



# Working with Pregnant and Parenting Teens

Care coordinators can help vulnerable pregnant and parenting teens overcome the hurdles they face in navigating the healthcare system.



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## INTRODUCTION

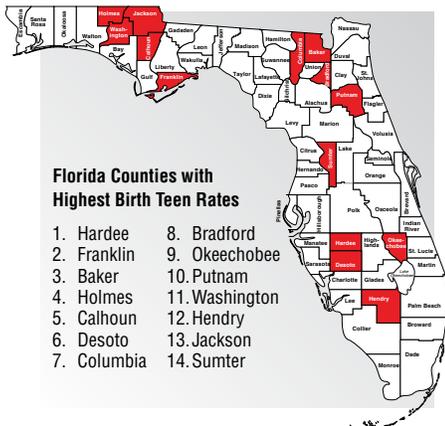
Care coordination is vital in helping teen parents access the necessary services and supports for optimal health. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a road filled with challenges and opportunity. It is a time when the brain is still maturing and risky behaviors are often the norm. For many pregnant teens, childhood sexual abuse and violent relationships add further complexity to this period of adolescence. Histories of trauma impact all aspects of their care and require the guidance and support of extended families, schools, health care providers, and communities as they begin to parent a child. By investing in resources that support access to health care, education equity, parenting, workforce development, and quality child care, we expand the capacity to address the many hurdles faced by teen parents, allowing an opportunity for a brighter future.

Care coordinators can help vulnerable pregnant and parenting teens overcome the hurdles they face in navigating the healthcare system. This assistance can increase the teens' compliance with prenatal care, link the family with support services ranging from home visiting programs to trauma treatment, and help improve health outcomes for the teen parent and the child.

## TEEN PREGNANCY IN FLORIDA

While Florida's data reflects a significant decline in the number of teen births over the past decade, almost 13,000 babies were born to mothers aged 19 years and under during 2014. Florida's provisional data for 2014 indicates a teen birth rate of 21.7, lower than the national rate. However, 14 rural counties in Florida have a rate greater than 40, which is nearly double the state rate<sup>1</sup> (see highlighted map).

Each teen birth represents a unique challenge for both the teen and her baby. Young families often live in communities struggling with economic inequality, community violence, and trauma. The overall link of teen pregnancy to the economic issue of poverty is often noted with co-occurring housing instability, limited access to health care, food insecurity, and decreased levels of education. These complex issues impact overall well-being and require the specific attention of healthcare providers.





## Potential Challenges to Overcome

Teens in general, present their own set of challenges regarding health care and their ability to follow through with recommendations. Pregnant and parenting teens often have a history of adversity or are currently experiencing situations that negatively impact their motivation to seek health care for themselves or their child. The care coordinator may be faced with difficulties in engaging the young parent and will need to consider several factors to understand the teen's needs and perspective. A review of the literature regarding pregnant and parenting teens shows that outcomes vary based on age, socio-environmental factors, and systems of support.

Being responsive to the needs of teen parents requires a sense of their developmental age.

Knowing the age and the developmental level of the parent is key to providing essential services for young families. Questions to consider include:

- How old are you? What grade are you in school, or what grade did you last complete? (Does age match with grade level?)
- Are you receiving any extra help or special classes in school? (Are there possible learning disabilities or developmental delays?)

Being responsive to the needs of teen parents requires knowing not just their chronological age, but also a sense of their developmental age. Some teens are child-like in understanding health information and follow-through, while others are more capable of processing information and moving forward as young adults.

Other key questions to ask the teen over time include:

- Have there been any significant changes/losses in your home/family/community?
- Do you have someone who you can turn to if you are having a problem, worry, or bad day?<sup>2</sup>

Attention to both physical and mental health, as well as risk and protective factors, provides a starting point for the essential care of teen parents and their children.

## KEY AREAS OF FOCUS FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS SERVING TEEN PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

### Health Issues

Both the quality and quantity of care play a key role in addressing the health needs of pregnant and parenting teens and their babies. Establishment of a primary care provider that is sensitive to the needs of the adolescent over time is the foundation for improving health outcomes.

- In the United States, pregnant adolescents are at increased risk for complications such as anemia, poor maternal weight gain, toxemia, increased mortality, and premature delivery. Younger teens are less likely to initiate early prenatal care, with less than half of pregnant 10-14 year olds beginning prenatal care in the first trimester; they are also more likely to deliver low birth weight infants. Socio-environmental and biological factors both play a role.<sup>3</sup>
- Nearly one in five teen births is a repeat birth. **Large disparities exist in repeat teen births. The use of the most effective contraceptive methods postpartum was reported by fewer than one out of four teen mothers.**<sup>4</sup>

### History of Violence, Abuse, Trauma

Specialized, trauma-focused intervention and treatment services are critical resources when serving pregnant and parenting teens.

- Interpersonal violence is intertwined with adolescent pregnancy. Extreme violence and risk of homicide is higher for women aged younger than 20 years.<sup>5</sup>
- Anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues can impact the teen's healthcare compliance and utilization.<sup>6</sup>
- Research shows that adversity increases the stress hormone, cortisol, and can cross the placenta to impact the developing fetus.<sup>7</sup>
- Teens' own trauma histories impact their capacity to parent and their ability to keep their children safe.<sup>8</sup>

As many as two-thirds of young women who become pregnant were sexually and/or physically abused at some point in their lives, either as children, in their current relationships, or both according to several studies.<sup>9</sup>



## Children of Teen Parents

Attention to the health and developmental needs of these children is an ongoing process in partnership with the young parent. Continuity of pediatric care, developmental screening and assessments, quality child care, and home visiting services can serve as protective factors for those most at risk.

