Published in final edited form as:

J Marriage Fam. 2015 April ; 77(2): 373–387. doi:10.1111/jomf.12175.

“I’ll Be There for You”: Teen Parents' Coparenting Relationships

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Abstract

Marriage promotion policy agendas have focused research attention on coparenting relationships, but little is known about coparenting among teen parents. Qualitative interviews with 76 teen mothers and fathers, supplemented with site observations at a school and clinic, investigated coparenting relationships and those relationships’ embeddedness in extended families and social institutions. We identified prevalent coparenting trajectories and analyzed individual-, interaction-, and institutional-level influences on coparenting. Coparenting trajectories diverged depending on whether the couple stayed together and assumed traditionally gendered parenting roles. Participants perceived that coparenting relationships strongly shaped their current and future socioeconomic, emotional, and practical circumstances and their success at “being there” for their child. Extended families, institutions, and social programs often pushed teen parents apart, although many participants felt they needed a functional relationship with the other parent. Coparenting relationships, considered jointly with extended families and social institutions, are fundamental for understanding teen parenthood and shaping effective social policies.

Keywords

adolescent parents; coresidence; qualitative research; transition to parenthood; nonmarital parenting; social context

With more than 1 in 6 U.S. girls projected to become a mother before age 20 (Perper & Manlove, 2009), teen parenthood is viewed as a serious social problem by most American adults (Science and Integrity Survey, 2004). Researchers have long known that most teen pregnancies occur within long-term romantic relationships (Hardy & Zabin, 1991). Yet the vast literature on teen parenthood has focused little on coparenting relationships between young mothers and fathers (i.e., active involvement in parenting, whether or not they are in a romantic relationship). In this lack of attention to coparents, research reflects larger trends in public discourse. For example, popular reality shows such as MTV’s *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* focus heavily on young mothers. Research has shown that coparenting relationships in teen-parent families really matter. Florsheim and colleagues (2003) found that fathers who had a strong relationship with their teenage partner during pregnancy were

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*This research was conducted with support from the University of Colorado’s Innovative Grant Program and Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. We thank Devon Thacker, Leith Lombas, Nicole Moore, Nancy Mann, Aakriti Shrestha, and Aleeza Zabriskie for their assistance, as well as the study’s participants for sharing their time and stories with us.

better parents later on, even if the relationship broke up. Increasing problems in the partner relationship heightened young mothers' stress in parenting, presumably affecting the child. In line with the literature, Jones and colleagues (2007, p. 677) define coparenting as "the processes by which two adults work together in their role as parents to negotiate childrearing." Our analysis shows that this definition also applies to parenting teens, identifying a very important aspect of their lives. Although some have begun to expand the study of teen motherhood to incorporate the complicated dynamics among mothers, fathers, and extended families, they have relied on young mothers' reports to do so.

Our study consists of 76 in-depth interviews with teen mothers and fathers in the Denver area, including both couples and single parents, supplemented by ethnographic observations of the school and clinic site in which we met them. Analyses focus on the presence or absence of, and experiences with, coparenting relationships. Our analysis of coparenting has a wider lens than the approaches used in much of the previous literature in three ways. First, we view the study of coparenting as larger than looking only at those who are currently active coparents—we include teen parents who coparented for a while and then stopped and those who intended to coparent but never did, as well as those who are still actively coparenting. Second, we examine coparenting as a lived experience changing over time. Third, we expand the typical dyadic focus to view coparenting as embedded in broader social relationships and institutions. This study aims to contextualize the experience of coparenting among teen parents as a culturally and structurally embedded phenomenon, taking into account the decisions and challenges that coparenting involves for teens and their possible longer-term impacts.

Because our interviews with teen mothers and fathers incorporate a subsample of teen-parent couples, we have a unique opportunity to investigate coparenting relationships before, during, and after the experience of a teen pregnancy from both parents' points of view. A second group of participants are also actively coparenting, but we were only able to interview one of the parents. Our data also include interviews with single fathers and mothers to uncover other kinds of coparenting histories. Supplementing the interview data with observations from the school and clinic sites provides information about institutions serving teen parents.

This study has two research goals. First, we describe typical types of coparenting experiences among teen parents over time. Second, we conduct a multilevel qualitative analysis of these coparenting experiences. Like others (e.g., Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006; Risman, 2004), our multilevel analysis focuses on the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. We consider ways in which coparenting affects teen parents (individual level), as well as the interplay between coparenting relationships and extended families (interactional level) and the institutions and programs that work with teen parents (institutional level).

Background

In this study, "coparents" are parents who are both involved with their child and coordinate their parenting in some way. They may or may not be a couple, and they may or may not live

together or even interact with each other. Distinct from both the couple relationship and the parent-child relationship (McHale, 1995), the term usually applies to a child's biological or social parents and not to other family members, such as a grandparent, who may undertake parenting duties. Jones (2007) traces its origins to family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), which expanded the mother-child dyad to a mother-father-child triad.

We find that coparenting relationships are very important to teen parents, even though many romantic relationships dissolve over time. This echoes past work that focused on coparents of all ages (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; McLanahan et al., 2003; McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Even if the romantic relationship ends, more positive coparenting relationships increase nonresident fathers' subsequent involvement with their children (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). An additional complexity in the lives of many U.S. coparents is multiple-partner fertility, particularly in teen-parent families (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006).

