



ESTABLISHING PATERNITY AT BIRTH GIVES CHILDREN A GOOD START IN LIFE

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

THE BIRTH OF A CHILD IS ONE of the most joyous events in a couple's life. For unmarried couples, that life-changing experience carries an added responsibility – establishing paternity for their child.

Establishing paternity is one of the most important jobs the Attorney General's Child Support Division performs, because it guarantees a legal relationship between a father and his child. Under Texas law, a child born to a man and woman who are not married has no legal father. Establishing legal fatherhood is very important. It ensures that children are eligible for child support and benefits such as Social Security, veteran's survivor benefits and health insurance. Legal paternity also guarantees a father's rights as a parent, such as making it easier for him to visit his children. In addition, it enables the father's name to go on the birth certificate, which is most important to a child.

Voluntary Acknowledgement of Paternity (AOP) is one way to establish paternity. The best place and time to sign an AOP is usually at the hospital when the baby is born. The child's mother and father will likely be present together and will be willing to do what is necessary for their child's well-being at that time.

Most parents come to the hospital planning to put the father's name on the

birth certificate. In Texas, however, a man who isn't married to the child's mother has to sign the AOP before his name can go on the birth certificate. Hospitals are required to provide unwed parents with the opportunity to establish paternity and with information about the rights and responsibilities involved. Because the Acknowledgment of Paternity becomes a legal finding of paternity when it is filed with the state Vital Statistics Unit (VSU), it is very important that parents understand the responsibility to which they are committing.

For example, a man should not voluntarily acknowledge paternity unless he is absolutely sure he is the father of the child, and the mother agrees to the same. If the parents are certain of the child's paternity, the father can sign the AOP at birth, and the hospital will file the form with the VSU for free.

The Office of the Attorney General is committed to seeing as many babies as possible go home from the hospital with paternity established. The Child Support Division has developed a Paternity Opportunity Program (POP) that trains and certifies hospital and birthing center employees to assist parents with the AOP process while the mother and child are still in the hospital. The POP staff — there is a coordinator in each of the eight child support regions — provides hospitals

with brochures and a video that discuss the benefits and responsibilities of paternity establishment. Hospital staff, in turn, provides this information to unmarried parents. Parents also can call **(866) 255-2006, option 1**, to receive information – in English or Spanish – about paternity establishment.

When a father can't be present for his child's birth, the Office of the Attorney General is happy to work with him to facilitate the AOP process. For example, when a military father thinks he will be deployed before a baby is born, he can obtain and sign an AOP from the Attorney General's Office during the mother's pregnancy. If he is deployed at the time of birth, the mother can take a copy of the AOP to the hospital when she delivers the baby, so the father's name appears on the birth certificate. Not only does the certified copy of the AOP help set a firm foundation for the child, but both mom and dad also can rest in the knowledge that if the unthinkable happens, the serviceman's child will be entitled to full veteran's benefits.

Together, the Attorney General's Office and birthing entities across the state are giving the children of Texas a sound start in life. If you would like more information about AOPs, please contact the Child Support Division at **(866) 255-2006**.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



ESTABLISHING PATERNITY

The **Acknowledgment of Paternity (AOP)** form is available at all hospitals, birthing facilities and child support offices, free of charge. The AOP is for unmarried fathers who voluntarily acknowledge paternity, when the mother agrees.

BENEFITS OF ESTABLISHING PATERNITY:

- Establishes legal fatherhood
- Makes the child eligible for child support and benefits, such as Social Security, veteran's survivor benefits and health insurance
- Guarantees a father's rights as a parent
- Encourages a father's involvement in his child's life

Unmarried parents can apply for free child support services by contacting the Office of the Attorney General at:

**Child Support Division
Office of the Attorney General
P. O. Box 12017
Austin, TX 78711-2017
(800) 252-8014**

Information on this and other topics is available on the Attorney General's Web site at **www.oag.state.tx.us**



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