Parental Styles and Teenage Pregnancy

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Abstract

Statistics in Kenya show an increasing sexual activity among teenage girls. The age at which girls are becoming sexually active continues to come down as time goes. One consequence of this activity is teenage pregnancy, which has without doubt been blamed for the rising number of abortions, psychological trauma and related consequences among young women in Kenya. As everyone seems to be puzzled by the turn of events a question arises whether there are any chances that these teenagers will delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood up to a time when they can make right choices. The Christian parent is faced with the task of formulating a workable plan to reverse this tragedy that has hit Kenya and seemingly the world at large. Programs designed to prevent teen pregnancy are increasingly recognizing the value of involving parents. This is partly because of the great influence that parents have on their children and since teenage girls need a lot of help from adults to become mature and be independent while keeping the right morals. For many parents to know that they still matter to their children may be good news, quite welcome and a reason not to give up on their teenagers. Even though the parents are influential, they still need guidance on how to use their influence in meaningful ways so that it gains the required result in the lives of the growing teenage girls. This paper seeks to describe the different parenting styles for teenagers, find out how Christian parents have failed in their responsibility to teenage girls in the past leading to increased teenage pregnancies. The paper also aims to find out what Christian parents can do in response to the challenge of teenage pregnancies facing Kenyans young girls in an effort therefore reduce the ever increasing cases of teenage pregnancies in Kenya.

Keywords: Christian Parents, Parental Styles, Teenage Girls, Teenage Pregnancies in Kenya.

1. Introduction

1.1 Parenting Styles

According to a research done in America, parents contribute on average 47% of
influence in making decisions about sex, peers about 18% and the much talked about media about 3% of the same (Rice, 1998, p. 69). This study has shown that throughout adolescence, young people (and therefore girls as well) continue to look upon their parents for guidance on sexual and moral issues. In Kenya where most teenagers have limited access to media especially the internet, parental influence is expected to be much higher. The parenting styles used with respect to teenagers my increase or decrease the influence of a parent to decisions about sex that a teenager makes. It is therefore important that the various parenting styles, their strengths and weaknesses be known as an attempt is made to know the link between teenage pregnancies and parenting. Santrock (2005, p. 318), identified four parenting styles that are associated with different aspects of teenagers’ behaviour: authoritarian, authoritative, neglectful and indulgent.

1.2 Authoritarian Parenting

Authoritarian parenting is a restrictive, punitive style in which parents force the teenagers to follow specific directions and directives they set for them. The authoritarian parent places limits and controls on the teenager and allows little dialogue. The teenagers whose parents are authoritarian are often anxious, slow to initiate any activity on their own as well as have poor communication skills. This parenting style is associated with teenagers’ socially incompetent behaviour.

1.3 Authoritative Parenting

Authoritative parenting encourages teenagers to be independent but still places limits on their actions. Extensive dialogue is allowed, and parents are warm towards their teenagers. The authoritative parents correct their teenagers with love and talk with them about how they could avoid mistakes in future. Unlike the authoritarian style, this parenting style is associated with teenagers’ socially competent behaviour. The teenagers of authoritative parents are therefore self-reliant and socially responsible. They can be trusted to make sound decisions when confronted with situations that demand so.
1.4 Neglectful Parenting

Neglectful parenting is a style in which parents are to a large extend uninvolved in their teenagers’ lives. The neglectful parents are not concerned with the decisions that their teenagers make. The teenagers of neglectful parents are likely to have socially incompetent behaviour especially lack of self-control. The same teenagers do not handle independence well. Neglectful parents are also linked to lack of parental monitoring. Jacobson and Crockett (2000, p. 82), link parental monitoring with lower sexual activity, higher grades and less depression in teenagers. Teenagers of neglectful parents are expected to be more sexually active, obtain lower grades and have higher levels of depression.

1.5 Indulgent Parenting

Indulgent parenting on the other hand is a style in which parents are highly involved with their teenager but place few demands or controls on them. The teenagers can do what they want, and the result is that they never learn to control their behaviour. Some parents who rear their teenagers in this way do so because they mistakenly believe that their being warm to them with few restraints will produce a confident teenager. On the contrary, indulgent parenting is associated with producing teenagers who are socially incompetent, not able to follow any rules and regulations. It is shocking to hear the blame of such a situation being turned from one person to another with no one being ready to accept responsibility. Parents would occasionally blame the media and peer pressure for the decisions that their teens make pertaining to sexual behaviour.

2. Parental Contribution to Teenage Pregnancy

There has been evident neglect on the side of Christian parent towards their teenage daughters. A critical observation of the role of Christian parents to their children would expose some of these failures that have cost the teenage girls physical, emotional and spiritual losses.

