

Teen Parenting: Implications for the Mother and Child Generations

FRANK L. MOTT*

The topic for this session is the special problem of teen parenting, and the overall program is aimed at issues which will help us all examine the needs of children, particularly those growing up in disadvantaged environments. I will take advantage of the ambiguity in the title to focus on two clearly inseparable issues: the problems and issues facing teen parents and their children—the problems of children raising children.

The issue of the well-being of adolescents and their children cannot be effectively discussed outside of the context of the early sexual activity actually happening now, and how this may differ from what was true only a few decades ago. I will discuss the issue of early sexual activity within a social context and then suggest how the issue may be intimately linked with the well-being of both young mothers and their children.

We will never really know how sexually active earlier generations of adolescents were. Much of what we know is based on impressionistic writings after the fact. However, some facts are conclusive. Let's go back only a short time to the World War II and post-World War II baby boom period. It is generally acknowledged that premarital sex was less prevalent then. However, keep in mind that most Americans married at a much earlier age. During the 1950s, the average American woman married shortly after her twentieth birthday. At present, the average marrying age is close to twenty-five.¹ Looking at this statistic in a different way, in 1950 young women who graduated from high school and did not go on to college, as was the normal course of things then, typically delayed sexual activity for about two years if they were predisposed to wait until marriage before engaging in sexual activity. The gap between high school and marriage for similarly minded young women today is more like seven years.

To some extent, what we have now is a substitution of typically less permanent relationships like cohabitation for marriage, particularly during the younger adult ages. In fact, research has shown that for young adults today, the total percent married or cohabitating is very similar to the percent of young

* Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Human Resource Research and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University. Ph.D., Brown University, 1972; B.S., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1958.

¹ BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 1982-1983, Table 124 (1982); BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, *Population Profile of the United States: 1995*, in CURRENT POPULATION REPORTS SERIES 23, rep. no. 189, App. Table A (1995).

adults who had in prior decades been married.² I am not, however, suggesting an equivalence between the two. What is clear is that our norms regarding socially appropriate living arrangements are fundamentally different from our norms of earlier decades and, given the more ambiguous status of a variety of such arrangements including nonmarital sex per se, it is not surprising that many of these patterns and trends in relationships have worked their way down to adolescence.

Let's consider these notions of relationships and sex a bit further, and think about how behaviors have changed perhaps more rapidly than societal values which may still, in important respects, reflect ideas from an earlier era. The notion of the acceptability of nonmarital sex by society is considerably different now from what it had been in the 1940s and 1950s. While non-marital relationships among consenting adults forty years ago were undoubtedly common, they were typically downplayed, and nonmarital cohabitation was relatively rare. Nonmarital sex among adolescents was definitely frowned upon in most circles. This probably was one major reason why it was less prevalent and certainly was the major reason why premarital pregnancy and childbirth, particularly among adolescents, were decidedly nonmainstream. This had several important ramifications. A young woman typically could not remain in school if she was clearly "with child." Thus, having a birth outside of marriage had major implications for the woman's career development and also for the possible well-being of the child. In all likelihood, the prevalent normative environment, and the reality of the social and psychological costs which could result from having an early pregnancy altered many young people's behavior. One can certainly speculate that many of our contemporary notions of "appropriate" behavior are still driven by the attitudes and behaviors of the generation which reached adulthood in the 1950s and 1960s.

Let's now move forward to the present. Today, an average adolescent will have many years between incipient adulthood and "traditional marriage." Cohabitation may be either a temporary or permanent expedient. Whether within or outside of a relationship, sexual activity is clearly considered normatively appropriate behavior by most adults and many adolescents. With respect to adolescents, I'm essentially a behaviorist in this regard, and I base my statement on the fact that fifty-four percent of all high school students say they have had sex, with the percentages reaching seventy-two percent for adolescents in their senior year of high school.³ What will this mean for young

² See Larry L. Bumpass et al., *The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage*, 53 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 913 (1991); see also Larry L. Bumpass & James A. Sweet, *National Estimates of Cohabitation*, 26 DEMOGRAPHY 615, 615-25 (1989).

³ NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHRONIC DISEASE PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROMOTION, CDC, *Sexual Behavior Among High School Students—United States, 1990*, 40 MORBIDITY

parents and their children? What are some of our options in dealing with this situation?

