Conceptualizing Fatherhood: 
Maternal Perceptions of Responsible Fathering

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ABSTRACT. We investigated maternal perceptions of responsible fathering among pregnant and parenting teenage mothers by interviewing 10 adolescent mothers. Mothers responded to what being a responsible father means to them and described the degree of involvement by the father of their children. Five primary themes emerged as characteristics of responsible fathers: “being there” for the child, helping to take care of the child, loving and caring for the child, providing financial support, and playing with the child. Seven major themes developed in response to mothers’ perceptions of their children’s fathers’ involvement: does not help take care of child, irregular or no contact, does not play with child, incarceration, financial support, left mother and child, and loves and cares for child.

Although recent research has shown the importance of father involvement, the literature indicates that adolescent fathers are at increased risk for low levels of involvement with their children (see Bunting & McAuley, 2004, for a review). Similarly, unwed fathers are at a greater risk for low levels of involvement with their children (Cabrera et al., 2004). Given these findings, it is noteworthy that 86% of teenage mothers in the United States were unmarried in 2007 (Ventura, 2009).

Since 2002, the number of single mothers, at the time of their children’s birth, has increased in most racial and ethnic populations (Ventura, 2009). Hispanic/Latina women have the highest percentage of nonmarital births, followed by Black women, White women, and women of Asian or Pacific Islander descent (Ventura, 2009). Mothers’ perceptions of their children’s fathers have a significant impact on fathering behavior (Feinberg, 2003). Maternal attitudes toward, and expectations of, the fathers of their children are related to fathers’ levels of involvement with their children (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; McBride & Rane, 1998; Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2003).
Thus, maternal perceptions of responsible fathering are important to investigate. Despite the large majority of unmarried teenage mothers, few researchers have investigated mothers’ perceptions of the biological fathers’ roles in helping to raise their infant children (Dallas, Wilson, & Salgado, 2000).

To our knowledge, two studies have explored adolescent mothers’ perceptions of father involvement, qualitatively. Dallas et al. (2000) examined mothers’ expectations for paternal role behaviors using a focus group with seven African American and Mexican American pregnant and parenting adolescent mothers. Mothers expected that fathers would provide financially, be available emotionally for both the child and the mother, participate in childcare activities, and serve as an intermediary between the adolescent mothers and the children’s paternal grandmothers. Mothers cited “being there” and spending time with the child” as the most important paternal role. Mothers reported assuming a greater proportion of childcare activities compared to fathers. When asked what they hoped their children’s fathers would gain from teen parenting classes, mothers reported a desire for fathers to become “more involved” by spending more time with children and participating more in childcare activities. In another study, Spear (2004) interviewed eight African American and European American pregnant teenage mothers about their experiences with pregnancy. Regarding future expectations, the majority of mothers expected the fathers of their children to be actively involved in the child-rearing process. The authors suggested that mothers were expressing wishful thinking with that expectation.

The methodology of the present study drew from Summers et al. (2006). Using a sample of 575 low-income, young adult fathers with 24-month-old children, researchers asked participants the meaning of a “good father” in an open-ended interview. The participants reported that the most important roles of fathers are providing a stable source of financial and physical support in the child’s life (i.e., “being there”), serving as the child’s life mentor, taking care of the child, and being emotionally available and responsive to the child. Summers et al. (2006) compared the responses of the fathers to the framework of positive father involvement set forth by Lamb et al. (1987) and found that the fathers’ responses were represented by the frameworks’ three components: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Another study assessed adolescent fathers’ descriptions of a “good father” (Lemay, Cashman, Elfenbein, & Felice, 2010). Participants developed the following five themes: availability (i.e., “being there”), providing financial support, providing emotional support, teaching the child, and taking responsibility for the child.

Given previous findings that mothers and fathers hold different expectations for fathering behavior (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Dallas et al., 2000), we sought to further the qualitative research on adolescent parents by assessing teenage mothers’ perceptions of a “good father” in this exploratory study. Consistent with Summers et al. (2006), we compared mothers’ responses to the positive father involvement framework (Lamb et al., 1987). In addition, we assessed the mothers’ evaluations of the paternal roles exhibited by their children’s fathers.

