

Teenage Fathers: The Missing-Father Myth

By Richard Stengel Tuesday, Jun. 21, 2005

They are the forgotten partners. It is obvious but often overlooked: for every teenage mother there is a father, usually a teenager who finds himself treated as an outsider, receiving none of the solicitous attention that occasionally attends the mother and child. These fathers are usually depicted as churlish scamps, irresponsible hit-and-run artists out to prove their sexual prowess without a thought for the consequences. Until recently, no one even seemed to factor the father into the situation. But with the surge of concern about teenage mothers, several groups and studies have taken a closer look at teenage fathers. Their findings have challenged many prevailing myths.

A recent study partially funded by the Ford Foundation revealed that many young fathers are not only willing but eager to help their partner and offspring. The project, coordinated by New York City's Bank Street College of Education, offered vocational services, counseling, and prenatal and parenting classes to nearly 400 teenage fathers and prospective fathers in eight U.S. cities. At the end of the two-year program, 82% reported having daily contact with their children; 74% said they contributed to the child's financial support. Almost 90% maintained a relationship with the mother, whom they had known for an average of two years. "We are learning that many teen fathers are anxious to participate in the parenting of their children," says Prudence Brown of the Ford Foundation, but, she points out, "they need a lot of help and support to help them assume a responsible father role."

Teenage fathers usually have lower incomes, less education and more children than do men who wait until at least the age of 20 to have children. One reason for this is that a teenager who has got his girlfriend pregnant often compounds his first mistake with a second one: dropping out of school. "When they leave school, they head right for a low-paying job," says Amy Williams, the executive director of the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting Project in San Francisco. "Their own internal drummer says to them, 'If you are going to be a good father, you have to get a job.'" Few are able to perceive the trap they are falling into. Says a counselor: "Five years down the line, they won't have skills to qualify for much more than work in a fast-food restaurant."

Teenage fathers are usually bewildered by the news of the impending arrival. Their own fathers, statistics show, were often phantom parents, and the young men have very little idea of what a father is supposed to do. Notes Debra Klinman, project director of the Bank Street College study of teenage parents: "A lot of fathers want to love their babies and do the right thing for them, but they don't see how to do what is right."

For many of the young men there is also a conflict between the desire to provide for their children and doubts about their own abilities as providers. Says Tommy Milladge, a counselor at the Youth and Family Center in Lawndale, Calif.: "The paradox felt by teen fathers is that while they want the young lady to receive services, they are ambivalent because they can't provide for them the way they should. It defeats their masculinity." Until recently, it was thought that this same sense of masculine pride would prevent young fathers from participating in programs designed to help them. The Bank Street College study showed that the opposite was true: teen fathers lunged at the opportunity, particularly where job training was offered. At the end of the two-year program, 61% of the previously unemployed young men had found jobs. Perhaps more important, 46% of those who had dropped out of school had resumed their education.