



Healthy Teen Network

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES
OF TEENS AND YOUNG FAMILIES

Policy Statement on the Unique Developmental Needs of the Children of Adolescent Parents

Below is the policy statement of the Healthy Teen Network, Inc. (HTN) on the children of adolescent parents. Following the Introduction are HTN's specific policy recommendations. The third section lists HTN's values statements, all of which relate to young parents and their children. We encourage members and affiliates to use this policy to inform the development of state, local and/or institutional policies and standards.

Introduction

Children of adolescent parents present unique developmental needs, stemming from the circumstances into which they are born. Young women who deliver babies prior to completion of high school are more likely than their peers to have had academic difficulty, school failure,^{i,ii,iii} and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.^{iv,v,vi} Young mothers are more likely to be survivors of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse and they are more likely than their peers to have been raised by teen mothers themselves.^{vii,viii,ix,x} While we know less about teen fathers, they share many of the same risk factors as teen mothers. Teen mothers and fathers are adolescents and face the same developmental challenges as their non-parenting peers, such as developing cognitive and social-emotional capabilities. Furthermore, most children born to adolescent parents are born into poverty, which has a fundamental link with a range of negative outcomes.

Poverty contributes to the causes of adolescent childbearing, which in turn compounds and perpetuates poverty. Eighty-three percent of young women who deliver infants in their teens are poor prior to their pregnancies. The chances are great, therefore, that the children born to teen parents will be raised in poverty.^{xi} Children raised in poverty are less likely to have adequate nutrition, health care, and child development programming, as well as safe, stable, and supportive housing. When multiple risk factors are present, the detrimental effects are compounded.^{xii,xiii,xiv}

The relationships children have with their primary caregivers are the most influential in determining the outcomes of their lives.^{xv,xvi,xvii} All children need healthy, nurturing, stable relationships, and to experience protective factors during early childhood. This will most likely be achieved when both mothers and fathers have security and stability in their own social, emotional, economic, and residential lives. Given the competing dynamics of adolescence and the demands of parenthood, it is incumbent upon families, communities, and society to provide supportive scaffolding to teen parents to ensure their children grow healthy and safe and reach school ready to learn.^{xviii,xix,xx}

Attention to early relationships is key to success in school and in later life. Cognitive development depends upon secure emotional and social development. Evaluations from numerous

comprehensive family support interventions and high quality preschool programs indicate that the children of teen parents and their families benefit greatly from an investment that responds to the complex social and developmental facets of young families.^{xxi,xxii,xxiii,xxiv} Further, there is strong evidence that school-based interventions for adolescent parents and their children with on-site child development programming and case management services can produce positive outcomes for adolescent parents.^{xxv,xxvi,xxvii}

Some children do well without intervention. However, the children of teen parents are more likely than those born to adult women to experience early school failure, adolescent childbearing, homelessness, juvenile delinquency, and incarceration.^{xxviii,xxix} With appropriate and timely interventions, many of these negative outcomes can be prevented.^{xxx} Further, there is considerable evidence that investing in these programs is cost-beneficial and produces substantial public return.^{xxxii,xxxiii}

HTN's Related Value Statements

The HTN Board of Directors has adopted a set of seven value statements, which articulate the core philosophical beliefs of the organization. All of these value statements have relevance to HTN's policy on the children of adolescent parents:

