Advocating for Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents: Implications for School Counselors

A Research Paper

Presented to the faculty of Adler Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling in Psychotherapy

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April 2011
Abstract

Pregnant and parenting adolescents who graduate from high school and receive their high school diploma can be equally successful as their peers who postponed childbearing until later. However, students who are raising children face many challenges that make high school completion very difficult. Pregnant and parenting adolescents face many obstacles such as the restrictions of attendance policies, lack of childcare, and limited support. In Minnesota, there are resources, such as Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting and Children’s Home Society and Family Services are available for parenting adolescents. School counselors are able to support, advocate for and encourage pregnant and parenting adolescents to reach academic success and be self-sufficient parents.
Advocating for Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents: Implications for School Counselors

According to Minnesota trends, teenage pregnancy is on the rise. In 2005, Minnesota reported 7,890 pregnancies to girls between the ages of 15 to 19 (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009). Of those females who are pregnant and parenting, only half are actually obtaining their high school diplomas. Adolescent parents without the proper education may have a difficult time supporting their families and often need to rely on government assistance.

A large number of pregnant and parenting adolescents are simply invisible to overworked school administrators. Instead of advocating for these students, some schools are choosing to ignore the “problem” while parenting adolescents are dropping out of school at alarming rates (S. Fust, personal communication. April 30, 2010). In order to reduce dropout rates among pregnant and parenting adolescents, schools must provide better support. “If a young mother completes her education and delays having additional children, research indicates she may do as well as her peers who postpone childbearing until later” (Fust, 2010). If pregnant and parenting adolescents are not enrolled in a parenting program, then who is there to support and guide these students? If involved in the lives of pregnant and parenting adolescents, school counselors can play an integral part in their success. They can offer these adolescents emotional support, connections to outside resources and individualized graduation plans. Tremendous success has been found in school-based programs for adolescent parents and their young children (Klerman, 2004). However, not all schools or even school districts offer such programs, and adolescent parents may choose not to attend schools that offer parenting programs.
Comprehensive Guidebook

The school counselor’s guidebook in Appendix A was created to for school counselors to use when working with this special population. It provides them with basic knowledge of adolescents who are either pregnant or parenting. It includes resources for challenges these adolescents face and best practices for school counselors. It also provides resources that school counselors can access and materials they can use in their work with pregnant and parenting adolescents. If these guidelines are implemented in counseling departments, the drop-out rates of parenting students should decrease.

The Importance of the Issue

Some school personnel have a really difficult time when it comes to working with pregnant and parenting adolescents. They often believe that making accommodations for pregnant and parenting adolescents will only encourage adolescents to parent while in high school (National Women's Law Center, 2009b, p. 3). There are a number of reasons schools should be investing time and energy into this special population. One of the concerns school administrators have expressed is that if they give special treatment to pregnant and parenting adolescents, then other adolescents will want to get pregnant too. This notion that seeing pregnant and parenting adolescents given special accommodations causes others to want to parent themselves is a myth. “At the schools that offer supportive services to pregnant and parenting students and treat them fairly and equally, pregnancy has not proven to be ‘contagious’” (National Women's Law Center, 2009b, p. 3).

School Ready

One of the main reasons school personnel should stand behind this special population is to support the adolescents’ children. The children of adolescent parents will be students
themselves in a matter of time. It would be in the school’s best interest to be proactive and invest in the future of these children so they will be school ready.

“Children born to teen mothers often do not have an even start to life. They are more likely to grow up in a poor and mother-only family, to live in a poor or underclass neighborhood, and to experience high risks to both their health status and potential school achievement” (Teen Parent Child Care Quality Improvement Project, 2005, p. 2).

If schools choose to not invest in pregnant and parenting adolescents, they could find themselves faced with future generations of students who have cognitive delays, behavior problems, and repeated cycles of adolescent parenting.

Economics

Most parenting adolescents require some sort of economic assistance provided by the government, services that are funded by taxpayers (S. Fust, personal communication, April 30, 2010). It is estimated that national teen childbearing costs taxpayers over $7 billion each year (Larson, 2006). Adolescent parents who drop out of high school often will receive lower paying jobs and rely on economic assistance for longer periods of time (Oxford & Lee, 2010). If an adolescent parent finishes high school, she is more likely to find a higher paying job and to be better able to support her family without relying on economic assistance, saving tax payers’ money.

