ❖ As children grow, they need a continuing, warm relationship with parents as well as effective discipline. Effective discipline means limit-setting and appropriate consequences.
- ❖ Harsh, physical and verbal punishment—hitting, slapping, just screaming “no” all the time—does not help a child learn better behavior.
- ❖ Children need loving interactions, guidance, and supervision from adults they love and respect. There are many good resources today at family or public health centers to inform parents of these more effective parenting skills.¹⁵



Read Aloud: Lily's Letter

(PP) Announce that you have a letter written by Lily (*Lily's Letter*, Resource 13f, pgs. 363–365), a fictitious unborn child writing to her mother. The author of this letter was a teen parent. She went on to community college and studied early childhood development. Drawing from the research on what helps a child succeed and what puts a child at risk, she wrote this letter from an unborn child's perspective and from her own personal life experience.

Read the letter aloud to the group. Pass out a copy to each participant. It contains an amazing amount of early developmental needs information in easy-to-read language.

Lily's Letter

- Ask your TA to read *Lily's Letter*.
- Discuss what each of you choose as the most important pieces of advice.
- Does your TA have more to add?



Trusted Adult Connection

SECTION 13.5

Decisions about Living Together

5 minutes

Findings from cohabitation research will be presented to help young people make informed decisions about living together, especially to know when it's more or less risky.

Should We Live Together?

(PP) Introduce the topic with these points:

- ❖ *Let's talk about living together. Today, it's pretty common.*
- ❖ *People live together today for all sorts of reasons, such as because you like each other and why not, it's convenient, to save money, because of an unplanned pregnancy, or it's seen as a way to test the waters to see if you want to commit.*
- ❖ *There's been more research recently on the growing trend of cohabitation. We have a better idea of when it is more risky and when it is less risky.*

State that the older research done on cohabiting couples pointed to a much higher risk for divorce (so much for testing the waters), more conflict and relationship unhappiness, higher levels of domestic violence, and more infidelity when compared to couples who didn't live together before marriage.

More recent research has identified different types of cohabitation and clarified which cohabiting couples are, on average, more or less at risk for those negative outcomes.

When is it less risky? (PP)

- ❖ *The new research shows being engaged at the time of cohabitation is not associated with the higher risks found in earlier studies.¹⁶*

Living Together
A Good Idea?



When it's less risky:

- If the sequence is:
 - Love
 - Commitment/plans for engagement
 - Then move in together
 - Then get married
- No less or more risky than those who don't live together before marriage.

- ❖ *Couples who have the sequence of love, commitment/engagement to a future together, cohabitation, then marriage (in that order) have no different outcomes than those who didn't live together before marriage.*
- ❖ *What appears to matter is clarifying the commitment.*

When is it more risky? (PP)

- ❖ *The earlier negative associations with cohabitation still hold, on average, for many of those who aren't on the same page about their commitment.*
- ❖ *The key questions: Did they have intentions for a committed life together before moving in?¹⁷*
- ❖ *And, have they even defined the relationship? In one study, 66% of couples reported they moved in without any plans.*
 - *In fact, they never really discussed what moving in together meant, marriage, or the future.¹⁸*
 - *For most (2/3) of the cohabiting couples in this study, it was not a conscious decision. It was things like, "Well, I was spending a lot of time there anyway." "My lease was up, why not?" "It's cheaper living this way."*

This could be referred to as *sliding into living together*.¹⁹

Explain why this might be related to greater risks. (PP)

- ❖ *Because living together makes it more difficult to break up than if you had separate addresses.*
- ❖ *How? Partners might not be on the same page about a future together. One is thinking living together means they're moving towards a greater commitment. The other one is just thinking this is fine for now. They stay and stay until maybe one day one finds their "soul mate" and breaks up.*

When it's more risky:

- No discussion about the future (no "DTR" talk).
- Not on the same page about a future.
- Moving in for other reasons such as convenience, why not—it's just the next step in dating, or to save money, to test the waters, or oops, an unplanned pregnancy.

This could be called *sliding* into living together.

Sliding into living together

- Makes it harder to break up.
- What started as something seemingly with an easy exit, gets in fact harder to exit.
- You might stay longer, or even end up, with someone you never, ever really chose as a long-term partner, co-parent, spouse.



- ❖ *And/or, partners start intertwining their lives and mingling finances. They might buy cell phone service together, sign a lease, buy a pet, put money down on a vacation, and/or they just kind of get in a routine and start feeling responsible for the other.*
- ❖ *Maybe one gets attached to the child his or her partner already had.*
- ❖ *The upshot? The couple stays together as their lives get more intertwined. Even if one or both start having doubts about the relationship, they kind of keep hanging around doing the same thing.*
- ❖ *Breaking up gets more complicated as their lives become more intertwined or just routine and comfortable.*
- ❖ *They might stay together and prolong a less-than-satisfying relationship. They might even marry the person they never would have if they hadn't been living together.*
- ❖ *Or, there's an unplanned pregnancy, and even though there are doubts and problems with the relationship, they just try to make the best of it and stay.*

The take home message:

- ❖ *What started as something with a seemingly easy exit becomes something more difficult and complicated to change.*
- ❖ *Sliding into living together seems risk-free, but in reality, a couple can slowly get anchored down. It can take them down a path they never really consciously chose to go down.*

Cohabitation and Children

(PP) Point out that much of the discussion on cohabitation goes on as if there were no children.

