

Chapter 16

Understanding Teen Parents in a Modern Context: Prenatal Hopes and Postnatal Realities



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In 2017, the teen birth rate for women aged 15–19 years was 18.8 per 1,000 women, which translated into 194,377 babies being born to teen mothers that year (Centers for Disease Control 2019). This number reflected another drop in rapidly declining teen birth rates in the United States. Between 1991 and 2015, the teen birth rate dropped by 64% (Centers for Disease Control). Because teen parenthood puts both parents and children at a greater risk of negative outcomes (e.g., chronic poverty, depression, substance abuse, and incarceration; Kiselica 2008), these declines are a positive development. However, the changing social context surrounding teen parenting, including its much lower incidence, has created unique challenges for teens who find themselves navigating the transition to parenthood.

In response to the ongoing needs of teen parents, the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) has continued to fund programs that aim to prevent teen pregnancy and support teens who become parents. One such program was the Education, Employment, and Engagement (E³) Teen Parenting Program, which was run through the New Hampshire Department of Education between 2016 and 2018. The mission of E³ was to link existing social service programs into a coordinated network to support teen parents and their families. The program was originally designed to serve teen fathers, because they have so few available resources as they transition to parenthood. However, in 2018, the program was expanded to mothers as well.

The three “E’s” of the program (Education, Employment, Engagement) were based on research highlighting the unique needs of teen fathers. Young fathers often feel significant pressure to financially support their children, which leads many to

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drop out of high school in favor of full-time employment. However, job prospects without a high school diploma are limited, and the decision to drop out can have lifelong consequences for both career development and lifetime earnings (Benson et al. 1999; Fagan and Lee 2013). Thus, the E³ program was designed to give teen fathers alternative routes to complete their high school education, while also working. This was accomplished by connecting teen parents to competency-based programs, adult education centers, and alternative schools with more flexible hours. Along with balancing work and education, the employment component of E³ included connections to skilled jobs when possible (e.g., flooring installation, plumbing) and provided supplements (i.e., an additional \$3/hr.) to parents' hourly wages to bring them closer to a living wage. Finally, E³ promoted family engagement through parenting classes and activities designed to enhance positive parent-child interactions. The network of programs that provided these services included state agencies, university partners, nonprofits, mental health providers, and parent educators.

Working with families in the context of this program revealed some important insights about the experience of navigating social systems as a teen parent. The tension between parents' prenatal hopes and postnatal realities was especially salient, as many parents began the program during the pregnancy and remained engaged following the birth of their child. In this chapter, we aim to articulate what we learned about teen parents. It became apparent in looking at our data and reflecting on our experiences as program developers that the broader social and political contexts of teen parenthood were reflected in the day-to-day interactions between teen parents, their partners, their families, and stakeholders in the programs designed to serve their needs. Thus, we organized our discussion with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model in mind, first explaining the data we collected about teen parents in the E³ program and then exploring what we learned about macrosystem, exosystem, microsystem, and mesosystem influences in pre- and postnatal teen families (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

Data About E³ Parents

Eligibility for the E³ Teen Parenting Program included becoming a parent before the age of 20 and being less than 24 years old at the time of enrollment. Pregnant teens and their partners were also eligible to enroll in the program. When the program ended in 2018, it had served 167 teen fathers (43%) and mothers (57%) over 3 years. The average age of the parents enrolled in the E³ program was 21.0 with a range of 16–31 years of age. Because only one parent needed to be a teen, some older partners of teen mothers were also enrolled in the program. This is consistent with research demonstrating that the majority of teen mothers have partners who are older than 20 (Kiselica 2008). E³ participants were predominantly White (78%), but the program also included parents that identified as Hispanic (9%), Black (7%), Biracial (3%), American Indian (2%), and Asian (< 1%). Among those enrolled in

the program, 106 participants (59 mothers and 47 fathers) provided data about their lives and experiences through screening and intake interviews. This subsample included mothers who ranged in age from 16 to 26 years ($m = 19.87$) and fathers who ranged in age from 16 to 31 years ($m = 21.3$). For the sake of clarity, we will refer to all teen parents who participated in E³ as “program participants” and all parents for whom we have data as members of the “sample of teen parents.”

Just under half of the teen parents in the sample ($n = 50$) were connected to each other through a shared child, though some were no longer romantically involved. Almost half (47%) of the participants reported their relationship status as, “We are committed to staying together.” The sample was somewhat racially diverse for New Hampshire; 73.6% were White, 19.8% were non-White, and 6.6% did not report race and/or ethnicity. Only 6.6% of participants reported having graduated high school or attending a postsecondary school that required a high school degree or General Educational Development (GED) certificate).