The bottom line resulting from the considerable increase in early sexual activity without any major corresponding improvement in effective contraception is the fact that the current birth rate for fifteen to seventeen year olds is not substantially different from what it was in 1970, even though our overall birth rate is substantially lower.⁴ Not only are most youth staying in school longer, but most Americans are marrying later. In 1970, about seventy percent of teenagers giving birth were married; reflecting the delay in marriage, this statistic is now in the low thirty percent range.⁵

Let me now take a life cycle approach to addressing a few related issues, following youth from childhood toward adolescence. Most people would agree that the longer an adolescent delays becoming sexually active the better. But at what age does sexual activity move from being an "age inappropriate" to an "age appropriate" activity? At what point within the context of children's life cycles is it appropriate to formally encourage contraception as the major programmatic approach? Thirty years ago these questions were relatively easy to answer. But today, while most people would probably agree that encouraging adolescents to delay becoming sexually active is good, I suspect that finding a consensus regarding the appropriate age when contraception should be the major programmatic approach would be more difficult. This, as I view it, is at the crux of our problem and is a major reason for teenage pregnancy. Bear in mind that we are talking about a societal behavior—sexual intercourse—which adults frown on adolescents doing, but otherwise is socially acceptable and in most circles, viewed positively!

Given that large numbers of adolescents become sexually active as early as age thirteen, a central issue then becomes one of helping young people cope with the responsibilities of engaging in adult behavior. Coping means keeping them from getting pregnant and from getting sick with diseases ranging from minor to terminal. And if they get pregnant and have a child, coping means helping them and their children become productive members of society.

My own research statistics indicate that children who are born to women below the age of eighteen have a fifty percent chance that their father will already be absent at birth regardless of their parents' marital status.⁶ And

& MORTALITY WKLY. REP. 885, 885-88 (1992).

⁴ Stephanie J. Ventura et al., *Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1993*, 44 MONTHLY VITAL STAT. REP. 48, Supp. Table 15 (1995).

⁵ Rebecca Maynard & Anu Rangarajan, *Contraceptive Use and Repeat Pregnancies Among Welfare-Dependent Teenage Mothers*, 26 FAM. PLANNING PERSP. 198, 198-205 (1994).

⁶ FRANK L. MOTT, *ABSENT FATHERS AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT* (1993) (monograph

among youth in this age range who decide to marry there is an extraordinarily high likelihood of a quick divorce or separation.⁷ Thus, to a considerable extent we are highlighting a population of mothers who have never been married and a population of children who are living without fathers. This has several implications.

Most children in single parent homes are living with their mothers and only sometimes with their fathers. As the data shows, in a large percentage of teenage relationships involving children, the father has never lived with the mother, and this is particularly true for the youngest mothers.⁸ Even in the most formal of these adolescent relationships, where the parents marry and divorce, custody of the children is awarded to the father only about ten percent of the time.⁹

The dominant living situation is one where the mother and new child are living in the maternal grandmother's home. Indeed, a significant number of adolescent mothers are living in their parents' home at the time of their child's birth.¹⁰ There is considerable controversy surrounding the question of what is best for the mother and child: Should the teenage parents marry and where should the new family live? The available research is far from conclusive, but suggests that very young mothers may often be better off psychologically and economically, at least in the short run, when they have not married the child's father.¹¹ This is true for two reasons. First, marrying may reduce the likelihood that the family unit will be able to reside with parents or with in-laws, and second, the presence of a more mature, knowledgeable, emotionally and economically supportive grandparent may be the single most important factor influencing the child's well-being.

Additionally, when the mother lives with the father, there may be increased pressure on the mother to earn money partly because her parents' support is more likely to be unavailable and partly because the child's father may be pressuring her to work so that he can continue his schooling which may come at the expense of her education. Bear in mind that these fathers will typically be gone from the home within a few years. All of this can negatively impact the

prepared for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, The Ohio State University).

⁷ Only about 20% of births to women under the age of 18 are to married women. Sally C. Clarke, *Advance Report of Final Divorce Statistics, 1989 & 1990*, 43 MONTHLY VITAL STAT. REP. 9 (Supp. 1995).

⁸ See MOTT, *supra* note 6.

⁹ Clarke, *supra* note 7.

¹⁰ See MOTT, *supra* note 6.

