

*Article 2*

**Needs Assessment for Adolescent Mothers:  
Building Resiliency and Student Success  
Towards High School Completion**

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Teenage pregnancy continues to play an instrumental role in high school dropout. Teenage pregnancy is a potential threat that may affect students' academic, personal and social involvement. The majority of teenage mothers in the United States are among African-Americans and Latinas (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006). Over 50% of African-Americans and Latinas will become pregnant before adulthood. Furthermore, teenage pregnancy is related to academic involvement; less than 3% of young mothers will successfully complete high school. Given these issues, there is a need for counselors to gain a better understanding of the resilient youth and the dilemmas of adolescent pregnancy. The current study focuses specifically on the resiliency among adolescent mothers and the factors contributing towards high school completion.

Adolescent mothers may struggle to balance the role of parenting with social relationships and academia. Mothers who lack social support are less likely to face and overcome their challenges. The two major social avenues for adolescents are the parent-adolescent relationship and peer involvement. Adolescents who receive low maternal and peer support have increased feelings of

isolation and lower educational aspirations (Valaitis & Sword, 2005). Recent studies have begun to expand the research by examining the role of social involvement and responsive parenting. Young mothers who experience a conflicting relationship with a parent are more likely to feel disconnected from their child(ren) and to display negative maternal behaviors (Nitz, Kettlinus, & Brandt, 1995; Whitman, Borkowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001). Therefore, it seems logical that the children of young mothers who are reared in emotionally distant families are at a higher likelihood of enduring child abuse/neglect.

Adolescents who become parents are often motivated to increase their standards of life towards increased school attendance, improved grades, and healthier relationships. Adolescent mothers will physically and/or mentally disconnect the involvement of persons who are unhealthy and unsupportive to their newly adjusted lifestyle. Thus, the development of a sense of self for adolescent mothers should be the primary focus for counseling intervention.

Mothers with positive personal characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, developmental confidence) are more likely to have higher educational aspirations. Ormrod (2006) reported that students with higher esteem have a greater likelihood of identifying and fulfilling academic completion. In addition, Pittman and Chase-Lansdale (2001), found that developmental confidence is positively associated with adolescent success. Young mothers with developmental confidence are less likely to feel marginalized and alienated from school, peers, family, and within their community.

The school environment is another factor related to the decreased number of young mothers who successfully complete high school. Pertinent student perceptions of the school atmosphere towards success include teaching quality, school involvement, and school size. Dropout rates are higher in schools reported to have poorer teaching quality (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000), decreased participation (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2005), and increased school size (Bickel, Weaver, Williams, & Lange, 1997; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Student mobility is also

associated with dropout. Many individuals who become pregnant may be more inclined to attend an alternative school due to pregnancy-related illnesses, desired self-pace in learning, and increased feelings of safety. Despite the reasons associated with mobility, the more schools that a student attends the increased likelihood of not finishing high school (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

Lastly, community involvement is another important factor related to high school dropout. It has been repeatedly found that community involvement and after-school activities are essential in promoting academic success (Bickel et al., 1997). Students who are engaged in community involvement and after-school activities are more likely to finish high school and less likely to become pregnant. Intervention programs are particularly needed for adolescent mothers, given the fact that pregnancy, a risk factor, has already occurred. Intervention programs that collaborate with agencies within the community can be a healthy source of support to enhance family unity and social connections, and increase educational aspirations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized the Resiliency Model to examine the success factors of adolescent mothers. Resiliency is defined as the capability that all youth have for healthy development and successful learning (Benard, 2004). According to Gonzales (2003), there are three main elements that are essential to characterizing resilient youth: (a) risk factors, (b) protective factors, and (c) personal characteristics. Adolescent mothers who continue in school, despite the overwhelming responsibility of parenthood demonstrate resilience.

Risk factors are characterized as stressful situations and adversity (Benard, 2004). Examples of risk factors are pregnancy, chronic poverty, abuse, marginality, divorce, violence, and stress. Risk factors are positively related to adolescent pregnancy and high school dropout: less than two-thirds of students who become mothers will graduate from high school. The more risks factors that youth face, the

higher the likelihood of teenage pregnancy and high school dropout. Adolescent mothers particularly need added support to shield risk factors that may limit healthy academic, personal, and social involvement. It is assumed that adolescent mothers will encounter a barrage of unfortunate circumstances given their changed lifestyles.

Protective factors are defined as the variables that reduce the chances of abnormal development (Mash & Wolfe, 2002, as cited in Gonzales, 2003). Major protective factors for adolescents are: (a) supportive relationships from adults and school personnel, (b) family involvement, and (c) social training (Chavkin & Gonzales, 2000). Protective factors can provide young mothers multiple benefits: a sense of belonging, higher expectations for parenting and overall achievement, increased educational aspirations, and involvement in meaningful activities (Busch, 2002). The more protective factors identified by counselors/intervention specialists and adolescent mothers, the less the perceived threat of risk factors.