- ❖ *Did you know that 43% of cohabiting unions involve residential children?²⁰*
- ❖ *Cohabiting relationships are much more likely to break up.²¹*

Cohabitation & Children

- 43% of cohabiting unions include residential children
- ¼ of children with cohabiting parents/adults will experience a split up
- 1/3 of children with married biological parents will experience a split up
- Cohabitation doubles (2x) a child's risk for emotional and behavioral problems, delinquency, drug use and school problems

- ❖ *Very few children born to cohabiting parents spend their entire childhood living with both parents. Some do, most don't.*
- ❖ *Cohabiting relationships are far more unstable. Serial cohabitation and children with multiple partners are growing. They are linked to greater child poverty and poorer child wellbeing.²²*
- ❖ *Children thrive on stability and healthy parental relationships.*
- ❖ *Cohabiting couples report more relationship violence.²³*
- ❖ **(PP)** *Children have a greater risk of abuse when they live with a parent and a non-biological partner. (8 times the rate of maltreatment than children living with their own married, biological parents.)²⁴*

(PP) Things to Consider—Think it over

1. *If you are thinking about living together (now or someday down the road), have a serious discussion about what it means, about your commitment levels, and about the future. Know it will be harder to break up than if you keep your own addresses. Don't slide.*
2. *Be aware there is no evidence that shows cohabitation helps pick a good life partner or prevents divorce down the road.*
3. *If you have a child, consider not cohabiting. There are considerable risks for children when the partner is not the other parent.*
4. *If you do, give it a time line. Reassess periodically. Don't waste years in a relationship going nowhere when you expect it to go somewhere. Think about risks of pregnancy.*
5. *If you are already living with someone, sit down and discuss where you both see things going. Talk about your vision for the future. Better to find out now if you are on the same page. See if you both want to stay together, commit, and begin to outline a plan for moving forward or not.*

Link to Child Maltreatment

- Children whose single parent have a live-in partner have more than 8 times the rate of maltreatment overall...than children living with their own two parents



Living Together—Think it over

- **Be open & honest:** Define the relationship and be clear about what you want. Discuss your commitment levels honestly and if you see a future together. It's least risky if you are both are committed to a future together.
- **Consider not living together:** It's harder to break up. Virtually no evidence it helps. Be aware of the risks of getting anchored down in subtle and not so subtle ways. It's most risky when you are not on the same page about your goals & desires.
- **Already have a child?** It can be risky for children.
- **Already living together?** It's time to talk. Lay the cards on the table. Better to find out now if you are on the same page than waste years.
- **Set a timeline:** reassess periodically

SECTION 13.6

Planning for Success— Wrap-Up

- Workbook: *Success Planning* (pgs. 51–54)
- Music: *Perfect*, duet by Ed Sheeran and Beyonce

5 minutes

- ❖ *The messages you created in the Child Speak activity were moving.*
- ❖ *It underscores why it's so important to avoid an unplanned pregnancy and to follow the Success Sequence.*
- ❖ *Doing some of life's big things in a particular order can really increase your odds of success (and greatly reduce the odds of you or your children living in poverty).²⁵*
- ❖ **(PP)** *Let's review the sequence—the order—for doing some of life's biggest things. Read the slide.*
- ❖ **(PP)** *And for pregnant youth or young parents, the sequence is pretty much the same. Read the slide.*

Young people who follow this sequence are far less likely to live in poverty.

- ❖ **(PP)** *Recall the findings on young Millennials (those aged 28–34) who did or did not follow the Success Sequence:²⁶*

Note: Be sure to point out not everyone has to get married. “On track” means education and employment and not being married or having children.

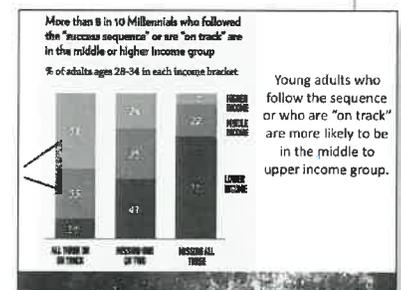
- 86% of those **who did** follow the sequence are in the middle or high-income bracket.
- 71% of those **who did not** follow it are in the low-income bracket.

Clearly, for those born into homes with advantages it may be easier to complete high school, go to college, find good employment, and be married before starting a family than for those from homes with fewer resources, models, and connections.

Planning for Success

The diagram shows a sequence of three steps: 1. Education/ Employment (represented by a graduation cap and a briefcase), 2. Committed Healthy Marriage (represented by a heart with a ribbon), and 3. 2nd Child (represented by a baby stroller). Arrows connect the steps in order.

1. Finish high school and get as much college or training as you can.
2. Be employed. Seek employment.
3. Decide, don't slide with your love life. Form a healthy marriage before having a second child.



- ❖ *But whatever challenges to overcome, whatever efforts it takes, finishing high school, obtaining further college education or training and finding employment, and being married before starting a family is really worth it.*

Instructor Note: Even for those who come from low-income families, following the sequence dramatically lowers the chances of poverty. See slides 31 and 32 in Lesson 8.

- ❖ **(PP)** *One thing for sure is that preventing an unplanned pregnancy is something you have some control over.*
- ❖ *You can decide not to have sex, to pace things more slowly, or to use contraception and condoms consistently and correctly if/when you are sexually active.*

Special note: Be sure to state that some people have no control. They have been forced or they have been trafficked. It is important to reach out and connect with a caring adult.

- ❖ *Now you know the facts. And, you have some knowledge and skills to make good relationship and sexual choices to clear the path for you to reach your goals.*

What Have You Learned?

(PP) *Remember at the very first session when you closed your eyes and envisioned where you would be in five or ten years and what kind of relationship you would want to be in? It was on the very first page of your workbook journal.*

- ❖ *Now we are at the end of this program.*
- ❖ *This is where you start making a plan.*
- ❖ *If life is a journey, then your personal vision is not just where you want to go, but how you want to get there.*
- ❖ *You cannot get to where you want to go without knowing what to pack, having a map, paying attention to roadblocks, and keeping yourself safe.*
- ❖ *Use the skills you've learned. Review your workbook to see all you've learned.*