**Purpose of the Study**

We assessed maternal conceptualizations of responsible fathering as perceived by pregnant and parenting teenage women, who were currently or who had previously been enrolled in a parenting education class sponsored by a community organization. Specifically, this study examined two questions:

1. How do pregnant and parenting teenage women perceive responsible fathering?
2. How do pregnant and parenting teenage women assess the father of their children against their maternal perceptions of responsible fathering?

Given the research that has shown that mothers and fathers emphasize different aspects of fatherhood (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Dallas et al., 2000), we expected that adolescent mothers would develop unique themes surrounding the roles of a responsible father compared to those reported by adolescent fathers reported in a previous study (i.e., Lemay et al., 2010). Given the preponderance of previous research suggesting that unwed, adolescent fathers are irregularly involved in their children’s lives (Bunting & McAuley, 2004), we expected that the children’s fathers would not fulfill the roles of a “good father” as perceived by the mothers.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants included 10 pregnant or parenting teenage women between the ages of 17 and 18 (M = 17.80, SD = .42). The sample included three
Hispanic, three European American, two African American, and two multiracial mothers. The mean age of the mothers at the time of conception was 16.60 (SD = 1.27), whereas the mean age of the fathers at the time of conception was 18.80 (SD = 1.55). Eighty percent of the women were single, and 20% were married. Of the women who were married, one was married to her child’s biological father, and the other was married to someone other than her child’s biological father. Of the women who were single, 20% were dating the fathers of their children. Most participants (80%) were already parenting, and 20% were pregnant with their first child. One participant, who was already parenting, was also pregnant. Most participants (70%) reported living with their parents, whereas 30% reported living with a sibling, the father of her child, or both the maternal parents and the father of her child.

Measures
Protocol. The semi-structured telephone interview addressed fatherhood by using the following questions: “What does being a ‘good father’ mean to you? (What does he do? How does he behave?)”, and “What is the father of your child(ren) like? (How does he treat you now, previously, and during your pregnancy? How does he treat your child(ren)?)” We drew the first question from Summers et al. (2006). Our research group developed the second question as well as the probes for both questions for this study.

Demographic information. Each participant answered a demographic questionnaire that assessed her age, her race, and her and her partner’s age at the time of her first pregnancy. We also assessed her marital status; living arrangement; and the number, age, and sex of her child(ren). Each participant also provided additional information concerning her relationship with the child(ren)’s father and who is helping her take care of her child(ren).

Design
We used open-ended interviews as our methodology. We contacted participants on two occasions via telephone communication. The first occasion was to arrange a convenient time for a 1-hour interview. The actual interview took place during the second phone call.

Procedure
We conducted 10 semi-structured telephone interviews with pregnant and parenting teenage mothers, who were currently or had previously been enrolled in a teen parenting program in west central Florida. School social workers distributed recruitment flyers to the pregnant and parenting adolescent mothers and informed them of the study. Social workers relayed contact information for the mothers, who were interested in the study, to our research group. We explained the purpose of the study to the mothers and arranged to obtain written informed consent from participants 18 years of age and older. We obtained both informed consent from the guardians and assent from participants younger than 18 years old. We called each participant twice using the contact information provided by the social worker. During the first telephone contact, we further explained the purpose of the study and scheduled a time to conduct a 1-hr telephone interview about her understanding of the fatherhood role. With permission from the participants, we recorded the interviews. Of the 12 names provided by the program directors, 10 adolescent mothers agreed to participate. We conducted this study with the approval of the university’s institutional review board.

