Community Support for Adolescent Parents and Their Children: The Parent-to-Parent Program in Vermont

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ABSTRACT: Most adolescent parents now receive good prenatal and neonatal medical care, some receive limited amounts of parenting instruction, and increasing numbers can participate in school completion programs. But few programs address the social isolation and broad developmental disruptions that often accompany adolescent parenthood. This article describes the implementation and short-term effects of one program that does strive to meet adolescents’ long-term, broad support needs. The Parent-to-Parent program is a home-based program designed to enhance the ability of adolescent parents to meet their young children’s and their own developmental needs. Through long-term home visiting by specially trained local volunteers, parent group meetings, and work with local human service institutions, the program strives to (1) enhance the quality of parent-child interaction; (2) enhance the parents’ ability to locate and acquire services that will help them meet basic needs; (3) enhance parent and child involvement in community life; and (4) help the parents become more aware of their own options for the future, and more capable of implementing the plans they make.

The transition to, and the first years of, parenthood are a stressful time for most families. For those in American society who become parents while still adolescents the stresses of initial parenthood are magnified. Both the individuals involved and our social institutions are especially unprepared for the “departure from the normative schedule” implied by adolescent parenthood (Furstenberg, 1976): the role changes, the restructuring of opportunity, the enormous new responsibilities for the parents, the demands on social institutions to meet nonroutine demands, to address a unique combination of problems.

Perhaps the most powerful social consequence of adolescent parenthood is isolation from the formal and informal networks in our society that provide childrearing information and long-term social support.

1The focus of this article, and its limitation, will be on mothers’ needs, as the intervention described has to this point principally involved mothers.

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Rossi (1977) points out that most new mothers and their young children experience social isolation in the contemporary household. The adolescent parent, in especially great need of information and support, is even more isolated than most new parents. Peers don't have childrearing experience to share. The father of the new child is frequently not there, and when present is just as unprepared to cope with the demands of parenthood. The adolescent's own parents frequently are not psychologically prepared to provide support to their daughter and her new child. Finally, human service institutions that serve adolescent parents are much more effective at providing specific assistance with discrete problems than at providing long-term, sustaining support to help young parents through the day-to-day, week-to-week stresses they face.

The costs to the adolescent, her child, and to society of lack of sustaining support networks for adolescent parents are high. Less than 20% of adolescent mothers under age 17 complete high school (Ventura, 1977; Wurtz & Fugen, 1970). Incomplete education, combined with the demands of parenthood, significantly limits adolescent mothers' potential for employment, particularly in satisfying, meaningful jobs. A number of studies have found that adolescents who leave school to bear children are unlikely to return, and unlikely to ever catch up economically to their peers (Card & Wise, 1978; Combs & Freedman, 1979; Moore, 1978).

Adolescent parents as a group have less childrearing knowledge and fewer skills than older parents. For example, teenage parents frequently underestimate their infants' developmental needs and abilities (Epstein, 1980; Hayden-Miller, 1980). They also engage in less verbal interaction with their babies than older parents (Epstein, 1980; Osofsky & Osofsky, 1971; McLaughlin, Sandler, Sherrod, Vietz & O'Connor, 1978). As a consequence they often fail to provide the interaction and stimulation necessary to promote optimal cognitive and social growth. They may also be more impatient with their young children, because of inappropriate expectations (de Lissovoy, 1973). A number of studies have noted that intellectual functioning of teenagers' young children is significantly below that of comparable groups of children of older parents (Furstenberg, 1976; Sklar & Berkov, 1974; Trussell, 1974).

The long-term effects on children of such patterns of parent-child interaction could include problems in adjusting to the academic and social demands of school and neighborhood, because of lack of cognitive and social preparation. This could lead to high costs to society for remediation—including a need for special education or mental health