

Fathering the Children of Teenage Mothers: The Need for Procreative Consciousness and Responsibility

James R. Dudley, Melvin H. Herring, Keith Cradle, & Melanie Rose Pace

Teenage birthrates remain higher in the United States than any other developed country. While there is broad consensus that teenage pregnancy is a major societal problem, the fathers of these children usually receive little attention. The purpose of this study is to provide understanding about the procreative consciousness and responsibility of 14 young fathers. The findings indicate that they have not learned much, if anything, about sex from their parents or schools. Their sexual activities seem to reveal little concern about preventing unwanted pregnancy. Yet, the reality of new offspring in their lives seems to awaken some deeper parental instincts and more conscientiousness about the connections among sex, pregnancy, and parental responsibility. Numerous suggestions are offered to help young fathers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Support groups for young males can help facilitate meaningful discussions about the topics of sex, pregnancy, and parental responsibility.
- Family planning agencies should collaborate more closely with schools, substance abuse agencies, prisons, neighborhood groups, and churches that serve young fathers.

National statistics inform us that teenage birthrates have been on the increase after a 14-year decline (Child Trends, 2009). While these birthrates are not nearly as high as they were at their peak in 1991, they remain higher than any other developed nation. Although teenage pregnancy is a major social problem involving both the young mother and father, the focus of attention by practitioners, researchers, and policymakers has fallen mostly on the young mothers and their children. The fathers of these children usually receive much less attention, because we are often at odds with knowing what to do to help them (Glikman, 2004). An important aspect of our efforts in addressing teenage pregnancy is to develop effective interventions for both parents and their children, including assisting fathers in caring for their children. A related area involves actively intervening to prevent further unwanted teenage pregnancies.

The purpose of this article is to provide more understanding about the procreative attitudes and behaviors of young men who impregnate teenage women. The statuses of these fathers vary considerably. They are teenagers and young adult males; in some cases they have a committed relationship with the mother, and in other cases they can be a casual acquaintance, with most being somewhere in between. This article focuses on the procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility of these fathers, both of which are critical to sex, dating, and pregnancy. *Procreative consciousness* refers to attitudes and beliefs of the fathers related to their awareness of how their sexual

activities can lead to pregnancy and producing offspring (Marsiglio, 2003; Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2001). *Procreative responsibility* refers to the fathers' attitudes and beliefs related to having offspring, raising their own child, and cooperating in parenting with the mother of the child. These two concepts are directly linked. The more knowledgeable and mindful young males are of the link between sex and procreativity, the more aware they will become about the links among sex, procreation, and parental responsibility. This new awareness can lead to more respect for themselves and the mother of their child when pregnancy occurs and increased commitment to raising their child once the child is born. New program and practice initiatives are needed to help young parents and potential parents more fully understand and be responsible for their procreative attributes.

Teenage Parenting

It is well known that virtually all young people are capable of producing a child often long before they are ready to assume responsibility for parenting children. When society does not adequately prepare preteens and teenagers for how to understand and manage their procreative attributes, their sexual desires are likely to prevail. Families, schools, and religious institutions must all give greater attention to teaching young people about age-appropriate procreative consciousness and responsibility, and social workers should play a critical role.

Impact on All Family Members

Teenage parenting is typically associated with serious problems that could adversely affect both parents and their children for the rest of their lives. This is a likely outcome that is important for teenagers to know about, especially before they become unintended parents. The social, economic, and personal costs of teenage pregnancy can be far reaching for them and their offspring (Ellis et al., 2003; Hoffman, 2006). Several studies have revealed

that teenage pregnancy and mothering are highly correlated with being raised in a single-parent family structure and having a lower family income (Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Lammers, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 2000). Teenage girls from lower income families tend to have sex earlier than higher income teens; they are also less likely to use birth control methods and seek abortions. Teenage mothers can have lower rates of high school completion, lower lifetime earnings, more difficulty in developing friendships and romantic partners, higher rates of being single parents, and higher rates of welfare use than teens who were not mothers at an early age (Hair, Jager, & Garrett, 2002).

What we know about these young fathers is very similar. They are often holding low-paying, unskilled jobs and not completing high school (Bunting & McAuley, 2004). Generally, fathers of teenage-parent births have lower academic abilities, commit more crimes, and are more likely to have economically disadvantaged parents, compared with young men who were not young fathers. These differences, when compared with their peers, were much larger for White unwed fathers than African Americans. Teenage fathers in particular, like teenage mothers, have unique developmental needs and problems related to parenting, such as major financial difficulties, incomplete education, feelings of loss of their youth, tensions with their parents and their partner's parents, partaking in highly risky sexual behaviors, and other stressors common to adolescence (Lesser, Tello, Koniak-Griffin, Kapos, & Rhys, 2001; Shannon & Abrams, 2007).

