



SIN VERGÜENZA, NO SHAME: Young Parents Share Their Stories, Challenges, and Determination

Justice for Young Families! Issue Brief 2

PUMP UP THE MIC: PREGNANT AND PARENTING LATIN@ YOUTH REPRESENT

Young mothers' and fathers' authentic voices are often absent in public health discussions of adolescent pregnancy and parenting. While pop culture has focused some attention on pregnant and parenting youth, their portrayal on so-called "reality TV" programs on the one hand trivializes their struggles and on the other, perpetuates negative narratives about pregnant and parenting youth. What these shows and other public programs have yet to do is engage in honest dialogue about the real issues that lead young women and men to become parents. CLRJ's Justice for Young Families (J4YF) initiative aims to change that by working to ensure that the experiences of young parents are front and center in the discussion and creation of policies that address them and their needs.

In CLRJ's debut [J4YF Issue Brief](#), CLRJ raised the need to re-frame how society treats and portrays adolescent parents, particularly Latin@¹ mothers and fathers, and to move from punitive measures to more supportive policies that improve the outcomes of young families. CLRJ contends that the lack of a quality education and access to real opportunities for advancement are significant problems unaddressed through traditional strategies focused on preventing unintended adolescent pregnancies alone. In this second Issue Brief, CLRJ intends to raise the voices of the young parents themselves, to provide testimony of their experiences and to speak about their needs. To that end, CLRJ conducted focus groups with young mothers and fathers to collect their stories. These stories contest mainstream beliefs that pregnant and parenting youth are unfit caregivers, irresponsible and/or unproductive. This brief furthers CLRJ's Justice for Young Families initiative, which challenges the dominant frame around teen pregnancy and brings in the experiences of teen mothers *and* fathers – the latter which are often secondary in the discussion of teen childbearing and child-rearing.



All new parents face challenges when raising a child. The families and parents who thrive – *at any age* – usually depend on support networks, community resources, public investments and the confidence of being able to ask for help, without feeling guilt or shame. Unfortunately, many young parents are treated



as social pariahs, deemed undeserving of assistance, and punished for their “bad” decisions or choices. But the reality is that being a teen does not make one an irresponsible mother or father and being a teen parent is not incompatible with educational attainment or with being successful. In fact, contrary to the social and political understanding of teen parenthood, for many young parents the demands and responsibilities of caring for a child inspire them to reconnect to or reinforce their educational goals. However, these stories often go untold, sometimes due to false assumptions that they may “encourage” teens to want to become pregnant, or more accurately, promote youth to have sex if they do not view pregnancy and parenting as a negative consequence. These assumptions minimize the complexities of both teen parenting and sexuality

and take away from the reality that once a young person is a parent they need familial, social and educational support. As such, instead of perpetuating the overwhelming stigma that pregnant and parenting youth generally face, it is imperative that as a society, we foster a positive and encouraging environment, where young parents are given the tangible support that all youth need to reach their full potential.

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

When pregnancy and parenting are motivating catalysts for a more positive future

Many pregnant and parenting students reevaluate their focus and educational attainment goals, regardless of their earlier attitudes. Indicators of increased school focus include improved grades, a resolve to graduate, and a new interest in further education.² Both the young mothers and fathers in the focus groups illustrated this and in addition to inspiring educational attainment goals, the vast majority of the young parents expressed that caring for their children changed their life for the better. One young woman stated: *“I just didn’t like school, I would ditch. My baby changed my life.”* One young father of twins stated: *“I feel proud of myself. I remember I used to just ditch and I wasn’t even at school... the kids keep me off the streets. I am home most of the time now instead of doing what I used to do.”* Another youth describes having even bigger aspirations because of her daughter:

“I could hear little messages coming from her, for me to take care of her, for me to be there, she is just pushing me more and more to do more than whatever I wanted before I was pregnant. She is just more of a big motivation for me.”