Adolescent Development

Providing support to pregnant and parenting adolescents will help them to be successful in school and to become productive members of society. “Adolescents are typically unprepared emotionally, cognitively, and financially to assume the role of parent and as a result both the adolescent and her child are at an enhanced risk for adverse developmental and behavioral
outcomes” (Coleman, 2006). Most adolescents who are pregnant are not ready to have a child and do not realize what parenthood entails (Bender, 2008).

Human brains do not fully develop until the mid-twenties which means that adolescents are not fully able to solve problems, make rational decisions, or plan for the future. Because their brains are not fully developed, adolescents tend to be present-focused and use concrete thinking. They are also not able to handle social pressures, instinctual urges, assessment of risk and consequences and stress as well as adults (Fust, 2006). Adolescent development must also be considered when working with the pregnant and parenting population. Specific behaviors such as problem solving, communication, and stress relief can be modeled by school counselors and other school staff members (Fust, 2006).

Support System

Many adolescent parents believe the only way they can go to school and raise a child is to pursue an education at an alternative school. While this is one way to obtain a diploma, these schools do not necessarily create college-ready students (S. Fust, personal communication, April 30, 2010). Adolescent parents can choose what type of school they want to attend. If a parenting adolescent decides to stay at her current school, by law the school has to allow her to do so. The students who decide to stay in mainstream schools will need extra support to complete the graduation requirements. A school that does not have a parent-based program will also not have case managers, so the responsibility lies with the school counselor to support and advocate for these students. Some girls report an increase in motivation to continue with school once they become pregnant, they just lack the support to do so (Shanok & Miller, 2007). Pregnant and parenting adolescents will need assistance connecting with outside resources and managing their school work load.
Title IX

People hear Title IX and often think of athletics. However, Title IX also protects pregnant and parenting adolescents by requiring that all students are treated fairly regardless of their parenting status. It also protects the student from being discriminated against while pregnant or experiencing any pregnancy-related conditions.

Some of Title IX’s requirements include the following:

A school may not exclude a student from school or extracurricular activities because she is pregnant, has had a child, has had an abortion, or is recovering from any of these conditions.

Absences due to pregnancy or childbirth must be excused for as long as they are deemed medically necessary by the student’s doctor, after which the student must be reinstated to the status, she held when the leave began and must be given an opportunity to make up the work she missed.

Any special services for temporarily disabled students (such as homebound instruction or tutoring) must also be provided for pregnant students” (National Women’s Law Center, 2007, p. 2).

School counselors should become familiar with the rights of pregnant and parenting adolescents. It is the role of the counselor to educate faculty and advocate for the students when their rights are being violated. Schools are required to have a Title IX coordinator that can assist with any clarifications or complete any complaint investigations. (See Appendix A, p. 6)
Barriers to Graduation

Academics

Becoming pregnant during adolescence presents many hardships, one of them being completing one’s education. Many young parents have already experienced a disconnection with their school and education prior to becoming pregnant (Domenico & Jones, 2007). Poor grades and poor attendance may be an indication of a disconnection with school. Many adolescent females who became pregnant were already experiencing academic difficulties in school and therefore were already at risk of dropping out before they got pregnant (Domenico & Jones, 2007). When students do not feel connected to their education, or do not possess long term educational goals, they are less likely to put forth the necessary work and commitment to completing their education. Long term goals and positive relationships will motivate the pregnant and parenting adolescent to complete her education.

Attendance

In addition to experiencing academic struggles, pregnant and parenting adolescents also face the limitations of attendance policies. Attendance is often times not monitored on a case by case basis. Once the student has missed too many days, they fall behind and are unable to graduate when anticipated. Pregnant and parenting students are found to have more success when their attendance is closely monitored (United States General Accounting Office, 1995).

According to Title IX

If a student has to miss school for reasons related to pregnancy or childbirth, the time missed must be considered a justified leave of absence for as long as is deemed medically necessary by the student’s doctor. At the time the student returns to school, she/he must
be reinstated to the status she/he held when the leave began (National Women’s Law Center, 2009a, p. 1). Legally the school must allow the student to miss class for doctor’s appointments as well as take the necessary time off of school for maternity leave. With that being said, many schools still do not abide by this law and at times legal action must be taken.

Title IX protects the rights of the students while pregnant and on maternity leave, but there is little mentioned about the absences that occur after the child is born. Adolescent mothers have expressed the difficulties of being up all night with a newborn and then being in school all day (Lall, 2007). These students are balancing school, work, and homework along with raising a child which can become very exhausting. In addition, there are times when the child may be sick and/or needs doctor’s appointments. If a parent is fortunate to find childcare, there may also be times that the childcare is closed. In order for pregnant and parenting adolescents to be academically successful, their absences must be excused for these times as well.

