

Influences on Parental Involvement of African American Adolescent Fathers

David B. Miller, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT: This study explores several factors related to the parental involvement of African-American adolescent fathers. These factors are identified through empirical literature as exerting influence upon adolescent fathers and their roles as fathers. An exploratory research design was utilized in order to obtain a better understanding of these fathers and how the identified factors affected parental involvement. Findings suggest that these adolescent fathers exhibit a level of parental involvement that is not generally perceived by the public. Additionally, the findings suggest that the identified factors interact to influence different dimensions of parental involvement.

Research on adolescent parental involvement has focused primarily on the adolescent mother, while the adolescent father has received cursory attention at best (Sawin & Parke, 1976; Connolly, 1978; Hendricks, 1981). Parental involvement of adolescent fathers has not received a systematic examination by social researchers (Battle, 1990). This is especially true of African-American adolescent fathers who have been neglected to the extent that they currently are identified as "invisible men" in family studies (Hill, 1988).

The importance of examining the parental involvement of African-American adolescent fathers is particularly critical considering lim-

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Dr. Miller is an Assistant Professor, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University. Address communications to the author at the university, 10900 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44106-7164.

ited empirical investigation in this area. The majority of information on adolescent fathers, especially African-American, often depicts a shadowy and irresponsible individual (Parke, Power, & Fisher, 1980) who is concerned more with proving his masculinity or establishing a reputation within the community than actively being involved in parenting. The adverse portrayal of the adolescent father is a result of society's negative opinion of the unwed father (Barret & Robinson, 1982 & 1985; Robinson, 1988). This negative perception also exists among service providers to adolescent parents (Freeman, 1988; Robinson & Barret, 1985).

As evidenced by limited empirical literature and contrary to popular belief, most adolescent fathers are willing to undertake active parenting roles with their children (Battle, 1990). Such literature also indicates that the father's participation in the child's development decreases the likelihood of subsequent behavioral problems (Barret & Robinson, 1985).

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect the parental involvement of African-American adolescent fathers, such as: (1) social support, (2) father-role readiness, (3) stress, and (4) involvement in the decision making process. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. a. What community resources are available to the African-American adolescent father in terms of social support?
b. Does a relationship exist between social support and parental involvement?
2. a. What effect does age, education, and employment have on the African-American adolescent father's perception of his readiness for fatherhood?
b. Does a relationship exist between the degree of perceived father-role readiness and parental involvement?
3. a. What are the primary sources of stress experienced by African-American adolescent fathers?
b. Does a relationship exist between the level of stress and parental involvement?
4. Does the African-American adolescent father's participation in the decision-making process regarding the pregnancy and subsequent child rearing increase his likelihood of being involved with the child and mother?

Literature Review

Social Support

According to Hendricks (1980), the social support system of African-American adolescent fathers comprises three sources: (1) family, (2) peers, and (3) community resources. These sources of social support promote competence in parental involvement (Coates, 1987). Financial, material, emotional, and/or educational support can be obtained through formal or informal sources (Thomas, Milburn, Brown, & Gary, 1988). In a study of African-American adolescent fathers in the inner-city, Sullivan (1985) found that the most involved fathers receive some type of support from their environments.

Father-Role Readiness

Hendricks (1981) indicates that African-American adolescent fathers frequently report an uneasiness with the pregnancy, initially, but as it progresses and they become included in the preparation of the newborn, their apprehensions decrease. Their readiness is shown in part by supportive behaviors, such as caregiving extended to the mother and child (Westney, Cole, & Munford, 1986). Although the literature indicates that adolescent fathers are not ready for fatherhood, some of them maintain a strong desire to remain involved with the mother and child and to develop parental competencies.

Self-image also has been associated with the level of father-role readiness displayed by the African-American adolescent (Christmon, 1990). In his study, Christmon indicates that African-American adolescent fathers with positive self-images are more likely to assume some type of responsibility for their children.

Stress

African-American adolescent fathers reported that they experienced problems in the areas of immediate family support, understanding the mothers of their children, and obtaining employment to meet their children's financial obligations (Hendricks, 1988). The stress experienced by the father may directly or indirectly affect his involvement with the child. As he struggles with the issues of adolescence, the adolescent father must also struggle with the issues associated with becoming a father. The literature also suggests that the nature of stress and how it impacts the father's attitudes and behaviors are other areas that require further examination.