The importance of nurturing and encouraging this motivation cannot be overstated. Although teen mothers commonly report college aspirations, teachers’ low expectations of them, expressing disappointment and the lack of college advisement often undermine these goals.³

Pregnancy discrimination is sex discrimination

Unfortunately, even the most motivated pregnant and parenting students may be deterred from continuing their education because of how they are treated by their peers, teachers and school administrators.

The young Latin@ mothers and fathers stated that pregnant and parenting students were belittled and humiliated by teachers and classmates alike. In one instance, a teacher scathingly told a pregnant student in front of her class: *“I think it’s wrong that you guys have childcare at school. If you guys get pregnant, you should be kicked out of school.”* Another young woman was forced to go to a “pregnancy school” because she didn’t *“fit into her desk.”* And another young woman was called a “slut” by other students.

These discriminatory actions are not only unjustified but they are also against the law. Federal Statute, Title IX, prohibits discrimination or harassment by fellow students, teachers, school administrators, and counselors, or any discriminatory school policy or practice.⁵

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Additionally, under Title IX, schools must give all students who might be, are or have been pregnant (whether the student is a parent or not) the same access to school programs and extracurricular activities that other students have.⁶ In blatant violation of the law, a young woman describes how she was forced off her basketball team:

“When I tried to go back to basketball, coach said he wasn’t going to play me because I had a child. He knew I was going to be on varsity and he said he needed people to be there every day. He said he wanted to put the team that wins and not the team that loses. So because of that I can’t play basketball.”

This type of discrimination and stigma is rampant and it takes a toll on the young mothers in particular.⁷ The primary reason most of the young women who participated in a focus group cited for choosing to enroll in the Pregnancy Minor Program (PMP) at their school was to not be judged as much. As one participant stated:

“I chose to come here [PMP] ‘cause I don’t want people judging me out there [regular campus]. ‘Cause I know that when you’re around pregnant girls, they can’t judge you because they’re the same way as you. They’re just like you because they’re a mom too. So they can’t say nothing. But out there, people criticize like, ‘Oh, look! She’s pregnant.’ And I just came out because I didn’t want to be judged.”

Other types of discrimination the participants described included teachers stating they *“feel sorry”* for them, expressing disappointment and low expectations, stating they have *“ruined their lives”* and that they are *“a waste of talent.”* This young women’s positive outlook was met with disdain:

“I don’t even know how to say how my teacher made me feel because when I told him I was pregnant and I told him that it’s giving me a motivation to actually like to do better and to graduate and stuff, he was like, ‘Oh so you needed a baby to motivate you?’ Like trying to say that I wasn’t going to be able to do it on my own - that I needed to get pregnant in order to do something. So it made me feel like ‘No, it’s not that.’ It’s just now I have a reason to actually do better.”

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The demeaning way in which pregnant and parenting students are treated and the biases and discrimination they face at school represent a significant educational barrier, tantamount to pushing them out of school. According to a survey conducted by the Gates Foundation, those who left school to care for a family member or because they became a parent, more than any other group who left school, were “most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.”⁸

Being a Good Student and Good Parent are Not Mutually Exclusive

The lack of reliable child care often represents another insurmountable barrier for young parents and more specifically young mothers’ high school completion. While many young mothers qualify for subsidized child care, the demand for services far exceeds available resources. One solution has been to locate day care programs within schools. Studies have found that student mothers receiving school-based childcare and support fared better than peers who did not receive these supports,⁹ as they represent a positive way for educational institutions to encourage young mothers to return to or stay in school, and acquire accurate information about child development and parenting practices. One young woman described this positive impact: “*Pretty much you just like concentrate more in school because you know your baby is safe at daycare.*” Other participants agreed and also pointed to other types of benefits including being able to check on their children throughout the day, as one participant discussed:



It’s [school daycare] just really helpful. Like I have my son there and like I feel more safe having him here ‘cause if there’s an emergency I can just go over there quick. And I can see him whenever I want to—during lunch, my nutrition. It’s just a lot better.

