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Implications of Co-Residential Status for Parenting Programs Targeting Adolescent Mothers

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Abstract

When a teenager becomes a parent, what type of family living arrangements best support her parenting competence? Conventional wisdom suggests that the mother's family of origin would be the best arrangement, but contemporary adolescents do their parenting in a variety of situations. Results from the study reported here, examining mothers living in three different types of arrangements, suggest that living with a parenting partner of the same generational age as the mother supports more positive parenting attitudes. A strengths-based, youth development approach to parenting education for adolescents is discussed in which the interpersonal context of adolescent parenting is explicitly addressed.

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Introduction

Parenting education efforts by Cooperative Extension professionals are frequently designed to address a variety of challenges associated with adolescent mothering. Extension recognizes that the mismatch resulting from the needs of adolescent mothers to successfully resolve the developmental tasks of adolescence (e.g., autonomy, sense of identity, more complex thinking) while simultaneously meeting the challenges of parenting can often result in less-than-desirable parenting behaviors (Bridge for Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Sexuality [BAPPS], n.d.).

Working from a strengths-based model of parenting, however, requires that Extension educators emphasize resiliency factors and the development of individual strengths that support effective adolescent parenting and help young parents reach their full potential. The [BAPPS](#) workgroup on adolescent parenting has outlined several key principles guiding Extension education efforts designed to promote healthy adolescent parenting programming, two of which pertain to the study reported here.

1. Focus on positive youth development and prevention through education rather than youth deficits, intervention and treatment programs.
2. Increase the sensitivity and understanding of parent educators to adolescent developmental issues and the challenge of teen parenting.

In their discussion of programming strategies, the BAPPS adolescent parenting workgroup identified adult mentoring and social support among the issues to be addressed when developing educational programs for teen parents (BAPPS, n.d.). A key factor emerging from research as consequential for adolescent mothers' greater success is family support (e.g., Apfel & Seitz, 1996); however, researchers now emphasize the quality and context of that support, rather than just its availability that is important (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998).

This article uses the results of the research described below to provide information to parent educators about the parenting contexts of adolescent mothers and the quality of parenting behaviors mothers report in relation to their preschool-aged child(ren). We discuss the implications of the study findings in connection with parenting education programs for adolescents.

Background

Although conclusions from research conducted nearly 30 years ago suggested that adolescents were better off living with their families of origin than as single heads of household (e.g., Furstenberg & Crawford, 1978), coresidential arrangements of contemporary adolescents are much more complex (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Rarely do the family contexts of parenting adolescents fall neatly into one category or another. Parenting adolescents often depend on a variety of individuals as they face the challenges of caring for their young children while also navigating their own developmental paths.

Few research studies directly address the complexity of adolescent mothers' living arrangements or the quality of mothers' relationships with those on whom they depend. However, in several studies examining intergenerational coresidence (that is, adolescent mothers living with their own mothers), the benefits of these living arrangements were found to fluctuate depending on their responsiveness to changes in the developmental needs of the adolescent mother as she matured (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamskey, 1994).

In addition to residential arrangements in which the adolescent mother lives with one or more parents or family members of elder generations, adolescents may live with same-generation (or *intragenerational*) kin--such as a sibling or cousin--or fictive kin--such as a boyfriend or same-sex roommate. Even though adolescence is a developmental period where peer relationships are increasingly important and influential for adolescent identity and autonomy development, it is striking that little is known about the role peers and same-generation kin may play as residential partners and sources of parenting support for the adolescent mother.

Research showing that the co-parenting relationship influences the quality of parenting a child receives (e.g., Simons, 1996) indicates that an understanding of the complexity of an adolescent parent's living arrangements should be considered in the development of effective parenting education. Nevertheless, the available information is limited regarding the effects of the various interpersonal contexts in which adolescent mothers parent their children on the quality of their parenting. Thus, the purpose of the study reported here was to examine the parenting behaviors of mothers who gave birth as adolescents in relation to their current living arrangements.

Methods

Participants were selected from the records of low-income families participating in a parenting and early childhood education program targeting families with at least one child age 2-5. A subsample of adolescent mothers was chosen from these records if intake data showed they met the following conditions: (1) the parenting adult was the mother of the child participating in the program; (2) the mother was under the age of twenty at the time of birth of this child; (3) the mother and child resided together in the same home.

From data collected between September 1996 and February 2001, 142 families fit the criteria. At time of delivery, mothers ranged in age from 14 to 19 years, with a mean age of 17.6 years. The average age of their children at data collection was 3 years. The majority of mothers were unmarried (78%), African-American (88%), and unemployed (71%), with 49% reporting that they had obtained a high school diploma or GED.

Participants were classified into one of three residential statuses: Intergenerational coresident status is defined as an adolescent mother and her child residing with the mother's or father's older generation kin. Fifty-two families (36.5%) were categorized as living in these types of arrangements. *Intragenerational* coresident status is defined as an adolescent mother and her child residing with a partner (husband, boyfriend), non-parental adult (female friend), and/or a family member of a similar age. Thirty-nine families (27.5%) were categorized in this status. Single residential status is defined as the adolescent mother and her child living alone. The mother is the absolute head of the household. Other children could be present in the home. Fifty-one families (36%) were categorized as living in these types of arrangements.

Information provided by the mother during the parenting program intake interview was used to create the study's latent dependent variable for "guidance." Mothers answered three items assessing agreement with attitudes about child discipline. The model for this variable was examined by AMOS (version 4.0) maximum likelihood factor analysis (Arbuckle, 1999) to assess the degree to which the factor model effectively reproduced the observed item covariances.