Data Analysis
Following the telephone interviews, we transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim and entered all responses from the interviews into the ATLAS.ti software package (Muhr, 1997) for coding and content analysis. This sophisticated software expedites the process of analyzing data and offers a more systematic method of data analysis by allowing for a consistent and thorough analysis. We developed a coding tree, a priori, in order to organize participant responses and to facilitate analysis. We used the coding tree solely for coding purposes; we did not ask participants questions based on the coding tree. Rather, we selected items for the coding tree that corresponded to each of the research questions. We used Atlas.ti in order to search for specific coded materials within the transcript and calculate their occurrences. This process was conducive to developing themes within our data. The research team developed the criterion of a 30% frequency rate of any response in order for researchers to consider the construct a major theme.

Results
The results of the interviews with pregnant and parenting teenage mothers produced a high degree of consistency across the respondents. This section
outlines major themes revealed in our analysis of the participants’ responses to “What does being a ‘good father’ mean to you?” and “What is the father of your child(ren) like?” Notably, mothers gave disparate responses to the two questions posed in the interviews. The themes developed around “What does being a ‘good father’ mean to you?” were more positive, whereas the themes developed around “What is the father of your child(ren) like?” were more negative. The subsequent section provides further examination of the major themes identified in our analysis.

“Good Father”
In response to the former question, five major themes emerged from the interviews: “being there” for the child, helping to take care of the child, loving and caring for the child, providing financial support, and playing with the child.

**Being there.** The most commonly reported criterion to being a “good father” reported by the women in this study was “being there.” Ninety percent of mothers reported that “being there” was an essential feature of a good father. Mothers expressed that spending time with the child was the most fundamental aspect of good fathering. It appears that, for the women in the study, having this basic role met held precedence over any further fatherhood duties. For example, one mother said, “I don’t know the definition of a good father except being in the baby’s life.” To the participants in the study, the role of “being there” should not be negotiated. One respondent described her thoughts about the uncompromising importance of fathers being available to their children,

They (fathers) should be there when it counts, and when it doesn’t count. When the baby’s sick, they should be there. When the baby’s not sick, they should be there. When I need his help, he should be here. When I don’t need his help, he should be here. He should be there as much as he can.

**Helping to take care of the child.** Eighty percent of mothers reported that responsible fathers help take care of children. Mothers identified feeding, changing, and bathing children as well as putting children to sleep as an important function of a “good father.” Women reported that two parents should be responsible for taking care of the baby and ensuring that the baby’s needs are met. One mother emphatically stated, “If you think you are grown enough to have sex, then if she gets pregnant, you need to be that grown-up and take care of your kid.” Mothers reported having been raised in households where the mother was the primary provider of childcare. Mothers in this study reported desiring a more egalitarian partnership with the father of their children.

**Loving and caring for the child.** Forty percent of mothers reported that loving and caring for their children is an essential characteristic of a “good father.” One mother described a father’s affection by stating,

I see now that like he really loves me and our son, and that his son is his everything, and he shows like a lot more that he is caring, more affectionate, just everything really. He’s more positive toward everything.

Mothers also described the importance of their children knowing that their fathers care for them regardless of whether the mother and father were romantically involved.

**Providing financial support.** Forty percent of mothers reported financial support to be an important aspect of good fathering. Although the mothers agreed that it was important, two of the mothers specifically stated that providing financial support held less significance than establishing physical and emotional ties with the child. Mothers commonly reported the concept of loving the child in conjunction with providing financially for the child. As explained by one respondent,

You can’t just be like, ‘Oh well, here—I support you. I give you money; here you go. I buy you clothes and food,’ because anybody can do that, but you have to give them the love that you want them to have for you.

Another respondent reported that the importance mothers place on fathers’ financial involvement discourages fathers from being paternally involved:

It’s not about money, and it’s not about the things that they give, it’s about how they love their child, and are happy that they’re in their lives. Ya know, it’s not about child support and all that. It’s the least important thing. The most important thing is love. The financial stuff would help, it really would. It would help a lot, but a lot of girls focus on that more, and
that is what drives the guy away is that they only want money. They should really focus on other things.

Mothers spoke about the strained relationships they had with their fathers, who would purchase them items instead of being a consistent presence in their life, as an attempt to “buy my love.”

