Teen Pregnancy and Family Poverty: Which Comes First?

The link between teen parenthood and a life of poverty caught the American public’s attention in the 70’s when the nation became concerned about the “epidemic” of teenage pregnancy. The relationship between early parenthood and family poverty is strong. National KidsCount data show that, among young people who delay pregnancy until they are 20 years of age, graduate from high school, and are married, only 8 percent live in poverty. However, of those who fail to meet these three goals, 78 percent live below the poverty line. The common conclusion from such statistics is that, if only these teenagers would make different decisions, they, too, would live prosperous lives. Evidence like this has fueled public policy in recent decades, including incentives in the current welfare reform movement for states to reduce teenage pregnancy rates.

However, Kristin Luker in Dubious Conceptions suggests that teen pregnancy doesn’t cause poverty. For one thing, 80 percent of teenage births are to mothers who were poor when they got pregnant, and plenty of evidence suggests that those who grow up in poverty have a difficult time moving up in income when they reach adulthood. By Luker’s analysis, low-income young people face an adulthood of limited prospects and may have little reason to avoid pregnancy.

Even within low-income neighborhoods, girls who become teen parents are the most discouraged of the disadvantaged. Their lives encompass multiple problems: they’re more likely to come from a single parent family, be the child of a teen parent, have a record of trouble and truancy from school, come from a home of divorce or separation, or live in a bad neighborhood. According to Luker, these young people don’t lack good judgment. They lack hope.

Contemporary trends in family formation reflect an increasingly bifurcated pattern, with middle and upper income young people delaying marriage and childbearing until they complete their education and settle into a career path. However, low-income families have maintained the tradition of early childbearing that became common in the 50’s. Unlike these earlier days, teen pregnancy is less likely to result in marriage.

According to Luker, these diverging life pathways are leading middle and upper class families to conclude that the poverty of teen parents is the result of their poor choices. Some of the recent years of frustration with social programs for the poor stem from this belief that low-income families are living out the natural consequences of poor decision-making.

For example, teen parents are less likely than their age mates to complete schooling, and in today’s economy, the uneducated have lost ground in income. Many have assumed that it is premature motherhood that leads a young person to drop out, but one recent study shows that a majority of parent dropouts had their baby more than nine months after they left school. Other studies show that many students who get pregnant have been distancing themselves from school for months before their pregnancy.

Other risks associated with teen parenthood may also reflect the low-income background of the mom, including lower rates of prenatal care, more complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and increased rates of premature and low-birth weight babies, all of which are more common among low-income women of all ages. Access to the medical community is a major source of these problems for poor families in the U.S., regardless of maternal age. In fact, in countries with national health care systems, teen pregnancies, and births actually have fewer physical risks than those of older women.

Teen parenthood is often considered to have negative effects on the next generation, with children of teen parents having poorer school performance, more likely to drop out, involved in early sexuality and pregnancy, substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. However, these differences, too, shrink, if one controls for the economic background of the mother before she got pregnant.

The currently popular view of cause and effect focuses the attention of policy makers on the issue of teen parenthood—if only we could prevent teenagers from becoming pregnant, we would solve the problems asso-
ciated with poverty. However, Luker suggests that “Americans are wrong when they assume that teenage parents suffer disproportionately from these problems because they are young; rather, teenage parents are vulnerable parents because they are poor.”

By this analysis, teen parenthood is an indicator of the extent to which many young people in today’s economy are excluded from the American dream. “Society should worry not about some epidemic of ‘teenage pregnancy’ but about the hopeless, discouraged, and empty lives that early childbearing denotes.” According to Luker, we won’t make much progress on teenage pregnancy until we learn how to develop opportunity ahead for all of our young people as they move into adulthood.

In sum, Luker’s review of evidence on teenage pregnancy suggests that:

- Teenage parents may face a life of poverty, but it is unclear whether it is caused by early parenthood.
- The low-income family history of teenage parents contributes to the negative outcomes associated with teen parenthood, including poor medical outcomes during pregnancy and birth, limited educational attainment of teen parents, low family income, and later educational and risk behavior of children of teen parents.
- From this perspective, teen parenthood reflects the loss of hope of young people from multiple disadvantaged backgrounds.

Luker’s analysis shows the limitations of drawing conclusions about cause and effect from correlational data. She makes a strong case for the role of poverty in the path to early parenthood, but does that mean that early childbearing, itself, has no negative consequence for the young mother and her child? Not likely. Prior poverty may lead to early pregnancy, but premature parenthood can have an additional negative impact on the ability of that young person to develop a stable economic future. Teen parenthood can increase stress on an already disadvantaged young person, making it even more difficult to attain the education that could improve her economic prospects.

However, Luker’s approach does present a caution to those seeking to reduce teenage pregnancy. That is, programs that promote abstinence, improve sexual decision-making, or inform young people about contraceptives may have their place. But they’ll have limited effect if we don’t attend the problem of the motive to avoid pregnancy. All the information in the world will not change behavior unless the young people believe that it is worth their effort to delay pregnancy. To this end, policy makers need to ensure that all young people see a better opportunity within their reach.

Written by: Harriet Shaklee. This discussion was based on *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

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### Parents and Early Child Development

Parents know that they have an important influence on their infants’ and toddlers’ development, but they do not fully understand the connection between healthy child development and their own parenting practices.

The most observable developmental mileposts—those that are largely physical—are the ones that mothers and fathers feel most knowledgeable about. Well-informed though they may be in this regard, however, parents clearly lack information about the less tangible developmental domains; indeed, parents report that they know the least about babies’ and toddlers’ emotional, social, and intellectual development.

#### The Information Gap On Child Development

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<th>Domain</th>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<td>Physical</td>
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Despite this self-reported information gap, parents believe they have the greatest influence on their child’s emotional development (39 percent)—more than twice as many as those who say their child’s intellectual (19 percent) or social (16 percent) development is most susceptible to their way—and the least influence on his or her physical changes and growth (14 percent).

In more specific terms, parents seem well apprised of certain parenting concepts (such as the importance of spending quality time with their baby or toddler), but are