
MAKING TEEN PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN VISIBLE

While adolescent parents and their children are a highly vulnerable population, they are not highly visible within most public systems. In most communities, the total number of parenting teens or of the young children of teen parents is not known, and their special needs and special opportunities are not the subject of community or agency plans or strategies. Of course, at the same time, this “invisibility” in the allocation of public resources and services does not extend to the political arena, where births to unmarried teens are often cited as one example of the decay of family values in our society and thus of the need for changes in policies in a number of areas to reduce adolescent sexual activity.

However, the fact that parenting adolescents and their children are not identified as the target for intervention in many service systems is a significant issue to be tackled in strengthening school-based, as well as community-based, intervention efforts. This section elaborates on some of the challenges associated with the invisibility of parenting teens and highlights some programmatic solutions we have seen in our work. It ends with several policy recommendations that could help programs and communities address these challenges.

The Challenges of “Invisibility” for Adolescent Parents and Their Children

Teen parents and their children are served by many different systems. These young parents often are or have been in public school. They may be a member of a household receiving public assistance benefits. They may use public health or nutrition services prenatally or for their children. They or their children may be enrolled with a medical assistance insurer or provider. They may receive counseling or social work services or case management because of involvement

with the child welfare system. Thus, teen parents are often found within the larger client or target population of many agencies, but generally not identified or identifiable as a separate group.¹

These challenges are just as evident for teen parents in schools. Given their relatively small numbers and the fact that student record systems generally do not identify (for good reasons) parenting students, teen parents can get lost within the general student population. This tendency may be reinforced by site-based management and decentralized budgeting. Individual schools may have identified only a few such students within their population and no school may have responsibility for identifying and tracking students who may drop out or move around frequently due to issues related to pregnancy or parenting. Teen parents have no natural advocate within the school-level administration, and this is even more true of the young children of parenting students since the focus of the building staff is on students at the junior and high school level, not on school readiness for upcoming cohorts of primary grade students.

This invisibility in systems that provide teen parents and their children with services means that their special circumstances and needs - and the special opportunities and challenges in serving them - are not recognized. These factors are likely to limit the effectiveness of interventions.

- Teen parents may be offered an intervention designed for adult clients that does not address their unique developmental issues.
- The additional challenges of attending and doing well in school while taking on the responsibilities of parenting may not be considered by the educational system.

¹ For example, schools are often reluctant to indicate on their records a student’s status as a parent, as it represents a stigmatizing characteristic. In public assistance and child welfare systems, teen parents and their children may be embedded within larger households and not identified separately when reporting case statistics.

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- The dynamics of three-generation households may not be taken into account in providing parenting education or other supports.
- Opportunities to address the special health and developmental risks that face the young children of adolescents may not be used.

The invisibility of teen parents and their children within schools and the health and social service delivery system obviously does not protect them from the potential negative effects - immediate and longer term - of early childbearing. In fact, it increases their risk for poor outcomes because often they are not connected with available services and supports and the services and supports they are provided may not be designed to meet their special needs and circumstances.

As a first step in putting in place effective strategies for these young families, decision makers at all levels need to be aware of the true numbers, circumstances and needs of parenting adolescents within their community and within individual systems. In our work we have seen several ways in which school-based programs, working with other providers and advocates, have made their communities more aware of the numbers and needs of teen parents and their children.

Solutions from the Field

Communities have used a number of strategies to reduce the invisibility of teen parents and their children within schools and service agencies and within the community. These strategies have resulted in increased resources being directed to meeting the needs of both the teens and their children and increased access to services and supports. These strategies include:

- Using more accurate estimates of the number of teen parents to advocate for program expansion and increased investment in services;
- Developing, and in some cases mandating, procedures to identify teen parents and link them with services and supports; and
- Promoting the protections Title IX affords pregnant and parenting students.

Using estimates of the number of teen parents in advocacy

Very often the number of parenting teens in a community is assumed to be the number of teen births in a given year. In fact, of course, it is several times that number when young mothers who gave birth in earlier years and are still teenagers are included.

- Procedures for more accurately estimating the number of female teen parents are described in CAPD'S web site www.capd.org/home/services/teenparents/

[teenparents.htm](http://www.capd.org/home/services/teenparents/teenparents.htm). They involve summing the number of births to women of a particular target age (be that 17, 18 or 19) and younger in a given reference year and adding this number to the numbers of births in previous years to women who are still younger than that age. For example, assume that only births to 17-year-olds or younger teens are of interest. In the year prior to the reference year the sum would include births to teens who were 16 or younger in that year. For the year two years prior to the reference year the sum would include births to teens who were 15 or younger in that year, and so on.

While estimates from this approach do not completely take into account migration, repeat births to teens, teenage fathers, and other factors, they are defensible and understandable benchmarks against which to assess current program enrollment and outreach efforts.

Statistical estimates of the number of teen parents in the community have been effectively used to stimulate public debate about strategies to address their needs and those of their children and to generate increased investment in those strategies.

