



# Research Brief

## Teenaged Parenting: The Importance of Cooperation and Support

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### Introduction

In the United States, nearly a quarter million adolescents give birth each year.<sup>1</sup> Although 88.7% of these births are to unmarried teenagers, it has been estimated that more than half of adolescent mothers are in a romantic relationship with the father of their child at the time of birth.<sup>2</sup> Even though research suggests that many teenaged parents aren't able to continue their romantic relationship over time, they often maintain a connection through their shared parenting relationship. Pregnant and parenting teenagers benefit from having two parents involved in child care tasks. Unfortunately, compared with adult fathers, adolescent fathers are less involved with their children or their involvement wanes over time.<sup>3</sup> Because these parents are often unmarried, the fathers are likely to live apart from the mother of their child, impacting their access to the child and thus their level of engagement in parenting.

Raising children can be challenging for young mothers and fathers. Younger mothers tend to feel less competent with parenting and consequently feel less certain about how to respond appropriately to their child's needs. Although not all adolescent mothers are unprepared for parental responsibilities, those who feel less competent may also experience stress, anxiety, and depression, along with low self-esteem, anger, and hopelessness.<sup>4</sup> Teenaged mothers and fathers have higher rates of medical, educational, behavioral, relational, and psychological issues, but are less likely than adults to seek or access potential resources.<sup>5</sup> This impacts not only the parents, but also their child(ren). Parents who

experience chronic mental, emotional, and/or financial distress are less likely to take appropriate care of their children. Consequently, the children of adolescent parents are at higher risk for negative outcomes, including abuse, low school achievement, mental and physical health issues, and risk of incarceration and unemployment in adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

### Maternal Role Attainment

During pregnancy, a mother-to-be goes through a process known as maternal role attainment, which is the process of becoming a mother.<sup>7</sup> This process is more than having a baby; it involves thinking about and finding information on becoming a mother, receiving help and support from others, practicing for motherhood, planning for the baby, developing an attachment to the fetus, and later developing an attachment to the new baby.<sup>8</sup> Maternal identity is the end point of the maternal role attainment process. A new mother who develops a healthy maternal identity will accept her new role as a mother, feel pleasure and competence with parenting, and feel that others support her parenting efforts.

Although becoming a mother is within the normal expectations for an adult woman, it isn't considered normal for an adolescent, which makes the maternal role attainment process for an adolescent more challenging. A cooperative and supportive relationship between adolescent parents can help with this process and with parenting. Understanding the linkages among these interrelated concepts can help practitioners concerned with family functioning

meet the relational needs of adolescent parents.<sup>9</sup>

**Maternal Role Attainment:** Process during pregnancy through which a mother-to-be prepares for becoming a mother. Includes activities such as thinking and fantasizing about motherhood, talking to and about the baby, and seeking out prenatal education and care.

**Maternal Identity:** The result of the maternal role attainment process. A healthy maternal identity depends on a variety of factors, such as amount of social support given to the expectant mother. Maternal identity is strengthened by support from the child's father.

Pregnant adolescents have the unique challenge of continuing to grow physically and emotionally while also preparing for a new role as a parent.<sup>10</sup> During a time when she would normally feel confused about whether she is a child or an adult, an adolescent mother has a difficult time with self-identity, role definition, and establishing independence from family, all of which can impact maternal role attainment.<sup>11</sup> However, even with these added difficulties, when adolescents are supported, they do not differ from adult women in their ability to attain a healthy maternal identity.

If a pregnant adolescent receives social support during pregnancy and after the birth of her child, she will feel more pleasure and satisfaction with parenting. Family support (especially parental support), peer support, and support from the baby's father are most important for the teenager.<sup>12</sup> An adolescent who has support from her family will experience increased well-being, less pregnancy related stress, and can achieve a more healthy maternal identity. The support of close friends will lead her to make better behavioral choices for herself and the baby.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, if she feels that the father of the baby is involved and

supportive throughout the pregnancy, she receives the encouragement, reinforcement, and emotional assistance that she requires to establish a healthy maternal identity that will benefit herself and her developing child. This support is also important because the maternal role attainment process impacts the future mother-child relationship.<sup>14</sup>

