

Voices and Visions: Perspectives of Teen Mothers in Sudbury, Ontario

Summary

June 2015







Authors

Suzanne Lemieux, Ph. D., Sudbury & District Health Unit Melissa Long, BSW, RSW, Sudbury Better Beginnings Better Futures Leigh MacEwan, D. Phil., Laurentian University Johanne Thomson, DSW, Sudbury Better Beginnings Better Futures Participating teen mothers

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the eight courageous teen mothers who volunteered to participate in this study by sharing their stories. Also, the authors would like to thank Carol Dodge from Sudbury Better Beginnings Better Futures for generously sharing her space, knowledge and expertise. Thank you also to Marie Langill and Hiren Rawal for their valuable contributions throughout this study, and to Laurie Gagnon for formatting this report.

Funding

Louise Picard Public Health Research Grant, 2013–2015

Contact for More Information

Suzanne Lemieux Resources, Research, Evaluation and Development (RRED) Division Sudbury & District Health Unit 1300 Paris Street Sudbury, ON P3E 3A3 Phone: 705.522.9200, ext. 400

lemieuxs@sdhu.com

Citation

Lemieux, Suzanne, Melissa Long, Leigh MacEwan and Johanne Thomson. (2015). *Voices and Visions: Perspectives of Teen Mothers in Sudbury, Ontario (Summary)*. Sudbury, ON: Sudbury & District Health Unit.

Copyright

This resource may be reproduced, for educational purposes, on the condition that full credit is given to the Sudbury & District Health Unit and Leigh MacEwan. This resource may not be reproduced or used for revenue generation purposes.

© Sudbury & District Health Unit, 2015

Contents

Background	1
Methodology	2
Findings: Voices and Visions of Teen Mothers	3
Pregnancy and Postpartum	3
Challenges of Motherhood	3
Strengths and Resilience	5
Needs for Improvement: Perspectives of Teen Mothers	7
Conclusions	8
Strength of the Study	8
Limitations of the Study	8
Final Thoughts	8

Background

Service providers from Better Beginnings Better Futures (BBBF), an agency that offers services to teen mothers in Sudbury, identified a need to better understand the perspectives and experiences of these mothers. In addition, the Sudbury & District Health Unit (SDHU), which aims to prevent disease and promote and protect health for all, identified the need to better understand how best to promote and deliver preconception health messaging and care among our teen population.

Much of the academic literature on teen parenting has focused on the prevalence of teen pregnancies (McKay, 2012). We know that teen pregnancy rates for the Sudbury area are higher than the rest of Ontario (SDHU, 2013). The literature also focuses on strategies for reducing its prevalence (Goesling et al., 2014; Kappeler & Farb, 2014), predisposing factors for becoming a teen mother (Al-Sahab et al., 2012; Pedrosa et al., 2011), risk factors of early motherhood (Brown et al., 2011; Jordahl & Lohman, 2009), and negative social construction of teen pregnancy (Vinson, 2012; Yardley, 2008).

Very few studies explore the experiences of the teen mothers themselves, particularly to understand the community barriers they face and how these could be improved to assist them with parenting. Therefore, a project that aimed to encourage teen mothers to share their lived experience, to voice their concerns, and to identify potential solutions for any barriers or challenges that limit them in their mothering, was developed through a partnership between the SDHU, Laurentian University School of Social Work, and BBBF. The group conceptualized a project that would meet the needs of all.

The project was funded by the Louise Picard Public Health Research Grant (LPPHRG), a joint grant between the SDHU and Laurentian University.

Methodology

In this study, a feminist participatory action research approach was used to explore the complexity of teen mother's experiences. This approach was chosen in order to allow participants substantial control over involvement in the study, including its implications for practice or action (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). As described by Maguire (1987), feminist action research provides a powerful approach to knowledge creation for social and personal transformation.

Using photovoice methods (Wang & Burris, 1997), this study aimed to document the narratives and photographs of eight teenage mothers in Sudbury, Ontario; photovoice uses photographs taken by research participants to document their everyday lives.

A total of 8 teen mothers were recruited to the study through a youth engagement group that offers prenatal and parenting services for teens 18 years of age or younger at BBBF. Data were collected using various methods, including photographs (1 to 10 per participant), individual interviews, and group interviews (3 in total). Demographic information was collected via questionnaire.

In an initial group interview with the participants, the researchers discussed the study and ethical considerations, provided training in the ethical use of cameras and taking pictures, obtained participant consent, discussed participants' questions, and distributed the demographic questionnaire for completion. Disposable cameras were also provided.