Lastly, adolescent mothers may have internal resilient qualities that need identifying and promoting. According to Ormrod (2006) resilient youth show strong and positive characteristics of social competence, problem solving, independence, and motivation. Individuals who demonstrate the positive traits of resilience are more likely to have increased esteem and assumed parental responsibility. The ideation and preparation of the birth of their child often increases the desire to achieve academically and socially.

## **Method**

Data in this study was selected from the second wave of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), conducted by the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES). The participants included all females (students in school and students who had dropped out) who identified themselves as a mother of at least one biological child (N = 572).

*Sample Demographics:*

Grade Level	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Race	White = 51% Hispanic = 23% African-American = 22% Native American/Alaskan Native = 3% Asian Pacific Islander = 2%
Residency	Rural = 39% Urban = 31% Suburban = 30%
SES	Low Quartile = 50% Second Quartile = 29% Third Quartile = 15% Fourth Quartile = 5%

*Measures:*

*Personal Attribute.* Sample item: “I feel I am a person of worth, the equal of other people.”

*Future Goals.* Sample item: “What are the chances that you will go to college?”

*Relationship with Parents.* Sample item: “I think that I will be a source of pride to my parent(s)/guardian(s) in the future.”

*Childcare.* Sample item: “How often you take care of your youngest child during the school year?”

*Peer Involvement.* Sample item: “How important is it to you that your friends finish high school?”

*Peer Academic Aspirations.* Sample item: “How many of your friends dropped out of school without graduating?”

*School Attendance and Absences.* Sample item: “How many times where you late/skipped classes in the first semester or current term of the current year?”

*School Climate.* Sample item: “How much do you agree that the teachers are interested in students?”

*Community Involvement.* Sample item: “How often do you spend time participating in youth groups or recreational sports programs?”

## **Results**

A discriminate analysis was used to determine the differences between the adolescent mothers who continued their education and the adolescent mothers who were not enrolled in school. Findings indicated that childcare, school climate, future goals, and peer academic aspirations were associated with high school dropout for adolescent mothers. Not surprisingly, adolescent mothers who continued in school reported the following: positive school climate, socialization with peers who have higher academic aspirations, and future goals towards postsecondary achievement. Contrary to the author’s perception of supportive childcare, both groups received similar support from their parents and the child’s father. However, adolescent mothers who reported increased parental involvement (e.g., mother-child) were more likely to continue school. Young mothers who dropped out of school spent considerably less time (20%) with their children than their counterparts (64%).

This study identified two limitations. One of the limitations of the study is that it did not include adolescent male fathers. It is possible that there were gender differences and similarities in dropout likelihood. Another limitation of the study was that the sample did not examine racial/ethnic differences.

## **Implications for Practice**

This study highlights the academic, personal, and social involvement of adolescent mothers and identifies potential barriers to academic success. There is a great necessity for adolescents, the family, and individuals within the community to understand the protective and risk factors related to the adjustment of pregnancy. As adolescent mothers perceive their home, school, community, and peer environments as supportive, they are more likely to increase their success by developing and maintaining resilient characteristics such as competence, problem-solving ability, and sense of purpose (Benard, 1991, 1995).

Adolescent mothers, who have higher levels of trust and respect in their homes, may be more likely to increase their involvement with their child(ren). This information is particularly important for counselors/intervention specialists to understand the need for on-site parental involvement between the adolescent mother and child. In addition, providing counseling and intensive case management for the entire family may enhance family involvement.

School climate yielded significant results between the two groups. Adolescent mothers who continued their education were less likely to feel threatened or marginalized within the school environment and were more likely to problem solve their dilemmas. Increased contact with staff/teachers (Benard, 1995) and the production of high teaching quality (Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000) may increase the likelihood of academic completion. Counseling at-risk adolescent mothers may empower students to decrease frequent absences and eliminate defiant behavior.

Lastly, peer academic aspirations proved a significant factor in the decision to leave school prematurely. Individuals are more likely to socialize and be influenced with like-minded peers (Aloise-Young & Chavez, 2002; Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997). Adolescent mothers who continue in school may socialize more with individuals who are academically motivated with plans to finish high school.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, adolescent mothers need additional resources to help balance the challenges of motherhood with academic, personal, and social involvement. More information is needed to explore the risk and protective factors of adolescent mothers. The family, school, and community can best help adolescent mothers when they are able to move past the disappointment related to the pregnancy. Ultimately, the resilient model supports the phrase, “it takes a village,” to increase the success of adolescent mothers and eliminate further generations of negative outcomes.

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