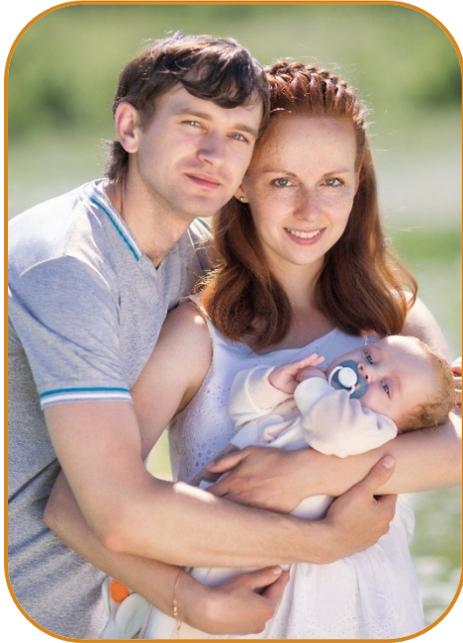


## Adolescent Parental Relationship

Many adolescent co-parenting relationships are characterized by undermining behavior, frequent conflict, and unhealthy communication.<sup>15</sup> These unstable relationships can decline while the child is young and often end in a termination of the co-parenting relationship.<sup>16</sup> And when the parental relationship is fraught with conflict, mothers may feel more parenting stress<sup>17</sup> and have trouble adapting to their maternal role.<sup>18</sup>

The nature of the relationship between adolescent parents has consequences for their children. Good co-parents collaborate about parenting practices, engage in harmonious conversations about their children, avoid bringing their children into arguments, and work together to avoid conflictual interactions. For

both the mother and the father, the health of the co-parenting relationship spills over into the parent-child relationship which, in turn, impacts parenting behaviors.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the marital or cohabitation status of the parents, children benefit when their parents have a healthy relationship.



It has been suggested that young fathers do not participate in co-parenting behavior due to their developmental stage and the likelihood that they are not in a committed or cohabiting relationship with the mother. The establishment of a positive co-parenting relationship may be more difficult for parents who have never married or lived together,<sup>20</sup> however, even in non-residential situations, maintenance of a healthy co-parenting relationship with the child's mother may increase a father's engagement with his children.<sup>21</sup> In relationships with less conflict and more cooperation, young fathers are more likely to be involved from pregnancy to after the birth of their child<sup>22</sup> and up to three years postpartum.<sup>23</sup> In the absence of a romantic relationship, even simply a friendship between the parents may be enough to encourage continuous long-term involvement.<sup>24</sup>

## Father Involvement

When fathers display frequent positive interactions with their children, through play and caregiving, there are benefits for mothers, fathers, and their children. Mothers with a highly involved co-parent are more responsive to their infants, adjust more quickly to the parenting role, and experience greater life satisfaction, parenting competence, self-confidence, and self-esteem.<sup>25</sup> In other words, a father's continuous involvement from pregnancy until after the birth of the baby facilitates development of a healthy maternal identity.<sup>26</sup>

Involvement with their children also benefits the fathers themselves. Involved fathers spend more time building their parenting knowledge, leading to more self-confidence and satisfaction in their parenting role. Similarly, fathers who are around their children more often are more attentive and accepting of them. Fathers who take an active role in parenting also tend to exhibit more maturity, and report less psychological distress and more life satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

Fathers and mothers interact with their children differently, and paternal interactions have unique benefits for their children. For example, fathers tend to use more unfamiliar words with young children and ask for clarification more often, encouraging children to rethink and rephrase their ideas in order to be understood by other people. Similarly, while mothers tend to solve problems for their children, fathers ask their children to think through and develop solutions, allowing them to build the ability to solve problems independently. Fathers also tend to excite and surprise their children, open them up to the outside world, and encourage them to take risks while ensuring that they are safe and secure, which allows children to be braver in strange situations by exploring, taking chances, overcoming obstacles, and standing up for themselves.<sup>28</sup> This relationship is only effective in the context of a close father-child bond. Consequently, when young fathers are

highly involved, there are significant social, emotional, behavioral, and academic benefits for their children.<sup>29</sup>



