Helping Teenage Parents: Use of Age-paced Parent Education Newsletters

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ABSTRACT: Although many school systems have developed programs to meet the special needs of school age parents, the norm continues to be school dropout for adolescent girls who become pregnant. Because these girls and their children are at high risk for problems, Cooperative Extension throughout the United States has created instructional material specifically aimed at preventing psychosocial and developmental problems among an audience of very young mothers. This article describes the considerations and formats of newsletters for young parents, originating in California and Washington through Cooperative Extension in those states.

Introduction

The social and economic consequences of school age pregnancy have been topics of intense concern to education and health professionals for over a decade. School age pregnancy has been called variously "an issue of increasing concern" (Morrison & Jensen, 1982), one of "the most prevalent and burdensome family issues in the United States" (Sillars, 1981), and "a social problem of epidemic proportions" (Sharp, 1977).

While contraceptive technology caused the birthrate for older American females to begin decreasing about 1960, among adolescent females, birthrates continued to rise through the early 1970s, with the lowest rate of decline after that time among females under 16 (Zelnik & Kantner, 1977). Today, adolescent females in the United States have a fertility rate higher than that of any other industrialized country (Baldwin, 1980). In 1980, 1,106,909 school age girls became pregnant; 460,120 experienced abortions, 84,459 miscarried, and 562,330 gave birth. Almost 29,000 of the pregnant adolescents were not yet 15 years old (National Center for Health Statistics, Natality Statistics Branch, personal communication, March 13, 1984).

National surveys suggest that at least two-thirds of the pregnancies among adolescents are unplanned (Shah, Zelnik, & Kantner, 1975). Yet 97% of each year's youthful mothers keep their infants and assume parental roles (Jensen, 1983). These young mothers are at risk, not...
only of failing to give their babies the kind of care and stimulation needed for optimum development, but also of jeopardizing their own chances for becoming effective, contributing adults. This article will discuss two educational newsletters, age-keyed to both babies' and young parents' developmental stages, and specifically addressing their problems.

**Consequences of Teenage Motherhood for the Mother**

Motherhood is likely to cause serious personal problems for teenagers. Pregnancy interrupts education for most. Eighty percent of all 16 and 17 year olds who become mothers never finish high school. Among mothers 15 and younger, 90% become permanent dropouts, more than 40% of them before completing the 8th grade (Baldwin, 1979).

Because they don't finish their educations, young mothers are more likely to be unemployed and dependent on public assistance. It has been estimated that for each teen year childbearing is delayed, the probability of poverty at age 27 is reduced by over 20% (Guttmacher Institute, 1981). Labor Department statistics show a 90% unemployment rate among women who dropped out of high school after giving birth between the ages of 15 and 17. Among these, 72% are on welfare (Scales & Gordon, 1979). In 1977, welfare assistance for school age mothers amounted to 4.65 billion dollars, a cost which did not include other welfare benefits, like medical care, food stamps, and housing (Swift, 1983).

About 60% of the girls who give birth between the ages of 15 to 19 marry the child's father. Among those 17 and younger, 40% marry. Some evidence indicates that those who marry early are more likely to be abused by their husbands than are older brides (National Clearinghouse for Family Planning Information, 1981). Teen marriages are three times as likely to end in divorce compared to those of partners who are over 20 at the time of marriage (Nye & Lamberts, 1983).

A young child requires constant care. Adolescent mothers soon learn that motherhood separates them from their peers. Often it also activates negative, and further isolating, social sanctions. Under the circumstances there is an understandable tendency to make new and unwise choices of male partners. Many (6 in 10) teen mothers who deliver before they are 17 will become pregnant again before their 19th birthdays, with increased health risks to themselves and their infants.