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

Journal of Family Issues


XX(X) 1–28

© The Author(s) 2010

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/0192513X10370110

<http://jfi.sagepub.com>

 SAGE

Stefanie Mollborn¹ and Peter J. Lovegrove¹

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

¹University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Stefanie Mollborn, Department of Sociology and Institute of Behavioral Science, UCB 483, University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO 80309-0483, USA

Email: mollborn@colorado.edu

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.¹

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

are still involved parents (Harris, 1998), at least early in the child's life, and they typically support their children financially (East & Felice, 1996). Therefore, we may expect many teenage fathers to have a more meaningful influence on their children's early development than conventional wisdom might anticipate. Although the traditional fathering role has focused on providing financially for the mother and child, we consider a wider variety of ways in which fathers may influence their children's lives.

How Do Teenage Fathers Matter for Children's Lives?

Past theorists of parenting, and fatherhood in particular, have identified many areas in which fathers matter for their children's health and development. We focus here on three of these: the child's household context, the father–mother relationship, and the father–child relationship. These three domains were chosen over others, because we expect that in these areas, the influence of a teenage father may be very different from that of an adult father. It is important to acknowledge that the three domains interact with each other in influencing children's outcomes, as the literature cited below illustrates. Fathers' multifaceted contributions to the lives of their children in these three domains have been identified as particularly important in the past. For example, Hawkins et al. (2002) developed a nine-dimensional theoretical model of father involvement that was not specific to any particular age group. Their nine dimensions broke down into these three broader domains: providing financial resources (which is a part of household context), support of the mother (father–mother relationship), and seven types of interaction with the child (father–child relationship).

Several influential theories predicting parenting behaviors (Belsky, 1984; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989) and intergenerational continuity in anti-social behavior (Capaldi, DeGarmo, Patterson, & Forgatch, 2002; Thornberry, Freeman-Gallant, & Lovegrove, 2009) have acknowledged that some or all of these dimensions are important in understanding the contributions fathers make to their children's lives far beyond the financial realm. In a review of the literature on low-income fathers, Nelson (2004) noted a need for more research about fathers' influences on their children's well-being. These influences could be direct or indirect through their relationships with their children's mothers.

Children's Household Context

The broadest of the three domains of fathers' influence on their children, household context (including both socioeconomic and other factors), can contribute

to children's well-being both directly and indirectly by affecting family processes such as the father-child relationship (Belsky, 1984; Capaldi et al., 2002; Patterson et al., 1989). For example, Whitbeck et al. (1997) found that harsh parenting by fathers increased with financial stress. In terms of the direct influence of household context, fathers' material support has been positively linked to children's outcomes in past research (Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; for a review, see Nelson, 2004).

On the basis of past research, *we expect teenage fathers' contributions to children's household context to be less positive on average than those of adult fathers.* Teenage fathers' typically lower education and income compared with adult fathers' pose a "contextual risk" for their children (Capaldi et al., 2002; Lerman, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2009). Not surprisingly, then, young fathers do not usually provide large amounts of direct financial support for their children (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Previous research has demonstrated the importance of material resources for understanding the educational outcomes of teenage mothers and fathers (Mollborn, 2007), but more research is needed on measuring resources that adolescent fathers typically provide to children.

The Father-Mother Relationship

As the second domain of fathers' influence, the father-mother relationship has been shown to affect fathers' parenting and child development (Belsky, 1984; Patterson et al., 1989). Much of the literature on the father-mother relationship focuses on emotional support. Fagan and Palkovitz (2007) found that closer father-mother relationships increased fathers' involvement in children's care. Father absence was associated with depression and anxiety among mothers (Gee & Rhodes, 2003), and support from fathers elevated mothers' psychological well-being (Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992). These findings are interesting because maternal mental health is an important determinant of children's development (Black, Papas, Hussey, Dubowitz, et al., 2002). Coresidence may be an important facet of the father-mother relationship because living with the biological father tends to be economically beneficial for mother and child (for a review, see Roye & Balk, 1996).

As with household context, *we expect adolescent fathers to be less involved with and supportive of the mother on average than adult fathers.* Teenage parents are less likely to marry than adult parents are (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998), and Marsiglio (1987) found that only about half of teenage fathers lived with their children after their birth. Few teen moms are involved with their children's fathers from pregnancy to age 3, and relationships get less supportive as time goes on (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). All of this adds up to

lower levels of partner support, as well as mixed benefits of such support: Roye and Balk (1996) noted that partner support is often, but not always, related to positive outcomes when children have a teenage mother.

The Father–Child Relationship

As the third and final domain of fathers' influence, the quality of father–child relationships and fathers' parenting behaviors are important for understanding children's behavior (Capaldi et al., 2002; Thornberry et al., 2009). Examples of important aspects of this relationship include discipline, paternal involvement, attitudes about parenting, and emotional attachment to the child. Father involvement has been shown to be positively related to children's academic performance (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996) and adolescents' behavior (Carlson, 2006). Fagan and Iglesias (2000) found that fathers' communication with their children improved children's communication skills, which in turn reduced behavior problems. However, some research has found a nonexistent or inconsistent effect of father involvement on children's outcomes (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Flouri, 2006) and has emphasized the importance of considering the quality of the father–mother relationship when investigating the association between father–child contact and child outcomes (Amato & Rezac, 1994).

We expect the quality of the father–child relationship to be lower on average for teenage fathers than for adult fathers. Not only are adolescent fathers less likely to be coresident and therefore likely less involved in the child's day-to-day life, but some teen fathers have also been found to have less competent parenting skills (Fagot, Pears, Capaldi, Crosby, & Leve, 1998). Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1998) noted the importance of conducting further research on the relationship between father–child bonds and child outcomes.

Our analyses explore differences between teenage fathers and adult fathers in all three of these domains. As stated above, we expect that when compared with adult fathers, teenage fathers' children will have more socially disadvantaged household contexts than adult fathers' children, the relationship between the teen father and the child's mother will be less supportive, and adolescent fathers will have a less involved and supportive relationship with their child. Because we expect that having a teenage father affects children in each of these three domains in ways that are negatively related to child development, *we expect that having a teen father compromises children's early development compared with having an adult father.* Little past research on this relationship is available. In one study, Furstenberg and Harris (1993) analyzed teenage mothers' children from the Baltimore Study, many of whom had also been born to an adolescent father. They found that strong attachments to coresident fathers led to improved

