

# Adolescent Parents

## An Intervention Strategy

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*L'article examine les facteurs communs observés à travers les étapes essentielles que doit franchir l'adolescent pour devenir un parent et les rattache aux stratégies d'intervention qui existent actuellement.*

*L'auteur soutient qu'une situation socio-économique peu élevée, de faibles aspirations et les stéréotypes traditionnels au sujet des rôles de l'homme et de la femme font partie de ces facteurs communs et qu'à chacune des étapes essentielles du processus qui mène à la maternité, ces caractéristiques s'accroissent et prédominent de plus en plus. Pour arriver à interrompre le cycle et réduire le phénomène de la parentalité chez les adolescents, nous avons besoin de stratégies d'intervention qui contestent le point de vue voulant que la maternité constitue le rôle unique ou premier de la femme.*

Teen parents in Canada in 1986 numbered almost 48,000 (Statistics Canada, 1980-86). The rate of teen mothers who are single at the birth of their child has risen from 18 per cent in 1951 to 75 per cent in 1986 (Statistics Canada, 1986). The rate of divorce following marriages of teens is at least three times higher than those in older marriages, which means that most married teen mothers will soon parent alone (Community Task Force, 1982). While the number of teenagers giving birth increases consistently from age 15 to age 19, over half of births to teenagers are to females 18 or younger.

### Adolescent Parenting: Child Abuse

It is generally believed that the potential for abusing children is high among sole-support and young parents. Bolton, (1980)

in reviewing the literature, demonstrated that the characteristics of maltreating parents correspond exactly with characteristics of teen parents.

A recent Government of Manitoba examination of deaths from child abuse in Manitoba between 1985 and 1987 produced the following information: 70 per cent of all infant abuse deaths were of children whose mother was a teen when her first child was born. The average age of the mothers was 18.4 years of age. In Manitoba, most of these mothers were legally children when their first child was born. It should also be pointed out that the infants' mothers were not the direct perpetrators of the abuse; usually it was a male in a relationship with the mother who was charged.

The number of deaths recorded, 10 in two years, considerably underestimates the extent of the problem. Other causes of neonatal mortality high among adolescent mothers include Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, neglect and accidents. In Manitoba, there have been several recent deaths by fire of children of teen mothers, which are no doubt related to the living conditions and immaturity of young parents.

### Adolescent Parenting: Economic Costs

The second major area of research and public policy concerns the economic costs of adolescent birth and parenthood. Considerable research in the United States has been done on the long-term welfare probabilities of this cohort and has documented that more than half of all persons in receipt of welfare bore their first child while teenagers (Burden and Klerman, 1984). Herold (1984) observed that in Ontario 85 per cent of teen mothers relied on social assistance for the first 18 months after the birth of their child.

In Manitoba, an estimated 2,750 teens were raising children alone in 1986

(Statistics Canada, 1980-1986). Government policy in this province dictates that all single mothers over 18 have a categorical right to receive welfare until their youngest child is 18. If 80 per cent of this group chose to exercise their right to welfare benefits, the cost would be high. Estimating the monthly allowance in 1988 at \$660, this cohort would cost the Government of Manitoba \$16,473,600 each year. If they chose to remain on welfare until their child turned 18, this group alone would require \$296,524,800 during that period (in 1988 dollars).

As well, there are, of course, a myriad of other financial costs: medical costs related to low birth weights and other conditions associated with young mothers; the social costs of children in poor or inadequately parented families; costs in lost wages and taxes; costs to the criminal justice and child welfare system. And these costs rise geometrically with each succeeding generation.

For all of these reasons, and many more, teen pregnancy and parenthood has become a social issue, but one without clear-cut or consistent policies or programming.

Although each survey on teen sexual activity produces slightly different percentages, approximately half of all female teenagers in Manitoba are sexually active, i.e., have begun to have sexual intercourse (Youth Health Behavior Study, 1987; Herold, 1984).

