
Self-Perceptions of Parenting Among Adolescent Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Using a descriptive correlational design, this study examined factors that contribute to self-perceptions of parenting among adolescent mothers 4 to 6 weeks postpartum. Healthy, first-time, 13- to 19-year-old adolescent mothers ($n = 126$) identified their own mothers as their primary source for social support. Additionally, the more tangible the support from the adolescent's mother, the lower the evaluation of self-perceptions of parenting. Older, more educated adolescent mothers were more positive in self-perceptions of parenting, suggesting that older adolescents have different needs in terms of parenting than younger adolescent mothers. These findings are important for designing and implementing nursing care and educating adolescents about the importance of social support, education, and parenting.


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Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, characterized by biological, psychological, and social changes. When an adolescent becomes pregnant, the psychological adjustment of pregnancy is added to the challenges in the transition of adolescence (Littleton & Engebretson, 2005). Learning about normal body functions, including sensual and sexual responses, is an important developmental task of adolescence. The development of gender identity and comfort with one's sexual orientation can also be influenced by cultural stereotypes about behaviors (Littleton & Engebretson, 2005).

Adolescent mothers experience more difficulty than adult mothers during the early-parenting period. For example, it is reported that adolescent mothers show less responsive and sensitive behav-

iors, use fewer vocalizations, and provide a less stimulating environment for their infants than adult mothers (Mercer, 1995) and do not typically exhibit the same variety or frequency of interactions as adult mothers (Martell, 2001). These differences are important because the maternal-infant relationship is reflected in the interactive behaviors of both mother and infant, which comprise a critical measure that further defines parenting (Pridham & Chang, 1985, 1989; Pridham, Lytton, Chang, & Rutledge, 1991). Adolescents are also less cognitively prepared to engage in newborn care, experience more stress in parenting, and are less adaptive in their parenting style when compared with adult mothers (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Mercer, 2004). What remains unclear is the role of perceived support in the self-perception of parenting in adolescent mothers.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTING IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERS

Self-perceptions of parenting are important because how mothers perceive themselves and whom they can depend on may influence the type of parent they become. Authors have reported associations between positive self-perceptions of parenting and a high degree of hope and vision for the future of the newborn (Clemmens, 2003; Spears, 2001).

Self-perceptions of parenting can be negatively influenced, especially when adolescent mothers do not have a dependable social support network (Logsdon & Davis, 2003). Relationships between adolescents and their own mothers, fathers of the newborn, or peers can negatively influence adolescent mothers' self-perceptions of parenting (Clemmens, 2003). If the relationship with their own mothers is not positive and their peers no longer provide them with needed support, adolescent mothers will often seek support from the fathers of the newborns, only to find neither dependability nor reliability (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). When the father of a newborn is the primary source of social support, the adolescent mother does not always perceive or evaluate herself positively during this crucial time.

SOCIAL SUPPORT, EDUCATION, AND THE ADOLESCENT MOTHER

Social support is a critical element and strong factor in the positive adjustment of adolescent mothers (Clemmens, 2001) and serves a variety of functions, such as guidance, social reinforcement, and tangible assistance. The main function of social support is to promote psychosocial development and help negotiate developmental tasks (Logsdon & Davis, 2003; Mercer, 2004) and is most effective when tailored to meet an adolescent's specific needs. Additionally, social support may be the key to relationships within the social network (Connelly, 1998). However, little research has been conducted to address the impact of perceived social support on the adolescent's self-view as a competent parent. The adolescent's relationship with her mother may be the most powerful of the possible support systems available to her and may have the most influence on her ability to parent her newborn. Many adolescent mothers often live in their parental home due to financial constraints; thus, the adolescent's mother may be readily available to offer support (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Rentschler, 2003).

Level of education may also be a significant factor for adolescent mothers' self-perceptions of par-

enting. Spears (2001) found that mothers who had more future goals and were positive about becoming a mother had plans to complete their education and possibly continue on to college. Limited information is available on the extent to which social support and education relate to the adolescent mother's self-perceptions of parenting (Clemmens, 2001).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that may contribute to self-perceptions of parenting in adolescent mothers during the 4- to 6-week postpartum period. The study specifically examined the relationships between levels of social support provided by the adolescent mother's own mother, the father of the newborn, and self-perception of parenting among adolescent mothers. In addition, the researcher determined whether differences existed in self-perception of parenting among mothers at different stages of adolescence (early, middle, and late), and whether differences existed in self-perception of parenting between adolescent mothers who attended and those who did not attend childbirth education classes.