(See Appendix A, p. 6)

**Transportation**

In addition to difficulties with attendance, one of the biggest barriers to education is transportation. If the adolescent parent is not able to financially afford her own transportation, then she must rely on the bus services offered by the school or public transportation. The student will also need to get the child to daycare unless she is enrolled in a School-Based Parent Program where the parent can take the child with her. Infants may not be allowed to ride the buses provided by the school, so the parent needs to find an alternative mode of transportation. The location of the childcare in relation to the school and the adolescent’s home must also be considered (S. Fust, personal communication, April 30, 2011). Traveling to and from school is
something students who do not have children do not have to worry about; however, it is a big challenge for those who do have children.

**Childcare**

Childcare also poses a major difficulty to parenting adolescents. Most often, adolescent parents are limited to working part-time due to being enrolled full-time in school, making childcare very difficult to afford. There are childcare programs offered through state and county assistance, but adolescents may have limited knowledge of how to access these programs. Childcare assistance may have stipulations, such as earning too high of an income, which renders the parent would ineligible to receive assistance. The options of childcare located near the adolescent’s home and/or school and of high quality may also be limited. The parent may find that the childcare that is affordable to her, to lack the necessary quality. These are some of the many limitations associated with finding affordable and quality care for the child.

**Other Obstacles**

While factors like childcare and transportation are major obstacles in completing a high school education, adolescent parents face many other issues as well. Homework is typically very difficult for these students. The time outside of school is spent working and taking care of their children. This leaves very little extra time to study which will have a negative effect on the students’ grades.

Another issue that adolescent parents face is isolation from their peers. Friends may distance themselves, peers may spread rumors about them, and the relationship with the child’s father may be strained. Their former support system may be diminished completely. The pressures of raising a child contribute to poor self-esteem and strained relationship, and increase
the risk of mental health problems (Leishman, 2004). The normal social pressures of high school are intensified making dropping out of high school seem like the only reasonable option.

Some pregnant and parenting adolescents are faced with homelessness. They may not have a permanent home for themselves and their children, so they have to stay in homeless shelters. With that also comes frequent moving from shelters or temporary homes. The location of the homeless shelter or temporary housing, combined with lack of transportation may make it even more difficult to get to school. Moving schools a lot could affect their support system and access to resources (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

**Best Practices for Working with Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents**

**Building a Relationship**

The first step in working with pregnant and parenting adolescents is to build a trusting relationship with a caring counselor. Developing a close relationship and maintaining this bond throughout the student’s time in school is one of the most important aspects in the adolescent’s success in school. Another is postponing subsequent births (Klerman, 2004; Schafer, Jost, Pederson & Lair, 2008). The adult-student relationship needs to be central and equal. The success of the relationship may be related to the degree of acceptance the student feels from the counselor (Bogat, Liang, Rigol-Dahn, 2006). Once the pregnant and parenting adolescent has established a relationship with a school counselor, she has someone to turn to when in need of advocacy and support. A school counselor will be able to closely monitor her path to graduation and help her define future goals. The relationship can also instill a sense of optimism in her future (Klaw & Rhodes, 1995).

According to Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting, when working with teens, adults must:
Avoid judging the adolescent parent as “bad” when she behaves immaturity
- Be good role models
- Develop caring relationships with adolescent parents
- Be concrete and give lots of examples

Never assume they understand things in the same way the counselor understands
them. They need to have conversations, clarify, repeat and ask questions (Fust, 2006,
p. 11).

Flexible, Quality Schooling

Pregnant and parenting adolescents have many hurdles over which to jump in order to
achieve graduation from high school. One way to bring this goal within their reach is to provide
these students with a flexible class schedule (Fust, 2006). Title IX puts laws in place to prevent
schools from discriminating against pregnant and parenting adolescents. Under these laws,
students are allowed to take the medically appropriate time off from school (National Women’s
Law Center, 2009a). If the school provides home schooling services for students who are
temporarily disabled, then they must also provide them for students who are on maternity leave.
Homebound instruction for a student on maternity leave will help the student to be caught up
with the rest her peers (S. Fust, personal communication, April 30, 2010).

