



The Experience of Being an Adolescent Mother of a High-Risk Newborn: Case Study

Jiménez-Quiroz Rosalía^{1*}, Toriz-Colín¹, María Fernanda¹,
Conde-Reyes María de la Paz¹, Martínez de Roque Diana Cristina¹,
Palencia-Romero Angélica², Ibarra Reyes Ma Del Pilar³, Castro-Soto
Laura⁴ and Guido-Campuzano Martina Angélica⁵

¹Psychology, Pediatric Follow-up, National Institute of Perinatology, Mexico

²Treating Physician, La Salle University Pachuca, Hidalgo, Mexico

³Neuromotor Stimulation, National Institute of Perinatology, Mexico

⁴Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, Woman's Hospital, Mexico

⁵Neonatology, Pediatric Follow-up, National Institute of Perinatology, Mexico

***Corresponding Author:** Jiménez-Quiroz Rosalía, Psychology, Pediatric Follow-up,
National Institute of Perinatology, Mexico.

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Abstract

Teenage pregnancy is considered a public health issue with high social impact. Mexico has the highest rates, ranking first place in the world. The implications on the lives of these women are diverse, affecting different areas of life.

Objective: to learn about the experience of being an adolescent mother of a high-risk newborn.

Methods: qualitative, descriptive, exploratory single case study with a categorical and phenomenological analytical strategy. The participant is a 20 year-old woman who became mother of twins at 17 years of age. A semi-structured interview was conducted and informed consent was obtained. The analysis consisted of the transcription and incoding of information. According to this the following analytical categories were obtained: perception of adolescent maternity, personal, familiar and social consequences, emotional sequelae, parenting and resignification of life.

Conclusion: Adolescent mothers experience significant personal, social and family consequences upon motherhood. Further investigation is necessary regarding personal experiences in this population, in order to delve deeper into this problem. This will contribute to identifying modifications, meanings and guidelines that allow these mothers adapt to the conditions they are subjected to. Furthermore, this acknowledges the importance of support networks (in this case the family) for the restructuring and functioning of socioemotional development of the mother as well as her child.

Keywords: Teenage Mother; Teenage Pregnancy; High Risk Birth

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence is “the period of human growth and development following childhood and before adulthood, ranging from 10 to 19 years” [1].

It is a crucial period of human development, entailing personal and social definition through a second individuation, involving exploration processes, differentiation from the family environment and the search for a sense of belonging and meaning of life [2].

Adolescence is considered the stage with the most physical and psychological changes of the individual. For this reason it is divided into three phases: early, middle and late adolescence. Early adolescence comprises the period from 10 to 14 years; it is characterized by considerable physical changes and coincides with puberty. Middle adolescence ranges from 15 to 17 years and corresponds to a period of increasing independence from parents and family, school dropout and early pregnancy. Late adolescence ranges from 17 to 19 years and is defined by the adolescent's search for reaffirmation of couple relationships and consideration of economic and other aspects [3].

As mentioned previously, an important event that may occur during middle adolescence is pregnancy, having a great social impact in our country. Mexico occupies the first place in teenage pregnancy in the world, with 16 million women between 15 and 19 years, and one million younger than 15 years of age giving birth every year [1].

Teenage pregnancy is considered a public health and social issue, given its high prevalence. It is associated with biological, psychological and social negative consequences for the mother and child, which puts them at a greater risk and social vulnerability [4].

Teenage pregnancy brings forth other difficulties, given that women are usually single mothers, live in dysfunctional homes and have no social or economic support. This situation is deleterious for teenagers because most of them are forced to limit their life projects and dropout of school, leading to lower academic levels, thus affecting their competence at the workplace. All this has an impact on the mother's income and her quality of life and that of her child [5].

Some authors argue that early motherhood hinders the usual activities of adolescence, such as studying for better life opportunities. Pregnancy and motherhood are conceived as an opportunity and a life project, as well as a way to overcome their socioeconomic context and the lack of opportunities, instead of a problem for the teenager [6].

