



**Research Article** 

# Emotional impact and its impact on families of pregnant adolescents

Impacto emocional y su incidencia en las familias de adolescentes embarazadas

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#### Abstract

Teenage pregnancy has historically been a topic that brings about various connotations within the family unit, impacting its emotional well-being. The purpose of this study was to examine the current emotional impact faced by families with pregnant teenagers. This non-experimental, descriptive, and cross-sectional research was based on the sociocritical paradigm and adopted a mixed-methods approach, both qualitative and quantitative. 20 families with pregnant teenagers aged between 10 and 19 were studied. A three-part questionnaire was used: the first part gathered general data about the teenager, the second used the Family Apgar to evaluate family functionality, and the third consisted of 10 questions about the impact of pregnancy on the family environment. Results indicated that most of the pregnant teenagers were between 15 and 19 years old and had completed secondary education. Most did not live with their partners and belonged to single-parent households with a low to regular socioeconomic status. Significant changes in behavior, relationships, and communication within the family were observed. Some teenagers faced discrimination due to their pregnancy, which affected their academic activities, leading to negative emotions and impacting their emotional development.

Key words: Pregnancy; Adolescence; Emotional Impact; Family.

#### Resumen

El embarazo en la adolescencia ha sido históricamente un tema que genera diversas connotaciones en el seno familiar, afectando el bienestar emocional de sus miembros. El propósito de este estudio fue examinar el impacto emocional actual que enfrentan las familias con adolescentes embarazadas. Esta investigación, de carácter no experimental, descriptivo y transversal, se fundamentó en el paradigma sociocrítico y adoptó un enfoque mixto, cuali-cuantitativo. Se estudiaron 20 familias con adolescentes embarazadas de entre 10 y 19 años. Se empleó un cuestionario estructurado en tres partes: la primera recopila datos generales de la adolescente, la segunda utiliza el Apgar familiar para evaluar la funcionalidad familiar, y la tercera parte comprende 10 preguntas sobre el impacto del embarazo en el ámbito familiar. Los resultados indicaron que la mayoría de las embarazadas tenían entre 15 y 19 años y habían completado la educación secundaria. La mayoría no vivía con sus parejas y pertenecía a hogares monoparentales de nivel socioeconómico bajo a regular. Se observaron cambios significativos en el comportamiento, relaciones y comunicación dentro de la familia. Algunas adolescentes enfrentaron discriminación debido a su embarazo, lo que afectó sus actividades académicas, generando emociones negativas e impactando su desarrollo emocional.

Palabras clave: Embarazo; adolescencia; impacto emocional; familia.

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# INTRODUCTION

Adolescent pregnancy is a widely discussed topic that encompasses various aspects. However, the implications linked to the family environment are rarely discussed in depth, particularly the impact that the latter experiences and the reactions it adopts after receiving the news of the pregnancy, especially during the first months (Figueroa *et al.*, 2020). It is essential to analyze this problem since, in many cases, it is a determining factor for the physical and emotional wellbeing of the pregnant adolescent, as well as the perception and management of the young woman regarding her condition.

Adolescent pregnancy has been the subject of study for a long time, which has led to the discovery of new approaches and perspectives. Young women, being directly affected, have been subject to multiple influences, often derived from the family circle, which affect the development of their pregnancy and possible future pregnancies (Cedeño & Villafuerte, 2021). Education and cultural conceptions play a crucial role, as it is well known that the emotional impact on families can trigger a crisis that requires specialized intervention (Alamo et al., 2017). Many times, the family's first reaction is denial, a difficult stage to overcome given that initial perceptions may not be the most appropriate and, instead of supporting the adolescent, complicate her adaptation to the situation.

The pregnant adolescent faces multiple challenges, such as the possibility of being a single mother. In these contexts, the father figure or household leader often assumes the expenses related to motherhood. In addition, family reactions can significantly influence abortion and suicide rates in this age group. Therefore, efforts are directed not only to prevent teenage pregnancy but also to mitigate the consequences derived from the emotional impact it produces (Velastegui, 2018).

Based on a report by the Pan American Health Organization (2018), the global rate of teenage pregnancy is alarming, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, which have the second-highest figures globally. This situation is confirmed by data from the World Health Organization (2022) and evidences a persistent problem despite the interventions carried out.

A study published in the Cuban Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology highlights that socially, more than 80% of pregnant adolescents drop out of school due to their condition. This educational interruption, added to the emotional and sometimes economic burden faced by the young woman, has significant repercussions on her wellbeing and quality of life.