Participants then took photographs that represented what it is like for them to be a teen mom. Once participants had completed the task, they selected 1 to 10 images that highlighted their experiences. An individual interview with each participant provided an opportunity to to discuss the meaning of the photographs and their experiences.

In a second group interview, participants each chose one photograph that was most important to them and shared their story with the group.

Finally, in a thrid group interview, the findings were presented to the teen mothers for validation, and a discussion regarding recommendations for improvement was held.

Findings: Voices and Visions of Teen Mothers

The findings emerging from the analysis of the data revealed four major themes: pregnancy and postpartum experiences, challenges of motherhood, strengths and resilience, and needs for imporvement.

Pregnancy and Postpartum

The teen mother participants revealed that they had experienced anxiety, uneasiness, and emotional turmoil when they first realized that they were pregnant. One mom describes her experience through this photograph and related explanation:

When I first found I was pregnant I felt really lost. I just felt alone like I didn't really know who to turn to...It's patchy being a mom. It was tough, it was hard, it's hard for the first time. I think being young or being old, regardless, it's going to be tough.



Challenges of Motherhood

Participants also discussed the challenges of motherhood. These challenges were catagorized according to the following sub-themes: time management struggles, relationship issues, financial burdens, health issues, educational problems, stigma and stereotypes, and accessibility of services.

In regard to time management struggles, participants mentioned difficulties in balancing childrearing duties, household chores, and demands of work and schooling.

A few teen mothers described having unhealthy relationships with the father of their child as well as with their family. One mother described her experience through this photograph:

I got three different flowers, put them on the rocks, because it was just three of us, but then we split apart, and it was always rocky, and it will always be rocky now, but we are still family, so three of us, even though it is rocky, it's tough.



Most of the teen mothers faced financial challenges and insecurities on various occasions. Ontario Works was identified as one of the systemic barriers they faced. One mom stated that "they just cut off the Start Up [Program] and they shouldn't. A lot of moms can't afford to move and they're just stuck where they are".

One mom spoke of her and her son's health issues as she described a photograph she took:

I figured that the balloon was me and then the branches of the tree were the struggles that I went through. And as the balloon keeps going up, I overcome the struggles in my life: like Aden (not real name) had to go through surgery, being a teen mom, being in recovery...just stuff like that.



Education was emphasized as a significant factor in attaining a better life; however, remaining in school and completing a program was challenging for most teen mothers.

In addition, the majority of teen mothers encountered societal stereotypes, discrimination and judgemental behaviours from the general public and professionals.

One mom shared:

There was a couple, they were just staring at me because I was big, like I had a big belly and actually the wife ended up like, purposely, it seemed to be, she purposely bumped into me. She was like...you don't have to care about that baby anyways.

One of the major challenges encountered by teen mothers was the unwelcoming and judgemental attitude of some frontline workers. When one mother was in labour, a nurse called the Children's Aid Society. She said that a child protection worker was present at the time of birth without any prior notice. The worker behaved unprofessionally with her family members. She remarked "they should not judge teen moms at all...they shouldn't judge you before they get to know you".

Another mom shared her experience: "I went to a [parent group] meeting and I felt very uncomfortable because I walked in there, it was all older parents and they were looking at me like, what are you doing here..." This mom also experienced rude, unwelcoming, and judgmental behaviours from the instructor during a speech therapy group session. She revealed that:

It was really uncomfortable and I would not go back, like, I really had a hard time with it and it's just hard because I don't want other people to go through that because you're there to help your child, and then you're being put in a position where you feel really uncomfortable and unwelcomed, it's really difficult to enjoy it...

Finally, moms expressed challenges with public transportation and access to daily activities, services, daycare, work and education.

Strengths and Resilience

The majority of teen mothers admitted that their personal struggles and societal challenges made them a strong person and strengthened their self-esteem. Teen mothers in general shared that their children had changed their lives for the better.

One mother stated:

"Just seeing the smile on your children's faces, being able to play with them and watch them grow up and change, and different toys, and like, the bonding experiences you get with your children".



This mother also took pride in the fact that she completed school while being a young mother. She expressed her sense of achievement in the picture below, which represents a stack of books with a paper indicating her age when she gave birth.

Mothers also valued the importance of a supportive environment. One mom shared:

I have a really good support system. I'm actually very lucky. All my family is very supportive. My mom was a young mother...she was there no matter what...I have my boyfriend which is an amazing father, like, I don't know what I'll do without him you know, like he helped me go back to school and stuff...