- In Minnesota an important part of a successful lobbying effort was demonstrating that there were many thousands of teen parents throughout the state, based on the estimates from birth records as described above. The coalition supporting the Teen Parent Initiative in Minneapolis joined with the Minnesota chapter of the National Organization for Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention (MOAPPP) in 1998 to successfully lobby the state legislature for an initial grant program to support

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the development and strengthening of school-based teen parent programs. The same coalition, joined again by MOAPPP and other teen parent programs around the state, is again engaged with the legislature during its 1999 session to argue for increased funding and expansion of this grant program.

- In another aspect of its work, the Minneapolis Teen Parent Initiative brought together a group of program managers and information system staff from the public schools, the city health department and the county social services agency to design and implement a cross-agency data matching project. This project was intended to provide the community as a whole with first-ever information on the numbers of teen parents involved in various service systems and build an initial understanding of their careers in those systems - what services they used, when they used them relative to conception and delivery, and with what results. This work, still underway, even in its design phase has contributed to a greater recognition among publicly funded programs of their shared interest in and responsibility for teen parents.

Using data to determine service gaps and identify unserved teen parents

Recognizing the gap between the number of parenting teens in the community and those known to be enrolled in public school programs can spur additional identification and outreach.

- Minnesota mandates that all teenagers who give birth be contacted to offer services and ensure that there is a plan in place to ensure their child's health and development and their own progress toward self-sufficiency. Implemented in different ways in different jurisdictions within the state, in Minneapolis it is the responsibility of the county social services agency, which has created an

Adolescent Parent Unit. Information on the numbers of teen parents living in the county compared to the number served through this unit has spurred interest in better communication and coordination between county social services and Minneapolis' school-based teen parent programs.

Analysis of program data on other services received by parenting teen clients can also strengthen outreach and referral procedures across programs.

- Data from the Pittsburgh Teen Parent Program indicated that WIC was a good potential source of referrals to the school-based programs because pregnant teens had already enrolled in WIC prior to entering school-based programs. There is now an established referral relationship between the two programs.
- In Pittsburgh, estimates of the gap between the number of parenting teens in the community and those served in school-based programs spurred additional outreach and referral efforts. The same was true in Minneapolis, where various school staff (social workers, nurses, school-based health clinic staff, counselors) were asked to identify currently enrolled pregnant and parenting students so that they can be offered the range of supports available within the district.

Geomapping of the residences of teen parents, school sites offering teen parent programs, and the location of child care providers, health clinics and other service providers can be helpful in identifying mismatches between the needs of teen parents and the accessibility and appropriateness of available services and supports.

- Geomapping carried out by the California Department of Health for the whole state has provided county by county geographic distributions of teen births using birth record data.

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Promoting the protections of Title IX

Title IX offers legal protections for the rights of pregnant and parenting students to equal access to educational opportunities within public schools. Concerns about compliance with Title IX can heighten the visibility of this group of students and make it harder to see each individual teen parent as a special case.

- The Pittsburgh Teen Parent Program has worked extensively within the school district to educate administrators, teachers and pupil support personnel about the requirements and protections related to parenting students under Title IX. This work has made the needs and rights of teen parents more widely known within the district.

Policy Recommendations

We have seen the power that even rough estimates of the numbers of teen parents in a community can have in increasing program investments and changing program practices. Therefore, one key policy recommendation is that **TANF, schools, health and social services regularly calculate rough estimates of teen parents and their children** in planning service delivery sites and approaches, including outreach. In particular, we recommend that state and local plans for the administration of TANF funds routinely identify the total number of teen parents and their children, both those currently eligible for economic assistance and those potentially eligible. These numbers should include teen parents who are nested within other households.

In addition, **community needs assessments** required by funding programs (such as CCDBG) **should include estimates of the numbers of teen parents and their children.** Further, local requests for funds related to maternal and child health, school achievement, youth development, early childhood and school readiness programs should indicate what priority will be given to teen parents and the children of teen parents.

Even more powerful would be **statutory requirements for identifying and ensuring adequate support for minor parents.** This may be a public health measure such as under Minnesota law, or a

child welfare matter such as in states that require mandated reporting of a pregnancy or birth to a minor under age 15, assuming a substantial incidence of statutory rape and/or sexual abuse among this population.

Along with these legal mandates should come **resources for carrying out assigned agency responsibilities.**

- These may include training designated staff responsible for teen parents and setting up appropriate accountability and incentive systems. The technical capacity and resources to identify parenting teens and the children of teens may not be well developed. Support may be required for information infrastructure enhancements and for technical assistance so that communities and their public agencies can compile and analyze pertinent information. This may include assistance in responding to concerns about data privacy and technical issues related to protection of data confidentiality across systems.

In particular, there is a need for **centralized responsibility for teen parents within schools,** as many districts move to school-based planning and management. One task for central administration would be to carry out wider education within schools (and among other agencies that serve teen parents) on the protections of Title IX as well as monitoring compliance with this law in the same way that the rights of students with disabilities have been overseen. This may require additional emphasis from the federal department of education on state accountability for Title IX compliance for pregnant and parenting students.

In addition, the **broader public and other provider agencies should be made more familiar with the rights of parenting adolescents** to educational opportunities through public schools under Title IX and the availability of subsidized child care available through TANF to support school attendance. This is beyond the responsibility of any community institution or agency and is likely to require the efforts of local coalitions and state-wide advocacy, as we argue in the conclusion to this document.