**INTRODUCTION**

This is the second of a two-part series on teen pregnancy and parenthood. The first article deals with the effects of teen pregnancy and parenthood on adolescents and their children and describes an exemplary program to keep teen parents in high school until graduation. The second article reports the results of a long-term study of teen parents after graduation from high school.

I attend school full-time. I’m able to concentrate on school because my son receives day care services in an on-campus infant/toddler center. The staff has helped my son develop a sense of security and trust. The program has helped me become an effective parent, feel good about it, and attend classes. (16-year-old teen mother). "Breaking the Cycle of Teen Pregnancy and Parenting" (1993)

The realities of teen pregnancy have been widely documented. Although teen birthrates have declined slightly after years of increases (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998), approximately 500,000 babies, half of all teen pregnancies, are born to teen mothers, ages 15 to 19, in the United States each year. Pregnant and parenting teens face seemingly insurmountable barriers. From an educational standpoint, unexpected pregnancies often interfere with teens’ ability to stay in school. About one quarter of teens who drop out of high school cite pregnancy as their primary reason. Almost half of all teen mothers who drop out never complete high school. From an economic standpoint, the lack of a high school degree reduces the likelihood of obtaining decent wages that parenting teens need to support themselves and their children. The lack of vocational opportunities increases parenting teen’s reliance on public assistance to make ends meet (Miller, 1997).

The annual costs to society have been estimated to run into the billions of dollars. In 1996, annual public assistance alone comes to $7 billion (Robin Hood Foundation Special Report, 1996). When the costs of other factors associated with teen pregnancy are factored in, such as increased medical and correctional costs, the total estimate skyrockets to $13 to $19 billion. However, estimates of public costs do not tell the entire story of teen pregnancy and parenthood. The children of teen parents are frequently forgotten. Teen parenthood has long-term consequences on children (East & Felice, 1996). Unfortunately, children born to teen parents are more likely to have had little or no prenatal care, to be born prematurely, and to have low birth weight. After birth, they are more likely to live in poor health, to grow up without fathers, and suffer from abuse and neglect (Rickel, 1999). When they enter school, children of teen parents are themselves at risk for educational failure. Their academic success is directly linked to the educational attainment of their parents (Pilat, 1997).

**STRATEGIES IN COPING WITH TEEN PREGNANCY IN HIGH SCHOOLS**

Teen pregnancy is not going to disappear any time soon. On the positive side, teen birthrates have steadily decreased over the last few years at the national level, from 62.1 per 1,000 girls to 54.7 in 1996 (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998). Yet, local communities are faced with the inevitable task of having to come to terms with teen pregnancy. While society increasingly recognizes teens as autonomous, responsible individuals, unexpected pregnancies raise troubling questions of “children having children” (Wallerstein, 1998). In particular, high schools in local communities are on the forefront of the public debate on teen pregnancy and parenthood. Across the nation, high schools have had to deal with the presence of pregnant teens on their campuses. In the past, the only available option that teen parents had was to drop out of school completely; today high schools have adopted different strategies in balancing their mandate to educate the country’s future citizenry and meeting the needs of teen parents. Strategies vary from school to school, but one option is to provide affordable, accessible child care on campus or at a nearby off-campus site. On-campus
child care provides numerous benefits to parenting teens. Specifically, teen parents are given the opportunity to return or stay in high school until graduation; place their children in high quality child care on campus or nearby site; learn effective parenting skills from the caregiving staff at the center; and consider postsecondary educational and vocational options.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF TWO-YEAR STUDY

The remainder of the article focuses on the preliminary results of an informal study of parenting teens at one large, urban high school in Honolulu. The purpose of the study was twofold: to assess teen parents’ parenting attitudes and educational aspirations and to track graduating seniors over the course of 1 year after they left high school. A secondary focus of the study was to examine the effects of on-campus child care on parenting teens’ perceptions of their effectiveness as parents. In other words, did the availability of child care increase teen parents’ parenting skills after repeated contact with the staff at the center?

The study was divided into two distinct phases. First, an interview was conducted to obtain relevant information on the subjects’ parenting attitudes and educational aspirations. Included in the interview were questions that examined their living arrangements and financial resources. The second phase of the study tracked the parenting teens 6 months after graduation from high school to check on their current educational or vocational options.

Sample

The sample consisted of 16 parenting teens who agreed to participate in a 2-year study with the written consent of their parents. The average age of the subjects at delivery was 16.4 years of age (range = 15.2 – 17.8). Three quarters of the parenting teens had children between 6 weeks and 1 year of age at the time of the interviews. The rest had children between 1 to 3 years of age. The majority of the subjects described themselves as members of an ethnic minority. About a third of the teens identified themselves as native Hawaiians, with another third as part-Hawaiians. The remainder of the sample included four Whites, one Hispanic, and one Asian American. Of the 16 subjects, two fathers participated in the study.

Subjects’ Marital and Financial Status

In the initial interview, none of the subjects were married. Two of five of the female parenting teens lived with their partners. In each case, no longer in high school, their partners tended to be older than them. Half of the parenting teens received public assistance in addition to their partners’ income. The remainder of the sample lived with either their parents, their partners’ parents, or other relatives. In contrast to the parenting teens who lived independently, 80% of the subjects who lived with their families and relatives relied on public assistance.

Educational Aspirations

The parents of the subjects in the study achieved varying levels of educational attainment. Over a third of the subjects’ parents did not graduate from high school. More mothers (44%) than fathers (31%) of the subjects did not complete high school in the sample. A few of the subjects reported that their mothers became pregnant in high school and did not complete their education. Fathers dropped out for different reasons, primarily to enter the work force before graduation. Nevertheless, over one quarter of the remaining parents continued their education and earned either a 2- or 4-year degree after high school.

The parenting teens who participated in the study reported high educational aspirations. Because their children were receiving on-campus child care, the subjects were able to stay in high school and consider their post-secondary options. A sizable number (75%) wanted to attend college. Of the 12 subjects who expressed an interest in continuing their education, half hoped to earn a 2-year degree and the other half wished to go further and enter a 4-year college.

In the second phase of the study, a survey was mailed to parenting teens who agreed to participate 6 months after graduation. Of the original 16 students, 4 declined to participate which left 12 parenting teens in the sample. However, 2 of the 12 moved without leaving a forwarding address and were therefore dropped from the study. Of the remaining 10, 60% returned the survey, while the remainder were contacted by phone.

The results of the follow-up survey revealed that only 30% attended college. One of the three who enrolled in college after graduation from high school entered a 4-year university. A large percentage (60%) did not attend college or find a job. Only one subject was working part-time at the time of the follow-up survey. The single common denominator given for not attending college or working was the perceived lack of accessible, affordable child care. Although the public university system in Hawaii, including the community colleges, provides child care to students, apparently the subjects did not know child care exists at each of the 2- and 4-year campuses.