Involvement in Decision-Making

The adolescent father's participation in the decision-making process has been virtually non-existent in literature on adolescent parents (Anderson, 1989; Marsiglio, 1987). According to a study by Reymond (1985) the majority of adolescent fathers want to be involved in any decisions related to the pregnancy. Based upon these findings, Reymond suggests that eliminating the father from the decision-making process may cause him to experience a sense of isolation, confusion, and having little control over the status of the child (McAdoo, 1988; Robinson & Barret, 1985). This situation could possibly contribute to problems between the adolescent father and mother, and also serve as the father's avenue of escape from responsibility.

Evidence suggests that the adolescent father's involvement in the decision-making process diminishes stress (Elster & Lamb, 1982) as well as strengthens his commitment following the child's birth (Reymond, 1985; Vaz, Smolen, & Miller, 1983). These findings appear to support Robinson's (1988) subsequent research in which fathers involved in the decision-making process reported less isolation and feelings of loss than those not involved.

Parental Involvement

According to Lamb (1987), the father's parental involvement comprises three components: 1) interaction with the child; 2) accessibility to the child, i. e., the nearness of the father to the child, even if no direct interaction occurs; and 3) responsibility for the child's well-being.

Methodology

Since literature and theoretical perspectives on parental involvement of African-American fathers are limited, the employment of an exploratory research design was most appropriate for this study. As Babbie (1983) indicates, if an area is relatively new or has not been researched, the exploratory approach is an appropriate vehicle for empirical study. This approach allows for the use of qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection.

Through the use of qualitative methods, data concerning these fathers reflect the depth and breadth of their parental involvement. The data obtained through the use of this strategy could then generate hypotheses that could be examined later through the use of more rig-

orous strategies (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1990; Hakim, 1987). The quantitative methods were utilized to enhance the understanding of the relationship among variables.

Sample & Population

A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit adolescent fathers. Existing literature suggests that the non-random sampling method, while not the preferred choice, is acceptable until a data base can be developed that will completely assess this population (Brown, 1983). Previous studies on adolescent fathers have revealed a wide range of sample sizes, from as few as nine to as many as 100 (Hanson, Morrison, & Ginsburg, 1989; Smith, 1988). An intended sample size of 25 was selected for this study. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was an appropriate number for an exploratory study (Hakim, 1987). It allowed the researcher to expend the necessary time exploring in greater depth the parental involvement of these fathers.

The metropolitan area in which this study was conducted has a network of agencies that offer services to adolescent parents. These agencies were contacted to recruit adolescent fathers from their programs for participation in this study. Additional fathers were recruited by placing an announcement in the newsletter of a project that provides services to families living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Fliers announcing the study also were distributed in African-American communities to reach those fathers who were served by the project but were not connected with the identified agencies.

Respondents were between 14 and 20 years of age. The author contends that young men between 18 and 20 who become fathers experience similar normative developmental and transitional issues as the younger fathers. This age range also provided the opportunity to investigate the consistency and extent of involvement in parenting because of greater variations in the length of time these young men have been fathers.

Data Collection

Data were collected from respondents using a questionnaire adapted from existing measures and information collected from the literature. This instrument, which was pre-tested with eight adolescent fathers, was refined and restructured to assure clarity and accuracy.

The author conducted a structured, personal, in-depth interview with each participant to gather data for this study. To assure reliability, validity, and confidentiality, the interviews took place at the social agency or the participant's residence. After receiving written permission, the interviews were audiotaped. Contrary to Hendricks et al. (1981), none of the participants objected to this method of questioning. These audio-tapes provided a complete review of the interviews for reference during data analysis.

Measures

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables for this study comprised three components of the father's parental involvement: parenting attitudes, parenting behaviors, and relationships with the child and mother.

Parenting Attitudes. This variable was defined as the father's attitudes and beliefs about his parenting role, and includes assessing his perception of how to instruct the child in certain behaviors.

Parenting attitudes were measured using two instruments adapted from the Steeltown Fathers study (Coontz, Martin, & Sites, 1989). A 13 item instrument—the Child Care-Should Scale—pertained to attitudes about the father's role. A 6-item instrument measured the respondent's level of enjoyment of certain parenting behaviors, such as buying clothes for the child. In addition, open-ended questions were developed to explore in greater detail the respondent's parental involvement.

Parenting Behaviors. This variable was defined as the father's behavior in certain areas in relation to the child. Significant areas include, but are not limited to, caregiving, playing, financial obligations, and interaction with the mother on issues related to the child's well-being. Parenting behaviors were measured through the use of a 13-item instrument.