Ecuador presents worrying figures in this area. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) and recent reports, there is a high prevalence of underage pregnancies. This situation, corroborated by other studies and statistical data, underscores the urgency of addressing this problem from multiple angles, the family being one of the most relevant.

Research on the emotional impact of teenage pregnancy on families is essential to understand and mitigate the associated negative consequences. This topic is directly related to the central role played by the family in society, making it imperative to provide adequate guidance and support to prevent family conflicts and ensure the wellbeing of all family members.

The relevance of this study lies in the transcendental role that the family plays in society. Its importance increases when we consider the imperative need to provide adequate orientation and guidance to prevent conflicts in the family nucleus. This research was possible thanks to the access to bibliographic, physical and economic resources. The main beneficiaries of this effort were the families of the pregnant adolescents to whom the evaluation instruments were specifically directed. In turn, this work serves as a reference for the adolescent population as a whole.

This research is of special social relevance, as it addresses an issue that, although it has been present over time, has yet to be the subject of sufficient intervention. It is well known that the family is considered the essential nucleus of society, and intrafamily dynamics have a profound impact on each of its members. This is especially true in such sensitive circumstances as adolescent pregnancy. The approach of this study, which links teenage pregnancy with its influence on family dynamics, represents an innovative contribution to research in the canton. It may also inspire institutions, both private and state, to delve deeper into the subject, expand it to other contexts and design programs to improve the family environment in these situations. The main purpose of this work was to evaluate the emotional impact on the families of pregnant adolescents.

# **METHODOLOGY**

The research conducted is non-experimental, with a descriptive scope and a cross-sectional approach. It was based on the socio-critical paradigm since it arises from educational needs and is based on social criticism. This paradigm has a self-reflective nature, in which the intrinsic relationship between the individual and society is emphasized (Gómez, 2022). A mixed approach was adopted for the study.

The methods applied include:

• Analysis and synthesis, emphasizing the relevance of an adequate diagnosis to understand and improve the addressed problem.

• Induction-deduction, based on existing premises, to arrive at accurate conclusions.

• Historical-logical, used to analyze the antecedents related to the problem.

Surveys and interviews were used for data collection. A population composed of 20 families of pregnant adolescents in the rural community "El Níspero", belonging to the Santa Ana canton, was studied. Given the small size of the community, we worked with the entire population. The selection criteria focused on families with pregnant adolescents between 10 and 19 years of age, either at any stage of pregnancy or those who had given birth in the last three months. Those that did not fit these parameters were excluded to ensure an accurate assessment.

The main instrument was a collection form applied to an adult member of the adolescent's family who shared the same household. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: general data on the adolescent, an assessment based on the family Apgar (evaluating adaptation, participation, growth, affection and

resources) and, finally, questions focused on the family impact of adolescent pregnancy. Data interpretation was based on descriptive statistics, presenting results in tables with frequencies and percentages.

An interview was conducted with 10 family members of the adolescents. The responses were contrasted with experts in comprehensive family counselling, a family physician and a clinical psychologist. The findings of these interviews were later cross-checked with relevant and updated academic literature from reliable sources.

## **Results and discussion**

For a proper understanding of the present work, it is essential to establish conceptual definitions that serve as a pillar for the analysis of the variables under study. In this context, it is crucial to address the definition of "emotional impact". This term refers to the psychophysiological reactions that arise in an individual as part of his or her adaptive process in the face of a specific event (García, 2019). On the other hand, within the framework of Ecuador, teenage pregnancy is defined according to the "Intersectoral Policy for the Prevention of Pregnancy in Girls and Adolescents" (2018) as that gestation that occurs in women aged 10 to 19 years. Said policy distinguishes between "early adolescence" (10 to 14 years) and "late adolescence" (15 to 19 years).

In relation to the family members who responded to the form, it is noteworthy that the mother was the main representative, participating in 55% of the cases. The father was the next most frequent representative, with 20% of the responses. Together, the mother and father represented an overwhelming majority of the respondents, accounting for 75% of the respondents. It is notable that other relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings, had a significantly lower participation, with each registering a presence of less than 2%.