Although increasingly much is known about coparenting in diverse family forms in the United States, there is much less research on coparenting among teen parents (who had a child before age 20). Teen parents face unique challenges. They are approaching the difficult task of parenting while working to build human capital by completing schooling or starting a career, which may put them at risk of being less successful in both domains. A lack of capital also contributes to lower rates of coresidence among fathers, which positively predicts children's behavior in teen-mother families (Martin, Brazil, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012). Many adolescents enter into and terminate relationships with various partners as they gain experience with intimacy, potentially resulting in higher levels of partner instability that can negatively affect their children (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Life course researchers have pointed out that because they have violated societal age norms (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965) about the appropriate age and life stage (e.g., after marrying or achieving financial independence) for having children, teen parents also face substantial stigma (SmithBattle, 2009).

Although most teen parents are not married, some degree of coparenting is common. Kershaw and colleagues (2010) found in a clinical sample that 52% of teen parents in a relationship with their child's parent were still in that relationship 18 months later. Research on teen fathers' involvement as coparents almost exclusively focuses on mothers' reports about their child's father, who may or may not be a teen (e.g., Cooley & Unger, 1991; Futris, Nielsen, & Olmstead, 2010; Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Herzog et al., 2007). With the exception of Lewin and colleagues (2012) who studied both parents' survey reports of coparenting cooperation and conflict in teen-mother families, an omission in the literature is the analysis of data collected from both parents in teen-parent families, perhaps because teen fathers are difficult to reach. Several studies have found that a bit less than half of teen or young single fathers live with the mother and infant, and their coresidence and involvement decline over time (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Fagot et al., 1998; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011).

The lack of data on teen coparents is part of the tendency to examine single and teenage mothers in isolation from the families and social networks in which they are embedded (Jones et al., 2007). Although this broader context would be useful in studying coparents of all ages, it is particularly important when studying teen parents because extended families

and social institutions are more likely to shape coparenting relationships than in adult-headed families. Across racial groups, coparents and/or extended families tend to take important roles in childrearing in teen-parent families (Jones et al., 2007). Mollborn and Dennis (2012) found that half of teen mothers lived with their infant's father, and half lived with at least one grandparent. Beyond the physical presence of extended families, their influence on teen parents' decision-making and the coparenting relationship tends to be substantial. Furstenberg (2007) found that the opinions of grandparents who were not supportive of the coparenting relationship often influenced teen mothers to reduce the father's involvement. In Gee and Rhodes (2003), teen parents' relationships were more likely to persist three years postpartum when the maternal grandmother was less supportive of the mother. Conversely, a supportive grandmother protected teen mothers from negative psychological effects of a strained relationship with the father.

Families are not the only social actors trying to influence teen coparents. Formal institutions and programs, including schools, the criminal justice system, governmental support programs, and programs intended specifically for teen parents, shape teens' coparenting relationships in important ways. Although recent social agendas targeting unmarried adult parents have increasingly promoted marriage (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004), policies targeting teen parents have shifted in the opposite direction. For example, 1996 "welfare reform" mandates that underage mothers must live with a parent and be enrolled in high school (Moffitt, 2003). This discourages a relationship with the child's father: The coparents cannot form a nuclear household while receiving support, and because of the schooling requirement, many cannot build substantial economic resources to finance such a household independently.

Gender is paramount for understanding the experiences of teen parenthood and coparenting. Because women are overwhelmingly the primary parent especially in single-parent families (Downey, 1994), fathers' involvement is seen as more optional and determined by the mother's role as "gatekeeper" for access to the child (Herzog et al., 2007). This typically gives the mother greater parenting rights, but considerably heavier responsibilities. In a study of inner-city teens, Anderson (1989) found that boys viewed sex and fatherhood as a "game" for respect and status. This perspective underestimates the importance of committed romantic relationships among teen parents that was evident in our study. We find that teen fathers' coparenting behaviors vary much more than those of mothers. Yet for both genders, the coparenting relationship is an important influence in their lives, and their emotional attachment to parenting is similar. Our interviews and observations, described below, support these and other themes.

Method

We conducted in-depth retrospective interviews in 2008–2009 with current and former teenage mothers ($n = 55$) and fathers ($n = 21$), combined with limited participant observation, at a school and a clinic in the Denver metropolitan area. (One pilot interview was conducted in an office.) With teen mothers accounting for 12 percent of all births, Denver is fairly typical of U.S. cities (Child Trends, 2009). Our researchers, who conducted interviews alone or in pairs, consisted of two female faculty members, one male and one

female graduate student, and one undergraduate who had been a teen mother. To be eligible, participants had to have had a child before turning 20. Some participants were single parents, and others were involved with their coparent or a new partner. Among these were 10 coparenting couples, with each coparent interviewed separately. We analyzed couples' interviews in tandem to compare accounts of their coparenting history and interactions. Because all of these participants were still in a romantic relationship and highly involved with their child, we included all mothers' and fathers' accounts of their coparenting relationships to represent the full variety of coparenting relationships in our overall sample. Most participants had babies or toddlers, but a few had older children, allowing us to observe both short- and long-term experiences of teenage childbearing. Our analysis is focused primarily on the 72 parents in their teens or early twenties at interview. For those in their twenties, the interviews addressed their teen parent years and challenges faced afterwards.

We chose site-based sampling to learn about the two institutional sites and to reach a wide variety of participants, both mothers and fathers, who were not from the same social networks and neighborhoods. Sites were selected because they permitted access to a large pool of geographically dispersed teen fathers and mothers, served different demographic populations, and provided different levels of resources to young parents. We conducted 28 interviews at a school for pregnant and parenting teenage girls that offered substantial resources to its typically financially needy students, including onsite child care, basic medical services, career counseling, and a "school store" to exchange attendance credits for diapers and other items. The school also had a satellite program for young fathers. Another 48 interviews were conducted at a hospital-based clinic for privately insured and Medicaid patients that provided tandem health care to teen mothers and their children. Many school-based participants were younger and appeared to have fewer personal and family resources than those from the clinic. A substantial minority of participants from both sites talked about backgrounds of incarceration, substance abuse, victimization, or mental health issues, which were even more prevalent in their families.

