

Teenage Pregnancy: Empowering the Adolescent to be the Best Parent They Can Be

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Teenage pregnancy is a concept that has affected women for generations. Teenage pregnancy occurs when anyone between the ages of 13 and 20 becomes pregnant (Bechtold et al., 2023). Teenage pregnancy gained relevance in the 1970's, when the average childbearing age increased due to emerging societal norms (Whitworth et al., 2016). Each year, over 16 million women worldwide aged 15-20 become pregnant, and over 2 million women worldwide under 15 become pregnant, with most women choosing to keep the pregnancy (Bechtold et al., 2023). Besides being physically pregnant, one other battle that most teen mothers face is psychological distress. Psychological distress is often overlooked when considering how to care for a teen parent, even though distress levels tend to be increased during this time (SmithBattle et al., 2016). This is due to the demands of motherhood along with navigating adolescence, a very tough time for most young women (Corcoran et al., 2016). Currently, our society is not focused on enhancing the mental health of pregnant teenagers, as a pregnant teen having poor mental health has the ability to affect more than themselves; it affects their baby as well. This paper will discuss how when it comes to teen pregnancy, our society needs to empower teen parents to be the best parent they can be for their child, while prioritizing their own mental health. This paper will explore many subjects related to this topic, such as adolescent struggles, identity crises, the struggle to complete an education as a teen parent, and how to properly support a teen mother. These topics will be explored by interacting with many scholarly sources, such as "The Journal of Marriage and Family" and "The Journal of Family Issues". Based on these sources and these sub topics it can be concluded that therefore, as a society, we can properly empower teenage mothers by supporting the teen throughout pregnancy and motherhood.

Literature Review

Mental health is defined as being mentally and emotionally in good health, which is shown by emotions surrounding self confidence, positivity, and the ability to handle everyday tasks. According to National Comorbidity data, around 25% of all adolescents suffer from a mental disorder (Bechtold et al., 2023). Mental health disorders are an epidemic that regularly affects adolescents. Some common examples of what would be categorized as a mental health disorder include depression, conduct problems, and anxiety (Bechtold et. al, 2023).

On top of the struggles behind adolescence, being a teen parent creates a new vulnerability. Not only do they have to deal with the struggles of parenting at a young age, but they also most likely experienced childhood distress due to the adversities in their lives. Statistically, teen mothers are more likely to have socio economic struggles, be a person of color, have unstable families growing up, and live in neighborhoods with high crime rates (SmithBattle et al., 2016). For example, the teenage birth rates of Latina and Black women are higher than the teenage birth rates of White women, and 89% of teenage pregnancies are to children that have single mothers (Whitworth et al., 2016). These adversities also increase the likelihood of participating in risky sexual behaviors. These behaviors include unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, or engaging in sex while under the influence. These behaviors correlate with pregnancy, specifically for teenagers because they do not have nearly as much education on safe sex as adults do (Helfrich & McWey, 2013). There are 20 states in the USA that do not have sexual education requirements in schools (Tebb & Brindis, 2022). This is also a risk factor for teen pregnancy because adolescents are not made aware of abstinence and how to prevent pregnancy if you are having sex, such as using a birth control method like condoms or taking the pill (Tebb & Brindis, 2022).

One of the main reasons why mental health struggles are so prevalent in teen pregnancy is because the teenager is dealing with two of the most pivotal stages of a young woman's life; adolescence as well as pregnancy. These stages of life were not intended to be experienced at the same time. In adolescence, a young woman's brain is still developing, while by the time a young woman reaches the age where she is ready for pregnancy, her brain is more developed and equipped to handle the emotional turmoil that comes with pregnancy and motherhood. An adolescent should not be going through such an impactful and challenging changing life stage such as pregnancy while her brain is still developing. For example, during pregnancy some women experience cognitive changes. This is referred to as pregnancy brain. This is when pregnant women tend to have more memory loss, as well as forgetting things due to different hormones flushing through her body. Teenagers already have a lot of cognitive changes that occur during adolescence, due to the fact that her mind and body is still developing. The cognitive changes that occur during pregnancy mixed with the cognitive changes that occur during adolescence can be detrimental on an adolescents brain. This causes adolescents to feel overwhelmed and unable to deal with the psychological distress that occurs during pregnancy. Also during adolescence, the brain goes through a transition in relation to decision making, going from literal thinking to process and operating. Because the adolescent brain is still making this transition, it hinders the adolescent brain from meeting some of the psychological needs of the pregnancy. Adults are more qualified to handle the stress of pregnancy and raising a child because their brains are more developed and equipped to do so. This makes pregnancy harder, therefore another reason why mental health struggles are so prevalent in teen pregnancy (Bechtold et al., 2023).