#### Table 1

General data on adolescent girls

|    | Percentage                            |
|----|---------------------------------------|
| 6  | 30                                    |
| 14 | 70                                    |
| 4  | 20                                    |
| 8  | 40                                    |
| 8  | 40                                    |
| 3  | 15                                    |
| 3  | 15                                    |
| 6  | 30                                    |
| 11 | 55                                    |
|    | 14<br>4<br>8<br>8<br>3<br>3<br>3<br>6 |

Table 1 shows that the majority of adolescent pregnancies occurred in the fifteen to nineteen age group, representing 70% of the total. In terms of educational level, both completed and incomplete high school were equally distributed, each comprising 40%. In addition, it was observed that in 55% of the cases, adolescent girls did not live with the father of their child. These results suggest a historical pattern in the behaviour of adolescent pregnancy, evidencing young women who do not establish a family unit after pregnancy and who, in many cases, drop out of school. The Ministry of Public Health (2018) notes, based on INEC data, that in Ecuador, 39.2% of women between 15 and 19 years of age have already initiated their sexual life. Interestingly, the degree of information these adolescents have about sexual and reproductive health increases as their educational level does, with the educational institution being the main source of such information. However, it is worrying to note that 67.7% of these young women did not use contraceptive methods during their first sexual intercourse and that 44.3% dropped out of school afterwards.

#### Table 2

Family organization

| Family structure     |      | Percentage |
|----------------------|------|------------|
|                      | n=20 |            |
| Nuclear family       | 6    | 30         |
| Single-parent family | 7    | 35         |

| Extended family Perception of socioeconomic level | 5 | 25 |
|---|---|----|
| Low   | 9 | 45 |
| Fair  | 7 | 35 |
| Good  | 4 | 20 |

Table 2 provides information on the family structure of the pregnant adolescents. According to these data, 35% of the families were singleparent, while 30% were nuclear. In relation to the perception of socioeconomic level, 45% of the respondents considered that they belonged to a low stratum and 35% to a regular stratum. These results find parallels in the research by Navarrete (2019), where it was identified that most families of pregnant adolescents were chaotic in structure, followed by single-parent and then nuclear. Similarly, the study by Bravo Saquicela *et al.* (2020), conducted with pregnant adolescents from the Santo Domingo Hospital in Ecuador, reflected that 75% of these young women belonged to a low social stratum.

#### Table 3

Family Functionality according to the Apgar scale

| Family functionality | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Normal               | 3         | 15         |
| Mild dysfunction     | 5         | 25         |
| Moderate dysfunction | 8         | 40         |
| Severe dysfunction   | 4         | 20         |
| Total                | 20        | 100        |

In relation to the evaluation of family functionality (Table 3), it was observed that 40% of the families presented moderate dysfunctionality. In contrast, in a study by Auquilla (2022), no statistically significant association was found between teenage pregnancy and family dysfunctionality. On this topic, Marín and Solís (2019) argue that the dynamics and functionality of the family environment directly influence the decisions that an adolescent girl makes. This family functionality is also related to the strategies that adolescent girls employ to

cope with complex situations that require support. Therefore, if the family system operates properly, it is feasible to reduce the stressful environment in such homes.

### Table 4

First emotion upon learning of teenage pregnancy

| Representative | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Joy            | 2         | 10         |
| Sadness        | 6         | 30         |
| Disappointment | 3         | 15         |
| Anger          | 4         | 20         |
| Concern        | 5         | 25         |
| Total          | 20        | 100        |

According to the data presented in Table 4, after learning the news of teenage pregnancy, the predominant emotions expressed by the families were sadness (30%) and concern.

(25%). A study conducted in Cúcuta by Cadrazco (2018) highlights that these emotions in the fa military of pregnant adolescents reflect an environment that could lead to

family disintegration or even abandonment of the home by the pregnant woman, given the negative connotation of sadness. The young pregnant woman, her characteristics and family circumstances are often factors that influence these emotional reactions. These feelings may intensify throughout the pregnancy, manifesting themselves even more negatively than when the news of the pregnancy was initially known.

#### Table 5

Family comments on learning of teenage pregnancy

| Comment  | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| If you are pregnant you must take responsibility     | 10        | 50         |
| You have to take care of yourself<br>as best you can | 4         | 20         |
| Your family will continue to support you             | 6         | 30         |
| Total  | 20        | 100        |

When exploring the family's initial reactions to the adolescent upon discovering the pregnancy, in 50% of the cases, it was suggested that "if she was pregnant, she should take responsibility". This response is consistent with the data previously presented on emotions, indicating that the reactions expressed do not necessarily reflect true emotions but are driven by the emotional tensions of the moment. In this context, social and educational constructs play a crucial role. Given the adolescent's age, her pregnancy is perceived as a mistake, leading many families to assume that if the young woman allowed the pregnancy, she should also be able to handle the consequences herself. This type of response reflects a social and cultural pressure that emphasizes individual responsibility, often marginalizing family and community support that could be essential in such circumstances (Silva & Abrão, 2020).

