THE TEENAGER'S EXPERIENCE OF THE TRANSITION TO FATHERHOOD:
A COMMUNITY HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

by

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ABSTRACT

In northern British Columbia, teenage pregnancy rates are high in comparison to other regions in the province. Approximately half of the babies born to teenage women are fathered by teenage men. Despite the attention given to teenage pregnancy by health care providers and policy makers, most of the attention is focused on the mother and her baby. Young fathers' experiences during transition to parenthood have been less well documented than those of mothers. The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative study was to gain insight into the experience of the transition to fatherhood from the perspective of teenage men. The goal of such research was to provide an understanding of those complex issues that are a part of this experience and their impact on the well-being of teenage fathers.

In-depth interviews were conducted in a small northern British Columbian community with seven fathers, whose babies were born when they were age 17-19 years. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a process of thematic analysis. The latter revealed that the experience of coping with the impact of challenges of fatherhood can be depicted by the metaphor “catching the curve-ball thrown into life”. In general, the fathers reported that they have caught “the ball” pretty well. All have adapted to the father role by discarding past destructive behaviors, and through a new motivation to work hard have begun to provide for their families. In spite of obstacles, most have developed a vision of the future, a definite life-direction and close relationships with their children. In terms of personal development, results indicated that the fathers experienced an increase in self-knowledge and respect, and improved skills in coping with anger, loneliness and lack of intimacy. As a result of catching the curve-ball, they discovered new capabilities as fathers and providers. Parents and friends were recognized for the key support that they provided, and their
on-going affirmation of these fathers in their new roles as parents was seen as vital to the success of early fathering. It is the willingness of these fathers to be responsible parents and remain involved in their children's lives, often against great odds, that needs to be captured and mobilized by policymakers and health care planners. Support services could be designed to capitalize on those positive attributes of young fathers, as well as responding to direct needs. In addition, policies and educational resources could incorporate positive images that affirm the importance of teenage men in the lives of their children. In the light of some unique findings of this study that relate to the social context of a remote northern community, it is important to produce programs and policies that reflect cultural and environmental differences.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Just becoming a father.....it was an interesting curve-ball thrown into my life and one that I think I caught pretty well. It’s helped me learn about myself and what I’m capable of doing. Watching this little person grow has been a great experience. (Liam)

Background Information

Teenage pregnancy is considered a significant social problem with important consequences to the health of the mother, father and child. Programs that have been initiated as a result of teenage pregnancy help young mothers and their infants by improving both immediate and long-range pregnancy outcome, but there has been little attention directed to understanding the needs of teenage fathers (Hardy & Duggan, 1988). Very little is known about teenage fathers and how premature fatherhood impacts on their lives (Elster & Lamb, 1986) and the lives of their children. Robinson (1988) suggests that programs that fail to reach out to young fathers not only ignore their emotional and educational needs but also overlook a significant support system for the mother and baby.

Teenage fathers need support and guidance rather than the denigration served by past stereotypes. The few outreach programs that exist for young fathers have already demonstrated that with encouragement, many males are keen to become competent, caring parents (Lehr, 1998; Robinson, 1988; Trapani, 1997). Teenage fathers are also eager to talk about their situations and willing to take responsibility for their children (Barret & Robinson, 1982). Lack of parenting skills and inappropriate expectations are similar for both first time teenage fathers as well as non-teenage fathers (Delight, Goodall, & Jones, 1991). Not only do teenage fathers have to cope with such stresses, but they are also struggling with the many psychological tasks of adolescence.
Educational and economic setbacks can be serious for teenage fathers (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997; Robinson, 1988; Trapani, 1997), and they frequently drop out of school and obtain poor jobs with low pay (Card & Wise, 1978; Kerkhoff & Parrow, 1979). If interventions are implemented to benefit these young men, they must be developed with a critical understanding of teenage fathers’ perceptions of their needs and problems and how these are linked to other facets of their lives. To facilitate such an understanding, health care planners must seek out teenage men in the communities where they live, encourage them to speak about their health and lives, and be genuinely committed to listening to what these young men have to say. Information may also be gathered on the influences of residential and geographical characteristics through this kind of endeavour.

It is difficult to estimate the numbers of teenage fathers in a community as there are no reliable demographic data available. Northern British Columbia perhaps has a higher proportion compared to the rest of the province when one considers that the provincial teen pregnancy rate for the Northern area is 60 pregnancies per 1,000 teenage girls, as much as three times higher than those of other regions (Provincial Health Officer’s Annual Report, 1995). An estimate of births to teenage girls in the States suggests that as high as 53% of the children born to these girls may have been fathered by teenage men (Sonenstein, 1986). This percentage may be used as a rough guide for estimation of the numbers of teenage fathers for British Columbia.

Statement of Problem and Purpose of Study

There is a lack of knowledge about the experience of transition to early fatherhood, for teenage fathers who live in isolated northern settings in British Columbia. It is possible that the teenage father has been a neglected parent in the stressful process of transition to parenthood.
This study describes the experience of transition to fatherhood from the perspective of the father himself. It illustrates how young fatherhood impacts on overall well-being and provides understanding of teenage fathers' definitions of themselves within their new families, peer groups, families of origin and society at large. In addition the study portrays the development of paternal attitudes to childrearing, coping mechanisms for transition to fatherhood, establishment of support networks of family and friends, and levels of local community support throughout the time of pregnancy and the first year of the child's life.

Research Question

The research question: "What are the experiences of teenagers who undergo the transition to fatherhood?" was used as an initial guide for the interviews with the teenage fathers selected for this study. With time, the question evolved to: "How does premature fatherhood impact on the life of a teenage father?" as the young men in the study not only described events, but in addition gave them meaning, related them to their overall quality of life, and explained how they dealt with them on both personal and practical levels.

Relevance of Study to Community Healthcare

Without knowing the specific issues of concern, well-meaning policy makers and program providers may fail to supply the support that is relevant to the needs of teenage fathers and their families. As a community health nurse who works in a remote northern British Columbian community, I am aware of the comprehensive support services made available to teenage mothers during the time of pregnancy and in the early years of their infants' lives. At the same time, I note that teenage fathers, although encouraged to use some of these same services, are not considered primary recipients of supportive care and education. Instead they tend to be regarded as support
persons for the mothers, with little recognition given to their own emotional needs, personal stresses and responsibilities. For instance, in the study community the teen parent group often allows fathers to participate only if the teen mothers agree on a particular session being made open to them. In speaking to colleagues in other small northern communities, I am told of similar lack of formal support services for young fathers.

As I began my inquiry concerning teenage fathers, I was astonished and yet intrigued that this unique group has been so ignored by health care providers and to a lesser extent by researchers, when fathers are such integral components of families and have as much right as others to optimum health care. Traditionally, social service agencies are more concerned with the young mother and child than the young father (Trapani, 1997), and it is this tradition that ensures the perpetuation of the status quo, making it difficult to change the system. As one young father in Trapani’s (1991) study noted:

You have to teach us and grow with us and guide us. If society wants to run away from us now, when it’s our turn to control things, what will happen? It’s like giving a baby a loaded gun. What do you expect a baby to do? If you don’t empower us, all you’re doing is hurting yourself in the long run (p. 52).

My own reasoning has led me to believe that it is the widely held stereotype of teenage men which is largely responsible for society’s treatment of young fathers as the “black sheep of the family”. While teenage mothers and their children deserve and use the supports that are already provided, it would appear highly advantageous if their partners also received assistance in adapting to their new roles as fathers.

The broad context of health behavior requires social, community and structural change as well as individual efforts and responsibility. Such change could serve to enhance the promotion of
optimum health for teenage fathers. Werner (1989) showed that triggers for the turnaround of high-risk teenage behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, dangerous driving and unprotected sexual activity have been found to include marriage, parenthood, employment, active participation in a group, and informal sources of support. It has therefore been of interest in this research project to hear how premature fatherhood has affected the participant fathers in terms of turnabout of high-risk behaviors as well as other risk factors and personal development.

In my role as community health nurse, I assist young parents in preparing for the birth of their infants and offer them support during the post-partum period. This support includes visiting their homes and assisting them to develop the necessary skills to care for their offspring. A number of the fathers are teenagers who are most willing to be fully active parents to their children. Some talk of their sadness in losing part of their adolescence, the struggle of finishing their education, the difficult task of finding a job, uneasy relationships with their partners' family and the lack of "hanging out" with their friends. Their responsibilities to people other than themselves, both financial and emotional, are often overwhelming.

A unique function of nursing is "...to nurture individuals experiencing critical periods in the life cycle so that they may develop and use a range of coping behaviors that permit them to reach optimal health" (Campbell, 1987, p. 28). It is therefore important in community health care practice to have as full an understanding of these experiences as possible, and hence deeper insights into the lives of teenage fathers. This understanding can only facilitate more sensitive health care planning for these individuals.

The environment for teenage fathers is often impoverished and "...erects barriers to knowledge and opportunity, leading to erosion of will to engage in a positive pursuit of health"
It is the difficult task of those who promote health to find creative ways to provide individuals and groups such as these fathers, with education and support that will effect changes in the environment and enhance coping mechanisms. As Trapani (1997) noted:

Communities have to start caring about the youth and kids. When you see positive things the youth can do, that’s important. When you help a youth, you’re not only affecting the youth. You have youth who are parents and you’re affecting their children too. It’s a domino effect (p. 54).

This current study is significant because it seeks to highlight the complex issues that are an inevitable part of teenage fathers’ lives, and it gives these young men a voice through which they can identify needs, both met and unmet. In addition it seeks to enhance awareness and understanding of the neglected teenage father’s health issues. Suggestions are made in Chapter 7 as to objectives for improving the health of teenage fathers who live in small communities in northern British Columbia. It is desirable that these suggestions will impact on future program development and at the very least, allow for a new sensitivity in healthcare to this population.

Qualitative methods for the description of the experience of teenage fathers’ transition to parenthood were chosen, to allow the fathers to speak for themselves and in this way, give the researcher new insights into their perspectives. In turn this will allow an understanding of their attitudes and behaviors, as well as key concerns with respect to health. This will also permit attention to be brought to their needs and the promotion of support for all new fathers.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of research studies conducted around the subject of teenage fathers. The review of literature regarding the lives of teenage fathers is presented by way of an initial description of the scope of the problem, an account of antecedents to teenage parenthood
and the characteristics of the fathers themselves, and the portrayal of commonly held stereotypes as compared to the reality of these fathers' situations. The development, psychological adjustment, and the overall emotional impact of becoming a teenage father are described, as are various programs and supports described in the literature. Chapter 3 describes my choice of methods, data collection and its analysis, and Ethical considerations. The themes and patterns that arose from the interviews with the teenage fathers are presented as results of the study in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 7 is a summary of key findings of this study. Links are made between these findings and past literature on teenage fathers, thus cross-validating research findings with reviews of previous research on teenage fathers and health promotion. In the light of corroboration of findings, ideas are proposed for adolescent parenting programs and support services which will be inclusive of fathers. Limitations of the study are described and implications of this study's results are discussed for future research and policy development.
CHAPTER 2
Review of Literature

Introduction

Like teenage mothers, teenage fathers appear to be very proud
of their offspring, one accomplishment in a sea of frustrations.


A review of the literature was conducted in order to identify current research findings
pertaining to the lives of teenage fathers. The information gained from this review will familiarize the
reader with knowledge about this population and place the research question in the context of the
literature. Traditionally teenage fathers have received little attention from social scientists, health care
providers and policy makers (Joshi & Battle, 1990). Studies as recent as that of Trapani (1997)
mentioned the paucity of information around teenage fatherhood, and how past research had focused
primarily on mothers when it came to adolescent parenting involvement (Adams, Pittman & O’Brien,
1993; Christmon, 1990a; Robinson & Barret, 1987). It is particularly striking that most studies have
been conducted in the USA, with few in Canada. As for small isolated northern British Columbian
communities, there seems to be an absence of research on the lives of teenage fathers.

Over the past decade, most studies have gleaned information from large quantitative surveys
as opposed to qualitative studies that employed the implementation of questionnaires and/or interview
techniques (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Chalmers & Meyers, 1996; Hendricks 1988; Lehr, 1998;
Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). Studies in the 1980’s in the USA either involved a limited number of paid
volunteer adolescent fathers (Caparulo & London, 1981; Earls & Siegel, 1980; Hendricks &
Montgomery, 1983; Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1984), an approach subject to sample bias, or attempted to extrapolate to fathers based on information obtained from teenage mothers (Berland, 1987; Robinson & Barret, 1987). Adams, Pittman and O’Brien (1993), in their book on the politics of pregnancy, mentioned that since it was not always known or proven if a man was the father of a child, national surveys have tended to focus on young women’s answers to questions on fertility, reproduction and parenting, as opposed to those of young men.

Berland (1987) established a young father’s support group that included seven teenage fathers. He found a major difficulty in learning about their experiences, needs, concerns and successes, was that they were often hard to locate. Robinson (1988a) also noted that research with teenage fathers has been hampered by major difficulties in studying this group, and Earls and Siegel (1980) in their study on precocious fathers, concurred with this. Since researchers have often located their subjects indirectly through female partners, I question the true inaccessability of teenage fathers. It may be that they would respond more readily if personal invitations were extended. Smith (1984) suggested that non-randomized selection of unrepresentative samples is a common shortcoming of methods used in gathering data about this population.

In spite of barriers in searching out teenage fathers, those who are identified and interviewed are often eager to talk about their situations (Barret & Robinson, 1982b; Lehr, 1998; Trapani, 1997). Greif (1995) pointed out that the recent focus of research had been directed to the experiences of young fathers who had obtained custody of their children, as opposed to those of non-custodial young fathers.

The literature and information that exists about teenage fathers can be further examined in terms of the following categories: scope of the problem; antecedents; myths versus reality; situational
factors; development and psychological adjustments; emotional impact; programs/support for teenage fathers.

**Scope of the Problem**

Approximately 500,000 adolescents become fathers every year in the U.S.A (Trapani, 1997), and a conservative estimate of 40,000 adolescents become fathers each year in Canada (Berland, 1987). In British Columbia alone, about 5,600 teenage women become pregnant each year (Provincial Health Officer, 1995). According to Sonenstein (1986), 53% of infants born to teenage girls in the USA have fathers who are 20 years of age or younger and therefore it can be estimated that as high as half of the children born to teenage women in Canada may be fathered by teenage men. Allen and Doherty (1996) pointed out that precise estimates of adolescent fathers were often difficult to attain due to failure to indicate a father’s name on the birth certificate and because some fathers did not know that they were fathers. What has been discovered is that a great many young men have lives which have been prematurely affected by the responsibility of becoming a parent, with an estimate of 1 in every 20 adolescent boys, with his partner, being responsible for a teen pregnancy (Elster & Panzarine, 1983). The British Columbian Provincial Health Officer (1995) reported that in northern British Columbia teen pregnancy rates were found to be two to three times higher than that of other regions of the province which might suggest that teenage paternity rates are higher as well. Aboriginal youth between 15 and 19 years were found to have a fertility rate of more than four times that of the non-Aboriginal community, and in northern British Columbia where there is a large Aboriginal population compared to other areas of the province, this may be particularly relevant (Health Canada, 1995). British Columbia’s Centre for Disease Control (1995) estimated that 95% of these teenage pregnancies were unintended.
Adams, Pittman, and O'Brien (1993) pointed out that in the 1990's fewer teens were choosing to marry than in the previous decade, and pregnancy did not necessarily change this. The low rate of marriage between teenage parents was not viewed as problematic to teenagers themselves. Furthermore, Adams et al. (1993) recognized that marriage was not a guarantee of a stable home life and responsible parenting, and noted that the divorce rate was high in the adolescent age groups. Personal biases of health professionals may lead to ineffective counselling, and the fact that pregnant teens do not choose to marry needs to be respected by those professionals involved with teenage fathers. It is of note that Berland (1987), in his study on support groups for young fathers, reported that marriage did not appear to be an indicator of whether or not the adolescent father would remain involved in his child’s life.

**Antecedents**

Antecedents to teenage fatherhood are well-documented in the literature pertaining to teenage fathers. There are a great number of studies that have looked at the relationships between many different antecedents and teenage fatherhood, but certain ones stand out as being more common predictors of fatherhood than others. While causal relationships between these antecedents and teenage fatherhood have not been established, many studies nevertheless demonstrate considerable strengths of association. The latter pertain to positive correlations between teenage fatherhood and drug and alcohol misuse, poverty and poor educational levels, and poor knowledge and cultural influences around contraceptive use. Culture appears to play a large part in teenage fathering and it is well-documented that cultural acceptance of teen pregnancy as a normative experience in the family as well as non-acceptance of contraceptive use are strong predictors for teenage fatherhood. Antecedents of birth order, family size and the fact that a teenager’s mother was also a teenage parent
are mentioned as having a correlation with teenage fatherhood but are not as strongly represented as other antecedents.

A developmental explanation of premature fatherhood is also given in much of the literature pertaining to teenage fathers. This developmental antecedent is described as “personal fable thinking”, an egocentric and unrealistic view of the world that can lead a young person to believe that he is immune from the natural consequences of his actions and that his feelings are unique (Elkind, 1967; Sonenstein, 1986).

As regards drug and alcohol use, Christman and Luckey (1994) suggested that impulsivity and risk taking that included the use of drugs and alcohol, were associated with an increased incidence of teenage fatherhood. Their study confirmed that young fathers have a higher frequency of alcohol, marijuana and other drug use than non-fathers, and it was suggested that programs developed for young fathers must deal with drug and alcohol misuse. Sonenstein (1986) indicated in her discussion on sex and contraception among adolescent males that sex among young people was largely irregular, unplanned and often associated with drug and alcohol misuse. It was suggested that teenage fatherhood resulted from a combination of lack of contraceptive use and poor judgement around use possibly resulting from drug and alcohol misuse. What remains unclear in the literature on drug and alcohol misuse is whether teenage fathers change their patterns of use when they have children.

The antecedents of culture of poverty and limited opportunities for education and employment, were positively correlated with teenage fatherhood (Castiglia, 1990; Hardy & Duggan, 1988). Trapani (1997) in her book designed to give teenage fathers a voice, highlighted low levels of educational attainment and poverty as key risk factors for fatherhood. Dearden and Hale (1992)
also examined educational antecedents of teenage fatherhood and concurred with Trapani's assessment of these antecedents but added that lack of interest in sons' education by their parents, negative assessment of boys' academic abilities by teachers and boys' own desires to terminate education as early as possible were also strong predictors of teenage fatherhood. Though low educational attainment and poverty were described as antecedents to teenage fatherhood, there was inadequate explanation on how these antecedents related to teenage fatherhood. It is difficult to decipher if it is the direct affect of these factors or some other unexplained related event that leads to fatherhood. Other confounding variables such as lack of knowledge about contraceptives and reproductive physiology, were not controlled in the studies that were examined.

Barret and Robinson (1982b) found that teenage fatherhood was partly due to a neglect of use of contraceptives but also to lack of information on matters of sexuality, reproduction and contraception. Often teenage fathers become sexually active at a young age but have poor knowledge around contraceptive use with the end result being an unplanned pregnancy (Robinson & Barret, 1987). Zabin, Kanker and Zelnik (1979) analyzed the risk of adolescent pregnancy in the first months of intercourse and suggested that the risk of pregnancy in the early months of intercourse was greater for those who began sexual involvement in early adolescence. It can be suggested that lack of knowledge around contraception and reproduction may be more significant for those in their early teens than those in their late teens. While sex education and birth control classes are shown to increase knowledge, they do not change attitudes and values (Castiglia, 1990; Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1984). Studies suggest that teens may not necessarily need more information rather that the effect of sociocultural attitudes on their values needs more attention.

Barret and Robinson (1982b) found that adolescent fatherhood was influenced by cultural
differences. For instance, Finkel and Finkel (1983) pointed out that White male teens were more inclined to use condoms than either Black or Hispanic teens. Robinson (1988a) recounted that European teenagers were found to be as sexually active as American youth, and yet the former were more likely to use contraceptives than their counterparts. Less than 1 in 20 adolescent females in England and 1 in 30 in Sweden get pregnant compared to 1 in 10 in the U.S.A. (Meyer & Russell, 1986). This dramatic difference strongly suggests that cultural differences in the use of contraceptives are directly related to the incidence of pregnancy.

Cultural acceptance of teenage pregnancy where it is commonplace, accepted and perceived to be of little disruption to the families of teenage fathers is a well-noted antecedent to teenage fatherhood (Robinson & Barret, 1987). Cultural attitudes towards sexual behavior, passed from one generation to another, are also correlated with teenage fatherhood (Robinson, 1988a). Christmon (1990) discovered that a significant number of teenage fathers were sons of teenage mothers, which added support to the theory of cultural norms. Rivara, Sweeney and Henderson (1984) stressed the high level of acceptance of teenage pregnancy within the Black teenage father’s family, and suggested that about 75% of mothers of teenage fathers were themselves teenage parents. Generally teenage fathers also were found to have a greater acceptance of children born out of wedlock with more liberal attitudes towards abortions in comparison to their contemporaries who were non-fathers (Redmond, 1985). This general acceptance of teenage pregnancy in certain cultures, led me to question the depiction of teenage fatherhood as a negative experience so often suggested by other studies. Have researchers only looked for problems when other positive elements might exist?

Teenage fathers often described their surprise at fathering a child in the words: “I never really thought it would happen” (Robinson, 1988b), a statement that strongly suggests a developmental
explanation of the cause of an unplanned pregnancy in terms of personal fable thinking. It is worth noting that most unplanned pregnancies are likely to elicit this type of reaction due to a belief that the individual has some sort of non-realistic protection from those normal consequences of sexual intercourse.

Those antecedents to teenage pregnancy of drug and alcohol misuse, low educational attainment and poverty, cultural norms and ‘personal fable’ thinking are not easily changed. However, the knowledge of such does allow for relevant future long-term policy making and program development. During examination of the literature pertaining to antecedents to teenage fatherhood, questions arose around the apparent lack of contraceptive use by American youth. It is also important to recognize that there may be many antecedents to teenage fatherhood related to female behavior that are overlooked in the descriptions of teenage fathers.

Myth versus Reality

Kiselica, Stroud, Stroud and Rotzien (1992), in an article, “Counselling the Forgotten Client: The Teen Father”, critiqued stereotypes and highlighted problems experienced by teenage fathers. They commented on the unfair stereotypes of teenage fathers that have devalued their role in the parenting of children. Miller (1997) explored factors related to teenage parental involvement and demonstrated that teenagers were still portrayed negatively, in spite of new knowledge about the lives of teenage fathers. Robinson (1988b), in his study on teenage pregnancy from a father’s perspective, mentioned five common myths used to describe teenage fathers: that they are worldly wise and knowledgeable about sexuality; lack inner controls and have a need to prove their masculinity; feel psychologically inadequate; that they have a casual relationship with the mother and few emotions about pregnancy, and that they are absent and rarely involved in the support and rearing of children.
The common stereotype held by society that young men are not willing to be involved with the mothers and children rides on another myth, that teenage pregnancy is only a problem for young women (Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1986).

In examining literature on teenage fatherhood, all the myths mentioned were dismissed and the reality of a young father’s behavior was presented. Myths around teenage fathers being worldly wise and knowledgeable, and exploiting helpless teenage females were debunked, and Barret and Robinson (1982a) suggested that today’s fathers were not knowledgeable about sex and sexuality as portrayed by the stereotypes suggested, but knew little more than their partners when it came to such matters. On a scale of sexual permissiveness attitudes, adolescent fathers were no more permissive than the general population of adolescent males (Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1986).

Sonenstein (1986) highlighted another myth about teenage fathers, that of their apparent lack of inner control and need to prove masculinity as a result of feelings of psychological inadequacy. She stated that teenage fathers were not the promiscuous opportunists that the stereotypical image portrayed. Redmond (1985) found in her research on the attitudes of 74 adolescent males towards adolescent pregnancy and fatherhood, that unlike the popular myth, most adolescent fathers did not think that causing a pregnancy demonstrated manhood or increased self-image among peers.

In regards to having a casual relationship with the mother of the child and few emotions about pregnancy, these two points are not the case in reality and many young fathers are not only willing but eager to be a supportive partner and participate in the birth and child care responsibilities (Panzarine & Elster, 1983; Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1986; Robinson, 1988; Stengel, 1985). They persist in their endeavours in spite of the fact that they may not have finished school or have an income and may still be struggling with unresolved emotional issues related to adolescence (Trapani,
1997). A common situation is that of an adolescent couple struggling to define and understand their own relationship while in the midst of a tempest created by a new baby and the extended families (Barret & Robinson, 1982b). Questions remain unanswered in the literature around how a young father perceives his success in handling stressful situations and how he views his priorities. Education is usually the first sacrifice to be made for financial necessity, although some adolescent fathers manage to juggle both work and school (Barret & Robinson, 1982b). Many young fathers manage to maintain intimate feelings toward teenage mothers and their babies and contribute financial support (Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1986). The reviewed literature did not present a picture of casual relationships, and the young fathers described should be commended for their commitment to their new families. It became apparent to the reader that this extraordinary struggle to remain supportive has been largely unaddressed by research. Questions that address lifestyle change, sacrifices made, personal development of the individual and coping techniques used, remain unanswered.

The myth that teenage fathers are often absent and rarely involved in the support and rearing of children was not supported by Robinson (1988a) in his book on teenage fathers. He suggested that many teenage men have not deliberately abandoned their children but have attempted to maintain involvement in the child-rearing process. Since Trapani (1997) pointed out that 60% of all children born in the U.S.A. in the 1990's would grow up in poverty, and often in homes without fathers, what then happens in those early years that result in the separation of a teenage father from his child? Huey (1987) shed light on this question through the development of the “Maximizing a Life Experience” program, designed to help teenage fathers understand their emotional as well as legal rights and responsibilities. His study of eight participant teenage fathers suggested that most young fathers wanted to be responsible for their children and partners but were confused and anxious due to the
burden of multiple stressors. He reported that these stressors, along with situational and developmental factors, often led to the subsequent lack of involvement of the young father. There were certain factors, such as the degree of bonding with the infant and amount of family support, that distinguished those who adapted favorably to teenage parenting from those who did not, and there were some compromises inherent in this adaptation.

Huey (1987) also reported that there was a misbelief held among professionals that teenage fathers did not recognize their own need for assistance. Barret and Robinson (1982b) suggested that not only did these types of myths need to be dismissed, but professionals needed to reflect on their own attitudes towards teenage fathers. The reality is that in the past social service providers have often treated teenage fathers as outcasts and the legal system has also taken a negative view, insisting on child support despite unemployment (Sander & Rosen, 1987). In short, the adolescent father remains an “invisible factor”, forgotten or excluded by health care and the legal system, and receives little attention because others assume that he is irresponsible.

It became apparent in the literature that teenage fathers do not have a political voice through which to share the realities of their situations. The absence of studies that allow teenage fathers to “tell it as it is” is striking. A few authors have made a start in allowing young men to speak for themselves. Trapani (1997) gave young fathers a voice in her book “Reality Check”, where they shared their experiences of being teenage fathers, and Lehr (1998) allowed non-custodial fathers to speak out about their dreams and disappointments and those issues that mattered most to young fathers. Allen and Doherty (1995) integrated objective and subjective aspects of young fatherhood in their study on the self-perceived responsibilities of fatherhood, and revealed that relatively positive self-perceptions and high paternal involvement were observed in young fathers. A sense of paternal
commitment was extrapolated from this study and young fathers described that the experience of fatherhood had changed them in some inexplicably positive way. There are few qualitative descriptive studies such as the latter that describe the reality of premature fatherhood and send a message to society that is loud and clear. How are young fathers coping with multiple responsibilities and developmental tasks? How does parenthood impact on their lives and what are the positive outcomes, if any, that result from becoming a teenage parent?

**Situational factors**

Certain situational factors to do with teenage fathers as opposed to adult fathers stood out in the literature. These centered around compromising living arrangements, financial hardships, difficulties with relationships with mothers of their children and issues to do with child involvement. There are no comparative studies that point out the influence, if any, of different geographical locations and environmental differences on the lives of teenage fathers.

**Living Arrangements**

Marsiglio and Cohan (1997) made the point that living arrangements and accompanying family pressures that affect teenage fathers tend to be different from those of older fathers. Adult fathers are more able than their teenage counterparts to materially support their children and usually live in independent dwellings with their new families. Pressures from family and friends, often associated with cramped, compromised living arrangements, compound already stressful life situations for young fathers (Castiglia, 1990). For instance, Hendricks (1984) highlighted the stressors of being told how to raise a child and prepare for the child’s future. The fact that a teenage father may not be living with his child does not preclude him from providing direct benefits such as food and clothing as well as the indirect benefits of emotional and economic support to the mother (Allen & Doherty, 1996;
Trapani, 1997). Rivara, Sweeney and Henderson (1986) found that mothers coped better if they had strong social support systems and fathers played important roles in these support systems. There may be an assumption that a young man who does not live with his family has deserted them, but according to Rivara, Sweeney and Henderson (1986) reasons for not living with the mother range from the father being in school to the fact that the girl’s parents are against it. In addition Robinson (1988) noted that it was common for the father’s family to be involved with their grandchild and to provide some sort of financial contribution toward care of the child.

In a book on unplanned parenthood, Furstenberg (1976) made an interesting observation concerning successful adaptive behaviors of some young fathers. He reported that a significant number of fathers established a stable live-in relationship with their children only after having been residentially separated from the mothers and children for a couple of years for the purposes of completing education and/or securing regular employment. Despite living in separate residences teenage fathers remain involved in their children’s lives and temporary physical separation does not necessarily jeopardize the father-child relationship or diminish the impact the father can have on his child’s development at a later date (Parke, Power & Fisher, 1980).

Financial Hardship

Financial obligations often initially restrict many young fathers from pursuing educational and career goals as they struggle to support their families through low paid, unskilled employment (Furstenberg, 1976; Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997; Maynard, 1997). This struggle to provide for a family and finish an education was a common theme found throughout the literature. On a positive note, Pirog-Good (1996) conducted a longitudinal study of 6,403 adolescent fathers on educational and labor attainments by drawing on national survey data from 1979-1988. Long-term earnings-deficits
of teenage fathers disappeared over time, and it was found that teenage fathers were as capable of providing for their children as were other young men from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds. The review of literature led to little other evidence of such comparable findings and further studies in this area are suggested. Most studies actually revealed that males who were at least 20 years of age when they had children generally had more education, higher incomes and fewer children than their teenage counterparts (Panzarine & Elster, 1982; Stengel, 1985).

Finding employment for teenage fathers can be difficult when equipped with limited education and few skills, and often a young father will not become involved with his family because he is unable to support them economically (Trapani, 1997). Lamb and Elster (1986) also discussed those factors that distinguished those individuals and families who have adapted favorably to teenage parenting from those who have not. They suggested that employment might have been a contributing factor in as much as employed teenage fathers were more likely to participate in family life.

**Relationship Difficulties With the Mother of the Child**

Allen and Doherty (1996) found that relationship difficulties with the mothers of their children were common for teenage fathers, and suggested that a strained relationship with the child’s mother frequently became an obstacle to meeting paternal aspirations. This in turn might have led to a lack of ability in being able to access the child. Difficulties in the teenage father’s relationship with the child’s mother and not being able to see the child often enough were cited in a number of studies (Adams, Pittman & O’Brien, 1993; Panzarine & Elster, 1983; Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1986; Robinson, 1988, Trapani, 1997). It is also noted that relationship difficulties affect both partners’ abilities to deal with both sets of parents and other relatives (Huey, 1991). Since 60% of all children born in the U.S.A. in the 1990’s are predicted to grow up in poverty and often in homes without
fathers (Trapani, 1997), it is reasonable to assume that these fathers may have abandoned their children. It is not clear in the literature what degree of effort these young men have made in order to remain involved in their children’s lives as caring, responsible parents.

**Involvement With the Child**

There are various points of view put forward around issues concerning teenage fathers lack of involvement with their children, but it is significant that most fathers who have been interviewed in research studies speak of a desire to stay in touch with their children throughout their lives, and want their children to know them (Barret & Robinson, 1982; Trapani, 1997). Data supports the fact that teenage fathers do not initially abandon their children but are eager to remain involved (Robinson, 1988a). There are some “gray areas” around what factors actually lead to eventual lack of involvement but in a recent study by Rhein et al (1997) on teen father participation in childrearing, a young father’s financial insecurity and/or confusion about childcare were put forward as possible answers. This study was unusual in that it employed teenage assistants for interviewing purposes. This in turn encouraged teen parent participation in focus group discussion and resulted in the gathering of rich data for subsequent analysis.