Relationship with Child and Mother. This variable was defined as the father's actual interaction with the child and mother that produces either a positive or negative outcome, e.g., the latter would be the father not being able to visit the child following a disagreement

with the mother. Also included in this variable are the duration of the relationship prior to the pregnancy, and the father's perception of his relationship with the mother and the maternal grandparents. This dimension was measured through several open-ended questions. e.g., respondents were asked "How do you get along with the mother of your child?"

Independent Variables

Since there have been few studies of the parental involvement of adolescent fathers, a limited number of measures were available to address this study's variables. In previous studies on African-American adolescent fathers, the particular variable(s) under study often necessitated the development of newly constructed measurement instruments (Brown, 1983; Christmon, 1990; Smith, 1988).

Social Support. This variable was defined as the assistance that a black adolescent father receives to facilitate his parental involvement. In this study, support was either emotional or practical (Koeske & Koeske, 1990). Emotional support was characterized as offering advice, counseling, or just listening to the father's concerns. Practical support was characterized as offering financial resources and actual assistance in child care activities.

Social support was measured using a modified version of the instrument developed by Koeske & Koeske (1990). The instrument consisted of 11 items divided into the categories of emotional and practical support. Responses to the items were based on a 5 point Likert scale: (1) none at all, (2) a little, (3) a fair amount, (4) quite a bit or (5) a great deal. In addition, eight open-ended questions were developed to obtain additional data about these fathers' social support networks. For example, respondents were asked, "Who specifically in your family helps you take care of your child? In what way(s) does that person help you?"

Father-Role Readiness. This variable was defined as the father's beliefs and activities as indicated in his understanding of the responsibilities of fatherhood. These beliefs and activities are characterized by the father's ability to provide care and nurturing to the child. Four dimensions constitute this variable: (1) self-confidence, including self-image and motivation; (2) behaviors; (3) attitudes; and (4) preparedness for fatherhood. In addition, the father's age, education, and em-

ployment status are factors that influence father-role readiness as identified by Westney et al. (1986), and included for measurement in this study.

The dimensions of father-role readiness were measured using an 11-item instrument designed by the author. Answers were based on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from: (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. Eleven open-ended questions were designed to provide additional insight into this variable. For example, respondents were asked, "As a father, what do you feel are the most important responsibilities that you have toward the mother?"

Stress. This variable was defined as the concerns and issues that influence the adolescent father's involvement with the child. These concerns and issues may be financial, emotional, relational or informational. Relational variables represent the extent of the father's relationship with the mother, maternal grandparents, and peers.

Stress was measured through the use of an 11-item instrument developed from a combination of items in previous studies of adolescent fathers. The following dimensions of stress were measured: 1) becoming a parent; 2) relationships; 3) financial matters; 4) health of child and mother; 5) vocation; and 6) future of self and child. Responses were based on the same 5 point Likert scale used for social support.

Seven open-ended questions were designed to obtain additional insight into the impact of stress on the parental involvement of adolescent fathers in this sample. For example, respondents were asked, "How do you/did you get along with the mother?"

Decision-Making. This variable was defined as active participation in decision-making during pregnancy and post-pregnancy, e.g., whether the adolescent mother should carry the pregnancy to term; involvement with the mother in prenatal care and educational activities; selecting a name for the child, and continued input into issues involving the child's growth and development.

Decision-making was measured through the use of a 10-item instrument designed by the author. Answers were either yes (1) or no (0). Six questions were designed to obtain additional information regarding the adolescent father's involvement in decision-making regarding the pregnancy. Follow-up questions concerning the areas in which these fathers make decisions allowed the respondents to detail their involvement.

Data Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to measure possible linear relationships among the variables in this study. Although those variables are ordinal, as Kerlinger (1986) points out, the use of the product-moment correlation is appropriate with ordinal variables using the assumption of equality of interval. The author exercised care in the construction of the measures and in the interpretation of the findings in consideration that the usage of the product-moment correlation with ordinal measures does violate some assumptions for statistical analysis. Content analysis was used to determine themes and patterns specific to this sample based upon the adolescent fathers' responses to the open-ended questions. These responses were aggregated by themes and patterns into units for analysis (Allen-Meares, 1990; Babbie, 1983). The interpretation of these units then led to the development of categories that illustrated variation within the variables.