The life stage of adolescence is mainly defined by identity development. This means that during adolescence, teenagers are in the process of figuring out who they currently are, who they want to be, and how they will fit into society (Brubaker et al., 2006). However, if a teenager becomes pregnant, it hinders the typical identity development process that occurs during adolescence, which can lead to mental health struggles. The physical and psychological changes that occur during pregnancy changes a pregnant teen's relationship with herself and others, which has the potential to become a major turning point in an adolescent's identity development. One factor that has a large impact on a woman's identity development is how much respect people in society have for her. Due to society having stigmatized views about pregnant teenagers, these women do not gain the respect and admiration they need in adolescence to develop a confident sense of self. This can cause pregnant teenagers to be less confident in themselves, more insecure, and feeling unworthy of respect from anyone. Therefore, being a teen mom becomes the adolescents entire identity. Because this identity was formed during adolescence, it can be a struggle for some teen moms to move on from this identity into adulthood (Brubaker & Wright, 2006).

A study done by Sarah Jane Brubaker and Christie Wright (2006) highlighted identity transformation in African American pregnant teenagers. There was a wide range of pregnant teenagers present in this study, with 41 teenagers being current parents, 7 teenagers going through their first pregnancy, and 3 teenagers being pregnant while parenting a child. The pregnant teenagers present in the study were between the age range of 14 and 19. During this study, the pregnant teenagers were asked to describe the narrative of their experience of being a pregnant teenager. Most of the narratives discussed loss in relation to physical attractiveness, innocence, respect, living as a normal adolescent, and having freedom (Brubaker et al., 2006).

Pregnant teenagers tend to attempt to neglect that their body is changing rapidly for as long as they possibly can. For example, they tend to avoid activities and interactions that would have a higher risk of exposing their pregnant belly or pregnant identity. The women in this study expressed feeling self-conscious about their bodies due to all the physical changes occurring in them. They no longer had interest in going out with friends, as they felt that their faces looked fat and their clothes didn't fit the way they wanted them to (Brubaker et al., 2006). They also expressed that their sense of self was damaged during pregnancy because of the loss of respect they received from the people around them. One girl in the study, Kila, said that the hardest part of being pregnant was the negative things people were saying about her. People were telling her she was wasting her life away and that she was a slut (Brubaker et al., 2006). One other girl in the study, Cathedra, said that her brother was her main bully during pregnancy. She said her brother expressed to her that "I should've kept my legs closed because I don't need a baby, I didn't need a baby. How, how young I was" (Brubaker et al., 2006). Pregnant teens receiving these types of comments from people, not only lowers their self-esteem, but can damage previous positive social relationships. These previous positive social relationships becoming damaged can lead to identify confusion and depression in adolescents, as they no longer feel they have that person to be a support system for them during this time (Brubaker et al., 2006).

One of the main reasons why teen pregnancy has such a negative light in our society is because of the idea that teen parents are forced to grow up too soon. If a teenager gets pregnant, she is then forced to grow up and expected to parent her child as well as dealing with the troubles that come with adolescence. When getting pregnant, most adolescents have to come to terms with the idea that their adolescence is not going to be what they expected. They might not even be able to finish their high school education, their social life may disappear, and their friendships

will change drastically. This can lead to identity confusion because they will miss out on some pivotal adolescence experiences that form identity, such as normal friendships and a normal high school experience (Brubaker et al., 2006). Therefore, teen pregnancy hinders the typical identity development process because of how adolescents are treated in such a vulnerable time of their lives, the loss of previously positive social relationships, and the loss of their childhoods and adolescence.

Adolescents having to make a decision about dropping out of high school and not finishing their education is also a stressor that is introduced during teen pregnancy. Not getting a high school education can lead to consequences in the future, such as not being qualified to hold a job. Adolescents being forced to make this decision that will impact their future greatly at such a young age can lead to depression and demotivation in adolescents (Whitworth et al., 2016). Teen pregnancy is the top reason for high school dropouts. 50% of teen mothers do not receive a high school diploma before the age of 22. This statistic is directly related to the support that pregnant teens receive inside and outside of school (Bechtold et al., 2023). Adolescents who are pregnant require more support from the school system and from their families and friends to motivate them to stay in school, setting them up for an optimal future.