Relationship difficulties with the mother of the child have been shown to affect the father’s ability to remain involved with the child, and Kruk (1993) mentioned that it was often the custodial mother who discouraged contact with the child in a variety of ways, including denial of access, not having the child ready or available for a visit, changing arrangements at the last minute, criticizing the father to the child and outright refusal to allow visitations. Reasons for young mothers’ obstructive behaviors were not alluded to in literature that solely focused on teenage fathers, but it has to be recognized that mothers may have some justified concerns about visitations in terms of their own or
children’s safety. Lehr (1998) described the experiences of non-custodial fathers and took an indepth look at difficulties of young fathers who had tried to remain involved with their children. His insights into the lives of separated fathers highlighted a father’s inability to access his child as opposed to lack of desire and responsibility when it comes to being part of a child’s life. It was noted by Marsiglia and Cohan (1997) that some young fathers were unable to follow through with their desire to be responsible because of past poor behavioral records. These records pertained to poor job references and/or criminal records, and indirectly led to lack of finances through unemployment. Financial insecurity impacts negatively on the relationship with the mother of the child, the father’s self-esteem and coping skills, which in turn affects his ability to remain involved in the life of his child (Marsiglia & Cohan, 1997).

Hendricks (1984) suggested another reason for teenage father lack of involvement that focused on lack of parenting skills. Teenage fathers have also been found to have unrealistic and inappropriate expectations of child development which can lead them to impatience and intolerance with their children (Robinson, 1988). Castiglia (1990) suggested that limited knowledge about child development, coupled with impatience, could lead to child abuse. This sort of inappropriate involvement of an adolescent father with his child may also negatively affect the child’s cognitive and social development in pre-school years (Joshi & Battle, 1990).

Certain psychological factors were highlighted in the literature due to their profound effects on teenage father involvement (or lack of involvement) with his new family. These included self-image, role-expectation, feelings of competence, and a father’s own experience of childrearing in his family of origin. Self-image and role expectations are thought to influence the degree of parental responsibility felt by a young father. If a teenage father is unable to fulfill any strong convictions he
has around responsibility, he will be driven away from his child (Allen & Doherty, 1996). Trapani (1997) found that a young father might not become involved as a parent if he was seen by other family members and friends as unable to support the mother and child. Furthermore, Robinson and Barret (1982b) suggested that society tended to seek the father out only to secure financial payments but did not allow his rights and legitimate decision-making in his child’s life. As a result of being unable to make these payments, he might struggle to fulfill his own role expectations as a father and experience a lowering of self-esteem. Continued involvement with the child tends to be both related to feelings of competence as a father as well as the ability to pay support and to access the child (Allen & Doherty, 1996; DeLuccie, 1996; Tepp, 1983). In an early paper by Rogers (1968), on the significance of self-regarding attitudes and perceptions, it was cited that a father’s self-perception was significant and if he saw himself as a failure, behaviors manifested might be consistent with this image. Joshi and Battle (1990) found that young fathers considered they had the right to nurture their children and this was not being recognized by society. Researchers such as Pannor (1971) discussed the negative attitudes of society, and how general lack of public conviction that adolescent fathers have an important role has been an ongoing difficulty for teenage fathers. According to Trapani (1997), attitudes in the 1990’s have demonstrated little change.

DeLuccie (1996) pointed out that a father’s own experience of childrearing was another important predictor in his involvement with his child. If meanings emerge through social interactions, it makes sense that the adolescent father’s perception of fatherhood will be influenced by observing childbearing and childrearing in his own family of origin (Allen & Doherty, 1996). Krymko-Bleton (1988) related that young men commonly indicated that they would be good to their own children in the fashion that their own fathers were to them, or conversely would correct their own poor
childhood experiences as they wanted their children to have what they did not receive. A report by Sander and Rosen (1987) showed that teenage fathers wanted to be better fathers than their own were to them but were not always able to carry through with their ideals.

Teenage fathers have to contend with a combination of situational stressors that all impact on each other. Stressful living circumstances, relationship struggles with partners and difficulties related to involvement with their children all have to be worked at under the umbrella of financial hardship. A few studies have indicated that although teenage fathers tend to become less involved with their children over time, they initially struggle to remain active, responsible parents and certainly have a desire to be a part of their children’s lives. There is a paucity of information on factors that help a father remain involved and the type of support that he may find useful. It is clear that stressful situational factors are not yet addressed by educational, social or healthcare systems, and that society and individuals do not truly understand how young fathers cope with their overwhelming situations.

**Developmental and Psychological Adjustments**

Adolescence marks a time of rapid change in all aspects of a young person’s personality, and has been commonly described as a transitional period of life (Balk, 1995; Corbett & Meyer, 1987; Dusek, 1991; Manaster, 1989; Muus, 1988). Not only does a teenage father cope with parenting stresses but he also struggles with the psychological tasks of adolescence, especially that of trying to form his own adult male identity (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). Tiller (1995) contributed evidence to the fact that adolescent developmental characteristics, such as separation struggles, egocentrism and cognitive developmental stages, all complicate the already difficult process of transition to early parenthood. When early parenthood occurs simultaneously with adolescence, the potential for problems with both processes is amplified (Sadler & Catrone, 1983).
WHO defined adolescence at its 1976 conference on adolescent pregnancy as a period when the individual progresses from the point of the initial appearance of secondary sex characteristics to that of sexual maturity, the individual’s psychological process and patterns of identification develop from those of a child to those of an adult, a transition is made from the state of total socioeconomic dependence to one of relative independence. In addition to this description of moving from childhood to adulthood, Corbett and Meyer (1987) noted that the state of adulthood and accompanying responsibilities were normally accepted as defined by one’s own society or culture.

**Identity Formation**

Erikson (1968) referred to adolescence as a period when identity is established and there is an attempt to eliminate conflicting and confusing issues associated with it. Establishment of an identity means that the young person has the ability to see himself as an individual separate from others, yet is capable of seeing himself in relation to others in the broad social system (Balk, 1995; Dusek, 1991; Johnson, 1986). Young (1988) described how many teenage men had yet to develop their own identities and were still engaged in struggles around separation from their own parents at the time of transition to fatherhood. The adolescent father faces his own developmental dilemmas as he attempts to manage his own separation issues, his relationship with his child, and the maintenance of his relationship with the child’s mother (Allen & Doherty, 1996). Robinson (1988) described the premature transition to fatherhood as a period of psychological conflict over the simultaneous roles of father and adolescent, and Corbett and Meyer (1987) mentioned in their book that there is a belief that the occurrence of pregnancy during the period of transition to adulthood may significantly alter the success of this transition and disrupt the normal formation of adult identity. There were no findings in the literature that suggested that premature fatherhood might actually
enhance transition to adulthood. According to Erikson (1968), the psychosocial stage of identity versus identity diffusion is usually followed by the stage of intimacy versus isolation and the crisis of premature fatherhood may well affect the process of resolution of these core conflicts in either unfavorable or favorable ways.

Achievement of a vocation and a place in society are tasks of maturation that Bennett (1982) described in his paper on worldwide problems in the delivery of adolescent health care. These achievements naturally follow the development of an appropriate degree of independence and a secure identity. It would be of interest to know if this natural development is interrupted or accelerated for a teenager who becomes a father.

Separation Struggles

Hendricks (1982), in his analysis of three select populations of black, unmarried, adolescent fathers, discovered that most teenage fathers did not perceive themselves as being fully ready either prenatally or postnatally for fatherhood. It is especially difficult for the teenager to exchange the child role for that of an adult role if he is placed in a dependent role such as having to rely on parents for finances, accomodation and other support (Robinson, 1988a).

Balk (1995) mentioned that risk-taking was a normal behavior used by adolescents to develop independent decision-making skills. Unfortunately the consequences of this method of establishing independence for teenage men and women may be an unwanted pregnancy (Elkind, 1967). Smoking, alcohol and drug use, dangerous driving, promiscuity and some sexual behaviors can all be part of this same risk-taking behavior. Teenagers also may use drugs and alcohol as a method of coping with stressful circumstances, including transition to fatherhood and early childrearing (Balk, 1995).
Egocentrism

Elkind (1967) and others broadly defined adolescent egocentrism as heightened self-consciousness. When an adolescent gains the ability to coordinate perspectives of the self in relation to others and the broader social system, he comes to realize that the self can be part of the background, and self-consciousness and the personal fable of viewing one’s own thoughts as unique and special, decline (Elkind, 1967). The imaginary audience form of adolescent egocentrism reflects a failure to distinguish between an adolescent’s own thoughts and the thoughts of others. As adolescents mature to adulthood, self-focused concerns usually lessen but for some adolescents it is hypothesized that transition stress on entering a new period of life can produce a temporary increase in self-consciousness (Jaffe, 1998). There was no indication in the literature as to how transition to premature fatherhood affects this process and this leads to the following question: “Does taking on the role of a parent help or hinder the adolescent as he matures through the period of egocentrism?”

Finding a place in society with accompanying sense of belonging is also a task usually achieved during the period of adolescence and it would also be of interest to find out how young fathers manage this process.

On a more general note about adolescent developmental processes there are other aspects that may influence how young fathers cope with their new roles. Hendricks (1984) suggested that problems in solving interpersonal difficulties, especially with the child’s mother, might be related to social cognitive immaturity, normal adolescent self-centeredness or an inability to plan for the future. It was further suggested that teenage fathers were found to be similar to their non-father peers in self-image, personality adjustment, coping style, and other psychological factors (Robinson, 1988a). Educational and economic setbacks are serious for most teenage fathers and cause great anxiety but
are rarely severe enough to cause different psychological characterizations from their non-father peers (Earls & Siegel, 1980; Robinson & Barret, 1982b).

According to Krymko-Bleton (1988), the resolution of the crisis of pregnancy and childbirth for any young man is dependent on the perceived and actual support he has from society as well as his own psychological maturity. Perceived support was not documented in the research material and it is critical for future researchers to find out from young fathers how they view support from society, friends and family. Not only have teenage fathers generally not completed their maturation to adulthood at the time of pregnancy, but society does not reach out to these teenagers in terms of recognition and support of them as prospective, responsible young fathers (Robinson, 1988a).

**Emotional Impact**

According to the literature, teenage fathers express a variety of emotions over their state of premature fatherhood. These include feelings of confidence and pride in being a father, love and commitment to the new family, as well as feelings of anxiety, abandonment, isolation, powerlessness, anger and sadness.

Allen and Doherty (1996) found that young fathers talked of feelings of confidence about the future as opposed to doubts about their past, and believed their experience of early fatherhood had changed them in some inexplicable positive ways. For some, having a child was the start of a more positive attitude to life and in the words of one father: “It straightened me out a bit” (Lehr, 1998). In studies where teenage fathers spoke for themselves, feelings of pride in being fathers and what their children said to them gave them immense pleasure and pride (Allen & Doherty, 1996).

Hendricks and Montgomery (1983) suggested that it was common for a teenage father to perceive his relationship with a young mother to be one of love, and to express that together they had
an interest in their child’s future. Freeman (1988) wrote that many teenage fathers spoke of strong commitment to the relationship with a partner but still might have difficulties in parenting. Westney, Jackson Cole and Munford (1986) also reported that a high percentage of teenage fathers expressed commitment to the relationship with the child’s mother, but added a note of caution, pointing out that this might not be sustained during the post-birth years.

Young fathers experience much anxiety over the combined responsibilities of finance, education, employment, relationships with their partners and parenting (Elster & Panzarine, 1983; Hendricks, 1980; Rivara, Sweeney & Henderson, 1986). Lehr (1998) found that young fathers experienced much stress and turmoil in their lives and that they needed to relax more. Buchanan and Robbins (1990) pointed out that perhaps most stressful of all was being an absent father as role expectations were not clearly defined, leaving the teenager with a sense of uncertainty and confusion. Heath and McKenry (1995) found men who had fathered during adolescence had greater rates of depression than men who had fathered as adults. However, studies generally showed that adolescent fathers were psychologically normal, and that depression and emotional conflicts were quite normal responses to the stress of premature fatherhood (Earls & Siegel, 1980; Robinson & Barret, 1982b). According to Castiglia (1990) and Robinson (1988) depression did not lead these fathers to abandon their partners.

Some young fathers worry particularly about the role conflict of being an adolescent and a responsible father at the same time and they speak of being nervous and afraid. In the words of one young teenage father: “I’ve thought about it a lot and it scares me. Hell, I’ll admit it. I’m not a full grown man and I never pretend to be. I’m still, well, a child in a sense....I’ll love the baby, but I’m not sure I’ll know how to teach it and guide it” (Panzarine & Elster, 1982, p. 119).
Miller (1987) described teenage fathers' feelings of abandonment and isolation from non-father peers, and community agencies that had left them unsupported and unaffirmed in their father roles. Some reported that “Facing life in general was stressful” (Freeman, 1988, p. 39), and Trapani (1997) pointed out that young men often found themselves paralyzed as to what to do about their situations. Feelings of guilt, powerlessness and sometimes bravado were reported, and this was of importance as regards the possible negative consequences for both parents and children (Miller, 1987).

According to Bolton and Belsky (1986), teenage fathers might have difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse, be personally violent and have difficulty in controlling their tempers due to feelings of overwhelming helplessness in being unable to fully contribute to their children’s lives. Lehr (1998) pointed out that young non-custodial fathers’ predominant expression of emotion could come through as anger and that this was often quite freely expressed. Anger was a problem that was recognized by the fathers and they realized that this needed to be kept in check. In particular, breakup with partners commonly led to frustration, anger and perceived helplessness towards the justice system and ex-partners (Lehr, 1998). It was also reported that relationship problems with an ex-partner often led to difficulty in accessing the child and diminished feelings of competency as a father, with accompanying feelings of sadness, helplessness and low self-esteem (Tepp, 1983; Trapani, 1997). Barret and Robinson (1986) mentioned that being excluded increased a young father’s sense of alienation as well as frustration and denied him the opportunity to make decisions.

Teenage fathers experience a host of emotions and feelings as a result of premature fatherhood (Huey, 1987). Whether these emotions are of confidence and pride, love and commitment, anxiety, abandonment, isolation, powerlessness, anger or sadness, it is recognized that
young men need to express these feelings and related concerns, and receive emotional support in return. Evidence of emotional support was scanty in the literature, and the reader is left asking: “Who does support young fathers?”

Programs/Support for Teenage Fathers

Although teenage fathers, as well as teenage mothers, face overwhelming odds against success in parenting, childrearing and marital relationships, there was general agreement in research studies that they have been largely overlooked in service delivery practices (Huey, 1987; Robinson, 1988). Programs that fail to reach out to young fathers not only ignore their emotional and educational needs but also overlook a potentially significant support system for the mother and baby. Results of studies suggested that “...an adolescent father’s involvement in his partner’s pregnancy, increased the young mother’s sense of confidence in her nurturing skills, heightened her sense of security after delivery and raised the father’s self-esteem” (Sander & Rosen, 1987, p. 107). Kiselica and Sturmer (1993) used data from 149 agencies for the purpose of examining the current availability of services for teenage fathers and found that fathers had largely been overlooked in service delivery. In addition they extrapolated those mixed messages that were given by society to teenage fathers. In light of similar mixed messages, Berland (1987) posed the important question: “What do we, as a society, expect of a teenage father?”

The literature reviewed on programs and other support for teenage fathers included material pertaining to the role of outreach programs, negative portrayals, types of assistance requested by teenage fathers, support groups, family assistance, peer support and sensitive delivery of services.

Role of Outreach Programs

Among researchers, Kiselica et. al. (1992) argue that if interventions to improve health are
to benefit young fathers, they must be developed with a critical understanding of the teenage fathers’ perceptions of their health needs and problems, and how these concerns are linked to other facets of their lives. The needs of young men must not only be properly assessed but programs must be culturally sensitive (Christman, 1990; Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). It is of particular importance that programs include an element that deals with drug and alcohol use (Christman & Luckey, 1994).

Kiselica and Murphy (1994) suggested that not only was relationship counselling important but it was critical that teenage fathers had assistance with housing, education and job training in order to be able to meet the needs of their families. They also need help in recognizing and understanding their emotional and legal rights and how to use available resources (Huey, 1987). Castiglia (1990) found that there was a need to try and establish hope for the future, since so many teenagers had a pessimistic outlook, lived in poor circumstances and adopted inappropriate coping techniques. She also indicated that the level of economic and practical support from parents was an essential consideration. Robinson (1988a) was not alone in pointing out that once involved in support programs, most teenage fathers were keen to become competent caring parents.

**Negative Portrayals and Biases**

Robinson (1988a) found that before programs and support services for teenage fathers could be implemented, healthcare practitioners needed to examine their own sex biases against young fathers as these biases might well prevent effective inclusion of fathers in all aspects of service delivery. Furthermore, young fathers themselves have indicated that the media has to stop portraying negative images of teenage fathers and recognize that young men have many positive attributes (Trapani, 1997). It will be a difficult job for health professionals to provide formalized support programs if society is not convinced that teenage fathers can make positive contributions in the lives
Lehr (1998) found that separated fathers often talked of feelings of frustration with the judicial system, and had much frustration, anger and helplessness over issues to do with custody, access and maintenance payments. In addition, they demonstrated a lack of confidence that courts would decide in their favor, and believed that they possessed fewer rights than the mother of the child. This apparent bias in the legal system and lack of knowledge were issues that young fathers wanted addressed. Services provided could assist teenagers in their understanding of the legal system, the rights that they possess, and offer them support in dealing with their emotions.

Types of Assistance Requested

Kiselica et al. (1992) found that teenage fathers desired relationship counselling, assistance with housing and employment, job training and education, instruction in childcare and financial planning, healthcare for their children, and emotional support regarding their sudden loss of freedom and those ambivalent feelings regarding fatherhood. Lack of transportation to attend service agencies (McGee, 1982), and fear of being judged negatively (Hendricks, 1988), were voiced as obstacles to accessing help. In the USA, teenage fathers themselves recognized that mentoring programs, men’s rites of passage programs and Operation Fatherhood Centres were effective in providing positive male role models (Trapani, 1997).

Social Support

A two year national research project in the States that was launched in 1983, “The Teen Collaboration Project” resulted in the availability of new information about support services for fathers. Sander and Rosen (1987) described results of this project, revealing that young men had difficulty coming into social programs on their own and that recruitment had to be aggressive through
active outreach on an initial one on one basis. As a result of the Teen Collaboration Project, there was a rise in teenage fathers seeking help, demonstrating that they did not want to neglect parental responsibility and were anxious to search out support (Sander & Rosen, 1987). Other studies in the USA provided good information on select groups of teenage fathers who had attended particular programs, but these results were often not generalizable (Adams, Pittman, & O’Brien, 1993).

Unfortunately in the 1990's there is still a lack of effective intervention programs for teenage fathers (Castiglia, 1990; Chalmers & Meyer, 1996; Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). Castiglia (1990) reported that she was concerned that programs poorly named with titles such as “Teenage Father Programs”, did not attract young fathers. She suggested more innovative titles such as: “The ABC’s of dating” or “Young Men’s Sexuality Awareness Program”. According to Adams et al (1993), there is a need to establish a more comprehensive model of support service delivery to the teenage father population.

Many young fathers rely on long term assistance from their families and will stay involved if they have support (Adams, 1983; Trapani, 1997). Some families are supportive of young fathers and may facilitate patterns of paternal involvement whilst discouraging others (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997). Allen-Meares (1984) noted that resentment and lack of support from parents could prolong the teenage pregnancy crisis and ultimately harm the baby.

Most teenage fathers have identified being close to their own mothers and going to them for advice and support (Hendricks, 1980). Christmon (1996) studied the involvement of paternal mothers with their grandchildren in teenage parenting. In his report on a study of 44 adolescent, unwed, fathers, he noted that an overwhelming majority of paternal mothers were involved in the lives of their teenage sons and grandchildren. He identified that this involvement could have a positive
impact on adolescent parents and their children, and that there was certainly a link between time involved with grandchildren and forthcoming financial assistance. The availability of a paternal mother as a part of the young father's support system might enable him to cope with the negative consequences of early parenthood. There was a gap in information around this latter issue, and I would suggest that further research regarding the support role played by paternal mothers might provide a clearer picture to healthcare providers and policy makers as they provide and plan services for teenage fathers.

Robinson (1988a) reported that the average teenage father got little support from his peers at the time of pregnancy. According to Hendricks (1980), it is actually the teenage father himself who eventually rejects his peers as a possible source of social support, and then turns to his family of origin for support. It is of note that fatherhood behavior involves a natural separation from the single peer group with more time being spent with married peers, which in turn reduces the stress of loss of old friends (Panzarine & Elster, 1983). Robinson (1988b) drew attention to the fact that many adolescent fathers reported ending partying and drinking as they changed friendships. It was probably this change in lifestyle from the party days of youth to a time now occupied by the responsibilities of a father, that mainly accounted for different choices in friends.

**Sensitive Delivery of Services**

Adams (1983) commented that it was the skills and sensitivity with which any resource was administered that determined its effectiveness. Nickel (1988) also discussed the need for sensitive delivery of programs by professionals. He commented that young fathers often have to overcome high emotional barriers in their attitudes towards caregiving functions, and questioned that the best way to prepare a young man for fatherhood was through prenatal classes. He suggested that a better
approach might have been to offer a training course, tailored to meet the father’s specific unique needs. According to Westney, Jackson Cole and Munford (1988) even when included and encouraged, adolescent males were reluctant to attend prenatal classes.

Lehr (1988) found through personal experience in working with young non-custodial fathers that an informal approach in outreach programs worked well, and that it was beneficial for young men to share their experiences with other young men. There was not enough information in the literature from teenage fathers themselves about what program format young men would like to see provided by professionals in order for facilitation of a smooth transition to fatherhood.

In an ideal context, programs should serve fathers’ needs and advance children’s well-being at the same time. Marsiglio and Cohan (1997) emphasized that if legal efforts were made to increase fathers’ involvement with their children, there had to be sensitivity to the fact that a father’s influence on his child’s development might only be positive if the father had a stable relationship with the child’s mother. Kiselica and Murphy (1994) suggested that society must also recognize that it cannot demand that teenage fathers become responsible parents without providing them with the understanding and guidance needed to assist them through the crisis of premature fatherhood.

The demands of transition to adulthood and parenthood can result in needs being unmet, and hamper efforts to become good responsible parents (Adams, Pittman & O’Brien, 1993). Hardy and Duggan (1988) reported that disadvantages associated with being a teenage father were clear cut, those such as an incomplete education, lack of a job and finances, and overwhelming responsibilities to others at a time of working through the tasks of adolescence. They cautioned that the struggles of adolescent parenting often resulted in a loss of human potential and economic and social costs that were dearly paid for by society. This comment was echoed by Maynard (1997) in his book, “Kids
having kids: Economic costs and social consequences of pregnancy. Since examination of the literature revealed that society has been negatively affected by the plight of adolescent fathers, surely it is to its advantage to provide them with the support that they identify as being of assistance in their efforts to act responsibly.

Summary

The review of the literature exploring the lives of teenage fathers has been helpful in providing background information regarding the unique facets of this population, as well as differences and similarities that these teenage fathers have to their non-father peers. It is apparent that culture, level of parental and societal support and other variables play important roles when assessing the needs of young fathers. Certain commonalities were identified in the literature when it came to living arrangements, financial hardship and low educational attainment, relationship difficulties, and issues to do with involvement with the child.

In addition to demonstrating significant research findings, the literature review served to highlight gaps in current knowledge about young fathers. These gaps were most significant in the area of the understanding of the experience of premature fatherhood and its meaning to young men, each a unique individual living within his own particular environment and community. More studies are needed in many different settings in Canada where unique conditions may impact heavily on this experience. The literature contained many statements of broad generalizations about teenage fatherhood that might not be applicable to all teenage father populations who inhabit varied community settings. There are gaps in our understanding of whether or not premature fatherhood is always a negative event or if it can have positive implications. It remains unclear how fatherhood affects the natural maturation processes of a teenage man, or if drug and alcohol abuse is of
significance after the birth of a child. There was little discussion in the research around positive coping techniques employed by young fathers and of their change in attitudes at the time of transition to fatherhood. How do young fathers define themselves within peer groups, families of origin and society at large?

As a health care provider I am especially interested to know what needs a prospective teenage father wishes to have addressed, those areas that he feels sensitive about, and the sort of approach he would find agreeable in the delivery of support/health care. There was not enough information in the literature to allow for these insights, information that is needed for the appropriate designing of programs.

The difficulties of young fathers and poor societal attitudes have been well documented but it is still not known how these fathers feel about the challenges of fatherhood and if they see these difficulties in the same light as society. In short, what are different young men’s feelings about the experience of fatherhood, and the impact it has had on their lifestyle and personal development, including the way that they have coped? Society is attentive to teenage mothers and the babies of teenage fathers but does it neglect those fathers who are struggling with their own needs and issues at a time when they are not yet considered adults? These young men lack a political voice, but there are a few researchers that include Lehr (1998) and Trapani (1997), who have made a start in putting young fathers “on the map” by giving them the opportunity to share their stories.

It is with the knowledge gained through this review concerning the lives of teenage fathers and the gaps identified, that I am able to place my findings in an appropriate context and recognize some common themes and new perspectives related by the young fathers in this study.
CHAPTER 3

Research Design

This research project provides insight into the attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of teenage fathers through the stories they tell of their experiences. A descriptive qualitative method aims to portray accurately the characteristics of a particular situation or group where there is a paucity of information available. This method was therefore felt to be an appropriate choice for a study concerned with the experience of premature fatherhood for a small group of teenagers who live in a remote northern community in British Columbia. A qualitative descriptive approach is favorable in research that pertains to people’s adaptation to critical life experiences, such as the transitions through adolescence and premature fatherhood (Polit & Hungler, 1995).

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research emphasizes the dynamic, holistic and individual aspects of human experience and hopes to capture those aspects in their entirety within the context of those who are experiencing them (Polit & Hungler, 1995). The aim of the researcher is to get close to the teenage fathers under study in order to understand their situation from their perspective (Polit & Hungler, 1995).

Qualitative research leans towards a concept that involves a deeper understanding of behaviors in terms of their interpretive meaning to the person concerned (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Weber (1968) suggests that the uniqueness of each person’s cultural experience can only be interpreted and conveyed to others by that person himself. Premature fatherhood is a cultural event for a teenage father and it is only through hearing his account of this experience that its true meaning might be understood by others.
If health promotion activities are to be directed towards the development of resources that maintain or enhance the well-being of an individual (Pender, 1987), it is important to gain insight into that individual's perception of any barriers to such, and the meaning that this carries.

In describing the effect of premature fatherhood on general well-being through a qualitative approach, it is possible to examine the data within the broad concept of health. Health involves the totality of human experience and all people are affected by certain basic conditions such as having fundamental needs met, being valued and treated with respect. Having a sense of control over their lives, participating in the decisions that affect their lives, feeling empowered, and receiving the support of family and friends are often identified by youths as fundamental to their health and overall well-being (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 1995).

The qualitative approach typically implies an emphasis on induction, generally using an interpretive/cognitive framework of analysis that involves field methods such as interviewing and/or participant observation (Palys, 1992). The phenomenon of interest, premature fatherhood, was researched by inductive methods in order to gain a better understanding of the life of a teenage father.

**Methodology**

**Selection and Recruitment of Participants**

The seven participants had fathered children in the years of 1994, 1995 and 1996 and were selected from a population of teenage fathers living in a northern community in British Columbia. Young fathers were selected from a single community in order to limit the number of geographical variables. By using this method of selection, the specific fatherhood experience of those in a remote isolated community would be accurately portrayed.

The young fathers selected were not all in their teens at the time of the study (see Table 1),
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym of father</th>
<th>Ross</th>
<th>Kevin</th>
<th>Brian</th>
<th>Neil</th>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Alex</th>
<th>Liam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym of mother of child</td>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Ann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym of child</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of father at birth</td>
<td>19 yrs</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>18 yrs</td>
<td>18 yrs</td>
<td>18 yrs</td>
<td>18 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of mother at birth</td>
<td>18 yrs</td>
<td>16 yrs</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>17 yrs</td>
<td>21 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father age at interview</td>
<td>22 yrs</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
<td>19 yrs</td>
<td>22 yrs</td>
<td>22 yrs</td>
<td>22 yrs</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1st Nations</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Slavic</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to mother</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>common-law</td>
<td>common-law</td>
<td>friendship</td>
<td>common-law/separated</td>
<td>common-law/separated</td>
<td>friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of child at time of interview</td>
<td>3 ½ yrs</td>
<td>1 ½ yrs</td>
<td>2 yrs</td>
<td>2 ½ yrs</td>
<td>2 ½ yrs</td>
<td>4 yrs</td>
<td>1 ½ yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangements</td>
<td>own home</td>
<td>own home</td>
<td>Sheila's parental home</td>
<td>parental home</td>
<td>parental home</td>
<td>parental home</td>
<td>parental home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custody of child</td>
<td>shared</td>
<td>shared</td>
<td>shared</td>
<td>shared</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>attending college</td>
<td>incomplete high school</td>
<td>incomplete high school</td>
<td>attending college</td>
<td>attending college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment at interview</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>student</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>full-time</td>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>part-time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
but met the criteria for inclusion in this research project by having been teenagers during the first year of their children’s lives. The period of childbirth chosen for selection of participants allowed the most recent teenage fathers in the community to be involved in the study. In choosing this group, poor recall of feelings and events at the time of pregnancy and during the child’s first year were minimized. A letter of request to access public health records was sent to the health unit head office in the community where the participants lived and permission to recruit participants through obtaining names, addresses and phone numbers from health records was granted (see Appendix A).

Purposive non-probability sampling was used to select the teenage fathers. This type of sampling does not aim at representativeness, as young fathers were chosen because they met a certain set of criteria for inclusion in the study (Palys, 1992). This purposive choice reflected my understanding of the phenomenon of interest and I was conscious that this might indirectly re-affirm rather than challenge that understanding. It was important to remain clear about the inherent limitations of this understanding. My theoretical position held at the beginning of my research came out of my experiences as a community health nurse with a teenage population that included teenage fathers, along with my readings of existing research and literature and my own preliminary observations (Mason, 1996). The total population of known teenage fathers was small, and calculated to be 25 in the period of January 1994 to January 1997. Each participant was chosen because he met certain criteria for inclusion in the study (Morse, 1986, p. 146), which were as follows:

1. He was a teenager at the time of birth of his first child and during the first year of the child’s life.
2. He was able and willing to honestly and openly speak to the experience identified in the research question.

3. He lived in a certain small northern community for the total duration of the experience of transition to fatherhood and the first year of his child’s life.

4. He was nineteen years of age or older at the time of the interview.

The fourth criteria was added so that parental permission did not have to be obtained and hence the young father was free to make his own independent choices around participation. The participants remained anonymous, and total confidentiality and protection of privacy could be assured.

Permission was obtained from the local health unit to recruit participants through the use of health records, along with the study approval from the University of Northern British Columbia’s Research Ethics Review Board. The teenage fathers were selected at random from the pool of 25 names with the intention of typically representing this already select population of teenage fathers. It was only possible to choose those fathers who had identified themselves as teenage fathers and hence the population was already not representative of all teenage fathers. It is only to those identified fathers, who are “still on the scene”, that society, families and healthcare providers are able to direct their attention and provide appropriate support.

All prospective interviewees are not created equal and “some are incredibly informative and others talk for hours and say nothing....” (Morse, 1986, p. 147). Since I had never talked with these participant young men before, it was not likely that interviewees who were most likely to be informative and open to this type of study would be purposively selected. A total of seven was identified as this was as large a group as the constraints of an in depth study and time allowed, and a reasonable percentage of the small population of 25 teenage fathers.
Since the purpose of this project was to study the phenomenon of teenage fatherhood experience intensively rather than extensively, the sample of seven participants was considered adequate to capture a full range of themes that might emerge in relation to the phenomenon of interest (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Judgement in assessing the representativeness of the sample chosen was exercised based on experience with this population and a thorough literature review. Since three of the fathers drawn at random declined to be part of the study, a further three names were drawn to make up the numbers. Since all fathers finally drawn were open to this type of study and seemed likely to be informative, it was felt that the data would be representative of the chosen northern community’s teenage father experience. The profile of the study population demonstrated a good cross-section of personal characteristics and diversity in their collective experience of teenage fatherhood and personal backgrounds (see Table 1). The profile for each teenager includes his age during the child’s first year, ethnic group, marital status, custody status, education level and employment status. It also lists the pseudonyms that were given to each teenage father, child and mother in order to maintain anonymity.

