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for the nineties?"

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## Teenage Pregnancy - A Problem for the Nineties?

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School age pregnancy has been and will remain a controversial subject. I met my first pregnant schoolgirl patient twenty years ago and I am still amazed at the varying responses I get from people when I tell them of the work I do. They vary from the outraged 'It shouldn't be allowed' to a shrug of the shoulders and a 'So what, Isn't that natural in some families?'

So what was all the fuss about?

Are there really problems associated with early teenage pregnancy or is this just a facet of human behaviour which provides a nice little niche for research workers to get their teeth into in preparing their theses?

Certainly this last way of regarding the situation must spring to mind when one considers the vast volume of papers produced in the United States. Yes, certainly teenage pregnancy is very prevalent in the USA - but can this justify the sheer volume of research re-researching and re-re-researching the same topics - not to mention the computer data bases filled with every conceivable piece of information down to what breakfast cereal teenage mothers prefer for breakfast. Sometimes I think that we have lost the ability to see the human dilemma through a barrage of questionnaires - evaluated and cross referenced, of course.

Have we lost our ability to see the wood for the trees?

So, to return to my question - Have the differences between teenage and older mothers been overstated, and the consequences been overrated. Could we say that early childbearing is merely a solution type response to a social situation?

Certainly there is a certain type of girl for whom pregnancy is not a problem but a solution to her problems, or so it may seem initially - a fulfillment, something she can do right, someone that is wholly hers and who will love her - a boost to her self esteem. However, looking at even one case history should provide ample evidence that this is an erroneous view - the solution is a false solution.

Teenage pregnancy caught the media attention with the publishing of the Guttmacher report '11 million teenagers. What can be done about the epidemic of adolescent pregnancy in the US?' (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1976). This was the time of the 'baby boom' in the USA and coincided with our peak teenage fertility in England and Wales. At the time it was thought that the problem would fade away with the end of the baby boom. However, the arrival in 1981 of the second report 'The problem which that has not gone away' - proved that it did not!

Twenty years on, the situation in the United States was most ably stated by Frank Furstenberg in a presentation to the 1991 Society of Adolescent Medicine conference in Denver - 'Reconsidering the costs of teenage childbearing'. The premise of his lecture was to confound the theorists who argue that teenage pregnancy is no more than having a child at an early age and carries no damaging sequelae and to show that there

are no advantages to girls or to society in bearing children while still of school age.

So does it matter if girls have their children at a very young age? How do we evaluate the consequences? Perhaps the time honoured tradition of looking at outcomes and control groups is not applicable and moreover confusing. The population of schoolgirl mothers is not homogeneous, there are ethnic and social divisions, moreover cross cultural groups are not comparable - the social pattern in Britain for instance is not analogous with that in the United States or other parts of Europe. Who does one choose as a control group? Different groups are relevant depending on the parameter being researched. There are pitfalls to consider at each level.

Let us consider a few pertinent facts - illegitimate births increased in older women in the eighties and white girls started behaving more like black girls (Birch 1986). Hence longitudinal studies or comparisons between older mothers and teenagers or across racial groups ran into problems with shifting baselines.

Should we be controlling for socioeconomic groups in looking at consequences? School age pregnancy is not a random occurrence but is associated with certain demographic variables. There is a definite increase in low socioeconomic groups (Birch 1987, 1989), hence can we say that there is an obviously poor outcome? There are those who argue that since early pregnancy occurs in low socioeconomic level families, then the poverty seen in such groups is not as a consequence of the early reproductive cycle but is inherent in their backgrounds. Such a proposition was put forward by Geronimus and Camus in their study of sibling comparisons.

They showed that teenage mothers financially did about as well, or as poorly, as their sisters who did not have children at a young age. There was only a modest income difference. However, what has been missed in this evaluation is the price which a family and thus other siblings, has to pay when one member of this family has a baby at a very early age.

Siblings are quite obviously affected when their sisters become pregnant. Sisters do of course, often follow the pattern and indulge in early sex or become young mothers themselves. Even if they do not, the pregnancy of a sister has profound implications. Family unrest, rows and upheavals may occur, the pregnant girl inevitably becomes the centre of attraction be it in a negative or positive manner. A sister, or brother may be forced to give up a bedroom or other living space for the new arrival and may be roped into sharing child care. Overcrowding, noise and the time devoted to looking after a baby all impinge on the siblings personal space and study time, hence leading to lowered expectations in education and employment and perhaps an urge to leave home sooner.

The family as a whole will be placed under financial strain by a new baby and thus all members will feel the effect of a school age pregnancy. Hence the cost to the family of origin must be considered not only on a financial level, but also on an emotional and practical level. Patterns of family structure, nest leaving and relationships are affected not only for the pregnant member, but for the family as a whole.

The ramifications of the consequences of early childbearing are thus very wide and hence difficult to either demonstrate or exclude in research protocol.

Several researchers have shown that later childbirth leads to increased marriage rates, better education prospects and higher financial status but are there any benefits of early childbearing? It has been suggested that bearing children at a young age may be beneficial - there is no evidence for this. Several studies have shown that with good antenatal care there are no increased risks to the mother in early childbirth, but certainly there are no advantages. However the proviso of 'good antenatal care' is often unfulfilled and there are attendant factors such as poor diet, poverty and illegitimacy which are indicators of unfavourable outcome. Moreover it is generally recognised that the baby is at increased risk of prematurity, low birth weight and possibly congenital malformation and this risk becomes significantly higher in repeat pregnancies.

Perhaps there may be some advantage in having a mother who is young, nearer to the age of the baby and thus able to communicate better? It would seem not - the young mother is in many ways still a child herself, is often emotionally very needy having missed out on love and attention herself in early childhood and hence is unable to give to her child that which she lacks herself. It is difficult for such girls to put their child's needs before their own or even to acknowledge their babies emotional needs. And what of the young father? These boys are usually a little older than their partners and they often do try to stay in contact and emotionally support the young mother. However very few eventually live together and although 45% are still in touch by the child's second birthday, a greater proportion lose contact as the years go by. (75% at birth; 65% at 6 weeks; 55% at 6 months; 50% at one year; 45% at two years - Birch 1986, 1987) Hence young fathers gradually fade out of children's lives.

Are there advantages in being brought up in an extended family and thus does the child of a teenager benefit from the presence of grandparents? Research in the US has shown that there is no advantage in a socially extended carers system and moreover that the longer they stay in such a situation, the worse the outcome. Girls do not find that they get much support from younger members of the family either, little sisters soon tire of playing with the doll and want to get on with their own lives. Most children and their young mothers move out after three to four years in any event (Furstenberg 1991). Hence there are problems both to the family and the teenage mother and her child inherent in their living together.

Weighing up the benefits and difficulties of early childbirth one can say that it is certainly an area fraught with difficulty. In our society we are not geared towards early pregnancy and hence we are unable to provide the support network required to help young mothers. In addition few girls are prepared for early childbearing and looking back girls do regret their early pregnancies - they say such things as -

'Well, I do love my baby and I wouldn't lose him for the world, but I wish I had been older' or

'I suppose I'll be OK, but who would marry me now? How can I find a decent bloke if I've already got someone else's baby?'

'I've grown up seriously since I had her. I can't believe some of the things I used to get up to .... I only wish I had grown up before....'

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