Notes

- 1 CDC National Center for Health Statistics 2017; Child Trends Data Bank, "Births to Unmarried Women" updated Oct. 2016; Trends in Teen Pregnancy and Childbirth, Office of Adolescent Health-Department of Health and Human Services June 2, 2017.
- 2 The poverty rate for children in married parent households is 11% and the poverty rate for children in single mother households is 47%, U.S. Census Bureau, "POV21: Related Children under 18 by Householders Work Experience and Family Structure: 2012," census.gov/hhes/. Children of teen mothers are nine times more likely to live in poverty, see Zill, N. & O'Donnell, K. (2004) Child Poverty Rates by Material Risk Factors: An Update, Unpublished manuscript. Rockville, MD: WESTAT. See also, "The Impact of the Changing US Family Structure on Child Poverty and Income Inequality," Robert I. Lerman in *Economica*, New Series, Vol. 63, No. 250, Supplement: Economic Policy and Income Distribution, pp.S119-S139.
- 3 "Fragile Families" in *The Future of Children* (Princeton-Brookings) Vol 20, Number 2, Fall 2010. See also *The Fragile Family and Child Wellbeing Study*, a joint project of Princeton University and Columbia University for a wealth of research, accessible briefs and policy discussions, fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/. England, P., Edin, K., editors (2007). *Unmarried Couples with Children* (New York: Russell Sage, 2007).
- 4 Sawhill, Isabel, V. *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*. Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2014.; Child Trends Data Bank (Oct. 2016) "Births to Unmarried Women: Indicators of Child and Youth Well-Being."

Carlson, M.J. & Meyer D.R. eds. *Family Complexity, Poverty, and Public Policy, The*

Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, 2014. This is a compilation of articles published from presentation at a national meeting of leading family scholars and public policy experts at the University of Wisconsin-Institute for Research on Poverty (Summer 2013). McLanahan, S. "Family Instability and Complexity after a non-marital Birth" in Carlson, M. & England, P. editors. *Social Class and Changing Families in an Unequal America* (Stanford University Press, 2011. Science Says Brief #34 Unplanned Pregnancy and Family Turmoil (April 2008), the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect. (NIS-4) Report to Congress 2010. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/ Administration of Children and Families.

- 5 Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 1975-2005 (Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research)

- 6 83% of young adults say being married someday is a "very important" or "important" life goal. Mindy E. Scott, et al., "Young Adults Attitudes About Relationships and Marriage: Times May Have Changed, But Expectations Remain High," *Child Trends Research Brief*, Publication #2009-30 (July 2009) p. 4-5.

Examining four decades drawing from the five largest nationally representative data sets, the surveys from the Institute of Social Research and University of Michigan (2005) have found little evidence that commitment of Americans to marriage and family life has eroded.

Monitoring the Future, which has been tracking attitudes of high school students

report 82% of girls and 70% of boys indicate having a good marriage and family life is “extremely important” or “very important”

- 7 Gallup 2013 survey shows only 9% of young singles age 18-34 say they never want to get married. Pew Research Center, Sept. 24, 2014 “Record Share of Americans Have Never Married” states marriage remains a desire for 70% of millennials.
- 8 *The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids and the Success Sequence Among Young Adults*. Wang, W. & Wilcox, W. Bradford (2017) Institute for Families Studies. See also Isabel V. Sawhill and Ron Haskins, *Creating an Opportunity Society* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey 2016. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/P60-259.pdf>
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Jessie's Thoughts Today

The Setup

This is a true story. Seven years ago I got an apartment with a friend of mine named Sara. Sara was six months pregnant and had already made verbal arrangements to give the child up for adoption to a couple she had met. At that time my firstborn, Emily, was still a newborn. After a month of watching me with my daughter, Sara started to reconsider her options. Sara, who was barely 17-years-old at the time and a ward of the state, decided to keep her son and raise him on welfare. I didn't necessarily agree with her choice to do so, but I did nothing to try to stop her. I should have. Sara's son Todd ended up being raised in an extremely unstable environment. I have always regretted indirectly influencing her decision through my own choice as a single teen mother to raise my daughter, as well as my decision to keep silent.

The Scenario

This letter is meant to travel through time. With the knowledge and experience that I have now, I would like to send this letter back in time and try to convince Sara that she should not feel guilty about putting her son up for adoption. I will also try to enlighten her on the severity of the decision she will make.

Dear Sara,

I know that things seem crazy right now. You've been through a lot—your parents turning their back on you, Doug leaving after he found out you were pregnant, and having to deal with cold, uncaring caseworkers. But I want to let you know that I am here for you, especially now when you are confused about making the right choice for the baby. I can tell that everything is getting to you. You are getting frustrated, depressed, and completely stressed out. Just try to understand that no one person in your life, especially an infant, is going to make your struggles simply disappear. It's not that I don't think you could handle being a single mom. I know you can deal with quite a bit. But at this point in your life, I don't think you need any more complications. It isn't good for you, and it isn't healthy for the baby.

I never understood how vulnerable children are to their environment. I used to think that unless the conditions that a child is being raised in are extremely hard or abusive, a child will grow into a healthy person with little more than food and love. When I had Emily, I used to get so stressed out. It seemed like my life went back and forth from being mildly unstable to having bouts of chaos. But it wasn't until later in Emily's life that I started to realize how drastically her mood would change to mimic my own. No matter how I tried to hide my negative feelings, she would sense them! When I would get stressed out, she would get stressed out; when I was depressed, Emily would get depressed. Now I know that all parents get frustrated or sad. But do you really think that a parent who is financially stable and has emotional support gets as stressed out as a single mom with no partner and no money? Let's be honest—the life of a welfare mom can be complete insanity! What I learned is that even though I may be able to accept my own disappointments with life, it is very difficult for my child to share my pain.

Did you know that a child's experiences actually help his or her brain to develop? At birth, a baby is born with all of the brain cells that it will ever need. But in order to activate the cells, a baby needs positive experiences. They tell you that babies need a lot of attention. Until now, I didn't realize how important that attention is! Babies need stimuli to make their brains work, stimuli that they can't get sitting around watching TV. So there I was, trying to get my own head together when I should have been concentrating on Emily's head (so to speak). All I can do is thank God that I made the conscious choice to give up my social life and spend all my free time with my daughter. If I hadn't put effort into focusing my attention on her, I could have actually deprived her of proper brain development! Having a baby isn't just 4 a.m. feedings and diapers like they would have led us to believe in high school! The effort that a parent puts into enhancing his or her newborn baby's life experiences affects that child forever. I haven't even mentioned my number one stressor—money. My financial situation has affected every aspect of my life now. My daughter deserves a good home in a good neighborhood. She needs healthy food, decent medical care, and good day care and schools. But getting all that isn't easy. I am constantly trying to financially support my daughter, but I am in this vicious cycle. I want to stay in college but I need to work.