Another important factor is that many of the fathers of children born to adolescent mothers are not teenagers (Bunting & McAuley, 2004). Most teenage pregnancies involve 18- or 19-year-old females and males in their early 20s, with the age difference being, on average, 3–4 years; although there are a substantial number of teenage fathers in the United States, a larger percentage of adolescent pregnancies are linked to adult males, not teenagers.

Most importantly, the children of teenage mothers can also be adversely impacted by several factors. The fathers of these children are less likely to be actively involved with their children than other fathers, and their involvement tends to diminish over time. Mandara, Murray, and Joyner (2005) reported that a father's influence enhances the development of a more traditional gender role orientation in children. Conversely, the absence of father involvement is associated with delinquency and psychological problems for children (Burns, 2008; Carlson, 2006; Hair et al., 2002) and elevated risks for early sexual activity (Manlove, Moore, Liechty, Ikramullah, & Cottingham, 2005; Santelli, Lowry, Brener, & Robin, 2000). Indeed, the cycle of teenage parenting from one generation to the next is likely to continue. Ellis et al. (2003) reported adolescent pregnancy rates as 7 to 8 times higher for female children experiencing an earlier onset of father absence and

2 to 3 times higher among those experiencing a later onset of father absence when compared to females with continuous father involvement.

Studies Still Scarce on Young Fathers

Studies that provide accurate information about the fathering of children with teenage mothers are still very limited in number and sample size. This is particularly the case with studies eliciting their self-reported views and experiences. Considerably more knowledge is needed to help us better understand their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to their sexual and intimacy needs. The literature review that follows summarizes research findings on the topics explored in the study: learning about sex, early and current sexual relationships with females, how these fathers want to be involved in raising children, their readiness to be fathers, and how they are actually involved.

Few studies could be found focusing on how teenage males learned about sex and what they recalled learning. Some studies that have been conducted focused on males in foster or residential care. Chase, Maxwell, Knight, and Aggleton's (2006) recent study found very limited young male access to education about sex and relationships. Those males who did report access indicated that it was too biological in focus, presented by embarrassed and ill-prepared teachers, and was too little, too late; this was particularly true for young people more likely to have their first sexual experiences in their early teens (Chase, Maxwell, Knight, & Aggleton, 2006). Many of these males said that they learned about sex from peers and through experience. A large questionnaire study of the preferences of male and female adolescents indicated that both males and females preferred their parents over schools, peers, and the media as the source of information about sex (Somers & Surmann, 2004): 24% of White males and 14% of Hispanic males preferred their parents; for some reason, most African American males did not respond to this question. A recent national survey of a representative sample of 1,800 unmarried men and women ages 18–29 found that almost all (90%) unmarried young adults said they had the knowledge they needed to avoid an unplanned pregnancy; however, when asked, many were found to know little or nothing about the most commonly used methods (Kaye, Suellentrop, & Sloup, 2009). This study is relevant to teenage pregnancy because the fathers are often within this age range.

Most often, unmarried young fathers have not been identified in birth certificates. Although many of these fathers were active parents after their baby was born, their involvement often faded and disappeared over time for various reasons (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007). Wiemann, Agurcia, Rickers, Berenson, and Volk (2006) reported on a study of 719 new adolescent mothers to determine the characteristics associated with low support by the fathers. Approximately

TABLE 1. *Topic Questions on Procreative Consciousness and Responsibility*Procreative consciousness

How did you learn about sex, from whom did you learn about sex, and what did you learn?

How do you view girls/women and what kinds of interest, if any, do you have in a partner or closeness/intimacy?

What are your views and experiences with getting a girl(s) pregnant, and what are your desires for an offspring?

Procreative responsibility

How important is fathering to you, how ready are you to be a father, and what is your view of an ideal father?

How do you want to be involved in raising your child? How are you actually involved?

What is the nature of your relationship to the mother of your child?

Do you foresee the possibility of a long-term relationship with her or a current partner?

three quarters of the fathers were reported to provide moderate to high support to the mothers at the time of delivery. These reports varied by the ethnicity of the parents. Low support was reported to 42% of the African American, 26% of the Mexican American, and 19% of the White adolescent mothers. Fathers who provided limited or no support were often characterized as having a chronic substance abuse problem, gang involvement, or partner-directed violence regardless of their ethnicity.

