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Teen Fathers: Implications for School Counselors

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Abstract

Historically researchers have focused on teen mothers, while neglecting teen fathers. Teen fathers are portrayed negatively and are often described as using teen girl only for sex and abandoning her when she tells him she is pregnant. Six teen fathers were interviewed in an urban school district in the southeastern region of the United States. The teen fathers expressed their needs, stressors, and involvement with their children. Suggestions for high school counselors working with this at-risk population are discussed as well as suggestions for future research.

Keywords: teen fathers, teen mothers, counseling suggestions

Researchers studying teen parenting have mainly concentrated on teen mothers while neglecting and negatively portraying teen fathers. Stereotypes confronting teen fathers include them being uncaring, absent, disinterested, unable to meet responsibilities, and unwilling participants in the lives of their children (Frewin, Tuffin, & Rouch, 2007). Within several studies, researchers have only included the teen mother's perspectives of the father and of her baby and have relied on the mother's opinions regarding the father's role and involvement (Reeves, 2007; Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Amin & Ahmed, 2004; Robbers, 2009).

The behavior of the teen father is better understood within his internal and external environmental factors. Many times teen fathers are not allowed input in what happens with their children because they are treated with hostility from the child's mother's family (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007). When the teen mother's family disapproves of him and wants her to distance herself from the baby's father, her family is frequently discouraging an otherwise interested father from having a relationship with his child and with the mother of his baby (Wiemann, Agurcia, Rickert, Berenson, & Volk, 2006). These are very difficult and trying times in a teen father's life.

Adolescence is a challenging and confusing developmental period where the adolescent experiences profound social, physical, and psychological

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changes. This is a time of pubertal changes, the evolution of abstract thinking, and increase in self-consciousness and self-concept (Frewin et al., 2007). It is also a period in the adolescent's life when he/she is establishing his/her independence from family, developing close bonds with friends, and becoming romantically involved. Becoming a father at this time means the teen must grow up quickly, and this period of time becomes a turning point in his life. The teen father can be propelled into adult roles and responsibilities when he is transitioned to fatherhood.

Typically, teen mothers and fathers are limited in their educational attainment and are more restricted in their employment opportunities (Sipsma, Biello, Cole-Lewis, & Kershaw, 2010). The children of teen parents are often raised in lower-income homes and are at a greater risk for neglect and abuse than children of older parents (Sipsma et al., 2010). Sipsma et al. (2010) conducted a study of 1,496 teen fathers and found that "sons of adolescent fathers were 1.8 times more likely to become adolescent fathers than were sons of older fathers" (p. 517). Only recently have researchers begun to study this group.

As a result of this new body of literature, specific indicators have been identified. For example, children without their father in their lives scored lower on measures of trust, self-esteem, socialization, and achievement (Amin & Ahmed, 2004). These children are also at a greater risk of early sexual experimentation, drug abuse, poor school performance, delinquency, and truancy. Frequently, this leads to more problems in their adult life including replication of the single parent template (Parker, 2011). Conversely, teen father's involvement with his child's mother and child increases the mother's sense of confidence in nurturing skills and raises the teen father's self-esteem (Amin & Ahmed, 2004).

Review of Literature

Historically, teen fathers have been thought of as outcasts and surrounded by negative stereotyping since few marry the mother of their children (Amin & Ahmed, 2004). Frewin et al. (2007) conducted a study of 12 teen fathers aged 18 and younger and in high school. Each teen father was well aware of his responsibilities as a father and was far from being disinterested. None of these teen fathers intentionally became fathers, and they would not recommend this life course (Frewin et al., 2007). These teen fathers were no longer able to participate in their former activities with their peers.

The teen father is often confronted with the stress of fatherhood that is directly related to the maturity of the teen father. This complicates providing support for his child's mother and parenting for his child (Wiemann et al., 2006). Stress emerges as a result of the demands facing life in general in conjunction with the demands of fatherhood (Mazza, 2002). The teen father is struggling with issues of becoming a father, satisfaction in the relationship with his partner, stress associated with paternity decisions, financial responsibilities, continuing his and his child's mother's education, and residency (Mazza, 2002). Other stressors include rejection from his child's mother's family and peers, blame for the pregnancy, personal anxiety, and struggles with issues of adolescence while struggling with the issues of becoming a father.

questions. He continues by clarifying that this alternative approach is easier to produce because the reader can usually find the desired information or skim the entire text without difficulty.

