Children and Their Teen Fathers: Examining the Associations of Prenatal and Birth Behaviors in the ECLS-B

Most of the research on teen parenthood has focused on mothers and much less attention has been paid to adolescent fathers. In particular, there is little information on what determines teen dads' involvement with their children, how fathers engage with them, and how that involvement influences children developmentally. Recent research suggests that certain factors such as prenatal father behaviors predict involvement over time and that fathers who are present in the home can be positively involved with their children, which is associated with children's higher cognitive scores and advanced language skills. One study found that children of low-income teen dads had similar cognitive and emotion regulation scores as children of adult fathers, except on a vocabulary skills test (Fitzgerald & McKelvy, in press). Another study of low-income adolescent fathers found that more than 60% of fathers had high levels of prenatal involvement and, when children were 24-months-old, more than 65% of fathers saw their children every week (Tarkow, Cabrera, & Shannon, 2004). Moreover, fathers with higher levels of prenatal involvement were more accessible to their children two years later suggesting that early paternal investment *even before the birth* is related to later father involvement for low-income young fathers. However, this study was based on mother report of fathers' behaviors and it does not speak to how early investment in children contributes to later involvement in other populations. The purpose of the present study is to address this gap.

This study uses data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The ECLS-B follows a nationally representative cohort of children born in 2001 from birth through first grade; however, children born to mothers less than 15 years of age were excluded from the sampling frame (Flannagan & West, 2004). The parents of 10,688 children born in 2001 participated in the first wave of the ECLS-B study when the children were approximately 9 months old. Child assessments were conducted on a total of 10,224 of these children. Since the sampled children were born between January and December 2001, base year data were collected on a rolling basis between the fall of 2001 and the fall of 2002.

The current study examines the teen fathers of children and their behaviors prior to the child's birth, at birth, and when the child was 9-months-old. It also examines how these behaviors are associated with children's cognitive and socioemotional development. Three research questions frame the study: (1) How are teen fathers from the ECLS-B involved with their children before and at the birth? (2) Are fathers who are prenatally involved with their children accessible to them at 9 months? And (3) Is there a relationship between prenatal involvement, accessibility, and children's cognitive and socioemotional development at 9 months?

Preliminary analyses were based on the ECLS-B 9-Month Public Use Dataset; however, final analyses will also utilize the restricted dataset which would enable more testing. The sample was weighted with post-stratification adjustments for father report and child assessment data (weight W1FC0) providing a nationally representative sample of children born in 2001 who have a teen father. Residential fathers aged 19 years or less (composite variable; n= 75) and nonresidential fathers aged approximately 22 years or less (i.e., birth year 1980 or later; n= 179) and their infants were included. Specific father ages will be available in the restricted data set. Final analyses will restrict nonresident fathers to those aged 19 years or less at the child's birth. The sample was racially diverse (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Children were also well-distributed across poverty ratings and urbanicity. As 75 children were born preterm, age adjusted for prematurity was used in analyses. Partners of young fathers were mostly younger than 20 years (63%), had never been married (88%), had not completed high school (60%), but were employed (66%).

At 9 months, fathers reported on their own demographic characteristics, whether the pregnancy was wanted, prenatal and birth behaviors (resident only), when they first held the child, how often they look after the child on their own in the past month, and how often they spent one or more hours with child in the past month (nonresident only). Child cognitive development was assessed with the Bayley Short Form-Research (BSF-R) edition, based on Bayley Scales of Infant

Development-II, to obtain a Mental Development Index (MDI), and socioemotional development ratings were also gathered.

Residential fathers had children who were significantly more likely to be White or Hispanic and employed than nonresident fathers. About half of all fathers reported wanting the pregnancy. Resident fathers were highly involved (e.g., saw sonogram of baby, discussed pregnancy with mom) during the pregnancy, most attended the birth and visited the hospital (80%), and looked after their children more than nonresident fathers at 9 months. Most fathers held their child on the day of the birth and were accessible to their children at 9 months.

Analysis I: Prenatal, Birth, & Accessibility Associations

Resident Fathers. Hierarchical regressions were run to predict three father behaviors: birth behaviors, when first held child, and accessibility. Predictors included child, mother, and father characteristics, wanting the pregnancy, father prenatal behaviors, and subsequent father behaviors. Results suggest that employed mothers and higher levels of prenatal behaviors significantly predicted higher levels of birth involvement. Also, higher levels of birth involvement significantly predicted when fathers first held the child. Hierarchical regressions on accessibility as measured by how often resident fathers look after the children on their own did not have significant results.

Nonresident Fathers. Hierarchical regressions were run to predict three father behaviors: first held infant and two measures of accessibility. Predictors included child, mother, and father characteristics, wanting the pregnancy, and subsequent father behaviors. Hierarchical regressions on when nonresident fathers first held child did have significant results. Results suggest that being above poverty predicted higher levels of accessibility as measured by how often they spent more than 1 hour with the child. Also, mothers who were younger at birth of their first child and increased father education predicted higher levels of accessibility as measured by how often they look after the infant on their own.