Providing pregnant and parenting students with other options such as home schooling or
summer school is another way to allow flexibility in their schedules (Center for Assessment and
Policy Development, 1997). Modifying attendance policies to better support the student will
increase the likelihood of the student completing her graduation requirements. The student will
need to miss school for medical appointments and childcare needs; allowing the student to make
up the missed time by working at home will help to alleviate some stress and promote
completion. “For all excused absences students should be allowed to complete all assignments and tests missed during the absence and receive full credit if the tasks are completed within a reasonable time” (National Women's Law Center, 2007, p. 2).

**Comprehensive Services**

Most schools do not have a parent-based program located on-site which limits the types of services they are able to offer pregnant and parenting adolescents. Many of these students need more than just educational support. As an advocate for these adolescents, providing community resources will help them reach success and provide quality parenting for their children. Comprehensive services reduce subsequent births as well (Omar, Fowler, McLanahan, 2008). Services that are helpful to pregnant and parenting students include: healthcare, childcare, transportation, financial services, counseling and parenting skills training (Fust, 2006). Comprehensive services should include depression screening and treatment because of the amount of stress and lack of support associated with adolescent pregnancy (Thomas & Looney, 2004). Because of the risk of post-partum depression, counselors should have mental health services to which they can refer pregnant and parenting adolescents too (Shanok & Miller, 2005; Shanok & Miller, 2007a). Researching local services will help school counselors to make appropriate referrals. An example of such services is contained in Appendix A, p. 19).

**Individualized Graduation Plans**

Providing an individualized graduation plan for a pregnant and parenting student will help her to reach her goals (National Women's Law Center, 2007). The first step is to find out what goals the student has for her future and what career paths she is interested in. After establishing her goals, it is important to research what educational requirements the field may require and explore post-secondary options. The next step would be to take inventory of the
credits that the student has already obtained, determining if she is on track to graduate or needs to recover credits.

Once the school counselor knows where the student is in relation to graduation, he or she can more adequately make plans for when the student is still pregnant, while she is on maternity leave, and once she returns back to school. At this point the school counselor will also want to look into aligning other options such as home schooling, after school programs, and summer school depending on what will best fit the young parent’s needs.

Once the student feels comfortable in the relationship, the school counselor will want to establish communication with her teachers. Having an open dialogue about absences and work will help the completion process go more smoothly. The teachers need to be on board with the graduation plan; it most likely will result in some extra effort and time on their part. Involving the pregnant and parenting student’s parents in the graduation plan will provide the necessary support at home. Reaching the goal of graduation requires support from many different areas. (See Appendix A, p. 12)

**Minors Consent for Health Care**

School counselors should familiarize themselves with the minors consent laws for health care in their state. Once the school counselor is familiar with the laws, they can better advise students and provide them with correct information. Minor consent laws are very specific when it comes to receiving health care under the age of 18 (Cleveland, 2008). If a student becomes pregnant, she may need to know what kind of services she can receive with or without parental consent. There may also be a student who needs to be emancipated from his/her parents, so having law services the school counselor can either refer to or request information from, is
helpful. Minor consent laws change from time to time so it is important to stay up-to-date. (See Appendix A, p. 17)

**The Adlerian Approach**

When working with pregnant and parenting adolescents it is important to be aware of their feelings of inferiority. Feelings of inferiority arise when the adolescent is discouraged. Inferiority feelings are your psychological weaknesses. When a child feels discouraged, he/she will act out or misbehave. Adler believes that striving for superiority is one way to attempt to overcome feelings of inferiority, everyone wants to be superior (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Being a parent is very challenging and she can develop feelings of failure when situations become stressful. She will be comparing herself to other mothers who she perceives to be more skilled and better equipped to parent.

To cope with the feelings of inferiority, the pregnant and parenting adolescent should compensate with social interest (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Social interest is based on the concept that each individual is a social being. In order to have a feeling contentment with one’s life, a person needs to feel a part of a family or community. When you contribute to the “greater good” you are instilled with feelings of belonging.

The school counselor should help facilitate opportunities of social interest. If there are multiple students who are pregnant or parenting in the school they can provide support to each other. They can teach their fellow students parenting skills and pass along resources. The relationship between the counselor and the student will also help cultivate social interest.

**Outreach Efforts**

In addition to advocating for the pregnant and parenting students who are currently enrolled, the school counselor should also conduct special outreach efforts to re-enroll students
who drop out (National Women's Law Center, 2007). Once these students are contacted, the school can offer them the same supportive services that are offered to the currently enrolled parenting adolescents. The school counselor should separately track graduation and dropout rates of pregnant and parenting adolescents. School personnel should conduct a survey of the students who have dropped out to give them a better indication of the kind of support these students need to graduate. Once obtaining this information, the school can tailor support services to the students’ needs.

