

"THE ADOLESCENT PARENT - A FIFTEEN YEAR LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF SCHOOL AGE MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN."

DR DIANA M.L. BIRCH

Most behaviour, including early childbearing is measured as problematic in terms of how it measures up to the norms and values of a particular society or group. In many developed nations school age pregnancy is regarded as a 'deviant' pattern arising from lack of contraceptive availability, poverty and ignorance and resulting in poor parenting standards, and family disturbance. For a great many young mothers however pregnancy is desirable and very much the norm of their family culture. Continuing this argument, there are also many cultures where early marriage and pregnancy is very much desired and one should separate the 'problems' raised by cultural expectations and lack of societal support from the personal and individual conflicts and stresses which might be caused by early pregnancy.

Findings of a fifteen year longitudinal study of nearly 200 young families in which the mother gave birth under the age of 16 years has provided information which refutes many of the stereotypic views regarding young parents. It illustrates how the presence of a supportive family leads to an improved prognosis for young mothers and their children and gives insights into positive and negative

predictive factors. Some unexpected outcomes and their possible aetiology are discussed.

Consideration is given to approaches which may enable professionals to confront the 'cultural trap' in which many young people are caught - in that those suffering the worst deprivation in early childhood, those raised in the 'care' system and children's homes are those young parents most likely to perpetuate the cycle of deprivation for their offspring.

Introduction -

"The Doll that Grew Up" -

Lorna's bedroom was like that of any fourteen year old - walls papered with posters and cut outs from teen magazines and bits of record covers - a football scarf draped round the light switch and a scatter of old cinema tickets and memorabilia blue-tacked to the mirror. The floor obscured by discarded school books and dirty underwear with the odd sweet wrapper, cotton wool balls and mother's 'borrowed' best shoes. Mixed in among the tea shirt collection on the bed lay the required row of furry animals and mascots - teddy, pink pig, Emu puppet, cabbage patch kid doll which she had pleaded for on her tenth birthday, grotesque stuffed 'something' which Mum won for her at the Easter fair and a baby.

She had never gone out much; was certainly not promiscuous and had no boyfriend then, now or ever. The baby was conceived on an ill-fated outing with friends when the little 'stay at home' was persuaded to have one taste of the bright life. On return from hospital with little David she sat shell shocked in her room - not knowing whether to play with baby or toys and alternating between them with mother anxiously hovering. She slept with David beside her in his carry cot and Teddy snuggled up to her inside the covers.

Fifteen years later she still has no boyfriend, she hardly ever goes out except to visit Mum. David is a fine boy, quiet and well mannered and his mother's only companion.

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Sonia also got pregnant at fourteen but was delighted to have her baby. Her one and only boyfriend stuck by her and they are now married with a delightful family of four children ranging in age from 14 to 6. Sonia is working and has taken up professional training. She would like to become a therapist.

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The lives of young mothers have taken many turns along differing paths in the fifteen years that we have followed them. For some it has been a success story, for others the road has been paved with disaster - some are lonely and sad - others have come through pain and hardship with immense fortitude.

Whatever the outcome - the one message that we need to learn from these stories is not to prejudge young parents - there are many stereotypes and many false impressions and whatever concept we may have of teenage parenthood we are likely to be wrong - we need to keep a completely open mind and remember that all parents - young or old,

are individuals and deserve unique attention.

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The study - "Are you my sister, Mummy?" - Early studies on teenage pregnancy - This first part of the survey provided an important database regarding pregnant schoolgirls and their circumstances. It was a vital piece of work since previously available information had dealt with American groups whose population was not comparable in any demographic or social sense. We needed information on our own population to examine the factors, risks and social stresses of the environment pertinent to British teenagers. (Birch 1987)¹ An information base was important in terms of understanding factors which led to early pregnancy and childbearing - what motivated young people, what the family's influence might be and how we might intervene to help at any stage.

Contact was made with every school girl who became pregnant in a specific geographical area - covered by a London Health District. All school girls falling pregnant and who by intent or by default continued their pregnancies within a time limit were included - addition to the group began in 1980 and ceased in 1987. The first 126 cases were analysed for baseline data and formed part of an MD thesis (Birch 1986)²; 150 cases were reported in the book "Are you my sister, Mummy?" ; 174 entered long term study which is fully described in "The child that rocks the cradle" (Birch 1996)³.

The initial piece of research involved a number of stages :-

- base line information gathering during the pregnancy
- data regarding the birth
- six week follow up
- six month follow up
- one year follow up
- two year follow up

The fifteen year survey.

Further survey points have been:-

- five years follow up
- ten years follow up
- fifteen years follow up

Findings and comments - It is hard to do justice in a paper to the findings of a fifteen year survey which has generated volumes of data on this population - both in terms of statistical facts and , perhaps even more importantly, in terms of qualitative information. The following is thus a brief summary of some of the more pertinent features of the study.

A. Fertility and Repeat pregnancy

Those who have been pregnant as schoolgirls are a highly fertile population. They begin their childbearing career at an early age and are likely to remain fertile during a large segment of their life span. The rate of repeat pregnancies continued to be high throughout the years. Each follow up showed a high number of girls had become pregnant again since the last interview.

