



Adolescent boys: Can they 'do' fatherhood?

Gareth Rouch examines the research on adolescent fatherhood from overseas and in this country and discovers a surprising prognosis

Who are likely to become adolescent fathers?

Adolescent fathers tend to continue an intergenerational pattern of commencing parenthood before turning 20 years of age. This practice has been found to be part of a standard family structure within a lower socio-economic segment (SES) of society (Christmon, 1990). Although males involved in pre-adult parenthood tend to display low commitment to wider social conventions and values (Mott and Haurin, 1988), their early parenthood is not considered remarkably unusual among their own family and SES cohort.

Males from the single-parent families in a low SES have higher rates of adolescent fatherhood than those from two-parent families (Ku, Sonenstein and Pleck, 1993). When homes are headed by females of any age, males are more likely to rely on the counsel of their peers for information on sex, contraception and relationships (Young et al, 1991). Being raised in such a family does not pre-determine a male to either become an adolescent

father or abandon his own child. Research findings point out that only 11 per cent of males born to adolescent mothers become adolescent parents themselves (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn and Morgan, 1987). For those who do, memories of an absent father can be instrumental in compelling young fathers to remain committed to parenthood and having constant contact with their child (Allen and Doherty, 1996). Those who

were deserted can cite the need to battle such a trend as a reason to remain involved in their child's life (Dallas and Chen, 1998).

Most adolescent males who become adolescent fathers are poorly equipped to provide for

themselves, let alone provide for a young family. In the UK, the strongest predictor of adolescent fatherhood is school failure. The fewer academic qualifications a male has, the higher his chances of fathering a child during adolescence (Dearden, Hale and Alverez, 1992). Such males have much higher truancy rates than their peers and are more likely to display a learning impediment (Thornberry,



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Smith and Howard, 1997). They leave school earlier than their non-parental peers and tend to have parents who are uninterested in their academic progress (Dearden, 1990). Most are obliged to take up low-paid unskilled positions with restricted opportunities for economic advancement. In times of economic recession, they are the portion of the population likely to find themselves unemployed and dependent on government benefits. For many, this is not unfamiliar ground. According to one source, adolescent parenthood is an overwhelmingly working-class affair (Hudson and Ineichen, 1991), and those who become adolescent fathers are likely to report experiences of economic hardship in childhood (Dearden, Hale and Woolley, 1995). It is in this section of society pregnancy is most likely to be carried to term (Marsiglio, 1987). This is possibly because, among those of lower socio-economic status, having a child in adolescence has little bearing on the limited economic opportunities they have available. Most were poor prior to parenthood and would have remained so even had they delayed child rearing (Mauldon, 1998). The rate of pregnancy among this group matches findings that they commence sexual activity earlier than their wider age cohort (Rosenbaum and Kandel, 1990).

Empirical quantitative research suggests that even if the SES and poverty issues were addressed, the males most likely to become adolescent fathers are poorly prepared to meet the requirements of being a stable and socially adept father. These fathers are three times more likely than their peers to be involved in some form of youth offending (Dearden, Hale, and Woolley, 1995). They also display far higher levels of aggression and violence than non-parental males (Hanson, Morrison and Ginsburg, 1989). Adolescent fathers had predominantly higher

rates of alcohol and drug use, and also a higher possibility of drunk driving. They were also more likely to report relationship problems, although given the inordinate stress they faced as adolescent fathers, this is not surprising. It is also unsurprising that incarcerated males have higher rates of adolescent fatherhood than their non-incarcerated peers (McLaughlin, Reiner, Reams and Joost, 1999), with rates as high as 20 per cent of incarcerated adolescent males. These findings need to be compared with the peers from the young fathers' SES cohort, and not the wider age group among whom both offending levels and adolescent paternity rates are low.

Fatherhood and changes to lifestyles

In New Zealand, research carried out at the School of Psychology at Massey University indicates that the forecast is not as bleak as it initially seems. Solely focusing on economic and broad psychological assessments fails to consider the profound effect fatherhood can have on an adolescent male. It can cause him to re-evaluate his lifestyle and make significant changes for the benefit of his child.

I conducted qualitative interviews with 12 adolescent fathers which assessed the effects parenthood had on them. Guidance counsellors at secondary schools throughout the Greater Wellington region distributed information about this research project to adolescent fathers presently at their school and past pupils who had become adolescent fathers. The young men were invited to make contact with me if they wanted to participate in the research. A total population of 9,000 secondary student males yielded 18 referrals, and 12 chose to participate. Interviews were conducted in a place of the adolescent fathers' choosing and all bar one chose their own home. All participants were aged 20 years or younger at the time of the

interview and all had become fathers before turning 18 years of age. At the time of the interviews, five of the young men were with the mothers of their children and seven were living apart.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, which I later transcribed. These transcripts were analysed using discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This involved identifying the broad themes adolescent fathers used to construct their experience of fatherhood and the linguistic resources they employed to do this.

