

Pregnancy Intentions among Expectant Adolescent Couples

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ABSTRACT

Study Objective: To examine the self-reported pregnancy intentions of the male partners of expectant adolescent mothers, the accuracy of adolescent mothers' perceptions of their partner's pregnancy intentions, and the concordance between young mothers' and fathers' pregnancy intentions.

Design: This cross-sectional pilot study collected interview data from expectant adolescent mothers and their male partners.

Setting: Data were collected in participants' homes.

Participants: 35 expectant couples were interviewed separately. Most participants were African American (89% of mothers, 74% of fathers). 69% of mothers were 17-18 years old, and half of the fathers were ≥ 19 .

Main Outcome Measures: Parents responded to survey questions adapted from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System Questionnaire.

Results: 44% of fathers reported wanting their partner to get pregnant. Another 15% were ambivalent. A kappa statistic of 0.12 ($P = .33$) indicated very little "accuracy" of mothers' perceptions of their partners' pregnancy intentions. Further, there was low concordance between the pregnancy intentions of mothers and fathers. Young fathers who wanted or were ambivalent about pregnancy were significantly more likely to use no contraception or withdrawal.

Conclusion: For a notable number of minority couples, adolescent mothers do not have an accurate perception of their partners' pregnancy intentions and use contraceptive methods that are not within their control. These findings indicate that teen pregnancy prevention interventions must target young males in addition to females and sexually active adolescents should be encouraged to discuss pregnancy intentions with each other.

Key Words: Adolescent pregnancy, Pregnancy intentions, Contraceptive use

Introduction

The U.S. continues to lead other industrialized nations in rates of adolescent births, despite declines over the past several years.¹ Each year, approximately 750,000 adolescent women become pregnant²; more than 80% of these pregnancies are unintended.³ An important factor in a young woman's decision to pursue a pregnancy is the opinion of her male partner. Studies of adolescent mothers suggest that the pregnancy intention of their male partners may be a significant determinant of their own pregnancy desires and reproductive behavior.^{4,5} Further, male pregnancy intention can be a stronger risk factor for adolescent pregnancy than female pregnancy intention alone.^{6,7}

Pregnancy intention is a multidimensional construct that describes desire for pregnancy in terms of timing, planning, happiness, and wantedness.⁸ It has been associated with both pregnancy and infant outcomes.⁸⁻¹⁰

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Research on pregnancy intention has largely focused on adult parents and parenting behavior; however, a few studies have found that pregnancy intention also plays an important role in reproductive decision making among adolescent women. Studies on teenagers' attitudes about pregnancy and contraception use have found that ambivalent or positive attitudes toward early childbearing can influence their use of contraception.^{4,11} Additionally, teens' relationship status and stability, the length of their romantic relationship, and their perceptions about their partner's intentions are important factors that influence young women's attitudes about pregnancy.^{4,6}

There are very few studies examining fathers' pregnancy intentions, in general, and even fewer of young fathers in particular. Most research in this area reports females' perceptions of their male partners' intentions, but the accuracy of these reports is unknown. Young fathers have rarely been asked directly about their pregnancy desires.^{12,13} The current study adds to the limited research in this area by asking both pregnant adolescents and their male partners about their pregnancy intentions.

We use baseline data from a randomized pilot study of a coparenting program for young, low-income, minority expectant couples to answer the following research questions: (1) What are young fathers' pregnancy desires? (2) How accurately do adolescent mothers understand their partners' pregnancy desires? and (3) How do young fathers'

actual (ie, self-reported) pregnancy desires correspond to their partners' pregnancy intentions and contraceptive use?

Materials and Methods

Participants

This study utilizes baseline data collected as part of a pilot study of a coparenting intervention for young, urban expectant couples recruited from community health centers, WIC clinics, and public schools. Participants were eligible for the trial if: (1) the mother was 15–18 years old and between 15 and 32 weeks pregnant with her first child, (2) the mother wanted to have the father of her child regularly involved in the child's life, (3) the father was available (ie, not incarcerated) and able to be contacted, and (4) both parents spoke English. The current study draws on data collected from the first 35 expectant couples enrolled.

