

Teenage Childbearing and Marriage

Each year there are nearly 900,000 teen pregnancies in the United States. Eight in ten of these pregnancies are unintended and 79% are to unmarried teens. Approximately one half of the pregnancies result in a live birth. According to the preliminary report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), reports for 2003, 81.3% of births to teens 15-19 are nonmarital, up from 80.0% in 2002.

Teenage childbearing is associated with many unfavorable consequences for teen mothers, their families and children. For teenage parents and their children, the prospects for a healthy and productive life are significantly reduced. Young mothers, in the absence of adequate nutrition and appropriate prenatal care, are at a heightened risk of experiencing pregnancy complications and poor birth outcomes. They are also more likely to experience a subsequent pregnancy while still in their teens. The infants and children of teenage mothers also face greater health and developmental risks: they have lower birth weights; they are more likely to perform poorly in school; they are at greater risk of abuse and neglect; and they are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Kirby, D. 2001). And the fathers, complete less education and earn less than men that wait to have children later in life. Society pays a price as well - in the mid-1990s it was estimated that the annual cost associated with childbearing prior to age 19 was \$6.9 billion (Maynard, 1997).

Research suggests that children do best when two parents who have a healthy marriage raise them. Yet only 20 percent of teen births occur within marriage, and teen pregnancy itself is associated with lower likelihood of marriage (Ryan, et al, 2004). Teen mothers are unlikely to marry the fathers of their children, and those teenage mothers who do wed often end up in unstable marriages (Lichter, 2001). By assisting teenagers to reach adulthood before childbearing would help more children grow up in families with healthy marriages and will improve the well being of children.

Consequences for Teen mothers

- Unmarried teen mothers are at a greater risk of poverty. Teens who give birth outside of marriage have lower education attainment; seven out of ten will drop out of high school.
- Adolescent mothers have lower incomes, earning on average of about \$5,600 annually, less than half of half of the poverty level (check for updated stats)
- Teen mothers are more likely to receive public assistance and her children are significantly poorer than their childless counterparts.

Consequences for the children born to unmarried teen mothers

- Children born to teen mothers are more likely to be born prematurely and 50 percent more likely to be low-birth weight babies, which increases the likelihood for chronic respiratory problems, mental retardation, and cerebral palsy.
- Children of teen mothers perform significantly worse on test of their cognitive development.
- Only 77 percent of the children of adolescent mothers earn their high school diplomas by early adulthood, compared with 89 percent of the comparison group.
- The teen sons of adolescent mothers are 2.7 times more likely to land in prison than the sons of mothers who delayed childbearing until early twenties.

Consequences for the fathers

- Boys are one third as likely as girls to become adolescent parents, according to studies of teen sexuality and childbearing.
- Adolescent dads will finish an average of only 11.3 years of school by age 27, compared to nearly 13 years by their counterparts who delay fathering until age 21.
- By age 27, adolescent fathers earn, less annually than the comparison group of men who delay fathering until age 20 or 21.

Teens want to get married

- Most teen mothers have expectations for marrying the father of their child, however, not even eight percent of unwed teen mothers are married to the baby's father within one year of giving birth.
- Teenage mothers have reduced chances of ever marrying compared to women who do not have children.
- Teenage marriages are unstable; one-third of teenage marriages formed before the bride is 18 years old end in divorce within five years, and almost half dissolve within 10 years.

What should be done?

Teen mothers and their children are vulnerable to severe adverse social and economic consequences. Many of the children end up in poverty during the most critical important developmental years. Children of teen mothers spend years trying to catch up whether educationally, economically and are more likely to be involved with the child welfare system. Reducing adolescent childbearing is a move toward ensuring that children are born into families that can provide a healthy and loving environment.

- Although teen birth rates have declined, efforts must be continued for this downward trend to continue. It has been estimated that the reduction has contributed to a 26 percent decline in poverty rates for children under age six and 82 percent decline in the number of children under age six living in single-parent homes.
- School based curriculums that teach about abstinence or comprehensive family life should be expanded to include sexuality and relationships. The goal should be to help young people acquire practical skills and useful knowledge about forming emotionally healthy, mutually respectful and ethically sound relationships that are based on more than skill or facts that will help them guide their behavior.
- A national media campaign should be created that will emphasize how teen childbearing decreases the chances of marriage and motivates them to wait until they are able to be responsible parents.
- For the teens that are determined to marry, efforts to provide them with marriage education, job training, family planning services (to prevent subsequent births too soon). We are not promoting teen marriages, because research has shown that few teen marriages are long lasting and increase child well being. However, for the few teen marriages additional support services, may help to increase the likelihood of a healthy outcome for their children.