We recruited almost all young parents by distributing flyers at the sites. Site staff also handed out flyers and described the study to any parents they identified as eligible. We recruited couples whenever possible. Participants' ages ranged from 15 to 38 with an average of 19, and only 4 were older than 24. Our participants had their first child between ages 14 and 19 with an average of 17. The average age of their oldest child was 2 (ranging from 0 to 21). Two thirds of mothers and half of fathers had just one child, and most had grown up in or around Denver. 10 participants identified as multiracial or multiethnic, whereas others described themselves using a single racial or ethnic label: 36 self-identified as Latina, 21 as African American, 3 as White, 2 as Native American, and 1 as Middle Eastern. Compared to Denver's 2006 teen births, our sample likely overrepresents African Americans and underrepresents Latinas and Whites, though our inclusion of multiracial identities makes comparison difficult (Child Trends, 2009). In analyzing our data to examine the role of race/ethnicity, we found considerable similarity in Denver-area teen parents' experiences across categories. 40 participants were enrolled in school, and 26 were working for pay. 18 participants were married at the time of the interview, 20 were single, and the others identified themselves as dating, in a relationship, living with someone, or engaged.

Some participants, often fathers, were in a relationship with a new partner rather than the child's biological parent, and some of these unions involved half-siblings to the child that was the focus of the interview. Nearly all mothers and about half of fathers were living with at least one of their children. More than one third coresided with a parent or parent-in-law, about one third with a sibling or sibling-in-law, and about one third with some other adult, such as an aunt or stepparent. Many lived with people from more than one of these categories.

Our research team took an ethnographic approach to the interviews and sites, observing the sites and interactions involving participants during our visits to meet with staff and conduct interviews, and taking field notes. Semistructured interviews about participants' experiences with teenage parenthood lasted about 45 minutes, and they received a \$30 gift card. We conducted interviews in Spanish upon request. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Topics covered during the interview included participants' perceptions of messages about teen pregnancy from their peers, families, communities, and broader society; their fertility decisions and behaviors; and people's reactions to the pregnancy. Their experiences before, during, and after pregnancy were discussed, as well as their ideas of what a good parent is. Participants described the resources available to them, who provided them, how these arrangements were negotiated, and how available resources had affected their lives. We asked them to describe the involvement of their child's other biological parent and (if relevant) coresident social parent.

Transcribed interviews were manually coded in the NVivo qualitative software package. First, we coded responses to each question, making simple distinctions between answers (e.g., a certain family member's positive versus negative reaction to the pregnancy). Second, both authors read whole transcripts and identified important emergent themes, which were then coded for all transcripts. Although we asked specific questions about coparenting, it emerged as a more important theme in our participants' lives than we expected, so coparenting themes fell under both categories. Coparenting trajectories were identified using teen parents' relationship, work, and schooling status and their account of the involvement of the child's other parent with the child. Finally, we read couples' transcripts in tandem, comparing accounts.

Results

In summary, our results show that participants' romantic relationships were usually well established and emotionally important to them before they experienced a teen pregnancy, even though most did not intend to have a child so soon. Fathers tended to remain supportive throughout the pregnancy, in the face of almost uniformly negative initial reactions from the people around the young couple. But sometime after the birth, the reality of teen parents' situations hits: To succeed in their future lives, they need to build human capital through education or work experience while simultaneously parenting and providing for a child. Many romantic relationships dissolve under this stress, sometimes signaling the end of the coparenting relationship and sometimes not. Other couples stay together and make decisions within their limited options that set them on either traditionally gendered or nontraditional coparenting trajectories. Young parents' coparenting relationships are tied up with the

emotional importance of “being there” for their child and the real costs of translating that commitment into action. Extended families, institutions, and social programs try to influence teens’ coparenting relationships, deliberately or implicitly pushing them apart when many participants feel that a functional relationship with the child’s other parent is important. All of these dynamics have important implications for teen parents’ futures. We support and extend the argument that teen parenting is embedded in a complex, multilevel system in which teen fathers may play a more prominent part than is usually documented or expected.

To capture the full diversity of past and current coparenting experiences, we draw all findings from both the 10 pairs of coparents interviewed and participants whose child’s other parent was not interviewed. The analysis is divided into two main sections. First, we discuss coparenting trajectories after the child’s birth, which diverge considerably depending on whether the couple stayed together and whether they assumed traditionally gendered parenting roles. Second, building on this empirical base, we turn to a multilevel qualitative analysis (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006; Risman 2004) of teen coparenting relationships. At the individual level, we analyze what coparenting relationships mean to both mothers and fathers and their consequences for participants’ lives. The interactional level focuses on family members’ influences on coparenting relationships, followed by an analysis of ways in which social institutions and programs shape teen coparenting relationships.

“It’s Not Just Me”: Teens’ Coparenting Trajectories

Although we did not discuss in depth our participants’ relationships with the child’s other parent before and during pregnancy, our findings generally echo Edin and Kefalas (2005). Nearly every participant in our study was in a serious romantic relationship with the child’s mother or father before becoming a coparent. Although some fathers-to-be initially denied paternity, most participants continued to invest considerable time and energy in their coparenting relationships during pregnancy. They planned to stay together and be involved parents.

