



Review article

Adolescent Parenting in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

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 A B S T R A C T

This review presents data from studies that report on adolescent parents as part of larger neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) parent populations, as well as studies where adolescent parents are given central consideration. A systematic search for English publications from 1990 onward relevant to adolescent parenting in the NICU was conducted. Most studies reporting on adolescent parents focus on parental stress or parenting practices in the NICU. A few studies examine parent–staff communication, parental needs, and parent intervention programs. One study presents a qualitative examination of teenage mothers' experiences in the NICU. Areas for further research include experiences of younger adolescent parents, adolescent fathers, and same-sex partners; issues unique to adolescent parents; and support programs for adolescent parents in the NICU.

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**IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION**

This review of adolescent parenting in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) includes studies that report on a proportion of infants admitted to the NICU who are born to adolescent parents, as well as studies where the focus is solely on investigating adolescent parents in the NICU.

For many expectant parents, the birth of a healthy newborn is a celebratory occasion. The event marks the transition to parenthood. Yet, for the parent of the child who is born premature and/or critically ill requiring care in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), birth might harbor anxiety and uncertainty [1]. Preterm birth is the leading cause of neonatal mortality worldwide. It is associated with increased risks for health problems and neurodevelopmental complications [2]. In Canada between 2006 and 2009, 11% of all infants were admitted to an intensive care unit within their first month of life [3].

In addition to the fragile condition of the NICU newborn, the hospital environment itself has been frequently cited as a source of stress for parents [1,4]. Although the experiences of parents with infants in the NICU are well documented in the literature [5–7], adolescent parents tend to be absent from the majority of

studies [4]. Arguably, more emphasis should be placed on this parent population given that adolescent compared with older mothers have been reported to be more likely to give birth to children requiring NICU care, even when controlling for socioeconomic factors [8–12].

Adolescent parents are a distinctive and potentially vulnerable population. For adolescent parents, their transition to parenthood occurs during a time of physical, emotional, and cognitive development [13–15]. Adolescents might be less prepared for child-rearing because of deficiencies in economic resources, shortages of social supports, lower levels of education, and immature coping strategies [14,16]. More so, teenage pregnancy is associated with mental health concerns such as addiction and depression [17]. Adolescent parents might be less interactive with their children, tend to adopt a more negative parenting style, and have unrealistic expectations of their children's development [18,19]. There is, however, considerable individual and group variability in adolescent parenting appreciable within and between different cultural contexts [20]. Resources available to teenage parents vary considerably dependent on family, community, and other social factors [21]. The psychosocial complexity of adolescence, coupled

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with the challenges of parenting a premature or sick infant, renders consideration of adolescent parenting in the NICU particularly salient.

The aim of this critical review was to explore the literature pertaining to adolescent parenting in the NICU. We include studies that report specifically on adolescent parents as part of larger NICU parent populations and studies where adolescent NICU parents are given central consideration.

Methods

A search was conducted using the Web of Knowledge (includes MEDLINE), Embase, PubMed, and CINAHL databases with the following MeSH terms: [teen* OR adolescent] AND [NICU OR neonatal intensive care] AND [parent OR mother OR father]. The search produced a total of 1,586 results. Literature published from 1990 onward was retrieved, given the paucity of earlier research on adolescent parents in the NICU. Articles were reviewed manually for relevance by both authors. For the purpose of this summary, adolescents are individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 years, as per the World Health Organization guidelines on adolescent health [22]. Studies were excluded if they were non-English; their focus was exclusively on NICU infant outcomes; or, if the researchers did not include analyses specific to adolescent parents. After exclusion, 22 articles were retained (Figure 1).