Many participants were pregnant with their first child when they enrolled in the program, including 38.3% of fathers and 20.3% of mothers. Among teens who were already parents, most had only one child at the time of enrollment, though mothers were three times as likely to report having more than one child (13.6%) compared to fathers (4.3%). More than half of participants reported being employed (55.7%), including 65.9% of fathers and 47.5% of mothers. More than one-third of participants reported that at least one of their parents had given birth to a child as a teen themselves.

Data Sources

When teen parents were referred to the program, the E³ Program Director conducted an intake interview including questions about the teen’s background, current educational status, and thoughts about parenthood. In addition to data from the intake interviews, an external evaluation team consisting of university researchers and independent consultants gathered data from a broad range of stakeholders as part of the federal reporting process. These data were collected through a combination of interviews and focus groups of program participants, program staff, and staff working in the network of organizations that provided services to teen parents (e.g., school administrators, parent educators). The following insights about teen parenting are based on data from across these sources.

Some intake interviews were audio recorded, providing opportunities to document verbatim quotes from participants, while other interviews were recorded more informally through the interviewers’ notes. This lack of consistency is a by-product of running a program for young parents. Intake interviews were often done in the field or in the moment when a referral came in. If another time was scheduled to complete the intake, we often lost touch with the parent. Thus, in the sections below, we provide examples based both on practitioners’ notes from intake interviews as well as direct quotes from parents (indicated by quotation marks).

Prenatal Hopes

Before their children were born, E³ teens' ideas about parenthood were rooted in their hopes, expectations, emotions, and reflections on their own childhoods. Thus, like many new parents, the prenatal experiences of teen parents were largely abstract. At the time of their intake interviews, most teens knew they wanted to be good parents and had ideas about what that meant to them, but the reality of how to accomplish their parenting goals was not fully formed. Early in the program, we discovered that one of our most challenging and important goals was helping parents clarify the steps that would lead from where they were in the present to where they wanted to be in the future both personally and professionally.

Consistent with other investigations of young, unmarried parents (see Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Nelson 2013), our sample of expectant teen parents met the news about their pregnancies with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation. During the intake interviews, teens were given a list of 15 emotions and asked to note which ones they felt when they learned they were going to become parents. Happy and scared were the most commonly endorsed emotions, followed by surprised, excited, and panicked. This mix of emotions is important, because it highlights the hopefulness that professionals working with teen parents can capitalize upon as they work with young parents to reach their goals. However, it also reveals the fear of becoming a young parent, which may need to be addressed along with the practical aspects of preparing for the arrival of a baby.

We also asked parents what being a good father or mother meant to them. Although providing financial and instrumental support was mentioned by nearly every parent, parents in the sample also expressed the importance of being warm and supportive figures in their children's lives. Sometimes, they articulated these values directly. For example, in an intake interview, one father described a *good father* as someone who is there, physically and mentally involved, and does not abandon the child. Other times, program participants' ideas about being a good parent were drawn in contrast to their own parents. For example, another father said that he wanted his daughter to say that he tried and that he did better than his own father by being there rather than disappearing and by giving her things she needs. In the absence of good role models themselves, being a good parent meant teaching their children about life; as one father put it: "Pretty much giving him life lessons that you didn't have from your past from your father." There was a strong sense of aspiration in parents' explanations of what it meant to be a good mother or father. One father described this goal as being a person, even a friend, his son can go to who provides financial support and bonds with his son, which he felt was especially important. Another parent listed as parental aspirations: paying attention, showing his love for his child, teaching his child, and not getting frustrated with him. Perhaps because they were so close to their own experiences in childhood, teen parents seemed to feel particularly accountable to their children, "I [want my daughter to think] that I did a good job raising her." Another parent said, "I want my daughter to see me as a role model." Beneath these aspirations were hints about the fear of not living up to their hopes for themselves or

their children. One parent talked about “knowing that you did your best to raise your child and owning up to your responsibilities”. He went on to say, “Depending on how you raise him, he can grow up to be a good person or a troubled kid and it’s never good to know that you were the reason why someone else had difficult problems.” Another parent said, “I hope [my son] will say I did my best and that I can make him be successful. Won’t say I wasn’t there, deadbeat.”

Along with more individual hopes for themselves as parents, they also reported on their expectations for building a family with their child’s other parent. In our sample, nearly half of teen parents (47%) said they were committed to staying with their partners and another 47% described themselves as either “on good terms” or “planning to coparent” with their child’s other parent. Again, similar to other studies of unmarried parents, the expectations during the pregnancy and immediately postpartum are to maintain strong family relationships, even in the absence of a romantic relationship between parents (Edin and Nelson 2013). The parents in the E³ program faced considerable barriers to meeting their prenatal goals for their families, but the desire to build a stable life for their children provided an important foundation for programming efforts.