For the most part, our research focuses on the time after the child’s birth, when our participants’ lives began to diverge depending on the status of their relationship with the child’s other parent. Setting aside the participants whose partners were never involved coparents, we identify three prevalent coparenting trajectories: uncoupled coparents, traditional coparents, and nontraditional coparents. Two coparent pairs represent the dynamics identified for each type.

Uncoupled coparents—Although most participants have lived with their child’s other parent at some point, about half of the young mothers and fathers in our study were no longer living with their child’s other parent at the time of the study (though some are living apart while in a relationship). The distinction between teen parents who no longer have a coparenting relationship and those who remain “uncoupled coparents” is illustrated by the fairly typical case of Lizzie and Michael (all names have been changed). As a reminder, coparents refer to parents who are both involved in raising their child to some degree, regardless of whether they are in a romantic relationship. Like many others, Lizzie and

Michael started out as a couple, then became uncoupled coparents, then ultimately dissolved their coparenting relationship. Lizzie had a daughter at age 16 with her then-boyfriend Michael. Now she is the single mother of a three-year-old living with her parents and siblings. She attends school part time and is looking for paid work, but a physical disability makes work hard to find. Lizzie and Michael stayed together throughout their unplanned pregnancy, and he did not want her to get an abortion. As we typically found, both remained emotionally invested in the future of their coparenting relationship throughout the pregnancy. Lizzie says, “As I was pregnant, he was still there for me ... He started denying her when she was three months old ... ’cause this lady came to his house and said there was ten other guys, [but] he was the only guy I dated.”

Michael paid informal child support until he denied paternity, even though it was “money face to face, not much.” When that aid dwindled, Lizzie “put him on [formal] child support,” but now “it’s not coming through,” and Michael never sees his daughter anymore. At this point, when neither financial nor practical support is forthcoming from the child’s other parent and he no longer sees the child, the coparenting relationship has ended. In such cases, it is common for the father’s or mother’s family to assume some of the responsibilities that a coparent would have taken, as Michael’s family did for a while. His family sees his daughter only occasionally because Lizzie “got tired” of always initiating contact and made less effort to visit them. Luckily, Lizzie’s family is a major though imperfect source of support. During the pregnancy, Lizzie’s mom “just told me, ‘I’ll be there for you,’” but Lizzie does not trust her mother’s babysitting because of mental health and substance use concerns. Lizzie says that “my dad is now the dad to her,” but she thinks he is not sufficiently attentive to her daughter’s safety. Lizzie’s teenage cousin is her most trusted source of child care, and another cousin provides emotional support. Considerable though flawed support from extended family is common for uncoupled mothers.

Day-to-day experiences in uncoupled teen coparenting relationships tend to be asymmetrical, with the mother giving the child much more time, energy, and money than the father. Krista’s relationship with her daughter’s father Luke has ended. She describes a typical day of parenting as being intensely demanding because of her daughter’s asthma, and she has little help. Krista says Luke visits “when it’s convenient for him,” which is clearly not daily. For example, he and his daughter might “go to Walmart and get a DVD and bring her back, nothing big.” Krista describes that Luke’s involvement is on his terms rather than responsive to her own or her daughter’s needs: “If you call, he’ll answer ... But he’s not gonna call and say, ‘Hey, how’s my baby doin’?” I know when we both had asthma and stuff, so we were in and out of the hospital, and he was like, ‘Oh, well.’ ... I’m like, ‘Do you really care? Do you realize you have a baby out here?’” Krista finds Luke’s low level of involvement even more trying now that her daughter is old enough to ask when her father is coming to see her.

Couples: Traditional coparents—Nearly half of all participants were living with their coparent in a romantic relationship at the time of the study. This diverse group includes those whose partner was also a teenager at the time of the birth and those whose partner was not, those who recently became parents and those who have been parents for a while. Although many participants report conflict, usually they seem satisfied with the relationship.

The coparents who have stayed together usually fall into one of two distinct trajectories. In the first, the couple's relationship has stayed fairly strong (some are married, some cohabiting, and others dating), and they have settled into traditionally gendered breadwinning and homemaking roles. Dominic and Alexandra, both participants, exemplify this "traditional coparents" trajectory. Dominic had his first child as a teen, and three years later he became a father again, this time with 18-year-old Alexandra. Now they live together, and Dominic, but not Alexandra, says they are engaged. Although he plans for college, Dominic is just shy of a high school degree, so he works as a fast food cook with variable hours. Alexandra has received her GED certificate and hopes to start college soon, but for now she is home with her baby. Alexandra wanted to have kids later after marriage and was simultaneously "shocked" and "happy" about the pregnancy. Dominic was "more happy" about this pregnancy than his first "because he gets to be in [his daughter's] life."

Alexandra describes her relationship with Dominic as "secure," saying, "he's the closest one to me ... he helps me a lot with the baby." Dominic agrees that he is an involved father, saying, "Now I've got two little girls to live for." In contrast, "Before [becoming a father], I thought life was just all about having fun and running in the streets." He talks about how important it is to "step up" now and "be a man," echoing his father's vision of manhood. Part of his ideal of fatherhood is Alexandra's role as a traditional homemaker: "I don't want my baby mama working." His first child's mother did not like being a stay-at-home parent, and it led to their breakup. Dominic says, "She got irritated towards the end of our relationship ... she'd just see those four walls in the house." In contrast, Alexandra prefers traditional gender roles, saying that Dominic "is the provider ... he's the dad, he's supposed to."

