



**Title:** “Educational Attainment for Teen Parents: Challenges Faced in San Mateo County”

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## **Introduction**

Despite the decrease in overall teen pregnancy rates, Latinas continue to have the highest rates of teen births along with increased rates of late or no prenatal care in San Mateo County (SMC). Educational attainment can be profoundly affected as a result of having a child and teen parents face challenges in areas such as securing childcare and needing to work to take care of their families. Those graduating from high school increase their employment opportunities and earning potential, explore higher education possibilities as well as to improve outcomes for themselves and their children. Cal-Learn's goal is to help pregnant/parenting teens earn a high school diploma or its equivalent and connect them to educational, health and other needed resources. Educational case management services are provided to teen parents and financial incentives and disincentives are earned based on academic performance. Moreover, reimbursements for school, transportation, and childcare expenses are offered as a support to help teen parents remain in school.

Cal-Learn staff was interested in better understanding the factors affecting teen parents' ability to be successful in school in SMC. Interviews were held with teen parents (primarily Latinos) and utilized Social Cognitive Theory as a basis for these discussions. In Social Cognitive Theory, learned behavior is a product of the interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental factors in one's life (Pajares, 2002). The Social Ecological Framework was also used in developing discussion topics and included topics such as client/family attitudes towards education, motivations to continue attending school, and how schools/policy makers can support teen parents. The objective of the interviews was to identify three barriers to educational attainment faced by teen parents as well as to improve service delivery within Cal-Learn. Findings will also help guide advocacy work and partnerships with other organizations and stakeholders in San Mateo County.

## **Background**

California has made significant progress in reducing the number of adolescent births over the past two decades. Adolescent birth rates have been declining in California since 2000, when the birth rate for adolescents between 15-19 years old was 46.7 per 1,000 females. By 2013, adolescent birth rates had decreased by 50% to 23.2 per 1,000 females (California Department of Public Health, 2015a). This mirrors progress that has been made on a national level, where adolescent birth rates decreased from 47.7 per 1,000 females in 2000 to 26.6 per 1,000 in 2013 (Ventura, Hamilton, & Mathews, 2014). Various factors contribute to California's low adolescent birth rate numbers, including no cost, youth-friendly family planning services and legislation such as the California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act (California Department of Public Health, 2013).

Yet, within California, the adolescent birth rate can vary widely from county to county. For example, between 2011 and 2013, the county with the highest aggregated birth rate (Kern) had a rate 6.1 times greater than the county with the lowest aggregated birth rate (Marin) (California Department of Public Health, 2015a). San Mateo County has seen significant declines in adolescent birth rates and repeat birth rates in recent years. In 2011, the birth rate for teens 15-19 years old was 14.7 per 1,000 – down from 22.9 in 2009 (California Department of Public Health, 2011). However, there are still areas within the county which are seen as “hot spots”: areas in which teen parents are likely to be found (Lirio, & Chabra, 2009). These areas include East Palo Alto, Redwood City/North Fair Oaks, San Mateo and South San Francisco. The southern region of the county – which includes East Palo Alto & Redwood City/North Fair Oaks – has seen particularly high numbers in both adolescent birth rates and percentage of repeat births in recent years (California Department of Public Health, 2015b).

Despite the decrease in overall teen pregnancy rates, the Latino population in SMC continues to face high teenage birth rates as compared to other racial/ethnic groups. The Latino population overall has increased in SMC and Latinos accounted for 78.2% of the teenage births for 5-year moving averages between 2000 and 2004. Moreover, Latinos have increased rates of late or no prenatal care (Lirio, & Chabra, 2009). The added difficulties of becoming a parent can greatly impact a teenager's ability to continue pursuing their education. Having little to no childcare options can lead to unstable attendance and despite Title IX protections against

discrimination at school, pregnant/parenting teens may continue to face stigma by school personnel or peers - resulting in them deciding to stop attending classes. In SMC, Latinas accounted for 9.8% of the high school dropout rate for the class of 2013-2014, whereas overall dropout rates were 6.6%. Moreover, Latino boys and girls accounted for over half of the high school dropouts during that same time (California Department of Education, 2015).