Pregnancy has a psychological, social and cultural impact at any age, but this tends to be worse in adolescents. There is even a term coined "pregnant adolescent syndrome", which includes failure in the following aspects: reaching independence, achieving personal

identity, continuing studies, preparing for adult life, starting a stable family and self-support. In the social sphere, adolescents experience discrimination and social shame [7]. Biological consequences for adolescents younger than 17 years include an increased risk of preterm birth, late fetal demise and perinatal deaths. This risk is reduced by controlling socioeconomic factors associated to poverty, low academic levels, the lack of healthcare and resources and the rejection this population faces [8]. Due to the high perinatal risk and pregnancy complications, these teenagers may experience an emotional condition during hospitalization characterized by feelings of ambivalence, sadness, preoccupation, insecurity, anxiety and a great fear of losing their child [9].

Other authors mention that family is the most important support network to confront adolescent motherhood; the most important companionship is that of the teenager's mother, who helps with pregnancy care and parenting [10]. According to a study, this is important because most adolescents are still students who depend on their parents and have no support from their partner [11].

On the other hand, some authors argue that the family context and social environment in which teenagers are immersed is founded in a traditional gender role distribution in which the woman's role of caregiver is deeply rooted [12]. The reasons for teenage pregnancy are not clear; there is a lack of self-determination and decision is left to chance. The adolescent mother is psychologically not mature enough, and may therefore experience emotional distress when faced with the responsibility of adult roles, especially motherhood. She is cognitively, emotionally and economically still a child, more evidently in early adolescence; this is why the adolescent mother may experience emotional conflicts such as depression, sense of failing as a mother, feeling of youth loss and even suicide attempts [5].

Given the variety of factors involved in adolescent maternity and the consequences of this event in the lives of the teenager and the child's development, the objective of this investigation is to learn about the experience of being an adolescent mother of a high risk newborn.

Methods

Descriptive, qualitative, exploratory single case study, with a categorical and phenomenological analytical strategy.

Participant

Three adolescents who attend the Department of Pediatric Follow-up of the National Institute of Perinatology were invited to the study, of which only one showed up the day of the interview. D, a 20-year-old woman, had twins at 17 years of age. The name of the participant was left out for confidential purposes.

Procedure

Informed consent was obtained to record the interview. Speech was obtained through a semi-structured script with the intention of approaching subjects useful for the objective of this investigation.

Analysis

The analysis consisted in transcribing the interview and incoding information. According to this the following analytical categories were obtained: perception of adolescent maternity, personal, familiar and social consequences, emotional sequelae, parenting and resignification of life. We proceeded to integrate these categories.

Results

Perception of adolescent maternity

Different meanings are attributed to adolescent pregnancy; some consider it a problem while others consider it an event that can generate positive changes [12]. In this sense the interview described the following:

“It is a very difficult situation; not all of us know what it means or how to cope, but I think that with time and a lot of effort and commitment it can be done and it may be satisfactory for the baby and for us”.

It also mentions: “Every action has its consequences, whether good or bad, and I decided to take it, so it doesn’t matter, I will try my best”.

The perception of the interviewee about pregnancy has changed over time. Through day-to-day experience, she has discovered what it is like to be a mother, attributing two meanings to her experience. In spite of her complicated pregnancy situation, she mentions that this new life experience may turn out satisfactory, outlining that this depends on the time and commitment dedicated, as mentioned by different studies [6-12]. Because abortion is not

well accepted out of respect for the unborn child, it is pregnancy that demonstrates one can be responsible in assuming the consequences of one’s actions, not minding how difficult it may be. Through determination, the teenage mother is convinced she can face this new stage in her life.

Personal consequences

On the other hand, teenage pregnancy changes the project of life, forcing the teenager to abandon goals by raising a need to face new responsibilities [13,14]. This is expressed in the following way:

“Everything changes: school, long-term life plans. I think everything, everything changes, the idea that it will not be the same and now you have to change the plans you had because it is not only you now, there is another person you must take care of”.

It is clear [6] that she had to change her future plans due to pregnancy: her new role as a mother has new responsibilities because somebody depends on her; now she works and studies, and she undergoes a change in mentality, acknowledging that from pregnancy on her life will not be the same. She must be responsible and adjust her activities to fulfill her new role, even if this means discontinuing activities of adolescence, such as going out with friends. Besides changes in her daily life she may experience a process of acceptance or resignation that allows her to continue with her life.