DEFINITIONS

For this study, "social support" was defined as interpersonal transactions, which are multidimensional and include two functional properties: emotional support, which refers to the expression of positive feelings from one person to another as well as the endorsement of another person's behaviors, perceptions, or expressed views; and tangible support, which refers to the giving of symbolic or material aid to another. Social support was measured using the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (Norbeck, Lindsey, & Carrieri, 1981, 1983).

Also, for this study, "self-perceptions of parenting" was defined as the process in which a mother achieves competence in her role, integrates mothering behaviors into her established role set, and becomes comfortable with her identity as a mother. It also involves the perception new mothers have of themselves as parents and of the parenting experience. This includes a mother's satisfaction with and confidence in parenting, life change, and the infant's centrality to her. Self-perception of parenting

Social support is a critical element and strong factor in the positive adjustment of adolescent mothers.

was measured by the What Being the Parent of a Baby Is Like-Revised instrument (Pridham & Chang, 1985, 1989).

METHOD

A descriptive correlational design was used to examine the relationship between variables measuring social support and self-perceptions of parenting in adolescent mothers. The study's convenience sample consisted of 126 first-time adolescent mothers who were under 20 years of age; could read, write, and understand the English language; and were 4 to 6 weeks postpartum. Screening criteria for each adolescent mother included being in good physical and mental health, having experienced an uncomplicated pregnancy, and having given birth to a single, healthy newborn.

Data were collected over a 7-month period in 2004. Four data-collection sites in New Jersey were used. The data-collection tools included a demographic form, the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (NSSQ) (Norbeck et al., 1981, 1983), and the What Being the Parent of a Baby is Like-Revised instrument (WPL-R) (Pridham & Chang, 1985, 1989).

The NSSQ measures both emotional support and tangible support. Cronbach alpha coefficients for the present study were .96 for emotional support and .94 for tangible support. The WPL-R consists of 25 items measured on a 9-point graphic rating scale. The subscales include measures of evaluation, centrality, and life changes (Pridham & Chang, 1985, 1989). Cronbach alphas for the present study were .89 for evaluation, .56 for centrality, and .62 for life change.

Each participant received \$10 as compensation for her time. All of the adolescent mothers at each site were open and eager to participate, welcoming the opportunity to participate in this institution-approved study while they waited to see their health-care provider.

RESULTS

Almost all participants in the study were single (97%), and the majority lived with their families (68%). While some lived with their boyfriends (22%), very few lived with their husbands (3%). Many did not consider themselves single, preferring to state that they were in a committed relationship ("almost married" or "married enough"). However, because marriage was defined for the adolescent as being involved in a legally binding

relationship, the participants self-identified themselves as single.

Data were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients and analysis of variance. No significant relationships were found between overall levels of social support and self-perceptions of parenting among adolescent mothers. A moderate significant relationship ($r = .54, p = .01$) was found between emotional support received from the adolescents' mothers and the evaluation scale of the WPL-R, indicating that the more emotional support received, the higher the evaluation of the adolescent mother's self-perception of parenting. A small but significant inverse relationship ($r = -.25, p = .01$) was found between tangible support received from the adolescents' mothers and self-perceptions of parenting as measured by the evaluation scale of the WPL-R. This finding indicated that the more tangible support provided from the adolescents' mothers, the lower the evaluation score. Additionally, a moderately significant relationship ($r = .42, p = .01$) was found between total support from the adolescents' mothers and the evaluation scale (see Table 1).

A small to moderate significant relationship was found between each aspect of social support (emotional support [$r = .41, p = .01$], tangible support [$r = .27, p = .01$], and total support [$r = .40, p = .01$]) received from the fathers of the newborns and self-perceptions of parenting on the evaluation scale. This indicated that the higher the levels of social support from the father of the newborn as measured by the NSSQ, the higher the self-perceptions of parenting on the WPL-R evaluation subscale (see Table 2).

A significant difference between the various stages of adolescence for the WPL-R on the evaluation scale ($F = 7.7, df = 2, 123, p = .001$) was also found.