**Resources in Minnesota**

Two main sources of information for Minnesota’s pregnant and parenting adolescent population is, Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting (MOAPPP) and Children’s Home Society and Family Services (CHSFS). Both organizations provide unlimited resources and referrals to services that support the work of pregnant and parenting adolescents. The staff members of these groups are supportive in any efforts to gain more knowledge and provide the information necessary to become an advocate.

**Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention, and Parenting**

Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting is a science-based, member supported organization that provides a wide variety of resources for professionals, policy makers, media, parents of adolescents and adolescents themselves. The three main goals of MOAPPP are to promote adolescent sexual health, prevent adolescent pregnancy, and gain support for adolescent parents (MOAPPP, 2011).

Within MOAPPP is an advocacy network that reinforces public policies which prevent pregnancy and provide support for adolescent parents. The organization also finances further
research and promotes legislation in advancing public policies. MOAPPP also works to increase public awareness of the needs and strengths of adolescent parents and their children.

The website (www.moappp.com) provides research articles on adolescents, fact sheets, and community resources. MOAPPP also hosts trainings on a variety of topics from “Meeting the Unique Needs of Adolescent Mothers and Fathers” to “Understanding Adolescent Risk-Taking Behavior” (MOAPPP, 2011). These trainings are provided for individuals working with adolescents. For instance, a February 2010 training “Meeting the Unique Needs of Adolescent Mothers and Fathers” included information on national and state trends, adolescent development, and competing developmental agendas of teens and babies. Other information included the best practices for working with teens and the importance of being an advocate and mentor for adolescent parents.

MOAPPP is a huge supporter of individuals who work with pregnant and parenting adolescents by offering trainings and resources. A school counselor would benefit from attending the trainings that are offered. The website has a list of local resources that school counselors can have access to and use as referrals. Other information on their website that might be helpful for school counselors are Title IX documents and current research regarding pregnant and parenting adolescents. There are also meetings for individuals who work with these students to find support and alternative methods.

**Children’s Home Society and Family Services (CHSFS)**

Children’s Home Society and Family Services offers adoption services, early childhood care and education, child and family support, and counseling. Their mission is to “give every child security, opportunity, permanency and a loving family” (CHSFS, 2011). Through their
services they offer support for families, new family formation and education. There are also parent support services to help alleviate family stress.

Of the many services that CHSFS offers one of the most beneficial is pregnancy counseling. “At Children’s Home Society & Family Services, our pregnancy counselors provide women experiencing a pregnancy, as well their partners, family members and friends, with vital information and support during the decision-making process” (CHSFS, 2011). During a meeting, the pregnancy counselor will assist in sorting through options and finding a solution that best fits. They provide decision-making and budget planning tools. Pregnancy counselors will also help to connect the pregnant individual to many different resources such as housing or medical assistance.

CHSFS is an important resource to utilize where a school counselor is presented with a pregnant adolescent. They can assist and provide information as well as support the student during a very stressful time. CHSFS will also support the parents of the pregnant adolescent. Pregnancy counselors will meet with the pregnant individual at a location that is most comfortable, which includes coming to her school to meet with her during the school day. When a school counselor has a pregnant student who is unsure of what they would like to do, they can refer the student to CHSFS. CHSFS can also be a resource to the school counselor when they would like more information surrounding adoption. (See Appendix A, p. 19)

Conclusion

Only half of adolescent mothers are completing their high school education and earning a high school diploma (Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010). There are multiple barriers that cause an adolescent mother to drop out including lack of support, child care, attendance, and
transportation. Pregnant and parenting adolescents also lack the support to complete their education and work toward future goals.

There are still many issues surrounding working with pregnant and parenting students. Future considerations should include systematic responses to the needs of these students, possibly examining alternative methods of instruction and assessment (Center for Assessment and Policy Development, 1997). Emphasis also needs to be put on gaining the support of school administration. While this paper did not address the specific needs of young fathers, there is a need for future research regarding their unique needs. Research supports father involvement in a child’s life has positive outcomes. When given adequate support young fathers can play an important role in their children’s life (Healthy Teen Network, 2011).

School counselors can play an integral part in the success of pregnant and parenting adolescents by providing guidance and advocating for their legal rights. They can also help by aligning resources to assist the students in their educational endeavors. Building a trusting relationship with the a pregnant and parenting student is one of the most important things a school counselor can do. When a student feels as though she has support and guidance she is more likely to set and reach her goals.
References