In recent years, it has become clear that even the youngest fathers are interested in being there for their children and their children's mother,<sup>30</sup> even if they do not reside with them. Although the potential for more involvement is greater when fathers reside with their children, non-residential fathers are often much more involved with their children than has previously been assumed.<sup>31</sup> In fact, even when non-residential fathers do not spend time with their children frequently, the factors that matter most for child outcomes are the quality of the father-child relationship, engagement in multiple forms of involvement with the child, and time spent in child-centered activities.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, when fathers are more involved with their child *and* the young parents have a cooperative relationship, mothers are more likely to identify with their maternal role in a healthy way and feel less stress with parenting.<sup>33</sup>

### Serving Teenaged Parents

In addition to teenaged pregnancy prevention programs, service providers need to offer teenagers who are already parents information

on how to make healthy choices about relationships. Healthy relationship education is helpful for all youth and works to strengthen the skills they need to maintain effective communication, self-control, and problem solving skills. For a young parenting couple, learning relationship skills will enhance their ability to work together to provide a strong and stable home for their children.

Services that prepare *both* parents to engage in positive ways with their child may promote father involvement which, in turn, may offer additional support to mothers in developing a healthy maternal identity.

### Support from Family and Peers

Healthy relationship skills benefit the relationship between adolescents and their parents, which is especially crucial for a pregnant or parenting adolescent. During adolescence, teenagers often feel that their parents don't understand them and don't listen to them. When a pregnant teenager is better able to communicate her needs to her parents, she is more likely to receive their support and acceptance, which is associated with more satisfaction and less depression.<sup>34</sup>



Likewise, adolescents often turn to informal peer supports for help in coping with the challenges of pregnancy and parenthood. Unfortunately, peer relationships during adolescence can be contentious and many

pregnant teenagers report feeling ostracized by their peers. Learning about issues common to peer relationships through healthy relationship education may enable them to seek healthy and supportive friendships. Additionally, if adolescents attend relationship classes and establish friendships with other pregnant or parenting teens, they may share parenting advice that furthers their maternal role attainment.<sup>35</sup>

## **Strengthening the Parental Relationship**

During the pregnancy and directly after the birth of their child, young couples are more likely to be involved in a romantic relationship, and are also more motivated to remain in that relationship. Fathers and mothers who are more committed to the romantic relationship may be more likely to invest in building their co-parenting relationship.<sup>36</sup> Thus, this time period is ideal for healthy relationship education that fosters an effective co-parenting relationship.

Increasing knowledge about relationships involves understanding and identifying healthy and unhealthy aspects of dating and romantic relationships, including patterns of verbal or physical aggression. Young parents who learn and develop these skills, ideally during the prenatal period, gain confidence and competence with maintaining a healthy parenting relationship, which in turn helps them to provide a strong, stable family for their child(ren), whether or not they choose to remain in a romantic relationship. Adding relationship education into programs and services geared toward young, unmarried parents has been shown to facilitate more supportive relationships.<sup>37</sup> Even if they decide to end their romantic relationship, these relationship skills will help parents ensure that they choose new partners that will be healthy for themselves and their child(ren).

## **Increasing Father Involvement**

Services to parenting adolescents have often focused solely on the mothers. Typically, the young mother is involved in a program with the aim of helping her complete school, obtain self-sufficiency, avoid future pregnancies, and learn how to care for and parent a young child. In recent years, practitioners have become aware of the importance of involving the young father and other family members in programs for the adolescent mother.<sup>38</sup> Programs for young fathers typically address his ability or motivation to provide financially for his child, although many programs now recognize the value of improving his knowledge of child development and parenting skills,<sup>39</sup> with a goal of improving the quality of the father-child relationship.

Unfortunately, programs for young parents do not often focus on helping them to work together as a parenting team. Teaching relationship and parenting skills to young fathers may give young couples an advantage as they head into parenthood. The ability to cooperate and manage conflict in an effective way may encourage ongoing father involvement with both the mother and the child, while providing the father with skills he will need in order to have a healthy ongoing father-child relationship.