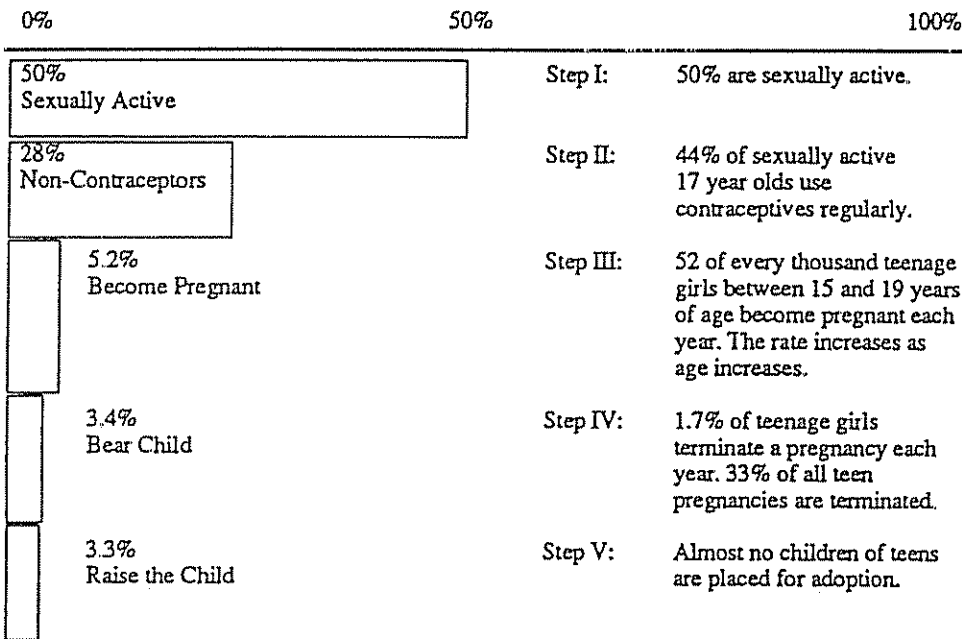
Of the 50 per cent who are sexually active, a little more than half do not use contraceptives (Herold, 1984) or use them sporadically (Youth Behavior Study, 1987). We conclude on the graph that it is those who do not use contraceptives that become pregnant. This is surely so, in a general sense, but it certainly underestimates the failure rate of consistent contraceptors.

About 5.2 per cent of Manitoba teenagers become pregnant each year (Government of Manitoba, 1989). The

#### Four Critical Steps — The Data Base

The following graph provides the statistics about the critical steps taken towards teen parenting based on data for 15-19 year old females in Manitoba in 1986.

15-19 Year Old Females in Manitoba  
(1986)



#### Contraceptive use

Research on contraceptive use among teens, as distinguished from attitudes, is limited to those who are sexually active. It, therefore, explores use and non-use among the previously discussed cohort of teens who hold relatively traditional values, fatalistic life views, and have low expectations.

Consistent contraceptors tend to begin intercourse at an older age (Cvetkovitch, 1978) and be more modern and optimistic about life. They separate sexuality from procreation. As Lindemann (1974) says, "Refusing to admit to oneself that one is sexually active is itself a cause of adolescent pregnancy".

Contraceptive users tend to have a feeling of control over their lives, believing themselves to be active agents rather than passive participants in life. They have higher educational aspirations and a belief in a positive future for themselves. As Chilman (1980) notes, the psychological variables associated with non-users include fatalism, powerlessness, alienation, incompetence, trusting to luck, passivity and dependency. Like the early initiators, non-users tend to hold very traditional views about roles of women and men.

rate increases as age increases among teens. The pregnancy rate may be as high as 7.8 per cent if the spontaneous abortion rate is 50 per cent, as some researchers have recently argued.

In Manitoba, the government estimates that at least a third of all pregnant teens terminate their pregnancy and, thus, 3.46 per cent of all adolescent girls each year bear a child. Although abortion is legal in Canada, for a variety of reasons some teens seek abortions outside the province or country, so the government estimates are, no doubt, low. A recent Canadian study (Wood and Nuttall, 1987) calculated that abortion rates for pregnant teens will be somewhere between 47 per cent and 70 per cent, depending on what data base is used.