Social consequences

Society may be supportive or critical of the adolescent [15].

“There are many stereotypes: she is too young, she cannot take care of herself and she is expecting a baby and similar arguments. Nevertheless, these stigmas don’t affect me because I want to prove them wrong so they don’t see me as they do”.

“She’s a child: foolish, immature, a child taking care of a child; she won’t be able to do it. I received many of these comments from my family, but as they say, just take it with a grain of salt”.

As reported in literature [14,15], the teenage mother described many stigmas surrounding teenage motherhood. Society may think that an adolescent cannot assume the mother’s role because she is immature, lacks economic stability and academic preparation.

Nevertheless, she was not affected by the fact that people thought she would not be able to do it; on the contrary, all those stigmas helped her prove to herself that no matter how old she was, she did not want to be seen as other girls, she wanted to break free from stereotypes, because she knows that “by making an effort” she will do a good job as a mother and offer her child a good quality of life.

Family consequences

The family’s experience changes, going from a “disappointment” to a “blessing” [16].

“In my family, I lost all credibility; at first they wondered: How was this possible? If we trusted her how come she acted in this way? At first they felt disappointed and sad. Then they decided to support me, and I think my family united even more”.

Communicating the news to her family was a relevant aspect in the experience of pregnancy because they expressed negative feelings such as distrust and sadness [14,16]. Everything is easier once the situation is assimilated. She feels the support in her close environment, from pregnancy until today, her family being her economic and emotional support. In spite of the initial anger, distrust and surprise, she feels a progressive bond that allows her to overcome the situation.

Emotional sequelae

One author reports feelings of ambivalence, due to maternal complications and feelings of losing the newborn [17]. “D” describes it as follows:

“I feel I had a tough experience since the beginning facing a twin pregnancy, knowing that I was very young, that my twin girls had complications due to their weight and immaturity and that one of my babies got sick and died”.

“It was difficult for me to assimilate it. It is still difficult to assimilate my baby’s death... I felt that I gave everything I could to one of them and neglected the other. I feel it was partly my fault, that my girl did not see me as a mother because I was not fair”.

“I feel terrible... it makes me think about many things, it makes me very sad, but at the same time it makes me mad, not knowing what to do to bring my daughter closer to me and make her trust me more”.

Teenage pregnancy is perceived by the interviewee as a risk factor that may have had consequences on her daughters’ health, including the death of one of them; this has a strong impact on her role as a mother because she experiences ambivalent feelings [5-17]. Her daughter’s vulnerable health condition influenced the time she dedicated to her and the closer bond she made with her healthier daughter difficulted interaction with the sicker one. This has driven her to build a closer bond with her surviving child even while having the memory and longing for the loss of the sicker twin [17]. This dynamic reflects that the emotional sequelae of the loss still have repercussions on parenting and her emotional wellbeing.

Parenting

It is also mentioned that pregnancy may be a condition that keeps the family together, even in spite of the adolescent’s emancipation, achieving a transgenerational legacy [16]. In this case, she says:

“I feel it affects me, the fact that they want to give her everything and pamper her, she feels loved but I don’t have the authority to say No! because they tell me not to scold her. Anything, for example: “Grandfather! My mother hit me.” Then my dad asks “Why did you hit her? It’s your fault” But wait, I did it for a reason, I scolded her for a reason, and yes, it was possibly wrong, I probably went over the line, but let me see, let me make mistakes”.

“I sometimes feel that we provoke her misbehavior”.

As reported in the literature [16], the interviewee experiences ambivalent feelings regarding the support she receives from her family in her role as a mother. Although she receives emotional and economic support from her nuclear family, she feels her authority in parenting is limited. She disapproves of her family pampering the child too much, preventing her from establishing clear limits that allow her daughter to develop the necessary skills to adapt to her environment, thus negatively impacting on the child’s conduct and development.

Resignification of life

This refers to the individual’s ability to give meaning to an experience from a retrospective perspective [2]. In this interview this was expressed in the following way:

“Knowing the value of things and how to be thankful. Everything I did not see before I learned to see with them, I learned to think before acting”.