Findings

Sample Characteristics

Twenty-nine African-American fathers agreed to participate in this study. The average age of the participants was 17.9 years, with ages ranging from 15 to 20 years. The average age these respondents became fathers was 16.9 years; approximately two-thirds of the respondents had become fathers by the age of 17.

Seven of the respondents were employed full time and one was employed part time. All but one, an emergency medical technician, held low-skill positions such as fast food worker or dietary aide. Of the unemployed respondents, 75.9% reported that they were able to provide financial support to the child and mother. These fathers indicated that their incomes were obtained from casual labor, e.g., painting houses, washing cars, or illegal activities such as selling drugs, and armed robbery. Twenty respondents reported that their parent(s) also had adolescent pregnancies, and 22 indicated that their siblings had adolescent pregnancies. Nearly one-half reported that they had been involved with the mothers of their children for over a year prior to the pregnancies; a slight majority are still involved.

Table 1 highlights the significant correlations among the variables.

TABLE 1
Significant Correlation Coefficients (n = 29)

Independent Variables	Dimensions of Parental Involvement		
	Parenting Behavior	Parenting Attitude	Enjoyment of Parenting Activities
Emotional Support	r = .3616 p = .027	****	****
Practical Support	****	****	****
Father-Role Readiness	****	r = .3481 p = .032	r = .4337 p = .009
Decision-Making	r = .5493 p = .001	****	****
Stress	****	r = -.3866 p = .019	r = -.3894 p = .018

****Indicates that there was no significant correlation.

Social Support

Thirty six percent of the respondents reported that their mothers play important roles in assisting them with childrearing activities, as well as teaching them about fatherhood; 32% indicated that they receive little or no assistance in learning how to be parents. Emotional support was significantly correlated with parenting behaviors (see Table 1). Emotional support is associated with improved parenting behavior in that the father perceives that he can obtain the necessary guidance within the environment in order to perform his responsibilities. Through this type of support, the young father is able to gain an understanding of what is expected of him as a father. There was no significant correlation between practical support and parental involvement.

Father-Role Readiness

Twenty-one respondents reported moderate to high father role-readiness. As their levels of education increased, the uneasiness experienced with their roles as fathers decreased. Respondents' perceptions of father role-readiness were significantly correlated with positive parental attitudes and enjoyment of parenting activities (see Table 1). These findings suggest that if the father perceives himself ready to assume the responsibility of fatherhood, his attitudes will reflect his beliefs about his role in childrearing. When fathers perceived themselves as being prepared to act as fathers, they were more likely to express positive parenting attitudes and enjoyment of parenting activities as one father stated, "It (becoming a father) made me look at things a whole lot more seriously. The more I be out on the streets and not doing something for myself, the more my downfall later in life when its time to really help my daughter out. It made me look into the future."

Stresses of African-American Adolescent Fathers

Twenty-one respondents reported moderate to high levels of stress associated with being fathers. Stress appeared to have a negative impact on parenting attitudes. As the father's stress increased his attitudes toward parenting roles began to reflect a perception that childrearing was primarily the mother's responsibility. Also, as stress increased these fathers experienced less satisfaction in parenting activities. Although it is conjecture at this stage, the source of stress that seems to produce the most change in attitude originates from the father's relationship with the maternal grandparents. This source of stress is evident in the words of one father who stated, "There were real assholes, because they played like they liked me but after their daughter became pregnant with my child, they disowned her and stopped communicating with me."

As assessed from the interviews, during the pregnancies these fathers were concerned with one of three areas: 1) health of the child, 2) health of the mother, or 3) health of the child and mother. The majority of the respondents, 36%, were concerned with the child's health. Conditions within their social environments were considered to be other sources of stress. Violence directed at some of these fathers caused them to resort to selling drugs, armed robbery, and other at-risk behaviors in order to provide financial support for their child(ren).

Involvement in Decision-Making

Twenty respondents reported moderate to high involvement in decision-making responsibilities, and nine reported no involvement. When fathers were involved in the decision-making process, there was a significant relationship with the parental involvement dimension of parenting behavior (see Table 1). As the findings suggest, fathers who participated in the decision-making process regarding the pregnancy reported more involvement in parenting behaviors. This finding is the result of the father's perception that his decisions are valued, and therefore, he is a more active and involved parent. It also appears that when the father's decisions are taken into consideration, it provides an intangible reward for his involvement. These fathers appeared to be most involved with the children in the areas of discipline, safety, and clothing. Clothing is an important issue because the wrong color could possibly place the child in jeopardy, unintentionally signaling gang affiliation. Contrary to popular belief, 52% of the fathers indicated that they had discussed with the pregnant mother the possibility of keeping the child and other relevant issues, such as living arrangements and maintaining their relationship.

