

“Mom, I’m Pregnant”: The Adolescent Pregnancy Reveal

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ABSTRACT The pregnancy reveal is conventionally a celebratory occasion, but for a pregnant adolescent, sharing news of a pregnancy, particularly with parents, can be a daunting prospect. Nonetheless, given the importance of social support to pregnant and parenting adolescents’ success, the pregnancy reveal is an important step toward making healthy pregnancy decisions. Drawing on data from 27 in-depth interviews with young parents in Texas who were peer educators in an adolescent pregnancy prevention program, we find that adolescents often delay telling parents about a pregnancy. The complex decision-making process they undergo as they consider how and from whom to seek help can be drawn out, sometimes well into the second trimester, potentially delaying prenatal care and other steps necessary for a healthy pregnancy. This finding suggests that the delay and its consequences warrant further research and may have implications for parents’ and practitioners’ conversations with adolescents about sexual and reproductive health.

The rate of adolescent childbearing in the United States has fallen dramatically over the last 2 decades, but there remain thousands of American teens and young adults each year who discover that they are pregnant or that an intimate partner is pregnant. For each of these adolescents, pregnancy is a major life event. However, there are substantial gaps in our understanding of the adolescent pregnancy experience, particularly regarding what happens when a young person first suspects or confirms a pregnancy and reaches out for help. Pregnant and parenting adolescents need social support, especially from family. However, a potentially disapproving or disappointed parent can be the last person in whom a pregnant

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young woman, or a young man whose partner is pregnant, may want to confide. Indeed, some evidence suggests that teens likely do delay telling parents about a pregnancy (Frost and Oslak 1999). This delay could have long-term consequences given the many time-sensitive matters, such as first-trimester prenatal care, behavioral changes, and decision making about abortion, with which adolescents likely need guidance and support.

Proactive help seeking is a positive and important part of adolescent development. Nonetheless, there is limited research on adolescent decision making about how to seek help, particularly with regard to one of the most fraught decisions an adolescent can face: how to reach out for help upon suspicion or discovery of a pregnancy. This study, which presents a qualitative analysis of interviews with young parents who have faced the challenges of adolescent pregnancy, finds this neglected and potentially consequential area of inquiry to be a salient part of pregnancy as adolescents experience it. This insight points to a need for further examination of this critical decision-making juncture, referred to here as the “pregnancy reveal,” as well as its natural counterpart, parents’ reactions to news of a teen’s pregnancy. Such examination could shed light on previously overlooked challenges to, and opportunities for, connecting pregnant adolescents and their partners with the positive, timely support they need.

BACKGROUND

Despite a substantial decline in the teen pregnancy rate in the United States over the last 2 decades (Martin et al. 2015), adolescent childbearing remains an important focus of research and policy. The pregnancy rate continues to be higher among adolescents in the United States than in any other advanced economy (Sedgh et al. 2015; United Nations Statistics Division 2015), and it is higher still in Texas, where this study took place. In 2013 and 2016 respectively, there were 58 pregnancies and 31 births per 1,000 females ages 15–19 in Texas; nationally, there were 43 pregnancies and 20 births (US Department of Health and Human Services 2019). Unintended pregnancies are most prevalent among low-income teenagers (Finer and Zolna 2016), who have the fewest resources for dealing with them. Moreover, teen pregnancy is associated with a wide range of negative social, economic, and health-related outcomes for adolescent parents and their children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019).

At the same time, research shows that adolescent pregnancy is not a “universally negative life event” (Beers and Hollo 2009, 217) and can in fact be a catalyst for positive life changes (Lesser, Koniak-Griffin, and Anderson 1999; Clemmens 2003). A robust body of literature points to social support in particular as a “key factor” in the success of adolescent mothers and their children (Letourneau, Stewart, and Barnfather 2004, 509). Several studies tie social support to specific positive outcomes, such as fewer pregnancy complications, more educational success, and greater life satisfaction. Conversely, lack of social support has been associated with maternal depression and lower infant birth weight (Feldman et al. 2000; Logsdon et al. 2005; SmithBattle 2006; Dunkel Schetter 2011). In her meta-analysis of qualitative studies on adolescent motherhood, Donna Clemmens (2003, 97) concludes that supportive relationships, particularly the “inter-generational caring” that comes from family, may explain why some teen parents experience better outcomes than others “both within and across studies.” Similarly, in their review of the teen pregnancy literature, Lee Beers and Ruth Hollo (2009, 217) find that teen parents can fare “equally well compared to their peers, particularly when provided with strong social and functional supports.”