The day-to-day experiences of traditional coparents reflect a gendered division of labor, with the mother doing more child care and the father more engaged in breadwinning. Dashiell and his partner Eva do not seem particularly traditional in terms of socioeconomic involvement—both attend school and work for pay. But their division of household labor and understandings of good parenting follow traditional gender norms. Dashiell says, "I know money can't buy love or anything like that, but you need money to support a kid ... It's hard for me to just look at my son like I don't know where I'm gonna get the next couple of dollars to get him some diapers." Although he is particularly focused on breadwinning, he gives his son a bottle, bath, and nap in the mornings so Eva can sleep. He says Eva "does almost everything for the baby as long as she's at home." But he sees his daily involvement as crucial for his son's future. Dashiell's advice to other teen parents is to "try to stay with your spouse. It's scientifically said that if a kid is brought up with a mom and a dad, he has a better chance of succeeding educationally."

Couples: Nontraditional coparents—The other common trajectory for coupled coparents is to parent in ways that deviate from traditionally gendered parenting roles. This nontraditional parenting is more common among working-class U.S. families (Shows & Gerstel, 2009), representing a "new normal" because most parents of young children work. Like childless teens, these couples expend substantial time and effort attending school or building careers. Unlike childless peers, they are also active coparents. This combination of responsibilities requires extreme sacrifice, but their relationships often remain fairly strong.

Anne and Pierce (both participants), who had their now two-week-old son at ages 19 and 16 respectively, are an example of the “nontraditional coparent” trajectory. Pierce and Anne both say that he wanted them to have a child, but for Anne, having a child “wasn’t in my plans” until age 25. They stayed together throughout the pregnancy and now have a demanding schedule, sharing parenting and work and school responsibilities in a way that bucks traditional gender roles. Pierce works an early full-time shift as a company supervisor, then Anne hands off the baby to Pierce and her grandmother and goes to school full time in the afternoon and evening. Although Anne had dropped out of high school before becoming pregnant, she is now a senior because “I want to have a good future secure for him [her child].” She plans to “go straight” to evening college classes to become a teacher. Pierce would also like to return to school. Anne says their responsibilities and schedule were a deliberate decision: “I told him, ‘Since you’re working in the day, I’m gonna have to be here in the day, but ... I want to work so we can have more money or go back to school so I can get a career and in the future make more money.’ ... And since he was working in the morning, I had to look for school in the afternoon.” Anne says their busy schedule “gets kind of stressful sometimes,” but when “I think about what the future will be like, it’ll be better if I go [to school].” Even though they are committed to the long-term benefits of their strategy, Anne but not Pierce perceives emotional costs. Pierce simply tells us, “We have always been happy, and we’re even happier now with the child.” Although Anne characterizes the couple as “pretty much happy,” she says they argue a lot over “little things” and “don’t really see each other, just on the weekends.”

The day-to-day experiences of nontraditional coparents are often dictated by the constraints of their work and school schedules. James, who lives with his son’s mother Liz and both works and attends school, talks about a typical day:

Get up in the morning, change him, get him dressed, get all his stuff ready for day care, get myself ready for school, put him in his car seat, give him to his mom. They go off to school. I walk to the bus stop ... go to school, after school come home, take care of him for an hour and a half. When his mom’s not at school and she gets home after school, she takes him and I run off to work, come home around 10, 11 at night ... I start sleeping and wake up in the morning and do it all over ... I don’t even talk to my friends no more.

Liz takes care of their son “all the time” when she’s not in school, so both of them are heavily engaged in child care and have time for little else.

“I Want to Be There”: The Meanings of Coparenting Relationships for Teens

To contextualize these coparenting trajectories, the second part of our analysis is multilevel, examining individual teens’ understandings of their coparenting relationships and the influences of extended family interactions and social institutions on these relationships. Participants’ own narratives of their coparenting relationships centered around two main issues: coparenting as a part of the important goal of “being there” for the child, and the consequences of coparenting for teens’ current and future situations. Participants spent a lot of interview time emphasizing the importance of being a good parent. When talking about what being a “good parent” means, most fathers and mothers bring up similar ideas: trying

to make their coparenting relationship work, providing for their child's future, and "being there" for their child. Edin and Kefalas (2005) have previously noted the importance of "being there" among unmarried (often teen) mothers, and we found that fathers were at least as focused on this idea. For almost all participants, the ideal of "being there" for their child includes maintaining a successful couple relationship with the child's other parent. Parents who have relatively little contact with their child (almost always fathers) often define "being there" in terms of how they would behave if the situation permitted it. In Cancian and Oliker's (2000) terms, they define "being there" as "caring about" (emotion work) rather than "caring for" (physical work or financial support), whereas mothers and very involved fathers see both as integral to "being there." This reflects recent findings that teen fathers report significantly greater emotional attachment to their children than adult fathers, but less physical involvement and support (Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2011).

Morgan, who only occasionally sees his daughter, deflects blame to his coparent and child while retaining a sense of himself as a good parent: "I try to make time. She's with her mom, really. I guess she don't like me. I don't know what it is, really." Later he says, "She's always basically with them [his coparent Soni and her family]. ... I seen her, I'd say, five or six times" in six months. Although Morgan interprets his limited attempts to see and support his daughter as "being there," Soni (also a participant) does not agree. He says that Soni "thinks I'm irresponsible," which mirrors her assessment though she acknowledges, "I see that he's trying." Soni sees Morgan's not "being there" as the final straw for their coparenting relationship:

Last time he seen her before yesterday was [the previous month] ... The past few months, there's been so much negative energy between the point where I didn't want to do the child support, because I know how that can be. So it was like, "Just give me \$60." That's nothing. That's enough to buy diapers and baby wipes. And he was like, "No, I'm not gonna be breaking bread for you-all." So I'm like [saying to myself], "You know what? Don't call him no more" ... Because you can't make somebody do something they don't want to do.