Postnatal Realities

In order to successfully transition to adult roles, teen parents must negotiate complex family relationships, while navigating school, economic, and political systems that are not always designed to meet their needs (Sarri and Phillips 2004). Despite their optimism about the transition to parenthood, the realities of managing multiple systems proved stressful and challenging for parents in the E³ program. In the remainder of the chapter, we use an Ecological Systems approach to understand the opportunities and challenges faced by teens after their children were born.

Macrosystem: Social Structures and Expectations

In the ecological model, the macrosystem represents the cultural norms, values, and policies that influence individuals’ expectations and experiences indirectly (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This broader context shapes teen parenting in at least two important ways. First, the expectations for when and how young people transition to adulthood has shifted, occurring later than in previous generations (Arnett 2015). Consequently, teen parents may take on adult roles a decade or more before their peers without children. Second, as the rate of unmarried births continues to climb, there is less pressure for couples to marry in response to a pregnancy. Thus, teens often become parents in the context of precarious romantic relationships (Edin and Nelson 2013). These macrolevel influences shape both the expectations others have for teen parents and also the expectations teen parents have for themselves.

Transition to Adulthood The legal age of majority in the United States is 18, yet many 18–29-year-olds are considered *emerging adults* – individuals who experience a moratorium on adult responsibilities in order to explore identity, career opportunities, and romantic relationships (Arnett 2015). In line with this change, most individuals do not marry until their late twenties or early thirties (Hemez 2018), and the average age of first birth for women is 26.8 years (Guzzo and Payne 2018). Teen parents lose access to this prolonged transition into adulthood when they take on the social and legal responsibilities that parenthood entails. Thus, in a modern context, having a child early in life can be experienced as an abrupt and premature transition into adulthood (Kiselica 2008). Although they have the responsibilities of adulthood, research suggests that this group also must negotiate some of the tasks associated with emerging adulthood such as completing their education, securing stable employment, and solidifying their identities (Gee and Rhoades 2003; Kirby 2007; Kiselica 2008; Lemay et al. 2010). The tension between these demands creates ongoing stress for teen parents (Benson et al. 1999; Fagan and Lee 2013), which has been linked to some of the negative outcomes often observed among this population (Kiselica 2008).

The laws that govern teen parents create a problematic mismatch between what is expected (e.g., completing an education, coparenting, financially supporting the child) and the freedoms and supports available for minors (Sarri and Phillips 2004). When teen parents are under 18 years of age, they are unable to sign legal documents such as leases, applications for benefits, or consent forms for healthcare without their parents' involvement. Systems and services are often designed with the assumption that there is a supportive relationship between teen parents and their own parents. For example, in 1996, the reauthorization of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) limited eligibility for services to teen parents who live full-time with a parent or supervising adult and remain enrolled in school full-time (Sarri and Phillips 2004). This policy rests on the assumption that teen parents have consistent and supportive family relationships, which many do not (Kiselica 2008). Thus, some teens who are trying to survive independently may find themselves unable to meet their child's basic needs, not because they are unmotivated, but because they cannot access the same supportive resources as adults can (e.g., food stamps, housing assistance, cash assistance; Sarri and Phillips 2004).

Socially and legally, teen parents are expected to maintain the same stable and healthy home environments for their children as adult parents, yet the modern context of teen parenting makes it particularly difficult to access services that would help them achieve those goals. The E³ program staff and stakeholders noted their role in clearing barriers for teens to achieve their school, employment, and parenting goals. One parent educator said, "The most impactful services we were able to provide with the E³ funds were supportive services, or those services provided to remove a barrier to education, employment, and/or engagement." For example, programmers mentioned helping participants with rent, transportation, tuition,

childcare, utilities, groceries, and student debt repayment so that they could engage in other aspects of the program. The program director summarized the outcome of these ancillary services, “Many participants have expressed a dramatic reduction in anxiety and increase in overall quality of life without having to constantly worry about housing, transportation, or debt.” Participants in the program also expressed this directly to the program evaluators:

I just wanted to reach out and say a big “THANK YOU” for helping me out with the student loan payment! That is the last bit of debt I was trying to clean up prior to buying a house and now I’m almost there. (...) Not too long ago, we were faced with so many challenges because we got pregnant at a young age. Thank you so very much!

Without help to secure their basic needs, teens would have had much more difficulty reaching the higher-order goals of the program to finish high school, gain skilled work experience, and practice being engaged parents. Although the E³ program was not designed to address basic needs like rent and transportation, it quickly became clear that the program could not function without a broader approach to helping teens transition to both parenthood and adulthood.