¹¹ CATHERINE CHILMAN, *ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY, SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES* (1980) (report prepared for the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare).

mother's and the child's long-term intellectual development and career possibilities.

Furthermore, strong evidence indicates that men who father the children of teenage girls are far from ideal spouses or partners. Contrary to popular opinion, a large proportion of these fathers are themselves *not* teenagers. According to one recent research report based on national vital statistics data, about half of all the men impregnating women who are below the age of eighteen are themselves at least twenty years old.¹² To paraphrase several studies, these relatively older men are not necessarily preferable partners, and the mothers in these relationships are not necessarily "better off than teenage mothers with partners of the same age."¹³ Some studies suggest that "older male partners of teenage mothers are more similar developmentally to teenage fathers than they are to their peers whose female partners are adults."¹⁴ These fathers also tend to be less educated and have sporadic work histories.¹⁵

I am not against the institution of marriage. Almost regardless of age, if two individuals are committed to each other, are within a relationship which is not likely to be readily dissolvable, and are committed to their family unit, they should be encouraged to stay together. More than that, all available social programs should be geared towards strengthening the relationship by providing strong and equal opportunities for both partners to succeed in their chosen career paths.

Adolescent relationships are not without consequence. I am, however, against the long-term maintenance of relationships which offer little hope for economic or psychological viability for its members, be they adults or children. The emotional ramifications for the mother and the child are perhaps more serious than the economic ones, for short-term economic scars are often more reversible than emotional trauma which may have direct physical implications for mother and child. The data on emotional trauma is disconcerting. One statistic indicates that about eighteen percent of women who have had sexual intercourse prior to age eighteen had at least one "forced" intercourse, and it is not unreasonable to conjecture that this may be an underestimate.¹⁶ Furthermore, a recent summary of statistics from pregnancy risk assessment

¹² J. David Landry & Jacqueline D. Forrest, *How Old Are U.S. Fathers?*, 27 FAM. PLANNING PERSP. 159, 159-65 (1995).

¹³ Janet B. Hardy & Anne K. Duggan, *Teenage Fathers and the Fathers of Infants of Urban Teenage Mothers*, 78 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 919, 919-22 (1988); see Landry & Forrest, *supra* note 12.

¹⁴ Landry & Forrest, *supra* note 12.

¹⁵ *Id.*; see Janet B. Hardy et al., *Fathers of Children Born to Young Urban Mothers*, 21 FAM. PLANNING PERSP. 159, 159-63, 187 (1989).

¹⁶ Kristin A. Moore et. al., *Nonvoluntary Sexual Activity Among Adolescents*, 21 FAM. PLANNING PERSP. 110, 110-14, (1989).

monitoring systems in four states suggested that teenage mothers had above average risks of experiencing violence during pregnancy, as compared with other mothers. The four states in the study—Alaska, Maine, Oklahoma and West Virginia—indicate that between 7.5% and 10.7% of all teenage mothers reported that they had been “physically hurt by their husband or partner during the 12 months preceding childbirth”—and these are probably underestimates.¹⁷

Moreover, the economic costs associated with having a child at a young age are high. A large percentage of these young mothers come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Even without the added problems due to having children at such an early age, these women would often need to strive mightily to attain reasonable incomes. The compounding problem of one or more early births makes upward mobility even more difficult. For example, nineteen year olds bearing children have only a sixty-eight percent chance of receiving a high school diploma by that age compared with about eighty-seven percent for a full cross-section of young adults.¹⁸

Ongoing research indicates that, even with good longitudinal data, it is difficult to understand why some children become sexually active at a very early age and why some do not, and of those who do become sexually active why some have children and some do not. The teenager's sexual activity is not particularly linked with the family's economic well-being or with the mother's education. It is, however, associated with the kind of friends the young person has and with a prior history of early cigarette or alcohol use, which of course is associated with peer influence.¹⁹ On the upside, if the teenager attends church service and if the teenager's best friends go to the same church, early sex is less likely. Within the family itself, the one factor that powerfully predicts early sexual activity by a child is if the child's mother became sexually active at an early age. This remains the most powerful predictor, independent of all other economic, social and psychological influences which we can measure. How this influence is transmitted to the child, whether it is a physiological influence or whether it reflects maternal role-modeling, verbal or otherwise, is not clear.