It is not possible to determine the exact percentage of births that culminate in adoption, but the number of babies being placed for adoption has dropped to a very few. Based on an accumulation of the above data, one could safely predict that at least 3.3 per cent of all female teenagers will begin parenting each year.

#### Predisposing Factors

##### Early sexual intercourse

The first step taken toward becoming a teen parent is to begin sexual activity early. The longer the period of sexual activity, the greater the likelihood of becoming pregnant. Younger women, as well, use contraceptives less consistently and have more sexual partners (Cvetkovitch et al, 1978).

There are many explanations for early sexual intercourse, involving class, culture and social influences. We know that early initiators have lower grades in school and are more likely to have dropped out (Jessor and Jessor, 1975). They have lower expectations for themselves and expect to accomplish little. They are more susceptible to being manipulated by boyfriends (Patten, 1981) and hold stereotypical views of sex roles, seeing women in very traditional ways (Cvetkovitch, 1978).

#### Pregnancy termination or childbearing

Pregnancy usually occurs to women who are not using birth control, although, as we previously acknowledged, even responsible and consistent contraceptive users sometimes find themselves unexpectedly pregnant.

When confronted with an unplanned pregnancy, the same factors that differentiate between the two previous groupings also divide pregnant teens who continue with the pregnancy from those who terminate it. The traditional value positions of the childbearers are even more pronounced and solidified. Childbearers are less educated and more likely to be unemployed (Landry, 1986). Childbearers tend to be fatalistic, do less well in school, and have lower educational and occupational aspirations (Olson, 1980). According to Simkins (1984), 80 per cent of females who become pregnant before 18 never complete high school.

Those who terminate the pregnancy do better in school and

more confidence about their abilities and their future. As one might expect, women whose contraceptive technique failed are more likely to terminate the pregnancy than those who used no birth control to prevent it. Those more highly motivated female teens see pregnancy as a deterrent to the achievement of their goals and, when independence and economic self-sufficiency are part of their goals, these young women are in fact correct in their logic.

#### Keepers and adopters

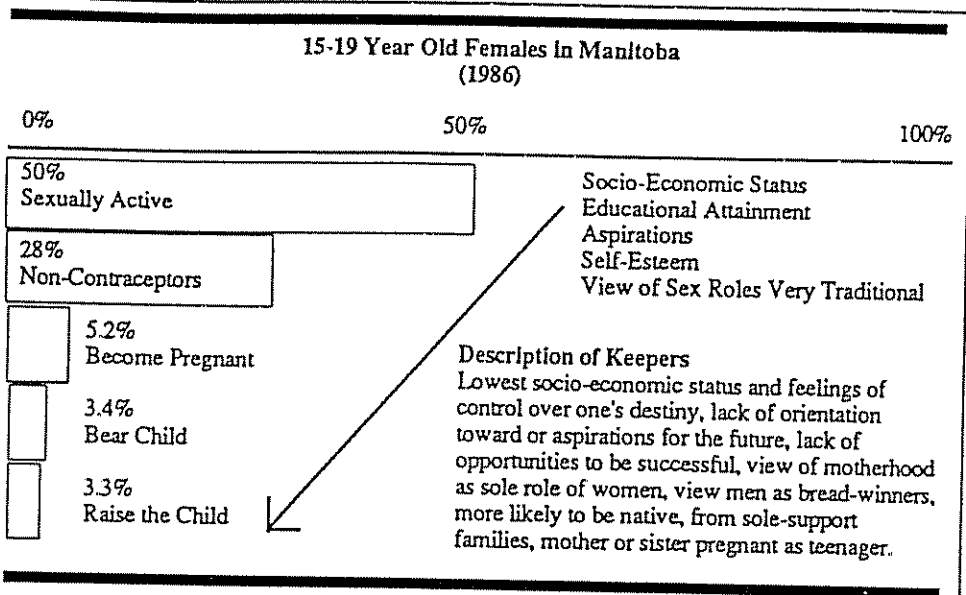
Following the birth of a child one final decision must be made: whether to become a parent or whether to place the child for adoption. The decision to place a child for adoption was rare in the 1980s and most teen mothers chose to raise their child. Unfortunately, those who chose adoption tend to be those with more education and higher aspirations and the ones who could combine parenting and work with the least difficulty. As Leynes (1980) noted in her study, "Those who were less capable of caring for their children decided to keep them".