Playing with the child. Thirty percent of mothers reported that playing with the child is an important aspect of a good father. Playing with the child was described differently than “being there” in that mothers stated, “The fathers do not have to be doing anything, but just be there,” as opposed to actually interacting in a playful manner with the children. Mothers commonly combined “talking and playing with the child.” One mother described a good father in the following manner, “He treats the children very good. After work, he always takes time to play and talk with them.” Mothers appeared to consider both talking and playing with the child as mechanisms to facilitate bonding between the father and child.

Mothers’ Perceptions of Father Involvement
In response to mothers’ perceptions of father involvement, seven major themes were developed: does not help take care of child, irregular or no contact, does not play with child, incarceration, financial support, left mother and child, and loves and cares for child. Themes developed in response to this question were often the opposite of themes developed in response to the initial question. Mothers perceived fathers who take care of the children in the role of a “good father,” whereas the majority of mothers in the sample perceived the fathers of their children as not taking care of their children. Similarly, mothers’ perceptions of a “good father” included the father playing with the child, whereas half of the sample reported that the fathers of their children did not play with the child. The same number of mothers, who reported that loving and caring for the child was essential to being a good father, also reported that the father of their children loved and cared for their children. Financial support was evenly split. Four mothers reported that they were receiving financial support from the fathers of their children, and four mothers reported that they were not. The mothers’ perceptions of whether providing financial support was an essential characteristic of a good father were also mixed.

Does not help take care of child. Eighty percent of mothers reported that the fathers of their children did not help them take care of their children. Mothers reported the unfairness they felt with one parent solely providing childcare duties. Women in this study cited a number of reasons that they were the primary provider of childcare duties, including incarceration of the father, the father having moved out-of-state, and decreased father involvement as a result of mothers and fathers no longer being romantically involved. In this study, the trend was for fathers to help take care of children more in infancy, which gradually waned as the children grew older. One mother described the conversation she had with the father of her child, “Like I told him, ‘You are a part of it, so you should help take care of your son, not just one person,’ but he does not see it that way.” Most mothers in this study reported that they were not receiving help from their children’s fathers.

Irregular or no contact. Seventy percent of mothers reported that the father of their child had either irregular \((n = 2)\) or no \((n = 5)\) contact with their child. Most mothers still desired for their children’s fathers to have contact with their children. One mother reported,

- We argue sometimes only because when I ask him to come by and see his son, he says he’s too busy, but he doesn’t have a job, and he’s not in school right now, so I don’t understand how he can be too busy to come and see him.

One mother would not allow the father of her child to have contact with the child due to his reported emotionally unstable behavior. However, most mothers, who had access to the fathers, reported continuing to plea with their children’s fathers to spend time with their children. As one mother reported,

- If he tells me he’s going to come get her, then he tells me he’s not, then most the time I just like flip out on him, and then he comes to get her after I like scream at him, but I shouldn’t have to. I shouldn’t have to yell at him for him to come and get his daughter.

Mothers’ reports of irregular or no contact is in stark contrast to their overwhelming response that “being there” is an attribute of a good father.

Does not play with child. Fifty percent of mothers reported that the father of their child no longer engaged in play behavior with the child. Mothers reported feeling sympathy for their children because they did not have their fathers to
play with them. One mother reported,

He used to play with her all the time. They would play like dogs or something. I don’t know what they would be doing. He used to growl at her, and now she growls. I miss seeing them play like that, and I don’t feel like he does it anymore.

Incarceration. Forty percent of mothers reported that the father of their child was either in jail or a detention center. Most mothers reported maintaining irregular contact with the father during his incarceration. Some mothers were hopeful that when the father got out of jail, he would be involved in his child’s life. One mother reported,

He’s always like, ‘When I get out, I’m going to buy her everything she needs, and I’m always going to be over there to help,’ and he wants to learn how to do stuff, like give her a bath and changing her diaper, because he doesn’t know how to do any of that stuff.

