Adolescent Children of Adolescent Mothers

Research shows that children of adolescent mothers experience poorer academic and behavioural outcomes during childhood when compared with children born to older mothers. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), Dahinten, Shapka and Willms recently assessed the influence of maternal age on the academic and behavioural trajectories of Canadian youth as they enter and move through adolescence. They also examined the potential mediating effects of family functioning (parenting behaviours and maternal depression) after accounting for family structure and socioeconomic characteristics.

The authors found maternal age to be related to detrimental effects on the academic outcome, math scores, and the behavioural outcome, property offences. Family functioning did not appear to mediate these effects. Consistent with earlier findings (Dahinten and Willms, 2002), the results suggested that for two of the three behavioural outcomes studied, it was the children of late adolescent mothers (18–19 years old at childbearing), not early/mid adolescent moms (13–17 at childbearing) who showed the poorest outcomes. This may be due to the fact that younger teen mothers are more likely to live at home than 18- and 19-year-old mothers.

In short, some of the detrimental effects of adolescent childbearing held even after accounting for family socioeconomic characteristics and family functioning. This suggests that we should continue efforts to encourage delayed childbearing beyond the adolescent years. There is a continued need for interventions aimed at supporting the healthy development of children of adolescent mothers. Moreover, policy makers, program planners, and practitioners must be careful to not neglect services for women who bear children during their late adolescence, perhaps expecting that they and their children are less at risk – the findings from this and previous research strongly indicate otherwise.


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