Most interesting about our research is the fact that it clarifies some commonly held perceptions, in this instance pinpointing their accuracy. Adolescent children who become sexually active early in life are much more

¹⁷ M.J. Vandecastle et al., *Physical Violence During the Twelve Months Preceding Childbirth—Alaska, Maine, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, 1990-91*, 43 MORBIDITY & MORTALITY WKLY. REP. 132, 132-36 (1994).

¹⁸ Frank L. Mott & William Marsiglio, *Early Childbearing and Completion of High School*, 17 FAM. PLANNING PERSP. 234, 234-37 (1985).

¹⁹ Frank L. Mott et al., *The Determinants of First Sex by Age 14 in a High-Risk Adolescent Population*, 28 FAM. PLANNING PERSP. 13, 13-18 (1996).

likely to verbalize a willingness to take risks.²⁰ Adolescents often consider themselves immortal until such time that events occur to dispel them of the notion. In the case of our sample, the sexually *active* adolescents who had *not* had children were somewhat more likely to say that they enjoyed taking risks, and that "planning wasn't fun," than were their virgin counterparts. However, when we examine these results further from a life-cycle perspective, some interesting attitude changes emerge with the birth of a child. The mothers become more conservative and perhaps more soul searching. They are much less likely to feel that planning "takes away the fun," and much less likely to feel that "life without danger is dull." Also, they are much more likely to feel depressed and, sadly, much more likely to "feel they are a failure." The point of these last statistics is to reiterate, in a different way, that learning does occur, albeit sometimes at a very high cost. Programmatically, then, how can we help these children learn these lessons at an earlier life-cycle stage and at a much lower cost to themselves and society? How do we do it in a way that is socially acceptable to the larger society?

Recent evidence shows that between twenty-five and thirty percent of mothers under the age of eighteen repeat the childbearing process within two years.²¹ It is unclear what alters the behavior of adolescents who have one child but do not repeat the process as quickly. Research suggests that for some youth, the experience of having a child so fundamentally alters their lifestyle that they choose not to repeat the experience. But for many others, this is not sufficient. For example, a recent study followed over three thousand first-time teenage mothers on welfare in Chicago, Illinois, and in Newark and Camden, New Jersey. Half of these youth were given a variety of post-birth counseling, information and services. The other half received no assistance. After twenty-four months there was no difference in the percentage of women in the two groups who became pregnant again.²²

Finally, what may this all mean for the *children of the children* caught in this process? As a demographer, I would like to offer a statistic which I believe is salient to interpreting this process. According to the 1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey, only twenty-two percent of births to women under the age of eighteen were "wanted" as of the woman's interview date.²³ These

²⁰ LORI KOWALESKI-JONES & FRANK L. MOTT, *EARLY SEX & EARLY CHILDBEARING: RISK-TAKING AND LEARNING THE HARD WAY* (1996) (paper presented at the Population Association of America, New Orleans).

²¹ Debra S. Kalmuss & Pearla B. Namerow, *Subsequent Childbearing Among Teenage Mothers: The Determinants of a Closely Spaced Second Birth*, 26 *FAM. PLANNING PERSP.* 149, 149-53 (1994).

²² Maynard & Rangarajan, *supra* note 5, at 198.

²³ Kathryn Kost & Jacqueline D. Forrest, *Intention Status of U.S. Births in 1988: Differences by Mothers' Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics*, 27 *FAM. PLANNING*

data are particularly revealing because they were collected after the event. Thus, these young mothers were telling us that they were less than satisfied with the event which had happened and with the baby that was now present in their lives. To set the stage more fully, the majority of these young mothers have little education and limited prospects, and are living with their parents who may well also be under stress, and whose economic resources are limited. Maternal depression levels are high, the fathers of the children are typically not around, and if they are, they may well be counterproductive. We should not be surprised now to learn that most of those children were not wanted at that time.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that a few closely linked causes and consequences, which cannot really be separated from both the socio-economic and psychological priors.²⁴ These youthful mothers: (1) are much less likely than others to have received early and adequate prenatal care; (2) are much less likely to breast-feed their infants even though they may have the time and are unlikely to have employment conflicts; (3) are less likely to take their child for well care early in life; (4) often don't complete high school and, in too many instances, go on to repeat the childbearing process too soon; and (5) have grandmothers, and possibly grandfathers, who are typically their primary social-psychological support. These grandparents more often than not have only limited resources themselves. I could continue, but I believe the point is clear.