Analysis of their interviews indicates adolescent males are acutely aware of the responsibility fatherhood poses, and prepared to rescript their lives for the benefit of their child and partner. The following discussion examines those transcripts. For purposes of anonymity, all identifying features have been changed.

The young fathers displayed a deep sense of responsibility for their children, despite unplanned pregnancies and their informal family units. There is a clear demonstration of the stereotypical male provider role. Parenthood, and pending parenthood, can act to impel working class males to secure employment and establish positive work habits. This breadwinner identity is central to the role of father for many adolescent males and, a factor often unconsidered in the issue of adolescent fatherhood, it prompts many males to adopt economically active roles and pro-employment attitudes. Males at high risk of adolescent paternity are also at high risk of experiencing unemployment.

John, aged 16, told how he adopted pro-employment attitudes on becoming a father. First, he detailed his life before parenthood.

I was doing casual work, couple of days [a week]... and then basically going out and spending all the money on whatever, a load of junk.

Once he became a father, John's attitude changed. He secured work on a farm, and was prepared to work long hours to support

his family. Doing so established his identity as the breadwinner, a central feature of his self-concept as a father.

I'm pretty much set on earning money and working ... providing for the family.

Another adolescent father,

Simon, aged 18, related his experience of this transformation.

I was living in [town] at the time, I had no prospects, I was unemployed, I had no vision of where I wanted to be or what I wanted to do.

On learning he was to become a father, Simon shifted, secured employment and began a taxing work routine. His use of the term 'vision' is notable in showing his desire for a purpose or goal. He realises that up until this point in his life he has lacked something to drive himself towards financial security and achievement, and fatherhood established that motivation. Having no employment history and no job qualifications, Simon is compelled to accept what limited work offers are available.

It was kinda hard cause I was working 12-hour days. And hopefully I would have the weekend off. If we had a big job on I would work the weekends.

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Fatherhood and its responsibilities impel Simon to adopt socially responsible attitudes to work and family provision. It needs to be noted that Simon did have other options –he could have resigned himself to remaining a social welfare beneficiary and raised his child in a household with no vision, where there was no purpose, drive or motivation. More than anything else he had experienced, fatherhood acted to invigorate Simon. Elsewhere he details why he felt so acutely about ensuring the financial welfare of his child.

I was a warehouse kid, you know, warehouse stuff. I want to be able to buy her [his daughter] what she wants, and spoil her rotten.

Like many of his adolescent father peers, he wanted to provide a childhood for his child which he himself had not received. Making that provision demanded he secure employment and transform himself from being socially indolent to socially responsible.

Koura makes a clear attribution for his motivation: it is his daughter who sustains his sense of duty.

I done all these real shitty jobs, and it all comes back to her [his daughter].

Koura's sense of paternal duty fuels his motivation to provide for his family. He was 14 when he became a father and 18 when he made the above statement. A salient feature of it is the degree to which Koura details himself as the breadwinner. As a father he is prepared to put up with lousy jobs. Crediting his daughter for his dutiful attitude to employment is part of a wider accreditation he makes to the experience of fatherhood. The birth of his daughter moved him

from an unproductive and socially irresponsible peer group and led him to adopt a dutiful and pro-social attitude. As do many adolescent fathers, he makes contrasts between himself and his non-parent peers to demonstrate the effect of this adaptation. Those non-parent friends remain engaged in self-destructive pursuits and are ignorant of their potential. For Koura, becoming a dad impressed on him not only the duty he had, but the talent he also possessed and his need to use it.



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When I see some of my friends, some of them are in jail, some of them are, actually they have potential. But yeah, some of them have had just a bit too much to smoke.

Koura is clear about the effect fatherhood has had on him, and attributes his commitment and state of mind to his sensitivity to the needs of his child.

The distinction between Koura as an adolescent father and the wider population of fathers is the amount of preparation before that transformation. A cohort of older fathers might have greater conceptual preparation, but their level of self-responsibility is indistinguishable from the responsibility Koura adopts for his child. Parenthood imbued him with a sense of proportion and one in which he can immediately identify his most pressing duties.

Conclusion

Admittedly the New Zealand sample I have used was small, but it is significant to note that a phenomenological assessment shows potentially good outcomes for the father even though the international quantitative research indicates the practical application remains

difficult. It is also important to note that these young fathers were the ones who chose to take part in this research. For these adolescent fathers, parenthood, despite its pre-maturity, is a redemptive experience. They are prepared to take full responsibility for a baby's life, despite the fact they had not been prepared to take responsibility for their own lives prior to parenthood. Simon and Koura talked of their high use of alcohol and marijuana respectively before the birth of their children. Other fathers used a similar prognosis to outline the almost personal salvation afforded them by fatherhood. One used references to friends who had been incarcerated, been hurt in car crashes, or just idled their youth away with no life purpose. It is not surprising they are able to compare themselves with peers who engage in these sorts of behaviours. Adolescent fathers predominantly come from a section of society with high rates of alcohol abuse, drug use and criminal offending. For those males who became fathers, fatherhood can offer them a fork in the road and if this desire to change is supported then an improvement in the long-term viability of the whole family can be achieved.

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