All the teen mothers admired the services provided through the Baby's Breath program, a free prenatal and parenting support program offered through BBBF. One mom shared:

We have Baby's Breath, you could come here and you could ask for like anything...if you need help or something they're always here for you...support system I think is a big part of being a teen parent... especially people who don't have that support system they can come here...



Needs for Improvement: Perspectives of Teen Mothers

The teen mothers highlighted opportunities for improvement as they relate to personal needs, teen mother awareness and education, accessibility to services, and eliminating stigma perpetuated by the public and health care professionals.

The participants indicated that they wanted to have healthy supportive relationships with the father, their families, and friends.

They also identified the need for a greater variety of services, as well as increased awareness and accessibility to services and programs available for teen mothers in the community. For example, they identified a need to provide adequate and educational information regarding pregnancy and child rearing to teen mothers. They also wanted improved public transportation to ease access to daily activities, services, daycare, work, and education as well as accessible services and schools in their neighbourhoods.

The majority of the teen mothers stressed that public awareness is necessary to reduce stigma and stereotypes associated with teen mothers in the community. All spoke of the need for non-judgemental public services in general and, in particular, a need for service providers who are welcoming, sensitive to the experiences of teen mothers, and inclusive of all mothers attending their services. Awareness raising may be done through presenting the findings of this study to local agencies. Many efforts have been made to action out this recommendation, including the creation and dissemination of the *We Are Teen Moms* video.

Conclusions

Strength of the Study

The use of feminist participatory action research allowed for the investigation of an agency's request and the development of an action plan that will ultimately express the viewpoints of the teen moms in this study. From the beginning, a commitment was made to hear and validate the teen moms' experiences, to understand the intersecting forms of oppression that occur in their lives, and with their recommendations, to work toward social change. The study began with building on existing relationships with the BBBF Coordinator and the Social Worker in order to develop a collaborative research partnership. BBBF co-researchers were involved in all stages of the study including providing direction in the design of the study, guidance in recruitment and retention throughout the study, and feedback in the exploratory and action phases. They not only wanted to provide a forum for teen moms to express themselves but they were also interested in learning more about conducting a research study. The final stage of the study will be to implement an action plan developed through the recommendations and suggestions made by the teen moms.

Limitations of the Study

Although this has been an important study to understand the strengths and challenges of teen mothers in northern Ontario, the study was also limited because of its small sample size; the homogeneity of the sample as it relates to gender, race, and culture; and the recruitment of participants from one agency. While the sample was appropriate for the research question, the findings of this study are not generalizable to all teen mothers.

Final Thoughts

The results of this study reveal a distinct social contradiction. Despite the documentation of the social, economic, and educational difficulties teen moms face (Jutte et al., 2010) and the poor health, educational, and social outcomes for children of teen moms (Jutte et al., 2010), the teen moms in this study demonstrated that they are resilient and resourceful. Many of the participants talked about being faced with extensive community barriers in trying to access parenting advice and resources, but they are also aware of their responsibilities in parenting, and identified needs of prenatal and parental education and resources in order to be a "good" mother. Rather than a community of helpfulness, the teen mothers faced the challenges of social stereotypes and judgments (Lessa, 2002; Jackson, Marentette, & McCleave, 2000–2001), unsympathic health care professionals (Jutte et al., 2010) and "practices of exclusion" (Lessa, 2002, p. 319) when trying to access health care or children's community resources; however, they were also thriving, able to identify their relational, community and social needs, and to advocate for themselves.

One mother summarised her experience via the poster below:

"Need strength, told failure in quotation marks, told you're going nowhere...need lot of determination, lots of families, please no discrimination, money is issue, don't stereotype and told you are responsible, and right in the centre it says...love... is what I get from my daughter. So that's what being a teen mom is to me I guess. Because I was told I was a failure, and I was told I was going nowhere and I was told that I wasn't responsible enough to be a mom because of my age.

But I guess I am proving everyone wrong".