To get a job that pays enough, I'll need a college degree. I tried doing both, but I couldn't afford the day care; I won't even mention what I have been paying for day care. I tried doing the right thing, but no matter what I did I couldn't support my daughter on my own. I am very grateful that my parents are willing to loan me money from time to time, but it makes me feel like I am dependent on my parents! Oh sure, I get help from the state from time to time. If you can get past the looks you get when you pay for the groceries with an EBT card, you still have to deal with the fact that the state can make an error with the amount of your assistance any time and without apologies. Trust me, when you have to deal with welfare, it is never free money. Sara, think back to the situations that you have gotten into involving the government. Did anything go smoothly? And child support—what is that? I got a court order saying that I am supposed to get support for Emily, but I get nothing. I guess you can't get money deducted from a man's check if he has no job (that you know of at least). It's like my mother says, "You can't get milk from a dead cow."

You would probably get child support from Doug, but that might be the extent of his involvement. You can't make a man be a father just because he has a biological spawn. Every child deserves a father. I just hope that your son doesn't look for a father in every guy that you bring home. I had a boyfriend who Emily got really attached to. When I broke up with him, it hurt Emily! I never wanted to hurt my daughter, but I did. I can't stay with someone just because my child wants me to. And I can't expect a man to just walk into my life and take over the role of daddy. At this point, Emily pretty much expects a man to leave after a few years. One time I got in this huge fight with my ex. Emily came up to me and said, "It's okay. We can find me a new daddy." What she said hurt and shocked me so much. It was as if my own messed-up love life had distorted her perception of men (and the importance of them) to the point where I really worry about what types of relationships she will have when she's older. It's bad enough that I have to suffer through the turmoil of my own romantic endeavors—my child should not have to deal with that type of instability. I am just glad that Emily has a positive relationship with my father. Hopefully, she won't get the impression that all men are jerks just because all the men I date are jerks (although statistically, a girl in her situation tends

to end up dating the same kind of guys). Having a kid does help weed out the truly undesirable men. But let's be honest, most guys don't even want to get involved with young moms. They think we are too emotionally needy—and they are a little bit correct.

Remember, your baby isn't going to stay a baby. Babies are easy to love, easy to handle. But they grow. And as they grow they don't need you any less. It will go from mixing formula, to reading stories, to potty training, to helping them with homework, to worrying about the friends they choose, and so on. Being a parent isn't an 18-year job. "Mom" is not just a name or title. Being a mom is a lifestyle—a commitment. I honestly don't think that I would have been able to make that commitment without the help of my parents. Family is so important when it comes to emotional and financial assistance. I know that you have lost your family, but there is still hope for your son to have one.

I guess what I am trying to say is that I know you feel guilty about this possible upcoming adoption issue. But don't think that the guilt will stop if you decide to keep the baby. I deal with guilt all the time. I feel guilty that I am not financially stable and that I can't give Emily the opportunities I would like to, like quality childcare, the best school, the best health care, and so on. I feel guilty because I am unintentionally taking Emily on an emotional roller coaster ride through my unstable life. I feel guilty that she doesn't have a close relationship with her dad. You know how close I am to my dad and how important that has been to me. I feel guilty that I can't be there for her more because I am too busy trying to get my own life together. I feel guilty because sometimes I secretly blame Emily for the many complications that being a single mother brings into my life. I feel guilty that sometimes she is exposed to an environment that is unhealthy or unstable—simply because my lifestyle doesn't always provide me with a healthy environment to raise my child. So guilt is an everyday thing in my life now. What you should remember is the reason that you considered adoption in the first place—so that by giving him to a family that can provide him with all the things you want for him, you are, in fact, providing him with all the things that you want for him.