Each teenage father was recruited by an initial phone call, and followed up by a letter of invitation that explained the study and requested participation. The potential participants were given a full description of the proposed study so that fully informed consent might be obtained from those who chose to participate in the research project.

**Information and Data Gathering, and Ethical Considerations**

In depth interviewing was the data collection technique of choice. This type of interviewing has often been described as “a conversation with purpose” (Kahn & Cannell, 1957). In this study, a few general topics (see Table 2) were explored to help uncover the participant’s meaning
Table 2

**Interview Questions**

1. What changes in your life can you describe that relate to becoming a father?
2. How have you coped with the task of becoming an adult at the same time as becoming a parent?
3. What experiences as a teenage father have been positive for you?
4. What experiences as a teenage father have been stressful for you?
5. How have you managed your education, finding a job and financial situation?
6. What is your experience of the attitudes of your partner, friends, family and society since becoming a father?
7. What issues pertaining to childbirth and childrearing would you have liked to have been more informed about before the birth of your child?
8. What would have made life easier for you during your partner’s pregnancy, at the birth of your child and in the year that followed?
9. What has been your experience with welfare, community support and health services?
10. How were you involved with your child in the first year of his/her life?
perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) but otherwise the participant was allowed to frame and structure the responses. The social phenomena of interest unfolded in the way that the participant father viewed it. A practice interview was undertaken with one participant in order to get a sense of the general topics of relevance to a teenage father. As this interview went particularly well, generating rich data on the experience of fatherhood, he was included as one of the seven participants. The literature review and my own experience with teenage fathers gave further direction as to the type of subject matter that would be included in the questions.

The interviews explored the following issues with the young fathers: their attitude to childbirth and childrearing; the changes and consequences that fatherhood had thrust upon them and how they had coped with this transition; their perception of support from the local community and welfare system; their relationships with partners, families and friends; personal support systems; level of knowledge concerning sex, sexuality, and reproductive physiology; involvement with childcare; their management of education, finances, employment and living arrangements; and their relationship with the child. An important issue that was explored was that of the individual’s simultaneous roles of being a parent and an adolescent. Another aspect of the lives of these young men that was discussed was that of their methods of dealing with the emotions of anger, anxiety, depression and loneliness. These had resulted largely from worry about financial responsibilities, lack of education, turbulent relationships with partners, changes in friendships, difficulty in accessing the child as well as the general stresses involved with parenting.

Each teenage father was given some options concerning the time and place for the interview. Without exception each chose the privacy of a private office (in the health unit), and all but one preferred to meet in the evening when he could guarantee that he was not needed to look after his
child. The primary task of the interviewer was to put the respondent at ease so that he felt comfortable in expressing his honest opinions (Polit & Hungler, 1995). This was achieved by the informality of the interview, ensured privacy and by the interviewer making an effort to remain unbiased and accepting of all shared information. Interview questions were open-ended and only used as a guide to ensure that certain topics were addressed. Neutral probes were used from time to time in order to encourage a more complete response.

The participants knew that other teenage fathers were participating in the study but in order to protect confidentiality, no names were given, and interviews were held individually on different days over the course of a month. Each father was interviewed for approximately one hour at one face to face interview and partners were not included or made aware of the study by myself. The interview began with a discussion on informed consent, a topic that I made sure was well-addressed. Consent forms (see Appendix B for copy of form used) were signed in duplicate, with one copy for the participant and the other for the researcher. The form described the objectives of the project, my professional status and affiliation with the University of Northern British Columbia, the time commitment required from each participant, his rights with respect to participation or withdrawal from the study, and an assurance of complete confidentiality and anonymity. The latter would ensure that identities would never be revealed in any aspect of the research project. The importance of the participant’s right to withdraw from the study at any time and of the researcher’s adherence to confidentiality, privacy and anonymity were emphasized. Permission to tape the interview was also included in the written consent.

The participants were provided with contact information for any questions that might arise and they were also invited to ask questions about any aspect of the methodology and purpose of the
study. A discussion around issues to do with informed consent moved quickly in all cases and I was reassured that the participants were eager to be part of this study and have an opportunity to put teenage fathers “on the map”.

Confidentiality was maintained by several mechanisms. All names and identifying features were removed from the tapes and transcripts. The audio tapes and written transcripts were kept in locked files in an office in my home. The tapes will be destroyed after two years have passed since the recording sessions. A coding system, only available to the researcher, identified each participant and his family. Pseudonyms masked the names of all participants, along with other people and places that are mentioned. A special point was made to not talk about the research project and the teenage father participants except in discussion with my committee for the purpose of reporting on my progress. In addition, I confirmed that I had not worked with any of the participants in my role as a health professional and thus ensured that this study did not pose as a threat to any client/nurse relationship.

Each teenage father agreed to his interview being audiotaped, something that did not prove to inhibit the flow of conversation. Indeed the data that evolved was prolific, meaningful and relevant. Field notes were jotted down during the course of each interview in order to record observations, interpretations and nuances in a more or less reflexive manner (Mason, 1996). I also wrote my impressions and feelings about different aspects of the interview that would include the emotions exhibited by the participant, hesitations and any other clues that would help with the later analysis of the data.

Fully informed signed consent having been received, the interviews all began with a “warm up” session where I spent time seeking general demographic information (see Table 1). This
preliminary informal discussion gave the teenage father and interviewer a chance to “break the ice” and ease into the exploration of a few more general topics, those that would help uncover the participant’s meaning perspective, but also permitted him to frame and structure the response. The interview continued with general enquiries such as: “What changes in your life can you describe that relate to becoming a father?”, a question that the teenage fathers managed to answer with ease. This sort of open-ended question gave them an opportunity to provide an overview of their current circumstances and reflect on the time of transition to fatherhood.

Questions were asked in a similar order but the structure of the interviews was kept informal, and allowed a flexibility in the asking of questions on the part of the interviewer. Face to face data generating methods such as qualitative interviewing and observation can involve the development of interpersonal relationships between researcher and researched which are characterized by a high degree of trust and confidence (Finch, 1984). Each teenage father was also encouraged to ask questions which helped establish trust and rapport. As a result of the informality of the interview, I was treated more as a confidant than a “detached” professional, and as a result, I gained access to considerable data that may not otherwise have been shared (Mason, 1996). Each interview had a relaxed atmosphere and the teenage fathers were able to be open with their feelings and opinions around the topic of interest, premature fatherhood. This was helpful and allowed them to share information that sometimes did not “put them in a good light”.

Data Analysis

The analytic strategy chosen for this study was content analysis and “data on communication was used to identify patterns and common themes” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 98) relating to the experiences of teenage fathers. “In applying a technique for making inferences by objectively and
systematically identifying specific characteristics of messages" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 98) descriptive information was elicited. Analysis of the data was ongoing throughout the study, information continually being created that benefited future interviews through adjustment of my assumptions and expectations. The transcribed interview material and the researcher’s field notes were the raw material used for content analysis.

The transcribed interviews (with field notes) and the audiotapes themselves were reviewed and listened to several times, allowing patterns and themes to emerge. Quotes were noted that supported a theme. Commonalities among the experiences shared by the teenage fathers led to specific themes that were identified and the natural variation in data was also noted (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Minimal interpretation of the data was used since the participants themselves provided their own interpretation of their experiences.

In order to code the content of the data, a category system was developed upon the reading of the first transcribed interview. As subsequent categories in following interviews emerged, adjustments were made. Highlighters and colored pens were used to identify key words, representative stories and thematic quotes. Data were coded in the margins of the printed narrative materials and the coded excerpts then cut out and filed according to the topic covered in the coding scheme (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Subcategories reflecting narrow topic areas within the major categories were identified, coded and filed in a similar fashion (Polit & Hungler, 1995). Data collection and data analysis using inductive logic, where theory was generated and tested, occurred simultaneously and... “categories elicited from the data were constantly compared with data obtained earlier in the data collection so that commonalities and variations could be determined” (Polit & Hungler, 1995, p. 531). Themes were descriptively presented in the results of the study by identifying
common patterns, along with quotes that supported each of them.

Each teenage father was sent a copy of the original drafts of the analysis of the data (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), and two weeks later, received a short phone call interview. This follow-up action gave the fathers an opportunity to read through the analyzed data, point out any misinterpretations of their stories, and to add comments that they believed would give further insight into the experience of fatherhood and its impact on their lives. All of the fathers expressed feeling comfortable with the information presented and were excited that their collective voice would be heard by others. There were no negative comments or requests to delete data.

Data Quality/Rigor: Limitations and Strengths

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), four criteria can be used for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In this research project, credibility was enhanced by debriefing with peers and experts (namely members of my thesis committee and those who work with teenage men), and validating with participants to provide an external check on the inquiry process (Polit & Hungler, 1995). By having used faithful descriptions of teenage fathers’ perspectives, other teenage fathers of similar perspectives will be able to recognize those descriptions.

Transferability of findings from the data of this research project to other teenage father populations is made possible by providing a clear description of this specific group of teenage fathers in the study, such that consumers of my research report will be able to evaluate the applicability of the data to other contexts.

Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by use of an audit trail, the systematic collection of data and documentation that left a “decision trail” for conclusions, that in turn can be
followed and validated by an independent external researcher.

An additional procedure that was used in the gathering and analysis of data to ensure data quality was that of written analytic memoranda, to examine my emotions, biases and conflicts. This additional data was also reviewed by peers and experts, a process that encouraged me to remain objective.

It was not the intention of the study to provide broad universal generalizations about the teenage fatherhood experience but rather to allow for the unique experiences of teenage fathers living in a remote northern community to be heard and understood. The validity of the study will be further enhanced if other teenage fathers in similar communities are able to recognize these descriptions, though it is possible that the population of teenage fathers in the community of study, were not representative of those of other communities. The culture and environment of each remote northern community might also affect teenage fathers’ experiences in unique ways.

There were several other limitations to the methods chosen for this research project, which included the decision to interview the teenage fathers in private settings away from their homes. As a result these young men were never observed in interaction with their children, something that might otherwise have generated some additional data of interest. On the other hand, in my selection of one on one private interviews, the participants were able to speak freely about their lives without partners or family members inhibiting the topic areas chosen, and without interruptions from the demands of children. These advantages ensured the willingness of the teenage fathers to participate. The sample of seven young fathers was small, as was the total population pool of an estimated total of 25 teenage fathers over a three year span. This latter limitation of the study remains an important area of consideration in the reporting of my findings, but as a qualitative researcher I was interested in
studying the phenomenon of interest intensively as opposed to extensively.

One strength of the design of this qualitative research project was its ability to enable participants to speak for themselves about their experiences and feelings. As a result, a large amount of rich detailed material was generated by means of the in-depth interview process.

My research targeted a specific population of youth in a small northern community in British Columbia and elucidated some key issues concerning unique needs, attitudes and experiences. It can be argued that there are many subcultures within the general youth population and in addressing health needs of youth, each of these different subcultures has to be assessed separately. The context of these subcultures is also of importance in an assessment, when a specific group’s basic needs have to be met within the social and economic environments in which they live, play and work (Ministry of Health, 1995). This research project addresses a gap in information on how a teenage father in a small northern community experiences fatherhood and how this impacts on his life and well-being. The project also contributes to research on youth populations in remote, non-urban northern communities, where there are groups who have different demographics, situational experiences and environmental influences than their peer groups in more populated urban centres.
CHAPTER 4

Transition to Teenage Fatherhood: "The Wake-up Call"

Introduction

Sometimes we didn’t know what we’re doing....right? We just didn’t know. I think we were just too young but I always needed to wake up and so that was good. (Kevin)

The seven participants spoke openly about their individual experiences of transition to premature fatherhood and their stories make up the basis of the discussion in the next three chapters. The account in this chapter gives an overview of the experience of that transition and allows the reader insight into the very texture of these teenagers’ lives. In Chapter 5, I will describe those challenges that the teenage fathers experience as central issues in their day to day existence, and the importance of these specific challenges in shaping their lives will be further discussed in Chapter 6. Field notes written at the time of the interviews, enrich the information described.

As an introduction to the participants, each is named by a pseudonym and a brief description is given of specific background information relating his current situation. In keeping with the criteria for participation in the study, all the young men were teenagers for the first year of the child’s life. During the time of pregnancy and child’s first year, each of the participants lived in the same isolated small northern community, and at the time of interview were 19 years of age and older.

Background Information on the Seven Participant Teenage Fathers

Ross

Ross is married and lives with his wife, Nina, their 3 ½ year old son Jordan and 1 year old daughter. He and Nina spent the first year of Jordan’s life living with Nina’s parents. During that time the couple saved money and in the following year was able to move into an apartment of their
own. They both worked hard at a variety of jobs and family members took turns to look after Jordan when a parent was unavailable. In the last year Ross has been hired full-time at a well-paying job as a welder and has moved into his own home with his family. Nina has developed problems with her health, which has reduced her capacity to simultaneously work full-time and raise a family. She is now only able to work part-time. Ross and Nina both managed to complete high school before the birth of Jordan and were age 19 and 18 years respectively at the time of his birth.

Kevin

Kevin lives in a rented townhouse with his partner, Shannon, and 18 month old son, Cody. For the first nine months of Cody’s life, Shannon aged 16 years and Kevin aged 18 years lived at Kevin’s parents’ home and Shannon’s father’s home on an alternating convenience basis. At that time, Kevin completed high school and shared the care of Cody with Shannon. Both parents attended high school on a flexible part-time basis and obtained the few needed courses necessary to complete their education. Grandparental assistance and welfare cheques paid the bills. Kevin is now actively job hunting and also has plans to do a wilderness leadership training course with a goal to take over a business in the community. Shannon has just finished her high school education and is raising her son.

Brian

Brian is living with his girlfriend Sheila and 2 year old son Luke in Sheila’s parents’ home. This living arrangement has remained consistent since the birth of the baby. He and Sheila, both aged 17 years old at the time of birth, took a year off high school in order to work at various low-paying jobs and raise the baby. They returned to school the following year in order to complete their high school education, and both sets of grandparents shared the care of Luke at this time. Outside of
school hours, Brian worked in his parents' small business and started up his own small business in order to contribute to the family income. Both sets of grandparents subsidised this income, and Sheila received welfare cheques which are still being collected. Brian is now attending music school, with the intention of transferring to university next year, and Sheila is doing courses in tourism. This young couple are both being assisted financially by student loans. Sheila's mother looks after Luke during the time his parents are at college.

Neil

Neil and his girlfriend Paula share the care of their 2 ½ year old son Dan. They both live separately in their own parents' homes. Neil lives with his father who is divorced, his mother remaining supportive but at a geographical distance. Neil and Paula are on good terms but have not decided if they are ready to live together. They gave living together a 6-month trial period when the baby was born but decided that there was too much friction between them and that they needed time apart to work at the relationship. At that time, Neil was 18 years old and Paula was 17 years old. There is no legal arrangement over custody of Dan and both parents take turns in caring for him on a flexible 50-50 basis. Neil is employed in a construction business and works shifts. Paula is finishing her high school education and receives welfare cheques that assist in paying the bills. At present, both Neil and Paula do not plan to do any post-secondary education but wish to be employed and earning incomes.

Sam

Sam lives with his mother and stepfather, his own father having died when he was two years old. He has a 2 ½ year old daughter Katie who lives with his ex-partner Mandy one week and with himself every other week. This 50-50 custody arrangement is of a legal nature since Sam and Mandy
are not on good terms and find it hard to agree on issues pertaining to their daughter. Sam is not receiving any welfare assistance and has a full-time job at a builders' supplier. His mother cares for Katie when he is at work. Sam has not completed his high school education but talks of doing correspondence courses. He does not have to make legal payments for the care of his daughter as he is caring for her 50 percent of the time and provides items of clothing and toys on a voluntary basis. Sam was 18 years old and Mandy 17 years old at the time of the birth of Katie.

Alex

Alex lived with his girlfriend Jasmine and son Steve for the child's first nine months of life, but now is living with his parents. Jasmine and 4-year old Steve live in a nearby town with Jasmine’s new partner. When Jasmine separated from Alex, she took the baby to her parents’ home out of town, making it difficult for Alex to visit his child. By the time Steve was 2 years old Alex had instigated and obtained a legal agreement to ensure that he had access and some time with his son. This arrangement is being further negotiated through the courts as Alex can only see his child on weekends, and he is now commencing a new, well-paid job involving shift work. Alex has been working at different part-time jobs in order to provide the legally mandated payments of child support and has struggled to complete some post-graduation forestry courses. He intends to continue to do more courses at the local college.

During the time that Alex had difficulty in visiting his son, communication was not only poor with Jasmine but her parents intimidated him and tried to keep him away from Jasmine and the baby. Communication is now much improved and negotiation is possible. Alex was 18 years old and Jasmine 17 years old at the birth of Steve.
Liam

Liam is the primary caregiver of his 18-month-old daughter Kelly. His ex-girlfriend of three years, Ann, has been attending college full-time for the last year. She lives with her parents and sees her daughter on weekends. There is no legal arrangement and Ann and Liam have an easy going friendship. Liam lives with his parents and works full-time at his mother’s business. Liam’s mother looks after Kelly when Liam is at work. Liam's parents provide financial and emotional support to Liam, as well as physical care for Kelly. Liam is planning to attend a nearby college next year in order to become an accountant. Liam was 18 years old and Ann 21 years old at the time of Kelly’s birth.

Having introduced the participant fathers through a simple overview of current and past living arrangements, some specific demographics, their current relationships to the mothers of their children, and present employment, financial and education status, I will describe chronologically their story of transition to present day fatherhood as a group. Some commonalities and differences of experience will be highlighted, as well as unique events mentioned that have occurred in the process of attaining fatherhood.

Life Before Pregnancy

The seven fathers spoke of their activities before the pregnancy, those common to many teenagers. Most of them recognized and acknowledged that they had been engaged in less than optimum lifestyles, Neil and Sam having been expelled from school and Kevin having taken a year out to “bum around”. Smoking pot and drinking were part of this group’s “normal teen experience” (Kevin) and as Alex put it: “I was right in there”.

Parties: Drugs and Alcohol

Five out of the seven fathers described the “old days” of wild parties and risk-taking
adventures where limits were tested and life was made up of self-indulgent activities:

So I basically lived with my buddy for 5-6 months and we just partied every day.... marijuana and alcohol.......I've never heard of anybody doing heroin, never. There are a lot of people that do coke. I was never a part of it. I tried it once or twice but I just didn't like it....I mean with weed you see what you're doing. Some guys could pour in some rat poison or something in with the coke or heroin. It is a white, odorless, colorless substance you know. With that stuff you don't know what you're doing. (Kevin)

Several mentioned those substances with which they had experimented, indicating a level of risk activity. For some, limits were clearly defined suggesting that there were some boundaries as to how far they wanted to go. It was important to Kevin that he was in control and that he exercised a choice in his behavior. He pointed out that hanging out with friends was a part of the “party scene” and that it was to this particular aspect of teenage culture that he chose to belong.

For Neil and Sam, alcohol and drug taking had some earlier serious consequences:

It contributed to me falling out of school and all that stuff. So that’s why I’m a little bit more responsible now with it because I was drinking lots and smoking lots in school and everything went haywire. (Neil)

As Neil reflected on his past habits, he recognized behaviors as irresponsible and as a result of following consequences, decided to make efforts to change. Sam also spoke of a new awareness of the error of his past ways, those that included criminal activity:

If you smoke too much, you’re not going to feel anything. You wake up, feel like a million bucks and go to work the next day. I smoked it since I was 16. My parents finally found out when I was about 18.....like there are power nights when you smoke up with your buddies and stuff like that and you can actually walk in a straight line. I did such stupid things. Like I stole my father’s car and trashed it. Wrote it right off at 100 mph and had a $6000 fine that I had to pay off before I got a license. My parents didn’t help me one bit. That’s another thing that taught me responsibility. (Sam)

Sam spoke of the consequences that followed his use of drugs, and of how his parents did not bail him out but left him to pay his own debts. He now realizes that this process of taking responsibility
for his actions awakened him to the destructive nature of his behaviors. Paying a $6000 fine taught him responsibility the hard way.

Sam and Kevin both enjoyed their party days but unlike Sam, Kevin did not have regrets about the fun he had and spoke of his past behaviors as an important part of life experience:

"Before I would drink all night....sit down with my buddies and drink a flat of beer in a couple of hours. It was fun. Every night we'd go out to the woods and have a big bonfire and have music cranked and just hang out and look at the stars. I do have those memories." (Kevin)

Kevin looked at the positive side of life events and described the importance for him to have been a carefree teenager, his "rite of passage". He spoke with some ambivalence at having left this way of life behind.

Alex also mentioned his early days of drinking and smoking pot, a period that included the time of pregnancy:

"Earlier I was drinking and smoking up. When I was into that stuff at the beginning I was mostly at home. I realized I wasn't going anywhere so I walked away from that but not until Jasmine took off and I was on my own." (Alex)

He did not "wake-up" to the reality of the effect that drugs and alcohol were having on his life until his girlfriend walked out on him and took his eight month old son with her. It was at that point that Alex realized that life had to change and that he had a great deal of personal "sorting out" to do.

Ross related that he did not have a background of partying with alcohol and drug involvement. He considered that he did not go through this turbulent teenage experience and spoke of growing up by the time he was 16 years old: "I used to go for beers a couple of times but I rarely got drunk. I was a weird kid. I think I was adult when I was 16." Ross talked of being responsible and expressed a recognition that he was unusual in the way that he grew up before his time.
For those who enjoyed “wild parties” and drinking and drugs, friends were an essential component of life. It was with peers that these risk-taking activities usually took place.

**Friendships**

Peer friendships are usually an important part of any teenager’s life and for these fathers this was no exception before the event of pregnancy:

All my friends, yeah they were really good buddies. But a lot of things happened when I was becoming a father. They didn’t have time for me. I think they got turned off once I had a kid. They weren’t the same anymore. I didn’t want to get into drugs like them - I lost friends from that. (Brian)

For Brian his friends were close, and he was sad as he spoke of them because when he later changed his drug habits, these friends deserted him. It was partly his decision to walk away from his friends too, as he did not like the sort of people they were becoming and was scared that he too might change in a negative way.

Neil was expelled from school for “not going to classes and being a young kid” (Neil). He was already working at a construction job with older friends at the time of being thrown out of school:

I liked where I worked. It wasn’t really the job but it was more because I’d hang out with a couple of my buddies. (Neil)

Neil’s “buddies” were important to him and his life evolved around time with them and not around working at school or a job, a common aspect of several of the participants’ lives before pregnancy.

They also spent a great amount of time in the company of their peers:

They all used to have houses and I lived with my parents. So I would go over there and hang out everyday. They’ve been like brothers to me for years....since grade four....so we’re really close. It’s good to have friends like that....where you can talk about anything....any topic. You can talk about it or joke. (Kevin)
Kevin spoke of a strong network of close friends, whose company he truly valued, where he could really be himself and feel secure and supported. Kevin also identified a common characteristic of living one’s entire life in an isolated northern community, that of having and knowing friends as well as if they were brothers. The small community in which these fathers live has few schools and all students of a similar age would know each other. This close acquaintance with peers generally allows a strong network of friends to evolve. Six out of the seven fathers had spent most, if not all of their lives in the one community, and it is noteworthy that they all talked of a strong network of friends during their pre-pregnancy teenage years. The exception to this is Ross, who had only been in town for just over a year when he met Nina.

Life had largely centered around the “fun times”, and in our conversations it soon became apparent that there were few plans at that time for the future and a general sense of no life direction.

**Lack of Direction**

It was common to hear descriptions of past lack of direction and focus in life in the period before children were born. It was a usual pattern for these young men to speak of such past vague life ambitions:

I never really thought about a better job because this suited my needs. I didn’t really know what I want to do careerwise, but I didn’t think of a career in a convenience store...so I just tried to figure out what I wanted to do. I had not the greatest car but I was only 18. I didn’t have any life plans, so the pregnancy didn’t really wreck anything. I didn’t know where to direct my vision and I didn’t have any goals. (Ross)

Ross gave the impression that he was living and drifting from day to day with no thoughts to the future. He was content to own a beat-up car and work in a convenience store. For him, there was no urgency to plan his life goals. A sense of nothing to lose is a common thread, and Neil like Ross, spoke of his lack of future dreams before he became a father: “No idea what my future plans would
be. I had nothing to lose or anything like that” (Neil). Most spoke of having lived in the present, hanging out and partying with their friends, with no forward planning and motivation to improve themselves. Brian mentioned his pre-fatherhood experience: “I wasn’t sure about my future, about school. I didn’t want to look too far ahead”, and Liam also talked about the past: “...not thinking too far up the road. I have no major plans or anything... just go to school and get stuff done.” Again there was a theme of living in the moment without too much thought to tomorrow. It was perhaps a time of discernment and waiting on important decisions until reaching a greater maturity. The serious business of the day was centered around enjoying life, visiting friends and for some, experimenting with alcohol and drugs.

Kevin, although an avid partygoer, was the exception amongst the teenage fathers with regards to having no goals and ideas about his future:

I could’ve waited another five or six years. That was my initial goal, not to have kids until I was done schooling, had a decent job and was married and had a house and all that. (Kevin)

He dreamed of a picture of the ideal family, under one roof, being well-established with a job, home and marriage before starting a family. There was a sadness, a sense of regret in his sharing of the broken dream. It is difficult to assess why Kevin’s dreams were broken and why all these young men got their girlfriends pregnant. Perhaps it might be that under the influence of drugs and alcohol, judgements would be impaired and perhaps with the lack of direction and thinking to the future, actions and consequences might not be integrated. Further it may be that those who take part in risk activities also take chances with sexual encounters without thinking too much of the associated risks involved. This leads to questions such as: “What were these teenagers’ levels of knowledge of birth control, sexually transmitted diseases and sexuality?”
Knowledge on Birth Control, Sexually Transmitted Disease, Sexuality

In reporting about their level of knowledge on issues such as birth control, sexually transmitted diseases and sexuality, most talked of having received good information at school on these subjects. They had also picked up information from parents and peers. Despite this knowledge, four teenage fathers reported being surprised at their partners’ pregnancies as birth control had been used. The honesty of a female partner’s adherence to birth control was not questioned by the participant fathers. Perhaps there are gaps in the type of information teenagers are being given in sex education classes. For example, Alex found it hard to believe that Jasmine became pregnant as she was using birth control pills:

She was on it. Yes, I guess I’ve got strong swimmers or something. It just didn’t work I guess. STD’s, there is always worry about that but we were both pretty clean people. (Alex)

His understanding of the action of birth control pills was less than clear, and yet he mentioned that he “knew everything that he needed to know” (Alex). He implied that he thought that sexually transmitted diseases are the result of poor hygiene and showed a lack of understanding about viral infection.

For Sam the situation was different as there was an acknowledgement of significant gaps in information rather than misinformation:

My parents didn’t have the birds and the bees talk with me. The harshest question I ever asked my dad was, “What are testicles?” He said, “That bag between your legs”. If my child was to ask, “How was I born?”, I would sit down and talk. I would say, “This is that and this is how”. We didn’t think it would happen. We were stupid. (Sam)

He frankly admitted that he lacked certain knowledge and was resolved that his daughter would be more informed than he was when he became an adolescent. He would make a point of discussing
such important issues with her. There was also recognition that his lack of knowledge was not an excuse for pregnancy, and like most, stated that the reason why pregnancy occurred was “through sheer stupidity” and lack of foresight to the consequences of not using adequate contraception. Neil also shared this sentiment with regards to his own careless behavior:

No, I knew everything about that. I was just 16, kind of being retarded. It was a total reality check. I don’t know what I was thinking. (Neil).

Pregnancy came as a “wake-up call” that placed everyone in touch with reality as well as the consequences of their actions:

I definitely used condoms but they didn’t work like they should have I guess. Once the sperm get through there, that’s it, it’s all over. I wasn’t thinking, “If I do this I might have a kid in nine months”.....“That it will never happen to me” is the main thing that you think. If you’re a kid you don’t think you’re going to have a kid yourself. It is crazy. (Kevin)

Kevin’s understanding of correct use of condoms may have been incomplete, but there was an almost dream-like non-reality to his behavior before pregnancy and a sense that “bad things” cannot happen to me. This theme of “it couldn’t happen to me” was a common thread in the stories of all the teenage fathers, a theme that supports the idea of “personal fable”, and it was an abrupt reality check when they were all told by their girlfriends of their impending fatherhood.

The Time of Early Pregnancy

Each participant volunteered information about his feelings at the time of discovery of his partner’s pregnancy. He spoke of the impact of this news and how this had affected his decision-making and general emotional status.

Impact and Shock

The seven teenage fathers were all struggling with the tasks of maturing through adolescence
when suddenly faced with the responsibility and concern of an unplanned pregnancy and being a
father. They all spoke of having experienced emotions of fear, anxiety and surprise at the time of
finding out that their girlfriends were pregnant and acknowledged that this was a time of great
insecurity:

I was scared because I was 17, right, and I was scared all the way up to when he was
born. I was kind of depressed. I suddenly wasn’t sure of my future, about school, about
what I would do to support the baby and support Sheila. (Brian)

Brian was thrown into a “tail-spin” and was overwhelmed at the news of the pregnancy. Life
presented many insecurities about the future and this was a time of great stress. Kevin also told of
his scared feelings at first and then not knowing what to do”. Neil talked of being very worried
during the week that followed his hearing of the news:

Yeah, I was really edgy and everything seemed to bother me. When watching TV
all I could see was pregnancy commercials and shows about pregnant people and hiding it
from parents. It was really weird. (Neil)

Early pregnancy was a period of high anxiety for Neil as he became preoccupied with the pregnancy
even when he was relaxing or involved with some other distraction.

Liam did not reveal that he was anxious but talked of being surprised and also added a
positive comment:

When Ann told me, I have this memory of a brick wall and it burned into my memory.
Ever since that moment the event has been a big part of my life. (Liam)

He recognized from the beginning of the pregnancy that he was going to take responsibility for his
child and was not upset that he was to become a father. The moment and impact of being told was
indelibly imprinted on his memory, indicating the intensity of this time of realization of pregnancy and
imminent fatherhood.

In spite of the concerns expressed about the initial impact of pregnancy, most of the teenagers
realized that they had to “face up to responsibility whether one liked it or not” (Sam). For some, the question of abortion was discussed.

**Ambivalence and the Abortion Issue**

Some of the teenage fathers discussed their initial ambivalence on whether or not to abort the pregnancy:

There are choices out there but I made the right one. For a time there I thought maybe she would have an abortion but then I had thought about it...I was totally glad I didn’t but....It would have been drastic if we did, but I was heavily thinking about that though. I was 18 years old and she was 16 years old and it was just way too early. (Kevin)

Kevin had been in a dilemma as to what to do about the pregnancy. He had been fully involved in the decision-making process with his girlfriend, and had felt that abortion was a harsh decision. He had also been concerned about his partner’s as well as his own capabilities in rearing a child.

Those who had considered abortion, all spoke of their eventual happiness at rejecting this idea. Sam, Liam and Brian never considered abortion as a viable option and Sam told his mother: “Well, we’re not going to abort this poor thing. I’m going to be a father”. As perhaps might be expected by the selection of a population of teenagers that acknowledge responsibility for their children, this group generally voiced negative feelings about abortion. Despite a degree of ambivalence over the abortion issue for some of these teenage fathers, most expressed how they quickly came to terms with the idea of fatherhood.

**Acceptance**

Ross and Liam gave the impression that they took the news of pregnancy in their stride. It is of interest to note that these two did not enter the party scene or participate in drugs and alcohol to the same extent as the others, and both talked of “being grown up before their time”. In some
ways perhaps these teenage fathers were more prepared for fatherhood in terms of maturity than the others. They were both surprised at the news of pregnancy but did not talk of fear, shock or confusion:

I mean you can't be a kid and a parent at the same time. I was a little surprised because we were not planning on having a child but I jumped right into it. It was never a bad thing. (Liam)

There was recognition by Liam that it was essential to be a mature adult in order to take on the role of being a father. He saw fatherhood as an inevitable step in life's continuum and immediately assumed what he felt to be a responsible attitude to impending fatherhood. Ross also had accepted prospective fatherhood in a calm manner with the recognition that this was an event that needed to be dealt with in a practical way.

The other five struggled with the prospect of fatherhood, each worrying about his own capacity to become a good father and to provide practical support for the child:

As soon as I found out, I went home. I was a nervous wreck. I bawled and cried. "I'm not ready to be a dad". I'm not even legal drinking age. (Sam)

Sam was not alone in his feelings of being too young and unprepared for fatherhood. Kevin also struggled with the idea of a "kid having a kid", and Alex mentioned: "We were too young to be parents. Still are. It's a lot to take in at that age".