Data analysis for this study followed Moustakas (1994) process for data organization and analysis. Moustakas' method utilizes the complete transcription of each participant's interview responses and has seven steps. Step one encompassed a listing of every expression from each interview that was relevant to the phenomenon. Step two involved reduction and elimination of the listed expressions, leaving only the expressions that could be labeled as a horizon of the phenomenon. Vague and repetitive statements were either eliminated or expressed in more descriptive terms. Step three clustered the labeled horizons from step two into core themes of the phenomenon. Step four required a validation of the final themes identified in step three. Validation occurred through cross-checking the extracted themes against the entire interview transcription for compatibility. If the theme and overall transcription were not compatible, the theme was deleted. In step five, an individual textural description for each participant, including the themes generated as well as pertinent verbatim examples, was created. Step six resulted in a general description of the structures expressed by each individual participant based on the individual textural descriptions created in step five. In step seven, the textural descriptions from step five were merged with the structural descriptions from step six. This merging resulted in a textural-structural description. Ultimately, from the textural-structural descriptions, the essence of the phenomenon emerged, representing teen fathers from the study as a whole.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is used to address validity in qualitative research methods. To establish trustworthiness and increase validity in this study, the strategies of thick description, member checking, and neutrality were implemented. A thick description aided in depicting the phenomenon of teen fathers and increased trustworthiness. Samples of the rich responses of the actual participants were included in the results and discussion sections of this study. The use of participants' verbatim responses increased interpretive validity and substantiated trustworthiness (Maxwell, 1992).

Member checking (Maxwell, 2005) enhanced trustworthiness and decreased the possibility of misinterpretation of the teen fathers' perceptions and experiences. After the completion of the open-ended interviews, participants were offered the textural-structural description derived from their interview transcription. The participants were given the opportunity to confirm or modify the information contained in their individual textural-structural description. Because the researcher is considered the main instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretation in qualitative research methods (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008), researcher bias was addressed by establishing objectivity. Objectivity was established in the study design by applying the established qualitative research methodology of Moustakas (1994) and Yin (2003). Finally, neutrality was exercised to address researcher bias during the interpretational analysis of the teen fathers' experiences and perceptions.

Findings

Question # 1-What themes are present in the narratives of teen fathers?

Within the narrative of the teen fathers was the theme that they had good relationships with their own families. In fact, one teen father said, "I have a much better relationship with my dad because I am making my grades and staying out of trouble." Another teen father lives with his mother and step-father, and the relationship is supportive. He will continue living with them next year while attending the community college near their house. Such family dynamics were not isolated cases.

One family home included the teen father, teen mother, their child, and a child from a previous relationship all living in the teen father's dad's home. When describing family relationships, this teen father shared, "I was in the streets all the time and in a gang for three years. My parents are divorced, and my dad was there for me when I told him my girlfriend was pregnant." Further examples of supportive relationships were described by the teen fathers.

Although raised by his grandmother since age six, one teen father reported a close relationship with his dad. This same teen father described an estranged relationship with his mother but close relationships with his sisters. One teen father, although living with his brother states, "I have a close relationship with my mother."

Question # 2-Do teen fathers identify with problems common to teen mothers?

One problem that is common to teen fathers as well as teen mothers is friends they had before becoming a father are different from the friends they now have. One teen father stated that he had the same friends, but did not have time to see his friends because he is working, going to school, and/or spending time with his child. One teen father voiced his concern about his inability to spend time with his friends since he had responsibilities and lacked money.

Other common problems and concerns were receiving their high school diploma and their ability to take care of their children. Finances, school, work, growing up too fast, and paying child support were more problems expressed by the teen fathers. One teen father was worried that he was not making enough money to pay for baby food, diapers, car payment, and car insurance. Another expressed his main problem was that of having to grow up too fast and was not able to enjoy the remainder of his once carefree teen years.

Question # 3-Do teen fathers feel they have needs that could be filled by in-school services?

