INTRODUCTION

New mothers experience a range of emotions, responsibilities, and challenges that can be especially difficult for an adolescent mother to navigate. The parent-child relationship is of interest due to the potential long-term effects it can have on children of adolescent mothers.

Studies point to the benefits of an affectionate and responsive caregiver relationship to the health and development of children. Maternal responsiveness affects cognitive and behavioral outcomes of children including intellectual and linguistic functioning, academic performance, and mental health. Parenting stress can lead mothers to feel that the child has a difficult temperament and can decrease empathy, acceptance of children, and confidence in parenting abilities, thereby impacting child development.

In this report, we examine how adolescent mothers from the Postpartum Adolescent Birth Control Study report that they relate and interact with their infants throughout the first postpartum year.

RESULTS

Factors in Positive Mother-Child Relationships

The majority of the study participants reported having “good” relationships with their children. A child’s preference for his/her mother contributed to participants’ sense of a good mother-child relationship. Mothers described feeling warmth and positivity when her child shows recognition and excitement for her.

It feel good that he knows that I’m his mother.

[When she’s with somebody else, and she’s crying, I’m the only one who can calm her down.

About Postpartum ABCs

The Postpartum Adolescent Birth Control Study (Postpartum ABCs) is a longitudinal study of the lives of first-time, African American adolescent mothers in Chicago. Researchers interviewed mothers five times during the first postpartum year to examine contraceptive use, health status, social support, and risk of repeat pregnancy. Transcribed interviews were reviewed and coded with emergent themes using Atlas.ti 5.0. For more information on the study, visit familyplanning.uchicago.edu/ppabc.

Participants said that spending time with their children, feeling needed and teaching their children were the things they enjoyed most about being a parent. Mothers commonly discussed watching, tracking, and contributing to their children’s development. Mothers recognized the importance of reading to their children and developing their language skills.

Just waking up every morning knowing a little girl needs you. It’s just amazing.

I love to teach my son things... just watch him and then he will come out of nowhere and do what I taught him. That’s so wonderful... you learned that well, I just love it.

I enjoy teaching her... like show her how to eat the right way with a spoon or a fork, or... when I tied her shoes up, I be like, showing her how to pull it like that. ... I just like showing her things like my mother used to show me.

Many participants described receiving social support that helped them manage the stress of parenting and build better relationships with their infants. Support from the baby’s father and the adolescent’s mother was described as especially critical.
It make me feel good, like I don’t have a lot of stress on worrying about how I’m gonna get this for her, and how I’m gonna get that. My mom and my daughter’s father help provide.

Challenges to Mother-Child Relationships
A few participants did not describe their relationships favorably. Some parents reported that they did not feel an immediate connection to their children.

…[A]t first I didn’t really have that close of a bond, it’s like when I first came home from the hospital…It just didn’t happen…[S]ome people get that click, Like, this is your child. And I didn’t get that click until later on and I finally got it and it feel good.

At times, the lack of a favorable relationship was attributed to the baby being too young to interact with.

Okay, I think it would be better if he was like old enough for we can talk…[L]ike now he don’t really do too much, he kinda boring.

In other instances mothers felt they were dealing with difficult children. In addition, some adolescent mothers reported that a lack of personal time or patience posed challenges.

I got patience, just sometimes when she don’t go to sleep, she make me like, mad sometimes.

Many participants paint a picture of isolation when it came to taking care of their children. Interestingly, a lack of direct support was commonly self-imposed, as many participants felt they were the only ones capable and trustworthy to care for their children. For some, the exceptions to this distrust were specified close contacts, but sometimes even the baby’s father was not trusted.

[My baby] like my second soul. I don’t like nobody holding her, changing her, feeding her, none of that stuff, unless it’s my sister or her goddad.

DISCUSSION
The vast majority of the adolescent mothers in our study described their relationships with their baby positively and found parenting enjoyable, especially appreciating the opportunity to teach their baby and watch their child grow and develop. Some mothers also described the challenges of first-time motherhood that can contribute to strained mother-child relationships, including limited patience, discipline issues, and social isolation. In previous studies, adolescent mothers have been found to have less sensitive and appropriate interactions with their children.6,7 Because we did not directly observe and rate mother-child interactions in our study, it is unknown how the participants’ self-reports correlated with parenting behaviors.

An interesting dichotomy arose in our interviews. Many adolescent mothers were grateful for the parenting support they received; indeed, support from partners and family contributes to favorable outcomes for both the adolescent mother and her child.8 Yet, other young mothers were disproportionately burdened with child-rearing responsibilities, at times due to their mistrust of others’ suitability to care for their children.

Overall, the young mothers in our study demonstrated a great deal of resilience and maturity as they assumed their new parenting roles. Despite coming from a position of socioeconomic disadvantage that has been associated with poor outcomes for children of teenage mothers, the participants were able to bond and maintain close relationships with their infants. This bodes well for the future well-being of their children.

References

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