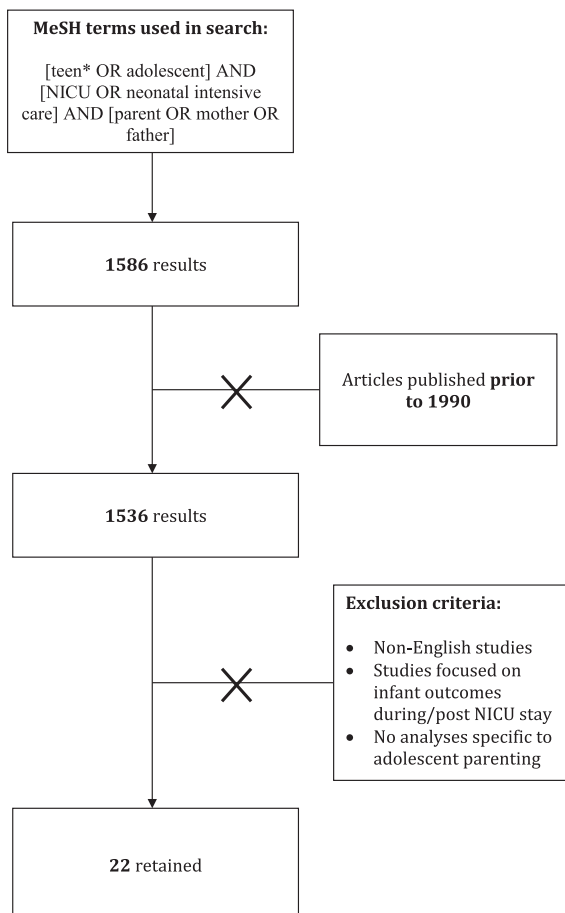


Figure 1. Retrieval of publications.

Adolescent parenting in the neonatal intensive care unit

From a review of the literature, only one qualitative study of teenage mothers' experiences in the NICU was found. The largest concentration of studies focused on parental stress and/or anxiety in the NICU. A number of studies report on observed parenting practices among adolescent parents. In a grouping of studies, NICU parental intervention programs were examined. Table 1 provides a brief summary of the studies discussed in the review.

Experiences of adolescent parents in the neonatal intensive care unit. Health care professionals need to have insights into their patient–family experiences. Generally, such understandings are gained through qualitative research. In New Zealand, Bocock [43] explored the experiences of four adolescent mothers whose infants required admission to an NICU. She used qualitative methods, such as interview and thematic analysis, inspired by the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.

Like older mothers, teen mothers might experience the NICU as an emotional roller coaster [43]. Varied, conflicting, and extreme emotions seem to arise during the separation of mothers from their babies in the foreign medical technological environment of the NICU. Experiences of separation–togetherness, belonging–exclusion, and connection–reconnection foreseeably all factor into mothers' experiences. Like older mothers, teen moms express a need to engage in mothering activities that might be facilitated or compromised by hospital staff and unit policies [43–45]. Because adolescent mothers generally exhibit a limited developmental state on giving birth to a preterm infant [46], medical staff might need to facilitate engagement between child and mother for the becoming of an adolescent mother as a mother [43].

It would seem from this research that teenage mothers, despite their developmental stage, might have similar experiences to those of older mothers reported elsewhere in the literature. Critically, it is unclear whether experiential aspects of NICU care that are unique to teen parents were missed in the study by Bocock, as she focused quite broadly on teen's experiences of the neonatal unit. In other words, experiences that might be more unique to teens, such as “being mothered” as a mother, come through in a cursory capacity from the presented experiential material. Clearly such a small, yet broad, qualitative study limited to mothers only gives us a glimpse into possible adolescent parent experiences. The chosen methodology also precludes generalization. Finally, it is unclear whether a similar description would be in keeping with teenage mothers from other sociocultural contexts.

Adolescent parent stress and anxiety in the neonatal intensive care unit. Adolescent parents might experience significant emotional distress from issues such as perceived parenting criticism, inadequate partner support, intimate partner violence, and financial resource strain [24,47,48]. Such distress might impair the establishment of the parent–child relationships leading teen parents to have less confidence in their own parenting abilities and even less acceptance of their own children [49]. Since parental stress and anxiety might be a part of the NICU experience, a number of researchers have focused on studying these psychological constructs in adolescent NICU parents.

An American study by Bell [23] focused specifically on adolescent mothers using a NICU-specific stress instrument, the

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