Some participants in the Fresno area also indicated that they had participated in a school-based childcare program called PACE (Parent and Child Education) lab. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, this program was eliminated. When asked what would happen without this program, one young father responded that: “*moms wouldn’t go to school as much, since they don’t really have anybody to take care of them [their children], and so they will take care of them themselves.*”

These responses indicate the great responsibility and love these young women feel for their children.

Although they expressed wanting to continue their education, they also understand that their children need to be taken care of and safe. Rather than assuming young parents are no longer invested or interested in their education, we should take a deeper look at the conditions they are in and what drives their decisions.

These candid statements portray a different picture as to why we must invest in programs for young parents that provide child care access, money assistance, job opportunities and other resources that would help support them to reach their academic goals.

Educational disadvantage and poverty often precede, rather than result from, pregnancy

Although pregnancy has been cited by many studies as a reason for students “dropping out” of school, other studies suggest the majority of teen mothers leave school prior to pregnancy.¹⁰ As shown in the previous J4YF Brief, studies have shown that many teenage parents were poor to begin with¹¹ – meaning that they not only lack in material possessions or money, but also lack or have limited access to information, health care, political power and education. And as a result of the current recession, the number of Latin@ families with children in poverty has increased, as Latin@ workers earn much less than their counterparts. Young people themselves understand the few opportunities before them, as they are the ones living that very reality. While employment opportunities for young people are dismal in general, it is a problem further exacerbated when a young parent is trying to provide financially with limited options available to them. Thus, they understand that without finishing their high school education, future opportunities for themselves and their children become scarcer. When asked what supports would help them while in school, young parents pointed to a need for flexible work and the consequences of not having that option. Specifically, the young parents expressed a need for job opportunities that did not interfere with school hours and that were flexible and close by to their schools. As one young woman stated, “[We need] *job opportunities for moms, because we can’t find jobs. Like after school or during the weekend.*”

That’s what my mom told me when I got pregnant. She’s like, “You’re life is over. You’re not gonna do anything.” I was like, ‘Um, I think like half of the people who are professors and all that or like you know high [achievers] – I think they had kids at a young age.’ You know there’s a lot of people who succeeded.

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Adults: Quit the blame, shame and judgment. All youth – pregnant, parenting, or not – need personal and emotional support.

Although material support is important, it is significant to note that when asked what they needed from the adults in their life, the vast majority of the young parents expressed the need for emotional support. Their statements towards the adults in their lives included not “*giving up*” on them, “*underestimating*” them, “*judging*” them and to “*stop being negative*” and let them “*learn from their mistakes.*” As one young mom put it, “*Don’t think that we can’t raise our own babies because we’re teenagers*” and another: “*...don’t think less of us just because we’re having a kid and don’t think we’re not gonna be able to go out there and be who we want to be.*”

Adults involved in the lives of youth, whether as parents, guardians, teachers, coaches, etc., are supposed to provide guidance and support. While feelings of concern are understandable given that parenting brings upon a set of additional challenges, becoming pregnant or a young parent does not merit losing the support of the adults around them – especially at a time when logically they will need more support. Young parents need support just like any other person going through a life transition would.

One young man gave the practical advice of inviting the expectant youth father to the baby shower so that “*he can be involved*” from the beginning. One young woman stated that they should not be given “*a harder*

time than what it already is,” another voiced the need for the adults in their life to be “more open-minded about sex,” and another pointed that many teen parents were responsible – even more so than those teens and/or adults who did not have children.

Like we're responsible more than some of those [adults] 'cause some of those don't even have kids. So, we're more responsible in some things than them...because sometimes they think, 'Oh, she's young. She's not gonna know nothing... They think we're not ready, but, it's like, you are.

Like all of us, young parents need social support and encouragement from people – particularly the adults in their life – to believe and encourage them to pursue their goals.