More studies have recently been conducted that report on the fathers' parenting. Some are self-reports of the fathers, while others elicit the perceptions of the mothers. These are usually small interview studies using mixed methods. Some of these studies have been beneficial in challenging potentially harmful stereotypes about teen fathers. Teen fathers have been thought to be uncaring and uninvolved with their children, but more recent data suggest that some are just the opposite—fathering is a central part of their lives. Kalil, Ziol-Guest, and Coley (2005) found that two thirds of their sample of 77 teen fathers was reported by the biological mother to have high levels of parental involvement; they found that about one third of fathers maintained high levels of involvement over time, a second subgroup started out highly involved but diminished involvement over time, and the third subgroup remained low in their involvement.

A factor that predicted greater sustained father involvement was the mothers' positive relationship with the father and his family. In contrast, they found that stronger mother support from the maternal grandmother was related to decreased father involvement over time (Bunting & McAuley, 2004). One explanation for this association is that these maternal grandmothers increased their involvement to replace the void left by an absent teen father. However, it is also plausible that this association may exist due to the "gate-keeping" strategies employed by maternal grandmothers to purposefully reduce the frequency of contact between the father and the child (Dallas, 2004; Rhein et al., 1995).

In several studies, most adolescent fathers who were interviewed described their parental aspirations as wanting to be responsible for their children and spend time with them, wanting to provide discipline, and willing to maintain lifelong involvement (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2004;

Shannon & Abrams, 2007). Many of these fathers especially wanted to have long-term relationships with their male children, as they felt male children needed their fathers in order to provide a positive male role model.

Methods

The purpose of the proposed study was to gain more in-depth understanding of the procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility of 14 young fathers who recently, with teenage mothers, each had a child born to them. Two fairly distinct topics (procreative consciousness and responsibility) were explored in qualitative interviews with these fathers to learn about their views and experiences with sex, female relationships, pregnancy, and parenting. Specific topics covered are in Table 1.

The sample was composed of 14 fathers. They were eligible if they had a child with a teenage mother. We developed our sample from the two public health departments in the adjacent counties in which we work because we thought they would be the best sources of young fathers. One health department sponsored a court-mandated therapy group for young adult fathers who committed minor crimes. In this case, we offered the invitation to all of the fathers who participated in this group. We stressed confidentiality and that there would be no negative repercussions if they chose not to participate. The other health department sponsored a program for new teenage mothers, and in this case the fathers were identified through the teenage mothers with assistance from the program director. We obtained the largest number of fathers voluntarily available from both health departments, including 10 fathers from the court-mandated therapy group and 4 from the teenage mothers program. Neither health department currently offered any other programs to young fathers. These programs were located in a large city and a smaller city in an adjacent county.

The fathers ranged in age from 17 to 28 years with an average age of 20.9 ($SD = 3.5$). Five of these fathers were teenagers and nine were in their 20s. The mothers ranged in age from 15 to 19 years with an average age of 17.9 ($SD = 1.5$). The fathers were, on average, 3 years older than the mothers. Three of the fathers reported living with the mother and their child, five lived with

their own parents, three lived alone, and three were in and out of jail and had work release privileges.

Five of the 14 fathers were raised by both their mother and father and had only positive things to say about their father and his influence. The other nine fathers did not have a father involved in raising them. Many said that they did not even know their father or they never saw him. Eight of the nine fathers were raised by their mother and some had grandparents raising them as well. One father was raised in a foster home. Most of the men mentioned having father figures as well (e.g., a pastor, stepfather, a sister's husband, or a coach).

Regarding ethnicity, 11 of the fathers were African American, and 3 were White. In terms of education, 11 had completed up to 9th or 11th grade, and the other 3 had high school diplomas; 4 indicated that they were currently in school. Eight reported being employed full time, four part time, and two unemployed. Their incomes were relatively low and ranged from one receiving less than \$100 each week, four receiving \$100 to \$300 per week, eight receiving \$301 to \$500 per week, and one with an income of \$501 to \$700 per week. The average age of their children was 2.75 years. Six of the children were female and eight were male. All but three of the fathers reported, when asked, that they currently have contact with their children. These 11 fathers involved themselves in varying degrees with their children. Most shared that they currently had very little involvement.

