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Assessing the Supports Needed to Help Pregnant and Parenting Teens Reach Their Educational and Career Goals

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Abstract: Teen parents often experience difficulty in achieving their educational and career aspirations. The study reported here identified the sources and types of support that teen parents consider most useful in reaching these goals. The teens rated relatives as the most helpful source of support and government assistance programs as least helpful. The most useful types of support included having consistent childcare, while establishing good relationships with parents of the father of their child and obtaining government resources were least helpful. Extension professionals are in a unique position to collaborate with schools and community agencies to help teen parents obtain necessary supports.

Introduction

In the United States, 800,000 to 900,000 adolescent girls 19 years of age or younger become pregnant each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000), and about 50% of these pregnancies are carried to term (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006). Hispanic female adolescents have the highest number of pregnancies per 1,000 in comparison to other demographic groups (US Census Bureau, 2004). Several factors, including machismo and familism, appear to encourage motherhood roles among Hispanic women (Cooley, 2001).

Although teen parents face many unique challenges, one significant challenge is achieving their educational and career aspirations. In 2002, only 10% of U.S. teen mothers, ages 15 to 17, graduated from high school

(National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003). Teen girls' educational and employment aspirations often go unfulfilled after having a baby (Barbour, Richardson, & Bubenzer, 1993). Among Hispanic teens, avoiding pregnancy is the single most important factor in ensuring graduation from high school (Driscoll, Biggs, Brindis, & Yankah, 2001; Marsiglio, 1993).

The presence of social support has been shown to help at-risk adolescents achieve their educational and career goals (Kenny, Gualdrón, Scanlon, Sparks, Blustein, & Jernigan, 2007). Supports can be either informal, which consists of support from family, friends, and the father of the child, or formal, which consists of support provided by teachers, professional services, and programs. According to the developmental contextual perspective (Lerner, 2002), such supports may help teen mothers overcome the barriers they face in obtaining their educational and career goals.

The study reported here sought to identify the sources and types of support that teen mothers see as most useful in helping them realize their educational and career goals. This information should be of value to Extension professionals and other youth specialists involved in educational and intervention programs striving to improve outcomes for pregnant and parenting adolescents.

Method

The participants, ages 13 to 18, ranged in grade from sixth to twelfth. They were all either pregnant or had at least one child. The young women were involved in weekly University of Nevada Cooperative Extension classes embedded within the alternative high school program in Washoe County. The classes were designed to provide support and information on a variety of topics that relate specifically to female teen parents.

The study included two data collection components, a written survey followed by three focus group sessions. Fifty-four female students who were either pregnant or expecting completed the survey. Participants who took part in the focus groups were a sub-sample of the survey participants, selected by teachers at the alternative high school by asking students to volunteer to participate. Those who volunteered were selected. They included three groups of six participants. Survey methods were used because this provided a relatively anonymous way to obtain information on a sensitive subject. Focus groups were conducted in order to encourage discussion in a supportive environment among teens who were parenting or expecting. Each method provided unique insights into the experiences of teen parents.

For the survey, half of the participants were Hispanic, followed by 11 White students, five Black students, two Native American students, and nine multiethnic students. The majority of participants (55.6%), mostly who identified as Hispanic, reported that English was not spoken at home. For the focus groups, 15 participants (approximately 83%) were Hispanic, followed by two White students, and one Black student. Thus, the focus groups primarily captured the perspective of the Hispanic students.

Survey Measures

The instrument used in the survey portion of the study was a 54-item questionnaire that included demographic information and information on the participants' educational goals. Specifically, participants were asked to assess how good a student they wanted to be, how much education they planned to attain, and what their career goals were. The second part of the survey asked participants to rate types and sources of support according to how helpful they were in helping them achieve their educational and career goals, which was adapted from a measure developed by Trivette, Dunst, and Deal (1994). They used a five-point Likert scale with response options ranging from (1) not very helpful to (5) very helpful.

Focus Group Format

The focus group interviews were held during the day in a private room at the alternative high school. All focus group sessions were conducted by a social psychology graduate student trained in qualitative data gathering techniques. Each focus group was approximately 45 minutes in length and was audio taped.

Interview questions focused on the level of support teens received in the program, the difficulties of having and raising children, and the relationship participants had with their parents. Examples of the questions included the following: What do you think the most challenging thing is or will be about having a baby? What do you think the best thing is or will be about having a baby?