#### Socioeconomic background

We have argued that low aspirations and educational attainment, low self-esteem and a belief in the traditional role of women as mothers can differentiate between females on each critical step taken toward becoming an adolescent parent. All of these attitudes and values are reinforced by socioeconomic status. Among those who become teen parents, there are few employment or educational options to motherhood.

Socioeconomic status may be the most powerful predictor of adolescent parenthood. Lower income teens begin to have sexual intercourse at a younger age than their middle income peers. They are less likely to use contraceptives or to use them consistently. When confronted by pregnancy, lower socioeconomic status teens are less likely to choose to terminate the pregnancy. And, class variables can still differentiate between those teens who raise their children and those who place their offspring for adoption. (Kinard and Klerman, 1980; Balton, 1980; Furstenberg, 1976; Russ-Eft, 1979).

In Manitoba, for example, the birth rates vary enormously. In an affluent suburb of Winnipeg the birth rate for



teens is 16.6 births per thousand females between 13 and 19 years of age. In contrast, the birth rate in the unorganized territories, comprised of the economically impoverished northern reserves, is 297 births for every thousand female teenagers, a rate almost 20 times higher (Government of Manitoba, 1988).

The most frightening conclusion in looking at this data is that the young women who are bearing and raising their children during adolescence are those seven per cent who have the least economic resources to do so. Even assuming that the above graph presents a perfect descending line downwards when it should be more fuzzy, it is still apparent that Canada's youngest mothers are in at least the bottom quartile in terms of past opportunities and future options.

The graph is a visual presentation of the previous data; one finds in examining the data on teenage mothers that the population is not randomly drawn from female teens but is in fact a subgroup of the most traditional and underprivileged young women in the province.

#### Analysis of the Data

The examination of this data should cause real concern. If, in fact, adolescent parents are a specific subgroup of low income teens with traditional sexually stereotypical goals and values, they are unlikely to initiate changes in their social

or economic circumstances. Consistent with this, we find most adolescent mothers are themselves the children of teenage mothers. As generational values, attitudes and class circumstances perpetuate themselves, an expanding pyramid is created.

Certainly, the most critical factor in allowing a young sole-support mother to regain control and independence is to ensure that another child is not born until she is economically and psychologically able to parent it. Yet, "some of the very risks of adolescent pregnancy: truncated education, unemployment, poverty, and alienation, are directly related to subsequent or repeat pregnancies among adolescents" (Klein, 1974). In fact, at least half of teen mothers experience a second pregnancy within three years and early childbearing predicts more children than average (Simkins, 1984).

Young women in Canada who become parents are those who adhere to the fantasy of the prosperous and kind breadwinning father and the docile, happy mother at home. Their aspirations lie in parenthood and their status is, therefore, increased with each successive child born. Since the males with whom they relate are, in general, drawn from the same class and social circumstance, this value system is never challenged.

Unfortunately, for the same reasons, if they choose to marry, it is highly unlikely that their fantasy will come true, as the wage-earning capacity

of their husbands will be insufficient to allow them to stay home and parent. Each additional child will make the family unit's attachment to the labour market more tenuous as the economic needs of the family exceed its ability to earn.

In Canada and the United States, a variety of strategies and programs have been developed to assist sole-support parents. They have, in the main, concentrated on developing positive parenting or encouraging young parents to reach their educational and vocational goals. The remainder of this paper will argue for programming that contradicts the attitudes, values and social circumstances that predispose some young teens toward early pregnancy and motherhood. In doing so we will concentrate on employment programs and briefly discuss other service directions in Canada.

### Employment-based Programs

The central hypothesis is that economic independence or the preparation for, and anticipation of, economic self-sufficiency is the most powerful intervention tool available to interrupt and change the pattern of living that caused the first pregnancy and birth. Programs consistent with this assumption are either educational or employment based. We will concentrate on employment-based programming because school is normally a step towards employment. Educational programs not predicated on the explicit goal of eventual employment would not be consistent with this process nor would those with a large concentration on traditional skills such as homemaking and childcare.