- The children of teen parents have increased risk for developmental delays and poor health outcomes.<sup>11</sup>
- For young children from low-income families, participation in very high-quality, center-based, early education programs has been demonstrated to enhance child cognitive and social development.<sup>12</sup>

## Educational Progress

Continued enrollment in an educational program is key to positive outcomes for the teen parent and school readiness for the young child. All providers should encourage ongoing school enrollment throughout

the teen's pregnancy and until the time of high school graduation. **The recommendation to stay in school often carries more weight when coming from the healthcare team and should be reinforced over time.** Specialized school programs typically work hand-in-hand with healthcare providers to promote health literacy and compliance with ongoing medical care.

- For young children from families experiencing significant adversity, two-generation programs that simultaneously provide direct support for parents and high-quality, center-based care and education for the children can have positive impacts on both.<sup>10</sup>
- Every Florida school district administers a [Teenage Parent \(TAP\) Program](#) which entitles each pregnant and parenting teen an opportunity to continue in regular academic classes, in addition to receiving instruction in child growth and development, nutrition, and parenting skills. TAP programs also offer ancillary services such as health and social services, child care, and transportation.

## GOALS FOR YOUNG FAMILIES IN MANAGED CARE

Connecting the teen and child to services in the community impacts their overall health. Programs such as parenting programs, early intervention, quality child care, and therapeutic treatment can assist in addressing the variety of needs and promote healing from childhood trauma. Other goals for young families might include:

- Establishing primary care for teen and baby.
- Referring the teen for prenatal care with a provider sensitive to the needs of adolescents.
- Ensuring that the teen receives education on women's health and reproductive issues to include basic anatomy, the birth experience, methods of family planning, sexually transmitted infections, and relationships without violence.
- Ensuring that the teen is referred to providers who are experienced in addressing the impact of chronic trauma on the prenatal and parenting experience.
- Ensuring that the teen is educated about how interpersonal violence can effect her relationships.
- Paying attention to the mother's mental health status during pregnancy and considering postpartum depression as a possibility. Knowing community resources for mental health or trauma treatment.
- Ensuring that family planning is discussed prior to the birth and a plan is in place to decrease rapid subsequent births.
- Encouraging primary care providers to promote a strong attachment relationship between the teen mother and baby.
- Ensuring that primary providers support the mother's understanding of appropriate expectations for the baby's development and guidance on what is coming next.
- Ensuring that immunizations are up to date for the baby and ongoing well-baby care.
- Promoting educational attainment for the teen and quality child care for the baby through referral to programs, as necessary.



Engaging young families can be challenging. Learn to be patient, and think about the life experiences of this young family. Recognize the signs of trauma: easily distracted, impulsive behavior, failure to plan or follow instructions, rage and aggression, and poor coping skills.

## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT YOUNG FAMILIES

### Dual Development

- Attend to the dual developmental needs of both the teen parent and baby.
- Accept the young parents where they are. Know that any progress may come in small increments.
- Consider the developmental level of the pregnant or parenting teen. How should you present and share important medical or community resource information?
- Focus on baby's development. Is the baby getting what he/she needs during critical periods of development? What referrals can be made for additional services?

### Approach

- Respect the parents for what they know about their child. Ask for observations and concerns. Share the teen's excitement about the new baby.
- Consider when to intervene, when to step back, and when to provide guidance and support.
- Use teachable moments when the parent is ready to receive information about her health care and the care of her child.
- Identify and reinforce strengths that the teen brings to the new role as parent. Let them know that you care about their progress over time. End the conversation on a positive note.
- Stress the importance of the adolescent parent caring for the child even if other adults are involved in the caregiving.
- Provide positive reinforcement by praising adolescents who are successful (e.g., graduating from high school, breastfeeding, keeping up with immunizations).

### Health

- Encourage the continuation of healthy lifestyles that may have been initiated during pregnancy. Information about the effects of maternal substance use and cigarette smoking on infant and child health and development is important to provide.
- Assess the risks of domestic violence and mental health issues, particularly depression, during and after pregnancy. Intimate partner violence is a significant problem among young mothers.

### Communication

- Sending a text may get the attention of the teen when other ways of communication are not successful. Appointment reminders are often helpful via text to encourage compliance.
- Be consistent in your follow-up contacts.
- Help the teen stay organized and record upcoming medical appointments for the teen and baby. Send reminders for contraceptive prescriptions.
- Use every opportunity to expand on the importance of social-emotional development and early brain development.
- Allow the parent to safely express any concerns. You may be one of the few people that they can talk to about questions and concerns.

### Service Provision

- Pregnant and/or parenting teens should be flagged in the database for a review to determine if there is a need for coordination of the teen and child's care.
- Assume trauma has played a role in the teen's life. Consider the impact of trauma in understanding risky behaviors, health care utilization and compliance; connect with trauma resources.
- Build relationships with service providers in the community that address the specialized needs of teen parents and their children.
- Encourage a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to caring for parenting adolescents by using community resources such as social services, home visitation programs, and WIC.
- Emphasize the importance of completing high school, pursuing higher education or vocational training.
- Refer to the early childhood system of care resource guide for appropriate referrals for teen parents.
- Identify barriers to attending healthcare visits. Utilize text reminders of appointments, if available. Always ask about plans for transportation to appointments.
- Be familiar with state and local resources for teen parents.



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