CONCLUSION: FOLLOWING THEIR LEAD

Having a child as a teenager is undeniably difficult—but some of the challenges young parents face could be alleviated when provided with resources such as financial assistance and child care in order for them to have more time and energy to focus on school. Additionally, honoring their right to quality education and fostering a positive and supportive environment in schools is imperative for pregnant and parenting students given that for teenage mothers in particular, **both school-related and personal support were found to be of importance** in their journey toward high school graduation.¹²

It is also extremely short-sighted to contend that poverty and or limited educational attainment could be avoided by simply delaying teen sex or by sanctioning teen mothers and fathers. Furthermore, by treating teen pregnancy only as a “personal choice,” without taking into consideration the external factors that may be leading to this choice, we fail to appreciate how parenting for some youth is not so much a failure of planning and “good-decision making” but a tacit recognition of the limited possibilities available to them. Rather than vilifying teen sexuality, teenage pregnancy and its challenges – these issues should be addressed by focusing on changing broader social determinants, such as investing in low-income communities and creating viable economic and educational opportunities to combat the staggering numbers of continual economic disparities for Latin@s.

The young mothers and fathers who shared their stories are showing us how to follow their lead when it comes to ending stigma and getting to the real issues. All young families need support from family, schools, institutions and society in general who can impact their future opportunities. All young families deserve recognition and respect because they are valuable - let us not forget that when young parents do well economically, educationally and socially, their children do better and so do all of our communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS: ADDRESSING LATIN@ ADOLESCENT CHILDBEARING THROUGH A REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE LENS

On a broad community level, we can all immediately begin to shift our thinking about youth sexuality and refrain from blaming youth for society’s shortcomings. Advocates, school teachers, counselors and administrators, service providers, political leaders, and families can:

- Stop using punitive messages towards Latin@ youth sexuality, particularly young parents.
- Invite young people to inform policy decisions and program development that reflect their lived experiences and uphold their dignity.

- Support policies that improve educational outcomes for all Latin@ youth, pregnant, parenting or not
- Invest resources in programs that offer both comprehensive sexuality education and support young parents.
- Support community-informed research to better elucidate the sexual, reproductive and overall needs of young Latin@s and improve approaches that normalize human sexuality.

Additionally, future policy work needs to tackle the extensive health, educational and systemic inequities many low-income youth are facing, such as access to comprehensive sexuality education, information and access to contraceptives, educational and economic opportunities, and poverty. J4YF will be working with young parents and stakeholders to develop a proactive policy agenda. Of immediate concern, though, are the repercussions of California's recent fiscal reforms. In 2013, California included a "Local Control Funding Formula" for education in its state budget that effectively eliminated the California School-Age Families Education (Cal-SAFE) Program, which served as a national model for providing school-based support services to help students complete school. Over 73% of teen parents enrolled in Cal-SAFE graduated from high school, compared with the national graduation rate of teen parents of 38%.¹³ This policy development requires advocates to work diligently at the local and state levels to ensure that young parents also receive the resources they need to thrive.

Interested in championing the rights of young families? For more information on CLRJ's Justice for Young Families (J4YF) Initiative and Campaign please visit us at www.clrj.org!

ENDNOTES

1. Latin@ is used to reflect the full spectrum of identities in our communities.
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5. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C.A. §§ 1681-1688.
6. *Ibid.*
7. National Women's Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. *Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation*, 2009. See: <http://www.maldef.org/assets/pdf/ListeningtoLatinas.pdf>.
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Justice for Young Families uplifts a broader national agenda to ensure every family has the rights, recognition and resources it needs to thrive as part of the Strong Families Initiative (<http://strongfamilies-movement.org>).

California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) is a statewide organization committed to honoring the experiences of Latinas to uphold our dignity, our bodies, sexuality, and families. We build Latinas' power and cultivate leadership through community education, policy advocacy, and community-informed research to achieve reproductive justice.

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