A semistructured interview format was used, organized around open-ended questions related to several procreative topics (see Table 1), with a section on their demographic and family characteristics. Flexibility was built into the instrument so that probing questions could be asked for clarity and elaboration of their views. An informed consent protocol was used that was approved by the university sponsor. Each father who completed an interview was provided with a \$25 gift card. Interviews were conducted by two young African American adult males. One was a graduate student in social work and the other in health administration. These interview characteristics were chosen to facilitate rapport with the fathers in the study. The interviewers were trained extensively in collecting qualitative data. Fathers were asked if the interviews could be taped; if not, the interviewer would take minimal notes, and the content of the interviews would be recorded manually afterward. All of the fathers agreed to the taping of the interviews. Locations of interviews varied; 10 were held at the health department in a private room, 2 were held in public libraries, 1 in the father's home, and 1 in a restaurant. In all cases, the fathers chose where the interview would be held. The length of interviews varied from 45 to 90 minutes.

A 12-step theme analysis strategy was used to analyze the qualitative data based on the methods of grounded theory analysis (Dudley, 2010). The steps included pre-

paring and becoming thoroughly acquainted with the fathers' responses, organizing their comments by the seven topics in Table 1, identifying and coding themes from the comments within each topic, articulating a label for each theme, identifying variations within themes, and looking for additional themes and associations across all of the topics. Four general themes were identified in the data. Two independent raters identified and coded the themes and variations in themes from the data. Whenever the raters disagreed about a theme or examples of it, their differences were discussed and resolved. A third rater was available if differences could not be resolved.

Findings

Limited Use of Sources About Sex

One topic on procreative consciousness was how these 14 fathers learned about sex and what they learned. Most of them mentioned more than one source, but none seemed totally satisfactory. *School* was mentioned more frequently than any other source, by eight fathers. Mostly, they mentioned a grade level in which they took a class, but none recalled anything about what they learned except for one father, who said, "Oh, sex education taught you how to put it on with a banana and everything." No one mentioned that they learned about the importance of a male-female relationship, respect for the female, or similar comments.

Only six of the fathers mentioned *their family* as an information source about sex. Many of their comments about family were brief and simply identified "parents," "my grandmother," or "my mother just told me about sex and all that." One father went into some detail with, "The first thing came outta [my mother's] mouth was, 'You gone lay down, you gone lay down with somebody, make sure it's the right one. Make sure you ready for it and always use protection.' And then she told me...a man can't make a baby. It takes a man to make half of the responsibility of taking care of that baby. That's what makes a man." He added, "She ain't really tell me about different types of protection, just condoms." Another father said, "I didn't really get the birds and the bees, what do they call it, type of parent talk. They didn't really go into specifics about sex and about pregnancy and stuff." None of these men mentioned their father (or a father surrogate), in particular, as a source of information even though a reference to "parents" may have included him.

Six fathers mentioned *friends* as a source, but they were vague or silent about how friends, always other males, helped them. A few of their responses illustrate this: "You know, you hear all your friends and you want to be right there with them," and "Everybody always talked about it. They told me some of their experiences messing with [a name mentioned]."

Five talked about learning, not from any source but through *experiencing sex*. One explained, "Being in the

streets, running the streets with my baby sister. I mean after a football game, we went to the club, started drinking, she turned me onto one of her friends and it led from there.” A consequence of not having information by one of these fathers was, “Didn’t know about condoms at the time. You know, I was sleeping with a girl, and a couple months later she was talking about she was pregnant.” Finally, 4 of the 14 fathers mentioned that they learned about sex, and in one case “how to get a girl pregnant,” from *media sources* such as movies and the HBO cable channel.

Having Sex Without Serious Concern for Pregnancy Issues

Ten fathers openly responded to questions about the possibility of getting someone pregnant. Six of the 10 volunteered they never thought about pregnancy, and one had not even talked about it to anyone. He commented, “No, it wasn’t even an afterthought. The thought was just, I was having sex.” Another said, “Well, before the situation I’m in now, pregnancy was nothing that I never [sic] talked to a female about, like never. You know what I’m saying? I was always being younger, man. I just never took things seriously.” Yet eight fathers admitted feeling panicked when they heard about the pregnancy they helped create. They expressed all kinds of desires about what they could do, including how to continue the relationship with the mother, how to support the child, and reflecting back on previous pregnancies.

