

SOCIAL SUPPORT, PARENTAL BELIEF SYSTEMS, AND WELL BEING

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Young maternal age has long been associated with problematic parenting practices. Adolescent mothers have been identified as “at risk” for neglecting and physically abusing their children (Wise and Grossman, 1980; Hawkins and Duncan, 1985). Intolerant child-rearing practices are often linked with authoritative parental attitudes leading to harsh discipline and child maltreatment (Robitaille, 1985). This negative focus on adolescent parents as a homogeneous group results in falsely labeling many young mothers as maladapted (Daniels, 1969). Recent studies have subsequently addressed those factors that serve to strengthen parental adjustment and well-being among young mothers (Buchholz and Gol, 1986; Gottlieb, 1985). For example, parenting-skills training has been found to enhance young parents’ affectionate responding to their children and to promote responsive parental style (Campbell et al., 1982).

The rationale for assessing “positive” parental attitude is provided by Fishbein’s (1980) contributions indicating that since stated intentions to act are good predictors to action, attitude as well as behavior must be studied. Because observation of behavioral interaction is often intrusive, a holistic measure of parent/child interaction includes the assessment of beliefs that influence behavior. Parental attitudes about child-rearing practices constitute a system of beliefs about responsive as opposed to punitive and authoritarian caretaker style (Segal, 1985). Although beliefs are not synonymous with behavior, a positive attitude toward parenting may be a requisite to healthy parent/child interactions. Segal defines responsive

or child-centered attitude as the ability to see oneself as parent-teacher, guiding the developmental skills of one's offspring, as opposed to viewing obedience and discipline as the primary responsibilities associated with the parental role.

Still another reason for studying belief systems is that they are not necessarily static, but are subject to change throughout the life cycle as a function of education and relationships with significant others (Laosa, 1982). The parent's access to and perceived satisfaction with supportive networks has been found to influence positively the parent/child interaction. When support is available, teen mothers are more responsive and affectionate toward their children (Colletta, 1983; Crockenberg, 1981). Further, social support from family members, neighbors, and the father of the child has been found to strengthen the adolescent's parenting capacity, including the attitude (Burden and Klerman, 1984).

SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Social support is defined by Cobb (1976) as information that one is loved, is valued, and belongs to a social network. For adolescents, financial assistance and the provision of child care by family members constitute additional components of support that affect parental adjustment (Furstenberg, 1981). In addition to identifying some of the unique needs the adolescent may have for support, recent studies are stressing the importance of including the availability and utilization of both the familial and nonfamilial sources of support. Unger and Wandersman (1985) note the importance of assessing both the structure of support—that is, the available sources of support—and the extent to which young mothers perceive such help as being useful to them. In addition to familial support, assistance to the young mother from the father of the child, from peers, and from the extended community have been found to mitigate the stressful transition to the parental role (Family Resources Coalition, 1983).

It is noted that social networks are usually conceptualized as potentially supportive. But the conflict between adolescents' devel-

opmental need for autonomy and their necessary dependence on family to assist them in meeting the responsibilities of their difficult parental roles is but one indicator of the stressful components of supportive networks. It is not always clear, therefore, to what extent help from family and other actors in the young mother's primary network does enhance her quality of life.

PARENTAL ADJUSTMENT AND LIFE SATISFACTION

Diener et al. (1985) define life satisfaction as an evaluation of the quality of one's life, a function of what respondents value in terms of negative and positive assessment of life events and feelings of content and discontent. Life satisfaction is related to positive life adjustment and has often been used as an indicator of mental health (Liang, 1982). Successful adjustment is a very relevant factor in assessing the life situation of young mothers who are having to undergo the multiple role changes important in entering adulthood and parenthood. Supportive networks that serve to mitigate stress do affect the quality of life among teen mothers (Thompson, 1986; Turner and Avison, 1985). The relationship between positive parental attitude and life satisfaction is less well established. However, interventions designed to reduce conflict in the parent/child dyad have been found to enhance mothers' adjustment to the parental role (Barrera, 1981). More positive and less stressful parental style can therefore be expected to lead to a more positive assessment of life events and a greater degree of contentment with life in general.

