
AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT FATHERS

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Current research on teenage pregnancy and parenthood primarily focuses on females. Research on males in general, and fathers in particular, is scarce as compared to the available information on mothers. Consequently, the role of the father in the literature on adolescent parenting is minimized to a great extent or effectively overlooked (Barret and Robinson, 1982).

Within the last twenty years, however, a growing body of literature on adolescent fathers has emerged that highlights apparent diversity within this group. Although some teenage fathers accept little, if any, responsibility for children conceived out-of-wedlock; others do attempt to fulfill their parenting obligations by maintaining contact with their children and providing some level of financial support (Lorenzi, Klerman, and Jekel, 1977; Nye, 1980, Panzarine and Elster, 1983)

Among teenage fathers who do maintain consistent contact with their children, their inexperience in parenting likely jeopardizes the quality of care they provide. Personal and developmental circumstances as they relate to the teenage father (e.g., emotional and psychological maturity) render many of these men inadequate sources of emotional and financial support. This inability to provide effective support may, in turn, have adverse consequences for the child's development (Elster and Lamb, 1982). Further, because the role transition to parenthood occurs relatively early, it is not synchronized with expected social norms for this event. As a consequence, the risks for personal turmoil and social (i.e., involving social support and family networks) disruption resulting from parenthood increase. Adolescent fathers must cope with both the stresses associated with normal adolescent psychological development and with being a parent. Psychological and emotional immaturity among adolescent fathers contributes to the stress that they experience and, in addition, also affects their abilities to effectively manage and cope with parenting stressors (Elster and Lamb, 1982).

The demonstrated parenting abilities of the adolescent father have important consequences for the well-being of the mother and child(ren). One of the most common means by which the adolescent father influences the mother is through the provision of financial support. Those living necessities that are made possible by financial support from the father affect the status of the baby in a number of obvious ways. However, financial contributions also enhance the mother's feelings of economic security. Emotional support from the father is particularly important for mitigating possible negative social sanctions that are experienced by teenage mothers. In

circumstances where the quality of the relationship between the adolescent mother and her parents is adversely affected as a result of the pregnancy, support from the child's father becomes very important in decreasing this stress. Further, the alleviation of maternal emotional stress may enhance the quality of the mother's involvement with her infant (Parke, Power and Fisher, 1980).

The psychosocial consequences of under-employment, interrupted education, and loss of earnings are well-documented in the literature on adolescent fathers (Card and Wise, 1978; and Rivara, Sweeney, and Henderson, 1986). However, research addressing distinctions between adolescent fathers and non-fathers on these factors is mixed and fails to discern clear differences. Hendricks (1983) and Hendricks and Fullilove (1983) found that adolescent fathers differed significantly from their non-fathers peers on a number of dimensions. Adolescent fathers as compared to peers who were not fathers were more likely to drop out of school, to be employed, not attend church, to be more trusting, and to possess an external locus of control orientation. Rivara, Sweeney, and Henderson (1985) found that adolescent fathers differed from non-fathers in that they were more likely to come from a family with a history of teenage pregnancy. In contrast, other research finds no significant differences between adolescent fathers and non-fathers (Johnson and Staples, 1979; Robinson and Barret, Skeen, 1983).

Despite the growth in the literature on teenage fathers, significant gaps in our knowledge continue to exist. Very little research has examined those factors influencing the parenting behaviors of adolescent fathers or the extent and types of involvement paternal grandparents have with their grandchildren. The remainder of this article will summarize and explore the willingness of black adolescent fathers to be involved in the lives of their children. The studies were based on a convenience sample (n=43) of African American fathers residing in an urban area and ranging in age from 15 to 21 years. In each of the studies, parental behavior was the dependent variable and was measured by questionnaire items that assessed how much responsibility fathers assumed for their children's care. For example, fathers were asked whether they fed their children, changed their children diapers, provided financial support for the care of the child, or spent time with them. The first study explored the influence of the father's own expectations of his parental behavior, self-image, and his perceived role expectations of his partner and parents (Christmon, 1990a). The findings indicated that the adolescent fathers' parenting behaviors were influenced by his own expectations of his performance and self-image.

The second study (Christmon, 1990b) examined the adolescent father's perceived role expectations held by his parents and his feelings and attitudes toward his family. In the first study the perceived role expectations of the adolescent fathers' parents were unrelated to adolescent fathers' parental behavior. The second study, however, examined mothers' and fathers' expectations separately. The results showed that the

parenting behaviors of adolescent fathers were influenced by the perceived role expectations of his mother, as well as his feelings and attitudes toward his family of origin. The more positive the adolescent fathers' feelings were toward their family of origin, the more likely they were to be involved with their children.

The third study examined the influence of self-image on parental behavior (Christmon, 1990c). Self-image was measured by the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire (OSIQ). The OSIQ uses 130 items to evaluate adolescents' functioning in 11 content areas. These 11 content areas clustered into five dimensions, each representing an aspect of the self. Fathers with positive attitudes toward their families of origin, positive attitudes toward sexuality, and with appropriate coping skills were more likely to be involved with their children.

Another study, based on a sample of adolescent fathers residing in a different state (Christmon, in press) examined the role of paternal grandmothers in the lives of their grandchildren. The findings indicated that paternal grandmothers were involved in the lives of their grandchildren and that they provided some level of financial assistance. Paternal grandmothers were likely to be involved with their grandchildren in situations in which the adolescent father lived at home, attended school, and was involved with his children.

The final study reported here was conducted on a large national representative sample of youth (Christmon, under review). It compared the use of alcohol and other drugs by adolescent fathers and non-fathers. While the other samples included only African Americans, this sample included Caucasians. Adolescent fathers reported less use of alcohol than their non-father peers, but were more likely to report problems associated with cocaine use.

The emerging portrait of African American adolescent fathers is one of diversity with respect to level of involvement in active parenting, psychological investment in the parental role, and the personal and social circumstances that impact their behaviors as fathers. Continuing research should pursue varied lines of inquiry with the goal of using this information to better understand the phenomenon of adolescent fatherhood and design effective interventions that support the well-being of young parents and their children.

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