All of the teen fathers were forthcoming when asked about in-school services that would be of benefit. They all requested teen parenting classes similar to those offered to teen mothers since they perceived their needs were the same. School counselors would also be an excellent support as well as resource. As a result of the nonjudgmental adult approach of school counselors, the teen fathers felt they could speak about their feelings, stressors, and concerns. Tutorials would enable them to get caught up in school since some of them have had to stay home with their children when their

After examining the related literature concerning teen fathers, it was noted that more research is needed to help them graduate from high school and obtain skills to support themselves and their children. The impact of not having a father in the child's life has a tremendous impact on the child (Parker, 2011). Children who had close ties with their fathers, whether they lived with them or not, had better outcomes for education and employment and were less likely to be depressed or become a teenage parent themselves (Bunting & McAuley, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the needs of teen fathers, so they could increase their likelihood of high school graduation. Another purpose was to study teen pregnancy through the lens of the teen father. Specifically, answers to the following questions were sought:

What themes are present in the narratives of teen fathers?

Do teen fathers identify with problems common to teen mothers?

Do teen fathers feel they have needs that could be filled by in-school services?

Does the stress of being a teen father interfere with high school?

Methods

Design and Procedure

To describe the perceptions of teen fathers, the qualitative case study methodology of Yin (2003) was implemented. Yin's model of phenomenological case study as a research strategy attempts to examine contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context. This study followed Yin's recommendations for an embedded case study design. Demographic information and open-ended questions were used to garnish perceptions of teen fathers. The design was chosen to "gain some understanding, even empathy, for the research participants in order to gain entry into their world" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 145).

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participating teen father by the primary researcher. The interviews were held at the teen father's high school, and each interview lasted no more than one hour, averaging about 45 minutes. Confidentiality and participant privacy were maintained through the use of a number coding system. Randomly assigned numbers were used to identify the individual participants during audio interview recordings and corresponding transcriptions. The open-ended interview recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed following the completion of the research and publication.

Interviews consisted of open and close-ended questions developed from the literature (Amin & Ahmed, 2004; Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Fagan et al., 2007; Frewin et al., 2007; Mazza, 2002; Reeves, 2007) to elicit respondents' candid and detailed views. The following questions were asked of each teen father:

What would you describe as your ethnicity?

How old were you when your baby was born?

What grade were you in when your baby was born?

Are you working?

If you are working, where?

What do you contribute to the support of your child?

How would you describe your relationship with your family?

How often do you see your child?

Do you have the same friends you had before becoming a father?

What are your stressors?

If you perceive yourself as being stressed, are these stressors interfering with your academics since becoming a teen father?
How?

What do you see as your greatest concern(s) as a teen father?

What in-school services would benefit teen fathers the most?

Participants

Permission was granted from the Institutional Review Board/Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB/CPHS) at a university in the southeastern region of the United States. Approval was given from a school district in the southeastern region of the United States. Nine teen fathers were identified by the social worker of a teen parenting program in the approved school district, which included two high schools. Before the interview was conducted each teen father provided informed consent as well as consent from his parent or guardian if he was under the age of 18. Also included in the informed consent were contact names and phone numbers of organizations teen fathers could contact if they became distressed by any of the issues discussed. Six of the nine teen fathers agreed to be interviewed. Of the six teen fathers interviewed, five were Hispanic, and one was African American. Three were 18 years of age when their children were born, one was 17, one 16, and one 14. One was in ninth grade when his child was born, two were in tenth, and three were in twelfth. Five were present at their children's birth, and all but one child had the teen father's last name. Two teen fathers lived with their children's mother, and of the two, only one lived in an apartment with his daughter and his child's mother. The other teen father who lived with his child's mother lived in his dad's house with his son and his child's mother's son by a previous relationship. One teen father lived with his grandmother, one with his father, one with his mother and step-father, and one with his brother.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of data comprised transcription, coding and categorizing, and identification of themes. Yin (2003) argued that the typical case study report is a lengthy narrative that follows no predictable structure and is hard to write and read. Yin posited that this pitfall may be avoided by replacing a case study narrative with a series of answers to a set of open-ended

children were sick. This often occurred when their children's mother had missed many days due to their children's illness. A mentoring program in the school would also be a positive influence. One teen father was in desperate need of a male role model since he did not have one when he was growing up.

Question # 4-Does the stress of being a teen father interfere with school?