### **The Cal-Learn Program**

Cal-Learn is one of the many support programs available to pregnant/parenting teens offered by San Mateo County's Family Health Services. What sets it apart from other home visiting programs is its emphasis on education for clients. Established in 1993, Cal-Learn is a statewide educational case management program for pregnant/parenting teens receiving cash assistance via the state's California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program. The goal of Cal-Learn is to help these teens complete high school or its equivalent, become independent and form healthy families.

Once eligible teens are identified by CalWORKs staff, they are referred to Cal-Learn staff and are required to remain in program until either their cash aid case is closed, they age out, or obtain their high school diploma/GED. Case management services are provided and financial incentives/disincentives are applied to their family's cash aid benefits based on academic performance. Moreover, clients can receive reimbursements for expenses related to school, childcare and transportation as long as they are adhering to program requirements. Case management services revolve around connecting clients to appropriate academic programs, home visiting nursing programs, and other services, as needed. For the period between August 2014 and August 2015, 75% of the active Cal-Learn cases in SMC were Latinos (all but two were mothers).

### **Method**

In order to improve Cal-Learn service delivery and guide advocacy work with other organizations and stakeholders in San Mateo County, a series of interviews were held with teen parents. There were a total of 9 participants – both mothers and fathers. Participants were primarily Latino and between 16-20 years old. Approximately 90% of participants reside in the southern region of the County – in areas considered “hot spots” for teen parents. Only one of the

participants was enrolled in Cal-Learn. This was intentional so as to explore any potential issues not already known to program staff. Interviews took place between Sept 2014-2015 and were held at client homes and local community centers. Participants were paid \$20 for their time. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by Cal-Learn staff.

Interviews were designed with Social Cognitive Theory in mind. Social Cognitive Theory views human behavior as being influenced by factors in three areas: environmental, personal (i.e., cognition, affective, biological) and behavioral (i.e., skills, self-efficacy). Interventions can be targeted at any of these areas (Pajares, 2002). Cal-Learn staff was interested in exploring how any challenges in these areas are influencing the overall behavior of being successful in school for teen parents. The Social Ecological Framework, which looks at influences at the individual level to a more macro-perspective, was also used in creating discussion topics. These topics included client/family attitudes towards education, how education has impacted their lives, concerns as parents, any norms impacting their education, etc.

## **Results**

Interview sessions were analyzed to see how they fit into the areas described in Social Cognitive Theory as being key influences in behavior development (environmental, behavioral, and personal). Findings revealed at least two factors per area affecting teen parents' ability to be successful in school.

### *Behavioral*

#### Self-Efficacy to Balance School and Work

Nearly all participants understood the connection between education and better job opportunities. Many had occupational goals such as becoming an architect or nurse and roughly half of them included higher education as part of their long term goals. However, the immediate need to earn money puts achieving these goals in jeopardy. Many of the participants feel like they cannot manage to both work and attend school at the same time and almost all of the participants are doing either one or the other. Fatigue was cited as a key reason as to why one father could not attend school and work at the same time. He stated, "...I stopped going to school because I was working. I was stressed, I was tired. I just didn't want to be going to school and then work after. I was always tired at work". Male participants seemed to view school as an

obstacle keeping them from being able to put their energy into working. Having reasonable work hours that fall after school is not the reality for some participants. One father described his girlfriend's situation, stating, "Ever since she had the baby and got a job she stopped going to school because they didn't want to work with her schedule. So it was hard for her. She was stressing out too because she wanted to graduate". One mother admitted that she would have been able to earn her GED almost a year ago had she not been working as much. One participant noted that their school is able to offer academic credits for work hours completed.