2.1 Lack of Information on Sex

It is true that all parents carry great fears about their children’s sexuality. Sex
is a mystery which is surrounded by many questions in the minds of a growing teenager. Many of these teenagers want answers to their questions but receive mixed responses from the society (Dobson, 1978, p. 80). The responsibility of bringing up children in a godly way and answering these questions first rests on the parents. It is the duty of every good Christian parent to let their children learn about sex and not just discover about it. Many parents pretend that sex issue never existed and simply decide to keep quiet on it. Others merely refer to sex talk as bad manners. Parents are very keen in informing their children about good use of facilities like gas in the house, electricity, refrigerators and other things that the parents consider could put their children in danger. Information about sex which could be a matter of life and death is in most cases ignored. The consequence of lack of this information, especially to the teenage girls has been very detrimental, often resulting to unexpected pregnancies that come as a shock to many parents. Many naïve teenage girls who have become pregnant in this manner confess that they did not expect it to happen.

2.2 Stress Leading to Early Maturity

Scientists have shown exposure of young girls to stress can trigger early maturity in them. The younger a girl is when she reaches puberty, the higher the likelihood that she will experience depression, breast cancer, take to drugs or risky sexual behaviour, or suffer teenage pregnancies (Obbo 2007). Girls who experience a lot of family stress perhaps from drunken father who returns in the night and does not pay rent on time, will mature faster than their counterparts who do not experience such stress. “If a girl grows in a tough environment and, therefore senses that the future will be tough, her body adopts an accelerated reproductive strategy which in our ordinary world is like buying insurance,” (ibid). This may therefore include early arrival of puberty, menarche as well as early pregnancy. By early maturity, maybe she hopes to become pregnant, and get the father of the child to give her support she does not have at home. The hormones in the body of a girl who is born in a caring environment, on the other hand, gets the signal that it can afford to wait, finish schooling and not get pregnant early. This, it does due to the support at home and therefore matures much later. Parents who do not create an environment which is conducive for their daughters may unknowingly be contributing to their involving
in sexual activity and consequently unwanted pregnancy.

2.3 Absence of Role Models

Christian parents are expected to be good role models. It is known that human beings learn more from seeing than from hearing. Teenagers need to see their parents read the bible for what it is worth, live by God’s rules, love unconditionally, forgive genuinely, exercise faith unspARINGLY and solve whatever problems they may have biblically (Fryling & Robert, 1991, p. 116). The examples of the parents will stir up a teenage girl to live for God more than mere verbal instructions and admonition. The scripture admonishes all Christians to be the light of this world. Consequently, “each parent is a model that her children can pattern themselves after,” (Munyere, 2006, p. 23). This implies that the Christian parents of today have an obligation to be good examples to their teenage girls.

Ashley (2007, p. 24), observe that, a teenage girl who grows up seeing abuse, hatred between parents, unforgiveness and lack of moral principles may end up not seeing anything worth emulating or listening to from her parents. The consequences to a teenage girl who is surrounded by numerous pulls such as her peers, media and body changes can be disastrous. It is therefore easy that teenage girls who lack role models at home and fail to get other strong complimenting model figures may find themselves trapped in the snare of teenage pregnancy. This can be attributed to lack of a role model at home which places the teenager prey for any group seemingly offering any form of enviable lifestyle.

2.4 Failure to Talk to The Boys

The thousands of teenage girls who get pregnant each year in Kenya do it in partnership. Boys and young men are involved. A common mistake that parents make is to totally blame the teenage girl while leaving the boy responsible for the pregnancy feel like a hero. It seems to be a bigger problem than many can see since teachers and other authorities seem to have come to terms with the same. It has been a common phenomenon in Kenya that the girls who get pregnant while at school quit learning but the boys responsible remain in class and continue teasing and abusing other young girls. According to a research done in Kenya it was concluded that “Most parents don’t talk about sex to their boys” (Gichanu, 2006). Talking merely
to girls about consequences of premarital sex, responsibility, love and other virtues is a job half done. Christian parents who neglect their boys are not only doing a disservice to their sons but also to other people’s daughters.

2.5 Parent –Teenager Conflict

A common belief is that there is a huge gulf that separates parents and teenagers that many scholars refer to as generation gap. This is said to be a time when the values of the teenager become increasingly distant from those of the parents. With respect to objectives of living, this generation gap is mainly a stereotype (Santrock, 2005, p. 322). Most adolescents share similar beliefs about the value of hard work, achievement and career aspirations. This does not mean that there does not exist any conflict between parents and their teens. Most of the conflict that exists involves the everyday events of life such as dressing neatly, keeping a bedroom clean and so on. Many parents base their argument on these unavoidable strains to neglect their teenage daughters. They often brand their daughters as rebellious. A teenage girl who is continuously called rebellious is more likely to become sexually active at an earlier age than one whose parents understand. Parents who do not understand that the source of conflict with their teenagers is not based on many occasions upon moral values may end up destroying teenage girls instead of correcting them in wisdom when they err.