As the fathers talked about how they learned about sex, a frequent topic that came up revolved around birth control. This undoubtedly was a topic that 10 of them remembered one way or another from various sources. Most seemed to know about condoms, and some mentioned other birth control methods. Some admitted knowing that they were not protecting themselves, for example, “Uh, I never really practice safe sex or anything. None of my previous girls I’ve been with were on birth control. Uh, I’ve used a condom a couple of times.” Four admitted that they did not like using condoms because it seemed unnatural or minimized pleasure.

Sex and the Challenges of Monogamy

The fathers were also asked about their early views toward girls or women, any changes in their views over time, and the extent of their desire for closeness or intimacy. Four fathers openly admitted their tendency toward having multiple sexual partners. One father pointed out, “Uh, the sexual part. You don’t have no attachments to it.” Another father explained, “Early ages, when I first started learning about girls, I started like trying to have a bunch at one time because I also love them as like giving life but in other ways, you know what I’m saying. There’s so many of them, just tried to have them all to make them mine.” Five fathers volunteered having positive feelings about women. Two qualified their comments that they

put the woman second to their need for sex. One of them explained, “I didn’t see them different, I just put them second. You know, as far as my priorities, I just put them second, man. You know, I feel like I had to do what I had to do. Even though I made my time around to them, don’t get me wrong now. But the sex, you know, I looked at that being just putting women second, man, you know just trying to get me straight first.” Another admitted, “I keep the conversation sparked up, you know what I’m saying. I’m naughty, get into a girl’s head, talk to them, you know what I’m saying.”

Eight fathers reported experiencing changes in their relationships with females since early in their life but did not share much about the specifics. The arrival of a baby was the primary factor that changed them, for example, “When I found out about it [the pregnancy], I just knew I had to do something. I had to get up, find a job, and get ready for the baby. Know what I’m sayin’? Get ready for the real world.” Another commented, “And I know the kind of game I used to run on girls and so, I can’t [do it]—it just wasn’t cool [because he would not want that to happen to his daughter].”

Most of these fathers expressed a desire for a continued bond with their child’s mother as a way of maintaining a continued relationship with their child. All but two admitted they preferred a long-term relationship with the mothers. Seven fathers volunteered a preference for a long-term relationship. Some of their explanations for their preferences were knowing women are “clean,” “it leads to a strong bond,” and a clarification that a long-term relationship does not mean that he cannot have sex with other females. None of these comments associated monogamy with a long-term relationship. The two fathers who stated they were exceptions to preferring a long-term relationship expressed their ambivalence, and as one put it, “As far as, you know, other than sex, I’m probably more of a relationship type guy.”

When asked, 8 of the 14 fathers commented on their views about marriage. Five of the eight endorsed, in various forms, a desire to get married someday. Three equivocated in their views, with most suggesting that marriage would not make a big difference in their relationships with a partner. Nevertheless, marriage seemed to be viewed by virtually everyone as something to be valued after they had their own home and financial security, when they were more mature, or just in the future. Several of the fathers viewed marriage as “teamwork” or “working together” with their partners. One said, “Working together as a team, not no [sic] man runs the situation or female runs the situation.” Another remarked, “Just, basically, it’s something like team work. Cause you’re not—no longer for yourself, you got to look out for somebody else too.” Finally a comment, “But marriage is powerful, man, joint accounts, man, joint credit, I mean there’s a lot of advantages, man.”

High Ideals About Fathering and Actual Fathering

Most of these fathers had positive, appropriate, and often courageous things to say about what they thought a father should be. Ten of the fathers had something to say about what they wanted as fathers for their child. Eight of them wanted the child to grow into a good, successful adult, to “try their best,” “have respect,” “stay out of trouble,” “obtain an education,” “become independent,” “be a celebrity,” and have other advantages they did not have. Three volunteered they want to be there for their children, be their father, be a two-parent family, or have grandchildren.

Six identified their desire to teach their child. In response to being asked what a father should teach or encourage, the highest frequency by far stated it was to get a decent education (something most of them did not have). They thought it was a possibility for their child. One father said, “I want him to be better than me. I want him to have all the advantages I wasn’t able to have. Graduate from high school, go to college. Or do something with his life.” Another emphasized, “But you know, I want them to strive and finish high school, if anything.”