For some, hearing the news of pregnancy was a more taxing event than for others, but most of the fathers expressed that the time before telling parents about their prospective fatherhood was an extremely stressful period, as was the event of actually confronting parents with the news of pregnancy.
Anticipation of Parent Reactions to News of Pregnancy

The majority of the fathers voiced how they were concerned about prospective parent reaction to the impending birth of a grandchild. They talked of the time leading up to telling their parents about the pregnancies, the event of “breaking the news” and how their parents actually responded. Each talked of his fear over the anticipation of his parents’ reactions to the pregnancy. The period before announcing “the news” was a time of great stress, decision-making, fear and much turmoil:

She told her parents and then a couple of months later I told my dad because I didn’t know what my dad was going to say....I was scared and worried about it....We knew right away that the pregnancy would go through. (Neil)

Neil was so fearful of his father’s reaction to the news of pregnancy that he delayed telling him. He believed that abortion was not an option and that there was no alternative than to eventually speak to his father.

Sam talked of his initial reaction to the pregnancy in terms of anxiety in facing his parents: “Oh my god, how am I going to tell my parents?” This fear of telling his parents “the news”, was Sam’s first concern on hearing about the pregnancy. Sam, Liam, Kevin and Ross all told their parents about the pregnancy within a few days of knowing about it themselves and therefore had little time to let anxiety build up. Neil and Brian dealt differently with the situation and let a prolonged length of time elapse before telling “the news” as they were concerned that their parents would “throw them out”. In Brian’s words: “Telling my parents was my biggest fear. I waited like a couple of months because they warned me about it, about kicking me out”. Neil mentioned: “My dad said if this happened he would get very mad”.

Telling the News of Pregnancy to Parents

Eventually the news of pregnancy was announced to their families. Liam and Kevin recounted
similar experiences of how they had handled talking to their parents:

I went straight home and said, “Look Mom, Dad, Ann is pregnant. We’re having a baby”. I just went straight for the throat...just said it. I wasn’t going to hide it, you know, work my way around the bush or bring it into a conversation somehow. I’m not going to say I didn’t surprise them with it as I did. (Liam)

I’m really straight forward with my dad. We’re honest with each other and I can’t really hide secrets from him. It was better that I told them than try and hide it because it’s hard you know, really hard....so I told them and they were kind of mad at first. (Kevin)

There was a recognition that they had to be upfront with their parents as they could not cover up their anxiety, and in the long run hiding the truth would make the situation more difficult.

In contrast to Liam and Kevin, Sam talked of trying to cover up his anxiety but mentioned that this was unsuccessful:

Yeah, as soon as I found out I went home. I just cried...... “I’m just not old enough”....it was quite funny but when I got home, I didn’t want to tell them right away and so I just kept quiet about it. My mom, right away, asked what was wrong and if I was in some sort of trouble.....so I said, “Oh shit, come on Dad I also need to talk to you”. I used the exact words: “I got Mandy pregnant”. (Sam)

Sam had been overwhelmed and upset about the pregnancy and had wanted to conceal his new found circumstances until he had thought things through. He had found it difficult to believe that someone so young as himself was to be a father. When confronted about his apparent anxiety, Sam could not hide the news of the pregnancy, for the burden of carrying such a secret was too heavy.

**Parent Reactions to News about Pregnancy**

Initially there were reactions of surprise, shock, disappointment, anger and sometimes acceptance to the news of pregnancy from the teenagers’ parents:

My father took it well...very well. He said, “What are you going to do?” and I said, “I’m going to be a father obviously. I’m not going to run.” Mom was shocked: “I’m not ready to be a grandmother yet”. I said, “Well, we’re not going to abort this poor thing.” (Sam)
Sam’s parents reacted in different ways. The fact that his mother was upset and thought of her own relationship to the baby, upset at the prematurity of being a grandmother, was a situation that Sam had not been ready to deal with. Luckily, he found his father to be calm, practical and accepting of the news.

Both Brian and Neil spoke of surprise and relief at the reaction of their families:

It was alright. It was O.K. Not what I thought it was going to be. More understanding than what I thought it was going to be. Like my dad could have got mad and my being so young it wouldn’t have helped anything. (Neil)

After hiding the news of pregnancy for two months Neil’s worse fears of being “thrown out” were not realized and he found his father to be supportive. He was also scared of his father’s temper and predicted that his angry reaction would compound his troubles, but to the contrary he was much relieved at the understanding attitude of his father. Brian and Liam had experienced similar fears, especially those of being thrown out. Brian worried about his father’s bad temper but he eventually told his parents of Sheila’s pregnancy and was met with unexpected understanding and support:

They were disappointed I guess but they understood which was good. When the baby was born my parents were happy. They gave me support and they didn’t kick me out or anything. (Brian)

In general the fathers were surprised and relieved at their parents’ reactions and in fact discovered in them unexpected sources of support. Having told their families about the pregnancy, each recalled putting his energies into preparing for the birth of his child. For most this centered on finding a job and making some money. It was also a time of thinking through educational plans and making a change in living arrangements.
Most remembered that life did not change dramatically before the birth of their babies. Some spoke of taking extra courses and returning to school, and others of searching for better paying jobs. Brian was the only one to leave high school in order to work. Some had attended prenatal classes and had looked at other preparatory sessions for parenthood. Sam was the only prospective father to move out of his parents’ home to a different accommodation, and Alex was already living with his girlfriend at the time of pregnancy. With the exception of Brian, Liam, and Ross, these teenagers talked about lifestyles that still included the same parties, drug and alcohol involvement:

We just partied every day. That pregnancy....It didn’t change much. Drugs and alcohol were still in the picture. Yeah, but once Cody came along..... (Kevin)

Kevin remained out of school and without a job until his child was born. For Kevin the full impact of becoming a father had not yet “struck home”. It was the same picture as regards the party lifestyle for Alex, Neil and Sam, though they had all found jobs.

Around the time of pregnancy, Neil and Sam were expelled from school and had obtained part-time construction and bartending jobs respectively. Ross and Alex had both graduated from high school, Ross already working at a convenience store and Alex at a cement works. Ross had started to search for better paid work, while Alex took extra courses in forestry in the hopes of finding a better job. Brian dropped out of school and went to work in his parents’ small business, whilst Liam stayed in school and completed his high school education. After six months absence, Kevin eventually returned to school in order to complete one course that would make him eligible to graduate. During this time before the child was born to the time of birth, some fathers accompanied their girlfriends to prenatal classes. Four of them spoke of their experiences in attending these
Prenatal classes.

**Prenatal Classes**

Prenatal classes that are offered in the community where the participant teenage fathers live, consist of a series of six sessions of instruction. These sessions cover the topics of body changes during pregnancy; the labor and delivery processes; medical interventions; infant feeding, namely breastfeeding, and an overview class. The subject material is focused on the mother’s needs and her role as the main caregiver of the child. The prospective father is invited as a support person.

Those that attended prenatal classes gave an account of their overall impressions of these sessions and identified their level of comfort with the environment and satisfaction with content.

Sheila and I were the only teenage people there, and the older people kind of gave us looks so we were kind of uncomfortable... but nevertheless we didn’t care because we wanted to know what to expect. (Brian)

Brian pointed out that even though he and Sheila felt awkward at the prenatal sessions, they nevertheless “hung in there” (Brian), in the hopes that they would learn about pregnancy and birth. They were preparing to become responsible parents in spite of feeling out of place.

In talking to some, it was doubtful that they learned the information that they had hoped to acquire:

Since my son was born I discovered that I didn’t know this and that about childrearing. I could have learned more about what happens during a child’s development and how to deal with different childrearing situations. (Neil)

This young father identified distinct gaps in his knowledge, even though he had attended all the prenatal sessions with his girlfriend. He was disappointed in the material offered and that it had not met his expectations. Ross talked of his disappointment in finding the classes boring and mentioned: “I fell asleep in one”. Liam spoke of gaining a new perspective on how prenatal classes prepare a
prospective father:

The classes were not focused on me and I was not really included. It was mostly the mother and the main role of the father was to help the mother. You know, be there when the mother needs you. Help her with the breathing and try to be the level-headed one when she’s going into childbirth....I learned a little bit about how to breast feed, how to hold a baby and how to change a diaper. (Liam)

It was apparent that Liam felt that something was missing for him in these classes, something which perhaps might also have accounted for Ross’ boredom. Liam suggested that he did not get relevant information on childcare and as well, felt left out as a caregiver and equal parent. He was given the impression that his role was somewhat subsidiary, that of supporting the mother.

Some of the others felt that they missed out by not attending prenatal classes. Sam spoke of being ill prepared and this included not “realizing how emotional the birth experience can get” (Sam). He wished that he had attended more classes in anticipation of becoming better informed. Kevin also spoke of having been ill-prepared for fatherhood, as his son had been born prematurely at seven months gestation, prior to any opportunity for him to attend prenatal classes. He spoke of “nothing out there to prepare him for this, except like word of mouth from people who have been there”, and indicated that classes aside, there had been no place to get support and information for dealing with a premature infant. The impact of suddenly having to care for a baby that was also premature was acute for Kevin, and he was forced to rely on family and friends for advice.

The material that was received in prenatal classes was found by most to lack meaningful and appropriate information around childcare and childrearing from a father’s perspective. Those who did not attempt to search out specific information prior to birth mentioned that in hindsight they would have tried to have been better prepared for the imminent step into fatherhood. From the description that the other fathers presented concerning prenatal classes, it is dubious that these
sessions would have been any more useful to Sam and Kevin.

Pre-birth Accommodation

During the time of pregnancy, all the prospective teenage fathers remained in their current dwellings with the exception of Sam. Alex resided in his own apartment and all others lived with their parents. Sam decided that he needed to leave his parents’ home and provide a place for his girlfriend and child:

I moved out of home when Mandy was pregnant. I then tried to get an apartment and it was the biggest hassle to get her on my file because she was 17 at the time she had the baby. I decided to move because responsibility was coming up. (Sam)

Sam believed that it was his duty to provide a home for his girlfriend and baby. He wanted to be a good provider and was “not going to run”. He spoke of his annoyance over the barriers to sharing accommodation with Mandy, which involved difficulties with social services in legally placing Mandy, (who was not yet adult), under his care as her guardian. Sam’s drive to be independent and in control was a strong motivating force in his life.

Although the time of pregnancy was a period of anxiety and of much insecurity, most of the fathers did not anticipate the impact that children would have in their lives. A few preparations for imminent fatherhood were made but there was little change in lifestyle until each teenager received the true “wake-up call”, the birth of his child.

Experience of Birth

It was poignant to see the transformation in the fathers’ faces as they spoke of the joy of first seeing their babies. A spark lit up in their eyes whenever they mentioned their children. Each considered the birth experience to be anxiety provoking but rewarding:

I was exhausted. It lasted a long time. I felt in a state of chaos. Then the baby came. It
was the happiest day of my life. It was Friday I think. So I just walked downtown and bought some cigars. (Brian)

....too many things were running through my head. It was just really fast. I felt like ten million dollars. I felt really great. (Neil)

These two talked of thoughts racing and feelings of chaos that were transformed into exhilaration, joy and relief at the birth of their sons. For both it was a memorable occasion and they responded as most new fathers respond when a child is born.

Brian also spoke of “a big relief because I just felt better because I had got my baby and I wasn’t scared anymore”. He was worried about the development of his baby, and fear due to lack of knowledge around the birth process was overwhelming. He also had some doubts about himself as regards bonding with his baby. This fear and anxiety prior to the birth was common for all the fathers and could be partly attributed to their youth, but also to the state of insecurity in which they all lived.

For Kevin the birth event was especially stressful as he was separated from his girlfriend who had been flown out to the city due to premature labor. He was anxious for the health of his premature son and girlfriend, and tells of his fear: “The day she went into labor I was talking to her on the phone and she scared me. She called me and I got on a plane the next day. He was so small......2 ½ pounds.” Kevin was “there” for his girlfriend and newborn son, and although he was young and scared, he did not hesitate to give support when it was needed.

Sam did not go into the operating room for his girlfriend’s Cesarean section as the “sight of blood made him weak”:

So I waited in that one hallway. There were two other guys there, my best friends. The doctor came out, looks around and says, “Who is the dad?” I put my hand up, “I am”. He said, “Oh, you have a beautiful baby girl. She’ll be out in a while”. When I saw her I
cried. I held her and then just looked at my friends and said, “I have to phone my mom and dad now”. It was really good. (Sam)

Sam was so proud of his daughter and wanted to share the joy of his daughter’s birth with his parents. His eagerness to share his good news with his parents was one of several incidents where he revealed his closeness to them, and the fact that his friends were present in the hospital with him at the time of birth, indicates that he has a network of peer support.

Having experienced the joy of being a new father, the relief accompanying the completion of pregnancy and birth, and the initial pride in sharing the news of fatherhood, each teenage father now faced the pleasures and trials of parenting his first child. These trials were often carried out under the stressful circumstances of lack of sleep in shared accommodation with grandparents, struggles with holding down or finding a job, and finishing a high school education.

The Experience of Living With the Child During the First Few Months

Most spoke of tiredness and lack of sleep in the early days of fatherhood, and the welcome support from grandparents especially around concerns over early infant rearing and financial support in terms of accommodation and meals. During this time, they had also been searching for jobs and had tried to complete an education. This was a period of rapid life adjustment when the impact of premature fatherhood started to take its effect.

Tiredness and Lack of Sleep

Most new parents have to cope with a reduction in their normal hours of sleep. Sleep deprivation is a most stressful part of parenthood for an adolescent who is geared to high energy output followed by an undisturbed rest period. The constant disruption to their sleep pattern was an ongoing adjustment for all:
Late night crying is pretty stressful. Being young, I am used to sleeping my twelve hours a night. But now it's O.K. It used to be really bad, like every three hours. Now he sleeps through the night. It's great. (Kevin)

Kevin talked of needing his sleep and how his son's crying disturbed him frequently through the night. During the day he had to go to school as well as take his turn at babysitting. He expressed relief when he related that the baby finally slept through the night. The repetition of disturbed nights would have put much stress on a young couple's relationship. This stress over the baby crying in the early days was a common theme and compounded other anxieties:

Like I said, the first three months were pretty brutal because I had to do so much to try for a better job. Kids aren't like grownups. I mean, you want to do your thing and they want to do their thing. Sometimes they want to stay up all night or whatever. (Ross)

Young fathers find lack of sleep particularly difficult as they are having to work hard at searching for jobs and finishing an education during the day. They are not used to conforming to someone else's sleep patterns and are not prepared for successive interrupted nights. They have no notion of the frequency of infant feedings and this comes as a shock. Ross eventually had two jobs, including some night shifts, which made it difficult for him to help out with the baby at night. He mentioned that “for a couple of months I didn’t really see him that much because I was working all the time”.

Ross' anxiety and exhaustion lessened when he eventually found a full-time job. At the same time the disturbed nights improved and he began to enjoy being a father. Sam also talked of the "trying" early days: "We had some really rough times when she was a baby, screaming and colicky and stuff like that. We were ready to blow up..." In spite of this type of tension and stress, each of the teenagers remained as a couple with their partner for at least the first eight months of their child's life. All the couples, with the exception of Neil and Paula, spent this period in the same home together. Some fathers talked of the invaluable support they received at this time from their parents.
Support from Child’s Grandparents

Grandmothers came into their own during the months after birth and were sought out for support and advice on childhood concerns:

My mom was really great. I thank my mom. We had some times with the baby and I’d say: “O.K. Here she is Mom”. (Sam)

Sam’s mom would take her granddaughter quite willingly in order to give the new parents a break. This type of support was appreciated by all fathers and assistance on which these young men heavily relied:

I could have learned more about everything.....but I knew enough. I would find out from my mom. I’d phone her - she’s a nurse. (Neil)

Even though she lived far away, Neil’s mother was always there for her son and he spoke of feeling supported. The fact that she is a nurse is also of importance to him as he views her as an authority on child care and health issues.

All grandparents shared information on caring for an infant and gave advice on how to deal with stressful situations. This type of support from grandparents was a common feature for all teenage fathers, and was spoken of with a sense of gratitude. This kind of support had given them some much needed confidence in dealing with infant problems. Accommodation and financial relief were other forms of support that were provided by grandparents in the early days of fatherhood. Alex and Sam were exceptions, as they were employed at the time and financially supporting themselves. Several of the young fathers spoke of the support offered by parents but also had mixed feelings about living with their own families at this time:

I mean her mother was just trying to be helpful but her ideas and Nina’s ideas didn’t work. I wasn’t really there much because I worked nights at the gas station and days at the hardware store. It could have been worse. (Ross)
For Ross it was stressful, though he was grateful to Nina's parents for their support with accommodation which enabled them to save sufficient money to have their own place within a year of the baby's arrival. Nina and her mother did have considerable differences of opinion and the young couple needed their independence in order to work at their relationship.

Liam and Kevin both spoke of the satisfaction of living at home with parents and welcomed the support and assistance with childrearing from family members in spite of the fact that they could not move on to greater adult independence. Liam, who has been the main caregiver of his daughter Kelly, described a picture of life at home with his parents:

My parents try and help me out whenever possible. Like when I'm working my mom takes care of her. Ann was at college and she was taking classes. If I'm working during the day my mom will take care of her. (Liam)

Support in childrearing from grandparents has provided some with an ideal environment in which to raise their children and yet be free to work at a job and/or college courses. Liam also has an added bonus in living at home, that of the interaction of his brother with Kelly:

He's younger than me so he's never been around babies. He's never been around little kids so he doesn't know how to hold a baby and that kind of thing. He really likes her and he's one of Kelly's favorite people. He'll come into the living room and he'll sit down and watch some T.V. and Kelly would go up to him and start babbling. It's really cute. (Liam)

Liam described his delight in the richness of family life that surrounds his baby daughter, a life that is not complicated by hassles with his ex-partner and her parents.

Kevin also talked of appreciation for the support of both sets of parents in the early infant rearing days. He, Shannon, and the baby lived as a family unit with their respective parents on a flexible basis, accommodation being provided by both families:

I was pretty close to my parents all my life. They were always talking to me and saying:
“How was your day today son”. Ever since I was a kid...we stayed with my mom and dad. It was excellent. My parents are so supportive. Shannon’s dad is really supportive too. Like if we ever needed anything like formula or milk or whatever, or if we’re in trouble, he’ll be there. Her mom is also helpful and talks on the phone with us from Edmonton. (Kevin)

All grandparents have helped out, including Shannon’s mother who is separated from her father. Communication with his parents has always been open for Kevin and he also gets on well with Shannon’s father. During this time of living with parents, Kevin was able to complete his high school education. As well he had relief from the financial burden of accommodation rental and provision of food and clothing. Constant support from grandparents, especially during the early weeks of the newborn’s life, has proven to be key to the smooth transition to fatherhood for many of these teenagers.

From the time of pregnancy to birth and during the early years of their children’s lives, they spoke of the hard reality of the wake-up call to fatherhood. During this time of transition in their lives, these young men have dealt with the shock and impact of an unplanned pregnancy, confronting parents with the news of pregnancy, the stress of the prenatal period, the birth experience itself, as well as the experience of living with a newborn baby. At the time of pregnancy, most were living carefree lives of partying in the company of their peers and enjoying self-centered lifestyles, free from the responsibilities of caring for others. Drugs and alcohol were a common part of their teen culture, although for several of these teenagers limits were set on their recreational habits. Drugs and alcohol abuse was related to criminal activity for one prospective teenage father.

Two of the young men had worked hard to complete their education but for the rest, education was not a priority. Some had been expelled from school and were drifting into low-paying jobs, while others spent more time with friends rather than attend classes. There was neither much
evidence of planning for the future, nor motivation to strive for a good job. Living in the moment seemed to have top priority.

They spoke of their invincibility in regards to bad things happening to them, and were truly shocked to discover that their girlfriends had become pregnant. By all accounts most believed at the time prior to pregnancy that they had had good knowledge around sex, birth control and sexually transmitted diseases. On later reflection they decided that they were either misinformed or had a lack of knowledge about specific topics.

The wake-up call of transition to fatherhood threw them into a state of insecurity, anxiety and for some, depression. The dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy led to discussions around abortion but most, quickly came to accept the fact that they were soon to become fathers. Part of the anxiety about the pregnancy was based on fear of anger from parents which for all, later proved to be unfounded. They all received a variety of support from their families and this for the most part was accepted. Two of the teenagers wanted to remain independent and made efforts to find work and provide homes for their prospective new families. The other young men searched for jobs and several attended prenatal classes. The latter were received with mixed feelings due to a lack of information that addressed a father’s needs and the fact that the father is only recognized as a support person to the mother rather than as an equal parent to his child.

The culmination of the wake-up call to fatherhood was the birth and presence of a baby. These events were unanimously considered to be both emotional as well as joyful, and were accompanied by feelings of relief and pride. The reality of living with a baby, searching for jobs and going to school gave rise to stressful early days, as well as tiredness through lack of sleep. Early health problems for the infant added to the already heavy load. It was at this time that grandparents’
advice was sought and their help was generally accepted. There were frustrations around lack of independence as well as differences of opinion on childrearing for some of those fathers who lived with their parents. There was however a general agreement that the support of parents was critical to the successful transition to premature fatherhood. Such support came in a variety of forms, including assistance with accommodation, finances, babysitting, childcare advice, as well as reassurance at a time when most were overwhelmed with multiple responsibilities.

Following early transition to fatherhood, challenges concerning compromising living arrangements, financial burdens, completion of an education, finding a job, the relationship with the child’s mother, involvement with the child, and friendships evolved as central issues for the seven fathers. Liam described these as the “curve-ball thrown into life”. It is this curve-ball of central issues and challenges in life resulting from premature fatherhood that will be highlighted in the discussion in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5

Central Issues for Teenage Fathers: “The Curve-Ball Thrown into Life”

This chapter examines the specific issues and challenges in a teenage father’s life that affect his day to day existence, those such as living arrangements, employment, an incomplete education, lack of finances, relationship with the mother of the child, care of the child, as well as changing friendships. It is the impact of these issues and challenges, and personal struggles encountered that have shaped the lives of the teenage fathers, and will be central to the discussion which follows in Chapter 6.

The participants have responded to premature fatherhood in a variety of ways, but without exception each has taken up the challenge to become a responsible parent. This challenge in itself has involved unique struggles that might be attributed to the prematurity of this life event for these young men. It seems important to highlight supportive as well as stressful aspects of their lives, as only when a clear understanding of needs is ascertained, can health care professionals and other care providers provide relevant support. Identifying the stresses on the one hand, as well as the supports on the other for each young man, provides insight as to how he balances such and copes with his situation.

All fathers are struggling to become responsible and concerned parents as they cope with those tasks related to maturing through adolescence. Each attempts to balance the completion of an education as well as finding and holding down a job, with family responsibilities and a sometimes tenuous relationship with the child’s mother. For most, less than optimum living arrangements have at some time proved to be a challenge, and for some this challenge continues.
Living Arrangements

Issues around living arrangements and support systems as well as stresses that evolve around these arrangements, are common. For most fathers, the inability to finance independent living arrangements has led to compromising living situations at various times. The latter sets teenage fatherhood apart from that of adult fatherhood. Most adult fathers have completed an education or skills training, found jobs and managed to secure independent dwellings by the time they decide to start their families. Unlike their adult counterparts, teenage fathers rarely plan the event of pregnancy and have not made provision financially for their own homes. As a consequence they find it difficult to provide stable environments in which to raise children and exercise some degree of independence. Alex is the exception among the seven, as he was the only teenager already living independently with his girlfriend when the pregnancy occurred.

For all seven fathers, pregnancy came as a shock, and none of them was prepared at this time for a life-long commitment with the mother of his child, and the accompanying financial responsibilities. The pregnancy immediately posed pressing decisions on these young men and their partners as regards to whether to live together or to live apart, with a view to coping with the responsibility of raising a child. The different living situations were at times stressful, but also allowed the heavy responsibility of childrearing to be shared, with grandparents often playing a supportive role. It is significant that whether or not he is living with his child, each of the fathers is actively involved to some degree in the life and upbringing of his child. Each type of living situation presents different advantages and disadvantages for these young fathers.

Three Generation Living

At the time of the interview three of the teenage fathers were living with their children in
parental homes, Brian being the only father who lived with his partner as well as child in the parental home. Living in parental homes has had both a positive and negative impact on the lives of the three fathers. Specific advantages include: having a resident babysitter (such as a grandparent) which allows a grandparent attendance at college or working at a job, financial relief in terms of rent and grocery bills, and above all, time apart from a girlfriend in a supportive environment in order to mature and sort out conflicts in that relationship. Lack of independence and adherence to house rules with loss of control over decisions concerning the child, and lack of space and privacy were voiced as negative aspects of three generation living.

**Babysitting.** For those who described the benefits of parental support in terms of a built in babysitter, there was also a general recognition of the need to further their education in order to secure well-paying jobs at a later date:

My parents try and help me out whenever possible....Like when I'm working or attending college to become an accountant. If I'm working in the day my mom takes care of her. (Liam)

Liam is a good example of a young father who has chosen to live in the supportive environment of his parents' home. He has sole care of his daughter and needs their assistance with her upbringing as he has chosen to further his education as well as work at a part-time job. Parental assistance enables teenage fathers to move out of the entrenchment of low-paying jobs and to achieve their ambitions.

**Financial assistance.** The financial relief of rent free accommodation is a common reason for living with parents for most teenagers. Brian is going to college, has no job, and consequently cannot afford to live independently:

Well, my mom says she's going to pay for college and I feel bad because it's a lot. I have
some student loans and an allowance for travelling. We live with Sheila's parents. Her mom and dad are very supportive and her mom usually cooks but I cook once in awhile to give her a break. (Brian)

In spite of not having a job, Brian is able to pursue a full-time post-graduate education through the relief of financial burden from both his own parents' generosity and the living accommodation afforded him by his girlfriend's parents. Liam also recognizes the benefits of living with parents in terms of financial support. Financial relief in terms of rent and food means that the fathers are able to pursue the education or training they need for well-paying jobs in the future. They are aware of the poor economic consequences of foregoing educational opportunities in return for immediate entry to the labor market.

**Time apart.** Spending time apart from each other gives young couples time to mature and work out their relationships at the same time as living in the supportive environment of their parental homes. Neil and Paula live separately with their own families after an unsatisfactory attempt to live together. Neil spoke of the reasons for this decision:

> We were not ready to live together but we still care for each other just as much as we did before the pregnancy but we just can't seem to see eye to eye. I just don't think we'll be apart forever. Living at home takes the stress off. I'm working on my own and my dad doesn't have to pay for anything anymore. This situation has a lot to do with age because we're just so young. (Neil)

This couple are actively working at their relationship as well as supporting each other. They recognize the advantages of support in terms of accommodation in their parents' homes, and the need for time to deal with conflict in their relationship. Others have also come to similar conclusions on how to deal with conflict with their children's mothers. Rather than live together in a hostile environment, they have chosen to live apart until differences with partners can be resolved. Living accommodation in the parental home gives the young father the opportunity to reflect on the nature of
his relationship with his child’s mother and yet he can still provide emotional and physical support for
his child.

Lack of independence and loss of control. Although some spoke of the benefits of living with
their own parents, others emphasized their eagerness to be independent and live with their own
nuclear families. For Brian, the lack of freedom to become independent and loss of control over
decisions with the child, at a time when he is struggling with the adolescent tasks of self-identification
and separation from family of origin, have led to frustrations:

It’s kind of hard for me to have a say in it because she’s the mother and it’s in her house. She’s always telling me to clean up. Telling me off - I am not allowed to feed my son breakfast because he sleeps until 11:00 am just like her and her parents, and I have to go to work. He is getting picky about food and I don’t like that. This is really getting me down. (Brian)

Brian is disappointed at the loss of control he has over his own choices, especially in decisions
concerning his child’s upbringing. He conveys a sense of powerlessness in his life and is depressed
about the dependent role that he has been forced to assume. This issue of forced dependence and
accompanying depression at a time when an adolescent is trying to become independent, seems to be
a common theme.

Space and privacy. Lack of space and privacy has been problematic for those who live in
parental homes:

It was kind of cramped. We were living in her parents’ basement so we could manage to
save money. We didn’t need a fridge because we ate all our meals with her parents. It was
stressful as Nina’s ideas and her mother’s ideas didn’t really coincide at times - well, you
always need your own space and there wasn’t much room. (Ross)

Ross needed the financial support of Nina’s parents for the first year of his son’s life as he was
working at several jobs and trying to save money for their own place. Living in cramped conditions
with Nina’s parents did not allow them the freedom to live their own lives or afford privacy. Kevin and Brian experienced similar frustrations in living with their partners in parental homes, frustrations that they were willing to tolerate in return for financial relief gained.

All recognized the benefits of living with their own parents and the support that this provides. In living in with parents, it is possible for young fathers to continue their education and/or work at a job. Unfortunately there are disadvantages, especially for those who live with their partner and child in this situation. There are the stresses of abiding by others’ house rules and opinions, with resulting loss of independence and feelings of powerlessness that can lead to depression. This type of living situation might be especially demoralizing if a father loses power over decisions involving the care of his child. Lack of space and privacy also lead to added tensions in parental homes.

Brian is currently the only participant living with his partner and child in a partner’s home. He places value on a post-graduate education and told of the necessity to sacrifice the short term gain of independence and privacy, in order to be able to have a resident babysitter and some financial relief as he attends college. Liam is also able to pursue a similar course, but in a less stressful environment than Brian, as he is living with his own parents. As well, he is the sole caregiver for his daughter and unlike Brian, does not have to contend with a difficult relationship with his child’s mother.

Living Together

Living together without the presence of grandparents leads to unique struggles for some young fathers. Three factors stand out as relevant to the situation of living together. In the first place, limited finances and the urgency to work at various low-paying jobs can be stressful for those living independently. Second, having a good relationship with a partner whilst living together in the midst of juggling school work, parenting and working at a job is stressful for an adult, let alone a
teenager. The latter’s level of maturity in dealing with all these tasks might contribute to domestic squabbles. Finally, those living independently, with no parental support but with the burden of multiple stressors associated with premature fatherhood, often spoke of their inability to control their anger in these isolated circumstances.

One father, Ross, is unique among those who live alone together with partners, as he is financially stable, mature and has good self-control. He accepted some early support from his family and has made a number of long-range plans to which he is committed. His situation is noted at the end of this section on “living together”.

**Limited finances.** Living together for Alex and his girlfriend proved to be stressful as finances were tight and jobs were hard to come by. He described the impact of the struggle to make enough money in order to maintain living independently:

> I was struggling at different jobs all the time. Money would have made life easier. It affected our relationship as a lot of times as I would be working and be gone all day. Well, the child went with his mother. We were going through a lot of conflict. When we broke up there was a lot of arguing...I don’t like losing it but sometimes there’s no way around that. Steve was always cranky and I was barely with him at all. (Alex)

The stress of working at different jobs to raise money, being away all day, and living with a baby who had colic were all sources of tension for this couple. It is possible that Jasmine resented being alone for long hours and Alex, on returning home to a crying baby, would deal with the situation with impatience. Unlike those who receive financial support from parents by living at home, young men who sacrifice the opportunity to live at home to complete an education and/or save money, have to provide an income for rent and provisions for their family. Those who have an immediate need to make money are lessening their long-term prospects of moving into a higher income bracket by not completing their education or acquiring some skills training.
Lack of maturity and domestic squabbles. A teenage father’s level of maturity is of significance when choosing to live independently with a partner and child. Removed from the guidance and assistance of his own parents, the young father can struggle with his relationships with his partner and a newborn baby:

Like there’s always an urge to....not run away but give up or something like that. For me and Shannon we fight a lot because we live together. We’ve lived together for two years now and you just get in the way of each other. A lot of times I will be ready to leave but I decide to stay and fight. It is not something that I like to do, just leave her you know...say “Adios, see you”. I realize that I have got a son to think about. (Kevin)

Kevin and his partner are not yet able, or do not have the skills to handle their differences peacefully. He is working through the tasks of adolescence and is probably still at a stage of self-centeredness and limited coping skills. He is struggling with issues around commitment and loyalty to his son, but has not yet come to terms with the effect that the volatile home environment has on his child. It is difficult for young fathers to cope in isolation with their own family struggles if they lack the maturity to handle those complex issues involved around caring and providing for others. The impetuosity of youth and a lack of vision to the future also may disable them in making wise decisions.