In contrast, Morgan feels that Soni has blocked many of his attempts at "being there" for his daughter. These conflicting definitions of "being there" for the child are a source of contention in or a catalyst for dissolution of some coparenting relationships.

The second major theme in participants' perceptions of their coparenting relationships (or lack thereof) was the important consequences of these relationships for their current and future lives. We have few participants with older children, so we limit our analysis of longer-term consequences. Lizzie clearly perceives that she suffers from the lack of a partner or coparent in her everyday life: "I have a kid, and now I do a lot. Of course, I keep the house clean for her. And sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night when she's sick ... You're stuck at home all the time." But to her, these struggles are outweighed by the perceived benefits of having full custody: "I'm glad that he's not around, because ... if he tries for custody, he has bad on his side and good on my side ... We don't see child support ... As long as I have her, that's what matters." Yet she is looking for a new partner and is sad because she can't find one who will "be there for your kid ... so I haven't been with nobody for a while."

Lizzie's account highlights the emotional and day-to-day practical consequences of coparenting, which tend to get less scholarly attention than the socioeconomic consequences. Emily illustrates practical consequences in describing the benefits of active coparenting:

The 50–50 part, where if I was tired or if I was sick, he's always there to back me up and watch her ... Or even when I'm not sick, he does that, too, sometimes. And we kind of do it back and forth so I'm not doing it constantly ... If you wanted to do something, go to dinner with friends or something, it's difficult to be just one parent. And I've seen that before. And the money issues plays a lot of a part in it, too, because he works, too, so he brings home money, so it's not just me bringing home all the money as well.

It is important to note that not every coupled father is so helpful to his partner, and sometimes relationship problems seem to outweigh the benefits of living together. In most cases, though, our participants clearly prefer being in an active coparenting relationship.

What do our participants see as the consequences of the “uncoupled coparents” trajectory? For mothers, the short-term emotional and socioeconomic consequences are often grim. Being a single parent while working or attending school is grueling, and it can be difficult to find a new partner. But the potential long-term consequences seem brighter for mothers, who are often building a more secure life for themselves and their children and who may repartner later. Uncoupled fathers have fewer short-term burdens, but neither are they as committed as mothers to building the human capital that could improve their child's long-term situation. Judging by the many young fathers in our study who had a child with a new woman fairly soon after uncoupling from their first coparent, multiple-partner fertility appears to be a possible future for fathers. This path may be emotionally motivated by a desire to “be there” for their second child and the mother, repairing their “good father” identity.

Although the other coparenting trajectories both involve couples, they have different consequences. Participants in the “traditional coparents” trajectory generally say they are happy with their coparenting relationships. They seem more satisfied than many other participants with their day-to-day parenting arrangements and their financial arrangements, which usually entail a breadwinner bringing in a fairly steady income. In other words, the short-term consequences of being traditional coparents seem quite good for these participants (though not for young parents who do not desire traditionally gendered parenting roles, such as Dominic's older child's mother). But many participants in this trajectory explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that they need to be thinking about their long-term socioeconomic future. Working the low-income jobs that fathers in this trajectory have, or staying at home with a child, are not sound ways to ensure long-term financial stability. Most participants in this trajectory say they want to go back to school or train for a better-paying job. But with limited financial support from family members who expect them to manage largely on their own, it is not clear how this will happen. In sum, the consequences of traditional coparenting seem to be the converse of those for uncoupled coparents: a positive short-term situation in the couple relationship, parenting, and finances, but with problematic long-term socioeconomic prospects.

The third trajectory, nontraditional coparenting, is perhaps the most complicated. By trying to combine the everyday routines of a committed parent with the activities of a typical teenager (building human capital through school and/or paid work), nontraditional coparents strain both their relationships and their resources. They need a strong shared commitment to this grueling daily routine, as well as consistent and reliable support from their families, to navigate through the difficult short-term consequences of their trajectory. Like Anne and Pierce, though, most teen parents in our study find their families' support, however generous, to be conditional and inconsistent. Managing this resource situation on top of their daily demands appears to place a strain on at least some couple relationships. All of this calls the long-term feasibility of this trajectory into question for some coparents. Those who manage the short-term difficulties with their support systems intact have perhaps the brightest future prospects. They have the potential for future socioeconomic stability while remaining highly involved with their child and maintaining the couple relationship that is important to them on an emotional and practical level.

“Just a Lot of Drama”: Coparents and Their Families

The second level in our multilevel analysis of coparenting is interpersonal interactions. In particular, teens' coparenting relationships cannot be understood without considering extended family. Family members are often influential in determining coparenting relationship trajectories, and their typically greater (though still quite limited) resources give them power over young parents. Participants told us that the reactions of both parents' family members to the pregnancy were of the utmost concern. Almost uniformly and echoing past research (Brubaker & Wright, 2006; Kaplan, 1997), family members reacted negatively to the teen pregnancy (see author citation 2012). Sometimes fathers' families encourage the young father to question his paternity, which causes lasting damage to the coparenting relationship. Soni and Morgan are an example. Morgan accepted responsibility when told of the pregnancy, and both families were angry. He says his mother was “disappointed” and “mad.” Soni elaborates:

His mom was still kind of negative towards it [the pregnancy] ... So she was saying ... [the father] could be somebody else. So they wanted a test ... And he was like, “Stop telling people that's my baby, because my mom doesn't think it's my baby.” So it kind of brainwashed him ... I didn't want to stay on bad terms to the point where he couldn't stand to talk to me to be there for his daughter. But after she came, she looked just like him ... [Morgan's mother] hasn't seen the baby since I had her.