Eight fathers felt that they were doing a good job as a father or they wanted to be the best father they could be, indicating that they were ready for the pregnancy and having a child; however, seven admitted they were not ready to become a father. Four of the fathers who claimed they were ready for their partners’ pregnancies were actually ambivalent, because they also were among those admitting not being ready to be a father. For example, one said, “Actually, I was happy—actually, I was sad. Because at the time I wanted a baby, but at the time I didn’t because I was still in school and I was trying—I was still staying at home with my mama.” Among those who admitted not being ready to be fathers, two provide illustrations. One said, “Really, I’m not—I’m going to tell the truth, really I’m not even really ready. I’m going to keep it real, I’m not ready. This, I’m telling you, this is a big step here, this is something big about to go down....I can’t even sleep ’cause that’s in the back of my head.” The other said, “But you’re also nervous, though, ’cause you don’t know the first thing about taking care of somebody else ’cause you [are] trying to take care of yourself, and you can barely take care of yourself, and somebody else comes into the loop and it’s kind of difficult.”

Nevertheless, several of the fathers wanted, as one father expressed, to “take care of business and do what you got to do.” Seven fathers shared their feelings that they felt some responsibility for raising their children despite the pregnancy being unplanned or unexpected. For example, “When she told me, I was surprised at the time, but I got over it and faced up to it and did what I had to do.” Another father felt responsibility to his offspring, but went on to say that it would be complicated to follow through: “Oh, I got to raise the child, that’s the image of me, you know what

I’m saying. I got to handle that business. I got to step up to the plate. I can’t let this thing beat me.” But he added, “My other girl [sexual partner], she don’t know about it.”

Eight of the 14 fathers indicated that they participated in prenatal care with the mothers. Four joined the mother for one or more prenatal doctor’s visits. Two went through Lamaze classes. Four claimed that they experienced and empathized with some of the physical changes that the mother was going through. All but three of the fathers indicated that they currently have contact with their children. These 11 fathers were involved, in widely varying degrees, with their children. Most admitted to currently having very little involvement (e.g., “Usually it’s just me and her over at my mom and dad’s house hanging out and playing,” or “We watch TV,” or “Oh yeah, he’ll definitely be with me... not when he’s little, though.”). In contrast, two others, both still romantically involved with the child’s mother, reported being very active. For example, “Well, after he eats, I clean him up, take him outside, let him play outside, or if it’s hot, I’ll take him to the park, to play outside in the park for a good 2 hours.” The other said, “I’m involved, you know. I go and pick him up when I’m not working. I spend as much time with him and his mother as I can. ’Cause you know it’s a partnership there. You got to work with the mother, you know what I mean, and raise the child. It’s both of you all’s child, not just one of you all’s.”

Discussion

All of these fathers expressed strong views on most of the topics of the study. They openly shared their early and continued desires to have sexual relationships with females, and the sexual pleasure that they sought and often craved. Having sex was a very high motivator for them, and most indicated they wanted it with multiple partners. Probing for additional views about these relationships led to very little relevant information about the nature of their needs.

In some contrast, they also expressed a different set of feelings related to their offspring and the mother. They expressed concern for the mother of their child in these relationships in the majority of cases. Impregnating a woman and having a baby, the first time for 11 of them, was a big surprise and an enormously frightening event in their lives. Most reported being shaken by the pregnancy when they first learned of it, and most expressed determination that they would make changes in their lives to accommodate their new offspring’s existence. Their child seemed to be, at least for the time being, a major motivator for them to change some of their ways and to mature. Many of these findings can be described and more fully understood within the context of the major concepts of this study, procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility.

First, the findings help us assess how conscious they were of their procreativity. Their knowledge about sexual information and their sources may have been more re-

markable than what they shared, but what *was* shared suggests little awareness and concern about their capacity to impregnate a female. Their sources about sexual information, from the highest to lowest in frequency, were schools, family, friends, personal experience, and the media. While school programs and their parents would ideally be their best information sources, they reported that what they learned from these sources was minimal to nothing. They admitted remembering almost nothing from their sex education courses in school, and they only mentioned a few instances in which family members provided them timely and useful information. When they reported learning about sex from their friends and from actual experiences, they seemed more animated and positive about what they learned. Unfortunately, male peers and learning through experience are not usually the best sources for responsible sexual behaviors and preventing pregnancy.