With respect to the impact on intrafamily relationships upon learning of teenage pregnancy, it was evident that 45% of respondents perceived a significant impact in this aspect. It is indisputable that an adolescent pregnancy introduces a source of destabilization both for the young woman in question and for her nuclear family. The shortcomings, whether physical, mental or social, derived from this situation can make interpersonal relationships more complex, generating disruptive behavioural patterns. These challenges can lead to drastic decisions, such

as dropping out of school, family estrangement, or even social isolation, triggering a rupture in the holistic well-being of the young woman and her family (Figueroa et al., 2020). The cohesion and quality of family relationships are crucial, as they constitute the main pillar of support for the adolescent during this transcendental period of her life. The way in which adolescents experience their motherhood is intrinsically linked to the quality of the relationships in their environment. This support network, or lack thereof, can influence fundamental decisions, including whether to continue or terminate the pregnancy.

Furthermore, with respect to behavioural changes within the family produced by the news of the pregnancy, 65% of the families surveyed stated that there was a notable change in intrafamily behaviour as a result of teenage pregnancy, as can be seen in Table 8. Vizcaino and Cusme Torres (2021) emphasize that these behavioural changes are closely linked to the psychosocial dynamics that can arise after the news of teenage pregnancy. The reaction of the young woman, her parents, her partner and the latter's family to the situation plays a determining role in how the pregnancy will develop and, therefore, the emotional and psychological well-being of the adolescent. It is important to note that the influence of the family in this context can be perceived as a source of conflict, a situation that frequently arises during adolescent pregnancy.

#### Table 6

Influence of the news of pregnancy on family communication

| Influence on communication   | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Communication is the same    | 6         | 30         |
| Communication has improved.  | 3         | 15         |
| There is less communication. | 11        | 55         |
| Total                        | 20        | 100        |

According to Table 6,55% of the study participants indicated that, after discovering teenage pregnancy in their family, there was a reduction in intrafamily communication. Fajardo *et al.* (2017) point out the importance of communication and affective relationships in the context of teenage pregnancy. In situations where the family acts as an appropriate role model, it is also reflected in effective and clear communication. This quality of communication is fundamental for developing maturity in the adolescent and plays a crucial role in the reaffirmation of gender roles. Communication, when simple, sincere and timely, strengthens family ties.

In other findings, according to the information gathered, 45% of the representatives stated that pregnant adolescents were sometimes discriminated against, while 20% stated that they were always discriminated against. Chávarry (2020) argues that teenage pregnancy is indicative of a significant cultural change at the global level, especially in relation to the age at which sexual life begins. The occurrence of pregnancy in this context is often the subject of judgment by society at large. As a result, it is common for the pregnant adolescent to experience isolation, both from a family and social perspective, due to the prevailing stigmatization that threatens her dignity. In addition to the impact of pregnancy itself, she faces other challenges, such as economic hardship, negative emotional experiences, abandonment by the family or partner and the emotional burden this entails.

In relation to the family perspective on the independence of pregnant adolescents, Table 11 shows that 55% of respondents stated that occasionally, the family contemplates the idea that the adolescent should become independent as a result of her pregnancy. Cedeño & Villafuerte (2021) point out an apparent contradiction in this attitude: while the family may reproach the adolescent for becoming pregnant, arguing that it is not the right age, paradoxically, under the influence of the emotions triggered by the situation, they may consider that the young woman should live alone and become independent. This contrasts with the initial perception of immaturity attributed to the adolescent, questioning her ability to face adversities on her own at this stage of her life.

Regarding how adolescent pregnancy affects the regular performance of academic and work activities, 35% of respondents indicated that this occurs constantly. Alonso-Muñiz (2018) has highlighted the depth of the repercussions that an adolescent pregnancy has on the lives of young women. Not only does it disrupt their roles as students, but it also has an impact on their emotional well-being, social context, and economic situation. Consequently, early pregnancy can limit the opportunities for these adolescents to develop to their full potential. If they drop out of the educational system, they face challenges in completing their formal education, which can subsequently complicate their insertion into the labour market. These difficulties expose them to a greater risk of falling into poverty, becoming involved in illicit activities or suffering social exclusion.