### Lower Parenting Skills among Fathers Impacts Mothers

Every interview session featured a desire for more services/supports for teen fathers and an imbalance in the parenting skills of mothers and fathers. Both mothers and fathers acknowledged this disparity and its impact on the mothers' education. When it came to parenting skills, male participants readily acknowledged their limitations. One father explained, "I can take care of (daughter) for an hour or two. After that, I don't think I'd be able to do it. It's too much...I try to give her the bottle but she keeps crying. I don't know what she wants; I don't know what to do. I start panicking like something is wrong or something hurts". Teen fathers interviewed stated that they were in a life skills program via Probation Department. Community support groups or life skill classes are not as available to teen fathers as they are to mothers. Thus, mothers are more likely to feel more pressed to do everything themselves. One mother stated, "My boyfriend is saying 'don't worry', even though he is not suffering". Conflict between teen mothers and fathers can also arise due to mothers having to do more. Another mother stated, "I also don't like asking her father because they'll say, 'Oh, it's your daughter'. But I say 'she's your daughter too'". The fact that teen mothers and fathers may not live together puts even more pressure on mothers to do everything. A common view is that fathers don't listen when mothers express a desire for them to become better parents and that the message would be more meaningful coming from others.

## Environment

### Stigma against Teen Parents Persists

It will come as no surprise that a supportive school environment plays a vital role in the performance and success of its students. Yet, interviews reveal that the stigma against pregnant

or parenting teens still persists. There was at least one participant in each interview session that could cite specific examples of teachers and peers reacting negatively to their pregnancy. One 20 year old participant stated, “Just one teacher, out of all the ones I knew, literally ignores me - even gave me an attitude. It made me feel bad, useless, the way they looked at me. Like they brushed me off...Even my friends, they just stopped communicating simply because I dropped out”. The lack of support can extend to employers as well. A second 20 year old participant stated “One of my old bosses told me to give my baby up to for adoption and that I would stay in poverty and that my baby’s daddy would leave me”. Sentiments like these can impact a teen parent’s self-esteem greatly.

Unfortunately, a negative school environment can be the final straw in a teen’s decision to continue attending school. Without supportive adults encouraging them to continue on, teen parents can feel better off trying to enter the workforce. One participant explained, “Like, once I saw how teachers saw me as a joke and once I heard what teachers were saying about me...I felt like, ‘alright, there’s no reason for me to even be in school’ ...if my own teachers wouldn’t help me, I felt like there was no point in staying”. It can be several years before a teen parent returns to school, likely a community school where they have to start from the beginning in pursuing a GED.

Conversely, a school environment which is supportive to teen parents’ situation can be the key in them even deciding to come to school the next day. Nearly all participants who were attending school are motivated in some way by their teachers and other school personnel. A 20 year old mother stated, “The one teacher that didn’t look at me differently asked me how I was doing and still talked to me”. This sentiment was echoed by a second mother, who said “But other people tell you that you can do it. It makes you want to keep going. It makes you feel better”. Adults cited as motivators seemed genuinely interested in how these teens’ children were growing and not afraid to engage in conversations with them. Little gestures, such as breaks are noticed and appreciated by teen parents. One 17 year old father discussed his relationship with one of his teachers, stating, “If I tell him I need to take a break real quick, he will let me. He’ll help me with my work because he knows I need extra help”.

School can also serve as an escape. Many participants alluded to problems at home and school serving as a respite from that environment. As one mother put it, “It’s nice going to school because I felt like I had people to vent to about problems at home. It was kind of

somewhere to have friends and forget about things for a while”. Lastly, adults at school can also be a source of support when it comes to more tangible needs. One 16 year old mother stated, “(I was) running out of diapers, had no money, asked and she (teen parent coordinator) gave me a bag of diapers. And that was helpful because we would’ve had to wait ‘till Friday for my boyfriend’s check”. This speaks to the need for teachers, counselors and other school personnel receive training in the unique needs of teen parents and the daily challenges that they face.