THE STUDY RATIONALE

The various factors associated with teen parenting have rarely been subjected to multivariate assessment. This study investigates the interplay among social support, parental beliefs, and life satisfaction. It is hypothesized that the number of members in the household who are available to provide respite care, financial assistance, and emotional support will be positively related to the

teen mother's parental attitude. Second, the young mother's satisfaction with support from family members, peers, the father of the child, and members of the community is expected to contribute significantly toward the proportion of variance in parental attitude. Finally, positive relationships are expected, such that the greater the level of support and the more positive the parental attitude, the higher the general life satisfaction among the respondents. The two demographic variables, education and maternal age, may influence parental attitude. Since the sample is homogeneous as to race and income, these variables cannot be expected to contribute to the variance in the dependent measures.

METHOD

SAMPLE

All individuals who were enrolled in a continuing-education public school program were asked to participate in the study. The respondents voluntarily completed a four-page questionnaire distributed in a group setting. Participants received careful instructions about completing the instrument.

A total of 118 adolescent parents, or all but one of the program enrollees, chose to participate in the study. The mean and median age among these young mothers was 16, ranging from 13 to 18 years of age. Educational level was 10 years of schooling, on the average, with a minimum of eight and a maximum of 11 grade levels completed. Most (91%) of the mothers were Black; 9% were White. Most (72%) lived at home; 28% lived with friends or other family, or in a residential setting. The median income reported by the respondents was \$233 per month in AFDC benefits and, in a few cases, from part-time employment.

MEASUREMENTS

Respondents' age, income, education, and the number of family members were continuous measures actually reported by the par-

ticipants. All the scales used in this study were presented in a five-point Likert-type format, ranging from "very much" to "not at all." The measures were coded such that the higher the score, the greater the respondents' satisfaction with the support they received, their satisfaction with life in general, and the less authoritative their attitude toward parenting.

Support from family members, the child's father, peers, neighbors, and friends was assessed by items indicating the availability of financial aid, help with babysitting, and emotional help from these sources. These items were computed into a scale similar to the measure reported by LaRocco et al. (1980), who found that combining various sources of support from friends, relatives, and peers resulted in a highly reliable and valid measure.

Parental attitude toward child rearing was measured by Segal's (1985) 24-item role disposition scale. The measure is designed to assess parental roles as primarily that of a disciplinarian as opposed to teaching developmental skills to children. The item content includes whether children should be allowed to question the authority of their parents and the importance of providing learning experiences for children at an early age. The higher the score on the scale, the less authoritative and more "parental" the respondent. Segal reports a high construct and concurrent validity of the measure.

Life satisfaction was measured by Diener's five-item life satisfaction scale indicating the condition of life as excellent, ideal, and satisfactory. The scale has favorable psychometric properties, including high internal consistency and high temporal reliability, and it correlates moderately to highly with other subjective well-being scales.

RESULTS

The data were analyzed using ordinary least-square regression. The t-test level of significance for each regression coefficient entered in the regression was set at the .05 level. The F-test for the significance level of all the Bs in the equations was set at $p < .05$.

Table 1 depicts Pearson's r between all the variables in the regression. These correlation coefficients indicate that multicollinearity was not a problem in this analysis. A total of 16% of the proportion of variance in parental attitude was accounted for by the two independent variables, number of family members living in the household, and social support. Those mothers who had a positive attitude toward parenting tended to come from larger families and they were more satisfied with the support they received than were their counterparts who scored lower on the positive parental attitude scale. Education and maternal age did not significantly influence parental attitude and were dropped out of the equation.

When social support, family size, and parental attitude were regressed on the dependent variable, life satisfaction, 45% of the variance was accounted for (see Table 1). The greater the respondent's satisfaction with the support she received, the smaller the family, and the more positive her attitude toward parenting, the higher her level of satisfaction with life in general.

DISCUSSION

It is noted that the sample in this study is homogeneous as to race, income, and to a lesser extent, education. Therefore, variance in the dependent measures attributable to socioeconomic factors cannot be ascertained in this study. The results are further limited in that generalizations to all adolescent mothers should be made with caution because the sample comprises those mothers who are enrolled in a program to complete their high school education. In view of the high dropout rate among adolescent parents from high school, this group of young mothers may be atypical in their utilization of supportive networks, their attitudes about their role as parents, and their satisfaction with life in general. These mothers may reflect the strengths associated with the successful negotiation of the dual roles of parent and student, and in some cases, employee. As such, they may serve as models for the best possible outcome of teen parenting.