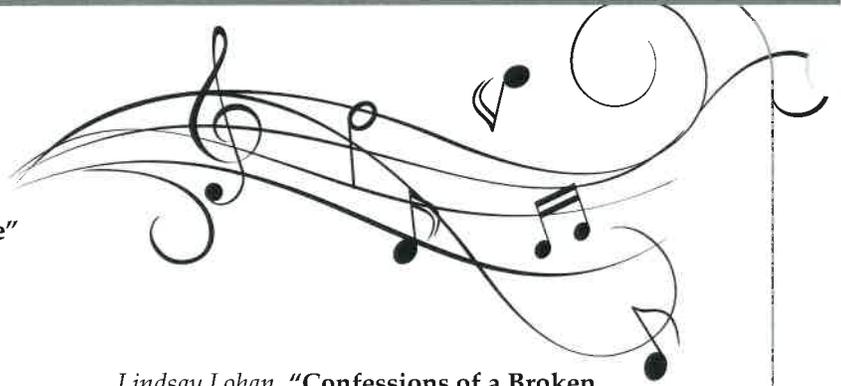
—Love, Jessie

Ten Ways to Be a Better Father

1. **Respect Your Children's Mother.** One of the best things a father can do for his children is to respect their mother. If you are married, keep your marriage strong and vital. If you are not married, it is still important to respect and support the mother of your children. A father and mother who respect each other and let their children know they do, provide them with a secure environment.
2. **Spend Time with Your Children.** How a father spends his time tells his children what is important to him. If you always seem too busy for your children, they will feel neglected no matter what you say. Treasuring children often means sacrificing other things, but it is essential to spend time with your children. Kids grow up so quickly and missed opportunities for interaction are forever lost.
3. **Earn the Right to Be Heard.** All too often, the only time a father speaks to his children is when they have done something wrong. Begin talking with your kids when they are very young so that difficult subjects will be easier to handle as they get older. Take time to listen to their ideas and problems.
4. **Discipline with Love.** All children need guidance and discipline, not as punishment, but to set reasonable limits. Remind your children of the consequences of their actions and provide meaningful rewards for desirable behavior. Fathers who discipline in a calm and fair manner show love for their children.
5. **Be a Role Model.** Fathers are role models to their kids, whether they realize it or not. A girl who spends time with a loving father grows up knowing she deserves to be treated with respect by boys and what to look for in a partner. Fathers can teach sons what is important in life by demonstrating honesty, humility, and responsibility.
6. **Be a Teacher.** Too many fathers think teaching is something others do. But a father who teaches his children right and wrong and encourages them to do their best will see his children make good choices. Involved fathers use everyday examples to help their children learn the basic lessons of life.
7. **Eat Together as a Family.** Sharing a meal together (breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner) without the TV on is an important part of healthy family life. It gives structure in a busy day, it gives kids the chance to talk about what they are doing and want to do. It is also a good time for fathers to listen and give advice. It is a time for families to be together each day.
8. **Read to Your Children.** In a world where screens, smart phones, and social media often dominate the lives of children and adults, it is important that fathers make the effort to read to their children. Begin reading to your children when they are very young. When they are older, encourage them to read on their own. Instill in your children a love for reading. Let them see you read.
9. **Show Affection.** Children need the security that comes from knowing they are wanted, accepted, and loved by their family. Fathers need to feel both comfortable and willing to hug their children. Showing affection every day lets your child know that you love them.
10. **Realize that a Father's Job Is Never Done.** Even after children are grown and ready to leave home, they will still look to their fathers for wisdom and advice. Whether it is continued schooling, a new job, or a wedding, fathers continue to play an essential part in the lives of their children as they grow, perhaps marry, and build their own families.

Source: National Fatherhood Initiative. Visit the website for more information and resources: Fatherhood.org.

Sample Music Lyrics



Master P with Snoop Dogg, "Mama Raised Me"

Pops wasn't home, left us all alone
Wasn't no thang, cause my mama had game
She showed me everything except
how to be a man

Tupac Shakur, "Papa's Song"

Had to play catch by myself...
A different father every weekend...
How can I be a man if there's no role model?

Papa Roach, "Broken Home"

I'm caught in the middle of this
My wounds are not healing
I'm stuck in between my parents
I wish I had someone to talk to...
Broken home... all alone...

Jay-Z, "Where Have You Been"

Hey dad... Remember me?
I remember being kicked out of the house
'Cause I looked like you...
You was an abusive pops...
You left us with some of my loneliest nights....

Good Charlotte, "Emotionless"

Hey dad I'm writing you...
Do you think about your sons?
Do you miss your little girl?
When you lay your head down at night
Do you even wonder if we're alright?

Blink 182, "Stay Together for the Kids"

If a stupid poem could fix this home
I'd read it everyday...
If this is what he wants and this is
what she wants
Then why is there so much pain?

Pink, "Family Portrait"

Momma please stop cryin'... it's tearin' me' down...
Can we work it out? Can we be a family?...
I promise I'll be better. Daddy, please don't leave.

Lindsay Lohan, "Confessions of a Broken Heart (Daughter to Father)"

Family in crisis that only grows older...
So, why'd you have to go...
Tell me the truth, did you ever love me...

Will Smith, "Just the Two of Us"

Got you home safe, placed you in your bassinet
That night I don't think one wink I slept...
Touched your head gently, felt my heart melt
'Cause I know I loved you more than life itself
Then to my knees, and I begged the Lord please
Let me be a good daddy, all he needs
Love, knowledge, discipline too
I pledge my life to you

Creed, "With Arms Wide Open"

Well I just heard the news today
It seems my life is going to change
I closed my eyes, begin to pray
Then tears of joy stream down my face

Luther Vandross, "Dance with My Father"

Back when I was a child
Before life removed all the innocence
My father would lift me high
And dance with my mother and me and then
Spin me around 'til I fell asleep
Then up the stairs he would carry me
And I knew for sure
I was loved

John Mayer "Daughters"

On behalf of every man
Looking out for every girl
You are the god and the weight of her world...
So fathers, be good to your daughters
Daughters will love like you do

Child Support



Quick Facts

- ❖ There are **two primary forms of custody—legal and physical**
 - Courts frequently award joint **legal custody** (to both parents). Legal custody involves medical, educational, religious and other decisions about the child.
 - Physical custody is about whom the child lives with.

- ❖ **Custody does not always go to one parent.** Practices and laws vary by state.
 - Most commonly parents are awarded **joint legal custody**, with one parent having **primary physical custody** and the other parent having **visitation rights**.
 - Many courts award joint **physical custody** when both ask and agree to it and appear to be sufficiently able to communicate and cooperate.

- ❖ **Each state has a formula** that determines the amount of child support to be paid. Child support calculators can be found for each state on the internet.
 - The amount a parent will pay for child support is generally decided at the same time as custody and visitation arrangements.
 - In most states, one factor that affects child support is the amount of time each parent spends with the child.

- ❖ **Visitation rights and child support are two entirely different issues** in the eyes of the law.
 - A custodial parent **cannot deny visitation** because of unpaid child support. The child still has a right to visitation.
 - And, a non-custodial parent **cannot stop child support payments** because the custodial parent is blocking visitation.

- ❖ **It is important to file for child support and to have a court order.**
 - Your child deserves the right to be supported.

Benefits of paying your child support

- ❖ Your child will know that you care and are doing right by them.
- ❖ You never have to worry about how to explain to your child when they grow up that you really did care about him/her even though you didn't pay child support.
- ❖ Your chances of having access to your child and increased visitation are significantly higher when you pay child support. Conflicts over child support payments often become a barrier to seeing your child.
- ❖ You never have to worry about what the state can do to you for not paying:
 - You never have to worry about a judge putting you in jail.
 - You never have to explain to your employer why your wages are being garnished.
 - You never have to worry about your license being revoked or your possessions or income tax refund being seized.
- ❖ Your new partner will know you are a responsible person who is willing to live up to your obligations.
- ❖ Your child will not be dragged into the middle of a child support battle waged between you and your ex.