### Graduation is Not Always a Family Expectation

When it came to how their families expectations impacted participants’ motivation to attend school, results were mixed. Some respondents reported feeling little to no motivation or pressure from parents to continue attending school after becoming pregnant or having a child. In response to what their family expects from them in terms of education, one client replied, “Nothing. Like, my mom, she does help me out but my family doesn’t think anything about education...I’m the only one that puts pressure on myself”. A second participant stated, “My dad told me to graduate and told me to go to school, but he was never around. I did not have support from any of them, my mom or dad”. The fact that their parents did not graduate from high school because they themselves became pregnant helped to set the perception in at least one participant’s mind that she would also not graduate due to having a child. English language capabilities of parents also impact their level of involvement in participants’ education.

However, other participants state that their parents are encouraging and stress the importance of completing high school for both themselves and for their children. Parents do this by using their economic situation as an example of the potential consequences. One 16 year old mother stated that her mom “didn’t want to see me work like how she does: cleaning mirrors, bathrooms and stuff”. Some participants see being able to earn a diploma on behalf of their parents as one of their only motivators. One father explained, “I’m trying to get my high school diploma because I know my mom never got it and I know she regrets it...That what I want to give her and then I can start working full-time”. Another participant explained how her mother helps quiz her at home.

## Access to Daycare

Nearly every participant expressed some level of concern over childcare availability and its impact on attending and/or focusing on school. Three participants specifically pointed out that the childcare center at their school was a facilitator to them continuing to attend school. One stated, "Why not go to school when there is support out there? If there's support out there, get it, accept it". While some schools and GED programs have on-site childcare centers, the majority do not. One participant described her reality as a result of not having easy access to daycare, "I would be able to go to every single class. Sometimes we don't have anyone to watch our kids or anything". Securing childcare is an even greater challenge for those attending night classes, where classes can end close to 10 PM.

A majority of the participants expressed some level of hesitance when it comes to utilizing childcare in order to attend school. There is a sense of worry and not trusting non-family providers to watch their children, which in turn affects their ability to focus on class. One mother stated, "Sometimes I'll be in sitting in class and then I'll start thinking about (daughter). I want to whip out my phone and text my mom or whoever is watching her to see how she is". In describing how he leaves his child at the school daycare center, one father explained, "I'm always thinking about her. Is she okay? Is it right that I'm leaving her in the daycare?"

## Personal

### Wanting to go to School vs. Stay Home with Child

Interviews revealed a strong ambivalence in mothers between wanting to attend school and wanting to stay home with their child. Although mothers want to go to school and earn their diploma for their children, they also want to spend as much time together as possible - even if that means no longer attending school. They pointed to the first year as being critical in terms of bonding/establishing a connection with their child. As one mother puts it, "The first years of his life are the most important. Main focus is not school. It's raising him right the first years. But I do want to go to school, but it is not a priority since he is at this young age. I feel being with him is more important". There was an underlying theme of mistrust for non-family caregivers and that others wouldn't be able to properly care for their children. One mother raised concerns over the "values" that her child could pick up from others. She explains, "Later, it will be like I have

to re-raise him. Not a chance I am willing to take”. Another mother expressed difficulty in being at school due to “missing” her child. As a result, mothers may not take advantage of childcare resources when available and stop attending school to stay at home with their children - vowing to return to school when their children are older.

### Teen Parents feel as if They Must do everything on Their Own

Another strong attitude described during the interviews is that teens are reluctant to seek help due to an expectation that they have to do everything on their own. This expectation was primarily expressed by teen mothers who struggle with not wanting to appear as weak or incompetent. One mother stated, “if you feel sorry for yourself, people will feel sorry for you...if others did not know as much about me, they would think negatively – that I am a ‘typical’ teen mom”. A second mother did not want to use their child as an excuse for not being able to accomplish things. Asking others for help is seen as a sort of last resort for some participants.