Anger control. Lack of anger control is a problem for some of those fathers who live together with their partners. With the buffer of adult support missing, the stresses of growing up, coping with making a living and domestic life, exacerbate these young men’s tempers:

Like Mandy and I have got into fights over money and the like. She slapped me numerous times. I took it out on myself. If I got mad I punched myself square in the face. I have a scar on my forehead. I did that by hitting it on a door jam, splitting it wide open. I’ve seen counselling about my temper. (Sam)

Sam and Mandy chose to live independently together and cope on their own, but when life became stressful due to lack of finances, continual job searching and poor communication skills, both Sam
and his girlfriend were unable to control their tempers. Their hot tempers, combined with the inability to cope with overwhelming financial demands, resulted in an escalating abusive situation and led to a separation at a time when their daughter was a few months old. Sam was isolated from his own parents at this time and was one of two fathers that had little immediate support at a time of strife.

Neil recognized his inability to control his anger and decided to change his living situation:

We lived together for a couple of months in an apartment. I then just decided that it wasn’t right for Dan to listen to us fight.....We are really stubborn people. We have to learn better listening skills and can’t do it right now...That’s not how a relationship is supposed to work. (Neil)

He realized that he was not able to handle a relationship with Paula that involved fighting. He was prepared to delay making a long term commitment to live with her, in the hope that their relationship would develop in a positive fashion with time. He has also been awakened to his own lack of maturity in certain areas and this has led to his decision to live apart. He spoke of needing to do “more thinking about life and more growing up” (Neil).

It was common to hear those who lived independently with their families speak of a lack of anger control at that time. For those who initially chose to live in this type of living arrangement, consequences usually involved the demise of the relationship, and the commencement of battles over access to the child.

**Stability and maturity.** Although living together with a newborn baby can prove particularly stressful, due to severe financial difficulties, immaturity, and lack of anger control, it is possible for the more mature young father to cope well with his new found independent living with partner and child. Ross exemplifies the latter, as he managed to finish an education and secure a job with a good income by living in his partner’s parental home for a year. He was then ready and prepared to live
independently with his young family:

We were living in her parent’s basement and so we saved money. We ate all our meals with Nina’s parents. While we were there we were buying things we needed. It was O.K. because we could see the light at the end of the tunnel. We actually bought a trailer and it was nice to move in. (Ross)

Ross demonstrated a maturity in his understanding of the benefits of making long term plans and in his acceptance of support. By the time Ross was living in his own place together with his partner, Nina, he was able to put a down payment on a small house and was free of those kind of financial stressors with which others continued to struggle. Maturity, early parental support, good self-control and employment stability enabled this young family to live together independently in a harmonious fashion. This was an uncommon situation among those who decided initially to live independently with their partners. At a time when support was most needed, some chose to struggle alone with financial obligations, failing relationships, and poor anger control.

Separate Locations: Sharing the Responsibility

Four of the teenage fathers are living in separate residences from the mothers of their children. The two fathers who choose to live separately and share responsibility for their children related that this arrangement enables them to be conscientious and caring fathers. The main features related to the success of such an arrangement are cooperation with a partner, and the teenage father’s supportive home environment. Level of maturity of the father also plays an important part. The two who do not choose to live separately have supportive home environments but are unhappily separated from their children’s mothers with communication and cooperation being poor.

Cooperation. Cooperation involves flexibility of arrangements, mature decision-making, respect and consideration for each other. Neil is cooperating with his child’s mother and he described
the easy going, flexible arrangement for care of his son and how responsibilities can be shared:

I had a lot of involvement in the first year including feeding him in the middle of the night. That was pretty good. I usually take him every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It varies sometimes. Sometimes she wants to go out certain days so I take Dan for a couple of extra days or whatever. It goes either way. He stays overnight. I like it...it’s fun. (Neil)

Neil talked of his responsibilities as a father and his willingness to accommodate his son’s mother’s schedule in order to provide consistent care for Dan. This couple have arrived at some mature decisions around the rearing of their child as each is able to give and take in order to provide for his well-being. Neil has maintained respect and consideration for Paula and in his words: “I’m still really fond of her and we’re still friends”.

Liam and his girlfriend both want to have a career and are taking turns in going to college. Their mutual cooperation allows them to provide a stable home for their child as well as achieve their personal goals:

Ann is at college now, but when Kelly is with her, she pays for everything. We stayed friends and worked out a comfortable arrangement. It was her idea to separate but I respect her decision. I want to be there for her. You can’t be a kid and a good parent at the same time. Becoming a father has been a great experience. (Liam)

Liam demonstrates that living in a separate location from a child’s mother still allows full involvement in the care of a child. Through mutual respect and consideration of each other, a couple can work out an optimum situation for all parties concerned.

Supportive home environment. The provision of a supportive environment through living in parental homes is often key to the success of shared child care:

When I’m working at night my parents will take care of Kelly...give her dinner and put her to bed. (Liam)

Liam appreciates the support of his parents and the stability that living at home provides for himself
and his child, and it is in such an environment that he is able to commit himself to being a responsible father.

For Neil and Liam, living separately from their child’s mother is satisfactory for all parties concerned, and the parental support of provided accommodation is to their advantage, both in terms of financial and emotional support. They manage to maintain respect and consideration for their children’s mothers and cooperate in sharing childcare responsibilities, maintaining full involvement with their children.

For Brian, Kevin and Ross, living in a parental home with a baby and partner was supportive financially and to a lesser extent emotionally, but unlike Neil and Liam, they have experienced stressors that include lack of control in decision-making, sometimes an immaturity in mishandling anger, cramped living arrangements and a loss of self-esteem in the inability to be providers for their families. Kevin and Ross now live independently but Brian continues under duress in his current living situation with Sheila’s parents.

Alex and Sam, having prematurely started their teenage fatherhood experience in an independent dwelling with a partner and new baby, found the stress of working at different jobs in order to pay the rent, the lack of readily available parental support, and their own immaturity in handling emotions, contributory to the breakdown of their relationships. Ultimately they had to contend with resulting separations and legal restrictions, and restricted access to their children. The full implications of imposed legal restrictions on these young men due to the break down of relationships with the mothers of their children, will be discussed in a later section.

As illustrated in the discussion on living arrangements, there are a variety of factors that have influenced each young man’s decision on where to live, though it is not always choice that finds him
in a certain situation as it may be his only option due to lack of income. His decision can be influenced by pride associated with the desire to have immediate independence; the pressure from a partner to live together or separately; the desire to get a good post-graduate education with a view to successful long term gain; the wish to accumulate a financial nest egg and hence take advantage of parental support; the recognition of the need of time to mature before assuming full responsibility; a strong belief in harmonious relationships as a basis for childrearing.

It is a complex set of issues that influences the quality of life for each father in his unique living situation. Some young men enjoy the support of parents, with the freedom to share care of the child through living at home, whilst others find this situation stressful due to reduced control over the child, less independence, and lack of space and privacy. Living with a partner can prove satisfactory for those who can control their emotions and have good relationships with their partners, but this arrangement can be detrimental to the health of all concerned for others who lack anger control, and experience multiple stressors, including difficult relationship. The lack of being able to make decisions around living with the child is perhaps the most stressful situation of all for a young father. This powerlessness and the resulting frustration can render a teenage father incapable of being a fully involved, responsible parent.

Unanimously, all talked of their desire to be caring fathers, actively involved in raising their children, but due to unfavorable circumstances some could not live up to their commitments. Each has had to balance coping with childcare activities, a relationship with the child’s mother, his own tasks of adolescence, changes in his role with friends and family as well as the different task of providing money for his family. In the next section, education and employment are examined in the light of the many difficulties faced by these young fathers. Already the discussion on choices of living
arrangements has illuminated the dilemma these fathers face in having to raise money for their new families whilst simultaneously needing to finish an education.

**Education and Employment**

Each teenage father is faced with the challenges of completing his education, finding a job and providing adequate financial support for his "new family". How he copes with these challenges is of particular significance for him, as the normal order of events has been disturbed by the premature arrival of a child, and the capacity and capability to provide for that child is severely hampered by the life cycle stage that he is in as an adolescent. The participants talked of their career goals and the struggle to simultaneously work at several jobs and attend college. A variety of scenarios are seen as some still have to complete high school whilst others are already attending college, and some have steady employment whereas others are searching for jobs.

**Completing School and Career Goals**

Most spoke of challenges encountered in working towards future careers and of efforts to become mobilized in order to finish an education. Four fathers still had to complete high school education at the time of the birth of a baby and each now approaches the business of school work and a career with a unique disposition. These dispositions include states of readiness, confusion and anxiety, ambivalence, and nonchalance around further education due to already having a job. Those who have completed high school all work at jobs and they talked of their difficulties and the practical planning involved in trying to follow a career. Overriding all these patterns of education and career planning, is the concern to provide financially for a family, and this will be discussed in a later section under finding a job and government assistance.

In discussing the different stories of those who have not completed high school, it is
important to note that ambition for a successful career was non-existent and at best vague before and around the time of pregnancy. For some, this has changed and they are now ready to meet the challenge of completing an education, a part of their preparations for the responsibilities of fatherhood.

**Readiness.** Kevin did not have to immediately contend with a job at the time of birth of his child, and with strong family support and childcare, he was able to finish his education and look at the challenge of a new career:

> I never really did well in school before and now that she was pregnant I just decided that I had to do something....So I did my one remaining course in three months and I graduated in the end. I did great in that class.....I have a friend who has shares with this company. He’s in the tour guiding business....wilderness tours and it’s kind of at freezing point right now. He hasn’t had any tours in a while and my friend and I want to take it over. I hope to cut all the new trails and add to the already extensive trails and camps. There’s a tour guide course.....2 ½ months in camp and you get your industrial first aid and your tour guiding license.....So we’re going to take this course and then come back and see whether we can just run the company. (Kevin)

The birth of a child, a true wake-up call, brought him to a new state of realization as regards working towards a career. He is now on the move with one of the tasks of adolescence, that of planning a vocation, and he is starting to deal with some of the practical aspects that this involves.

**Confusion and anxiety.** The birth of a child throws some fathers into a state of confusion and anxiety about the prospect of completing school and planning a career:

> I had to earn money and just be with them because I was overwhelmed - lots of stress right then. I was uncertain about everything. I was working at a restaurant in the evening and for my parents in their business.....I’m worried about my parents. They said they would help me out but I’ve been spending a lot of money. I find budgeting hard. There’s a lot of pressure about school and the money worry is really a burden. (Brian)

Brian had a full year of school to complete at the time of his son’s birth, but he found himself immobilized by the overwhelming demands of childcare and work and was unready to finish school
in spite of family support. Transition to fatherhood was a time of personal crisis, and anxiety about the future and confusion in how to manage his life were and continue to be dominant challenges in Brian’s life.

**Ambivalence.** Sam talked about his ambivalence around completing his highschool education. He is still trying to come to terms with multiple issues in his life, that include, the ability to hold down a job, lack of maturity in terms of unrealistic thinking, unresolved anger, as well as the task of completing highschool courses:

> I am having a hard time with getting steady jobs....I think by getting my grade 12 through correspondence it would kind of help me towards opening my own business. That’s actually a dream of mine....inflatable castles for kids. I mailed away for a big catalogue of all the different huge castles. (Sam)

Sam’s dream to open a business is a long way from being achieved as he struggles to hold down a succession of jobs. He has not attempted to complete his education in the last three years due to time constraints related to his job and childcare responsibilities. His suggestion of taking correspondence courses is not practical as he has trouble remaining at a job for any length of time, as well as care of his daughter for 50% of the time. He is ambivalent and unrealistic about his education and a career, and has not become motivated to put his plans into action.

**Nonchalance.** Neil is another father who described his lack of drive to complete an education. He has a steady job and is nonchalant about the immediate need for education:

> I’m probably going back to college eventually to get a few courses. I think I’d like to get a trade in carpentry and then go into a large business. Right now I’m just not ready for it. (Neil)

Caring for a child and holding a steady job is enough of a challenge for Neil. He is satisfied to remain in construction work and earn a reasonable income, as this allows free time to spend with his son.
He has vague ideas to learn a new skill but has not yet put any plan into action.

Liam, Ross and Alex had completed their high school education by the time their children were born. Their stories illustrate some of the challenges that teenage fathers confront when they attempt to follow a career path, those of hard work and being able to juggle time for study at further education and employment to make money.

**Hard work and practical plans.** Liam takes a practical view at the way he will follow his chosen career path. He carefully plans the care of his child, the method by which he will raise money, and a strategy that will enable him to become an accountant. He faces the challenges of fatherhood in an orderly fashion and recognizes that he cannot achieve all his goals at once. It is important to Liam to be home for his daughter in her infancy: “I could have afforded to go full-time to college but I wanted to be there for the first year” (Liam). He chose to delay his college education in order to work hard at a job, and has taken time to reflect on his choice of future career as he takes on the full-time responsibilities of a father. His mother has agreed to take care of his daughter during the time when he is absent at college:

I hope to get my accounting degree so that I can have a good job and support Kelly when she gets older. I’m probably going back to college next September and I’ll start full-time. (Liam)

Most of the fathers understand the importance of preparing themselves for well-paying jobs so that they can attain a decent standard of living for their families. It is a challenge for them to systematically juggle careers, make money and care for their children through practical thought out plans.

It is striking how all participants spoke of how they are going to great lengths to remain a part of their children’s lives, which sometimes involves the sacrifice of an education and/or career. They
are faced with several obstacles that prevent further education, those of child care, the hard work of different jobs, and for three, their present mental/emotional states. One has already been able to finish his education due to parental support and the lack of constraints on his time, but another finds that he has to first deal with feelings of confusion and anxiety before he is able to concentrate on his school work. Finishing an education sometimes does not seem feasible for someone already burdened with multiple responsibilities. Two of the young fathers do not consider school to be a priority when there are other challenges in their lives of greater importance. They show an ambivalence and nonchalance respectively about the immediate need for a further education. The others work hard to meet the multiple challenges of holding down a job, caring for a child and taking steps towards a long term career. They achieve this through hard work, careful long term planning and by working at one aspect of life at a time. It is of note that the degree of family support and the need to make money also plays a strong part in the choices of all as regards completion of an education or the pursuit of a career.

For most, lack of education is a stumbling block towards future employment and a stable financial situation. It has taken a couple of years for them to sort out their life direction and to recover from the immediate dilemma of coping with a child in their life. All are involved in the lives of their children and with the exception of Kevin, have found some form of employment. The birth of a child has been a wake-up call for all of them, and each has worked hard at trying to provide for his new family, often with the financial backing of his parents. The challenge of completing an education and following a career goal underlies the immediate need to meet new financial obligations. This is addressed by finding employment and/or applying for social assistance. Searching for a job in a small northern community presents a challenge in itself.
Finding Work in a Small Community

In remote northern towns, there are limited number of opportunities for employment especially for those who have sparse educational qualifications or no special skills training. At the time the teenagers’ girlfriends became pregnant, only Neil had a permanent full-time job. He was working for a construction firm and during the summer months made a reasonable income which was enough to sustain himself and his family throughout the year. The others struggled to find work and often worked at two jobs in order to get enough money to pay all the new bills. The struggle to make money is a common theme for all the participants and they spoke of their willingness to work hard at any job that they could find in their community. Finding work in a small community presents different challenges for each father and these involve the drive and persistence of the individual, creativity around employment, personal disposition in “holding down” a job, and personal contacts. It is of significance for Ross that his girlfriend was also searching for work and this will be highlighted at the end of this section.

**Drive and persistence.** Several talked of their drive and persistence in securing a job:

Well I started working at the mill on Friday which is good. I’m glad I got in there but basically over the last couple of years I have been just doing a lot of cement work. Nothing too steady...It’s been sort of tough. I was working and going to school and in between I was collecting UI....trying to save money for the baby. I’ve been struggling at different jobs for a long time. I give Jasmine $200 a month and have an account put away for Steve. (Alex)

I started working at two jobs after Jordan was born. It was not so much to save money but the second job was a higher paying job. The problem was that neither were permanent yet. The other job was to do with renovations at the builders’ centre and that was just temporary. I didn’t want to quit the gas station job as they liked what I did. We wanted to move out of Nina’s parents’ place but I needed a better job for that. I didn’t see my son for those months at Nina’s place as I was working all the time. It was pretty brutal because I had to try so hard. (Ross)

Alex and Ross were persistent in their search to find steady well-paying jobs. They spent long hours
struggling with several jobs in the hopes of providing for their families and in order to work up the job ladder to secure a well-paying job. In rising to meet the challenge of finding employment they led stressful lives. Alex's struggle to make ends meet may well have been contributory to the demise of his relationship with his child's mother. Ross had strong parental support and a mature relationship with his partner and succeeded in "weathering the storm" of early fatherhood. He proved that it is possible by sheer hard work and persistence for a teen dad to make it in the work force.

Creativity. Since it was difficult to find a job in his home town, Brian resorted to his creativity and became self-employed:

Well, I was working for my parents at a restaurant. I was helping them out and they were actually helping me out. The money went towards baby stuff and just saving. I wanted to support my family and so I started my own market business and was successful. I was working at two jobs and making money. (Brian)

He wanted to provide for his family and not rely on the support of his parents. Through being creative, he was not only able to make money but also his successful endeavours raised his self-esteem and fuelled his motivating forces. New found pride in being creative and success in the part-time job field can motivate a young father, and may in turn enable him to go to college and prepare himself for a better job market.

Personal disposition. Personal disposition is an important feature when it comes to holding down a job. For Sam this is an especially relevant point:

I was on and off with work. My job as a delivery man didn't work out because my car broke down as well as being upset with everything else. So I had to quit. Then I washed dishes and was paid $4.25 and hour. I said "no" to that and became a bartender. If it wasn't for this job I'd be really screwed over. (Sam)

As he had a short temper, and a general lack of persistence, Sam never managed to keep a job for very long. He struggled to find jobs and was forced to depend on the welfare system at times. He
still has not come to terms with his own personal issues that include lack of drive to complete his education or the planning of a career. This scenario is shared with Neil, but Sam has the added disadvantage of a poor personal disposition, his greatest challenge.

**Personal contacts.** Personal contacts, whom one knows, maybe of particular importance when it comes to finding a job in a small community. Kevin spoke of his friend whose wilderness company he hopes to join, and Liam’s mother has already provided him with a ready made small business to run. Ross also has had a connection in getting one of his jobs:

I put in some 60 applications around town and pounded the pavement a lot. I actually got a job at the hardware store as Nina’s mom worked there. (Ross)

For the others, finding jobs proved to be difficult. The challenge was so great that their search included another small town some distance away. For Sam and Alex this proved to be stressful as it took away from time with their partners and led to added travel costs. Time away from home may also have lead to the demise of relationships with their children’s mothers.

**Two parent income.** All fathers, with the exception of Ross, have partners who are unemployed. Ross is the only one to have a mortgage and successfully live independently. This is largely due to the fact that the challenge of finding work has not been limited to himself but also his partner, Nina, who has been industrious in finding a steady well-paying job:

Nina was working at the Cold Beer and Wine store and she was working at a catering job so that was kind of stressful. Plus it took a big toll on her health working both jobs and caring for Jordan. When she got home she basically went to bed. It was rough as I had to do everything around the house as well as two jobs. (Ross)

It is economically advantageous to have a girlfriend who is persistent in holding down different jobs. As a result this eases the urgency for the teenage father to find a job as he faces the challenge of raising money in a small community. Poor health and fatigue are costs that Ross and Nina have paid
for their commitment to hard work, a price that many young couples are not willing to pay.

Drive, persistence, creativity and personal contacts often lead to success in actually finding a job. Personal disposition appears to play an important part in being able to remain in a job, which sometimes results in a "climb up the ladder" to success at a higher paying job. Lack of persistence, immaturity and poor personal disposition may lead to difficulty in finding and/or keeping a job, and for a couple of fathers these attributes have led to some degree of dependence on the welfare system.

Government Assistance

Government assistance has been requested infrequently, but those who need a college or university education are forced to rely on student loans. Only Kevin relies entirely on welfare cheques to financially support his family and he is actively searching for a job. The infrequency of requests for government assistance in spite of financial strain in the lives of these fathers, can be related to their pride in providing for their families, their eagerness to be independent of others, and their willingness to work hard at low-paying jobs with supplement income from parents.

Pride. Pride is an issue for all these young fathers. Kevin is the only father collecting welfare assistance, but he is not happy with this situation:

Shannon gets the welfare cheques for her and Cody and soon all three of us are going to be on the same thing....so we'll split one big cheque.....but I don't like it though. I haven't heard anything since my interview but there are prospects. (Kevin)

As a matter of pride, Kevin does not like to receive welfare assistance but at present there is no alternative method by which he can support his family. He is actively searching for a job but as yet has not been successful. Leaving the community is not considered a viable option for the majority of the fathers as each wants to be a presence in his child's life.
**Independence.** There is an eagerness to be self-supporting and any myth about depending on handouts is dispelled. None of the fathers directly receive the family bonus for their children, and Liam, who is currently the main caregiver of his daughter and entitled to this money, has not claimed it for his own use. He mentioned: “I don’t get any government assistance but I think Ann gets the child support”. Liam is content with this state of affairs and is working to provide for his child. He does mention that Ann sees their daughter on weekends and is involved in her life, and so assumes she spends the money appropriately. This assumption suggests that there is a good bond of trust in Liam and Ann’s relationship, which is not always the case in other separated parent relationships. In spite of the availability of government assistance, these young fathers want to work hard and independently support their families. They do not abuse the social welfare system and are constantly looking at ways to avoid having to access such assistance.

**Low-paying jobs and parent support.** There is a willingness to avoid welfare assistance by working hard at a variety of low-paying jobs, and accepting parental support is common place:

I live back with my parents now and so I don’t have to pay rent. I’m now part-time at the builder’s supplier. I might get full-time in the spring. The pay isn’t enough for rent as I was only making $300. As a single independent on welfare I’d get $500. It makes me angry as I work hard and avoid collecting welfare. (Sam)

Sam has gone to great lengths to avoid collecting welfare assistance. He has worked at numerous low-paying jobs in the past and is forced to live with his parents in order to “make ends meet”. It is common place for these fathers to go to great lengths to avoid dependance on the welfare system. Brian who is incurring student loan debts talked of his anxiety around paying it back: “I think there’s some remission that you can apply for and you only have to pay back half. It is a concern”. These young men are proud and try to remain independent of social assistance even if it means depending
on parents for awhile. They are committed to the grind of working at different jobs in order to provide for their families.

In spite of the struggle of finishing an education, attending college and working at a variety of low paid jobs, most fathers are currently managing to earn a reasonable income. They are determined to support themselves and their families and become independent, but have had to rely on support from parents or government assistance at some point along the way. Each father mentioned a career goal, though some goals are more realistic than others. Their states of readiness to pursue a career varied, some being ready, and others being either anxious and confused, ambivalent or nonchalant. The struggle has been tough for those who sought immediate independence from their families and may have led to separation from partners for two of the fathers. There is no common thread in education and job status, but for each there is a common goal to work hard and provide for his family. This has been achieved to date through immediate income from a low paying job and parental support and for a few, through welfare support. Some are pursuing the appropriate education that eventually will secure a good long-term earning potential, and share a strong work ethic and the ability to make practical long distance plans.

Perhaps the most critical part of the curve ball thrown into life is the struggle the young fathers face in dealing with the evolving relationships with their children’s mothers. The quality of this relationship is is particularly significant when it comes to the shared responsibility of raising a child. The fathers did not anticipate long term commitments to their girlfriends before the time of pregnancy, but when they realized they were to become parents, they decided to provide support and work at their relationships. These relationships have all developed under strained living circumstances and the ongoing struggle to finish an education and make money.
Relationship With the Mother

Relationship issues concerning the mother of the child are central to the participants’ stories, and all of them speak of the ongoing task of working at these relationships. The relationships with the mothers of their children changed at the time of the pregnancy, resulting in a spectrum of situations including marriage, common-law relationships, friendships, as well as bitter separations and custody battles. Relationship issues are found to be critical as regards each father’s ability to spend time or gain access to his child. The latter sometimes involves the legal system and child support. It is of particular significance when it comes to the shared responsibility of raising a child that both parents show respect and support for each other and work together to create a healthy environment for their child. This can be achieved when a couple lives together or apart, but unfortunately is not the case for all teenage father participants. Relationship issues are discussed in terms of those who are either married or in a common-law partnership, friends or legally separated. It is of special note that young fathers recognize the state of motherhood and have heightened awareness of a young mother’s needs.

Married and Common-Law Relationships

As regards those who live together with their partners, respect, personal maturity and past experiences are important factors that contribute to the success of the relationship and the ability to provide a conducive environment in which to raise a child. “Toughing it out” due to fear of loss of the child through separation, immaturity and self-centeredness are features of less successful relationships.

Respect, maturity and past experience. One couple demonstrates that living together in an environment of mutual respect with the bonus of maturity and experience can lead to a successful
relationship in spite of youth:

Nina is pretty good. She is very understanding. I am not as patient as her with the children. She is very self-sufficient, self-reliant. We are very similar that way. Both of us have a good work ethic. I don't have much time for feelings, but Nina's really good and she helps me a lot. She is also good at dealing with stress. (Ross)

Ross spoke with admiration of the qualities that his wife possesses and told of her support of himself. He is aware of his own failings and strengths and believes in working together with Nina on their relationship. In this way they support each other and provide a healthy environment for their child. From past experience, he has learned what facilitates a healthy relationship:

The thing is if you don't stay with the mother, then "be there" for the child and support her too...don't talk her down. My parents divorced when I was two and there was no fighting. It is important to work it out for the kid. Don't necessarily stay together but just "be there" for the kid. If you fight there will always be tension and so it is better to take the child somewhere. (Ross)

Ross experienced living in a single parent home as a child, and believes that it is not healthy for a child to live in a home where the parents do not get along. Since he spoke so respectfully of his own wife there is suggestion that he is reflecting on the mature decisions of his own parents and not on any failings over decisions in his own marriage. Past experience from his own parents' failed marriage acts as a motivator and enables him to make wise choices in his own relationships. Ross and Nina have worked hard at their partnership, and together have insights, maturity and common respect for each other.

Fear of loss of child. Kevin and Brian have had different experiences from that of Ross, and find living with their partners most stressful. The main issue for those who remain in stressful relationships, is the fear of losing the child if separation does occur. These fathers believe in "toughing it out" and live in relationships that suggest poor communication and less than ideal
situations in which to raise children. Unreadiness to work at a relationship is a reminder of tasks of adolescence uncompleted:

I’ve heard so many things about her leaving or staying. It is all so confusing. I’m not ready to leave yet. Being a family is important to me. I was brought up in a different way than Sheila and it’s kind of annoying the way she was brought up as she is really picky. Sometimes I talk to my girlfriend a lot but sometimes I’m scared that she might not understand. It is good for Luke for us to stay together but we’re not too sure if it’s good for us… well, kind of. If we don’t end up together she will obviously get custody. I’m not really worried about this yet. If you separate the family it would be hard on her. I don’t think too much about it but I do just sometimes, just in case. (Brian)

Brian worries about his future relationship with Sheila and is unable to communicate effectively with her. He is scared that he will lose contact with his son if they separate, and this fear prevents him mobilizing towards a more life-giving arrangement. Life is stressful in living with Sheila’s parents due to the fact that Brian has little control over his child’s care and that he disagrees with their values around childrearing. Brian spoke with some ambivalence as he mentioned that he thinks it is in his son’s best interest that he and Sheila stay together even though he is unhappy with his circumstances. His choice to “tough it out” may be detrimental to his own personal growth, and he feels insecure and distrustful of his partner. At the present time he is content with the status quo as he wants to get his career established and some form of independence before deciding on issues around the relationship.

Immaturity and self-centeredness. Kevin may well be afraid of losing involvement with his child if he and Shannon separate, and it is possibly lack of maturity that leaves him largely unable to work at a supportive relationship and provide a healthy atmosphere at home for his son. The way this couple plan their recreation time sheds some light on the quality of their relationship:

My best buddy, he’s always there to talk to and always around. I don’t really have a special night out but whenever I want to I just say that I plan on going out on this night for a couple of hours. Thursday night is Shannon’s night out to go out with her friends and do whatever. We talk about it but the system is like that. You’ve got to be open otherwise dust builds up
in the closet, you know? (Kevin)

Kevin and Shannon do not share the same groups of friends and spend their leisure time away from each other. This arrangement works for this couple but it is questionable how much they have in common, and it is apparent that life goes on with friends as in the period before the baby was born. This couple have not yet worked through the tasks of adolescence. Living together without parental support is stressful and they need time to leave the self-centeredness of youth behind and focus on the best arrangement for their child.

Friendship With the Mother of the Child

Liam and Neil have both succeeded in maintaining friendships with their partners and due to open communication and respect, they are able to share responsibility and care of their children and be supportive to each other in a way that is conducive to all who are involved:

It was her idea but I respected her decision. I didn’t like it at the time because I had a strong feeling for her and it was a bit of a shock, but I came to accept it. I don’t want to get my hopes up and strive for something that might not happen. We went steady for quite a while and then we drifted apart. (Liam)

Some fathers are able to take a mature attitude in dealing with rejection and do not have any false expectations of resuming relationships. In treating each other with respect, trust and understanding, Liam and Ann keep up a friendship and are still able to communicate with ease over issues to do with Kelly. Liam also has the ongoing support of his parents which enables him to go to college, work at a part-time job and raise his daughter. The environment for Kelly is both harmonious and supportive, with both parents actively contributing to her care. It is possible for separated teenage parents to rear their children in satisfactory ways for all concerned. A mature attitude, the child’s best interests at heart, and family support are all essential to this success.
Legally Separated

For those who legally separate, there is the problem of child custody and shared access to the child. If the relationship with the mother of the child is poor, resulting in lack of effective communication and cooperation, a bitter struggle for paternal access to the child ensues. Legal restrictions applied to the young father often lead to feelings of being cheated and anger, and loss of self-esteem resulting in depression. It is also striking how the interference of maternal parents can affect access to the child and further exacerbate a failing relationship with the child’s mother.

Alex and Sam are both legally separated from their children’s mothers and exhibit all the described scenarios. Relationships with their children’s mothers are poor and they have had the heart-breaking task of trying to remain involved in their children’s lives.

Cheated: Anger. The inability to be fully involved with the child and have a real say in his or her life is an issue for those who are unhappily, legally separated from their ex-partners and children. They spoke of the frustrations and bitterness experienced through this enforcement of living apart from their children for at least 50% of the time:

And when Katie is old enough to realize who is dad and who is mom, and with whom she wants to live, I will be more than happy to take her. This all drives me crazy. I don’t pay child support but I take her for half of the time and spoil her. I’m more than happy to take her to the dentist or the doctor and go half and half with the bills. I feel like I got the short end of things as a parent because being separated I missed a lot of my child’s growing up....the best years. (Sam)

Sam finds it unbearable to not have his daughter at home with him all the time, and indicated feeling cheated of what he considers his right to be fully involved as a father. He assumes if Katie had to make a choice, she would choose to live with her father. Sam has not considered that the child may also be attached to her mother as well as himself, and is focused on his own feelings as opposed to
the best interests of his child. He is also struggling with normal adolescent self-centeredness though irrespective of the complications of living separately from his ex-partner, Sam is willing to share responsibility for his child in every way.

Sam exposed his feelings about the loss of relationship with his ex-partner and lack of full-time access to his daughter, through displays of anger and frustration:

"It really hurt the hell out of me. It really hurt......we were planning on getting married, having another kid and settling down. This drives me crazy....Mandy way out there and we're separated. I've tried to get back together with her, but she's stubborn and says, 'No, I was never happy'. I wanted it to be the mother and the father.....I still have feelings for her." (Sam)

The concept of not rearing his child in a traditional family unit is unacceptable to Sam and he perceives his separation as a personal failure. As a result of this, he struggles with feelings of anger, disbelief and loss of respect for himself. Young fathers can experience a tremendous sense of powerlessness in their roles as separated fathers.

The compromising situation of not living full-time with the child, with legal restrictions placed on time with the child, is one that many may have to face if they are not able to come to amicable resolutions with their partners over the care of their children. Their youth and resulting difficulty in handling their emotions are all part of this unsatisfactory picture. Difficulty in accessing the child was only highlighted by those who are already legally separated from their children's mothers.