Regarding the perception of negative feelings on the part of the adolescent regarding her pregnancy, 60% of the cases indicate that such feelings do exist. Pregnancy during adolescence, together with the social challenges it entails, can trigger negative attitudes and emotions in the young woman. Often, these adolescents feel that they have lost their value, that their place in society has vanished, and that their opportunities for advancement have evaporated. They may experience feelings of guilt and sadness and sometimes be influenced by the opinions of their family (Urgilés León et al., 2018). This scenario underscores that the emotional impact felt by an adolescent girl comes not only from her environment but also from within herself. Thus, the role of parents is crucial, and their support and education are essential for the emotional and psychological well-being of the young woman.

Regarding the perception of the negative influence of pregnancy on the emotional development of the adolescent, the data in Table 14 show that 75% of the representatives believe that there is a significant influence in this aspect. A pregnancy during adolescence can lead to the young woman experiencing frustration and hopelessness. This challenging emotional state can upset her psychological balance and potentially trigger symptoms associated with disorders such as depression or anxiety. This impact is compounded by the fact that, in adolescence, individuals are in full search of their identity. With the arrival of an unexpected pregnancy, intense emotions such as guilt, fear, and insecurity may arise (Loredo-Abdalá et al., 2017).

Following interviews with the families of pregnant adolescents, a strong family nexus was observed, providing economic and emotional support during and after pregnancy. Specialists, including the family counsellor, clinical psychologist and physician, emphasize the importance of continuous support and guidance for the adolescent, given the emotional and physical alterations she may face during this period.

Often, families question and feel guilt about how an adolescent became pregnant. Experts agree that facing such situations can be stressful and can lead to a stage of denial before being able to adjust. Therefore, it is essential to offer counselling and family guidance. The physician also emphasized that family history can influence teenage pregnancy.

Parents feel that, despite the information available on sexual health, many adolescents do not consider it. This perception highlights the need for continued education and prevention on these issues in collaboration with families and schools. Finally, family members expressed a desire to participate in programs designed to prevent adolescent pregnancy and support those facing it.

## Conclusions

After a meticulous assessment of the emotional impact on the families of pregnant adolescents, the study revealed essential data on family and socioeconomic dynamics. Predominantly, mothers are the primary caregivers and advocates for these young women, whose most common age range is between 15 and 19 years. Most of these adolescents have completed or incomplete secondary education and are not in stable relationships with their partners. The predominance of single-parent family structures with a perceived low to average socioeconomic level is notable.

Adolescent pregnancy introduced significant dysfunctionality in the families, manifesting itself in expectations of independence and premature responsibility for the young woman. This situation triggered alterations in behaviour, interactions and family communication. It is worrisome to identify episodes of discrimination towards these young women; however, there is a family tendency to encourage the independence of these adolescents, although they also recognize the adverse impact of pregnancy on their academic and emotional lives.

These findings underscore the imperative need to persist in the investigation of this problem in a population that faces historical and deep-rooted challenges, both at the individual level and in their environment. Intervention and program development aimed at mitigating the impact of teenage pregnancy on families is crucial.

Given the depth and complexity of the repercussions that teenage pregnancy imposes on the family and personal fabric, it is essential to undertake a number of corrective and preventive measures. First and foremost, it is proposed that robust educational programs be instituted in schools and communities, focusing on sexual and reproductive health. These should be designed for both adolescents and their guardians, providing a framework for information and open dialogue. In addition, the creation of psychosocial support centres for pregnant adolescents and their families is imperative. These spaces, staffed by trained professionals, could be the cornerstone of adaptation and coping processes, helping to transcend the emotional and practical challenges of pregnancy in these young women. Finally, to fortify intrafamily ties and dynamics, the implementation of workshops and programs specifically oriented to this end is suggested, promoting assertive communication and mutual understanding.

# Contribution to scientific knowledge

This study, meticulous in its conception and execution, introduces a fresh and valuable perspective in the field of research on adolescent pregnancy. By offering a comprehensive analysis of the intertwining of family structures, emotional impact, and adolescent pregnancy, it significantly expands the existing body of literature in this area. Particularly revealing is the emphasis on the dynamics of single-parent families, a topic that, until now, had yet to be explored in such depth in relation to this issue.

# Limitations

Despite the thoroughness and rigour with which this study was carried out, it is vital to recognize some inherent limitations. The demographic specificity of the study may restrict the full generalizability of its findings to other regional or cultural contexts.

#### Author contributions

María Joaquina Mera Pico: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing: proofreading and editing

#### **Mónica Katherine Murillo Mora:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Research, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing: proofreading and editing

#### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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