Common Misconceptions and Facts

1. *If my ex owes back child support, I don't have to give him/her visitation.*
 - **False.** Visitation and child support are two entirely separate issues in the eyes of the law. Visitation is a child's right.
 - If you are frustrated over unpaid child support, contact your local Office of Child Support Enforcement.
 - Any attempt to bar visitation—except in situations of danger to the child—could be used against you in court, since many jurisdictions place importance on whether each parent supports the child's relationship with the other parent.
2. *Since my ex blocks me from seeing my kid, I don't have to pay child support.*
 - **False. Never** stop making your payments. In fact, stopping payments violates a court order and you may face serious penalties.
 - Keep a record of times and dates of missed visitations due to interference, and file a petition in court to enforce visitation rights if it's a pattern.

3. *Once the court establishes child support, it cannot be changed even if I get behind or lose my job.*

- **False.** If you truly cannot pay all of your child support, you can file a formal motion at the courthouse requesting a modification due to changed circumstances (e.g. laid off).
- It is **always** better to request a modification due to changed circumstances than to fail to pay child support. You are likely to get it changed and avoid the consequences of non-payment.
- States are more aggressive in child support collection these days, and the authorities will typically discover when a person is behind on their child support payments. Jail, wage garnishment, driver's license revocation, seizure of your income tax refund and any other items you own can happen.



4. *My ex left, and I don't want him/her interfering with my child anyway. So why should I file for child support with the courts?*

- It is important to file for child support and to have a court order. It is the only protection for your child and yourself.
- You and your child may not be eligible for government assistance if you haven't filed for child support—like day care assistance, food stamps, housing subsidies or other financial assistance.
- Prior to granting any government assistance, the state will make every effort to collect child support.

5. *My ex has abandoned our child, and I have no idea where he/she is, so I have sole legal and/or physical custody.*

- **False.** Even if an ex (whether you were formally married or not) has left and abandoned the child, you still need to file for custody to be recognized by the court as having sole legal and physical custody.
- From a legal standpoint, in most states, both parents share legal and physical custody *until* a court rules on a formal custody order.

Tips for dealing with high-conflict child support and/or custody disputes

- ❖ **Focus on what you have control over—*You*.** You can't change how the other person behaves, but you can change the way you respond or contribute to the situation.
- ❖ **Learn and use good communication and conflict management skills.**
 - Master how to effectively take a time out. You can hold off and postpone a discussion if it's getting too heated or emotional.
 - Use the Speaker Listener Technique. (You can use this technique even if the other person doesn't want to.) Take turns speaking and listening.
 - Use your WWA (What, Where or When, Affect) formula for raising issues.
 - Use the problem-solving model when appropriate
- ❖ **Set boundaries with your ex.** Put limits on when you'll answer the phone, text, and meet to discuss the situation. For example, let your ex know that you're available until 8 p.m. to talk on the phone or text, but that your phone will be set to silent after that. And when you need to discuss custody and other issues in person, make a point of meeting in a public place where you feel comfortable.
- ❖ **Don't argue about child support and custody issues around your child.** Don't vent your feelings to your child. Put on a brave face for your child and find another adult to vent to and express your true feelings.
 - If necessary, seek the help of the Child Support Enforcement Office for non-payment.
 - Or, if visitation is being blocked, file a petition in court to enforce visitation rights.
- ❖ **If these steps are not adequate and you feel threatened,** minimize contact. If safety is a concern **seek help** from police, a domestic violence organization, a counselor, or a wise person immediately.

Remember, child support payments can become a significant source of contention and stress. What you do and how you choose to react will significantly determine how it impacts your relationship, your ability to co-parent and your relationship with your child.

Note: A useful website that addresses many of these topics is: SingleParents.About.com

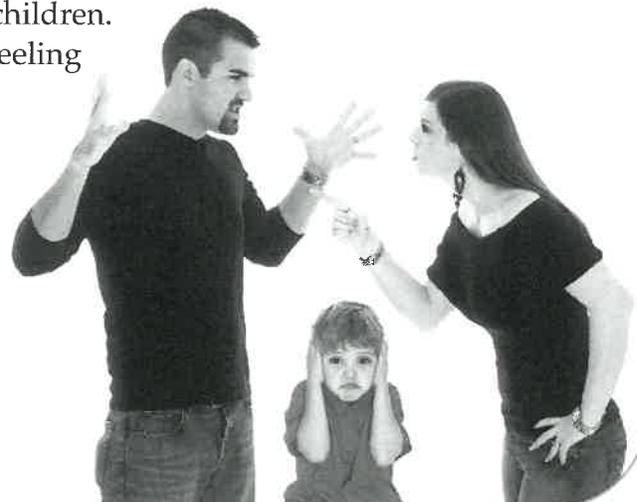
When Parents Aren't Together

FOR STARTERS:

- **Do take a break from relationships** to build yourself up and focus on being the best parent you can be.
- **Do Not hop into another relationship right away.** Keep potential partners you meet separate from your child until you feel it could be something permanent. Children easily get attached. *Do not* take your child through an emotional roller coaster of potential partners you are checking out.
- **Do Not cohabit casually.** Think twice. It can put your child at risk.
- **Do use the love smarts you have gained.** Don't slide, pace it slowly, and have a plan.
- **Do Not assume just anyone can substitute for the other parent.** It is said it takes as many years as the child is old for a step-parent to feel like a parent figure to a child. A step-parent should support the biological parent and not come in and take over. Children often feel they are being disloyal to their parent if they show any liking toward the step-parent.

IMPORTANT DON'TS:

- **Don't badmouth, judge or criticize your child's other parent**—even if you think they deserve it. Children literally view themselves as half Mom and half Dad. Therefore when you attack the other parent you attack your child.
- **Don't burden your child**—don't cry on your child's shoulder, turn your child into your confidant or protector. It's unfair to children. It makes them anxious, overwhelmed or feeling guilty. *Find an adult shoulder to lean on.*
- **Don't use your child as a messenger or spy.** Be responsible for finding some way to communicate with your ex.