## Healthy Relationship Education in Practice

Information about healthy relationships can be disseminated to teenaged parents in various ways and in different service delivery systems. Colorful and age appropriate brochures, pamphlets, or tip sheets focused on healthy relationship and parenting practices could be displayed in lobbies or waiting rooms where teens are likely to go to receive services, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices. Other options include schools, hospitals, pediatric offices, mental and behavioral health agencies, and Head Start or other child care centers.

### Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grantees, funded by the federal Office of Family Assistance, provide comprehensive healthy relationship and marriage education services, as well as job and career advancement activities, to promote economic stability and overall improved family well-being, along with activities designed to help fathers improve relationships with their spouses, significant others, and/or the mothers of their children. Many programs serve young mothers and fathers who have unique needs that are not always addressed by parenting and relationship programs for adults. For more information about HMRF grantees that may be serving adolescent populations in your community, see the list of current grantees at:

<https://hmrfa.acf.hhs.gov/programs/grants>

Recent research indicates that delivering accurate and accessible interventions through the Internet or social media may increase the likelihood that adolescent parents will access and obtain the information.<sup>40</sup> Partnering with other organizations that already provide services to pregnant or parenting teenagers may also help share this information through previously established networks.

It is also possible to develop or integrate relationship education into programming specifically targeted toward pregnant and parenting teenagers. These skills can be taught in addition to, or in conjunction with, parenting skills classes, which may be a smooth way to integrate this knowledge into an existing service.

For example, relationship classes can be incorporated in a school setting, which offers a convenience factor that increases the likelihood that teenagers can attend. When developing programming, it is crucial to adapt the program to meet the needs of these young and impressionable parents. The following recommendations can make relationship education for teenaged parents a success:

**Togetherness:** Encourage pregnant or parenting teenagers to attend classes together—they are more likely to practice the skills they learn together if they engage together, and are more likely to retain the information outside of class.

**Facilitation:** Ensure that your trained facilitators are comfortable talking about adolescent romantic relationships, including topics like sex and intimacy, and will be able to build a good rapport.<sup>41</sup>

**Awareness:** Be aware of cultural considerations, including differing norms, values, and family structures in the population you will serve. This way you can incorporate the knowledge, culture, and experience of your participants, while also ensuring that you don't include information

that turns participants away from your program.<sup>42</sup>

**Strengths-based:** Tailor your program to focus on the positive by identifying and building on the inherent strengths of the young people involved.

**Support:** Help the participants to recognize and engage with existing supports—both formal and informal—while also assisting them with seeking out and building new support systems. Often young parents do not know where to go for help or how to ask for it. Investigating and having a plan for potential resources can help you to help them.<sup>43</sup> Also, take into account the childcare needs of teenaged participants.

**Engage:** Adolescents learn differently than adults. Tailor your curriculum to fit their unique needs. Adolescents learn best when lessons are brief, flexible, and include many hands-on learning opportunities.

**Goals:** Goal-oriented programs help pregnant and parenting teenagers focus on the future, which makes them more likely to make decisions that are beneficial for themselves and for the baby.<sup>44</sup> Have your participants identify strengths and weaknesses as a guide to understanding their relationship and personal goals.

## Conclusion

The support of those around her, particularly the child's father, is critical for a pregnant or parenting teenager. Young fathers who are highly involved prenatally may remain highly involved after the birth of their children, however, involvement is more likely when a father's relationship with the mother of his child is cooperative and non-conflictual. Likewise, fathers' involvement with their children is only associated with a healthy maternal identity when the parents are able to negotiate and compromise.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, young parenting or expecting couples rarely have the opportunity to learn how to navigate successful

and healthy relationships, and often break off relationships when their children are young. Supportive family members can play a key role by encouraging young parents to maintain a healthy, low conflict co-parenting relationship for the benefit of their children. Providing access to resources about healthy relationships and encouraging the development of relationship skills for these vulnerable parents may set them on a safer and healthier path.

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