

COUNSELING TEENAGE COUPLES ON HAVING VS. POSTPONING CHILDREN

**Method of Josefina J. Card, Ph.D.,
Research Scientist, American Institutes for
Research, Palo Alto, California.**

Teenage childbearing has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in recent years. Throughout the 1960's, as the overall birth rate declined, births to teenagers became an increasingly large proportion of all births in the United States. The Alan Guttmacher Institute of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America recently published the following facts about the extent of teenage sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbearing in the United States:

(a) 11 million teenagers are sexually active and half of unmarried women have intercourse by age 19.

(b) 1 million teenagers become pregnant each year.

(c) More than 600,000 teenagers give birth each year.

(d) One-fifth of all births are to teenagers.

(e) Our nation's teenage childbearing rates are among the world's highest.

(f) One-third of births to teenagers are out of wedlock.

(g) Half of all out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers.

(h) One-third of teenage marital births are conceived premaritally.

(i) Two-thirds of teenage pregnancies are unintended.

In counseling teenage couples about the wisdom of having versus postponing children, it is very important to make them aware of the tremendous lifelong consequences of an early birth, both for themselves and for their child-to-be.

Consequences for the teenage parent

1. Reduced educational attainment.

Among students who reach Grade 9, only about 40% who become parents before their 18th birthday, 60% who become parents at age 18, and 80% who become parents at age 19 have a high school diploma by age 29. In contrast, virtually all their classmates (over 95%) have their high school degree by age 29. By age 29 only about 12% of teenage parents have a college degree; in contrast, six years earlier at age 23, over 50% of their classmates have college degrees.

2. *Reduced occupational attainment.* Apparently because of their relatively low educational attainment, teenage parents are much more likely to hold low-prestige jobs than their classmates. For teenage mothers, at least, reduced occupational attainment also means lower income and greater job dissatisfaction than their classmates. The spouses of young women who have children as teenagers are also more likely to have lower educational and occupational attainment than the spouses of classmates who postpone childbearing until their 20's or later.

3. *Greater family size.* Teenage parents eventually have 1.3 times as many children as their classmates who wait to begin childbearing until their 20's. Indeed, by the time they are 29, teenage parents have already exceeded their family size preferences, while their classmates have not. Not surprisingly, teenage parents are also more likely than their classmates to have their first child out of wedlock, and to be relatively young at the time of first marriage.

4. *Higher rates of marital disruption.* For all of these reasons, perhaps, by age 29 those who give birth as teenagers are more likely than their classmates to have experienced unstable marriages and to have been married several times.

It is important to note that all of the consequences of teenage parenthood are more severe for the young mother than for the young father, probably because women physically bear the child and have generally accepted greater responsibility for raising it. Thus men can more easily walk away from unwanted parenthood. Even when both new parents acknowledge their responsibilities, it remains easier for males to combine parenthood with student or worker roles. This is because fewer young men than young women drop out of high school with the onset of parenthood. Among those who do drop out, women generally stay at home to care for the new infant while men enter the labor force—presumably to support their new family. All of the above consequences of teenage parenthood are more severe for those who give birth in the early teens (before expected high school gradua-

tion) than for those who give birth in the later teen years. The differences between teenage parents and their classmates diminish somewhat but still exist when socioeconomic status, race, and academic achievement, aptitude, and expectations are controlled. Thus, early childbearing appears to be a direct cause of these outcomes, independent of other influences.

Consequences for the child born to teenage parents

1. *Greater health risks.* Infants of young mothers—especially mothers under 15—are subject to higher risks of prematurity, lower birth weight, and higher rates of mortality. These health consequences can be overcome to a certain extent with proper prenatal care and nutrition.

2. *Poorer cognitive development.* Possibly because of these initial physical consequences or because of rearing in less stable, single-parent homes, cognitive decrements have been found among elementary school children born when their parents were teenagers. Even after controlling for differences in race, socioeconomic status, and other conditions correlated with both an early birth and low cognitive scores, there remains a small but consistent linear relationship between maternal age and intellectual achievement in children. However, the consequences for children born to teenage parents are small compared with the consequences for the parents themselves.

In conclusion, it is generally advisable for teenage couples to postpone having a child until their 20's. By postponing the onset of parenthood to later in the life cycle, teenagers are making an investment in the quality of their future lives.

References

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