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THE ADOLESCENT MOTHER AND HER CHILD:

DETERMINANTS OF MATERNAL PARENTING

BEHAVIOUR AND INFANT DEVELOPMENT

Robyn S. Dixon

Abstract

Despite having the second highest teenage pregnancy rate in the developed world, there has been an absence of New Zealand research investigating outcomes for the adolescent mother and her child. The present study was designed as a first step toward redressing this situation.

The aim of the study was twofold, to provide a descriptive profile of a sample of New Zealand women giving birth to their first child during adolescence, the primary aim being to identify psychosocial variables associated with maternal parenting behaviour and infant cognitive, motor and social development.

One hundred and twenty, first time mothers aged between 15 years 6 months and 19 years 9 months were interviewed in the postnatal wards of Waitakere Maternity Unit in West Auckland. In addition to gathering extensive demographic data, measures of mothers' social support system, perceived stress, locus of control and knowledge of child development were taken. The second phase took place in the homes of the 80 subjects who were successfully located and agreed to further participate in the study. Again as part of this interview, demographic data were collected and, in addition to repeating the measures of social support and perceived stress, mother's satisfaction with her role as a parent was measured. Infant
development was assessed using Bayley Scales of Infant Development. Finally, a 10 minute videotape was made of mother-infant interaction. During this time mothers were asked to change the infant’s nappy, and then to play with their baby using a selection of age appropriate toys provided by the researcher.

Following analysis of the descriptive variables, multiple regression analysis was used to identify variables associated with maternal parenting behaviour and infant outcomes. This resulted in the development of a model of adolescent parenting which suggests that social support, particularly the size of a mother’s supportive network and the availability of emotional support, has a direct effect on maternal psychological status, which in turn impacts on maternal parenting behaviours. A mother’s satisfaction with parenting being especially important. As expected maternal parenting behaviour is associated with infant interaction behaviour. Moreover, social support and maternal psychological status both had a direct impact on infant mental development scores.

Furthermore, the results of the study have highlighted the importance of including measures of parenting satisfaction in models of adolescent parenting, a variable which up until now has been missing in research in this area.
Finally, the implications of the findings for education and health professionals, and policy makers, concerned with the well being of these young women and their children are highlighted, and directions for further research identified.
Acknowledgments

In the first instance I would like to dedicate this study to Katherine and her delightful daughter Rhiannon who provided me with the inspiration for this research.

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