Five of the six teen fathers stated that the stress of being a father did interfere with their academics. Their biggest stressor was balancing school, work, and sleep. One teen father commented that he had not gone to school a few times in order to sleep because he was so tired from working 30 to 40 hours a week, attending school, and keeping up with his homework. Reported by only two participants, was the stressor of child support.

One teen father court-ordered to \$310.00 a month in child support was stressed about the financial mandate and threats to his visitation. The mother of his child continually leveraged visitation with his son if the teen father could not make the child support payments. Another teen father stated that in addition to the stressors of child support, his request to marry the teen mother was not supported by her family.

Discussion

The findings from this study provided greater understanding of parenting from the teen father's perspective. Every teen father interviewed was enthusiastic about schools offering a parenting class for them. Since it was the first time they were parents and still adolescents, these teen fathers had limited knowledge about caring for and raising children. The majority of them expressed a desire to be able to speak freely without being judged by their counselor concerning the stressors that they had encountered from the time their children's mother became pregnant to the present.

Every teen father in the study was projected to graduate on time; three of the teen fathers indicated that they had not been coming to school and were in gangs until their children's mother became pregnant. They wanted a better future for their children and wanted to be able to tell their children that they had their high school diploma. Five out of the six wanted to further their education by attending a two- or four-year college upon graduating from high school. One teen father wanted to attend a technical school and become an electrician. Another teen father was in advanced placement classes and received a \$21,000 a year renewable scholarship to a four-year university. Amin and Ahmed (2004) stated that the teen father's self-esteem increased when he became involved with his child. All of the teen fathers were involved with their children, and none of them expressed a problem with low self-esteem.

Bunting and McAuley (2004) posited that stressors encountered by teen fathers include concerns for the health of their children and the inability to provide financially. Mazza (2002) explained that stress was prevalent in teen fathers' lives because of the demands of fatherhood while still facing the issues of adolescence. This was evidenced when the teen fathers expressed that their main stress was balancing work, raising their children, and maintaining academics. Two teen fathers reported that there were "not enough hours in the day" resulting in them missing school a few times so they could sleep. One teen

father said that he only saw his son on Saturdays because his child's mother took him to court. She did not want him to see his son very often, and the judge ruled in her favor.

Limitations of the Study

Only six of the nine teen fathers were interviewed because three did not give permission to be interviewed. Teen fathers are a very difficult population to identify because many of them attend another high school, and the teen mother is not willing to identify the child's father. Many teen mothers are no longer with the teen father, and they do not want him in their lives or their children's lives. This makes it very difficult to identify the teen father. It is much easier to identify the teen mother since she is the one carrying the baby and comes to the school counselor stating she is pregnant in order for the counselor, the school nurse, and the school social worker (if there is one on campus) to assist her in applying for federal and state assistance. Despite these limitations, the study gives current information on a group of unwed teen fathers.

Suggestions for Future Research

There is an abundance of research concerning teen mothers, but little concerning teen fathers (Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2001; Wiemann et al., 2006; Robbers, 2009). Researchers have an obligation to study and to advocate for this population's needs. Additionally, they could explore the needs and effective interventions for teen fathers, such as high school matriculation and healthy parenting. Longitudinal studies to appraise the fathers' involvement with children, parenting stress, and social and financial support should also be conducted.

Implications for School Counselors

Teen fathers must not be looked upon as outcasts, but as contributing citizens who need encouragement from society. Their school counselors need to recognize the positive impact of parenting classes and support groups. This will aid teen fathers in becoming active participants in their children's lives. While parenting classes are advantageous for teen fathers, it is equally important for the public to understand their myriad of unmet needs. Teen fathers benefit from discovering their strengths, exploring their feelings, and facing their fears (Mazza, 2002). Even though teen fathers are young and frequently not prepared for fatherhood, they are an important person in the lives of their children. Professionals and the public have an obligation to see them as young fathers who should neither be ignored nor criticized.

School counselors can assist in the expansion of social services to teen fathers by providing them with available in-school services and partnering with community-based resources. Teen fathers are an at-risk group for high school drop-out and low wage earnings (Amin & Ahmed, 2004; Bunting & McAuley, 2004). When services are not provided to teen fathers, social workers and school counselors are not addressing all aspects of this social problem. The goal of these services is to enable teen fathers to have the capacity and the ability to provide adequate financial, social, and emotional support to their children.

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