

# SESSION 1: WHAT IS A PARENT?

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## INTRODUCTION

**p.a.p.a.** stands for Parenting and Paternity Awareness. It's a program from the **Office of the Attorney General**, the child support agency for the state of Texas, to help you understand some of the important facts you need to know when you make your own decisions about parenthood.

When a child's parents have separated, divorced or never married, the Office of the Attorney General provides a wide range of child support services designed to help make sure that both parents contribute to their child's financial support.

Parenthood is something that most of you and your friends will experience at one time or another in your lives. Most people in our society want to be parents. It's an important and rewarding job...but it's also challenging and expensive. Ideally, parenthood is something that is carefully planned. It makes sense to have things in order in your own life – finish school, start a career, and enter a loving committed relationship such as marriage – before bringing a child into the world. However, sometimes people haven't made a life plan or, if they have, things don't go as planned. In those situations, parenthood may be unexpected or unintentional. Regardless of the circumstances, parenthood can have a tremendous impact on you and the people around you.

Over the next 10 sessions, you'll learn about the rights and responsibilities of parenthood, as well as the realities. Through a series of video clips, you'll hear stories from teen parents who will explain how their lives changed after becoming parents. You'll learn about some of the legal and financial issues that parents face, especially fathers, when they are not married to mothers of their children. And you'll learn more about child support and services provided by the Office of the Attorney General. You'll learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships and explore the impact of parents' relationships on their children. Finally, you'll do some thinking about your plans for the future. You'll think carefully about where and when parenthood fits into your life plan. You'll make a lot of decisions in the years ahead, but few will be as important as the decisions you make about parenthood.

### Child Support services include:

- Locate absent parents
- Identify the child's legal father, establish paternity
- Establish and modify court orders for child support and medical support
- Collect and distribute child support and medical support payments
- Take enforcement actions against absent parents who fail to pay support

## SESSION 1: WHAT IS A PARENT? *Continued*

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Do you think you'll ever become a parent? If yes, why?

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If no, why not?

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Depends? On what?

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What things do you want to have in place in your life before having a child (or having additional children if you're already a parent)?

In p.a.p.a. you're going to explore all of these questions, and more. You'll gain information to enable you to make informed choices about parenting and paternity.

### **Understanding Terminology**

Have you ever heard any of the words below to describe parents?

- Biological parent
- Noncustodial parent
- Custodial parent
- Caregiver

## SESSION 1: WHAT IS A PARENT? *Continued*

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Every baby has two biological parents who may or may not be the baby's caregivers. The biological parents are the people who provided the sperm and the egg to create the baby. Caregivers are the people who provide for the child's needs.

When you're a small child, you need somebody to fix your food, help you get dressed, explain things, and take care of you when you're sick or hurt. It could be more than one person. It could be different people at different times.

All young children need somebody they can count on to be there for them. This is their primary caregiver... their safety net...the person taking responsibility for their daily care.

Sometimes the two biological parents are a child's primary caregivers, but it isn't always that way. Sometimes, for one reason or another, only one biological parent takes care of the child. Sometimes neither biological parent takes care of the child.

A person who adopts a child is both a parent and a caregiver, though not a child's biological parent. Adoption is the legal transfer of parental rights from one parent to another. Adoption is one path to the love, stability, nurturing, and care all children need from their parents.

A child's legal parent is the person legally responsible for providing care the child needs. If something happens to the child or if the child does not receive basic care and protection, the legal parent can be held responsible. This is how our society tries to make sure that every child is cared for.

Both parents are responsible for supporting their child financially. When a child lives with just one parent, that parent is called the custodial parent (the parent with custody).

A parent who does not live with his or her child is called the noncustodial parent. The noncustodial parent is required to provide child support and medical insurance for the child unless the child has been legally adopted by someone else.

## ACTIVITY: What's It Been Like?

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In this activity, you'll identify what children need from their parents and reflect on your experiences as a child.

**Who are your biological parents?** *Write a brief description for each of your biological parents:*

Biological mother: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Biological father: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How close is your relationship with each of your biological parents?

Who took care of you when you were a small child? Probably several adults looked after you and took care of you at different times. They may or may not have included your biological parents. They may have also included an older sister or brother, an aunt, a grandparent, an adoptive parent or a step-parent.

Who were your caregivers when you were small? In order of importance (name as many or as few as you want):

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

Put a star by the name of anyone above that you considered a real parent. What did that person do for you?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## ACTIVITY: What's It Been Like? *Continued*

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### What was it like when you were a young child?

Describe your family: Were there other children? How many and how old, compared to you? What were their names? How did you get along with them?

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We've all had times when we were little kids that we needed help from an older person. It feels good when somebody is there. Most of us have also had times when we needed help and nobody was there. That doesn't feel very good.

Describe a time when you needed something and your parent or caregiver was not there for you. How old were you? What did you need? What happened? How did you feel?

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Describe a time when you needed something and a parent or caregiver was there for you. Who helped you and how? How did that make you feel?

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Based on your experiences, write down some things children need from their parents:

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## ACTIVITY: What Makes a Good Parent?

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If you were on a committee to select a good parent(s) for an orphan, what kind of person(s) would you look for? Consider the following issues:

- Would you look for an individual or a couple? Why?
- If you did select a couple, what kind of relationship would you want them to have?
- What personal qualities would you want the parent(s) to have?
- What kind of financial resources would they need to have?

Consider the following important parent characteristics:

<b>Dependable</b>	Will be there when the child needs them
<b>Adaptable</b>	Can adjust to the unexpected
<b>Self-sufficient</b>	Can take care of themselves and support themselves financially
<b>Disciplined</b>	Does what they need to do, even when they don't feel like it
<b>Resilient</b>	Can bounce back after something goes wrong
<b>Responsible</b>	Can be counted on to take care of things the child needs (food, clothing, shelter, keeping them safe, etc.)
<b>Loving/Caring</b>	Demonstrates a deep personal attachment
<b>Affectionate</b>	Shows fond feelings, is tender, gives hugs and kisses
<b>Patient</b>	Is calm, composed, willing to wait something out
<b>Understanding</b>	Tries hard to understand, shows empathy

## ACTIVITY: How Ready Are You?

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How would you measure up as a parent at this point in your life? Circle “*very*,” “*somewhat*,” or “*not at all*” after each characteristic to indicate how much of that trait you currently possess.

<b>Dependable</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Adaptable</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Self-sufficient</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Disciplined</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Resilient</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Responsible</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Loving</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Affectionate</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Patient</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all
<b>Understanding</b>	very.....	somewhat.....	not at all

1. Based on this assessment, how ready are you to be a good parent?

very..... somewhat..... not at all

2. What would your strong points be?

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3. What would you have to change?

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