However, some mothers were less optimistic about life after incarceration as evidenced by one mother, “His mama go up there every day to see him to tell him how I’m doing and stuff, and he says he can’t wait to come home. But yeah, I don’t believe that.”

Financial support. Forty percent of mothers reported not receiving any financial support from the fathers of their children. Mothers primarily reported receiving financial help from their parents or from the fathers’ parents. One mother reported, “My parents were the ones that um helped me with her mostly. They’re the ones that supported me and the baby, cause he wouldn’t really give them anything.” Conversely, 40% of mothers reported that the fathers of their children did provide some financial support to them and their children. Referring to what the father of her child is doing over summer break of college, one mother reported, “He’s just working to get money to help me and when he leaves, when he’s gone, to give if the baby needs diapers and stuff.”

Left mother and child. Forty percent of mothers reported that the fathers of their children left them either during pregnancy or after the birth of their children. Of these mothers, some knew where the fathers were currently living, and some had no idea. Mothers reported dismay that the fathers of their children left them. A mother pregnant with her and the father’s second child together reported, “He left knowing he had a daughter already and I was pregnant, and I guess he didn’t really care. He didn’t even say he was leaving, he just left.” Most mothers did not appear to anticipate the occurrence of the fathers of their children leaving; however, one mother added the following caveat to young women:

I would tell other young girls who wanna have babies that think they are ready, that they are really not. And they think that the dad is actually going to be around, and most the time he is really not. I actually got really lucky so, and that having a baby is not going to save their relationship. Some girls think that if they have a baby, that it is gonna help. It is only going to make it worse, and they should all know that.

Loves and cares for child. Forty percent of mothers reported that they believed the father of their child loved and cared for their child. All but one of these mothers was still romantically involved with the fathers of their children. One mother reported, “The father of my child supports us. He cares for us. He cares for us and wants the best. He tries to spend as much time as possible with us.” There was less agreement with this theme among women who were no longer romantically involved with the father of their child.

Discussion

This study investigated maternal perceptions of responsible fatherhood among pregnant and parenting teenage women. Five characteristics emerged as dominant themes of responsible fatherhood: “being there” for the child, helping to take care of the child, loving and caring for the child, providing financial support, and playing with the child. These themes are consistent with the Lamb et al. (1987) framework of positive father involvement, which suggested that father involvement comprises three components: engagement (e.g., helping take care of the child and playing with the child), accessibility (e.g., “being there” for the child), and responsibility (e.g., providing financial support). Interestingly, loving and caring for the child did not fit neatly into any current component of the father involvement framework described by Lamb et al. (1987). This finding suggests that the framework may benefit from modifications that incorporate father’s affection toward the child.

The themes developed in the current study are largely consistent with Lemay et al. (2010). Both adolescent mothers and fathers reported “being
there” as the prominent feature of a “good father.” Mothers and fathers also agreed that providing financial and emotional support as well as taking care of the child (i.e., assuming responsibility of the child) are important characteristics of a responsible father. Interestingly, fathers did not cite playing with the child as an important component of a “good father,” whereas mothers did not cite teaching the child as an important aspect of a “good father.” This finding partially supports our expectation, and previous findings, that mothers and fathers would emphasize different components as being related to a “good father” (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Dallas et al., 2000).

Findings of the present study also largely mirrored those of Dallas et al. (2000). Adolescent mothers in both studies agreed that “being there” for the child, taking care of the child, and providing financial and emotional support were desirable characteristics of a father. The current sample seems to have developed a unique theme, playing with the child. Similarly, Dallas et al. (2000) reported a unique theme of the father serving as an intermediary between the adolescent mother and the father’s mother. These unique themes suggest that researchers have not yet reached saturation in adolescent mothers’ perceptions of responsible fathering. Thus, more research in this area is warranted.

It is of interest that this study is the fourth one to report the theme of “being there” as the primary aspect of good paternal behavior (Dallas et al., 2000; Lemay et al., 2010; Summers et al., 2006). Mothers and fathers alike agree that spending time with the child is the most important behavior a father can exude. This essential characteristic appears to transcend both gender and age differences.

