



Teenage Parents and Their Educational Attainment

Introduction

Becoming a parent, at any age, can be a life-altering experience. Regardless of race, education, and socio-economic status, motherhood—and fatherhood—uniformly places demands on one's life that were non-existent prior to the birth of a child. When school-aged students become parents, the new responsibilities can be overwhelming. For teenage parents who lack support from their own parents, this experience can be even more daunting as they seek support in adult-oriented systems, which even older parents may find challenging.

Teenage parents—or students with children, as they are also referred to in the literature—are parents between the ages of 13 and 19. Often these students drop out of school because of the pressures they experience, including stigmatization associated with early parenting; isolation from peers; and lack of needed support from family, friends, schools, social service agencies, and other organizations. According to the latest available statistics, Texas has the highest teenage birth rate in the country, with 62 births per 1,000 women (Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010).

To find research on this topic, Texas Comprehensive Center staff searched two databases (ERIC and Education Full Text) and the Internet (using the Google search engine). A variety of search terms were used, alone or in combination: teenage parents, student parents, school-age parents, adolescent parents, child care, childcare, school-based child care, pregnancy, student achievement, drop-outs, and graduation. The literature revealed through these searches focuses primarily on the educational attainment of adolescent mothers and ways to lessen the negative consequences of early parenthood. Research on adolescent fathers was not as prevalent in the literature; however, available information is included.

Limitations

This briefing paper on teenage parents includes the following limitations:

- Data, research, and information from school-based parenting programs were used because they were often identified as most successful in increasing a teenage parent's educational aspirations. Other types, including community-based teenage parenting programs, were not the focus of this paper.
- Due to the abbreviated length of this document, a limited number of research sources are cited.

QUESTION:

What does the research say regarding educational achievement by students with children?

Summary

Research indicates that teenage parents experience reductions in their educational attainments compared to teenagers who are not parents. However, strategies have been reported that can help close this gap between teen parents and non-parents.

Key Points

- Teenage parents drop out of school due to the responsibilities of caring for their children as well as because of stigmatization and isolation from peers.
- Teenage parents who receive support from school-based services tend to remain in school more than those who receive no support.
- Strategies can be implemented to help reduce the negative consequences of early parenting.



- The diversity of research sites—urban, suburban, and rural, in a variety of states and cities—created a range of results that may not be replicable in all programs.

Inclusion of programs or processes within this paper does not in any way imply endorsement by SEDL.

Findings From the Literature

Adolescent parents and their children are both at critical points in their lives, when their life courses can be shaped toward healthy development, stability, and productivity, or toward life-long poverty and dependency. Efforts to improve outcomes for these young families must take advantage of every opportunity to connect them with the services and support that will help them move toward positive growth.

(Stephens, Wolf, & Batten, 2003, p. 5)

When teenage parents do not receive the support and resources they need, a variety of detrimental consequences can result. In 2002, only 10% of mothers between the ages of 15 and 17 graduated from high school on time, and estimates indicated that 67% of teenage mothers never graduated (Brosh, Weigel, & Evans, 2007). Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) listed within Melhado's research show that teenage parents had a total of 11.9 years of education compared to those who had no children and who averaged 13.9 years of education. However, having access to appropriate resources can reduce this 2-year "education penalty" (Melhado, 2007).

Socio-economic outcomes have been the traditional focus of research on teenage parents, often finding a negative impact on employment and earnings (Beutel, 2000). However, education can help to mitigate these negative outcomes. In 2008, workers who possessed a high school diploma or its equivalent earned, on average, nearly 44% (\$10,000) more per year than those who dropped out of high school (Infoplease, 2011). For economic reasons alone, it pays to stay in school and graduate.

The challenge of keeping teenage mothers in school has consistently been more successfully met by school-based programs (Seitz & Apfel, 1999). Title IX protections preclude districts from automatically assigning teenage parents to separate schools or programs unless they have the same educational offerings and experiences available to students in a traditional setting. Williams and Sadler's (2001) study found evidence that social support and school-based programs that provide counseling, health care, health teaching, and education about child development to teenage parents can help to alleviate many of the problems associated with adolescent pregnancy and parenting. In their study, a 100% success rate was achieved for high school graduation or continuation. In addition, Brownson (2009) found that student mothers receiving school-based childcare and support fared better than peers who did not receive these supports.

Although research shows that pregnancy is the leading factor limiting a teenage mother's educational attainment, Zachry (2005) noted that other studies have suggested that these students' reasons for leaving school have more to do with school policies and previous school experiences than with being pregnant. Teenage mothers have expressed negative perceptions about education, including a lack of relevance and a negative school environment. In her literature review, Zachry cited studies by several researchers who identified these issues as structural disorganization and negative teacher interactions.

Teenage parents often cited school-related reasons for dropping out of school. One of the specific issues that was identified as hindering their educational attainment was a rigidity by some school administrators concerning the schools' attendance policies. This included the inability to provide adequate leave for teen parents to complete their general child care responsibilities. Also voiced was the limited credit that is often received from home study. Another school-related reason for teenage parents dropping out was the lack of transportation between their homes, daycare, and the school for both them and their children (Mangino, 2008). The gap between teenage mothers' aspirations and the support they receive suggests that educators are missing an opportunity to facilitate teenage mothers' school progress and their long-term educational attainment (SmithBattle, 2007).

In contrast, other studies have shown how a supportive and organized school environment can serve as inducements to teenage mothers. Zachry (2005) cited several studies done by researchers in the 1980s and 1990s that identified the importance of school programs focused on helping with the caring for a child; these programs often meant the difference between dropping out or continuing in school.