The expectation of having to do everything on your own comes from others as well. Mothers have difficulty in asking family for help taking care of child for fear of judgment and being told “it’s your child”. Nearly every mother in the focus group had experienced this. It is not uncommon for participants to keep things inside and not discuss with others in order to avoid judgment. One mother stated, “I feel like I don’t have anybody to vent to because they’ll say it’s my fault”. Because they feel this expectation, many mothers find it difficult to complete tasks such as trying to complete homework, fill out job applications, clean, etc.

### Other Stressors Get in the Way

Interviews revealed that financial and economic issues were a prime concern for participants, especially for fathers, who are concerned over being able to provide for their families. This stress is resulting in both lowered performance and attendance at school. When describing his routine of leaving school, having to take his partner to work and getting home to watch child all within one hour, one father responded, “At school I was just thinking ‘I hope I make it in time’ ...I would just be stressing so I stopped going to school”. For those in relationships with their child’s parent, discussions suggest that fathers were more likely to stop going to school and focus on work while mothers would continue to pursue their education. One mother explained that she and her boyfriend are currently experiencing this: “Education is not his

priority. I mean, education is both of our priorities, but more mine than his. But working – money – is the first thing. It has to be or else my daughter wouldn't have the things that she has now". The housing crisis currently affecting the entire Bay Area region is on many of the participant's minds. At least one participant's family is currently facing eviction and is currently considering moving further out of the Bay Area. Agencies that may address employment or financial concerns don't appear to be as utilized by teen parents as one would hope. Not many participants seemed to know what organizations they could turn to and one complained of the waiting time before they could get help.

### Implications

I. There is a unanimous desire for more parenting programs and resources to be available to teen fathers. Fathers have an interest in becoming better parents and recognize the impact that their perceived lack of skills has on the mother's level of responsibility to care for their child. Male participants cited that their own parents are their main source of knowledge. Any life skills class offered at school or support groups offered to mothers should also be made available to fathers. Males may not be as easily identified as parents and so it behooves providers to conduct thorough outreach to identify and engage them in services.

Programming that was more family-centered would also be welcomed by teen parents. Mothers feel that the daily challenges they face in raising their child are not understood by fathers, which can lead to arguing and possibly breaking up. Mothers called for more access to relationship counseling and services to help teen parents communicate and support one another.

II. Schools need to continue striving towards being more supportive environments towards teen parents – especially mothers. Training on the unique challenges of teen parents should be provided to school personnel. While Title IX laws offer protections for pregnant and parenting students, consistent adherence to these policies at school sites remain a concern (National Women's Law Center, 2012). Although not possible in all locations, more school-based childcare options should be made available. Lastly, efforts should also go towards ensuring that teen parents understand the rights and protections that they have when it comes to excused absences or being allowed to turn in make-up work. Increased job support and career exploration for teen parents would also be beneficial.

III. Agencies and organizations should outreach to teen parents more and provide more teen-friendly materials in order to encourage utilization. Community childcare centers should be encouraged to provide more evening coverage to meet the needs of parents attending evening GED programs or who work in the evenings. Efforts need to be aimed at providing more affordable housing so that teen parents can remain in their communities and continue to attend school.

A limitation that this study faced was recruiting participants to be interviewed. In addition to local teen parent support groups, participants were recruited by other County home visiting programs. However, teen parents living in other areas of the county either declined to be interviewed or could not participate due to scheduling challenges. Moreover, nearly all of the participants lived in the southern part of San Mateo County.

### Conclusion

Teens face numerous challenges in trying to remain engaged in school and earn their diploma or GED once they become parents. Their success in school is influenced by behavioral, personal or environmental factors and interventions that can affect all three areas will be more impactful to their lives. How schools and families respond is pivotal in whether they will return to school the next day or forego their education in order to enter the workforce. There is room for improvement in terms of addressing the needs of teen fathers and access to childcare. The results from these interviews will help improve services delivery among Cal-Learn staff in San Mateo County and help in determining areas to focus advocacy efforts towards.

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