This study also asked adolescent mothers to evaluate the paternal behaviors of the fathers of their children. Seven themes (predominantly negative) emerged to describe the mothers’ experiences of fatherhood with the fathers of their children: does not help take care of child, irregular or no contact, does not play with child, incarceration, financial support, left mother and child, and loves and cares for child. The disparate themes, compared to those developed in response to a “good father,” suggest that the majority of teenage mothers who participated in this study did not perceive the fathers of their children to be meeting their perceptions of a “good father.” These results are consistent with previous findings of young adult mothers (Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008), which found that the majority of mothers in their study reported that they received child support irregularly, and half of the sample reported that their children’s fathers had irregular contact with their children, with many either being incarcerated or banned from seeing the child. Additionally, most mothers expressed a desire for increased father-child interactions, much like in the current study. To our knowledge, the other themes have not been developed in the extant literature.

It is important to note that mothers who were in romantic relationships with their children’s fathers reported more positively about the behaviors those men were exerting with their children, compared to mothers who were not romantically involved with their children’s fathers. This finding is consistent with previous research (Herzog, Umaña-Taylor, Madden-Derdich, & Leonard, 2007), which found that adolescent mothers who were in romantic relationships with their children’s fathers at the time of the study reported being more satisfied with the fathers’ levels of involvement compared to mothers who were not romantically involved with their children’s fathers at the time of the study. This finding is also supported by research that suggests that fathers who are romantically involved with their children’s mothers are more involved with their children than fathers who are not in a romantic relationship with their children’s mothers (Carlson & McLanahan, 2010). These results suggest that the children of adolescent mothers in this study may not be exposed to behaviors associated with responsible fathering. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that suggested that unwed, adolescent fathers are not likely to be highly involved with their children (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Cabrera et al., 2004).

Although this exploratory study had many strengths, it also had several limitations. Foremost, we had both a small and heterogeneous convenience sample, which precludes the results of the study from being generalizable. Some women in our sample were pregnant for the first time, whereas other women were already parenting. It is plausible that mothers who are already parenting may hold different perceptions of responsible fathering compared to mothers who have not yet given birth. However, Dallas et al. (2000) reported that the most discrepant responses between expectant mothers and mothers who were already parenting was the expectation that
fathers would continue to emotionally support mothers after having the child, whereas parenting mothers reported that the emotional support they received decreased after having the child. Our sample also varied on other demographic characteristics including race, marital status, romantic involvement with the child’s father, and the number of children mothers had.

Future studies concerning this topic should use larger sample sizes by recruiting from a variety of sources, including multiple teen parenting programs, schools, governmental agencies, and churches. Future research conducted on teenage mothers’ perceptions of fatherhood should recruit participants from a diverse population of teenagers including those from different ethnic/racial groups; mothers in preconception, gestation, and interconception stages; and mothers who are romantically involved or living with the father of their child as well as those who are not. Future research should compare these various groups’ responses, as it is reasonable to expect that different subpopulations of adolescent mothers would have a different definition of a “good father.” Although the small number of participants precluded the generality of this study, the findings suggest a discrepancy between the mothers’ perceptions of a “good father” and their perceptions of the paternal behaviors they are receiving from the father of their children.

This research informs social workers and couples therapists regarding the roles that teenage mothers perceive as being a “good father.” Programs could be more tailored to the needs of mothers and their perceptions of fatherhood. Knowing the expectations the mother has for the father of their child is a starting base for future interventions on how to effectively work with the father in order to achieve those expectations. Social workers and therapists should work with the mothers in improving all areas of their lives, including the relationship they have with the fathers of their children. Despite the limitations of the current study, this study is valuable in that it examined the perceptions of fatherhood among adolescent mothers. We found that adolescent mothers have clear perceptions of what makes a “good father,” and the majority of mothers did not perceive the fathers of their children to be measuring up to their expectations.

References


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