Family Formation Expectations Historically, unmarried couples who conceived a child were expected to marry in order to legitimize the pregnancy (Coontz 2005). Although the long-term outcomes of these marriages were not always positive, they may have provided young families with social status and structure that were beneficial as they transitioned into their roles as parents. Today, there is little expectation that teen parents will marry, yet they are still responsible for coordinating the instrumental and financial support of their child. Although many young couples are romantically involved at the time of their child’s birth, most break up by the child’s first birthday (Reed 2007). When their relationships dissolve, teen parents must either negotiate shared parenting informally or pursue a legally binding parenting plan through the court system.

Outside of the context of marriage, there is no structured process for shared parenting unless the family actively seeks it. This gap was especially evident in our data about teen parents’ coparenting arrangements. We asked about whether they had a legal parenting plan that would establish a structure and schedule for shared parenting. We also asked if they had informal agreements about how they would share responsibilities for their child. We found that many parents were unclear about whether they had a legal parenting plan. Some reported that they had a parenting plan in writing (11%), but they could not provide details about the nature of the agreement or the legal process that had produced it. Informal agreements were more common (89%), yet many relied on having an ongoing positive relationship with each other. Without a legal plan, there was no recourse for parents who could no longer agree on how to coparent their child. The parents in the sample made informal agreements with the hope and expectation that their relationships would remain positive, but the stressful realities of parenthood often challenged their earnest desire to remain a family.

Microsystem: Daily Relational and Institutional Negotiations

The microsystem consists of the activities, roles, and relationships that an individual engages with directly and regularly (Bronfenbrenner 1979). One of the challenges we observed in teen parents is that their microsystems expanded quickly when their babies were born. In addition to their school and home lives, they had new activities (e.g., caregiving), relationships (e.g., parent-child, coparenting, relationships with their partner's family), and settings (e.g., childcare, work, social services agencies) to manage. In the interest of parsimony, we will focus on one microsystem change for each of the main components of the E³ program: new family relationships (engagement), school challenges (education), and the workplace (employment).

New Family Relationships Most E³ participants were romantically involved when they became pregnant with their shared child, but the transition to parenthood brought about significant changes to their relationships with their partners and added new relationships: coparental and parent-child relationships. In many ways, the pregnancy itself started the transformation of their couple relationship (see Chap. 13 in this book by Florsheim and Burrow-Sanchez for more information on young couples' prenatal communication patterns in relation to their postpartum adjustment). We will first discuss the coparental microsystem and then the parent-child microsystem.

The coparenting relationships between teens were often fraught because of stressors surrounding the pregnancy and the teen parents' difficulty in creating a stable and sustainable adult life following the birth of their child (e.g., having a home and a job). An E³ practitioner who has worked with teen parents for 10 years explained that young women often default to cutting fathers out of the situation when they find out they are pregnant. Part of her role as an educator and mentor has been to show them different paths that honor fathers' rights and provide their children with meaningful access to both parents. Sometimes that involves formalizing a parenting plan through the court system so that they have a roadmap for parenting in place if and when they cannot effectively coparent.

When parents have an ongoing relationship that may provide opportunities for coparenting, they have to overcome significant challenges related to both the transition to parenting and their experiences of living in poverty. For example, one couple in our sample, Ava and Dave, became part of the E³ program when they were pregnant with their first child together, though Ava had custody of two children from a previous relationship and Dave had custody of one child from a previous relationship. They were around age 20 and living in their respective parents' basements as they prepared to welcome the fourth child to their combined family. One of the E³ practitioners described how she coached them about coparenting in a difficult situation:

I always say, right, you can either be you against them or the two of you against the problem and [Ava and Dave] really shifted to doing that especially with baby number 4 (...) They are coparenting literally the new baby, but then watching that bleed out into how now they're dealing with the other three kids has been awesome.

The barriers to coparenting in this population are considerable, so engaging alternatives that maintain civility and provide opportunities for each parent to be involved with the child are important. Anna and Justin provide an example of success in this kind of “parallel” parenting. Anna’s parents separated when she was three but lived on separate floors of her home throughout her childhood. Despite their close proximity, they did not have ongoing communication, so their parenting was very separate. When Anna became pregnant at 16 with Justin (15), she had a framework for parenting effectively with someone without having a great deal of contact. For example, she led the process of making a parenting plan before the baby was born. A practitioner described this relationship as, “the most undramatic, anticlimactic teen parenting relationship ever. They just sat down and figured it out and went on with their lives.” These examples demonstrate the need to reconsider what successful coparenting looks like to include models of parenting that do not require ongoing communication or consensus. It may particularly benefit teen parents who are unlikely to remain romantically involved or who have strong negative feelings toward one another to seek opportunities for parallel parenting rather than traditional coparenting relationships as they have historically been conceptualized in coparenting studies of married, two-parent families.