These fathers presented themselves more impressively in the area of procreative responsibility. While none had planned to be fathers at this point in time, the reality of offspring in their lives seemed to awaken some deeper parental instincts and may have led them to give more thought to the connections among sex, pregnancy, and responsibility. Eleven of the fathers reported still being involved, to some extent, with their child, and all seemed to have healthy views of what a father should be and do. Some of their views offered clues for how young fathers could be engaged in discussions about their parenting role. They include: (a) being shaken and in a panic after finding out about the pregnancy—it scared them on a deeper level; (b) their joys about the birth of their new baby—many of them were deeply touched by having a child that was an extension of them; (c) their strong desires, at least in the present, to change their ways and devote more of themselves to raising their child(ren); and (d) their growing respect and concern for their child’s mother and the relationship with her.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Several of the themes presented in the Findings section have significant implications for policy and practice designed to help young fathers who are not adequately prepared in the areas of procreative consciousness and responsibility. Most of the fathers in our study expressed reflections of the four themes above in one form or another. Based on these themes and other research that has been cited, it seems likely that their views and experiences could be widespread among other young fathers. Some important policy and practice questions follow, such as, “What can we do to help these fathers become more ready to assume some long-term responsibilities for their offspring?” “What types of policies and practice interventions could help them become more fully prepared to be responsible sexual partners and parents?” Also, “What could be done to help them develop more empathy and

support for the mother of their child?” Although their responses on the topics of procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility were sometimes deeply felt and central to their lives, these interviews may have been the first time or at least a rare moment when they were asked by a caring adult about their views and experiences on these topics. Having these conversations and developing their self-awareness around these issues can be incorporated into any interventions designed to help these young men. Procreative topics like the ones explored in this study need to be introduced and discussed with young men, teenage and older, in numerous supportive settings such as in sex education programs, young male support groups, family planning settings, various counseling venues, and hospital programs. Let’s look at how these topics can be discussed in some of these settings.

Comprehensive sex education. To date, sex education policies and programs in public schools and other social agencies have been found to have limited effectiveness (Poobalan et al., 2009). This is partially because they have focused primarily on abstinence and because there is not an unequivocal mandate for comprehensive sex education in most local communities. Vocal school board members, parents, and others in many locales have resisted giving serious emphasis to comprehensive sex education because these programs are in conflict with their own religious and ethical beliefs. On the other hand, there is a growing public policy outcry to do something more to prepare young people. In recent years, some states have been taking legislative and public policy stands in support of more effective sex education because of the rise in teenage pregnancies and the growing social and financial costs. Comprehensive sex education programs in school settings are being proposed to cover a wide array of relevant issues including learning self-respect, respect of others, general communication and relationship skills, and sensitivity for vulnerable people including teenage girls, along with age-appropriate biological, scientifically based content on sex, pregnancy, and birth control. When these programs are offered using a psycho-educational format, information on these topics should always be followed by a thorough discussion of the issues by the participants (Parra-Cardona, Wampler, & Sharp, 2006). Within this context, procreative topics can be effectively introduced and discussed in a manner very similar to how they were discussed in this study.

Young male support groups. These groups are another excellent venue for discussing procreative topics. While many support groups are leaderless, it is recommended that these groups have a leader who is a young father and a model of procreative responsibility for the participants (Reeves, 2006). Young males, teenage and in their 20s, need to have access to groups in which they can feel safe in airing their feelings, sharing their stories, asking their questions, and learning more about procreative topics. These

male support groups can be offered in numerous settings, including prenatal care programs, hospitals, schools, family agencies, and others. The more recognition and support young fathers receive in their parental role from others, the better parents they will tend to be (Erkut, Szalacha, & Coll, 2005). Social supports of potential importance include a positive relationship with the mother of their child, caregiving and financial assistance from family members, support from current partners if they are not the mothers, and friends. The social institutions in which they are affiliated (e.g., employers, churches, and social clubs) also have an important role to play in supporting their fathering activities, or at least not hindering them.

Family planning settings. These settings have a mandate to help young people plan their future with regard to having offspring and preventing unwanted and unplanned pregnancies. Typically, males are less likely than females to seek family planning services, suggesting that family planning agencies may need to create new, more effective ways of reaching out to males. Family agencies face major challenges in reaching and serving young fathers like those in our study. Some progress is being made on this front, but evidence-based programs that succeed in reaching and engaging these males need to be more widely publicized. Family planning agencies, for example, may need to provide more outreach services to males in settings such as schools, substance abuse agencies, prisons, neighborhood groups, and churches. Family planning agencies and the organizations they collaborate with should regularly initiate discussions of procreative topics with males individually, as couples, and in support and focus groups (Dorning et al., 2009).