“I have to try my best and look forward, make the best of what I didn’t do, there is no other way. If you don’t want to be in such a situation, you must look forward”.

Her pregnancy helps the interviewee find a new meaning in life. Through a reflection of the past she notices things that she did not value before, and that pregnancy allowed her to see; at the same time she learned that “she should think before she acts because her actions have consequences”. She highlights the fact that she needs to make the best of everything she did not do before pregnancy, finding new motivations to get by in the present [2-12].

This process also allows a reflective gaze on the motivations [13] that led the individual to attribute that particular meaning to the experience:

“I want to give my daughter a quality education, I want her to know that she can do it; she will surely have many obstacles in life but we have to pull through, keep studying, keep trying, and make the best of what we didn’t do at a certain time”.

The experience of pregnancy allows the adolescent to give an alternative meaning to life, besides making her realize her motivations for attributing this meaning. In this case she wishes to demonstrate her daughter that although there may be obstacles she must always keep going forward. She finds a motivation in continuing her studies, mainly to give her daughter quality of life and she highlights that she must learn from everything she did not do in order to start doing things differently [12-15].

Discussion

Teenage pregnancy is considered a public health issue due to its exorbitant increase, its biological, psychological and social negative consequences, and the greater risk and social vulnerability it puts the mother and child in [14].

The meaning of maternity is unclear; through time and daily life the teenager may attribute a meaning to her experience, which may change over time, going from difficult to satisfactory.

The teenager also suffers personal consequences when faced with new responsibilities: she is forced to abandon her future goals [5]. This is confirmed by our study, where the young teenager perceives everything changes; she was forced to change her plans now that she has the responsibility of looking out for another human being. Society may be supportive or critical of these pregnant teenagers [7]. While the teenager mentions having been criticized and stigmatized this helped her demonstrate that age or academic level are not determinants in facing the situation.

In spite of facing family rejection, most teenagers receive support from their parents. “This allows obstacles to be considered surmountable and allows them to face the situation and help their children face it” [18]. Finally, this event is considered an opportunity to keep the family together. It is reported that due to the high perinatal risk and pregnancy complications, adolescents may experience an emotional state during hospitalization characterized by a great fear of losing their child [9]. This is confirmed by our study; the emotional sequelae are not only present during hospitalization, but persist through time. The interviewee has ambivalent feelings such as sadness for the loss of one of her daughters and happiness for having the opportunity to be close to the surviving twin. This poses a great challenge for her; besides living with emotional sequelae from the high risk pregnancy she knows she must make it for her daughter and develop a close bond with her. Family support, especially the teenager’s mother plays an important role because it compensates the lack of abilities, parenting skills and financial aspects [12]. Although family support is crucial to face the situation of teenage pregnancy, in this study we observed that it also limits the mother. The family assumes that she is not capable of fulfilling her maternal role and exhibits behaviors that don’t allow the adolescent to be an authority figure, a role that is important for the teenager and her daughter’s development. The lack of authority in her daughter’s upbringing triggers feelings of anger and sadness. Finally, in this case a resignification process occurs that allows the adolescent to give her life a different meaning. After her experience, pregnancy is perceived as an opportunity to do things differently. For the benefit of her daughter, she finds new motives that help her get by in the present day. In spite of the complications that may exist in a teenage pregnancy, there is the other side of the story, as this may represent an important event for personal growth. This is

why more research must be conducted to better understand this phenomenon and see through the eyes of the teenagers to learn about the factors involved.

Conclusions

In this study we see that being an adolescent mother implies physical and psychological risks, just as the literature mentions [4]. Likewise, maternity has personal, social and family consequences that influence the teenager's acquisition of social and emotional skills necessary to face this new stage. Family plays an important role as a support network; there must be a restructuring of member roles in order to ensure wellbeing and development of the new member [19].

In spite of the complexity of this phenomenon, through experience and reflection there is a resignification process where the teenager finds meaning and new motives that lead her to adapt to her experience [2]. This is why it is important to continue the research on this topic and elaborate on the population with these characteristics.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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