The model was evaluated using chi-square tests and, in addition, due to the small sample size, two goodness of fit indices. Chi-square tests were not significant, indicating that the data for the construct fit its model. For "guidance," both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) yielded acceptably high goodness of fit indices (both exceeding .99). All items loaded significantly ($p < .05$) on the single factor model (.31 to .66).

Results

Analyses of variance indicated a significant effect of residential status for guidance, $F(2, 139) = 4.5$, $p < .05$. Post hoc tests revealed *intragenerational* status to be significantly different from both intergenerational (.005, $p < .05$) and single (.018, $p < .05$) statuses. Attitudes about discipline were less harsh among mothers in *intragenerational* households than in other living arrangements. No significant difference was found among the attitudes of mothers living in *intergenerational* and single-head-of-household arrangements.

Further analyses were conducted to examine the *intragenerational* group in more detail. The *intragenerational* group was split into those adolescent mothers living with a husband, boyfriend, or father of the child (*intragenerational* romantic, $N=27$), in contrast to those adolescent mothers living with a sibling, cousin, or friend of similar age (*intragenerational* non-romantic, $N=12$). Results of the ANOVA conducted using four residential statuses indicated a significant effect of residential status for guidance, $F(3, 138) = 3.01$, $p < .05$.

Due to a violation of homogeneity, Dunnett T3 multiple comparisons test was used to examine the significance of the mean differences. Results indicated that the *intragenerational* romantic status was significantly different from both intergenerational status (.009, $p < .05$) and single residential status (.026, $p < .05$). No significant difference was found between *intragenerational* romantic living arrangements and *intragenerational* non-romantic living arrangements. However, *intragenerational* non-romantic was not found to be significantly different from any of the other living arrangements.

Summarizing, results from this study suggest variability in parental guidance attitudes depending on residential status.

- Mothers living with same-generation peers or kin showed more positive disciplinary attitudes than mothers living with older-generation kin.
- Mothers living with same-generation peers or kin showed more positive disciplinary attitudes than mothers living alone.
- Mothers in romantic partnerships (married or unmarried) showed more positive disciplinary attitudes than mothers in non-romantic residential arrangements.
- Mothers living alone and mothers living in intergenerational households showed no differences in their guidance attitudes.

Implications

Researchers who study adolescent motherhood suggest that knowledge about young mothers' relationships is a critical variable by which research and intervention strategies should be guided (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 1992). Few studies, however, have directly examined how various residential arrangements are related to a mother's parenting competence. To the extent that these various arrangements are characterized by particular patterns of interaction, they are important to examine because of an increasing body of evidence suggesting that parenting quality and child outcomes are associated with the quality of the adult relationships and the co-parenting behaviors experienced by the child (e.g., see resources and research briefs supporting Iowa State University Extension's satellite broadcast, "[The Impact of Couple and Marital Relationship on Parenting and Child Outcomes](#)").

While the study's focus on variations in household structure cannot offer insight into the dynamics of the various parenting relationships and interactions they represent, it supports re-assessing programs based on the assumption that the optimal environment for adolescent mothers and their children is with the mother's family of origin. Adolescent mothers living with grandmothers in this study were no better off in regard to the harshness of their disciplinary attitudes than those living alone.

Prior research has found that the positive parenting practices of adolescents correlate with factors such as individuation (Wakschlag, Chase-Lansdale, & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), family cohesiveness (Kalil, Spencer, Speaker, & Gilcrest, 1998), and a supportive caregiving context (Coll, Hoffman, Houten, & Oh, 1987). Intergenerational coresidence does not always offer these benefits. For example, intergenerational coresidence can be rich in conflict, and opportunities for individuation can be infrequent if the grandmother is focused on concerns other than the teen's continuing development as an adult (Chase-Lansdale, et al., 1994). In contrast, opportunities that facilitate identity development and autonomous decision-making in an adolescent mother may be perceived as more available in the context of a partner relationship than in the typical, hierarchically structured parent-child relationship.

Taken together, these findings and prior research confirm the importance of Extension parenting educators developing an understanding of the adolescent mother as embedded in a unique interpersonal context. Interactions with her parenting partners are connected to and consequential for her parenting, as well as her own and her child's developmental outcomes.

It is also worth remembering that the mothers we surveyed were functioning in a low-income context. Consequently, the development and delivery of educational programs for such young mothers must be sensitive to the challenges that they face in organizing their limited resources to meet family, caregiving, and work obligations. (See Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2004, for an elaboration of these challenges.) Furthermore, with regard to the socioeconomic aspect of the co-parenting context, it is possible that the mothers in our study who reported more positive parenting practices had co-parenting partners who had relatively more resources with which to support them. Although our data do not permit us to address this possibility, such speculation reminds us of the importance of knowing our target audience in order to deliver relevant educational content.

In summary, educational programs targeting adolescent mothers should explicitly address the broader interpersonal context in which they parent their children. Program activities could include identifying those on whom the adolescent relies for assistance with typical parenting tasks and for support of her as a parent. Facilitated discussions and role playing focusing on the strengths and challenges of such assistance could be implemented, leading to group problem-solving about how to negotiate for the mentoring and social support young mothers need from their co-parenting partners.

Leading young mothers to think concretely about the nature and quality of their co-parenting situations is an educational process supportive of positive adolescent development. Late adolescence, for example, is a time when a consolidation of ideas about oneself takes place and a cohesive sense of one's abilities, goals, commitments, and future orientations is formed. Early parenthood and the dependence on others that usually accompanies it can impede or sidetrack this process. Educational programming addressing the adolescent mother's progress in developing as a whole person may be a key component in facilitating her development into an effective parent.

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