To gather information pertaining to the teens' perceptions of the focus group interviews, an eight-item survey was administered at the conclusion of each focus group interview. Ninety-five percent of the participants reported that they felt comfortable during the sessions, which indicates that the answers the teens gave were accurate and honest. Researchers transcribed the interviews and then identified themes and subsequently compared the themes that emerged in order to ensure reliability.

Results

The Educational and Career Goals of Teen Parents

Results indicate that the majority of teens surveyed wanted to obtain a high school diploma or a GED (Figure 1) as well as obtain a job that requires a high school diploma or GED (Figure 2). Hispanic teens, as a group, follow this overall trend, as did the rest of the sample. Less than 10% of the sample did not aspire to achieve a high school diploma or GED or a job that requires one of the degrees (Figures 1 and 2). Again, these trends were the same for the overall Hispanic sample and the rest of the sample. This indicates that despite the challenges associated with being a teen parent, these girls overall maintain educational and career aspirations that require at least a high school diploma or GED.

Figure 1.
Number of Participants Corresponding to Specific Educational Aspirations

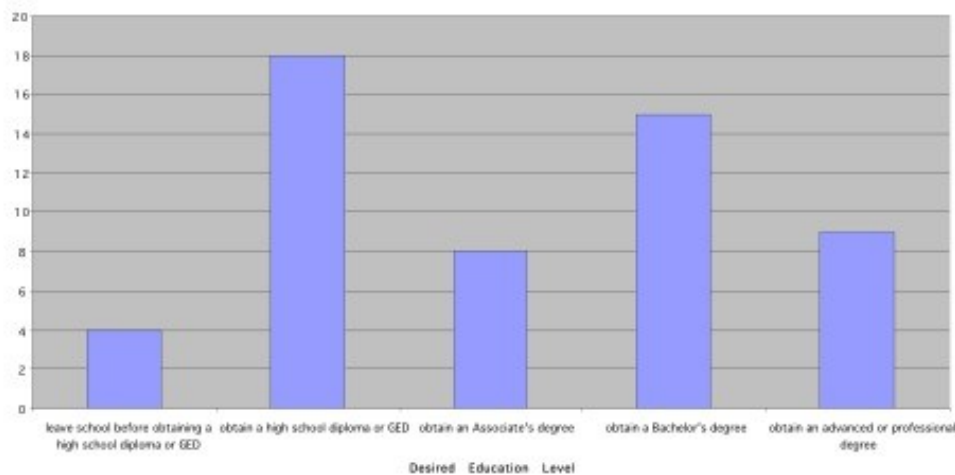
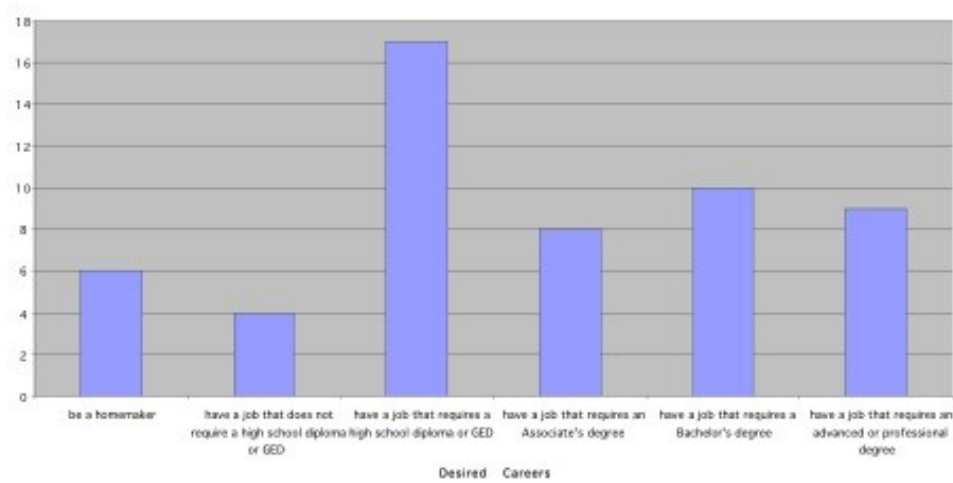


Figure 2.
Number of Participants Corresponding to Specific Career Aspirations



Most Helpful Sources of Support

We found that when it comes to educational and employment goals, adolescents overall, and Hispanic teens in particular, perceive and value informal supports from their immediate relationships. The most highly rated sources of support were parents and siblings of the adolescent. The focus group results reinforced this finding; participants discussed how important their relationship with their parent was to their goals and also expressed interest in receiving advice for maintaining a good relationship with them.