Analysis II: Prenatal, Birth, & Accessibility Associations with Child Development

Resident Fathers. Hierarchical regressions were run to predict child cognitive and socioemotional outcomes. Predictors included child, mother, and father characteristics, wanting the pregnancy, prenatal behaviors, birth behaviors, and accessibility. Results suggest that increased child age and the fathers' fewer number of children related significantly higher cognitive scores. Hierarchical regressions on socioemotional outcomes did not have significant results.

Nonresident Fathers. Hierarchical regressions were run to predict child cognitive and socioemotional outcomes. Predictors included child, mother, and father characteristics, wanting the pregnancy, first held infant, accessibility as looking after, and accessibility as spending time. Results suggest that increased child age, increased mothers' number of children, and decreased number of fathers' children related significantly increased cognitive scores. Also, increased number of mothers' children, decreased father education, and decreased number of fathers' children related to significantly increased positive affect in children. Lastly, increased mothers' age when first child born related to significantly increased social engagement in children. Hierarchical regressions on other socioemotional outcomes did not have significant results.

Conclusions

Resident fathers' involvement during the pregnancy predicted attendance and involvement at the birth of the child, over and above child and parent characteristics. However, early investment in the pregnancy and birth did not predict accessibility 9 months later for resident fathers. For nonresident fathers, wanting the pregnancy did not predict when fathers first held their child. Further, accessibility was predicted by parents' characteristics rather than by these nonresident fathers' behaviors perhaps emphasizing the importance of the familial context in understanding which fathers are nonresident and for promoting father involvement.

For all fathers, child's age was most predictive of cognitive outcomes at 9 months. Also, fathers who had fewer children had children with increased cognitive skills than fathers who had more children. However, for nonresident fathers only, mothers who had more children were also associated with increased cognitive skills making the pathway through which parent characteristics relate to children's outcomes unclear. With the given measures, fathers' characteristics and behaviors did not have much relation to children's socioemotional development at 9 months. Indeed, there were no associations between resident fathers' characteristics and children's outcomes. For nonresident fathers, children's positive affect and social engagement were predicted by parent demographics, but not fathers' behaviors at birth or accessibility. Again, the importance of parent characteristics and the family environment appear crucial for understanding why certain parenting behaviors are not related to children's outcomes.

Children of teen fathers had fathers who were involved before their birth supporting past findings that low-income teen dads are involved with their children at birth. Further, teen fathers in this study are highly accessible to their children 9 months after birth in contrast to negative stereotypes. However, the amount of father involvement, as measured by how often fathers look after the child on his own and how often he spends more than hour with the child (nonresident only), is associated with children's cognitive or socioemotional development. These findings have important implications for research on the determinants of father involvement and the pathways by which it leads to positive outcomes for children as well as for programs that aim at helping teen mothers and fathers become better parents.

References

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Table 1. Sample Demographics

Demographics	Full	Resident	Nonresident
Child Characteristics			
Age adjusted for prematurity (M)	9.96	9.68	10.09
Race (%)			
White	25.4	38.6	20.1
Black	35.9	8	47.2
Hispanic	27.5	42.6	21.4
Other	11.2	10.8	11.3
Female (%)	50.3	45.3	52.4
Urban (%)	67.1	48.1	67.6
Poverty (%)	53.6	66.6	55.4
Father Characteristics			
Education Level (%)			
<High School	NA	70.8	46.9
High School	NA	22.6	37
>High School	NA	6.6	16.1

Demographics	Full	Resident	Nonresident
Working (%)	NA	85.3	69.6
Prenatal (%)			
4 out of 6 behaviors	NA	15.1	NA
5 out of 6 behaviors	NA	57.6	NA
6 out of 6 behaviors	NA	21.8	NA
Birth (%)			
1 out of 2 behaviors	NA	19.4	NA
2 out of 2 behaviors	NA	80.6	NA
Accessibility- look after child on own (%)			
Everyday or almost everyday	NA	45.9	19.7
A few times a week	NA	34.7	39
A few times a month	NA	9.7	15
Once or twice	NA	9.7	14.4
Never	NA	0	11.9
Accessibility- spent one or more hours with child in past month (%)			
Everyday or almost everyday	NA	NA	61.1
A few times a week	NA	NA	27.1
A few times a month	NA	NA	6.6
Once or twice	NA	NA	3.3
Never	NA	NA	2
Mother Characteristics			
Age			
< 20 years	63.1	77.5	57.5
20 to 24 years	32.6	22.5	36.4
25 to 29 years	3.6	0	5.1
30 or more years	.8	0	1.1
Education Level (%)			
<High School	59.6	69.4	51.6
High School	26	22.6	27.2
>High School	17.1	8	21.2
Working (%)	66.1	57.1	69.7
Marital status (%)			
Married	8.7	25.3	1.7
Never Married	88	73.3	94.3
Other	3.2	1.4	4
N=	252	75	179

Note. Percents represent % of total N, although Ns vary.