Childbearing patterns- Three sub-populations were identifiable :-

- 1) **Single pregnancies** - girls who have one pregnancy only. (12%)
- 2) **Constant repeaters** - who maintain a high level of repeat pregnancy throughout (68%)
- 3) **Late repeaters** - girls who have one pregnancy as a school girl then do not have repeat pregnancy until they enter a

second later stage of child bearing (adult childbearing stage) (20%)

This group of young women have a higher fertility rate than other girls of the same age. The risk of pregnancy is particularly high during the first year after the birth of the first child when teenage mums are eight times more likely to get pregnant (250 live births per thousand) than the general teenage (< 20) population (30 per thousand) ⁴.

Girls who had been in care tended to have more pregnancies over the years than those who had not been in care. Girls from more difficult circumstances may have a greater need to repeat their pregnancies. They form a greater percentage (90%) of the 'constant repeater' group.

B. Patterns of Relationships.

Staying Together-Single Partners.

The myth of the promiscuous schoolgirl mother was exploded when it was noted that at the time of conception, over two thirds of the couples had been together for more than six months and for over two thirds of the girls this was their first sexual relationship. Fifteen years later over a third of the girls (39%) have only ever had one boyfriend. For another 12% the 'rescuing' boy who entered their lives at an early stage during pregnancy or in the first months of the baby's life and became an 'early replacement father' was the only other man on the scene. So 51% of the girls only had one significant relationship.

Multiple Partners. Nearly half the sample (49%) follow a serial monogamy of more than two partners. Girls who 'bounce' from one man to another without

breaking down have a high level of flexibility which allows them to adapt to these differing domestic arrangements - but a low ability to learn from their experiences - they thus continue to 'repeat' their pattern. The parade of parenting partners takes a toll - both on the children - in terms of instability, inconstant boundaries and on the mothers experiencing recurrent loss and being left 'holding the baby' quite literally over and over again. A need to fill a 'father shaped' gap in her life coupled with low self esteem means that she is likely to form a relationship with an inadequate man or a boy with problems of his own. He is placed under enormous pressure to cope with a needy 'instant family'. He too does not enter the arena in a pristine state - nor does he leave the scene unscathed.

Asexual lives. Girls without

Boyfriends. 10% of the girls did not ever have a real relationship with a boy after the birth of their first and only child. They feel let down by society and by the father of their child and do not seek sexual relationships in the future. Some never actually had a boyfriend EVER.

The Late Relationship - the

'Adult' Relationship. Many mothers who had been through painful periods in their lives made a deliberate change of life-style and passed through a threshold in identifying with their new 'adult' selves. They had 'teen' and later 'adult' lives

C. Families

There are many different family structures. Our society in general has moved away from the

single idea of the nuclear family - mother, father and two children - as being the only acceptable pattern. Single parent families are much more the 'norm' than when this study commenced in the early eighties. It has also become more acceptable for couples to live together outside marriage.

The family of origin of the teenage mothers. They generally came from large single parent families with an average of five children. Two thirds of their natural fathers were absent from the household and the 'father figure' was usually a man who moved in and out of the 'family' fathering more children and then going on his way. Neither fathers nor stepfathers figured significantly in most girls lives.

Just under half the girls (45%) got on with their mothers but in half the of these cases - a fifth of the whole (21%) - the relationship was described as 'over close' and suffocating. The families fell into the main groups of - good relationships with both parents ; absent or weak father and dominant or poor relationship with mother; both parents absent or ineffectual. To a large extent this family pattern was recreated in the next generation.

Baby Fathers - It was noted in the early part of the study that the boyfriends of schoolgirl mothers tended to be of similar background and characteristics - dropping out of school, not often in employment, having similar family histories of school age pregnancies with regard to their mothers and sisters and had similar needs to become parents.

Despite all the negative connotations and difficulties a reasonably high number of the natural fathers of the first born children were still in contact with their offspring at the age of two years. (45%). Past this stage a number of 'baby-fathers' dropped out of the children's lives with the result that by the time the children were in their teens themselves only 20% of fathers were still in touch with their children. This figure was significantly different for the partners of young mothers who had been in care - they were ten times less likely to maintain contact with their children (2%).

Grandmothers often have a very hard time coping with their children and grandchildren. It is also extremely difficult for a child brought up by grandparents who may be too old to do some of the 'parental' task or have fun. Children are also immensely bereaved when grandparents who have been their prime carers eventually die. Children who had been brought up by grandparents were markedly deprived in comparison to those brought up by their parents.

D. The Children

Child Care -Placement of Children

The majority of children were brought up by their natural mothers and lived with them throughout the time of the survey. 80% of the children were with their natural mothers at 5 years and this dropped very slightly to 78% at 10 years and 75% at 15 years. Splitting the groups into subgroups of girls who have been in care and those who had not, once more the care group had a worse prognosis with only 62% continuing to care for their children at 15 years as

opposed to 82% of the non care group.

Children's Views and Lifestyles

The children of school age mothers are like other children of the same age. As teenagers they have similar likes and dislikes and indulge in all the usual teenage activities. In the main they came across as a confident and healthy group.