TABLE 1
Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient Between Social Support From the Adolescent's Mother and the WPL-R

NSSQ	WPL-R Scales	
	Evaluation	Life Change
Levels of Social Support From the Adolescent's Mother	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>
Emotional support	.54*	-.03
Tangible support	-.25*	.13
Total support	.42*	.01

Total sample = 126

* $p < .01$

TABLE 2

Pearson Moment-Product Correlation Coefficient Between Social Support From the Father of the Newborn and the WPL-R

NSSQ	WPL-R Scales	
	Evaluation	Life Change
Emotional support	.41*	.13
Tangible support	.27*	-.05
Total support	.40*	.08

Total sample = 126

* $p < 0.01$

Late-adolescent mothers scored higher than middle- and early-adolescent mothers (see Table 3). No significant difference existed for the “Life Change” subscale, and no difference was found in self-perceptions of parenting among mothers at different stages of adolescence who attended childbirth education programs. Because only 13.5% of the adolescent mothers attended childbirth classes, one must be cautious when interpreting this finding.

Significant differences were found in the level of emotional support provided by the adolescents’ mothers ($F = 6.27$, $df = 2, 123$, $p = .01$) and the total support provided by the adolescents’ mothers ($F = 3.99$, $df = 2, 123$, $p = .05$) among the stages of adolescence. Late-adolescent mothers perceived higher levels of emotional and total support from their mothers than did middle-adolescent mothers (see Table 4). No statistically significant differences existed for levels of social support provided by the fathers of the newborns when the different stages of adolescent mothers were compared.

TABLE 3

One-Way Analysis of Variance Comparing Self-Perceptions of Parenting to Different Stages of Adolescence

WPL-R Scales	N	Mean	SD	F
				df (2, 123)
Evaluation				7.7*
Early	5	6.0	1.6	
Middle	64	7.0	1.3	
Late	57	7.6	0.9	
Life change				2.9 NS
Early	5	6.1	1.3	
Middle	64	7.4	1.2	
Late	57	7.0	1.4	

Total sample = 126

* $p < 0.01$

NS = Nonsignificant

TABLE 4

One-Way Analysis of Variance Comparing the Different Levels of Social Support From the Adolescent’s Mother to the Different Stages of Adolescence

Levels of Social Support NSSQ Subscales	N	Mean	SD	F
				df (2, 123)
Emotional support				6.27*
Early	5	11.6	3.5	
Middle	64	10.7	3.2	
Late	57	12.9	3.2	
Tangible support				.96 NS
Early	5	8.0	.00	
Middle	64	7.6	1.1	
Late	57	7.5	1.3	
Total support				3.99**
Early	5	19.6	3.5	
Middle	64	18.4	3.8	
Late	57	20.3	3.5	

Total sample = 126

* $p < 0.01$

** $p < 0.05$

NS = Nonsignificant

DISCUSSION

Differences in Adolescent Age Groups

Differentiating between ages in adolescent mothers is important because younger and older adolescents may be different in emotional maturity and emotional support opportunities (Secco, Atech, Woodgate, & Moffatt, 2002). Whereas previous studies have combined age groups into one category, grouping all adolescents together (Hudson, Elek, & Fleck, 2001; Spears, 2001), this study sought to differentiate between younger and older adolescent mothers to determine what important empirical differences might be revealed. It is reasonable to believe that younger adolescent mothers may have more negative self-perceptions of parenting because they lack the emotional and social maturity and the identity formation that adult mothers possess. Because adolescent mothers’ needs may differ, determining whether younger and older adolescent mothers differ in self-perceptions of parenting is important.

One of the strengths of the present study was the representation of three, distinct, adolescent age groups: early adolescence (14 years old and younger), middle adolescence (15–17 years old), and late adolescence (18–19 years old). The sample of early-adolescent mothers was small ($n = 5$, 4%); however, they represented a greater proportion of early-adolescent mothers than the national 1.9% of early-adolescent births in the total birth population (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004). In the

present study, the largest percentage of adolescent mothers (51%) was in the middle stage of adolescence, with 45% in late-stage adolescence.

Late-stage adolescent mothers perceived their newborns as important and a positive influence in their lives. They also had better self-perceptions of their parenting ability than middle- and early-stage adolescent mothers. The differences between younger and older adolescent mothers are consistent with earlier research findings that suggest that 18- to 19-year-old mothers may be more similar to adults than to early teenagers in maturity-related constructs (Kemp, Sibley, & Pond, 1990; Pond & Kemp, 1992). The research findings presented here not only validate a key purpose of the present study in determining whether measurable differences exist between younger, middle, and older adolescent mothers, but also remain consistent with Swiss philosopher Jean Piaget's (1972) suggestion that early adolescents are cognitively different from late adolescents.