Although they were sometimes surprised by the demands of parenting, E³ parents expressed a lot of joy and a keen sense of responsibility toward their children. Some were candid about their lack of preparation for the parenting role. One father said, “Nothing that can prepare you to being a parent. Just happens and have to do your best to prepare yourself.” Another said, “I was a nervous wreck with the baby coming. I didn’t know what to expect.” Yet, parents in the E³ sample took pleasure in the daily tasks of caring for their children. One father stated that the best part of being a dad was playing with his daughter and spending time with her, while another explained: “Taking [my daughter] on small hikes and nature walks is like exhilarating. To bring what I love from my childhood into her childhood. It’s the simple things.” They talked about playing with their babies and showing them the world. For example, one father said that he liked to play with his daughter and make her laugh and smile. Even when resources were limited, parents found ways to meaningfully engage with their children. A father commented on how tight money was, and that this affected how much he could do with his daughter, but he also described that he read to her and went for walks.

The positive experience of watching their children grow was evident across parents in the program. Yet, they often experienced stressors related to their roles as parents. Between school and work, some parents expressed a lack of time with their children. One parent explained a common challenge, “finding time really to do things with her because of my schedule and she is in daycare.” For others, shouldering much of the burden of childcare brought its own stressors:

For me, there is a lot. Her mom is at school, so I am doing everything. I don’t care, but it’s a lot. It’s hard. (...) First couple of months it was a lot on my plate. Getting up in the middle of the night. Sometimes I feel like I am doing it all.

Other parents faced unique challenges to building a relationship with their child, like one father who was in foster placement when his child was born and stated that he did not have a chance to bond with his son over the past 8 months, since he only saw him a couple of days during the week and on weekends. These experiences of both joy and stress in engagement with their new family roles are common for the transition to parenthood among any population. What seemed to set teen parents apart was that their other microsystems, primarily school and work, were not set up to accommodate their needs as new, young parents. This intensified their stress and made it more likely that parents would retreat from school, work, or both. This is one reason why E³ placed a strong emphasis on supporting teens in their school and work environments.

School and Work All E³ participants under the age of 22 had access to a free and public education, yet many had lost touch with their local schools once they became parents. School personnel reported losing contact with teen parents because their phone numbers and living situations changed frequently and they could not keep contact information updated. The educational sites that had the most success with young parents (e.g., earning credits or graduating) were those that provided the most flexibility in terms of attendance and curriculum requirements. Programmers reported that schools with rigid credit-hour and attendance policies left little room to support teen parents, who were often far behind in their education. Interestingly, many teens in the program were experiencing academic challenges before becoming parents. For example, 25.4% of parents in the E³ sample had an Independent Education Plan (IEP), (6.6%) had a 504 plan (i.e., accommodations for disabilities), and 2.8% had both. Parenthood simply added another level of complication to their educational needs and schools were rarely equipped to accommodate them.

The workplace microsystem presented yet another set of challenges. Parents often reported that they were employed (66%), but they worked mostly in part-time, low-wage jobs. Parents generally knew they needed more education to reach their goals. One father said, “[I] need to get an education because I am so far behind and [need to] learn about driving.” Another explained, “[I] cannot be hired full time without a high school diploma or GED.” Yet another expressed a common sentiment about the future, “I want my GED, want my education...I want to get somewhere further down the road.” In addition to a formal education, programmers noted a host of “soft skills” that teen parents required to be successful on a jobsite (e.g., communication, conflict management, and self-regulation). Yet, the rapid transition to adulthood left little time to develop and practice these skills. Additionally, even though New Hampshire is a state with labor shortages and the program would pay for part of their wages, program staff could not always convince employers to hire young parents. Employers were wary of teen parents’ lack of a high school degree and their limited access to reliable transportation. Unlike the education system, even strong advocacy from E³ staff could not always overcome these barriers to meaningful employment. As a consequence, the program focused more on skills training and increasing the wages of the jobs participants already had.

Mesosystem: Loose Ties Between Systems

The mesosystem is made up of the linkages between elements of the microsystem, or all the settings that are directly related to the developing person (Bronfenbrenner 1979). When teens transition to parenthood, they experience an ecological transition, which involves a shift in a person's role, setting, or both (Shelton 2019). A consequence of this shift in microsystem components is that the mesosystem (the links between microsystems) for E³ teens was somewhat disorganized during the transition to parenthood. For example, most E³ parents had contact with a school during the pregnancy and for some time after their babies were born, but their schools were not equipped to serve young parents. Schools had experience working with teens and with the adult parents of those teens. Yet, when their students became parents, there were no obvious linkages between the school and other services the students now needed (e.g., employers, social service agencies, childcare providers for the new baby). The lack of connections between these emerging systems created additional stress for new parents. Thus, one of the most important contributions E³ made for teen parents was helping them build and navigate the relationships between their microsystems following the birth of their child.