Procedures

After securing informed consent/assent (from participants and their parent/guardian, if age appropriate), a research assistant (RA) administered the baseline interview with each expectant parent independently, at the recruitment site or the participant's home. The RA read each question and response option and had the participant privately circle the responses on his/her copy of each form, which the RA later reviewed for completeness and entered into a computer database. Each parent was given a \$25 retail gift card for completing the baseline interview.

Measures

Data analyzed for this study were mothers' and fathers' responses to structured survey questions administered at baseline, during pregnancy, prior to randomization or receipt of any intervention.

Pregnancy Intentions

These survey questions were adopted from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System Questionnaire.¹⁴ Mothers' pregnancy intentions were assessed by asking them to describe "your feelings 3 months before you got pregnant", with response options being: "I was trying to get pregnant," "I was trying to not get pregnant, though not very hard," or "I was trying hard to keep from getting pregnant." Comparable response options were used to obtain fathers' perceptions of "your partner's feelings 3 months before she got pregnant." These responses are correspondingly labeled 'intended', 'ambivalent', and 'unintended'.¹⁵

Fathers' pregnancy desires were assessed by asking them to describe "your feelings 3 months before she got pregnant," with response options being: "I wanted her to get pregnant," "I partly wanted her to get pregnant," "I didn't care if she got pregnant," "I didn't especially want her to get pregnant," or "I wanted very much for her not to get pregnant." Comparable response options were used to obtain mothers' perceptions of their partners' feelings. To correspond with mother's pregnancy intention, fathers'

pregnancy desires were categorized as wanted (fully or "partly"), ambivalent ("didn't especially want"), and unwanted.

Contraceptive Use

Each participant was asked a series of questions about their sexual behaviors prior to conception of the current pregnancy. If they indicated that "you or your partner were doing something to keep from getting pregnant," then they were asked to identify which form(s) of birth control they used from the following list: Rhythm method, Withdrawal, Condom, Pill, Depo Provera, IUD, Diaphragm, Patch, Emergency Contraception or Other. These analyses focus on the most commonly reported methods: withdrawal and condom. All other methods were endorsed by fewer than 3 participants.

Socio-demographic Characteristics

Participants completed an extensive demographic questionnaire. Parents reported their age in years, race (White, Black/African American, Asian) and Hispanic ethnicity, highest grade completed (less than high school, high school graduate or GED, some college, college degree or more), whether they ever repeated or were held back a grade, whether they had ever been in special education classes or diagnosed with a learning disability, typical hours of work per week (recoded into full-time if ≥ 40 hours, part-time or unemployed), and whether they were currently romantically involved with child's other parent and how long they had been before becoming pregnant (in months).

Statistical Analyses

To address our research questions, frequencies were calculated for father's self-reported pregnancy desires. Chi-square tests were conducted comparing fathers who wanted/were ambivalent to those who had not wanted the pregnancy on father demographic characteristics, mother demographic characteristics, and mother- and father-reported contraceptive use. We explored within-dyad/couple associations between mother and father reports of fathers' pregnancy desires, using kappa statistic, and fathers' pregnancy desires and mothers' pregnancy intentions using the chi-square test.

Results

Sample Descriptives

As shown in Table 1, in this sample, most adolescent mothers were 17–18 years old, and their partners were typically over 18. The vast majority of participants were non-Hispanic and Black/African American. Most adolescent mothers had not finished high school, whereas 27% of young fathers had. Close to half of adolescent mothers and young fathers had repeated a grade and 37% of fathers had been in special education or diagnosed with a learning disability. Most participants were unemployed, but 28% of young fathers worked part-time. 80% of couples were still romantically involved, although most of these relationships had been on-going for less than 2 years.

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