3. Parental Contributions to Preventing Teenage Pregnancies

According to Isoka (1999, p. 18) Christian parents should realize that they have a great responsibility their teenagers. The simple escape root of imagining that somebody else would take the responsibility has proven futile. It is time parents took up their responsibility to bridge the gap that exists between them and their teenagers. Many scholars support simple common-sense ways to help teens delay becoming sexually active.

3.1 Parental Supervision

Christian parents should strive to establish rules, curfews, and standards of expected behaviour, preferably through an open process of family discussion and respectful communication for their teenagers. If children get out of school at 3 pm and the parents don’t get home from work until 6 pm, it would be wise to know the one
responsible for making certain that they are not only safe during those hours, but also are engaged in useful activities. Supervising and monitoring one’s teenagers’ whereabouts appropriately is important for a parent. One suggested way of supervising teenagers is by being aware of the friends they have and keep since friends have a strong influence on each other. Christian parents should help their children and teenagers become friends with kids whose families share Christian values. Parents of teens can even arrange to meet with the parents of their children’s friends to establish common rules and expectations. It is easier to enforce a curfew that one’s teenager and his friends share rather than one that makes him or her different. Wise parents can also welcome friends of their teenagers into their home and talk to them openly. This would all ensure that to the best of the parents’ knowledge, they can reduce the influence that comes from bad company thereby reducing the chances of teenage pregnancies.

3.2 Knowing More About Teenagers

It is indeed very important that Christian parents recognize that their children go through the two important transitions of life. Brubaker and Robert (1981, p. 59), cites these transitions as ones from childhood activities to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood. Collins (1988, p. 167) suggests three overlapping periods of adolescence: spans early, middle, and late adolescence. The first two tend to be within the ages of from eleven to eighteen years while the late adolescence is between eighteen to early twenties. This could make the Christian parents of today to understand their teenagers are indeed in adolescence which is characterized by rapid changes in the body, establishing independence, achieving a sense of self identity and generally asserting oneself. Collins comments on this important area that all parents ought to know that:

“...adolescents are going through a significant change period, characterised first by the need to adjust to a variety of physical changes, second by the influence of great social pressures, and third by the challenge of making life determining decisions about values, beliefs, careers, lifestyles, and relationships with others, including those of the opposite sex,” (Collins, 1988, p. 167).
Ultimately, “Research has repeatedly shown the strong correlation between healthy family ties and positive social behaviour in teenagers,” (Devries, 1994, p. 80). This may partly be attributed to the fact that, “the bridge to adulthood is a relational bridge and teenagers need parents and other adults to help them cross well,” (Rice 1987, 85). It is therefore the responsibility of Christian parents to learn as much as they can about their teenagers. This will help them understand them and treat them as they ought. Consequently, as well, the complications that come in a family due to misunderstanding of teenage girls will be reduced. When girls listen to their parents who understand them, feel appreciated by them, the chances are that this will reduce teenage pregnancies.

3.3 Knowing What Children Read, Listen to and Watch

The media which include television, radio, movies, music videos, magazines, the Internet are chock full of material sending the wrong messages to our teenagers. In most media stations, Sex is casual, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and few people having sex ever seem to be married or even committed to anyone. The question that arises here is whether this is consistent with the expectations and values of any Christian parent. If not, it is important that a parent talks with their children about what the media portray and ask for their opinion about it. Programs or movies that offend a parent should be made known to the children and an explanation given as to why the parents do not feel comfortable with them. Christian parents should strive as much as possible to be aware of “media literate”. This will help them to think about what they and their families are watching and reading. They should also encourage their kids to think critically by asking them to ask them what they think about the programs they watch and the music they listen to. “Parents can always turn the TV off, cancel subscriptions, and place certain movies off limits,” (Troccoli, 2006, p. 25). It may not be possible to fully control what children see and hear, but Christian parents and indeed all parents can certainly make their views known and control the own home environment while encouraging the kids to be responsible in choosing what they see or watch out of the supervision of the parents.
3.4 Parental Counselling

Peter Kariuki Njoroge in his book Kariuki (1981, p. 71), affirms that Kids and more so teenagers have lots of questions about sex, and they often say that the source they would most like to go to for answers is their parents. Good Christian parents should take the initiative to start the conversation, and make sure that it is honest, open, and respectful. It is hard to think of how to start the discussion, bearing in mind that talking about sex is a taboo in most African communities, Kenya not being exempt. A parent may consider using situations shown on television or in movies as conversation starters. In such a situation, a parent may start off by telling a teenager candidly and confidently what he thinks and why he takes these positions. Occasionally there are situations or issues that the parent may not be sure about. A good Christian parent should be careful not to just dismiss them or approve them, instead he should be open to learn as well as do research about them. Above all, parents should endeavour to have a two-way conversation and not a one-way lecture. Asking teenagers what they think and what they know can help parents to correct misconceptions.