Employment-based programming challenges the view that motherhood is the exclusive or sole role of women. While the role of mother cannot be ignored, since without adequate and consistent child-care plans employment is not possible, employment programs for sole-support mothers personally and publicly attack the view that motherhood is a single, exclusive role. This requires a major shift away from stereotypical, traditional values, and requires the acceptance of dual roles for single parents.

Such programming also contradicts the view of men as the sole bread-winner. As this is an option only

available to women in consistent relationships with middle-or higher-income earning males, participants will begin to recognize the necessity for employment skills. As their self-esteem and economic power increases, women in employment programs gain a greater sense of control and self-worth. While many service providers recognize the increased risk of violence being directed at them by male relationships during this process, the young women are also gaining the power and self-assurance to terminate abusive relationships. This may result not only in greater safety for the women, but also as a protection for the children.

The single greatest impediment toward the goal of self-sufficiency is the birth of a second child. The pressure of parenting alone increases as isolation and the lack of alternatives closes in on them. Not only does a second child create more difficulty in securing childcare and finding employment, it also requires a higher wage to keep the family above the welfare limit. Employment-based programming, however, should reduce the likelihood of unplanned pregnancy, primarily by moving teens from being inadequate or non-contraceptors to consistent contraceptors. Their aspirations will have increased and broadened to include two roles. Both employment and education appear to be sufficiently regarded to motivate young women to prevent subsequent pregnancies (Peabody, et al, 1981).

The argument for employment-based programming challenges the assumptions inherent in other resources offered to single parents in Canada. Drop-in centres and some parenting programs have been specifically designed for young parents; welfare, while accessible to many, is the major economic resource of single parents.

Drop-in centres appear to be based on providing opportunities for psychological and social support. It is of considerable worry that these centres, which provide crafts and social occasions, appear to replicate the coffee clutches of the affluent class. While a good referral service could be generated in such centres, without an educational or vocational presence, they do not offer the resources for any significant change. In fact, by promoting daytime social

activities, they act as a contradictory work or school.

Parenting programs which operate without regard to the grinding effects of welfare dependency at best are doomed to fail and at worst reinforce the role of mother as the exclusive and best role for women. As such, the likely outcome is to encourage subsequent pregnancies. Even with a concurrent strong emphasis on contraceptive use, it is unlikely that any value shifts that occur would be those contradicting the traditional stereotypical values which caused the first pregnancies.

Welfare in most parts of Canada is the major financial support for young, sole-support mothers. It provides a basic living allowance, usually with no emphasis on any alternatives to long-term dependence on public monies. While a categorical right to welfare for sole-support parents is an admirable and necessary safety net, it can have negative effects if it continues to promote the idea that women need to be supported by men or the state. A whole variety of rules and attitudes currently inherent in most welfare systems foster this view, discourage recipients from seeing alternatives. While the categorical right to welfare must be preserved, governments need to continue to shift their emphasis towards the presentation of alternatives and options.

The differences between program assumptions are, in fact, based on competing ideological positions. Employment-based programs are the outcome of feminist views articulated and developed during the 1970s and now part of the intellectual viewpoint of many policy-makers and thinkers. The welfare, parenting and drop-in programs reflect a more traditional view of women and one consistent with both the Catholic Church and its agencies and the more conservative elements of the population.

### Conclusion

This paper has argued that educational or employment-based programming offers the best and perhaps the only method for counteracting those conditions which predispose an adolescent toward becoming a teen parent.

It presents the observation that many programs for young parents are

rooted in an ideological base that reinforces the view that parenthood is the primary or sole role for women.

Changing this value system requires a broad societal commitment and cannot be achieved by any one group alone. Social workers, however, need to examine their own values, and the kind of services they lobby for, to ensure that the resources offered to young women increase, rather than impair, their likelihood of developing a positive and economically independent lifestyle.

The services for teen parents must contain a strong, well-developed, and clearly articulated education and employment component if we intend to seriously tackle the problems inherent in adolescent pregnancy and parenting.

#### Footnotes

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