Many other types of programs can be effective in helping young fathers develop their attitudes and behaviors related to sexuality and dating. Male mentoring programs (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002), father-child activity groups (teaching fathers how to interact with their children), family mediation and counseling agencies, child support services, paternal advocacy groups, and traditional counseling are possibilities. Unfortunately, there were very few services available to these 14 fathers designed to help them become more involved parents. Programs for young fathers in the region where they live are scarce or have had a short previous life. Readers could conduct a needs assessment of programs for young fathers in their areas to find out to what extent this is also true where they live.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this study include the following: First, the sample is small and based on a nonprobability (criterion) sampling approach; therefore, the implications of these findings for other young fathers having similar characteristics should be explored very cautiously. Second, the interviewers were not very successful in uncovering the impact of other related issues, such as difficulties in find-

ing decent employment or experiencing trauma or neglect from a parent.

Considerably more research is needed focusing on these procreative topics with young fathers in other geographic areas. Further, we recommend that the methodological approach that we used be creatively expanded. Although probing was used in this study, many of the fathers found it difficult to articulate their experiences, and often times would provide one-sentence or one-word responses to open-ended questions. However, it was apparent that their limited responses were not a result of a lack of willingness to participate fully in the interview process. Future studies should consider using contextually based scenarios to probe for more details from young fathers. Perhaps providing these fathers with scenarios can assist them in explicating their thoughts and rationales for making various decisions. For example, we suggest providing similar research participants with scenarios such as the following in an effort to extract contextually specific information:

1. Two females in your neighborhood have expressed interest in getting to know you romantically. How would you handle this situation? Why would you handle this situation this way? (*multiple partner issue*)
2. You began a romantic relationship with a female that you later discover is 15 years old. How would you handle this situation? Why would you handle it this way? (*adult male-teenage female issue*)
3. You are about to engage in sexual intercourse with your female partner and realize that you don't have a condom. How would you handle this situation? Has this ever happened to you? How did you handle the situation? Why did you handle it this way? (*birth control issue*)
4. Your partner recently informed you that she was pregnant and expected you to help take care of the baby. How would you help take care of your baby? What would taking care of your baby include for you? What would be some of the barriers preventing you from taking care of your baby? (*father involvement issue*)
5. You and your partner are considering getting married once the baby has arrived. What issues do you think may prevent this from happening? How would your employment or lack of employment affect this decision? How might your race play a role in making this decision? What roles do you think your family and your partner's family will play in this decision? (*marriage issue*)

Most of the adult fathers who were studied seemed rather immature and lacking in communication skills. Possibly, they selected younger, teenage women to date because they were a closer match for them on these characteristics than women closer to their age. The younger teenage women, still early in their development, are likely to be flattered

by the attention of an older male; they may also be more vulnerable to having sex before they are ready (Elo, King, & Furstenberg, 1999). These dynamics suggest that both adult fathers and younger mothers may need more assistance in developing their self-esteem and communication skills to succeed in finding more gratifying relationships (Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997).

In addition to communication issues, economic and educational discrepancy may further explain why many minority young adult males impregnate teenage females. More young adult females attain higher education and have better employment opportunities; as a result they may intimidate their male counterparts, in turn discouraging these males from engaging them romantically. In many cases this role reversal denies these young men the fulfillment of their perceived patriarchal responsibilities of being the head or lead person in romantic relationships. Subsequently, many of these young adult males may seek out younger partners to maintain some level of relational control. It is also plausible that availability plays a role in the establishment of such relationships. For example, if the young adult females are graduating and moving away to college, then it is reasonable to believe that these men are selecting mates based on the females available in their neighborhoods (Lindberg et al., 1997). Because these are largely speculations from our sample, more research is recommended on these issues.

Teenage pregnancy has been on the rise, and considerably more needs to be done to help these young males and females as well as their babies. Among other things, we need to help prepare male as well as female young people to become more fully informed, aware, sensitive, responsible, and empowered to address the procreative topics examined in this study (Jewkes, Morrell, & Christofides, 2009). Prevention of unplanned pregnancies should be the first front in planning interventions to help young men and women. Intervening during the unanticipated crises of an unwanted pregnancy is another critical front; it was a time that the fathers in this study needed help and did not find it. Many kinds of assistance can be provided to help young fathers and numerous ideas for policy and practice interventions are offered in this article.

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James R. Dudley, PhD, LCSW, professor emeritus, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. **Melvin H. Herring**, MSW, PLCSW, PhD student and research assistant, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. **Keith Cradle**, BA, MHA, manager, Inmate Program, Meck County Sheriff's Office. **Melanie Rose Pace**, BA, graduate assistant, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Correspondence: jrdudley@unc.edu; Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223.

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