The deep hostility between Soni and Morgan's mother is fairly unusual—family members' reactions are usually tempered to reluctant acceptance or even happiness after the birth.

Teen parents often feel a desire to “prove wrong” a family member who has doubted that their romantic relationship or parenting can succeed. Brubaker and Wright (2006) describe a “narrative repair” process of creating an identity and a related narrative to counter the experience of stigma. This path to redemption partly entails the teen's taking responsibility for the child without needing too much support, but the coparents' relationship also plays a complicated role. During or after the pregnancy, family members often intervene in this

relationship. Depending on their opinion of the couple, they might try to push the couple closer but much more often work to separate them. Fulfilling family members' wishes about the coparenting relationship becomes one major way the teen can show success as a parent. Fabian's story illustrates the latter dynamic with his girlfriend's family and the former with his own:

I was 14 when she got pregnant ... It's like, "OK. I got this responsibility now." ... And then there was conflict in the family because my family ... wanted the child to be born, and her family didn't ... We were together, but her family, when she was there with them, they was trying to prevent her from coming. So eventually my mother took her in and we stayed together at my mother's household, because my mother, she wanted to have the baby ... So it was just basically that. Just a lot of drama. ... I didn't really know what to do ... Once he was born, her family then wanted to be involved, and it's like, "OK, you caused me all this grief and trauma," so my mother was like, "You have rights as grandparents and whatever, however, I've been taking care of your daughter and whatever else, so she's gonna continue to stay here and I'll have say-so in this and that."

Fabian's experiences speak to the high degree of involvement in decision-making that teens' families often have about the coparenting relationship, as well as the conflicts that arise between one parent and the other parent's family or between the two families.

Families' selective provision of resources gives them decision-making power, even over parents older than 18. For example, in the nontraditional coparent couple described above, Pierce says Anne's family "wanted to separate us [during the pregnancy] but couldn't." Perhaps as a consequence of defying her family's wishes, they give Anne and Pierce limited financial support and little emotional support. Anne's father and grandmother help out with backup child care, but Anne and Pierce pay all their own expenses and split rent payments with her father, who lives with them. Anne tells us that her grandmother helps a lot, but regularly and hurtfully shows her disapproval of Anne and Pierce's youth and parenting skills. For example, "one time she was like, 'I can't believe you have a baby. It looks like a little girl playing with a doll.'" Lower support has particularly important consequences for nontraditional coparents, who have complicated schedules combining work or school with parenting. Without reliable family support, their day-to-day lives may not be sustainable.

For traditional coparents, families often approve of the young couple assuming gender-normative parenting responsibilities and show more emotional support. Yet perhaps because they believe the couple has assumed adult rather than teenage roles, they provide less financial support. For example, Alexandra's family visits her frequently and provides so much parenting advice that "it's kind of annoying sometimes." Financial support is less forthcoming. She and Dominic are responsible for all costs related to their daughter, and they split household bills with Alexandra's mother. They cannot afford to have their broken car repaired. Finally, families of uncoupled coparents, like Lizzie's above, tend to be more emotionally and materially supportive. This may be because these participants need help most, but also because the family does not need to apply pressure to break up the couple. As in Lizzie's case, the initial support from the father's family tends to taper off if his involvement with the child ends.

“They Want to Split Us Up”: Institutions’ Influence on Coparenting Relationships

The rosy picture of couplehood painted by our teen parents may appear overly optimistic to adult readers, bringing to mind a Romeo and Juliet narrative of “us against the world.” This is a fairly accurate description of the sense participants gave us of their relationships with their extended families. Teen coparents also perceive this dynamic with the institutions and social programs that target them (the third level in our multilevel analysis). Several participants complained that social programs intended to help teen parents do not accommodate couples or coparents. Our field notes indicate that although our two sites, unlike many other programs, acknowledged the presence of fathers, they still did so in ways that implicitly marginalized dads and coparents. The school had a satellite program for young fathers, but it was separate from programming for mothers—couples and coparents did not receive services together. The clinic allowed fathers at medical visits, but the tandem health care provided to teen mothers and children did not include fathers. Other institutions, such as mainstream schools, medical clinics, and social support programs such as TANF (“welfare”), marginalize fathers more explicitly. This is particularly interesting given many social programs’ pressures on adult couples to marry.

Several participants cite social programs’ lack of accommodation of couples and coparents as a major impediment to getting help from services and programs. Dylan tells us, “I think programs that are designed to help teen families, they split them apart. As of now, my life is actually in a [residential] program, and that program continuously tries to make us get divorced or make her press child support on me.” He says the authority figures in the social service program he is currently involved with “constantly talk bad about me, even though I’m doing a good job as a father.” Ashley echoes this sentiment:

I have never found a program that would help me and Robert ... parent together. Every program I’ve seen always wants to split us up ... I don’t think that’s right. And also, I don’t think the dads have enough support. Everybody has gotten so set on single moms not being able to take care of their kids that they don’t look at *families* not being able to take care of their kids, moms and dads ... They just look at the moms and want to take care of the moms.

This finding is important because institutional sources of support can make a big difference for teen parents’ future socioeconomic prospects.