- **Don't retaliate when the other parent says or does damaging things.** Retaliation or giving a child your side of the story continues the cycle of children feeling confused and caught between mom and dad. Instead say, "I'm sorry you had to hear or see that."
- **Don't expose your kids to details and things they shouldn't be hearing—**court matters, child support, financial concerns or intimate details regarding your relationship and split-up.
- **Don't withhold visitation if child support is unpaid or fail to pay child support if the other parent is withholding visitation.** Both actions are illegal and are viewed as separate issues by the court.
- **Don't try to buy your child's love or out-buy the other parent.** Children want to be cherished. They want time with you, not just stuff.

IMPORTANT DO'S:

- **Do let your child know it is okay to love both Mom and Dad.** Most children want a relationship with both parents.
- **Do support your child's relationship with their other parent—unless it's dangerous.** Inform the other parent of special events, school functions, or extracurricular activities.
- **Do listen to your children.** Be open to their feelings without judging, fixing or trying to change how they feel. Your child's feelings don't have to reflect your feelings. Allow them to talk about feelings of loss or sadness, even if you can't stand your ex.
- **Do reinforce that children are members of two homes.** Children should not be made to feel guilty or as if they have to choose which is their real or better home.
- **Do provide your children with discipline, as well as love.** Children still need parents to provide structure and limits, especially during difficult times.
- **Do find an adult shoulder to cry on, to vent, to seek support.**
- **Do assume that your child may need to process (try to make sense) and reprocess the split-up as they reach different developmental stages in life.** Repeat often, "It's not your fault" to your child.

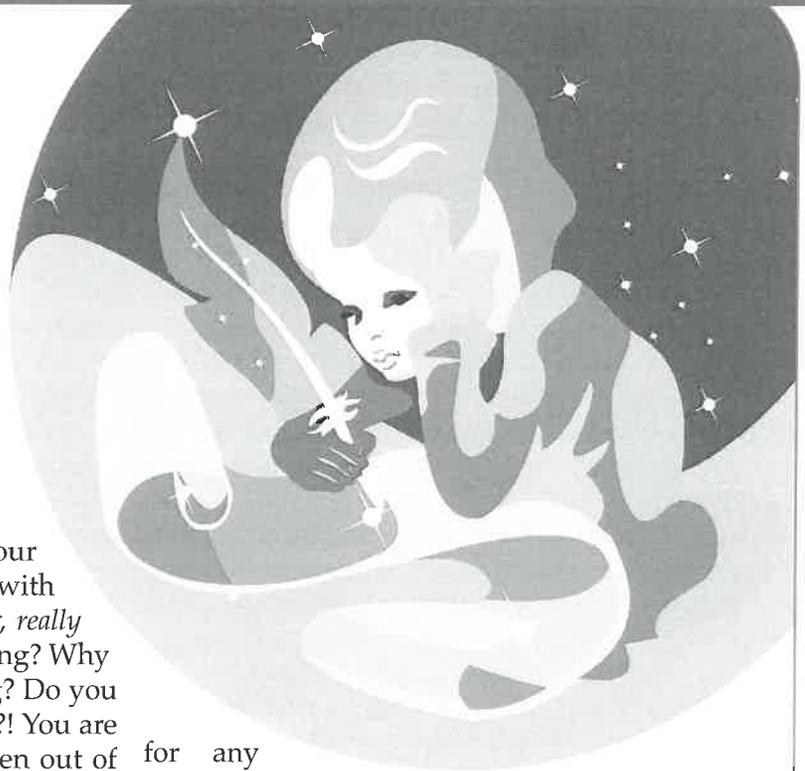
Lily's Letter

Dear Mom,

Hi, Mom! It's me, your baby, Lily! How am I writing this to you from inside your womb? Well, that's a great question... but that's not the question I'm here to answer. Mom, we need to talk. **Now.**

Mom, what are you doing with our life?! You're seventeen, pregnant with me and you're still doing some really, *really* stupid things. Why are you still smoking? Why are you still hanging out and drinking? Do you have any idea what that's *doing* to me?! You are putting me in jeopardy before I'm even out of your body—did you know that smoking causes low birth weight? I know that women love to be thin and light, but not baby girls! I'm supposed to be plump and healthy, and you're not letting me have that chance! Your smoking is putting me at risk for lung ailments like asthma, not to mention the organ and tissue damage that cigarette smoke is doing to my little body. Nicotine is a chemical that harms a developing fetus like me. This poison can destroy my brain cells and leave me with learning disabilities and behavioral problems in the future. Do us both a favor: put out the cigarette and don't touch another one until I'm at least out of the womb. You know, I'd prefer it if you just don't pick up the habit *ever* again.

And what's with the drinking, Mom? Do you have any idea how horrible that is for me? Would you let me sit at the bar with you and drink beer? I didn't think so, but that's exactly what you're doing when you're pregnant with me! Alcohol is the biggest offender against my development inside you. Your drinking could cause Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) for me. My face may look very strange and my brain could be damaged. Mom, I'm begging you to stop drinking right now, if not for you, then do it for me. There is no reason or excuse



for any baby to be born with FAS; it's a form of child abuse. Think about it.

Everything you consume, I consume, and Mom, you need to start putting some vegetables down here! Could you make it broccoli, please? That has lots of good-for-you folic acid, which every woman needs during pregnancy. If you can't get enough from your regular diet, take supplement vitamins. When you go for your prenatal visits, be sure and ask what foods you should eat.

Mom, may I ask you a really personal question? Do you plan on marrying my daddy? In today's poisoning culture, a kid really has advantages if she has two parents to guide her through life. And now for the next really personal question. Is Daddy someone that you and I should be having in our lives?