References

- Al-Sahab, B., Heifetz, M., Tamim, H., Bohr, Y. and Connolly, J. (2012). Prevalence and characteristics of teen motherhood in Canada. *Maternal & Child Health Journal*, *16*, 228-234. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10995-011-0750-8
- Bonnell, C. P., Strange, V. J., Stephenson, J. M., Oakley, A. R., Copas, A. J., Forrest, S. P., ... Black, S. (2003). Effect of social exclusion on the risk of teenage pregnancy: Development of hypotheses using baseline data from a randomised trial of sex education. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, *57*, 871-876. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/195354273?accountid=12005
- Breheny, M. and Stephens, C. (2010). Youth or disadvantage? The construction of teenage mothers in medical journals. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *12*, 307-322. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691050903513234
- Brown, G., Brady, G. and Letherby, G. (2011). Young mothers' experiences of power, control and violence within intimate and familial relationships. *Child Care in Practice*, 17, 359-374. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2011.601285
- Bunting, L. and McAuley, C. (2004). Research review: Teenage pregnancy and motherhood: The contribution of support. *Child & Family Social Work*, *9*, 207-215. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2004.00328.x
- Chandra-Mouli, V., Camacho, A. V. and Michaud, P. (2013). WHO Guidelines on Preventing Early Pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 52, 517-522. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.librweb.laurentian.ca/docview/1364705003?accountid=12005
- Connolly, J., Heifetz, M. and Bohr, Y. (2012). Pregnancy and motherhood among adolescent girls in Child Protective Services: A meta-synthesis of qualitative research. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 6, 613-635. DOI: 10.1080/15548732.2012.723970
- Daniel, E. and Balog, L. F. (2009). Early female puberty: A Review of research on etiology and implications. *The Health Educator*, *41*, 47-53. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=EJ897768
- DiCenso, A., Guyatt, G., Willan, A. and Griffith, L. (2002). Interventions to reduce unintended pregnancies among adolescents: systematic review of randomised controlled trials. *BMJ: British Medical Journal (International Edition)*, 324, 1426-1430. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com.librweb.laurentian.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=686 3526&site=ehost-live
- Dodson, N. A., Gray, S. H. and Burke, P. J. (2012). Teen pregnancy prevention on a LARC: an update on long-acting reversible contraception for the primary care provider. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 24, 439-445. http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/MOP.0b013e328354cc62

- Duncan, S. (2007). What's the problem with teenage parents? And what's the problem with policy? *Critical Social Policy*, 27, 307-334. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0261018307078845
- Ellis, B. J., Bates, J. E., Dodge, K. A., Fergusson, D. M., Horwood, J. L., Pettit, G. S. and Woodward, L. (2003). Does father absence place daughters at special risk for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy? *Child Development*, 74, 801-821. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00569
- Fals-Borda, O. and Rahman, M. (1991). Some basic ingredients. *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. New York: Apex.
- Gilfus, M. (1999). Research on violence against women. *Violence Against Women*, 5(10), 1194 11213.
- Goesling, B., Colman, S., Trenholm, C., Terzian, M. and Moore, K. (2014). Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Infections, and Associated Sexual Risk Behaviors: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 54, 499-507.
- Greenwood, D. and Levin, M. (1998). *Introduction to Action Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jackson, L.A., Marentette, H. and McCleave, H. (2000-2001). Teenage moms living in nova scotia, Canada: An exploration of influences on their decision to become a mother. *Int'l Quarterly of Community Health Education*, 20(1), 17-38.
- Jordahl, T. and Lohman, B. J. (2009). A bioecological analysis of risk and protective factors associated with early sexual intercourse of young adolescents. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 31, 1272-1282. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.05.014
- Jutte, D. P., Roos, N.P., Brownell, M., Briggs, G., MacWilliam, L. and Roos, L.L. (2010). The ripples of adolescent motherhood: Social, educational and medical outcomes for children of teen and prior teen mothers. *Academic Pediatrics*, 10, 293-301.
- Kappeler, E.M. and Farb, A.F. (2014). Historical context for the creation of adolescent health and teen pregnancy prevention program. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 54, S3-S9.
- Lessa, L. (2002). Unraveling a relationship: single motherhood and the practices of public housing. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 17, 314-331.
- Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts.
- McKay, A. (2012). Trends in Canadian national and provincial/territorial teen pregnancy rates: 2001-2010. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 21, 161-175. Retrieved from http://www.sieccan.org/cjhs.html
- Sudbury & District Health Unit. (2013). *Teenage pregnancy fact sheet: Results for Sudbury and Districts*. Sudbury: Author.

- Vinson, J. (2012, August 2012). Covering national concerns about teenage pregnancy: A visual rhetorical analysis of images of pregnant and mothering women. *Feminist Formations*, 24, 140-162. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ff.2012.0017
- Wang, C. and Burris. MA. (1997). Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use of participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, *24*, 369-387.
- Yardley, E. (2008). Teenage mothers' experiences of stigma. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11, 671-684. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676260802392940