Perhaps the most common resource our participants told us they needed but did not have was independent housing. Sometimes they want housing to be nearer to work or school, but often it is to give a coparenting couple space to be a family. With housing almost always controlled by extended family members, teen coparents whose families disapprove of their involvement often experience considerable relationship strain because they lack private space. When we asked what social programs she would design to help teen parents, Zoe told us she would “help them out with the housing situation for teens, where they can live as a family.” Anabelle specifically identified age-related barriers for housing and other social programs:

I can’t apply for Medicaid for my daughter on my own because I’m not 18 ... I can’t get TANF, I can’t get housing, I can’t get any kind of help because I’m not 18.

That's one of the biggest obstacles ever, 'cause if I could live closer to the school in some of the housing places, it would be way easier to get to school ... I have to catch four buses to get to school.

There are sometimes ways around institutional constraints, but they require considerable planning and coparent or family support. For example, Anne and Pierce were able to combine his early work shift with her day at a nontraditional school (not our study site) that met in the evening and that several other participants also attended. These kinds of institutions and programs allow flexibility for teens, but even they do not acknowledge or support teen parents' coparenting relationships. In sum, we found that coparents can rarely build a satisfactory life without the support of extended family members, programs, and institutions, but these social actors usually try implicitly or explicitly to separate the coparents.

Discussion

The teen mothers and fathers in our ethnographic study make it clear that their coparenting relationships are integral for understanding their experiences. Our goals were to describe typical coparenting experiences among teen parents and conduct a multilevel qualitative analysis contextualizing these experiences. Almost all of the teen parents start out as a committed couple, with both extended families invested in decision-making around the relationship and pregnancy. Social programs, schools, clinics, and other institutions, as well as extended families, tend to discourage romantic and coparenting relationships among teen parents, creating conflicts around the best trajectories for young parents to take. Our participants' experiences show that coparenting relationships and their embeddedness in extended families and social institutions are fundamental for understanding teen parenthood and its consequences. Yet, to borrow Ashley's words, researchers, service providers, and policy makers generally "just look at the moms and want to take care of the moms." Although some work has examined teen fathers, or teen mothers and their own mothers, many researchers have underestimated the importance of coparenting and the problems that the lack of a supportive coparenting relationship can cause. New data collection should include both coparents and their families. Studies that analyze either young mothers or fathers in isolation, or even couples in isolation, are likely to paint an incomplete picture of teen parents' decision-making and lived experiences.

Our participants have reacted to childbearing in one of two ways. The first, represented by the "uncoupled coparents" and "nontraditional coparents" trajectories, is to continue to focus on the human capital accumulation that is typical for a teenager. For many participants this means combining heavy parenting responsibilities with work or schooling. These efforts require considerable support from the other parent, extended family, or social programs and may not be sustainable in the long term for some participants. In the second reaction to childbearing, our "traditional coparents" stay coupled and assume gendered adult breadwinning and homemaking roles. Because they have not usually built enough human capital for stable socioeconomic prospects, this may be problematic in the long term, despite short-term social approval and practical and emotional support. No matter which of these choices they make, teen parents are in a double bind resulting from their stigmatized

assumption of the adult role of parent while still in the socially recognized stage of adolescence (Furstenberg, 2003). Because the parenting demands on mothers are much higher than on fathers if they are to receive social approval (Hays, 1996), the double bind is stronger for young women than men.

Our study of teen parents' coparenting relationships also has implications for understanding coparenting throughout the life course. The multilevel analysis finds that teen parents are seen as appropriate targets of social control from their families, institutions, and social programs—whether because they are teenagers, because they have violated social norms, or because they exchange power for resource support from adults. But these same control processes, while perhaps less consequential, are likely to matter for adult coparents' lives as well. Institutions, social programs, and extended families may have less power over adult parents, but many still seek to control them. These dynamics should be a focus of future research. Our study also shows that uncoupled coparenting relationships are often very important for understanding the lives of single parents and their children. In keeping with more recent scholarly trends (e.g., McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010), research on coparenting relationships should be expanded beyond couples to include uncoupled coparents. Further research on the dyadic interactional processes between young coparents and the longer-term implications of different coparenting trajectories is also needed.

Our teen parents think social programs and institutions can have important positive impacts on their lives. Most participants readily articulated policy changes that they would like to see in order to better help teen parents, many of which involved an end to what they perceived as the discouragement of couple relationships among teen coparents. We also find that teen parents generally need more support. Our participants' experiences imply that effective support should integrate coparenting relationships. For example, Fagan's (2008) coparenting intervention for young fathers-to-be led to increased involvement with infant children. Florsheim and colleagues' (2011) Young Parenthood Program, which targets both members of teen-mother couples for counseling, reduces intimate partner violence. Nearly all of our teen parents seem eager for education or job training, but traditional coparents are less likely to do this in the short term. Another recent policy tack, interventions targeted at improving couple relationships, will help traditional and nontraditional coparents, but not those who are uncoupled.

Because there is no "one size fits all" solution, effective policy programming should facilitate teen parents' agency. These youth have strong preferences about whether and how to move forward with their coparenting relationship, and policies with only one possible trajectory may backfire. If a social program had pressured Alexandra to enroll in school immediately, she and Dominic would have balked because they wanted her to stay home, but later on this help would have been welcome. If Dominic's first coparent had felt pressured to stay in a gender-traditional relationship that made her unhappy, a policy encouraging these actions would not have led to success. The United States has a long history (for example, in repeated permutations of "welfare") of attempting to regulate young mothers' agency in their relationships with the fathers of their children. Working with teen coparents and

approaching coparenting as embedded in extended families and social institutions are important first steps to creating effective support.

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