Does he drink? Does he beat us? Is he going to be the kind of influence you really want for me? Well, Mom, I can hear in here, and I've heard Daddy say some pretty bad things, and I can only imagine what he's doing that I can't see. I know he's hit you before. If he can beat you around, do you think he wouldn't do it

to me? Mom, the first few years of my life will shape the rest of my entire future, and the kind of abuse that I know happens between you and Daddy will stay with me forever. It will determine how I react to other people. It will affect the way I bond with my parents, how I view myself, society, and the world. Daddy's abuse will seriously alter my brain, growth and self-esteem. I know I told you that I need two parents, but they need a healthy relationship. I need parents who will do right by me. If the man who is biologically my father isn't it, then leave him. It is better for me to grow up with one good parent who loves me and cares for me than with two parents, one of whom abuses you and me.

Which leads me to my next point; Mom, if you do leave Daddy, I don't expect you to never have any connections with another man again. When you do, please be smart about it. Make sure you know him well. Is he a good person? And, please don't bring men into my life on a whim. I'm going to be making all sorts of important bonds with my caregivers, and it will be hugely damaging to me to have a revolving door of father figures coming in and out of my life. I need stability, and so do you. Make smart choices about whom you choose to bring into our lives. All of those broken bonds will damage my ability to trust and form my own healthy relationships in the future. I need you to be stable.

Mom, it won't be long until I am out in the world. Are you ready for me? I think it would be appropriate for me to tell you how important it will be for you to always, always, *always* be there for me every single time I need you, day or night. It's going to be mapping so much for me: my ability to soothe myself, regulate my emotions and bond with others. You're going to be the very first person I will ever love. And one thing, Mom—don't listen to Great-Grandma when she says that you can spoil me by picking me up too much or that I'm manipulating you. My brain isn't capable of manipulating you yet—that comes later. Allow me an impish

laugh. There is no way you can spoil me by responding to me every time I cry in those first months. I need that; I need to know that when I need something, you're going to take care of it for me, whether if it's a diaper change or if I'm simply bored. (Hey, come on, I can't even lift my head up yet! That mobile above my crib is only entertaining for so long.) Pretty soon you'll notice that I'll start calming down as soon as I hear your footsteps coming for me; that's no coincidence! My brain has formed connections with those footsteps, your voice and your scent to being soothed. I've come to anticipate it. I know that Mom's on her way and all is right with the world. But hey, just because I've calmed down doesn't mean you're off the hook. Get in here and have some cuddle time with me!

The next thing we need to talk about is emotional attunement. This is a big thing, so listen up. You have to help me understand my emotions and manage them—it will help me in the future to control my anger and frustrations as well as experience the full range of happiness. The way you respond to me right now is going to build my foundation for my emotions in the future and the proper way to handle them. I'm just a baby and I have no idea how to regulate my emotions—that's where you come in. Let's say I'm scared and I'm wailing my head off. Now is not a good time to ignore me—bad, bad, *bad*! Pick me up, cradle me, and croon soft endearments to me. Tell me it's okay. Pardon the pun, Mom, but baby me! The same is true when I'm all giggly and delighted about something; get delighted with me! Show me you understand what I'm feeling and play it back to me. This is how I'm going to learn about emotions and how they work, when to use them and how to control them.

Hey, Mom, flash me those pearly whites of yours! I need to learn how to smile. Sure, sometimes it looks like I'm smiling, but that's probably just gas. But by my third month, I'll have my social smile, the one that I'm going to use to express happiness... but I can't do it without you! Smile at me! Encourage me! Show

me that what I'm doing is cool and I promise you I'll do it again. I do what's reinforced. If you smile at me and clap when I smile, it'll make me want to do it again and again and again. Don't be afraid to reinforce me every time I do it. If you don't reinforce that social smile, I just might stop using it. I might stop trying. If I'm not winning your approval for smiling, I'll move on or, worse yet, lose interest altogether. So help me to smile and keep me smiling for years to come.

Mom, before you know it, I'm going to be a toddler. And before you know it, your sweet, perfect baby girl is going to be beating the ever loving snot out of my playmate that tries to take my dollies or trucks away from me. Don't worry, Mom, that's totally normal. It isn't, however, acceptable. Every little kid can be aggressive, and especially over toy ownership when they hit the terrible two's and three's. We're like little wild animals; it's your duty to see to it that I'm civilized. When I'm screaming my head off at you, kicking and biting, you need to take me by my hitting hand and tell me that what I'm doing hurts and I can't do it. Don't expect me to understand it the first time around; maybe you'll have to turn your back on me for a few seconds, like a mini time-out, to get the point across. Mom, I love you more than anything else in the world—even more than my dollies—and I want you to be pleased with me. You have to teach me some consequences for my actions—but don't hit me. Don't scream at me. Put me in a time-out, one minute for each year. (Example: If I'm two, give me two minutes.) I'll get the idea. The key thing here is that you have to teach me this before the age of five; if you haven't taught me that aggressive behavior is unacceptable and some cooperative social skills, you'll have a holy terror on your hands. You need to help me learn how to take turns, use rock, paper, scissors to handle my conflicts with other kids, and to share. Kids aren't born bad, Mom, they just haven't been taught. You're my first and most important teacher, Mom. And, Dad should be too. It will be twice as hard to start disciplining me and be effective at age seven than at age three or four.

Sounds like a big job, doesn't it? Being a mom is the greatest job you'll ever have—but are you really ready for it? Are you ready to give up your social life in order to become a parent? I'm going to be a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. You're not getting weekends off. You don't get holiday pay or overtime. You can't go out with your friends like you used to and be the kind of mom I need. I will come first in all of your priorities. This is a very tough job even for a pair of adults. This is a very hard thing for me to say to you, Mom, but if you have a lot of doubts, you may want to consider if adoption would be best for me. I know what you're thinking.... You're thinking that you love me too much to give me away. But maybe if you love me enough, you will. Maybe adoption is best for me. You are barely seventeen; your life hasn't even started. You need to finish school, be emotionally mature, go on to higher education, get a job where you can afford to be a mother, and... have a daddy for me who's committed and married to you. There are adoption programs and couples that would be willing to allow you, as my birth mother, to visit me and stay a part of my life. Adoption isn't about not loving me; it's about loving me enough to sacrifice what you want to give me what's best.

I know you will choose what is right for me. It's a lot to think about.

See you in a couple of months.

—Love, Lily