Influence of Education

The study participants acknowledged the importance of education for their future. The higher the grade level completed by the adolescent mother, the more positive were her self-perceptions of parenting and feelings of how important the infant was to her life. Many participants stated that education was important, but they had no definite plans for achieving or continuing their educational goals. This type of attitude may be considered typical for the developmental level of these adolescent mothers (Paskiewicz, 2001). Study participants viewed their newborns as a motivation to complete school, and some considered enrollment in college, claiming they would continue their education in the future. Having educational goals may positively contribute to an adolescent mother's self-perceptions of parenting (Paskiewicz, 2001). Determining whether education has a long-lasting influence on self-perceptions of parenting needs to be further investigated and extended beyond the first postpartum year.

Childbirth Education Class Attendance

Only 13.5% of the adolescent mothers attended childbirth education classes, and only 10% attended parenting classes. The adolescent mothers in this study commented that the written materials available concerning childbirth and parenting education classes did not pertain to them and were typically geared more toward adult mothers. Because participation in childbirth education classes is associated

with promoting healthy families (Stiles, 2005), developing age-appropriate materials and classes is vital for society to meet the childbirth education needs of adolescent mothers. Although the present study showed no differences in self-perceptions of parenting between those who had and those who had not received childbirth education, too few subjects had participated in childbirth education classes to make meaningful generalizations. However, it is reasonable to believe that age-appropriate childbirth education is important and that the younger adolescent mother could derive the greatest benefit.

Social Support From Mother and the Newborn's Father

Social support from the adolescents' own mothers and the newborns' fathers was of particular interest. It was hypothesized that social support would contribute to the adolescent mothers' self-perceptions of parenting. All of the participants in the study identified their own mothers as one of their primary sources of social support, while 77% identified the fathers of the newborns.

Mother-Daughter Relationships. Although they may have not always agreed with their own mothers, the participants relied on their relationships with their mothers, which continued to be a source of conflict as well as dependable support. One interpretation is that the adolescents had begun to appreciate their own mothers and what it meant to be a mother. A significant, positive relationship was found between self-perceptions of parenting and the emotional support received from the adolescents' mothers. This finding suggests that the higher the maternal level of emotional support provided, the more favorable the self-perceptions of parenting. The amount of emotional support an adolescent mother received from her own mother seemed to be a factor in how the adolescent assessed her own parenting skills. Present findings suggest that an adolescent mother may feel more competent when her own mother provides emotional support. However, the more the adolescent's mother provided for her daughter, or the more she assumed some of the responsibilities of the mothering role (i.e., tangible support), the lower the adolescent mother's evaluation of her own parenting skills. Some participants depended on their mothers to provide them with the care they still needed and did not fully assume the role of mothers to their own infants, which may result in a delay in an adolescent mother assuming her parenting role.

When an adolescent has a sense of worth and a basic sense of continuity of self, the adolescent is ready to move on to succeeding psychosocial stages (Erickson, 1968). Kretchmar and Jacobvitz (2002) speculate that a woman's relationship with her mother tends to be recreated in her relationship with her own infant. Therefore, both the short- and long-term effects of the adolescent's relationship with her own mother may be factors that contribute to her self-perceptions of parenting.

Social Support From the Father of the Newborn.

Although the study participants identified their own mothers as the primary source of social support, support from the father of the newborn may also have contributed to the adolescent mothers' self-perception of parenting. The participants openly verbalized both positive and negative parenting behaviors demonstrated by the fathers. The results of the study suggest that the higher the perceived support from the newborn's father, the higher the adolescent mother's self-perceptions of parenting. In some cases, the father was expected to provide only for minimal emotional or financial support. Other adolescent mothers expected the fathers to be involved in their lives even though their relationship as a couple was over.

A positive relationship also existed between social support from the newborn's father and the adolescent mother's self-perception of parenting. The pattern was evident for the emotional-, tangible-, and total-support NSSQ scales. This finding suggests that the higher the level of social support from the newborn's father, the higher the evaluation of self-perceptions of parenting by the adolescent mother. The couples' relationships often changed before, during, and after their infant's birth, but adolescent mothers generally looked to the infant's father for social support. Participants became very vocal about these changing relationships and were pensive while responding to questions in the NSSQ as they carefully considered each person they identified.

