The Unwed Adolescent Father’s Perceptions of his Family and of Himself as a Father

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ABSTRACT: The study reported in this paper investigated how an adolescent father’s relationship with his family of origin affects his relationship with his own child. The dependent variable was parental behavior. The adolescent father’s perceived role conceptions of his parents and his feeling and attitudes toward his family were the independent variables. The study included a non-random sample of 43 African-American unwed adolescent fathers. The findings of the study indicated a father’s parental behavior was influenced by his perceived role conceptions of his mother and his feelings and attitudes toward his family of origin.

Much of the current research activity on teenage pregnancy has focused on pregnant females, teenage mothers, and their children, but gradually researchers, practitioners, and administrators have begun to realize that “adolescent pregnancy cannot be understood if it is viewed solely from the adolescent mother’s perspective. To understand the etiology of adolescent pregnancy, the individual responses of the male and female must be examined” (Redmond, 1985, p. 377).

While researchers have begun to examine issues of unwed adolescent fathers, there is limited research on the parental behavior of adolescent fathers. This paper investigates how an adolescent father’s relationship with his nuclear family affects his relationship with his child. The investigation provides information on the relationship among parental behavior and the adolescent father’s attitudes and feelings toward his family and the perceived role expectations of his parents.

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It has been estimated that adolescent males partly account for 1.1 million unintended adolescent pregnancies (Barret and Robinson, 1985, p. 354). The National Center for Health Statistics (1985) reported 18.4 percent children born to adolescent females were fathered by adolescent males. The number of live births to teenage fathers was 116,145 (Barth, Claycomb, and Loomis, 1988). These statistics are only estimates, because it is impossible to determine exactly many adolescent pregnancies and births were caused by adolescent fathers. In some cases the adolescent mother refused to or could not name the father. In other cases, often the age of the father is omitted from the birth certificate or the father is not named on it (Sonenstein, 1986, p. 32).

**Literature Review**

Fatherhood and motherhood are complementary processes that have evolved within the culturally established family structure to safeguard the physical and emotional development of the child (Benedict, 1970, p. 167). One of the functions of the family is to transmit norms and values to the child. The family prepares the children for their future (Offer, Ostrov, and Howard, 1981, p. 65). Yet research on the adolescent father has not examined his relationship with his family as an indicator of his involvement with his child.

While some teenage fathers have accepted little if any responsibility for children conceived out-of-wedlock, many others have accepted their responsibilities and tried to fulfill them (Nye, 1980, p. 8). Many adolescent fathers maintain contact with their children and provide some financial support (Lorenzi, Klerman, and Jekel, 1977; Furstenberg, 1976; and Panzarine and Elster, 1983). However, it is not clear why come some adolescent fathers become active in their children’s lives and others do not. It is known that it is from parents that adolescents begin to observe ways of negotiating the familial social order of mothers and fathers (Fox, 1981, p. 75). It is through the family that children learn about responsibility.

The research on adolescent fathers also suggests there was a tendency for adolescent fathers to have either a parent or sibling who was a teenage parent. Robbins and Lynn (1973) found that adolescent fathers tended to come from families where there was a history of teenage parents. Either they had siblings who were teenage parents or their parents were teenage parents. Rivara, Sweeny, and Henderson (1987) also found that adolescent fathers were more likely than