E³ helped to build up the mesosystem linkages for teen parents in two ways. First, the program sometimes directed parents to alternative educational settings with teachers and administrators who had more capacity to work with teen parents. Several parents attended an alternative high school that ran classes for only half of the average school day so that parents could work or take care of their children without incurring additional childcare costs. Participation in the E³ program also created lines of communication between employers and the program's stakeholders, because the program was supplementing teen parents' pay. By linking employers with the E³ program, they became more sensitive to the needs of teen parents and there was a dialogue between the employer and stakeholders working directly with teen parents.

The mesosystems of E³ parents were also shaped by specific members of the stakeholder team (e.g., program manager, parent educators, and advocates) who acted as regular contacts with parents throughout the process. The demands of communicating with many different service providers and maintaining personal relationships with their children, partners, and families was difficult for young parents. Teens who had already become parents explained during their intake interviews that their stress was due to their age, their busy schedules, and not knowing what to do. As the E³ program evolved, it became clear that a key to helping teen parents succeed was providing warm, experienced adults to shepherd them through the systems they needed to navigate. As one practitioner described:

It's like imagine standing on the top of a mountain and all you know is that you have to get down. If you have at least somebody who's kind of a Sherpa being like, "No really, come this way. Here's some boots and a hot cocoa. And we're fine, let's sing a song where everyone has to get down the mountain." And that's part of it. You have to be an unrelentingly cheerful muppet of a human being [so] that even if, and I have had it happen, even if they screw up and get arrested they still will come put their face in your face because they know you're gonna say, "Well you shouldn't have done that, but what can we do next time?" And it's not the end of their world.

E³ participants who gained the most from the program formed strong bonds with either a school official or the central E³ personnel who could link them to services. For example, one of the first E³ participants had a very involved educator from his school who was constantly scanning the state for resources. She would seek out the participant at home, find methods for him to talk with E³ personnel, and then ensure the connection between the program and this young man. Though our sample of teen parents often reported challenging relationships with their own parents and distant relationships with most school personnel, they reported very positive relationships with E³ personnel. One teen father said:

There is a staff person here. He has helped me a lot recently. Helped me get connected with myself. I have conversations with him about my son sometimes and how I want to be there for him more. He told me a lot of good advice.

The advocates and educators that became connected to the program acted as bridges across the many systems and services that parents encountered during the transition to parenthood.

Exosystem: Process Evaluation Findings from E³

In the ecological model, the exosystem includes settings, events, and individuals that are indirectly related to the developing person (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Thus, the exosystem may not have any contact with the developing person, but it shapes their experiences in important ways. In the context of the E³ program, the behind-the-scenes workings of the program itself served as an exosystem for teen parents. The nature and strength of relationships between stakeholders and the process involved in satisfying the requirements of the grant imposed both opportunities and limitations on the type of services teen parents were provided through the program. The external evaluation team conducted a rigorous process evaluation of E³, including interviews and focus groups with the program manager, members of the stakeholder group, and consultants working directly with fathers. The data from those interviews highlight a few important mechanisms through which the functioning of the program shaped teen parents' experiences.

First, although the eligibility criteria for the program were clear, the first few referrals raised questions about who the program could effectively serve. For example, the first referral was for a father who lived far away from most of the providers in the original stakeholder group. Including him in the program meant making connections with new stakeholders in his area to satisfy his need for alternative education, meaningful employment, and family engagement activities. As the program leaders worked to make these connections, there was a lag in what the program could provide to that father. Similar barriers were encountered with stakeholders' ability to provide services in languages other than English and their expertise in helping parents with complex legal needs (e.g., loss of child custody, parents in foster placement, or parents involved in the criminal justice system).

Despite these challenges, the flexible design of the program allowed for positive developments as E³ grew to include more teen parents. The grant application included an initial set of stakeholders that represented the three main components of the program (education, employment, and engagement), but the goal was always to expand to service providers across the state to reach as many teen parents as possible. By using the professional networks of initial stakeholders, the program found service providers with knowledge and experience that greatly enhanced the program's approach and offerings. Dedicated new providers became a regular touch-point for some teen parents in the program, but all of the participants benefited from what those providers brought to the table behind the scenes. For example, based on feedback from a parent educator, E³ adopted a menu approach to the family engagement portion of the program. Rather than asking E³ participants to attend scheduled parenting classes, we generated a list of activities that counted as family engagement (e.g., getting a library card, attending a birthing class, completing online modules about child development) and encouraged parents to participate in them using a financial incentive structure. This provided parents with the flexibility to engage in activities that made sense for their families, and also provided small amounts of money to ease financial stress during the transition to parenting.