But there are exceptions: teenage mothers who support strong families, ultimately have careers, and raise emotionally and cognitively healthy children. In this regard, there *are* some positive research results which indicate that children raised in fatherless homes can indeed succeed intellectually and emotionally. However, the emotional component may be more difficult to achieve than the cognitive.²⁵

It may be easier to compensate for an intellectual deficit in a family unit than an emotional deficit, for private resources or government resources can more easily remedy cognitive deficits. Also, the family environment in which children of adolescent mothers are being raised is typically inherently unstable. Many of these young mothers will be entering new relationships which means the children will have new fathers and new siblings. There is a huge body of literature which highlights the complexity of the "blended" families that result from changing marriage and partner relationships. These new families, and the process of transition from family to family, can often have traumatic consequences for children; the situation which I am describing, where the

PERSP. 11, 11-17 (1995).

²⁴ FRANK L. MOTT & STEPHEN V. QUINLAN, MATERNAL-CHILD HEALTH DATA IN THE NLSU (1991) (report prepared for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Center for Human Resource Research, The Ohio State University).

²⁵ MOTT, *supra* note 6.

parents are young, with limited parenting skills and limited economic resources, undoubtedly accentuates the psychological adjustment problems.

Solutions to these problems are not readily apparent. But let me conclude with a few general thoughts which may reveal my bias. The ideal solution is to delay sexual activity as long as possible for both health and pregnancy reasons. However, if this is infeasible or unlikely, programs which encourage contraception are critical. Failure to provide this assistance to sexually active children is, in my opinion, economically, socially, and probably morally inappropriate. If pregnancy *does* occur, abortion, a personal choice, should be an option. From both a personal and societal perspective, these solutions involve modest economic costs compared with the alternatives.

If an adolescent childbirth does occur, it is most important to keep the mother and father in school. Without a high school diploma, these young parents will have only limited career options. If the father opts to remain involved in the relationship, all available social programs should be jointly focused towards both parents, with equivalent education and employment assistance being made available to both the mother and father.

While employment assistance is critical in the long run, with teenage parents the primary focus should be on schooling and basic skills development. Schooling is clearly linked with job preparation and job readiness and should include classes that develop family raising skills and that provide access to needed childcare. Of course, as the young parents age, direct job-skill development becomes essential. Furthermore, these adolescents must be trained for jobs which they can obtain, and which have some long-term potential. A good job will make a mother feel better about herself which will make her a better mother. A meaningful job will provide a liveable wage and a reason to look to the future.

In summary, finding answers to these questions is difficult, but it does seem apparent that successful solutions are closely tied with continued schooling and eventual employment. Early successes can only enhance self esteem among teenage parents, and in all likelihood, lead to a more prosperous future for both parents and children. Not incidentally, they may also significantly reduce teenage pregnancy and childbearing.

Other cultures, particularly some of those in Western Europe, have a lot to teach us. These countries have youth who also become sexually active at an early age, but who are much less likely to become pregnant. Perhaps this is because of the normative acceptability of early sex in many of these societies. The embarrassment factor in the discussion of sex and family planning, prevalent in the United States, is less evident. Children and adults can discuss these issues in a more appropriate manner. Youth can get information about and access to contraception more readily, at a modest cost, and in a more

socially neutral environment. Perhaps most critically, these youth typically can anticipate a secure and satisfying future.

One final demographic note is worth highlighting. A factor operating in our favor in recent years is that the number of older adolescents is decreasing and is currently much smaller than it was a few years ago. The current older adolescent population was born after the baby boom years. However, this is a temporary phenomenon, as soon, the children of the baby boomers will attain late adolescence sometime between 1995 and 2005, and the number of fifteen to nineteen year olds will increase by over 3 million from 17.8 to 20.9 million.²⁶ Thus, without some adolescent behavioral changes, most of the problems mentioned in this Article could well be exacerbated in the short-term future.

²⁶ Jennifer C. Day, *Population Projections of the United States, by Age, Race, Sex and Hispanic Origin: 1993 to 2050*, in U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, CURRENT POPULATION REPORTS SERIES 24, rep. no. 1104 (1993).