**Low self-esteem and depression.** Alex spoke of his ongoing struggle to share in his son's life after his girlfriend had left him. In a state of low self-esteem and depression, he returned to live in his parents' home for financial reasons and emotional support, and it was a year before he felt able to go to court and take responsibility for his son:

"It was hard. It was tough....I didn’t know what to do. I went out to her place and I don’t
know what her family thought of me, probably that I was a psycho or something. I had to go out of town to see my son. There was so much stress but at least I am smiling now. It is a lot better. It was just whenever I could get a glimpse of him. I went for a year without seeing him. (Alex)

He talked of the despair and desperation that he went through when his girlfriend and child moved to her parents’ home and he couldn’t live with his son. His own immobilization, most likely due to low self-esteem and depression, led to the total absence of involvement with his son. The pain of living apart from his son was immense for this teenager and he explained why he did not see his son or seek help in order to gain access to him:

She (Jasmine) wouldn’t let me see him. I told myself I didn’t want everything rushing in on me because I wasn’t feeling good, and I didn’t want to go through the court. So I just calmed down a little bit and tried to get a hold of her to work something out and let my son see me and if that doesn’t work we’ll have to go to court. I felt like I was something in the way. The mother said she figured I was being selfish and to not stop in and scare my son. It was all too much. (Alex)

For Alex life was particularly overwhelming and frustrating immediately after separation. He could not contend with his feelings of inadequacy gained through perception of himself as a detrimental influence on his child. His ex-partner had him convinced that he should not be a part of his child’s life and made it impossible for him to access his child. As a result, he became confused, depressed and immobilized, and unable to address the court system for legal rights to see his child. It is the perceived inadequacy of this young man’s abilities as a father that directly affect his continued performance as a father.

The lowering of self-esteem and resulting depression are found to be common place among those dealing with separation issues and poor relationships with their partners. This is often compounded by incessant fighting over gaining access to see the child, which is made worse by interference of the ex-partner’s mother. Alex spoke of the interference of his ex-partner’s mother:
"When Jasmine left, her mom got in there. She's very overpowering". It is important to note the power of maternal grandparents in influencing the amount of access and control a teenage father has over his child. Not only does he find himself intimidated and physically barred from seeing his child, but his ex-partner can be heavily influenced in her own decision-making, not always with everyone’s best interests at heart.

**Recognition of the State of Motherhood**

In spite of bitter separations and relationship problems, the teenage fathers share a common recognition of the stresses associated with the state of motherhood:

I just stick with him (Cody) and the mother too because she goes through a lot of difficult changes in the pregnancy. Everything is different afterwards too. (Kevin)

She never drank or nothing. She’s a good mother....I never cut her down in front of my son. I always have something nice to say.....I always say good stuff. I have a lot of respect for women. I realize it is hard. It’s a lot of responsibility and work. She has a lot more of that than I do. (Alex)

Alex is careful in being positive and respectful in his attitude towards his ex-partner for the sake of his son’s happiness and well-being, a sign of his maturity and adaptation of the parent role. He also spoke of the deep respect he has gained for women through his experience of seeing his girlfriend give birth and cope with a child, a remark that illustrates his lack of self-centeredness and ability to empathize with others. In spite of the pain he has suffered during a bitter separation, he realizes that Jasmine has been through a lot of hardship too and bears her no grudge.

Both Kevin and Alex spoke with sensitivity about the difficult task of being a mother and are certainly not the “macho men” so often identified with teenage fathers. In spite of unsatisfactory relationships with their children’s mothers, they come across as decent caring individuals with heightened awareness of young mothers’ needs.
Most are still struggling with some aspect of their relationship with the mother of their child. One father has achieved a mutually supportive relationship with his partner and demonstrates a level of caring and unselfishness. Many of the other fathers struggle with the inability to move beyond thoughts about themselves and other tasks of adolescence. Some live in fear of separation in the likelihood that they may lose access to the child, or because they cannot conceive the thought of the child without a mother and father under one roof. Consequently they are willing to live in stressful dischordant circumstances which may negatively affect all household members. The fear of losing full access to a child as a result of separation is realized for two of the participants, and for one of those fathers, maternal grandparent interference makes life especially difficult.

Many are able to be supportive and respectful to their partners even if they do not get along. There is a common recognition among all fathers that mothers deserve this support and respect. Some couples choose to live separately but their relationships are such that open communication, trust and lack of criticism about each other enhances their own lives and that of their children. For those who do not achieve such relationships, anger, feeling cheated, loss of self-esteem and depression may follow, with difficulties arising over access to the child.

All the participant fathers care deeply for their children in spite of the spectrum of different relationships with the mothers of their children, and the majority reckon that the curve ball thrown into life, the challenges that result from unexpected fatherhood, are well worth it. As Brian summed it up: “It is a wonderful thing to have a child”.

Father/Child Involvement

Most of the fathers have found a compromise in living as a teenager and coping with the duties of a father. Some of the main points that they described around their involvement with their
children, center around emotions that deal with the joy and wonderment in having a child, the excitement and pride in being a parent, feelings associated with ambivalence around childrearing, and impatience over unrealistic expectations concerning the child. Restricted access to the child naturally limits this involvement, and in discussion around this topic they spoke of their frustrations with the legal system, lack of ex-partner cooperation, low self-esteem, missing out on the child’s development, and concern for the safety of the child. Other topics that were highlighted pertained to various issues around discipline and values, positive and negative role models, and health and development. As illustrated in the previous section, the young father’s relationship to the child’s mother is critical to the amount of involvement he is able to have with his child, especially if legal restrictions on visitation have been imposed. This aspect is further elaborated in the discussion on access to the child.

Emotions of Fatherhood

Joy and wonderment. The teenage fathers commonly spoke of enjoying the company of their children and to date most reckon fatherhood to have been a great experience:

...the special things that she does with you that are our little games and things. It’s a lot of fun. At 4:30 in the morning a few months ago, she stood up in her crib and went “Daddy, Daddy”. That’s the first time she had ever said that... It was the most amazing feeling and I wanted to call Ann and say: “Hey, you know she’s talking.” (Liam)

Liam has discovered the joy and wonderment of being a parent. He is particularly happy to hear his daughter talk as there were concerns about her ability to hear and hence speak. He has fully accepted his paternal role and the responsibilities that this entails, which include getting up in the night to attend to his daughter. It is of note that Liam mentioned his awareness of his own personal growth as well as the physical growth of his daughter:

It was a time for learning about myself and what I’m capable of doing and then watching this little person grow. (Liam)
Liam’s response to the call to fatherhood has favorably impacted on his own development. He has a new self-awareness and a maturity that allows him insight into his new role of being responsible for someone else. Most fathers spoke with confidence about their new roles, and having adapted well to new relationships with their children. However compromising the circumstances have been around the birth of a child, they have all been filled with joy and wonderment at the small person that has entered each of their lives.

**Excitement and pride.** All spoke of pride in their children and how each day holds a new element of surprise and excitement:

It’s my little girl and she’s precious to me. Like absolutely! She is adorable. I went to my friend’s place with her and she’ll out of the blue say right away, “That’s my Daddy”. Then she hugs my leg and that feeling there, it’s like, I’m real proud and everything. (Sam)

Like today he enjoyed helping me pull the stumps out and stuff and...you can hold a conversation with him and he talks non-stop. I like it when I’m working in the house and he comes around and he’s got his little hammer with him. He helps me sometimes. I quite enjoy doing stuff like that...more and more actually. I am a pretty proud dad. (Ross)

It is apparent that involvement in parenting enhances both Sam and Ross’s own sense of satisfaction and self-worth. Ross enjoys seeing his son emulate himself and both fathers admit to liking their children’s company. Pride in having a child is a common theme that was related in all discussions. It is apparent that the young men enjoy the admiration of their children and being such special and important individuals in their lives. This sense of significance in another’s life has greatly enhanced the self-confidence of most of them.

**Ambivalence.** Some talked of their ambivalence around life with a child:

Watching him grow up is pretty exciting. Like I’ve seen him grow from a little baby, when he couldn’t even sit up, and now he’s walking around and got his own language. He’s got a little personality alright. I swear he talks Chinese or something. Sometimes it’s pretty tough. A lot of hard days we are both pretty tired and all day long we run around after him.
He started walking recently and chasing him around can make me irritable. But I still have the ability to go to my friends as usual with him. It worked out pretty well. There’s not much that I would change. (Kevin)

Kevin still wants to live the more carefree life of a teenager and may lack the ability or motivation to sacrifice his old lifestyle. He is simultaneously thrilled at observing his child’s development, yet frustrated at his own lack of patience which is frequently tested by the activity of a child and the restrictions placed on his desired lifestyle. He is not unusual in that he manages to find a compromise in his way of socializing by the inclusion of his newly mobile son on visits to his friends.

**Impatience.** Impatience with the child due to unrealistic expectations was mentioned by several:

He used to speak really clearly and then his speech started getting a little off. The doctor said it was probably something to do with his ears. What bugged me is that before this was diagnosed he heard me fine. Suddenly he is not listening. It nearly drove me nuts but now I’m learning to be more patient. Kids don’t do what you tell them. At work I say this is what we are going to do and the guy does it. No questions asked. When I come home I say “Jordan go and get dressed” at least five times and he finally goes and gets dressed. He can dress himself and so I try not to do it for him. (Ross)

They are frustrated by unrealistic expectations of their children. Ross is easily irritated by the antics of a preschooler, and finds it hard to cope with his son’s impaired hearing. It is also common for fathers to have false expectations around child age appropriate responses. Their lack of knowledge around child development and “the impatience of youth” result in extreme frustration around dealing with some of their children’s behaviors. Several expect their children to respond in the same way as adults and this adds to their frustrations in child-rearing.

The teenage fathers are no different from any other father in having the capacity to fully enjoy their role as fathers and interact in positive ways with their children. The joy and wonderment, excitement and pride in having children, and seeing themselves as capable, caring men, carries them
through the frustrations of coping with early fatherhood. This is at a time when they have not yet learned to deal with youthful impatience and the general tasks of passing through adolescence. Lack of knowledge around child development with unrealistic expectations of the child’s abilities, lead to impatience and ambivalence around loss of free time versus time with the child, and are negative factors that can impede the success of the relationship with the child.

Issues Associated With Access to Child

The two participants who have court ordered access to their offspring are trying to be actively involved in their children’s lives. Around the time of his child’s birth, each had striven to achieve independence from parents, but this had resulted in an immediate urgency to make money thereby adding more stress on the family unit. Living away from parents excludes the convenience of ready made babysitting services, some prepared meals and a source of emotional support.

Some of the heartaches related to lack of involvement with a child that are created by legal restrictions were highlighted by the fathers. These have to do with direct frustrations with the legal system, lack of cooperation and denial of visitation rights by the child’s mother, sadness at missing out on some of the child’s development, and concern for the safety of the child.

Frustrations with the legal system. Alex talked about the unfairness of the legal system and his experience with restrictions on seeing his child:

I ended up taking her to court... I was denied my rights. I wasn’t able to see him too much and all that. It seemed like it was more for her than myself and I felt like I was something in the way for the longest time. I’ve worked but sometimes I’ve gone a couple of months without work. That is pretty stressful because I would have liked to see him more. (Alex)

Alex’s visiting rights are contingent on making child support payments. Therefore due to lack of employment and a shortage of money it has been difficult for him to have meaningful visitations with
his child on a regular basis. In the past, Alex’s ex-partner has used this lack of ability to meet financial demands as a way to limit his time with his son. Both Alex and Sam suggested that, as fathers they do not have equal legal rights with their ex-partners, to assume care for their children, and the access they have secured is at an unfair financial cost. For Alex, payments are often impossible due to poor employment opportunities and lack of qualifications to access the job market. On the other hand, Sam’s ex-partner, Mandy, in the meantime, receives the child support cheque and is not asked to make financial contributions even when care is loaded in the direction of Sam. He is considered privileged in being able to access his child, yet the mother is considered burdened in caring for the child. All of the participants indicated a desire to work and care for their children, and are able to provide for them in ways that are not always financial. They believe that society is still not legally recognizing the full role of a father.

Lack of ex-partner cooperation. Those who are separated rely heavily on cooperation from their ex-partners in order to be able to spend time with their children:

Well, the child went with his mother. We were going through a lot of conflict. The mother was always negative. I have to phone 24 hours before I am to see Steve and then I only get him for the weekend. (Alex)

Alex and Sam are both separated and they do not have positive relationships with their ex-partners. This has created difficulties with visitations and in particular, affects Alex’s confidence in his parenting abilities. It is noteworthy how perceived failure of self as a good father leads to a lack of involvement with the child and how perceived success has the opposite effect. Most perceive themselves as capable in their paternal roles, and take a pride in new found successes, but for Alex, this perception is different. He is recovering from the past bitter criticism of his relationship with his son by his ex-partner and her mother:
I don’t want to scare him or have him disappointed in me. I don’t want to be a failure as a father. I don’t want to be worrying about that. I want everything to be good. We play soccer and he likes swimming - just outdoor stuff. It’s nice. (Alex)

Alex doubts his own abilities as a father and has a poor self-image and little self-confidence. His state of low self-esteem and sense of failure left him insecure at the time of separation and this was magnified by accusations about his lack of ability as a parent by his ex-partner. He mentioned: “Communication has now improved between us and I can spend time with Steve”. He received some counselling and is now starting to feel better about himself, and is able to work out his problems with his ex-partner. He is aware how the positive change in his relationship with her has affected his ability to secure more time with his son, and this in turn has enhanced his self-esteem.

**Missing out on child’s development.** One aspect of living apart from a child is that of missing out on developmental stages. Sam spoke of his sadness and frustration at not being able to witness his daughter’s developmental progress:

The thing that is really disappointing is that I missed so much. Well, I saw her first steps but the words and talking, I missed that. I really want to be there for her and everything. (Sam)

Sam regrets that he cannot be totally involved in his daughter’s life and he shared his feelings about this. Others who are not fully participating in childcare expressed the same grievance and found it difficult to contend with missing out on their children’s lives.

**Concern for safety of child.** Not only were frustrations with the legal system voiced as regards an inherent unfairness due to bias in favor of the mother, but one teenage father told of his concern for the safety of his child in a situation which he could not monitor:

I think the system should allow me more time with my child. It’s more on the mom’s side. Mandy would always win - it is just unreal. There are times when I go over to her place and it’s like a pigsty and have some real concerns around abuse. I went up to her boyfriend who treats her like crap.....I spent all Christmas eve with Katie because she had a bruise on the
inside of her ear. I didn't know where it was from. I just took her home and had her examined by the doctor. He said: “I suspect child abuse and I have to report this”. They said it was either a twist, pull or a punch. If anybody is doing this to harm my child I will kill them. (Sam)

Sam believes that the courts do not recognize that a mother's home situation may be potentially unsafe for a child. He is concerned that there is no apparent assessment of the suitability and safety of the child's environment. Sam pointed out that an ex-partner's new boyfriend may impact negatively on the quality of life of a child, and that a father has no control over this. He has well placed anxiety around his concern over the sort of care his child is receiving. Child abuse is an issue that is in the forefront for those who cannot monitor the care of their children.

The two fathers, who have court ordered access to their children, spoke of their desire to be actively involved in their children's lives. Even when legal rights to be an active parent have been secured, they find that conditions are stressful and loaded in favor of the mother's rights to her child and not necessarily in the best interest of the child.

In conclusion, some fathers have an ongoing struggle with their feelings of frustration with the legal system, poor partner cooperation, low self-esteem, feelings of "missing out" and concern for the child's safety, all making it difficult to get "back on their feet". As Alex points out: “I was pretty young, wild and all that. I now have to collect my thoughts a little bit more. I guess there is stress in every area and a lot of things could be a lot better”.

**Discipline and Values**

Various challenges around matters of discipline and values are common place. It could be suggested that the inexperience of youth might exacerbate some of the normal struggles around such issues as those of agreeing on methods of discipline, fear of rejection by the child and appropriate
discipline use. It is important to recognize that some fathers live in parental homes, and as a consequence, house rules can become a source of conflict when trying to discipline children. The teenage father's own father role model plays an important part in his choice of discipline, and each described behaviors in his own father that he wished to emulate and those that he did not want to adopt.

**Conflict over methods of discipline.** For the most part, all have sorted out methods of discipline for their children but they often described the differences that they have in disciplining from that of their children's mothers:

> When Cody pulls a cord out of the wall, I say, "Cody, no!" and he'll get all sad and start crying. That's O.K. because he knows not to touch. Shannon says you shouldn't do that or he'll start hitting you back or something. He is not going to hit me back in a hurry. You've got to teach him a lesson. That is my philosophy. If he is doing something wrong and you sit him down, he's already back there in like two seconds. There has to be some significance that shows it's not for them. (Kevin)

Kevin has strong views on punishing his two year old child that involve the raising of his voice and corporal punishment. In contrast, his partner believes in talking to her son and teaching him boundaries. Agreeing on a method of discipline with a partner is a common difficulty, and many have had no information sessions on childrearing. This may be common for all parents but especially difficult for an adolescent couple who are still sorting out their own values in life and often have not been around other people's babies and young children.

**Fear of rejection by child.** Those who are separated from their children's mothers, share a common concern about fear of rejection by a child as a result of loss of popularity. Alex described his difficulties around his ability to discipline his child, who lives for the most part in another family situation:
It is a pretty tough situation there. I don’t know what to do. My son is getting pretty wild and I don’t want to spank him because I don’t often see him. It’s hard for me to talk to him because he doesn’t listen to me. I told her (Jasmine) to do something about it. As a dad, I would probably give him a smack on the butt but I’m not going to do that because he won’t come to see me again. I don’t want to give him a reason to be afraid of me. (Alex)

Alex lives in fear of rejection from his son and as a result is struggling with the dilemma of whether to be firm or lenient with his son. He is anxious that if he is strict with his son, Steve will not want to spend time with him and as a consequence he has poor control of his child’s behavior. He talked of his lack of skills in effective disciplining, and how low self-esteem leaves him unable to risk the consequences of disciplinary action. Young fathers want to be perceived by their children as good fathers, but those who are engaged in separation arrangements are at risk of being criticized by their ex-partners, which also leaves them open to rejection by their children. It is therefore difficult for the separated father to discipline effectively as he will be conveniently misnamed as the “bad guy”.

**Appropriate discipline.** Sam talked about his strengths as a disciplinarian but his conversation raised questions on the type of discipline used, especially as he had previously discussed his lack of anger control:

She’s really good with me. I don’t know why Mandy has problems with her. I don’t know what she does. If Katie does something I’ll say: “Do you want me to spank your bum?” Now I don’t hit her but it’s just the fact that I’m saying it. She’ll stop instantly. One thing I’ve noticed with Mandy is that she doesn’t make her say “please” and “thank you”, and that is a must with me. That’s polite. I want a polite child. If she asks for something I say: “What do you say?”, and she says: “Peeese”, like that and then she gets it. (Sam)

Although separated, he does not have Alex’s fear of rejection and spoke with pride about his skills in disciplining his daughter and of positive results achieved. It is questionable how he would respond if his child ignored him and as a consequence carry through with his threats to hit her, as in his own words he “has a short fuse”. He has much self-confidence and is definite in asserting himself as a
strong father influence. He demonstrates that it is possible to discipline effectively as a separated parent, but his methods may involve corporal punishment which indicates a gap in knowledge on methods of disciplining and appropriate use of discipline techniques.

**House rules.** Discipline methods and value systems often differ between the teenage father and his partner but this is compounded when the couple live in an extended family home. It is often difficult to work out compromises as it is usually the house rules that are the standard:

Yeah, feeding is a worry for me because I was brought up in a different way than Sheila. She doesn’t eat anything, including fish. I don’t know if it’s right, but I was forced to eat and therefore I like food now...I don’t want my son to be a fussy eater too. It’s hard because we always end up arguing about it and it has always been an issue. (Brian)

Having two different value systems in a parental home adds to the conflict between a young couple. This is a fragile situation for a young man living in his partner’s family home and one that will probably not be resolved until the couple live independently.

It is evident that all the fathers wish to adhere to some definite standards, some having the ability to be more successful and determined than others in living up to these standards. All seven are trying to cope with the challenge of disciplining their children, and this is not an easy task when living in parental homes or if responsibilities for childrearing are shared by separated parents. Some struggle with frustrations around discipline methods, sorting out their values, their sense of powerlessness in disciplining effectively, fear of rejection by the child and parental interference in disciplining, but each is conscious that the use of discipline is an integral part of responsible childrearing. It is also part of the challenge of relating to a child which is common to all fathers.

**Role Models**

All expressed some ambivalence around modeling themselves on family members. Some like
to model themselves on their own fathers or grandfathers, and others are making a point to avoid behaving like them. Some have tried to correct what was missing for them in their own childhood and mentioned: “I keep telling myself not to become like my dad”, (Liam). They do not want to become like their own fathers, and emulate favorable behaviors and omit negative behaviors. These negative behaviors include verbal abuse, general lack of anger control, and lack of intimacy, whereas a good work ethic and responsible parenting were mentioned as admirable qualities to copy.

**Negative behaviors.** Neil spoke with some ambivalence about his father as he recognized much goodness in his fathering skills but also remembered how he had suffered as a child from his father’s verbal abuse:

> There are a lot of things that I didn’t like that my dad did...when you are a little kid you get yelled at by your dad and stuff like that. He always seemed to try and make a way to help us out...he was always there. He was a good dad other than the verbal stuff. I heard my parents fighting and it made me cry. There will be no fighting and yelling. I don’t freak out on my son. (Neil)

This young father has made some unselfish choices around the kind of father he wishes to be for his son. He has made a commitment to try and not emulate his father’s fighting and shouting in order to spare his son the type of pain and fear that he experienced as a child. The fact that Neil decided to live separately from his girlfriend, (with whom he continually fought), in order to raise his child in a peaceful environment, is a strong sign of this commitment. Experience has taught wisdom to some whose own fathers did not set limitations on their frustrations and anger.

Others have made efforts to not lose their tempers in front of their children:

> If he tests me I will do something else to change the subject. I think he knows I’m doing that and so he’s fishing around to get under my skin. I don’t like yelling but sometimes there’s no way around it. (Alex)

Alex spoke of partial success in his efforts to curb his anger. He is possibly among those who learned
to exhibit anger in destructive ways when upset in their families of origin, and now shares a common struggle to correct behaviors of which he is not proud.

Positive behaviors. Ross reflected that for the most part, his family of origin had provided him with suitable role models:

I would say actually my grandfather is more of a father figure, not because lack of effort from my dad but simply because my mother moved back on to my grandfather’s farm. He was the guy I saw all the time. My dad was responsible as well and had a good work ethic. I behave a lot like both my dad and grandfather with my son. I try to be close to my son but I might now be as close as I should be. I think it is to do with my grandfather being very old school - he never said much but always let me tag along. He wouldn’t talk about feelings. I try to be closer to my kid and I’m working at it. I’m just not good with feelings. (Ross)

Ross shows some ambivalence about himself as a role model, as he is generally proud of his similarity to his father and grandfather as regards their strong work ethic and responsible parenting, but is disappointed in his lack of ability to be intimate. He hopes to change this latter aspect of his relationship with his own son and is making a conscious effort to connect at a deeper level. Several have difficulty in dealing with intimacy issues, often influenced by the culture in which they were raised and by the fact that they are still dealing with the tasks of adolescence.

Most tend to have mixed feelings about their own fathers as role models. Whatever messages have been heard around fathering skills, all the teenage fathers are trying to rectify those areas of fathering that they consider were problematic during their own childhood and put into practice those skills that are worth copying.

Health and Development

For a small cohort, the participants have experienced a high incidence of medical problems with their children including, prematurity complications, problems associated with jaundice, deafness,
speech delays and suspected child abuse. This has caused much anxiety, and the progressive
developmental stages of their children have given rise to some added concerns. Certain factors
influenced their experiences with their children’s health and development, those pertaining to
information on health and development, unexpected changes in health status, emotional support for
themselves, and multiple family health issues.

Information on health and development. Several spoke of their lack of knowledge around
child health and development issues, and their unpreparedness for events to do with these issues:

He was in a Vancouver hospital for three or four days. I wasn’t there but I almost cried when
I saw him because he had black eyes and half his face swollen and 42 staples across his head.
I learned the hole in his head was too small for his brain to grow and so they cut the
bone. (Kevin)

Teenage fathers often lack information on child development and childrearing, but the arrival of a
premature baby leaves any father unprepared and nervous. Kevin was ill-prepared for the events
around prematurity and was given little explanation as to what was happening to his child.
Consequently, he exhibited a high degree of anxiety around health problems and mentioned: “If you
look for information you have to find it in a pamphlet or book. I didn’t know what to do. If you
have a question you have to go ask it or it could be trouble later” (Kevin).

Most spoke of limited knowledge around health and developmental issues and mentioned the
anxiety that this had caused them. They actively searched out the information they needed from
books but this was not adequate in allaying their fears.

Unexpected change of health. An unexpected change in health status or a new development
stage has caused much frustration and added concern for some:

Jordan hasn’t been responding lately. We figured out that he might be ignoring us.... and then
the doctor said that he might have to have tubes in his ears. He said it’s not a permanent
hearing loss but I’m not quite sure. He used to speak clearly and then his speech started getting a little off. (Ross)

Ross worried about Jordan’s poor speech and lack of responsiveness, and was unaware of the cause until the doctor diagnosed a hearing problem. He was unprepared for possible changes in health status of a child and this led to a delay in getting appropriate treatment for his son and much unnecessary anxiety.

As their children develop, many discover that they are ill-prepared to deal with new concerns related to the health of their children. They do not fully recognize that their children are at greater risk for injuries as they become more mobile than when they were as more passive babies. Lack of knowledge on expected changes in infant/child development and childhood health problems, seems to be common among the participants.

**Emotional support.** There were mixed reports concerning the amount of emotional support the teenage fathers experienced as they dealt with anxieties concerning their children:

My family doctor is good and the specialist is great. Whenever I take her to appointments and I’ve had any questions about her development I feel very free to ask the doctor. (Liam)

Liam talked of his doctor’s support and it was significant that he expressed less anxiety than others about the health of his child. Those who did not have the same experience of support as Liam, related a high state of anxiety when dealing with a sick child. Kevin said: “I was so scared. I almost cried as I wasn’t there”. He was left in his remote home community with little support at a time when the mother of his child travelled to the city and was able to be present at their child’s surgery. This incident demonstrated a lack of recognition of the role of a young father and his own personal needs as an anxious parent.
Multiple health issues. Some have the added burden of worry concerning their partners' poor health:

My wife may need surgery eventually. It does weigh on my mind but less since she's seeing this specialist. It is something like ulcerative colitis but it's not. Even the specialist said he's never seen this before. The treatment he has come up with seems to be working. (Ross)

Ross is attentive to the personal well-being of all his family. He is comforted by the fact that his wife is receiving a treatment that is starting to improve her health, but for him multiple health concerns add to the burden of coping with fatherhood at such a young age.

Nurturing an infant and child requires a certain level of maturity and knowledge at the best of times. The seven teenage fathers have been coping with the many health problems that have arisen as well as anyone can, and have been attentive in seeking all possible medical assistance, advice, and available knowledge on health issues. Lack of knowledge and sparse emotional support, unpreparedness for illness or a new development stage, and multiple health issues, give rise to a high degree of anxiety. There is little report of recognition of this anxiety by the health care system or society, and no formalized support is offered. Individual health professionals, when approached, have assisted these young men, but in general there is small recognition of the role a father plays in the health maintenance of his child. It is of note that the seven participants have demonstrated a high level of responsibility around the health care needs of their children.

All are involved in the lives of their children and depending on various factors, some are more able than others to spend time with their children and fully enjoy their paternal roles. Each welcomed a child into his life with much joy and wonderment, and his new involvement in parenting gave him a sense of pride and increased self-esteem. Some feel ambivalent around sacrificing their own free
time yet appreciating time with their children, but compromises are sought and the more mature young men genuinely enjoy their new found past time of child care. Unrealistic expectations of the child are found to be key to the low level of patience of some fathers.

Limited access to their children soon disheartens young fathers, especially as they experience bias in favor of mothers, within the legal system. Ex-partners often make visitations difficult and fathers find themselves with limited control over decisions concerning their children. There is the added disappointment of missing out on stages of the child's development, and anxiety over the safety of a child when the mother has a new partner. These factors lead to loss of pride and sense of control, and a reduction in self-esteem.

The teenage father often finds himself in conflict over matters of discipline with the child's mother and/or her parents and this can lead to his inability to have a say in the way his child is brought up. Fear of rejection by the child may lead to ineffective disciplining. Methods of discipline are varied between the participant fathers, some being more appropriate than others, and many are not aware of effective ways to discipline a child and of current policies pertaining to some of the legal aspects of using corporal punishment. Some are selective when it comes to role modelling behaviors of their own fathers and they try hard to emulate positive habits and reject those behaviors that impacted negatively on their own childhood experiences.

In regards to health, each described a lack of information, preparation and support in regard to his own child's health problems. There was mention that health professionals are supportive when approached but overall there is little recognition of young fathers' own needs as anxious parents and husbands. Advice and knowledge are actively sought by them and it is of note how ill-prepared they are to deal with child-related health problems.
Changes in Friendships

One of the major challenges of a teenage father's experience of premature fatherhood is a change in pattern of friendships. Changes in friendships refer to those friends who have fallen away, new friends who offer their support, and those original friends who have adapted their lifestyle to suit the young father and fit in with his new responsible lifestyle. Most have changed their pattern of “hanging out” with peers to spending more time with their partner and child. For all, involvement with their infants, time taken in completing an education and often working at a job, take away from time spent on their own recreational activities. The time involved in these areas also invariably impacts on time spent with friends. The fathers talked about new support, loyalty and respect from friends, the accommodation of friends to the father’s new lifestyle, sadness at loss of friendship, ambivalence around old friendships, the lack of peer support in remote communities and closing the age gaps in friendships.

Support, Loyalty and Respect

Coping with new demands and loss of freedom to hang out with friends has been tough. It is the continued camaraderie with peers, even under new circumstances, that has been of invaluable support to some:

They (the friends) know I have a kid and so they respect that I stay home and raise a child teaching him the ways of life, you know. They’ve been like brothers to me since grade four and they still come by. But it’s not really that noticeable I don’t think. They never really changed......no they’re still the same. My best buddy Mark, he’s always there to talk to. He’s always around. We’ll talk and he gives me words of wisdom. (Kevin)

Kevin did not find that his friends changed when he became a parent. He talked of his loyal best friend and the fact that his friend spends time now at his home, offering support. Many fathers are respected by their peers for the responsibility and commitment they show towards their children. This
in turn enhances their self-esteem and assists them in being attentive fathers. They are proud of new respected positions in their relationships with others.

**Accommodation of Friends**

Several recounted tales of positive change in attitude of their friends due to the influence of a lifestyle change in their “father buddies”:

They would come over and visit and I’d be hanging out with Paula. They would just come over and hang out as well. I didn’t lose a lot of time with my friends. Just the things we did and stuff like that were a bit different. (Neil)

.....I had my thing and they were doing their thing and I didn’t do half the things that they did. I used to but not anymore. I had to start thinking about my son and get on top of things. My friends looked at me differently because they realized I had to be more responsible....I was a parent now. I wasn’t as free as they were. (Alex)

Young fathers are no longer free to please themselves and go out when they want, and their friends understand that this is the way that it has to be. As well they find that their friends adjust well to their lack of free time, and are understanding and accommodating around the teenage father’s lack of availability.

**Sadness at Loss of Friendships**

Brian was sad and let down about the loss of peer friends. These peers did not want to change their old lifestyles and accommodate to their friend’s new life patterns:

When I found out that Sheila was pregnant I didn’t really hang out with my friends anymore. I wanted to be with her because she needed support during her pregnancy. I also would rather be with my son. I don’t really have any friends and so I stick to myself, think about it and try to resolve my own problems. In some ways those old buddies weren’t that great of buddies. Whenever I need a break from Sheila no one is there anymore. (Brian)

Brian is lonely due to his loss in friendships. His old friends did not change their ways and offer him support during his transition to fatherhood. He chose to spend time with his partner and son but is
disappointed at having lost his peer support group. Those friends who do not change their old habits that often involve drugs and alcohol and accompanying parties, find themselves unable to identify with the teenage father and his new responsible lifestyle. They are unable to accommodate to his way of life and cannot offer support and encouragement.