School - Forty percent of the boys reported being bullied at school, but often this was part of a two way process of disruptive behaviour since 70% had behavioural problems relating to violence in school, fighting and disregarding teachers. A quarter of the boys had been involved in something illegal.

The rates for girls were lower. 20% had behavioural problems at school and were disruptive in class. 35% were bullied at school. 6% had been involved in minor crime.

Relationships with Parents - 80% of boys and 95% of girls said they get on with their parents. Half the boys (50%) and rather more of the girls (70%) said they could talk to Mum about most things and 50% of boys and two thirds of the girls said they would confide in their mothers if they had problems.

Pregnant schoolgirls often lack a father figure in their lives. Their sons seem greatly affected by lack of a father within the household. It is the boys who appear to be reaching out to a paternal figure, miss their fathers and get involved in early sexual liaisons possibly in an attempt to identify with the father figure. This axis of father / teenage son has often

previously been ignored in the study of causes of early pregnancies. A significant factor in prevention of early pregnancy is the psychological and emotional status of the boy.

Sex Education. 50% of boys and 75% of girls had knowledge of sex education, 10% of boys and 50% of girls learned this from their mothers which was a significant improvement on the previous generation.

Sexual Activity. Boys are more sexually active than the girls some started as early as 11 Most used condoms but 15% boys had unprotected sex.

Conclusions.

The influence of the care system is pernicious and young mothers who have been in care do worse than those who have not over a number of different dimensions. They have more children, they have more relationships, their relationships are less stable and more of their children end up in care themselves ... But is this an influence of the care system alone - does being a young Mum who has been in care differ from being an older Mum who happens to have been in care? If you are a family on low income, you are more likely to have a daughter who is pregnant young ... if you are in an area of social deprivation ... you are more likely to have a schoolgirl who is pregnant Schoolgirl pregnancy is very much a 'culture of poverty' ("Schoolgirl Pregnancy - a Culture of Poverty")⁵ and traps deprived girls in a cycle of derivation.

"The repercussions of teenage childbearing are long lasting: the young parents acquire less education than their

contemporaries ; they are more often limited to less prestigious jobs and the women, to more dead end ones. .." (Card and Wise 78)⁶. "The adolescent mothers consistently experienced great difficulty in realising their life plans when compared to their classmates who did not become pregnant premaritally in their early teens .." (Furstenberg 76)⁷. If you are in care you are more likely to get pregnant early - in our sample 22% of the pregnant girls had been in care at a time when less than 2% of the child population of the area was in care. The important message is that if families are supported and the effect of social deprivation and poverty is minimised. then not only will the rate of 'premature' motherhood diminish - but those mothers who do start their families early will be able to raise their families happily and well.

There is a group of girls who wish to become pregnant at an early age, are ready for it, are mature emotionally and physically and if it were not for the stigmatising of our society and the lack of support - they would have every chance of success. Others are immature, they neither desire motherhood nor feel able to cope with the birth of their children, they may pass the child over to the care of others. Between these two extremes we have a whole spectrum of girls who though not actively and consciously seeking pregnancy, nevertheless are happy to be mothers and make some emotional or existential gain by virtue of their 'mothering' status. Most important in this context is the gain in self esteem and a sense of 'purpose' in life. Even from the other side of the Atlantic, where the general view is perhaps

more pessimistic than ours, there are encouraging comments - "Some adolescent parents do overcome the handicaps imposed by adolescent childbearing; they complete their education, get decent jobs, avoid welfare dependency .." (Furstenberg and Crawford 1978)⁸

Most studies from the USA show that children of teenage mothers do badly in comparison to their peers. (East and Felice 90)⁹ " The children of teenage mothers are distinctly worse off throughout childhood than the offspring of older childbearers." (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn and Chase-Lansdale 89)¹⁰. In Britain the same factors operate to an extent but are highly dependant on social status of young mothers rather than her age per se. Children can bear a heavy burden when they are expected to fulfil the role of 'little parent' to their child mothers. These children fill a need in their parents, provide love, fulfilment and self worth. Perhaps in some ways this is a valid role? These children are valued, wanted and loved in return. What more could a child want?

The male first born children seem to fare worse. Daughters take the role of sisters and at least have a mother as role model and confidante - something the young mothers wish they had themselves. Sons have no role model, do not know quite how to relate to their mothers who they often end up 'fathering'. Single mothers can lack the knowledge and resources to appreciate and provide for their developing sons needs. These very first born sons are more prone to early sexual acting out and their numbers swell the ranks of the less supportive and

less stable teenage fathers for the next generation.

Families certainly play an important role. Girls tend to recreate their family of origin. Those with good supportive families fare better. Those with no families do worse. But there are casualties and surprise successes in all life styles.

Being a young parent is not the end of your life and dreams - it need not be a life of toil and hardship - sadly for some unfortunate families it can be - but given adequate support young parents can do remarkably well. Perhaps it is time to stop condemning young families and instead try to help them. To look for the positive attributes of young parents and work on them rather than spell doom and gloom with negative statistics. Young mothers have the potential to succeed in all walks of life - if we give them the chance to do so.

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