TABLE 1

**Significant Factors Influencing
Parental Attitude Among Teen Mothers**

R² = .16

F = 3.65

P = < .01

	r	B	P
Social Support	.21	.38	.04
Family Size	.15	.29	.05

**Significant Factors Influencing
the Life Satisfaction of Teen Mothers**

R² = .45

F = 9.16

p = .00

	r	B	P
Social Support	.45	.34	.00
Parental Attitude	.42	.33	.00
Family Size	-.22	-.24	.03

That maternal age did not significantly contribute to the variance in parental attitude indicates that the process of identifying the multiple factors influencing positive parent/child interactions is much more complex than comparing young mothers with their older counterparts. Variance in the structure, availability, and utilization of supportive networks appears to be a more potent influence on the young mother's world view about child rearing and her general contentment in life than is her age.

The fact that social support is a significant predictor of positive parental attitude has several implications for interventions designed to strengthen the parenting capacity of young mothers. First, because the measure of support includes the father of the child and peers, as well as family members, it is important to target these relevant "actors" in the adolescent's environment as part of interventions. Among the questions that arise when support is to be strengthened is: To what extent can significant members of the

young mother's social network be called upon to provide needed respite care and financial and emotional support? Further, social skills training may involve teaching young mothers to plan their day-to-day activities effectively and to negotiate for needed child care and material aid. For example, young mothers can exchange respite care, and absentee fathers may be encouraged to provide some basic needs for the baby even when they cannot pay child support.

Network therapy is defined as planned activity by a professional that aims to strengthen the function of existing networks or create new supportive networks (Gottlieb, 1985). Interventions that teach negotiations and conflict resolutions could have a direct impact on the utilization of available networks. For example, parent/teen relationships may be strained when maternal grandparents are seen as interfering with the adolescent's role as parent. Skills in negotiating these conflicts and assessing what type of support can be expected from each member of the supportive environment are important components of network therapy.

At first glance, network therapy aimed at strengthening available support would seem to be more realistic than would adding new "actors" to the primary supportive structure of the adolescent parent's environment. But acquiring skills in the assertiveness of requesting aid and in identifying potential sources of help may assist the teen mother to elicit support from sources such as community members who have traditionally represented strong mutual aid systems, especially among ethnic subgroups.

The relationship between support and parental attitude is rather complex when we look at the apparent recursive relationships between the two variables. That is, interventions designed to enhance parental attitude seem to have ripple effects extending to the mother's support network. According to Unger and Wandersman (1985), child management training has been found to influence the primary actors in teen mothers' supportive networks. Not surprisingly, when mothers are taught to use clear, concise commands to their children and to reward them for appropriate behavior, family members and peers, including the child's father, learn some of these child management skills from the young mother.

The relationship among support, parental attitude, and life satisfaction adds another dimension to the parent/child interaction process. Interventions targeted at strengthening supportive networks may affect parental attitudes and satisfaction with life as well. Parent education, combined with network-centered interventions, may affect the quality of life among teen mothers in various ways. The acquisition of child management skills of positive reinforcement can serve to reduce the stress levels associated with punitive parental attitude. Interventions designed to reduce dissatisfaction with life, often associated with depression, should best be introduced in tandem with parent education, including child management skills, as viable alternatives to punitive methods of teaching behavioral compliance to children.

The multidimensional role of supportive networks in providing respite care to overburdened teen mothers and help with financial assistance is also related to the number of family members living at home. The importance of a large family network in promoting positive parental attitude is in contrast to the negative impact of family size on the general life satisfaction of teen mothers. The structure of the supportive network seems to have positive impact on the teen mother's parental attitude. But larger families may have fewer resources to share and more potential for conflict which leads to a greater level of dissatisfaction with life on the part of the teen parent.

SUMMARY

The relationship among social support, parental attitude, and quality of life has multiple impact on the service delivery to teen mothers. The various types of support must be distinguished and interventions must be aimed at strengthening the components of the supportive environment already in existence, as well as enlarging the network of primary actors. Many aspects of social skills training for adolescent mothers are closely related to the enhancement of social support, responsive parental attitude, and satisfaction with

life in general. Further assessment of the impact of these factors on the parent/child interaction is indicated.

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