- We believe that all children deserve to grow up in safe, nurturing environments that promote their healthy development. We further recognize the responsibility to address the multiple needs of children of young parents.
- We believe adolescent pregnancy and parenting pose long-term challenges for adolescents, their children, families, and communities.
- We believe youth can make responsible decisions about sexuality, pregnancy and parenting, as well as be effective parents when they have complete, accurate, culturally relevant, age-, gender-, and, developmentally appropriate information, skills, resources, and support.
- We believe that both male and female partners are equally responsible for preventing early pregnancy, as well as supporting, nurturing and parenting their children.
- We believe that effective adolescent pregnancy prevention, pregnancy programs and parenting programs are comprehensive, utilize research-based strategies, demonstrate an understanding and respect for the rights and capabilities of adolescents, and include a range of stake holders in the decision-making, implementation, and evaluation processes. We further believe that identification and evaluation of innovative strategies and promising approaches will serve the field.
- We believe that individuals and organizations in the field must have access to the most current information on research, best practices, and fiscal resources, as well as professional growth opportunities.
- We believe that the involvement of families, communities, practitioners, schools, religious institutions and local, state, regional and national coalitions and networks is essential in addressing the issues of adolescent pregnancy, prevention, and parenting.

Policy

HTN strongly believes that the children of adolescent parents can experience favorable outcomes when adequate, developmentally appropriate, comprehensive support is provided to them and their young families. We believe that adolescent parents are highly motivated to provide better lives for their children and that many more of their vulnerable children will have positive outcomes if the recommendations below are implemented.

HTN makes the following policy recommendations based on our values and currently available evidence of the effectiveness of various strategies.

Policy Recommendations

1. HTN recommends additional resources be allocated by federal, state, and local governments to support programs that improve the health and developmental outcomes of pregnant and parenting adolescents and their children.
2. HTN recommends expansion and replication of evaluated comprehensive programs that support the simultaneous development of pregnant and parenting adolescents and their children as well as foster innovative multi-generational efforts. Resources should be directed at building program capacity and conducting evaluations of these efforts to improve the knowledge base on effective strategies.
3. HTN recommends ongoing professional development, training, supervision, and support on the unique developmental needs of adolescent parents and their children for all providers who serve this population.
4. HTN recommends development and expansion of policies and programs that address racial, ethnic, and social justice in access to health care, affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, quality education, and living wages.
5. HTN recommends programs that care for young families address personal safety issues, trauma, and abuse prevention to ensure safe and secure environments for all families.
6. HTN recommends young families receive comprehensive family support services designed to address their complex needs, build their resilience, and expand their protective factors.
7. HTN recommends use of infant mental health principles in programs that serve adolescent parents and their children. These principles support the parent-child relationship, promote responsive caregiving, acknowledge the role of relationship-focused early intervention, and provide ongoing services for young families.
8. HTN encourages family-based preventive care for the health, well being, and mental health of adolescent mothers, fathers, and their children. This care includes comprehensive home-based postpartum maternal-child health services, access to regular pediatric preventive health care, early identification and treatment for mental health and developmental needs, and promotion of optimal nutrition (including breastfeeding when possible), safety, growth, and development.

9. HTN recommends adolescent parents receive information and clinical services regarding their reproductive health needs, given that secondary pregnancy prevention is critical and many adverse maternal and child outcomes are prevented by the delay of rapid subsequent childbearing.
10. HTN recommends young parents receive support to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education and training, given the factor most closely correlated with positive school outcomes for the child is the level of educational attainment of the child's mother. Every effort must be made by schools and other community institutions to identify pregnant and parenting school-age adolescents and link them to regular and alternative school settings.
11. HTN recommends all children of adolescent parents have access to high quality and stable early education and care that models safe, nurturing, responsible parenting.
12. HTN supports infusion of family literacy activities in all programs that serve the children of adolescent parents to improve school readiness and increase opportunities for eventual academic achievement and economic independence.
13. HTN recommends that, to the extent possible, practitioners assisting young families provide support and build on the strengths of the mother, the father, and both their families.
14. Given the complexity of these issues, HTN recommends the development of comprehensive, community-wide, coordinated systems that address the unique needs of pregnant and parenting adolescents and their children. Such a system would coordinate:
 - the planning and implementation of programmatic options;
 - the outreach and identification of pregnant and parenting teens;
 - informing adolescent parents of their options;
 - a system-wide tracking of services provided with outcomes; and
 - a system-wide review of progress that includes the capacity to adapt to better meet the needs of young families.

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