Ambivalence around Old Friendships

Sam spoke with ambivalence about losing some of his friends. He was matter of fact about discovering which of his friends remained supportive and like Brian, discovered that most of his friends had only been around for the “fun times”:

They said, “Oh, you’ve changed too much. Let’s not go over there. He’s not as much as he used to be”. I still crack a joke here and there. Quite a few of my friends are dads. There are some times when they are with their kids, and they’re like: “Come on for fuck sakes”, and I’m like: “Do you have to swear in front of the child?” Sometimes it is nice to see my friends sit down and cuddle with their kids. Sometimes we actually sit down and BS about our kids. The things that changed most are that you find out who your friends are real quick. They say: “Oh he’s a dad now and if we go over there we have to be quiet”. They can’t cope with the change. The house changes and like at 8 o’clock everything shuts off. I had a whole bunch of friends and right now I have two friends. One of them is like the brother I never had and the other one is a geeky looking guy. (Sam)

Sam has mixed feelings about his friends as he likes to socialize and talk about his child with those friends who are parents. Although he enjoys visiting with their children, he is upset that they do not conform to his new rules, those such as “No swearing in front of the children” and “Quiet time after 8 p.m.” He finds that he only has two genuine friends, as others cannot cope with the way in which he has changed and are not willing to accommodate to his new lifestyle. He did not talk of sadness at the loss of friends but the general tone of his conversation was one of anger, another expression of grief associated with loss.
Lack of Peer Support in a Remote Community

Ross raised an important issue that is common in his remote northern community, that of single peers leaving town once they have finished school:

Well, I don’t really have very many friends, close friends....a lot of them moved away. I don’t think they really understood but they did realize that I had a lot to deal with. I didn’t really need them but I think if I did, then they would be there. Sometimes I go over to my friend’s house to escape for a bit but I’ve always been kind of self-sufficient. (Ross)

Ross admitted to being a loner but mentioned that he has a source of peer support if needed. The latter may not be the same for all young men as there are few opportunities to further an education in Ross’s hometown, and for a greater part of the year most teenagers and young adults migrate to larger centres for post-secondary education and/or training. For those who are left behind due to family commitments, available same age friends can be somewhat sparse. Remote northern communities share the common problem of lack of institutions for furthering an education. This means that young people tend to go to larger centers and great distances for the purposes of following a vocation.

Closing the Age Gap

A lack of peer friends is often remedied, through searching out older friends who are parents. The generation gap has narrowed for some, as older adults with children have become new friends, sharing tips on childcare and offering advice on domestic matters:

My friends respect my decision to be a father even after Kelly’s mom left me....a lot of my friends are like: “My mom wants to meet your baby”. They think I’m responsible, that I’m a great person because I’m taking care of this baby. One of my best friends, his mom just had a baby a couple of months ago. She always likes it when I come over and have coffee and the babies play together. It’s kind of thrown me into two age groups. I’ve got a new bunch of friends in my life. These are the people that you meet through classes in getting ready for being a parent. It was great when Kelly took her first steps and there’s my friend’s mom sitting at the table drinking coffee with me. (Liam)
It is a common experience for many to find that older adults have become a significant and unexpected support group. These friendships have enriched their lives and they find themselves treated with respect and as equals. They now have common interests with their older friends and they enjoy “exchanging notes” and social lives, whilst simultaneously caring for their children.

Each accepts changes in friendships, sometimes at the cost of loneliness. The teenage fathers are aware that past time spent with friends has to now be given to their families, but those friends who remain loyal are a welcome and much needed source of support. For some, new older friends have entered their lives, giving them rich, unexpected dimensions in friendships. Those peers with whom they partied and hung out have either lost contact or adapted to the new situations and become supportive.

Those ongoing challenges in the lives of the participants related to the central issues of living arrangements, education, employment and finance, relationships with the mother, the child, and friendships have produced a host of personal struggles for each father. These struggles have often involved coping with various losses: loss of pride in having to ask for help, whether it is in terms of accommodation or financial assistance; failure to complete an education; inability to hold down a job; a failed relationship with a partner; lack of access to a child; loss of control over decisions concerning the child; loss of personal freedom; terminated friendships and the end of “partying” and other activities that abbreviate the carefree days of youth. Although losses for them often involved problems with anger control, low self-esteem and depression, and lack of patience often related to false expectations around issues with the child, fatherhood has also generally been received as a positive challenge to a greater maturity, responsibility and a meaningful life. Teenage fathers recognize the positive aspects of children in their lives and the joy that fatherhood brings. They strive
to find jobs, work at relationships, spend time with their children, appreciate and enjoy the support of loyal friends and family.

In Chapter 6 I will describe how challenges related to the central issues already discussed, have shaped the lives of these fathers and brought them to a place of new insight as regards their niche in society. It is in this shaping of their lives that these young men develop a certain quality of life in terms of overall health.
CHAPTER 6

Facing the Challenge of Premature Fatherhood:

“Catching the Curve-ball Thrown into Life” (Impact on Personal Health)

The seven participants have been confronted with many challenges during the period of transition to fatherhood that have had an impact on their health in terms of overall well-being. Certain aspects of their health are described in Chapter 6, namely those that relate to lifestyle change and the personal development that has occurred during the process of becoming a parent. It is the response to the challenge of premature fatherhood and the direct impact of changed circumstances in his life that have contributed to the teenager’s present health status and quality of life. The challenge, “the curve-ball thrown into life”, has not only shaped his life, but has also brought him to a place of new insight as regards his place in society.

In coping with the challenges of stressful living circumstances often involving a lack of independence and loss of personal freedom, the task of securing a job and making an adequate income, completing an education, the struggle to maintain a relationship with the mother of the child, childcare responsibilities, difficulties around access to the child and changing friendships, these young men have reached a new maturity. They speak of lifestyle change in terms of increased responsibility and commitment, turning life around through the discarding of old behaviors, new motivation and life-focus direction, and a new found work ethic. Personal development is expressed as an increase in self-knowledge with a new found respect for self and others, and in terms of improved coping skills related to loneliness, lack of intimacy, impatience and anger.
Lifestyle Change

There is a general consensus among the participants that their lives have improved considerably since the birth of a child: "It's (the experience of being a father) helped me and has been worthwhile" (Liam). The majority agreed that they would still be "sliding down the slippery slope of parties, drugs and alcohol and irresponsible behaviors" (Kevin), that were a part of the turmoil of teen years, if they had not experienced the challenge of those central issues associated with their new roles.

Commitment to the provision of emotional and physical support for their children and mothers of their children, the discarding of poor behaviors, new motivation and life-direction focus, and new found work ethic are all part of a new responsible lifestyle that was described by most. A persistent theme that threaded through conversations with each participant was that of the birth of a child being a "wake-up call", a sudden look at the reality of his current lifestyle. As a result of the teenage father's response to this call, positive changes were described that resulted in him becoming a responsible parent with a new found sense of commitment.

Commitment to Family

Commitment and responsibility to the "new family" is a priority for each, and without exception the fathers spoke of acceptance of new obligations to strive for their families' well-being. In speaking of commitment and responsibility, the teenage fathers made several key points. It is of importance that professionals, community, society at large, friends and family recognize their efforts in becoming responsible and committed citizens/fathers. This affirmation is essential to their continued success in being responsible parents and gives rise to feelings of pride, and a new sense of belonging and place in society. Other important points made in regards to responsible lifestyles
pertain to a new found sense of purpose in life by making priorities that include spending time with
the child and sacrificing free time, the desire to tell other prospective teenage fathers about the
positive aspects of fatherhood and the rewards it brings, and the valuing of involvement of
grandparents, an important and gratifying part of the experience of being a father. Above all it is of
importance to each that he is a physical presence in his child’s life as opposed to an unknown
“shadowy figure” who occasionally makes a financial contribution.

**Need for affirmation.** All spoke of their need for affirmation in the new responsible role as
a committed father. This encouragement promotes the continuation of a responsible lifestyle and a
positive self-esteem. Ross mentioned how one professional affirmed him in his new commitment to
his partner and child:

> Obviously we were making a commitment to each other and so the minister was O.K. If
something comes up and you’re responsible, then you just deal with it. (Ross)

It is of importance that new commitment to a partner and child is approved of by community
members. The teenage fathers believe in accepting responsibility and spoke with a sense of pride
about public recognition of their new attitudes. They have a sense of belonging in the world in their
new roles as fathers. In contrast, Sam is offended that his friends have not always recognized his
responsible behaviors:

> Yeah, I really hate that word “babysitting”. Like when somebody says: “Oh, you are busy
babysitting?” I correct them and tell them that it’s called “parenting”. It is my own
daughter….my own. (Sam)

He is committed to his new role as a caring parent and he sees this as an integral part of his life now.
He spoke with indignance when he described how his parenting skills were negated by an inference
that he was tied up with the chore of babysitting. Teenagers are proud to be fathers and are
frequently looking for affirmation in their new roles. They have learned that their responsible behavior earns them respect:

One thing I’ve noticed though is that my friends, they understand. They know I have the responsibility there and when I meet new people and they find out that I have a kid, they’re very respectful. (Liam)

Acceptance by friends in the new role as a parent, gives a young father a new place in society, and encouragement through the early struggles of premature fatherhood.

On the other hand, the fathers spoke of their upset with the way society does not fully recognize their responsible behaviors and commitment to their new roles:

I get strange looks when I buy diapers or wet wipes at the drug store. I’ve got my child in the backpack and I get weird looks. A couple of times people say: “Aren’t you a little young to have a kid?” I think society needs a swift kick in the arse because all fathers are an integral part of a child’s life. (Kevin)

Society is still looking at fathers in an old fashion way where the mother stays home taking care of the child all the time and the dad goes to work, comes home, eats dinner and goes to bed. He is seen to have no influence on the child’s life. I would like to see people more accepting of the teenage dad. (Liam)

Even when they take on their new duties, they do not always receive affirmative messages from society in the same way that they do from friends and professionals. They spoke of being unimpressed at public attitude where they find they are not supported but chastised for their youth in being parents. Kevin pointed out: “There’s a teen mothers’ group but there is nothing like that for guys. I was worried as I didn’t know what to do if Cody choked. How can a dad know anything?”

As they face up to their new responsibilities, teenage fathers commonly complain about the lack of relevant community programs, a sign of society’s lack of recognition of the positive role a young man can play in the life of his child and a lack of awareness of his needs. They gave clear messages that affirmation of the father role encourages a smooth transition through early fatherhood.
New found sense of purpose. Those early days of lack of direction and destructive behaviors are over. All talked about the discovery of a new found sense of purpose in life through their commitment to their children:

Like there is increased responsibility in taking care of my daughter, and also the financial responsibilities. I dropped half of my classes so that I would have more time to spend with Kelly and work in the evening to raise money. (Liam)

A child in a young man’s life gives his life meaning as he takes on responsibility and reaches a new maturity. Each enjoys a sense of achievement in having made priorities around striving to lead an unselfish lifestyle and provide for his new family. It is a new found sense of purpose in life that acts as an “anchor” for the teenage father.

Telling other prospective teenage fathers about the rewards of responsible parenting. The participants have known other young men who have not stayed around to support the child and mother, and they want any future teenage father who is contemplating rejection of his father role to know of the experience of being a responsible father: “They don’t care, they just take off. I would not recommend that because to be there is great” (Brian). The impact of having a child has transformed their lives for the better, and they want others who are thinking about abandoning their responsibilities to recognize the positive aspects of fatherhood, and that facing struggles and challenges brings its own rewards.

Valuing grandparent involvement. Grandparent involvement with the child is an important aspect of teenage fatherhood and much appreciated:

People have been pretty open-minded and my parents get along with Steve. It is important to me to see my parents get along with him. They just love him. I also want to have lots of fun with him. (Alex)

Alex sees his own parents as an extension of his own involvement with his son, and is delighted at
the relationship that they have developed with Steve. Since he is estranged from his child’s mother, grandparent involvement strengthens his tie with his son. It gives young fathers much pleasure and encouragement to witness their own parents accepting the new grandchild and becoming a significant part of the child’s life. They have reached a new maturity in terms of improved communication and respect, in their relationships with their own parents through common bonds and commitment to provide for their children.

Being there for the child. It is important to each father that he is a physical presence in his child’s life, and that he has an intimate relationship with his child. The possibility of being separated from a child is unbearable, in Neil’s words: “There is no way I could stay away from my boy”. All seven participants are “visible” in their children’s lives. It is this strength of commitment to “be there” for the child that is common to all, and it is apparent from conversations with them that they go to great lengths to provide financially and emotionally for their children, and that they truly enjoy their new found responsibilities.

The fathers are facing their responsibilities and want to be an integral part of their children’s lives. This commitment to be “present” is bolstered by affirmation from those around the young father, and it is clear that he wants other teenagers to understand the benefits of accepting the challenge of being a responsible father. Each is proud of his new position in society, and the new found sense of purpose in life of meeting life’s challenges for his child’s sake, has led to a more responsible and unselfish lifestyle when compared to that of prefatherhood days. For those who are separated from the child’s mother with only legal access to the child, there still remains the same strong sense of commitment and willingness to remain involved in the child’s life. Grandparent involvement is especially supportive for those young men who are separated and is recognized as a
positive aspect of being a father by all participants. A new maturity has evolved in relationships with their parents and this has greatly enhanced the experience of childrearing.

**Turning Life Around**

The study population is considered especially at risk for parenting and personal difficulties because of the developmental and situational factors discussed in Chapter 5. In the past most of the participants were leading lifestyles that involved partying and drinking with their peers. Drugs and alcohol were a significant part of their recreational activities and used as coping techniques during the period before their babies were born. The birth of a child, the “wake-up call”, motivated most to leave their old ways behind, a call to a new responsible lifestyle. Five of the seven participants talked of an end to lifestyles of partying in recognition of their destructive elements, namely drug and alcohol involvement and associated risks. They talked of recognition of the “pitfalls” of past lifestyles that led to making choices, the way that they filled the void created by loss of old recreational habits, regret about loss of free time, and the possible reasons why teenagers in their community fall into destructive recreational activities. The two young men who delayed changing their old ways after their children were born spoke of how they had used drugs and alcohol as coping techniques rather than for recreational purposes and the consequences that followed.

**Recognition of pitfalls and filling the void in life.** A changed way of life brings teenage fathers to a new perspective concerning the “pitfalls” of their past lifestyles:

I’m glad I did it and now I don’t do drugs and parties anymore. You learn your limit and now I know what to do....things change....we’ll go to a friend’s house and then catch a cab home. Before it was just so crazy. It’s only personal choice. There’s always a way of stopping. A kid is a pretty powerful reason to change. (Kevin)

One of the main things was how gross it was. It was getting expensive and I could see my friends getting heavily into it. (Brian)
Experience has taught young fathers the destructive nature and serious implications of past recreational behaviors. They are now able to discern that even though they enjoyed this time of irresponsibility, it was not an optimum way to live. The “wake-up call” of a child has caused them to reflect on their lifestyles and motivated them to make responsible difficult choices. They turned their lives around by making sacrifices, compromises and setting limitations. These young men appreciate that a child in their lives has “brought them to their senses” and given them a better quality of life with a sense of hope for the future. As Neil mentioned: “I am glad I left it because I’d rather be this way than the other way now”.

It was a common theme for them to speak of filling the void in their lives after they had left their wild lifestyles behind them:

Then I luckily smartened up. I wasn’t doing all the stuff that my buddies were doing anymore. They were like into partying and all they care about is drinking and other stuff. They got turned off me when I had a kid and I wanted to support my family. I worked at two jobs. So it was over and I was past that stage. (Brian)

They see the foolishness of their old ways and are relieved that fatherhood brought them to their senses. They fill the void of loss of old habits by working hard and spending time with their families.

**Loss of free time.** Most spoke with an element of regret about their loss of free time:

I don’t get as much free time anymore so I can’t spend time with my friends like before. It was never a bad thing to change. It was just another step in life. It hasn’t really bothered me.....She mimicks me and watches me do stuff. We have our little games. It’s lots of fun.  

(Liam)

They have had to make priorities in their lives around how they manage their free time. Sometimes there are regrets at leaving the old ways behind, but generally they display a maturity in their readiness to sacrifice their own activities and change the prime focus of their lives from themselves to their child’s welfare. They have discovered the satisfaction of interacting with their children and enjoy
watching them develop their personalities.

Choice of recreational opportunities in remote northern communities. Since most of the seven teenage fathers were spending a lot of their pre-fatherhood existence at parties, drinking and smoking marijuana, there is suggestion that perhaps other entertainment opportunities are limited in the small northern community in which they live. Brian alluded to this possibility when he discussed how he got involved in his pre-fatherhood lifestyle:

At night you wander about in this community. There is nothing to do and so you just go and party. (Brian)

Brian highlighted that drug and alcohol involvement might be due to boredom from lack of available recreational activities. Northern communities are noted for their harsh weather conditions, long winter nights and isolation from neighboring towns. There is suggestion that the types of recreational activities chosen by young people serve as a form of escapism.

Changing poor coping techniques. The two teenage fathers, who continued to lead a wild lifestyle of partying after their children were born, realized too late that their relationships with their partners were in trouble. For some this way of life was seen as a way of coping with stress:

I got into the party scene a bit and realized I wasn’t going anywhere. When I was going through that I was with her (Jasmine) and doing my thing. Like to fall back on to drown my worries. Then we split....so I wanted to get away from that and I tried to work everything out. I was drinking and smoking up at the time. I drank hard with my friends but everyone knows that it is not the life. It never worked as it made life twice as difficult. Having a child makes you grow up a lot quicker, and that’s positive. I grew up fast and would probably still be partying if it was not for him. (Alex)

It is only in retrospect that Alex recognized his past lack of maturity, poor coping habits and irresponsible behavior. He realized that he needed help in changing his life around only after his girlfriend had left him and he had become depressed.
Alex continued to use his old coping patterns of drugs and alcohol for a while in order to try and forget the pain of not being with his girlfriend and son but eventually managed to find other alternative ways to relieve stress. Family support and counselling helped him turn his life around but as Alex commented: “I still have a lot of growing up to do but I have taken on responsibility now too. I have learned a lot”. There was pride in the teenager’s voice as he told of his personal growth and yet at the same time exhibiting humility and maturity in the recognition of his own limitations.

The participants have responded well to the call to a new responsible lifestyle and commitment to their new families. It is important to them to be responsible, good, role models. It did not take long for most of them to recognize the “pitfalls” of past lifestyles. Having left behind their old ways of drugs and alcohol use they fill the void created, with work and activities with their families. Some have a sense of regret around having less fun in life and a lack of free time but for the majority, new found fatherhood is seen as a rewarding event and an opportunity for positive change and personal growth. Living in a remote northern community has offered limited recreational opportunities and partying with drugs and alcohol has been a popular way to stave off boredom. For some this type of activity has been used as poor alternative for dealing with stress.

It has taken much motivation and effort on the part of these young men to make responsible changes in their lifestyles and remain committed to the welfare of their children. The ability to energize and rise to this challenge is now a consistent thread in the lives of most.

**Motivation and Life-Direction Focus**

Premature fatherhood interrupted the fathers’ lives at a time when most were content with the status quo of getting by on minimum work, either at school or a job, and spending most of their time on recreational activities, often self-centered and destructive in nature. Lack of ambition and
motivation to improve their own lives or those of others was a significant part of prefatherhood days, and was referred to in Chapter 4. It is striking how they have turned their lives around, and it was common to hear them describe new dreams and plans about the future, their new energy and drive in achieving goals, and a new maturity in long-term planning.

**Dreams and future plans.** Neil and Sam have made a slow start as regards planning careers, but have begun to think about their futures and spoke of their dreams:

I have just little ideas now. Like moving away or something like that. Going somewhere else to find work. I think I am going to get a trade in carpentry. (Neil)

I dream of opening my own business but you have to get grade 12 before you can do any business courses. I guess I can do my provincials at college. (Sam)

Due to their endeavours of work at low-paying jobs, and time spent with their children, Neil and Sam have been fully occupied with their families’ immediate needs. They are only now able to think about how to move towards long term goals. Achievement of ambitions is going to be a slow process, as neither one has taken action yet but is still dreaming, and for Sam there are still lifestyle issues that complicate the picture.

The arrival of a child in each of the other teenagers’ lives gives him new motivation to search for a better paying job and decide on a possible career:

I have goals now. I had the chance at a trade but I turned it down, but I am now in a position to apply for any trade I want. The next time a trade comes along that I want I will apply for it. I would really like to be an instrument mechanic. (Ross)

Most fathers are on the move trying to find jobs and make money to support their families. Fatherhood has challenged these teenagers to make something of their lives and they are all responding in positive ways. Each now dreams of a future and is making some positive plans to achieve his goals.
New energy and drive. A new found focus to life and the related commitment to a child has fuelled the motivating forces in many and they have been moved to action:

I am concentrating on a lot of different things and more motivated now. It’s hard for me to sit around......If you feel bad, you talk to someone and you can feel better. I had to start thinking about my son and get on top of things. (Alex)

I went back to the high school for awhile. I stuck at my course and it only took me three months to do English. I was just very, very motivated to get it done so that Shannon could then finish school. I am hoping to begin a three month training course. (Kevin)

Alex and Kevin are highly motivated now that they have a new found purpose in life, that of striving to provide for a family. Lack of completion of a high school education has not deterred Kevin from persevering in the direction of his life ambition. He wants to make something of his life with a view to supporting his family in whatever way that is possible. For Kevin and most of these young fathers, energy and drive directed at a positive life were distinctly lacking before the birth of a child. They talked about the challenge of a child in their life giving them new energy and reason to apply themselves to an education and jobs. Most of them have chosen some well thought-out goals in regards to moving towards future well-paying employment and a chosen career.

Long-term planning. Most of the fathers show a new maturity in their abilities to make long term plans. It has become important to them to learn appropriate skills that may lead to higher paying jobs. Each spoke of giving some serious thought to a career in order to focus on a life direction:

I was going to get a teaching degree but now I want to get my general management and accounting. That’s a couple more years of college work. (Liam)

Liam is typical of most, in that there is a change in his attitude to career planning as he is now motivated to make some long range plans as opposed to only immediate plans, a sign of a new maturity.
The overall impact of the challenges of fatherhood has transformed the participants from unambitious, directionless teenagers into motivated hard working young men, fuelled with new energy and drive. They have a vision of the future with a definite life-direction focus.

Work Ethic

A dominant characteristic of the participant father group is that of a strong work ethic. Any notion of the "phantom father", where the father is absent and rarely involved in supporting or rearing his child, is not the case with these fathers. They spoke of working hard and the pride that this gave them, a keenness to apply themselves to multiple jobs, a lack of idleness and dependency on social assistance, and frustration with flaws in a system that does not encourage employment opportunities for those entering the work force.

Pride in hard work: Multiple jobs. Each father talked about taking pride in the fact that he is working and providing for his family:

When I got hired full-time. I went to the boss and said: “O.K. I’ll work until the day before I go to Builders”, and I worked at my last job until the day before I went to the company. When you work, you work....that’s how I was brought up. (Ross)

Ross is proud of his new found strong work ethic and proves to be as good as his word in giving of his best. He comes from a family of hard workers and is proud to be able to identify with them. Without exception the teenage fathers apply themselves to hard work, and this in turn enhances their self-esteem. Ross and his partner carried as many as four jobs between them at one point, and Sam moved from job to job to make ends meet in order to support his family. They are keen to apply themselves to a wide variety of jobs and do not complain about the sort of work they are forced to accept:

That’s one thing that I have going for me....If someone says: “Do you want to work?”, I’ll
be there with brass boots on. There’s no problem whatsoever. I’ll wash dishes, pack dry wall.... (Sam)

Sam is willing to work at the most menial of jobs in order to support his family. There is a recognition of the need to make money, and fuelled with new energy and drive, all fathers are conscientious in their endeavours.

**Idleness and dependency.** There was no indication of idleness or complacency around depending on the welfare state heard in the conversations with the study group. Several of them spoke of their dissatisfaction with any form of dependence on the welfare state:

> There is not much work to do in construction right now and so I don’t want to grow up lazy. I am on Unemployment Insurance right now but I should be working at the end of the month. Welfare bothers me as I like to pay my way. (Neil)

Neil likes to earn his living through hard work. He is concerned about lazy work attitudes and does not want to rely on handouts, though he has had to temporarily rely on assistance. Young fathers want to work and provide for their families and a lack of available work concerns them. Finding consistent employment in a small isolated community is an added difficulty. Employment opportunities are limited, especially for those who have sparse educational qualifications and skills training.

**Frustration with lack of work incentives.** Most mentioned their frustrations with a system that does not encourage employment for young people entering the work force. Sam said: “It makes me angry that if I work hard and receive $300 it is taken off my welfare cheque. There is no incentive to work”. He described an unfairness in a system where if a person works hard at a low-paying job, he ends up with no extra income at the end of the day. This discrepancy particularly impacts upon low income earners such as these teenage fathers.
They are dealing with the challenges of having to materially provide for their families at a time in their lives when they are ill-prepared to enter the job market. Their response to this challenge is most favorable and they have already changed their carefree idle ways to those of hard work. They take a pride in their new strong work ethic and go to great lengths to remain employed, often working at multiple menial jobs and avoiding any dependence on welfare. They are frustrated with the lack of jobs in the community in which they live and a system that does not provide work incentives for young people.

All demonstrate a new commitment and acceptance of responsibility in their lives as a result of struggling with the challenges of premature fatherhood. They have all changed their lifestyles in a dramatic way by discarding old destructive behaviors and choosing to get their “lives on track”. Encouraged by the support and affirmation of others, they strive to provide for their families. A sense of purpose in life is discovered, an awakening that each wants to share with other prospective teenage fathers. More fulfilling relationships have blossomed with their own parents, and grandparent involvement with the child is greatly appreciated. They now avoid the past “pit-falls” in life and enjoy “being there” for their children.

Drug and alcohol abuse of pre-fatherhood days is partly accounted for by the fact that teenagers find limited recreational activities offered in small remote northern communities. The seven participants are no longer bored, and are kept so busy with their new families that they now express regret at the lack of free time. The two fathers who used drugs and alcohol as coping techniques have had particularly difficult struggles with their new roles. They have sought professional help and like the other fathers have found new meaning in life and are working hard to provide for their children. All are motivated by a new sense of purpose in life, have energy to plan their futures and
are proud of their dedication to hard work. This is a new development since the birth of their children. Some are more ambitious than others and having established long-term goals, showing a creativity in how they progress with their plans and make ends meet.

Fatherhood has complicated the lives of these teenagers but it has also profoundly changed the quality of their lives for the better, and as Liam said: “A child has made my life interesting and meaningful”.

**Personal Development**

As new lifestyles evolve, certain elements of personal development are worth noting. The participants spoke of new self-knowledge and insights developed, and self-respect and respect for others that emerged as important elements in their development. They also talked of ways of combating feelings of loneliness and lack of intimacy, and dealing effectively with their emotions of anger and impatience that can all be related to a new maturity. There was reference to the more effective coping skills that are now practised and most described a new awareness of how they fit into the world around them as they emerge in their paternal roles. They inferred that these relationships to the world around them are a change from pre-fatherhood days, when they were mainly consumed in their own self-centred worlds of self-serving activities, some being destructive in nature. Increased self-knowledge and growing respect of self and others have transformed these fathers to a new state of well-being and they are now able to identify and accept their own capabilities and limitations.

**Self-Knowledge and Self-Respect**

Many were able to describe their insights into their own awakening to self-knowledge and their new found sensitivity towards others that came out of respecting themselves. They recognize their new capabilities as fathers and providers and the limitations of past and present behaviors, and
as a consequence have developed a new respect for themselves and other people.

In regards to new self-knowledge, they highlighted their recognition of their own new maturity and emotional growth, the ability to discern past mistakes, new capabilities and self-identity. Several of them described their respect for themselves in terms of a new found sensitivity and respect towards others, an emerging social conscience and a connectedness to the world around them. In the sharing of stories about self-knowledge and respect, they revealed an awareness of their own limitations.

**Maturity and emotional growth.** Alex talked of his insights into his own new personal growth and growing wisdom:

> I just grew up a lot I guess. Feelings changed towards a lot of things. I had to think a little more and that was a big change. I could have left my kid but I didn't. I discuss a lot of different things these days but I realize I've still a lot of growing up to do. I do have a lot of responsibility and I have learned a lot. (Alex)

All the participants have experienced much emotional growth and gained deeper perspectives on life issues. They realize that their life experiences have taught them a great deal and are open to the possibility of further change.

**Discerning past mistakes.** Most of these young men spoke about the folly of past behaviors and their ability to discern mistakes.

For Sam, “growing up” has been an ongoing challenge:

> I was a problem child. I will admit that I really don't know why I did such stupid things. Now I look at it and think, “What an idiot”. I actually sat down and typed a letter to my parents to apologize for all the things that I did as a child. I realized I made them go through hard times and everything. If I could replace that car, I would. Now they take Katie for me when I go out and do my thing. I know she is in safe hands. (Sam)

He has matured to a point where he recognizes and admits to his past poor behaviors. He spoke of
feeling regret about those behaviors that hurt his parents and the remorse he now experiences. He has made amends by apologizing to them and they are supportive in return. Most of the participants are aware of their past thoughtless behaviors and the ways in which these affected others. They have all made advances in their personal growth in regards to learning from past mistakes and acting in new responsible fashions.

New capabilities and self-identity. Liam described his new found capabilities and the self-identity that this discovery has given him. He was careful to mention that he still has some areas of limitation at which to improve:

Learning about myself..... I now know what I'm capable of doing. Child care is something I picked up really quickly. I took on the increased responsibility for caring for my daughter.....changing diapers, protecting her neck and holding her head up....that sort of thing. I found that I was quite a natural at that. I just jumped right in. Now that Kelly is talking I try my best to do some sign language as she doesn't hear all the tones....I'm not as fluent as I could be. (Liam)

Through his early successes in caring for his child, Liam is empowered to be a committed father. He is surprised at what he is able to do for his child, and shows a maturity in an awareness of his own strengths and limitations when it comes to communication.

Kevin learned of his capabilities through his new application to school work, and the fruits it bore. “I surprised myself actually..... it was pretty weird having a kid and going to school. I never did really well in school before, but this time I did great” (Kevin). Others spoke of discovering their capabilities through “the experience of supporting a family and becoming mature” (Brian). They have grown up quickly due to the experience of premature fatherhood, and are proud of new found capabilities and the identity they have achieved in becoming responsible fathers. Hard work and responsible parenting have given rise to positive self-concepts.
Sensitivity and respect for others. Most of the fathers talked of a new sensitivity towards individuals, with an accompanying reduction in self-centeredness. In learning about his capabilities and limitations, and in forming his new identity, each has gained respect for himself that reflects in his concern for others:

I think part of that new found responsibility comes from respect for other people and in some ways respecting yourself as well. (Kevin)

Most have gained insight into the fact, that out of self-respect it is possible to “move out” and respect and appreciate others. They have developed a positive self-esteem through their view of themselves as responsible parents. For Sam, a new awareness and courtesy to other people has even extended to those police officers whom he once held in disdain:

Like I bumped into the police officer who arrested me when I was a teenager and they’re like: “What are you up to now?” “I’m staying out of trouble” I say, and I’m not mean. I have gained more respect for the police officers because when I was less mature I’d think: “Stupid cops”. (Sam)

He has had several confrontational encounters with police in the past, and his new respect for them mirrors the new found respect he is now gaining for himself through hard work and active parenting.

Most of the teenage fathers now think before they act, and this new maturity allows them to consider those around them:

I just got my life in a twist. I was just not thinking about what I was doing....thinking of the moment and having fun but as soon as I saw him (Dan), I just knew that things were going to change. I don’t really think about myself too much now but more about other people and what I am going to do for Dan. (Neil)

Neil changed the focus of his life from self-interest to that of concern for the well-being of his child and others. He spoke of this being a conscious decision and not just an automatic process that comes with his new role. The young fathers are exhibiting social cognitive maturity where they are now able
to devote their lives to others as opposed to just acting to serve themselves.

**Social conscience.** Some talked about general attitude to others and a new emerging social conscience:

So that’s another thing that changed, my outlook on other people. Like I always had respect for my elders but I didn’t do anything about it. I just minded my own business. But now, believe it or not, I look out for them. Today I just walked into the hospital and someone was sitting up on his bed. I wouldn’t have done this two years ago but I looked over and said: “Do you need a hand?” He said, “Oh yes”. So I gave him a gown. It was just the fact that I could be in that state and hopefully my kid would take care of me like that. I have become more sensitive to other people. (Sam)

Sam has a new awareness of those around him and has developed a more responsive attitude towards others. In developing a social conscience he now recognizes his own vulnerability. All teenage fathers are generally proud of their change of behaviors and the way in which they relate to others. As each deepens in self-knowledge and develops a new self-respect and sensitivity towards other people, he finds himself moving out from the self-centered world of adolescence and rapidly entering adulthood. These fathers are experiencing a connectedness to the world in which they live, and have moved out of themselves and developed a social conscience. Simultaneously they are becoming aware of those feelings and emotions that have not been well addressed in the past. For some, loneliness or lack of intimacy has impacted on well-being, and for others poor anger control and impatience have been detrimental to quality of life/health.