Discussion

This study explored the relationship among factors that, according to the literature, influence parental involvement of adolescent fathers, specifically African-American. Although the sample size was limited, the results of this study suggest that many adolescent fathers are attempting to assume responsible roles. This finding does not negate that this study also revealed that some of these fathers personify the stereotype of adolescent father. As Parke et al. (1980) suggests, some adolescent fathers are shadowy and irresponsible, concerned only with establishing reputations and proving their virility.

Fathers in this study exhibited more parental involvement than is perceived by the general public. Data reveals that many of these fathers are involved in the lives of the child and mother. The findings also suggest that parental involvement is influenced by factors present in the father's immediate environment. Therefore, it is essential that social workers and program developers understand the factors explored in this study in order to facilitate the parental involvement of adolescent fathers.

Limitations

The manner in which participants were selected was a limitation, in that they were self-selected and, thus, may not represent all black adolescent fathers. The financial stipend associated with the study may have yielded these fathers solely because of the monetary reward. The inability to verify their activities and attitudes, through observation or by confirmation from the mother, presented an additional limitation to this study. The issue of social desirability also should be considered a limitation because it is likely that these fathers want to be perceived as responsible and involved parents.

Implications/Suggestions

Given that adolescent fathers of all racial and ethnic groups have received limited empirical attention from social researchers it is important that both qualitative and quantitative measures be employed to investigate these fathers. The qualitative measures will provide a rich and broad base of understanding to these fathers that can not be uncovered from quantitative measures. As one of the fathers said, "Finally, someone wants to hear our story, from us, by us and for us. We are not all hanging out trying to make babies, then leave the baby and the mother, and brag about it but there are many of us who do care, and try to do the right thing for our child. It is these young fathers that need to be heard about more than those that do not do anything for their child except fade away."

Policy considerations for programming for adolescent parents should include parenting skills training for adolescent fathers. From an intervention perspective, early involvement may increase the likelihood of a long-term, consistent parental commitment. As discovered in this study, most parenting programs provide adolescent fathers with education and employment training and adolescent mothers with training in parenting skills. Although education and employment are important in assuming the father role, these factors do not fully prepare these fathers for parenting. Thus, it is imperative that they also receive training in parenting skills.

Support systems (i.e., the family) must be strengthened to assist these fathers' in being responsible parents. As advocates, social workers can seek assistance from appropriate welfare organizations on behalf of support systems, while simultaneously instructing the fathers how to use available services.

The development of instructional programs that address sexuality

and fatherhood is essential for social workers associated with the educational system. These programs should be geared toward all adolescent males. Those at risk of becoming adolescent fathers could be identified by assessing the family history of the adolescent pregnancy. Pregnancy prevention and the responsibilities of fatherhood should be the focus of these programs. Policy formulation and implementation also should address how the educational system encourages adolescent parents to remain in school and continue their education.

Agencies that offer services to adolescents could implement a group for adolescent fathers, co-led by a facilitator and an adolescent father functioning as a peer counselor. This group could be incorporated within the context of existing services and provide a forum for these father to discuss issues that affect them. The time also could be used to instruct them on the basics of child care, such as feeding, diapering the child, and the roles of play and discipline. This type of group could be gender specific to help these fathers become more concerned with fatherhood and less concerned with impressing members of the opposite sex.

Future Research

Future research into the adolescent father's role in parenting is essential. As the literature illustrates, the African-American adolescent father's role as parent has not been adequately investigated by researchers. As the findings of this study suggest, these fathers exhibit characteristics of parental involvement that have not been typically associated with them. For example, future research might investigate the father's sense of responsibility to the mother and child, his availability to the child, and the process through which he makes decisions regarding his child's health and future. Further investigation into these and other characteristics will undoubtedly provide a more accurate representation of a young man's activities as a father.

Future studies of adolescent fathers would benefit by employing longitudinal designs in order to follow the fathers for a specific period. Such designs would give researchers the opportunity to track changes in parental involvement. It would also provide an opportunity to examine the variables which affect the consistency and level of his parental involvement and those factors which contribute to his not being involved with the child and mother.

In future studies, parent-child interaction should be illustrated and

categorized through the use of established measures of observation. In addition, the adolescent mother also should be interviewed to ascertain her perceptions of the father's parental involvement.

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