**Adolescent Childbearing and Upward Mobility: Exploring the parenting experience of young mothers in a parent support program in Mexico**

**Rose Kagawa**

American society often views the children of teenage mothers as doomed to failure. New York City recently launched a billboard campaign aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy rates in the city. The billboards portray tearful children with captions about the challenges of teen parenthood and the threats to the children’s welfare. One reads, “Honestly mom… chances are he won’t stay with you. What happens to me?” Another features the message, “I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen.” Through informal conversations, I found this sentiment in certain sectors of Mexico as well. Concern over teen pregnancy rates in Mexico can be seen in the literature,[[1]](#footnote-1) news,[[2]](#footnote-2) and in the presence of teen pregnancy prevention programs.

While concern over teenage pregnancy is widespread, the literature on the impact of young maternal age on child development is divided. Poor women are more likely to become teen mothers,[[3]](#footnote-3) and children born into poverty are likely to remain impoverished,[[4]](#footnote-4) but does being born to a teenage mother add an additional barrier between a child and upward mobility? Through in-depth interviews with teenage and older mothers in Mexico, I hoped to untangle teen motherhood from the social and economic factors that are often associated with early childbearing and reduced social mobility.

**Background: Teenage Childbearing and Early Childhood Development**

Research tells us that in general, teen mothers have less education and are more likely to live in poverty compared to their non-parenting peers.[[5]](#footnote-5) The children of teen mothers tend to be less ready to begin school and show cognitive and emotional developmental delays.[[6]](#footnote-6),[[7]](#footnote-7) These children also tend to leave school earlier, earn less income as adults, and are more likely to end up in prison than those born to older parents.[[8]](#footnote-8)

But research also tells us these moms and their children would not necessarily have fared any better had they waited to begin childbearing. Adolescent-headed families seem to be doing as well as older moms and their children when compared to families with similar incomes, social status, and family background.[[9]](#footnote-9),[[10]](#footnote-10),[[11]](#footnote-11),[[12]](#footnote-12),[[13]](#footnote-13) This research suggests that the differences in maternal and child outcomes comparing teen mothers and their children to families headed by older mothers are due almost entirely to underlying characteristics such as family background and poverty status.

And yet more research tells us the opposite, again. Comparing families with similar economic and social characteristics, young maternal age *does* have an additional, unique negative effect on a child’s development.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The majority of this research was completed in high-income countries. The relationship between maternal age and early childhood development in low- and middle-income countries remains unclear. Mexico’s Secretariat of Social Development (SEDESOL) has implemented two programs in Mexico that provide a unique opportunity for understanding the role of maternal age in child development and upward mobility. Both programs seek to move families out of poverty through investments in education and health. Mexico’s National Institute for Public Health (INSP) is evaluating the impact of each program on child growth and development. If young maternal age is an additional barrier to upward mobility, we except to see fewer gains among the children of adolescent mothers compared to the children of older mothers.

**The Programs: Oportunidades and Educacion Inicial**

In Mexico, the conditional cash transfer program Oportunidades invests in education and health in an effort to break the cycle of poverty through human capital development. Educación Inicial is a parent support intervention overlaid on Oportunidades that aims to improve child development outcomes through early stimulation and parent education. Educación Inicial works with pregnant couples, parents, and children in the first five years. The program targets areas of Mexico where these developmental factors are worst in an effort to break the cycle of poverty by setting children on a trajectory to meet their potential from the beginning. In coordination with the INSP, we set out to untangle the web leading from maternal age to child development.

**The Interviews**

During the summer of 2013, we collected qualitative data on the parenting experience of teenage mothers in rural, impoverished communities in Mexico. This data will provide context and depth to the quantitative study comparing child development outcomes among teenage and older mothers. Through in-depth interviews with mothers who gave birth to the child in the parenting program before they reached the age of 20, as well as older mothers for comparison, we sought to gain an understanding of the unique parenting challenges that early childbearing mothers face and the sources of support that help them promote the healthy development of their child. By interviewing young and older mothers with similar economic and social situations, we are able to focus on differences in the experience of motherhood that rise from maternal age. In each interview the mothers spoke about the circumstances of their pregnancy; what they believe makes a good mother; their own feelings, challenges, and strengths as a mother; their hopes for their children’s and their own futures; and how the parenting program has influence their parenting.

We completed 30 interviews with program participants. The women ranged in age from 17 to 42. Half of the women were 19 or younger when they gave birth to the child participating in the program, and seven of the older women began childbearing at 19 or younger. In this process, we discovered a wealth of information and unearthed many new questions. Generational differences, family size, level of education, familial support, partners’ expectations, whether the child was planned, and whether the mother had traveled to other areas in Mexico can all influence the relationship between a mother and her child. This variety of life experience provides a detailed backdrop in which to understand how maternal age influences child development. Stay tuned for results.

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