Teen pregnancy does not just have effects on the teen who is pregnant, but it also affects the baby that the teenager gives birth to. Children who are born to adolescent parents are at higher risk for neonatal complications such as having a preterm birth, a lower birth weight, restricted growth, infections, and SIDS (Martins et al., 2023). In addition to these complications, the teen parent having depression during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy can also lead to preterm deliveries, which has the potential to affect a child's health for the rest of their life (Siegel & Brandon, 2014). Mothers who are depressed tend to be less responsive to infant

cues and are harsher parents, which can lead to neglectful or authoritarian parenting (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016). These parenting styles are not ideal, and a depressed pregnant teen most likely does not have the maturity or mental stability to know how to parent their child appropriately. Their children are at a higher risk for developmental delays, depression, poor health and behavioral problems; they are also more likely to have an insecure attachment style (SmithBattle et al., 2016). This idea correlates to generational parenting. This is defined as passing down traits and behaviors from one generation to the next (SmithBattle et al., 2016). When a depressed teenager is parenting an infant, it can cause the infant to become depressed in their future, as well as leading to other health problems during their childhood. The children of teen parents are also more likely to have adverse childhood experiences, just as their parents had. Some examples of adverse childhood experiences include growing up in families with mental illnesses, substance abuse, violence, or criminal activity (SmithBattle et al., 2016). These problems can be easily prevented for teen parents, by assuring that they have the proper support during and after pregnancy to raise their child so the teen mother does not become depressed, and so that the baby is appropriately parented.

One support that is a major assistance to pregnant adolescents is social support. Social support is defined as friends an adolescent has to give them support throughout their pregnancy (Siegel et al., 2014). Pregnant teenagers prefer a higher quality of social support than quantity, meaning that they would rather have one really great friend who fully supports and encourages them rather than ten mediocre friends. Social support with pregnant teenagers has the ability to decrease depressive symptoms, and helps the teenager feel more like a teenager. Parental support is also important for a teen who is pregnant. A teen who is not fully supported by either of their parents during their pregnancy can lead to depression during and after pregnancy. Mothers tend

to become more unavailable to their pregnant child, and fathers tend to act more hostile towards their pregnant child. These behaviors are discouraging to a pregnant teenager, which can lead to depression (Siegel et al., 2014).

Another type of support is instrumental support. Instrumental support is a type of support that provides a pregnant teenager with resources and grace to help them during and after pregnancy, specifically with getting an education (Baney et al., 2022). Instrumental support is crucial for pregnant teens to accomplish regular adolescent milestones, such as graduating high school. Teachers should have grace for the pregnant teenagers in their classes so they are motivated to finish up and get a diploma. Some examples of ways that educators can support pregnant teenagers in their classes include being flexible about deadlines, breastfeeding, and verbally encouraging the student. These supports will make a pregnant or parenting teen feel comfortable in school, therefore further motivating them to finish their high school education (Baney et al., 2022).

Educating and informing pregnant and parenting teens is also very important in reducing mental illness. Most pregnant teenagers do not receive a proper amount of education prior to their pregnancy, which can leave them feeling lost and scared throughout the experience. This can be caused by a few things, including healthcare providers wanting to shelter the truth about pregnancy and parenthood from such young children, and improper pregnancy and parenting education in schools. Giving pregnant teenagers proper information regarding pregnancy and parenthood can help that teenager become the best parent they can be (Baney et al., 2022). The WHO and other health care providers are also looking to make doctors offices more adolescent care friendly. This means that hopefully in these offices, adolescents will feel more comfortable asking their doctor questions about taboo topics, to educate them in the best way possible. Some

ways that people are looking to make doctors offices more adolescent friendly include confidential care, respectful and empathetic care, good communication skills, and easy access to counseling sessions (Martins et al., 2023). Young pregnant girls need unbiased, judgment-free and educated opinions about their situation, so they feel accepted, seen, and can get the education they need to move forward with the pregnancy (Martins et al., 2023).

Conclusion

As supported by evidence above, currently there are still some teen parents who do not get the support they need to successfully go through their pregnancy. Their main unseen struggles include having identity struggles, not wanting to complete a high school education, and struggling with the mental battle of becoming a teen parent. These struggles can be combated with supporting adolescents in numerous ways. These include providing them with resources that can guide them on how to manage being an adolescent and a parent, assuring they have peers and friends who are close to their age who accept them and give them social supports, and giving teens proper education about teen pregnancy before and during their pregnancy, giving them more confidence as they become parents. Hopefully, if more people in our communities implement the supports listed and researched above, teen parents will have a more positive experience in our society, finally bringing an end to the generational trauma and stigma that comes with teen pregnancy.

Word Count- 2,869

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