

THE ASTARTE PROJECT

2010

[Teen Parents Research Report Summary of Results]



Dr Bronwyn Harman
Edith Cowan University

Participants

The Teen Mothers Project consisted of qualitative research conducted in 2009 with teen mothers in Western Australia, and involved both surveys and face-to-face interviews. There were 46 surveys returned, and 30 interviews were conducted. The mothers who returned the survey averaged 17.62 years of age at the time of the birth of their baby, and the interviews were conducted with teen mothers who averaged 16.84 years of age at the time of the birth of their baby. The average age of the children at the time of survey or interview was 2.5 years for all participants¹.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data. These were:

Changes

As would be expected, the mothers all reported that having a baby changed their lives. This was not necessarily a bad thing: some reported that the baby gave them direction, or that the baby saved them from a negative life cycle. Generally, the mothers reported that they had to change direction when it came to education and subsequent employment: deferral or accesses via another means were common responses. The mothers generally agreed that financial difficulty followed the birth of their baby. One of the biggest challenges was an issue that is often reported amongst new mothers, which is change in identity, but teenage mothers feel this is more salient for them because they had not really established their identity when the baby was born.

Support

Support from family members was divided into polar opposites, whereby the mothers reported that their family members were either very supportive or very negative to the new mother. Friends, however, were generally less supportive of the teen mother, and gradually drifted away. Contrary to popular opinion, the father of the baby was often very supportive of the teen mother. Approximately 90% of respondents said that the father was still involved with the baby; of that 90%, about half of the teen mothers were still in a relationship with the father.

Perceptions

Almost all the teen mothers reported negative reactions from other people when out in public. This was particularly true of “older” people, especially women, and teenage girls who were younger than the teen mothers. The negative reaction ranged from “dirty looks” to name calling,

¹ Some participants had more than one child; only the age of the first born child was counted in averaging the age of children.

and direct and indirect comments. Sadly, the teen mothers also reported a negative reaction from those in the medical profession, including doctors, midwives and child health nurses.

“Good” and “Bad” Mothers

The teen mothers reported the feeling that they were “bad” mothers, because members of society told them so. They commented that the appearance of their child was especially important, because they felt that they were being judged on how their child was presented.

Future

Despite the apparent bleakness of life as a teenage mother, they were mostly very positive about their experiences. Almost all said that they loved being a mother, despite the challenges, and would not change anything. Many of the teen mothers foresaw a positive future, where they would be educated, employed, partnered and not reliant on welfare benefits.

Programs

It is essential that services are provided to support all mothers; however, service delivery needs to be tailored to specific populations. There are several ways of supporting teen mothers, including – but not limited to – teen support programs that target the concerns of teen mothers (examples include Eyes Wide Open, Rockingham Educating Young Parents and Young Pregnant and Very Excited), and supported playgroups specifically for teen mothers.

Summary Statement

While the teenage mothers saw the birth of their child as a challenge, most of the mothers said that they had plans for the future. They acknowledged that being a mother at such a young age was prohibitive, in that they might not have the education or employment or the ideal “white picket fence” now, but that these things could come later, and many were working towards that goal. It is important to also acknowledge that, for many of these mothers, the birth of the baby gave them hope and impetus to improve their own lives.

“I know my sister and I both got pregnant young, but we’re not drug addicts, we’re not alcoholics, we both go out, and we’ve made the best of our lives, we love our kids, we’re both good mums, we own our homes, we’re both with our partners that, you know, that we’ve had our children with, it’s the same for my sister, so we’re good people, we just happen to have had our children very, very young.”