These examples demonstrate the importance of looking beyond teen parents to see what is happening with the service providers working with them. Particularly for individuals who need support across domains, the functioning of the agencies that serve them may have an important, if indirect, influence on their experiences and outcomes.

Scaffolding Successful Transitions to Parenthood and Adulthood

Among the most defining features of teen parenthood is that it is temporary. Eventually, teen parents become adults, but their experiences transitioning to parenthood and adulthood at the same time have a lasting effect on their development and their children's development (Kiselica 2008). This is why, despite declining numbers of teen parents, this population remains an important target for interventions. When teen parents are provided with the type and level of support they need, the benefits ripple through two generations: young parents and their children.

The E³ program was originally created to address teen fathers' academic, professional, and family engagement needs, but in the process, we gained broader insights about how to support young people who are learning how to be parents while they are still growing up themselves. Perhaps, the most important take-away lesson was that *who* the program provided for parents as resources was more important than *what* the program provided. E³ parents were under tremendous pressure to coordinate school, work, and family life. They felt overwhelmed even before their children were born. Thus, providing more services that required them to show up, sign up,

fill something out, or go somewhere to get what they needed only added to that burden. What helped them the most as they made their transition to parenthood was having an experienced adult who could help them work through the systems they were facing. E³ did that by coordinating a network of stakeholder agencies that already had staff working for the well-being of individuals experiencing a range of vulnerabilities. However, building a network is not the only way to provide access to supportive and community-connected adults. Sarri and Phillips (2004) identified a number of “gateway agencies” (e.g., schools and churches) that young mothers used to gain access to other services. Capitalizing on the resources of agencies that already come in regular contact with teens has great potential to connect them with much-needed services.

School-Based Interventions Based on our work with E³ parents, we would argue that schools are the gateway agencies with the most potential to help teens successfully transition to both parenthood and adulthood. When schools have the capacity to serve and accommodate young parents, those parents have the greatest likelihood of completing their education, which has a profound and lasting effect on their life chances in adulthood (Benson et al. 1999; Fagan and Lee 2013; Kiselica 2008). Also, because federal and state laws mandate that adolescents be enrolled in school, educators are a nearly universal resource for teens as they gain more independence from their families. Research indicates that positive teacher-adolescent relationships are associated with a host of positive outcomes for students, including increased student achievement (Eryilmaz 2014; Jekielek et al. 2002; Yildirim et al. 2008), improved coping behaviors (Zimmer-Gembeck and Locke 2007), and increased academic self-regulation (Raufelder et al. 2016). These relationships also improve teachers’ effectiveness, motivation, and job satisfaction. When teachers have strong relationships with students, they are better able to identify students’ learning gaps, gain knowledge about students’ needs, monitor students’ work, and personalize instruction (Drysdale et al. 2014). This evidence points to the potential benefits of engaging educators as advocates for young parents. However, the kind of work that E³ program staff and stakeholders did on behalf of teen parents is well beyond the scope of work for the average classroom teacher. Thus, we will focus our recommendations on how to build capacity in schools as a whole and in specialized teacher leaders to identify and connect young parents with external resources to meet their needs.

In the last 20 years, the education field has turned its focus to the importance of family and community engagement as a way to both boost the school’s presence in the community and improve student outcomes (Bryk et al. 2010; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Moles and Fege 2011). Family and community engagement initiatives are often required by state and federal law (Henderson and Mapp 2002). However, they tend to be narrowly focused on the parents of current students. We would argue for schools to broaden the target population for family and community engagement efforts to include the parents of students *and* students who have become parents. By viewing teen parents as part of family and community engagement, schools can grow their capacity to meet the emerging needs of their students. This is likely to

have a positive impact not only on the academic achievement of student-parents, but also to foster stronger connections with alumni who then become part of the broader community.

Another effort to improve the supports available in schools is through specialized teacher leaders, who are trained to shape the positive culture of their schools and influence education policy at the local, state, and federal levels. For example, Teach Plus is a national nonprofit that trains and funds nearly 1000 teacher leaders each year in American public schools. Teacher leaders have a role in their schools and communities that is especially conducive to advocacy for students who are going through any number of challenging transitions, including the transition to parenthood. Specifically, teacher leaders can help their peer teachers shift their focus from instruction and behavior management to view students as parents, partners, and family members who may need additional flexibility to succeed. Education systems can be very flexible once student needs are identified and documented. Promoting understanding and flexibility is essential when working with young parents, because we found that teen parents retreat from inflexible systems – only reappearing when they are older and likely facing far more complex problems. However, educators cannot do this work without support. They need training to help them understand the contextual factors that shape family life for teen parents, and they need readily accessible connections to agencies that can provide direct services to teens.