In addition to the parents and siblings, the important sources of support centered on the relationship the adolescent mother has with the baby's father and his family. Despite the importance, focus group results revealed that the majority of participants in the sessions reported poor relationships with the boyfriend's parents. Because the participants were primarily Hispanic, Hispanic values and beliefs may have influenced this finding. Past research indicates that working-class Hispanic families are said to highly value maternal roles for women (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Therefore, the parents of the father of the baby may see the continuation of school, a behavior that does not align with the maternal role, as a threat to the quality of the family relationship.

Least Helpful Sources of Support

Adolescents overall, and Hispanics in particular, perceived assistance programs provided by state and local government as the least helpful for achieving their goals. This may be due to the adolescents' perception that these agencies are inaccessible and that receiving services from them are too complicated. This was reported by many individuals during the focus group sessions. A variety of factors may be influencing this perception, including language (a majority of the sample reported that English is not spoken in the home) and age barriers (a majority of the sample reported that they do not have someone to negotiate with agencies for them).

Most and Least Helpful Types of Support

Overall, three out of the five types of support advocated by adolescents overall, and Hispanics in particular, as important centered on the actual care of their child or children. These results lend support to the need for childcare resources and parenting information. In contrast, three out of five of the lowest ranked types of help centered on receiving help with education and a future career. It is interesting that the more immediate support for children was seen as more important than the more direct support for educational goals.

Discussion

The adolescent girls in our sample hold lofty educational and career goals, but often find the path necessary to achieve these goals difficult to navigate. The major challenges that the adolescents reported were obtaining consistent care for their child, establishing good relationships with parents of the father of their child, and obtaining resources from government agencies. These more indirect sources and types of support were considered more important than direct help for goals. This indicates that adolescents' basic needs should be met before they can focus on achieving educational and career aspirations.

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted, including the small sample size, data collected from only one school district, and only tapping limited aspects of support. Also, assumptions were made about the knowledge that the teens had on certain topics, but some participants may not have known the educational requirements for certain jobs. For example, participants were simply asked what type of career they wanted, but were only presented with information regarding educational requirements and not the jobs available with that amount of education.

It is important to note that although this sample primarily tapped the needs of Hispanic adolescents, the study could be replicated using a sample with different demographic characteristics; the sources and types of support selected for inclusion in the study were based on previous studies with a more stratified, general sample.

Implications

We believe that the results have several implications for Extension professionals involved in school engagement, career awareness, and parent education programs.

1. Despite their circumstances, pregnant and parenting adolescents continue to hold high educational and career goals given the current rates of pregnancy among youth. There remains a strong need for Extension programs that will help these adolescents achieve their goals.
2. It is important for future Extension programs targeting Hispanic adolescent mothers and pregnant adolescents to understand the sources and types of support adolescents regard as important for achieving educational goals; the likelihood that this population will achieve goals is directly tied to the supports available to them.
3. Many of the young mothers and mothers-to-be in the sample indicated that the need for parenting support is important to them. Extension professionals can work with education and community agencies to offer ongoing parenting programs, pamphlets, weekly parent-child playgroups, and mentoring programs. Also, the eXtension Just In Time Parenting Web site offers a wealth of

information for new parents.

4. The availability of childcare seems to be very important in helping these adolescents achieve their educational and career goals. Extension professionals can initiate and facilitate community efforts to provide childcare while pregnant and parenting teenagers are involved in school or work opportunities.
5. Extension professionals would benefit from incorporating relationship counseling and support into their programming for this audience. Results indicate that although adolescents strongly value relationships with parents and relatives, they are not always satisfied with the quality of these relationships.
6. Extension should continue partnering with school systems. In doing so, Extension professionals can help teens obtain community supports and services. Such efforts will allow Extension professionals to continue to play a critical role in improving the parenting, educational, and career outcomes for pregnant and parenting adolescents.

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