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Adolescent Parents: The Demographic Disaster of the 1970s

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*Un nombre croissant d'enfants naissent de mères adolescentes non mariées.
Ce phénomène a pour résultat non seulement des problèmes personnels
pour la mère et l'enfant mais aussi pour la société en général.*

After the shower, after the birth of her baby, after friends have moved on, after the newness is gone, she sits alone with her child and cries. This misery was not what she had expected nor what she wants. Having a baby to love and to love her had been her fantasy. The fatigue, isolation, poverty and myriad stresses of parenting are the harsh realities. She cannot cope. She no longer wants to try.

She is a teenage mother, herself a dependent minor, struggling to fulfill the

task of parenting, a task that surely requires the most mature adult functioning. Perhaps time and maturation can equip her to parent. Meanwhile, neither her nor her baby's needs are being met. Yet, in spite of her initial fantasies, there is little basis for optimism about the future, not if the statistics regarding adolescent parents and their children are scrutinized. Such statistics also show that adolescent parenting is not only a personal problem, it has become a serious societal problem.¹

Various scientific and social events converged in the early 1970s to have a profound impact on the North American birth rate. Of major importance were the development of a safe, reliable and readily available contraceptive—the Pill—the advent of women's liberation, the legalization of abortion and the thrust of organizations such as Zero Population Growth and the National Organization for Non-Parents. Combined with an inflationary economy, more couples began to defer or

turn away altogether from parenting. As a result, by the mid-1970s the total birth rate declined to the lowest in North American history.

Meanwhile, the numbers of adolescents bearing children began to increase, especially among younger adolescents. Eleven to 13-year-old pregnant girls are not uncommon. The result of these two trends was that a larger percentage of all of the babies were, and are, being born to adolescents. Presently one-fifth of Canadian babies are born to teenagers, rising from 11.5 per cent in 1971. If not for the many pregnant adolescents who opt for abortion, the proportion would be even higher. About 1,000 teenagers become pregnant each week, of whom approximately 50 per cent have abortions. In the United States actual numbers of adolescent mothers peaked at about 600,000 in 1973 and have declined only slightly since then. Of these, one-third of the girls were under 17. Within less than a 5-year period in the United States, approximately 3 million teenage girls undertook the role of mother.²

While the numbers of adolescent parents were increasing, conversely, their ages significantly decreased. Mainly because of this, the problem of 'illegitimacy' is inextricably tied to teenage pregnancy. A minimum estimate is that 95 per cent of pregnant girls under 15, and 71 per cent of the 15-19-year-olds are single.³ Clearly, many marriages occur because of the girl's pregnancy. Otherwise these figures would be even higher. In at least one American city, over 50 per cent of all births were to unmarried girls.

Unlike the unmarried mothers of the past, most girls do not now contemplate adoption. For some, adoption is viewed with the shame and guilt that previous generations felt about the pregnancy itself. Indeed hardly more than 10 per cent of babies born to adolescents are placed for adoption, a reversal of former statistics. About 9 out of 10 babies are kept by their mothers, at least initially. They are encouraged to keep the babies by various societal pressures and the generalized fantasy that all parents are—or can be—good parents, no matter what their age or problems. Thus, more babies are being born to those who are least equipped to fulfill a parenting role for them. Here are some of the facts.

Children born to adolescent unmarried mothers do not fare as well as other children. Even at birth they are disadvantaged. Young mothers are high risk for prenatal complications, toxemia and premature delivery. Their babies are smaller, with a

17 times higher risk of dying in early infancy. Mental retardation and congenital malformations are more frequent. As they grow, such children have more physical and emotional problems and achieve less well in school.⁴

Poverty colours life grey for most single parents and this is especially true for the young unmarried mother. Two out of three girls drop out of school and lack employment skills. Approximately 75 per cent of girls who first gave birth between the ages of 15 and 17 live on public assistance. In Canada the yearly welfare grant for girl and baby is about \$5,000. Meanwhile, other necessary community supports, such as special education programs for the girls and quality day care for their children are largely unavailable. Where they do exist they are hard put to meet all the needs of both mother and child, each a dependent minor.

The younger the girl at the time of her first pregnancy, the more likely she is to have subsequent children. If marriage occurs because of pregnancy, three out of five couples will separate or divorce.

Recently, more of the fathers have sought custody of the babies. However, most adolescent fathers are the counterparts of the mothers and are no better prepared emotionally, socially or intellectually to fulfill parenting roles.

In the past, a young girl could depend on her family, usually her own mother, to help with the baby. Now, economic pressures force many grandmothers to work. Other still young and liberated grandmothers are disinclined to raise a second generation of children. If one thinks of 13 to 15-year-old unmarried mothers, then one notes that many grandmothers are in their late twenties to mid-thirties. They are not about to take on the care of another infant in today's society.⁵

Extended family supports still exist in mainly Native and first generation immigrant families who retain their traditional lifestyles. However, as these families become more a part of an urban society they are less apt to be of help.

The lack of traditional extended family supports leaves mother and child in isolation, dependent upon community supports that are generally lacking. Growing children may be raised by a succession of caretakers such as girlfriends, neighbours or current boyfriends of the mother. Neglect of children is a major problem and abuse of the children is frequent. Young mothers who seek to fill otherwise empty lives in over-close relationships with their babies soon find interest waning as the babies grow older. As a result, increasing

numbers of children are being brought to social service agencies as abused, neglected or abandoned, to be placed in foster care or, if lucky, in adoptive homes. But many come with problems that are difficult to reverse.

Some adolescents begin a pattern of common-law relationships. Even when the baby's biologic father remains interested, most children grow without a consistently present father figure.

The increasing numbers of older parents who are single as a result of divorce or death of the spouse has tended to obscure the inherent parenting problems of the never-married adolescent. Yet all studies on teenage parenting prove that adolescents are poor risks in this role. Adolescents often are impulse ridden, have a low tolerance for frustration, view normal infant behaviour as negative—personally and maliciously directed—and tend to be harsh in disciplining. Age itself is the major contraindication for adolescent parenting.

In an era of women's liberation, when girls may aspire to higher goals than ever in the past, many adolescents have no other goal than that of parenting. Perhaps the very freedom of choice actually stirs anxiety in those who feel insecure. Having a baby may seemingly direct the life of one who otherwise feels hopeless. It provides a structure and a role or identity. It follows that the very girl who elects to become a parent is the least likely to succeed. If by pluck or luck she can overcome the myriad problems she faces, she and her child can achieve normalcy in living and perhaps become contributing members of society. If she fails, the personal sorrow of this minor adolescent and her child will be experienced in some measure by all of us. That very young teenagers can have and keep babies is a reality. That the demographic implications of adolescent parenting are serious is no fantasy.

Notes

1. Betty A Schwartz, 'Having My Baby,' *Baltimore Sunday Sun*, Oct. 6, 1974.
2. *Washington Report on Children's Services*, Child Welfare League of America, New York, N.Y. Vol. 2, No. 9, Sept. 1977.
3. '11 Million Teenagers,' Planned Parenthood Federation of America Inc., New York, 1976.
4. 'Teenage Pregnancy,' Alert Bulletin, the National Foundation March of Dimes, White Plains, N.Y., Feb. 1979.
5. Betty A. Schwartz, 'Adolescent Parents—the Inversion of Family Planning Concepts,' unpublished paper, Nov. 1976.