Age-appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin early in a child’s life and continue through adolescence. As Karen Troccoli (2006, p. 24), suggests, parents should resist the idea that there should be just one conversation about all this - you know, “the talk.” Parents and kids should be talking about sex and love openly all along. This should apply to sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. All kids need a lot of communication, guidance, and information about these issues, even if they sometimes don’t appear to be interested in what parents have to say. One advantage of having regular conversations is that parents do not worry so much about making a mistake or saying something not quite right, because they will always be able to talk again.

Teenagers need as much help in understanding the meaning of sex as they do in understanding how all the body parts work. For any willing Christian parent, apart from the bible, there are many inexpensive books and videos available to help with any detailed information they might need. Nevertheless, lack of technical information should not make a parent shy. Often teenagers will confuse love and sex. Telling
them about the two, and what the difference is could help. On the other hand, one should always remember to talk about the reasons that kids find sex interesting and enticing. When a parent discusses only the ‘horror’ of unplanned pregnancy and disease he misses many of the issues on teenagers’ minds. Teenagers should as well grow expecting after having lived well to enjoy the gift of sex the right time in marriage.

### 3.5 Helping Create a Bright Future for the Teenagers

According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy statistics show that the chances that teenagers will delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood are significantly increased if their futures appear bright (Troccoli, 2006, p. 22). This means helping them set meaningful goals for the future, talking to them about what it takes to make future come true, and helping them reach their goals. A parent can for example tell a teenager that if they want to be a teacher, they will need to stay in school to earn a degree and pass certain exams. It also means teaching them to use their free time in a constructive way, such as setting aside certain times to complete homework assignments. Parents should explain how becoming pregnant—or causing pregnancy—can derail the best of plans. A simple illustration could be how child care expenses can make it almost impossible to afford fees for higher education. All in all, the point is that creating an impression of a bright future that can help reduce teenage pregnancies.

### 3.6 Clarity on Sexual Values

Parents who communicate with their children about sex, love, and relationships are often more successful because they are certain in their own mind about these issues. To help clarify the parent’s attitudes and values, it is appropriate that the parents come out clearly on what they think about teenagers being sexually active. Since many young men imagine it is the responsibly of girls to say no to any sexual advances, issues such as who is to be responsible for setting sexual limits should be discussed early in advance by the parents. It is the duty of Christian parents as well to speak what they feel about the use of contraceptives. Sometimes it may help if parents would come out clearly to admit that as teenagers they went through similar circumstances that their daughters go through. A discussion on how some of these
things were handled could be of help. Above all, it is very important that parents express Christian virtues as those that require abstinence not for the simple reason of preventing unwanted pregnancies but for the very central reason for which all live people- to please God. On the overall, “parents should work closely with pastors of their teenagers,” (Warren 1987, 87). Such a link would establish what morals the pastors have taught in their lessons therefore ensuring that the teenager gets the right message without parents assuming the pastor has done it.

4. Conclusion

While many people believe there is no such thing as excellent parenting, authoritative parenting is likely the most effective style. This is because it establishes an appropriate balance between control and autonomy, giving teenage girls opportunities to develop independence. It also allows teenagers to express their views. This type of environment is likely to help teenagers delay the onset of sexual activity. Today’s Christian parent should seek to express love and affection to their teenage girls. Telling them that they matter and praising their accomplishments should be done on all possible occasions. On the same note they should seek to spend time with them so that they share experiences and help the growing teenage girl. On all occasions, listening is a skill that all parents should develop and cultivate in themselves. Being supportive and interested in what interests’ teenage girls would open them to discussions about sex. Courtesy and respect to teenage girls and their friends by parents is normally reciprocated. Parent – teen relationships that are warm and in tone, firm in discipline, and rich in communication are likely to bear much fruit in the fight against teen pregnancies. These close relationships should be built from an early age and not during teenage years. In this relationship, a parent should seek to listen carefully to the teenager, be a good role model, talk together to establish family rules and be good counsellors. This if implemented can reduce teenage pregnancies in Kenya.

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