Racial/Ethnic Background

The majority of adolescent mothers in the present study were Hispanic/Latino (52%), followed by African American (25%) and Caucasian (18%) adolescent mothers—percentages that closely match national ethnic birth rates. However, findings revealed no racial differences on any of the scales regarding the participants' self-perceptions of parenting.

Both the short- and long-term effects of the adolescent's relationship with her own mother may be factors that contribute to her self-perceptions of parenting.

Participants' Overall Response to Completing the WPL-R

Completing the WPL-R allowed study participants the opportunity to think about their feelings and concerns about parenting. They responded eagerly, did not refuse to answer any questions—often spontaneously adding further explanations—and appeared enthusiastic about having their viewpoints heard. According to the participants, the WPL-R offered them the first opportunity to express how they felt about parenting. Participants received assurance that their responses would not be judged and that every response was meaningful, which made them feel important and willing to respond. Self-perceptions of parenting in adolescent mothers should be viewed as evolving toward the role of a parent, rather than fully attaining this role during the initial 4- to 6-week postpartum period, in which they continue to grow into both adulthood and parenting roles in an ongoing process. Longitudinal studies with representative samples will be necessary to determine the generalizability of the present findings.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study was limited by including only four data-collection sites in the northeast region of the United States. The study made no correction for multiple statistical comparisons and resulting alpha inflation. Because of this limitation, some significant findings may be spurious (Howell, 2002). Therefore, findings of this study should be interpreted with caution.

The study was a one-time measure of factors that may contribute to understanding self-perceptions of parenting in adolescent mothers during the 4- to 6-week postpartum period. However, because the study measured a restricted time range, findings cannot be generalized to longer-term postpartum perceptions and attitudes. Determining whether the present findings are sustained over time will require longitudinal studies. In particular, postpartum measures should include 3-, 6-, and 12-month evaluations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors contributing to self-perceptions of parenting. These measures would allow examination

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of the variables as they change over time. Additionally, factors such as social support from the adolescents' own mothers and from the fathers of the newborns, stage of adolescent development, and education should also be evaluated in a longitudinal study.

The present study included only adolescent mothers and newborns with no physical, psychological, or mental disabilities and no factors such as illness that might have influenced self-perceptions of parenting. Consideration of complications of labor and birth were also not addressed. In addition, a measure of whether the pregnancy was planned, unplanned, or unwanted could be considered important for self-perceptions of parenting and should be included in future studies. Because participation was limited to those who spoke English and were literate, future research should include participants who speak languages other than English.

Although adolescent birth rates have declined in recent years by 22%, Hispanics and African Americans continue to have higher adolescent birth rates than non-Hispanic Whites (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, & Park, 2002). Furthermore, because race is a complex, sensitive issue, future studies should consider research designs with appropriate ethnic sampling in order to determine whether racial differences in adolescent mothers' self-perceptions of parenting exist. Additionally, at-risk populations, such as homeless adolescent mothers, would present a worthy challenge for future investigators.

Because clarity is important in any study, schema need to be developed that are sensitive to the realities of adolescent mothers' perceptions. In the present study, this aspect became apparent when the adolescent mothers addressed the issue of how they perceived "marital status." Thus, it seems reasonable to believe that marital status and living arrangements may be important factors that contribute to self-perceptions of parenting among adolescent mothers. How these terms are operationally defined in a study must be made clear to participants.

CONCLUSION

The present study found that adolescent mothers looked to their own mothers as their primary

source of social support. Additionally, the higher the level of emotional support, the higher the adolescent mothers' assessments of their self-perceptions of parenting. Although tangible support was not positively related to self-perceptions of parenting, the study's findings are consistent with the conclusion that these adolescents rely on their own mothers as a model for parenting and as a source of primary social support. The adolescent mothers did not consider the fathers of the newborns as reliable as their own mothers. They reported that although the fathers of the newborns played an important role in supporting their (the adolescent mothers') needs—both emotional and tangible—the role of the fathers was not as important as that of their own (the participants') mothers.

How the new adolescent mother perceives her parenting-skill level and views her support structure may provide valuable insight for health professionals in the assessment and development of appropriate interventions for this vulnerable population. An awareness that younger adolescent mothers may lack parenting skills and have more physical and emotional needs than older adolescent mothers should be developed in providing perinatal care and childbirth education. Consideration of the differences between the older and younger adolescent mother is also important for the childbirth educator, because the study's results clearly indicate that these groups are at distinctly different developmental ages, necessitating specific approaches and interventions.

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