Relationship and Coparenting Education Efforts to improve the relationships between unmarried parents are well funded and widespread. Learning from those interventions is an important starting place for educating teen parents, but they do not provide a perfect template for helping young people transition to both parenthood and adulthood at the same time. Based on our work with the E³ program, we think that the three most important areas for program development are father involvement, program incentives, and mental health counseling.

E³ was originally designed to serve fathers, because there are so few resources available to them. We found that simply acknowledging fathers as family members with both rights and resources to contribute helped to shift conversations in the state about the value of serving fathers. As one practitioner noted, creating stable families cannot focus only on mothers and their children. Indeed, Cowan and Cowan (1987) emphasized how men experience the transition to parenthood differently from women; men's transitions to parenthood occurred more slowly and they were less involved in their newborns' care than were mothers. However, greater father involvement in the Cowans' sample was associated with benefits for mothers, fathers, babies, and the couple relationship (Cowan and Cowan 1987). Whether similar findings also apply to teen parents has not been investigated yet, but it is clear that treating fathers as allies in supporting the needs of families serves to welcome the positive influence fathers have to offer and creates another point of intervention for stabilizing young families. Another key to this process is engaging the court system to help fathers establish paternity and formalize a plan for fathers to be involved with their children. Though it may seem counterintuitive, going through the court to create a parenting plan reduced teens' anxiety about the future parenting

relationship, because it provided a road map for how they were going to work together. One of the challenges of E³ was helping young parents to plan for the long-term future. The demands of the present were so intense that it was difficult to think about how their families might change or the needs they may have in a year or two. Formalizing a parenting plan was a first step in planning for the future. In programming efforts, it is important to create space for both parents to be involved and parenting plans are one of the ways to formalize fathers' rights to parent their children.

Another key aspect of E³ was the incentive structure that we used to help parents financially while we delivered other services. Parents could submit pay stubs from their jobs and E³ would provide them with lump sum payments that rounded up their hourly wage to \$10 per hour. The program also provided a \$250 incentive once parents had completed 10 family engagement activities from our approved list. Ava and Dave in our sample demonstrated how powerful these incentives could be in creating a successful transition to family life. During the pregnancy, Ava and Dave lived separately with each of their parents. However, they each completed the family engagement courses and received a total of \$500 between them. They used that money as their contribution to a community program that helped with paying the deposit on an apartment. Around the time their child was born, the transmission in Dave's car failed. He used \$800 from the work incentives through E³ to fix his truck. This allowed him to keep his job, which was necessary for them to continue paying rent and supporting their four children. Almost 2 years after completing the E³ program Ava and Dave have an apartment, two jobs, and a vehicle. Without the financial support from E³, they may not have been able to move out of their parents' homes and build a life together as a family.

Another incentive that was added later in the program was paying for teens to get driver's education. For teens who no longer were matriculating at public high schools, getting the required classroom hours and supervised driving experience was cost prohibitive. By offering funds to pay for driver's education, E³ was able to keep parents engaged in the process and give them a tool that would help them get and keep a job. The value of these incentives went beyond encouraging teens to continue working toward program goals. The incentives themselves served to move parents toward the goals of improving education, employment, and engagement.

Finally, E³ provided free individual, couple, and family counseling to teen parents. This in-kind incentive was especially powerful, because it laid a foundation for wellness in parents that could improve their capacity to parent well. Counseling helped parents to address the stigma associated with being teen parents and provided tools for working through issues from their own childhoods. One of the marriage and family therapists who worked with the program explained the value of counseling for teen parents:

When teens are balancing finances, employment, school, family conflict, couple conflict, a newborn, and more, it is helpful to remind them that being self-critical is not helpful or ok. They are balancing so much they may as well have compassion and possibly even pride in themselves for all they do on a daily basis. Once there is an awareness of how much they do, the things that they would like to see as different or better feel a little possible.

By engaging counseling services alongside other education efforts, programs can better address the complexity of living as a young family in poverty.

Teachers and relationship educators should not be asked to replace the social safety net that is in place to support young families. This is where community-based advocates and services are indispensable. What we learned through E³ is that having services available is not enough when working with teen parents. They need adults to connect and guide them to service-providers. Adult mentors have the potential to provide teens with an access point to get them past particularly stressful postnatal realities and into a future that more closely resembles their prenatal hopes.

Acknowledgments The preparation of this chapter was aided by the efforts of Peter Durso and Amelia Hasbun, who were instrumental in the collection and management of program data, respectively. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Janis Lilly, whose insight about teen parents from a practitioner perspective informed the recommendations for interventions targeted toward teen parents.

This work was made possible by Grant Number SP1AH000027 from the HHS Office of Adolescent Health. Contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the office views of the Department of Health and Human Services or the Office of Adolescent Health.

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