**Coping With Loneliness and Lack of Intimacy**

Loneliness is a consequence of being separate from others with whom one desires intimacy and friendship. The very process of individualization, which is a fundamental task of adolescence, produces loneliness. Loneliness is thrust upon teenagers because of the many cognitive, physical and social changes that mark their development, but for a young father this is a particularly poignant
experience as he is also coping with a loss of friends and an especially complex process of identity formation. Rejection, feelings of hopelessness and depression are factors that most of the participants associated with loneliness and lack of intimacy. Cultural influences were sometimes held responsible for hindering the development of intimate relationships. The fathers talked about the ways that they are actively dealing with those difficult aspects of their lives.

**Rejection.** Some, who have been rejected by their girlfriends or pre-fatherhood peer group, talked of their troubles in overcoming loneliness and isolation from friends:

> Sometimes I find myself talking in circles. I do a lot of thinking but I don’t really talk to anyone about it. I’m starting to like being on my own and I don’t think that it is healthy. I’ve had a lot of bad experience trusting people and that is probably the reason I don’t confide in friends. I’m a bit lost. I’ve also gained tons of weight.....maybe this is an emotional effect. I’m considering joining a league or something....I was mostly into the martial art thing. (Brian)

Brian is different from most of the other fathers, in that he has not yet developed a clear sense of self-identity and trust in other people. He is recognizing that he is depressed and must broaden his social circle to alleviate his loneliness. He finds it difficult to be involved in the wider world and has withdrawn into isolation. He is starting to realize that he must take action to promote a healthier lifestyle as he is not coping well with his lack of friends. Others, like Brian, who have left their past poor coping techniques of drug and alcohol use behind, are searching for new ways to involve themselves in society. Some have managed to disclose some of their personal thoughts and feelings to others, but there are those who have had more difficulty. Brian mentioned that he “....couldn’t talk to his girlfriend because she wouldn’t understand”. Until he gets some help with his low self-esteem and depression, he may continue to have trouble with loneliness, trust and intimacy. Rejection for the teenage fathers commonly gives rise to loneliness and isolation.
Hopelessness and depression. They talked of their difficult recovery from loneliness and the associated feelings of hopelessness and depression, experienced after partners had left them:

I just try to keep my mind off my problems and keep active. I then stay healthy and when you feel good about yourself you don’t mind being alone. I have also sought professional help. (Alex)

Drugs and alcohol are now no longer relied upon to numb the loneliness that has been felt since separation from ex-partners and children. The young fathers have learned more effective mature ways of dealing with their feelings and these in turn enhance their general well-being and perception of themselves. In coming to terms with his new identity, each becomes more self-reliant and self-confident.

Cultural influences. The participants have all struggled with the crises of self-identification and intimacy versus isolation, all part of the tasks of becoming adults. For most these crises are settled, but for some cultural stereotypes hinder the development of intimate relationships. Ross did not admit to loneliness in the past but indicated that he has a hard time with intimacy, this being a culturally induced problem for him:

I think I had trouble expressing how I felt because my grandfather with whom I lived was very “old school”. He’d never talk about his feelings. He was fairly distant. I tend to be a bit of a loner but I’m trying to be closer to my kids. I’m working at it. I haven’t given up. (Ross)

In acknowledging his difficulty with intimacy, Ross can now positively address his problem by making efforts to develop a closer relationship with his children. He mentioned how his wife gets involved with their children: “She likes to always have the kids with her and it encourages me to be more involved with things” (Ross). He is supported by Nina in his efforts and shows a maturity in his willingness to try and change his learned childhood pattern of remaining detached and keeping his
feelings to himself.

Many talked of taking positive steps to combat loneliness and lack of intimacy through searching out counsellors, friends and family with whom they are able to express their feelings, and by taking up pursuits that they enjoy. This positive change in coping techniques from past destructive ways, demonstrates a new stage in the personal development of each young man as he rapidly attains adulthood. The recognition of their own problems with loneliness and lack of intimacy that encompass such difficulties as rejection, hopelessness and depression, and negative cultural influences, and their maturity in striving for change, are also worthy of note.

Impatience and Anger Control

Lack of patience often resulting in lack of anger control is another personal problem that impacts on the well-being of these young men and many struggle with these attributes on an ongoing basis. Difficulties with short tempers, often tested under the multiple stressful circumstances of struggling with less than optimum living arrangements, searching for employment, meagre finances, relationship difficulties, childcare, loss of friends and the developmental tasks of adolescence, have been a challenge for most of them. Displays of anger most frequently arise around issues to do with children. They mentioned that threats to a child in terms of others swearing and arguing over the child, the frustrations of a crying or awkward child along with unmet unrealistic expectations of a child, difficulties with discipline and relationship difficulties with a partner that lead to tension in the home, are the main issues that cause loss of temper. They also talked of the new ways in which they are learning to deal with their frustrations and volatile emotions. Lack of anger control was discussed as a predominant issue for those two fathers who had experienced bitter separations and custody battles over their children, situations where tempers are tested at the best of times.
Swearing and arguing. Sam described his efforts to control his temper and the sort of situations that trigger his temper:

My mom actually sat me down and talked with me. She told me that she would not tolerate my temper and so I don't go kicking in doors and stuff but I just go outside to cool off. It's harsh to think but my mom is more my friend than my mom. I would say I dealt with my anger mainly myself. I look at my knuckles and try to control my temper. I still once in a blue moon have a short fuse. I've seen counselling about my temper and I would say it calmed down now. I just don't tolerate arguing and swearing around my daughter. (Sam)

Sam spoke freely about his problems with anger control and how his temper is quickly aroused over issues that might affect his daughter's well-being. Although he talked of his successful efforts to control his temper, he recognizes that he needs professional counselling. He finds it difficult to restrain from being violent and the general tone of much of his conversation at interview was one of anger. Those who expressed a lot of stress in their lives are aware they have to learn to relax more. Most recognized anger as a problem that needed to be put in check, and a few fathers have already gone through anger management programs and have sought a strong network of supportive adults.

Frustration and unrealistic expectations. Some of the young fathers told of their frustrations and unrealistic expectations in dealing with a baby or young child. They were not prepared for the many demands a baby/child places on an adult and found this particularly tough to deal with as they were working through so many of their own issues:

My son showed me that his ears were bugging him. It drove me bonkers. It was really stressful. I'm now learning to get less frustrated. I don't really want to yell at him - I was like: "You little brat" but he probably couldn't hear me. Kids aren't like grown ups. Sometimes they insist on staying up all night or whatever. (Ross)

Several expressed that it was stressful to deal with the frustrations of coping with a young child and had unrealistic expectations of the child's development. Their stress often led to impatience and loss of temper, but through seeking help from family, friends and counsellors for assistance in parenting
skills and child developmental knowledge, each is “making sure to not be a disappointing father” (Alex). For those who do not have custody of their children it has been particularly difficult to come to terms with the role of absent parent. Each has begun to find a way to cope with the obstacles that present, and is well-supported by his family and professionals in his endeavour to be an effective parent.

**Difficulty with discipline.** Teenagers do not always have the knowledge concerning effective methods of disciplining children. This can lead to extreme frustration and loss of temper:

Steve really tests me and he seems to know that I’m avoiding the issue.....It makes me lose my temper....I’ve talked to a friend of the family and other people. I know lots of people that I can talk to. (Alex)

Alex is afraid to discipline his son as he is capable of losing his temper and as a consequence believes that Steve will not want to spend time with him. He recognizes his inability to deal with the situation and is looking for guidance from others.

Many of the young fathers rely on their families and older friends for support and guidance in coping with their frustrations around child-rearing. In times of high annoyance and anger they are learning positive ways to deal with their feelings. They spoke of being able to remove themselves from a volatile situation and having the maturity to take a step back from the scene before reacting:

When problems start happening I start to think and try and figure out different options: I’ll go for a walk, I don’t freak out. I might use a strong tone of voice but I do not yell. (Neil).

Sometimes when I am upset with him (Cody), I just go for a walk or sit down on a log. I then think and get a bigger perspective. You realize that once you get to thinking, that you overreacted. With a lot of personal problems it is often one’s own fault. (Kevin)

Neil and Kevin demonstrate maturity in the way they cope with bad situations by looking at options, and also conceding that they might be at fault. They have insight into the nature of human emotions
and have learned to step back from situations and reflect before taking action. They are beginning to solve their own interpersonal difficulties and learn self-control.

Brian has not yet explored options on how to deal with the tensions in his family situation but is reaching some conclusions around staying together in a home of fighting and tension. He mentioned: “I’m not too sure if it is good for us. It may be good for Luke” (Brian). There is still some ambivalence about what this father believes is in the child’s best interests, but also a realization that anger in the home is a poor environment for all family members.

It is with wisdom gained through the experience of becoming a parent and reflection on past consequences of poor behaviors that strong tempers are kept in check. Many recognize the importance of controlling anger for the sake of the child’s happiness and the general well-being of all the family.

Most participants spoke of expressing emotions of hurt and frustration through displays of anger in the past, a problem that they are now learning to control through new learned behaviors, new insights and the maturity gained by experience. Some have already sought out advice from others whilst others have managed to develop their own positive ways of dealing with their frustrations and impatience. For the most part, their descriptions of themselves as they were at the time of interviews, portrayed well-adjusted, even-tempered adults.

**Summary**

The seven young fathers are facing the challenges thrown into their lives by premature fatherhood and reckon to date that they have caught their “curve balls” pretty well. Premature fatherhood for the most part has impacted favorably on their health. They have responded in positive ways to the multiple stressors that they have encountered. Most talked of an improvement in their
lives in terms of the discarding of destructive behaviors and the resulting pride in their roles as responsible fathers and providers, increased self-esteem and discovered sense of purpose in life. They enjoy being committed to a new way of life and having responsibility for others, and take pride in a new found work ethic. It is important for them to receive affirmation from professionals, community, friends and society at large. They now have insight into the effects of past destructive behaviors and inappropriate coping skills, and are able to identify problem areas in themselves with which they need help. At the same time they recognize their own capabilities as young fathers and take an active part in the care of their children. Some of these young men have learned to make priorities, and most are energized and motivated towards new goals. They want other prospective teenage fathers to know that the struggle of premature fatherhood is worthwhile and brings many rewards in terms of the child and their own personal development and fulfillment.

In terms of personal development, new found self-knowledge has taught them their strengths and weaknesses and for the most part, they are using their new insights to seek out support and to modify past unhealthy behaviors. In the process of developing a new self-knowledge, they have learned to respect themselves, gained respect for and from others, and have developed social consciences. They are able to devote their lives to others as opposed to focusing solely on themselves. A new maturity has empowered most to be at peace with themselves, to let go of the past and focus on the present and future. They are discovering positive ways to deal with their frustrations. This has involved dealing with many emotions, loneliness and/or anger being the most prevalent sources of distress. These fathers also have a new awareness of people in the world around them and how in their new roles, they fit into this world. A few are still struggling with their emotions, limited coping skills and current unresolved life situations but are starting to develop ideas
on how to effect a change and where to obtain appropriate support.
CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

Undertaking a study of adolescent fatherhood experience in a remote northern community in British Columbia addressed the obvious lack of research that exists in regard to the lives of teenager fathers. Despite the critical role of any father in a child’s life, little attention has been paid by health care providers to the struggle of the teenage father to remain actively involved in his child’s life, or to his unique combination of unmet needs. Furthermore, stereotypes characterizing this population as absent and rarely involved in the support and rearing of their children, and as having casual relationships with the mothers with few emotions about pregnancy, often overshadow those multiple tasks that they wrestle with and the enormous sacrifices that are made.

This study sought to examine those complex issues that are a part of a teenage father’s life experience, and the impact of these issues on his well-being. Without exception, the participants in this project described the hardships of finding a job, completing an education, compromising living circumstances and struggling with changing relationships with their partners, friends, children and families of origin. These descriptions are supported in the literature by researchers such as Allen and Doherty (1996), Barret and Robinson (1982), and Panzarine and Elster (1983), who described extensively the struggles of the teenage father in resolving relationship issues while at the same time, finishing school and providing an income.

It was not clearly illustrated in the research literature how these young men went about coping with these multiple tasks. However, this study demonstrated that the seven young participant fathers have largely been successful in their abilities to cope with the many difficulties they have faced, actually improving their lifestyles and possibly reaching a new level of maturity at a quicker pace than
if they had remained non-fathers. Initially, they addressed those elements of life that compromised their general well-being and abilities to be responsible for themselves and others. For most, past destructive behaviors were discarded, such as those that usually involved the use of drugs, alcohol, associated partying, and non-attendance at school. Not only did participants in this study reject the use of drugs and alcohol and parties, they also rejected friendships that were a part of the same picture. The results of this study as regards changes in previous destructive friendships are supported by other research findings that indicate that teenage fathers eventually reject those peers who are not supportive of new responsible ways (Hendricks, 1980; Robinson, 1988b).

One of the most striking results of this study is the increased motivation and work ethic that each father has adopted in order to provide for his new family. Although interrupted education and low-paying jobs feature prominently in their lives, most now have a vision of the future and have long-term plans with a definite life-direction focus. They are willing to go to great lengths to provide financially for their families, including travelling to other towns, holding down multiple jobs and using creativity in finding a job. This willingness was not highlighted in other research.

**Key Negative and Positive Factors That Impact on Well-being**

This study has found that certain key negative and positive factors have impacted on the well-being of each of the young fathers. Negative factors pertain to lack of affirmation in the paternal role by friends and family, poor societal attitude that includes lack of recognition of a teenage father’s needs, poor knowledge about childrearing and caring tasks, and frustrations with the legal system. Positive factors that influence well-being include affirmation of a teenager’s involvement as a father, support from family and friends, paternal mother involvement, and a positive relationship with the child’s mother.
As regards those negative factors mentioned, lack of affirmation in the paternal role has perhaps the strongest detrimental influence on health of all. This lack of affirmation often leads to loss of interest in childrearing, with accompanying loss of self-esteem and sometimes depression. As a result of poor feelings of self, involvement with the child may continue to decline. It is critical that early successes in caring for a child are recognized by others as this type of affirmation enables a young father to feel worthy in his new role and spurs him on to further interest in childrearing.

Poor societal attitude, that includes a lack of recognition by healthcare providers in addressing a young prospective father's needs and thereby treating him as a less than equal parent, has negatively affected the fathers' feelings of self-worth. Findings in this study suggest that teenage fathers desired emotional support regarding their sudden loss of freedom and those ambivalent feelings around fatherhood but did not have their needs addressed. Kiselica et. al. (1992) identified similar findings in regards to a lack of recognition of a teenage father's needs. The first obstacle met by the seven participant fathers that related to lack of recognition of needs was met at the prenatal stage, where the overall consensus among the teen fathers was that prenatal preparation was aimed solely at the prospective mothers. The participants told of their personal struggles with societal attitudes, and mentioned that there were no teen father support programs in the community where they lived. The fact that there are no support groups delivers a strong message to young fathers that says fathers are of secondary importance as parents. There is a general agreement in research studies that indicates that the teenage father population has been overlooked in service delivery practices (Huey, 1987; Robinson, 1988).

As regards the negative factor of lack of knowledge about childcaring and childrearing, data from this study revealed that the seven participants experienced a gap in their knowledge levels on
health, childcare and child developmental stages and that they wanted some instruction on childcare and infant health problems. Similarly, Joshi and Battle (1990) identified a need for caretaking skills instruction for teenage fathers. Lack of knowledge on health matters often led to extreme anxiety, anger and ineffective disciplining of offspring for the teenage fathers.

Frustrations with the legal system were found to be strong negative influences on the well-being of those teenage fathers who had court ordered custody. The main reason for difficulty in remaining involved in a child’s life for them was an apparent bias in a legal system that supports mothers over fathers, a reason that was also put forward by Sander and Rosen (1987). This study’s results suggest that young fathers are frustrated and angry with their treatment by the courts where child care is treated as a privilege for them and a burden for mothers. They resent making payments when they are willing to contribute fully to child care, and express those same sentiments of helplessness as did those fathers in the study by Lehr (1998).

At the same time as negative factors influence the well-being of teenage fathers to their detriment, certain factors impact positively on the well-being/health of teenage fathers. The main one is affirmation of a teenager’s involvement as a father, which is seen as critical to the ongoing success of remaining responsible and committed to the new paternal role. In this study affirmation was found to come from family, peers, older friends and professionals and this type of recognition enabled most of the fathers to develop positive self-images, new drive and motivation and commitment to their new families. Roger (1968) also found that those who do offer affirmation are viewed by the young father as an essential part of his support system.

Support from families, friends and partners was found to be critical to the success of these teenagers in overcoming the complex stresses of premature fatherhood. Information elicited from
the participants revealed that a variety of practical support in terms of housing, finances, babysitting, and emotional support from both sets of the child’s grandparents was key in assisting them during the transition to fatherhood in the early years. Without exception, the paternal mothers have remained involved in the lives of their grandchildren and have supported their sons by “being there”, providing advice on issues related to childcare, providing work opportunities and taking care of their children. Christman (1996) also indicated that paternal parent involvement has a positive impact on the adolescent father and might well enhance his abilities to cope with any negative consequences of premature fatherhood.

The results in this study are mixed pertaining to peer support, in contrast to at least one study (Robinson, 1988a) that noted that fatherhood behavior involved a natural separation from the single peer group. Some of the teenage fathers have chosen to leave their old friendships behind, but there are those who continue with the same friendships. Although new terms of friendship are subsequently laid down within these friendships, peers continue to be a strong part of their support system.

In this study a positive relationship with the child’s mother was found to impact strongly on the overall well-being of the teenage father. Some fathers talked of the love and respect they have for the mothers of their children, and it is significant in the participant group that not one of the fathers initiated an emotional and physical separation from the mother of his child. Two of them had difficulty in remaining involved in their children’s lives and this was associated with poor relationships with the mothers of their children. Each wanted to be part of his child’s life but found this difficult for several reasons associated with the breakdown in the relationship with his partner.

Those key negative and positive factors that have been identified all impacted on the teenage fathers’ abilities to find employment, finish an education, persist in following a career path, remain
involved in the child's life and proceed smoothly through the tasks of adolescence. Positive influences have generally outweighed the negative influences and most of the teenage fathers are now successfully managing to remain responsible and involved. They highlighted that by respecting themselves and others, and by recognizing past mistakes and their own capabilities and limitations, they have moved into a new maturity and healthier lifestyle. Pride in their new work achievements and commitment to child care responsibilities were contributary to feelings of improved self-worth. The teenage fathers talked of feelings of confidence about the future as opposed to doubts about their past, a finding that Allen and Doherty (1996) also described.

A new connectedness to others and pride due to the father role gave each a sense of belonging in the world, a state that these young men might have reached more quickly than if they had remained non-fathers. They have used their new insights gained through better self-knowledge and maturity to seek help with their frustrations and anger through professional counselling and anger management programs. The results of this study, which show that anger is a prevalent emotion among those who are trying to resolve relationship difficulties and who are denied access to a child, are consistent with similar results in studies by Lehr (1998) and Bolton and Belsky (1986). This study also adds strength to the discussion of Buchanan and Robbins (1990) who suggested that anxiety related to the stress of being an absent father was the most serious of negative psychological consequences for the teenage father.

This project encourages an awareness and understanding of those issues around those positive factors that enhance the health and enrich the lives of the teenage fathers, but also those negative factors that are so detrimental to their health. Notably health for these fathers was improved in terms of happiness through close relationships with their children, new found sense of life directions and
connectedness in the world, more efficient coping skills, the discarding of past destructive behaviors, motivation, satisfaction from good work ethics, their abilities to seek out support from families and friends, recognition of own limitations, and new found commitment to families. Although premature fatherhood severely disrupts the natural course of development and life pattern of a teenager, throwing him into a temporary state of confusion, the results of this study suggest that overall health for the participants improved as a result of the impact of this life event.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

Qualitative methodology effectively fulfilled the descriptive objectives of this study, specifically allowing teenage fathers to have a voice and share their experiences of transition to fatherhood and how it has affected their lives. The small select group of participant fathers chosen allowed for rich data to be elicited but does not permit use of this data for broad universal generalizations about the teenage fatherhood experience. This lack of generalizability is a limitation of this type of study, but it did allow for the experiences of teenage fathers living in a specific remote northern community to be heard and understood.

Most remote northern communities share a common setting of geographical isolation from other communities, often great distances away. There are usually as few as two or even one road leading from town and the surrounding terrain is often wilderness and high mountains. Weather conditions are bleak in terms of rain, snow and cold temperatures. Demographics often show a predominance of one ethnic group, little economic diversity and limited facilities. People tend to know a large section of the local population and meet informally on a regular basis.

The unique set of characteristics of a group of teenage fathers who live in a remote northern community that are discussed in this study demonstrate the importance of examining the social
context of any cultural experience. These unique characteristics are: the ability of young men to sustain long-term friendships throughout their childhood; the loss of most friendships and peer support system when peers seek further education in communities which are at great distances; the strong support of families of origin in a close knit community; difficulties in finding recreational opportunities and related high drug and alcohol involvement; limited job opportunities due to the small number of openings for a large youth population; scarce resources in the form of support groups and funded programs; geographical barriers in finding jobs in other communities that relate to weather conditions and distance; and degree of recognition/affirmation in a small isolated community due to high profile.

In light of the findings of this study related to social context, future research would benefit from the addition of multiple studies of this nature conducted in a variety of isolated northern settings both in British Columbia and across Canada, in order to allow for comparison of results and possible generalizable themes to emerge. Variables identified in this study, such as those pertaining to support systems and coping techniques, could be used in surveys to assess the type of support programs and services that would benefit different teenage father populations.

The fathers in this project were interviewed outside of their family environment in order to give them opportunity to speak freely about their lives, but it would enhance future studies if the addition of participant observation methods were used in the home in order to add further perspective on this subculture of fathers. Rhein et al (1997) employed teenage interviewers in their study on teenage father participation in childrearing, and found this allowed for more open discussion in focus groups. This could be a useful technique to use in research projects of a more invasive nature which might involve entering a teenager’s home. Additionally this type of study requires replication not only
in other settings that share comparable characteristics in terms of geography, but also with other ethnic groups of teenage fathers.

The teenage fathers who were selected randomly from a small pool of 25 fathers, were all aged 17 through 19 years of age when they became fathers. Therefore results of this study cannot be automatically applied to those teenagers younger than 17 years old at the time of birth. A point of note is that only three of the teenagers in the original pool were under 17 years old, and it was therefore reasonable, according to chance, that none of these young men were selected for participation in the study the lives of their children. As the young fathers in this study are all involved in the lives of their children, results cannot be generalized to teenage fathers who are uninvolved.

In order to address the health of the many subcultures within the general youth population, each subculture has to be assessed separately. Since the context of each subculture is an important part of this assessment, the triangulation of quantitative data from a survey of circumstances relevant to teenage fathers with the qualitative data elicited from in depth interviews would best allow for valid and reliable representation of the unique experience of a specific group of teenage fathers.

Policy and Program Recommendations

The outcomes of this research project clearly demonstrate a gap in regards to the provision of support services and programs for teenage fathers, and appropriate prenatal and postnatal education and support for the prospective father. Those complex issues that are an inevitable part of the lives of teenage fathers were voiced, and those needs met and unmet were identified. Perhaps the most significant problem for this group of young men is a profound failure on the part of society to recognize and accept the role of a teenage father.

Although this study did not set out to examine predictors of teenage fatherhood, results
suggest an association between pregnancy and lack of knowledge on birth control and sexuality, and “personal fable” thinking for this group of young fathers. These results are also supported by studies of Robinson and Barret (1987), Robinson (1988b), and Sonenstein (1986). In the light of corroborating evidence, more studies on teenage father groups in small remote communities may be needed to assist in the assessment of levels of knowledge and attitudes among young teenagers on issues to do with sexuality, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Educational programs can then be planned that address those areas of knowledge deficit in young teenagers, that teenage fathers retrospectively can identify. Current education regarding birth control, sexuality and knowledge on reproduction seems to be missing the mark. Although teenagers say they know about these issues, if the fathers in this study are representative of other teenagers, then their attitudes and behaviors do not lead to use of this information.

Most of the teenage fathers in this study were all involved in high-risk behavior with little ambition and hope for the future before the time of pregnancy. It is therefore important to structure policies and practices that help young men who are at risk find ways to plan feasible careers that instill an element of hope for the future. Castiglia (1996), in her recommendations for prevention of teenage pregnancy for those who are most “at risk” due to their pessimistic outlook on life, concurred that strategies that include one on one counselling, peer mentoring and vocational training could assist young men to more meaningful lifestyles that would give them reasons to be more attentive to contraception.

The prenatal period is a time of high stress and confusion for the teenage father, and I would recommend the implementation of prenatal sessions for young men that deal with such issues as their self-identified emotional and practical concerns, the father’s role in the nurturing of his child as well
as “hands on” care, legal and health information, and management of finances. These sessions would be as much supportive as informational, with the inherent purpose of affirming the individual in his preparations for fatherhood. Since the paternal mother, as opposed to paternal father, has been identified as a significant support person by the teenage father, programs could be designed with an option for the father to include her in prenatal sessions. These types of prenatal sessions would not exclude the teenage father from being a support partner to the prospective mother of his child and attending her regular prenatal classes.

A parliamentary committee reviewing Canada’s 30 year old Divorce Act has made recommendations to the government that include the removal of the terms “custody” and “access” from the act, to be substituted by the phrase “shared parenting”. Results from this study would promote such a review as such terms are loaded against a father. The phrase, “shared parenting”, recognizes the equal importance of both parents in the life of a child, and the right of children to have two parents in their lives. This review has sparked outrage from women, but has been praised by paternal groups which is not too surprising. It will be hard to change the historical attitudes of society when it comes to this sort of change in legislation. If stereotypes are to be dismissed, the education system through preschool, school, college, university and other training institutions has to look carefully at the material used for instruction where bias around the value of different parental roles can subtly occur. Society often mentions that, “he was responsible for that pregnancy”, in spite of the fact that consenting females can also accept responsibility in the prevention of a pregnancy.

In the community where the participants live, there is a teenage support group for young mothers where the fathers are included if the general consensus among the mothers is that they are welcome. Though a combined parenting program would be optimum, it may be recommendable that
separate support groups be set up for teenage fathers if young women feel uncomfortable about the inclusion of fathers. Possibly some of their concerns, such as anger management, low self-esteem, anxiety, burden of responsibility and lack of employment would be different from those of the mothers. Non-traditional approaches which respond to a broad range of needs such as parent training, vocational and life-planning, need to be offered to teenage fathers in a non-threatening and non-punitive fashion.

Relationship or cooperation counselling for the young father and the child’s mother would be a strongly recommended component of any community based program for young parents. As this study demonstrated, a poor relationship with the child’s mother so often leads to future lack of involvement with the child. This has serious implications for all parties concerned, and society ultimately bears the costs of the plight of single parent families and angry, disillusioned young men. I see the sensitive delivery of health care services as critical in attracting young people to programs that promote healthy lifestyles and provide support. Due to the critical life stage that these young men are at, and the enormous amount of stress they are under, it is important to use nurturing skills in program facilitation that enhance their capabilities and positive feelings of self. Health care and other service providers must not only understand the needs of youth at critical periods in their lives, but must examine their own biases towards youth.

Summary

This research project confirms that premature fatherhood is a complex stressful event in the life of a young man. Information gathered suggests that although transition to fatherhood is experienced as a life crisis involving many practical and personal changes for a young man, it is also a time of challenge to a healthier lifestyle and a greater maturity. Support systems play a critical role
in enhancing the teenage fathers' ability to meet this challenge. It is significant that even with limited support from family and friends, young fathers work hard to find jobs, spend time with their children, seek out information and derive much pleasure and pride from their relationship with the child in their new roles. The energy, enthusiasm and capacity of youth to survive against incredible odds is well validated in this study. These qualities need to be capitalized on when assisting young fathers through the transition to fatherhood to a point of stabilization both on a personal and practical level. This study demonstrates that there is a point of distress that leaves some teenage fathers immobilized and powerless often at a time when the father is afraid that he is losing involvement with his child. The actual pain of irrevocable separation from a child can lead to further lack of involvement of a young father, accompanied by feelings of hopelessness, low self-worth and sometimes depression. If the recommendations in this chapter were implemented, this sort of outcome along with loss of vitality of youth might be avoided. As several fathers mentioned in this study, it is possible to live separately from the child's mother and yet remain a loving, active, influential parent.
REFERENCES


Joanna McKenzie  
Public Health Nurse  

November 20, 1897

RE: REQUEST FOR RECORDS RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Joanna:

I have checked your request with the F.O.I. office in Victoria. Based on our conversation about your request, I am prepared to grant you permission to proceed subject to the following parameters.

1. That the subjects contacted have supplied their names to the health unit themselves and we have had contact with them in the course of our business. No names supplied by a third party will be used.

2. The health unit records will be used only to verify phone numbers and/or addresses. Any other information will not be used without the consent of the individual.

3. A copy of the signed consent forms be made available to the health unit should any issues arise pertaining to the records.

If these conditions are satisfactory please sign below and return a copy of this memo to me.

I agree with the above terms and conditions.  

Joanna MacKenzie
Joanna MacKenzie
APPENDIX B

Consent to Participate in Research Project

The Experience of Being a Teenage Father and the Transition to Early Fatherhood.

I am a community health nurse working in community “x”, and a student in the Masters of Science in Community Health Degree program at the University of Northern British Columbia. As part of my degree I am undertaking a research project that involves teenage fathers. The purpose of this project is to explore the experience of being a teenage father and of the change to early fatherhood, from the perspective of the father himself.

I am asking you to assist me in gathering information about your experience of early fatherhood. I am also interested to hear how you have coped with this period in your life, and how family, friends, society and local community have responded to you as a teenage father. In talking about your experiences, you will be able to discuss how your needs have been met or not met and how this has affected your general well-being.

You will be asked to attend one interview with me that will be approximately one hour in length. The place of our meeting will be of your choice and the time chosen at your convenience. The interview will be tape recorded and kept in my possession in a secure place. You will not be identified by name during the interview or in the write up of the study. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential.

Participation in the interview is voluntary and you can withdraw from this study at any time. In the published research report both your name and the name of the community in which you live will be masked by false names.

I have received permission from the community health department to obtain your name, address and phone number, and this study has been approved by the University of British Columbia’s Ethics Approval Committee.

If you have any questions, or wish to contact me, please feel free to call me at the health unit. If you have any concerns regarding confidentiality you can contact Dr. Max Blow at UNBC, Chair of the Ethics Committee: 960-5535.

Your signature below indicates that you have agreed to participate in the study described and that you have an adequate understanding of what this involves. Please sign two copies and keep one. Thank you for your assistance.

Joanna Mackenzie
Health and Human Sciences
UNBC
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9

Name: __________________________________________ Signature: ____________________________
Date: __________________________________________ Witness: ____________________________
APPENDIX C

Statement of Confidentiality of Research Project:

The experience of being a teenage father and the transition to early fatherhood.

The study will involve one interview and a meeting with each of the seven participants. Fully informed consent will be obtained from each interviewee and anonymity, confidentiality and privacy will be assured. A participant can withdraw from an interview without penalty at any time during the study and he will be made aware of this before signing the consent form. The place of interview will be at a location of his choice.

The interviews will be tape-recorded and all tapes and transcripts will remain in my possession in a secure locked place for two years. The tapes will be destroyed after this time. The participant names and the name of the northern community involved in the study will not be identified on the tapes and transcripts. Pseudonyms will be used to mask names, and coding will be used so that only the researcher can identify the source of the information.

All responses will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous by the researcher.

Signed:

Joanna MacKenzie
Graduate student in the
Community Health Masters
Program UNBC
**APPENDIX D**

**Glossary of Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition to fatherhood:</td>
<td>The period that covers from the time of fathering the child and knowledge of pregnancy to the time of the infant's first birthday.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curve-ball:</td>
<td>A teenage father's description of the challenges resulting from premature fatherhood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teenage/adolescent/young/participant father:</td>
<td>Terms used in this research study to describe a father who is aged 17-19 years inclusively.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wake-up call:</td>
<td>The immediate impact of the birth of a teenage father's child.</td>
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<td>Common-law:</td>
<td>Description of the relationship of a couple when they live together as an independent unit, but not legally married.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship with partner:</td>
<td>A non-romantic liaison that is amicable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adolescence:</td>
<td>Synonymous term for teenage years, the span from 13-19 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neglected partner:</td>
<td>A teenage father in the mother/father relationship.</td>
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