Seldom are pregnant and parenting adolescents asked what resources and types of support they feel are important for reaching their desired level of educational attainment. This frequently omitted step can be instrumental in allowing parenting programs to align their strategies with the needs and goals of the teenage parents. Higher success rates are predicted when this alignment is an integral part of the program. The mothers with the most supports were the least likely to believe that they had limited opportunities for success (SmithBattle, 1995).

Brosh, Weigel, and Evans (2007) found that the highest ranked type of needed support voiced by teenage parents, especially teen mothers, was childcare. The lowest ranked resources in this study dealt with career development programs that were implemented in an effort to prevent teenage mothers from joining and lingering on the welfare rolls.

Another study (SmithBattle, 2007) found that teens reevaluated their focus and educational attainment goals when they became pregnant, regardless of their earlier attitudes. Indicators of increased school focus included improved grades, a resolve to graduate, and a new interest in further education.

Teenage parents have described how having a child reinforced their interest in education and was instrumental in helping them to see how education would help them provide a better future for their children, increase their employment possibilities, and help them avoid depending on public assistance. The decision to accept available support is characterized as the personal transformation stage of teenage parenting. The personal transformation stage begins when a teenage mother realizes that success and freedom for her and her child do not come without personal drive, unselfish dedication, and a commitment to succeed. Some studies indicate that teenage parents have found that having a child critically changes their perspectives on both their schooling and their future (Zachry, 2005).

Due to the stigma attached to teenage pregnancy and parenthood, teenage parents often choose to remain under the radar. School administrators and staff may be unaware that some of their students are, indeed, parents. This invisibility of teenage parents often produces negative results: inappropriate interventions to address their unique developmental needs, lack of advocacy for teenage parents, and insensitivity on the part of the educational system to help parenting teens balance their education and their responsibilities as parents (Center for Assessment and Policy Development, 1999). Both school-related and personal support were found to be of importance to teenage mothers in their journey toward high school graduation (Mangino, 2008).

Research on Policy

Perspectives about teenage pregnancy have influenced policy through the decades. Studies referenced in Zachry (2005) found there are documented instances of teenage pregnancy being called an “epidemic” or out of control by the media, when birth rates for this population were actually at their lowest in decades. Zachry cited a study by Luker in 1996 that found that the connection between teenage pregnancy, poor education, and poverty has become a powerful belief within America; this belief often influences the development of policies affecting teenage mothers and their education.

Studies suggest that some school personnel believe that being a teenage mother will limit the student’s educational attainment. This is contrasted to studies cited by SmithBattle (2007) showing a belief by teenage mothers and their parents that the effects of pregnancy were short term and limited. Teens did not expect being a mother to interfere substantially with their education or employment. A recommendation to policy makers includes working with an understanding of how teenage mothers see themselves and how they see their own role in their school success. Focusing on teenage mothers only as welfare recipients or students with low academic achievement limits the broader ways one can think about educational attainment. Supporting these young women in academically challenging work may be the step that will help them gain the education and skills they need to build a successful future for themselves and their children (Zachry, 2005).

Research has found that some people believe teenage parents should get married and the mother should serve as the primary caretaker; the father should work to support his family. Evidence suggests that these actions may actually decrease the teenagers’ educational attainment (Mollborn, 2007). Instead, policies could be considered that include financial aid packages—similar to those in the higher education system—as one way in which to provide resources to teenage parents. In addition, Mollborn proposes that teenage fathers should be encouraged to live with both parents and work less than half time. Teenage mothers should be encouraged to live with at least one parent, work less than half time, not be married, and share childcare duties with others.



Education can help to minimize the economic burden of early parenthood by helping young parents to attain the educational resources necessary to achieve their economic and other desired lifetime goals.

More and more people recognize education is the game-changer in the global economy. A world-class education system is the engine of economic growth, innovation, competitiveness and job creation. Our children, our teachers and our parents deserve a world-class education—not some day, but today.

(Arne Duncan, U. S. Secretary of Education)
(Duncan, 2011, p. 2)

Summary

Research supports that teenage parents experience reductions in their educational attainments compared to teenagers who are not parents. However, strategies were found that could help close this gap between the teen parents and non-parents.

It was reported that teen parents often experienced a lack of resources and support—both at home and at school—prior to the pregnancy and, even more so, afterward. By increasing these resources, especially in the school setting, the educational attainment of teenage parents increased.

Studies often found that new teenage parents experienced a change in attitude and focus toward school. Even when pre-pregnancy attitudes were not positive toward school, graduation, further education, and employment opportunities, post-pregnancy focus was often improved and combined with a new commitment to improve. This new commitment was not always met with the support it needed in the home and school settings.

The school climate and expectation levels and their impact on teenage parent educational aspirations were reviewed. Studies suggested that the school's expectations of teenage parents did not always align with that of the students or the students' parents, the schools often having a lower expectation level for those students. When the schools did not embrace the same academic expectations as the teenage parents and make strides to eliminate or modify policies and procedures to support them, these student parents were made to struggle, often to the detriment of their education and future goals.

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Wesley Hoover, SEDL President and CEO
Vicki Dimock, SEDL Chief Program Officer
Robin Jarvis, TXCC Program Director
Haidee Williams, TXCC Project Director
Shirley Beckwith, TXCC Communications Associate

Briefing Paper Team: Ann Neeley, Program Associate; Marion Baldwin, Program Associate; Shirley Beckwith, Communications Associate; Haidee Williams, Project Director.