

# How Teenage Fathers Matter for Children: Evidence From the ECLS-B

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## Abstract

Much is known about how having a teenage mother influences children's outcomes, but the relationship between teenage fatherhood and children's health and development is less well documented. Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort, the authors investigated how teenage fathers matter for children. They expected teenage fathers' influence on children to differ from adult fathers' in three domains: the household context, the father–mother relationship, and the father–child relationship. Teenage fathers were less often married and more often cohabiting or nonresident, and their children experienced a variety of social disadvantages in their household contexts. The quality of the father–child relationship did not often differ between adolescent and adult fathers. Fathers' marital status and children's household contexts each fully explained the negative relationship between having a teen father and children's cognitive and behavior scores at age 2. These findings suggest that policy interventions could possibly reduce these children's developmental gaps in the critical preschool years.

## Keywords

teenage fathers, adolescent fathers, fathering, ECLS-B, paternal coresidence

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Recent increases in the U.S. teenage birth rate (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009) have refocused public attention on the consequences of adolescent childbearing, but teenage fathers are often overlooked. One key reason for this omission is a dearth of nationally representative quantitative data. There is a need for research that uses recent national survey data to draw conclusions that apply to teenage fathers and their children throughout the United States. This study uses the newly released Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to ask two primary questions concerning the association between having a teenage father and children’s outcomes, a relationship that has received surprisingly little empirical attention in the past (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). First, how do teen fathers influence their children’s lives and early health and development? This descriptive exploration includes a particular focus on adolescent fathers’ coresidence with their children. Second, why might having a teenage father compromise children’s early health and development? We work to identify mediational pathways through which this occurs.<sup>1</sup>

Popular perceptions equate teenage *parenthood* with teenage *motherhood*. Most teenage parents are female because most teenage mothers’ children are fathered by adult men (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998), whereas few teenage boys date adult women. Still, there are many teenage fathers, and they are largely invisible in public discourse. These assumptions are reflected in scholarly work: In most studies of teenage parenthood, scholars have focused solely on mothers (for reviews, see Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Hoffman, 1998). Most previous research has agreed that the children of teenage mothers have substantially worse outcomes in their preschool years than children of adult mothers in areas such as cognitive, language, physical, and social development (Luster, Bates, Fitzgerald, Vandenbelt, & Key, 2000), though this relationship is often caused more by preexisting maternal disadvantage than by young maternal age per se (Levine, Pollack, & Comfort, 2001; Turley, 2003). Cognitive, verbal, and behavioral outcomes measured in early childhood predict success when children start school (Baydar, Brooks-Gunn, & Furstenberg, 1993), which is linked in turn to later assessments of achievement, high school completion, and higher educational attainment (Luster, Bates, Vandenbelt, & Nievar, 2004). Despite their importance, less is known about these early years of children’s development than later periods (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

Although 30% to 50% of children born to teenage mothers also have a teenage father (see Roye & Balk, 1996), research about the influence of teenage fatherhood on children is sparse. Is it reasonable to believe that children are affected by having a young father? Past research suggests that most teenage fathers are not coresident with their children (Pirog & Magee, 1997), but they