Among the many members of an adolescent’s informal support network, partners and parents, particularly mothers, are frequently found to be most essential (Stevenson, Maton, and Teti 1999; Beers and Hollo 2009). Research suggests that mothers play the most substantial role in providing a broad range of support (e.g., provision of housing, educational support, and parenting help) for pregnant and parenting teenage girls (Letourneau et al. 2004; Beers and Hollo 2009; Berthin 2011). There is evidence that social support is similarly important for teen fathers in facilitating the transition to parenthood (Thompson and Walker 2004; Fagan, Bernd, and Whiteman 2007), although this research is less robust than that on teen mothers (Bunting and McAuley 2004; Thompson and Walker 2004; Beers and Hollo 2009). Additionally, some studies show that material and emotional support from both teenagers’ parents (Fagan et al. 2007), especially from paternal mothers (Miller 1994, 1997), is associated with better outcomes, such as improved parenting behavior and increased involvement in the child’s life (Bunting and McAuley 2004). Notably, this research also suggests that many teen fathers do not receive familial support, leaving a crucial need unmet (Bunting and McAuley 2004).

There has been little systematic inquiry into how teens reach out for social support when they first suspect or confirm a pregnancy, but there is some evidence that teens are likely to delay telling parents. In a survey of pregnant teens in California, Jennifer Frost and Selene Oslak (1999) found that 76.8 percent of respondents shared news of their pregnancy within a day of discovery; however, only 16.8 percent said that their mother was the first to know. Meanwhile, 42.4 percent told the baby's father first, and 16.2 percent told a girlfriend. It is unclear how long respondents in the latter two groups waited thereafter to tell a parent or other adult. Among all respondents, however, nearly half (47.7 percent) said they "didn't tell mom right away," and 55.2 percent said they "didn't tell dad right away" (Frost and Oslak 1999, app. table 7).

This delay matters because adult guidance, encouragement, and support, particularly with practical matters such as gaining access to medical care, may be especially important during the initial stages of pregnancy. For instance, early prenatal care helps ensure positive birth outcomes (Nicolaidis 2011; US Department of Health and Human Services 2011), but research indicates that young teens are less likely than their older peers to begin prenatal care in the first trimester (Gavin et al. 2009). Similarly, abortion becomes more expensive and medically risky as a pregnancy advances, yet studies of abortion patients have found that teens are more likely than older patients to report having delayed seeking abortion (Finer et al. 2006; Lee and Ingham 2010) or having sought abortion "beyond the clinic's gestational limit" (Foster et al. 2012, 120). Pregnant teens may need early guidance with behavioral changes as well, as they may be more likely than their peers to have a history of engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking and drug use (Elfenbein and Felice 2003). Together, these studies indicate a need among pregnant adolescents and their partners for wise counsel at a time when they may be especially unlikely to seek it.

Although there has been little systematic effort within the teen pregnancy literature to examine the pregnancy reveal, findings about other pregnancy decisions indirectly touch on the matter and provide some context for understanding it. For example, a study of abortion patients found that among teens ages 17 and younger, only 64 percent reported having told their mothers of their decision to seek an abortion (Ralph et al. 2014). In addition, teens have cited "concealed" pregnancies to explain why they did not seek prenatal care (Friedman, Heneghan, and Rosenthal

2009, 179) and why they sought a late abortion (Lee and Ingham 2010, 482). Other studies reflect and suggest some reasons for a similar reluctance to reveal pregnancy. In a study of pregnant teens in primary care settings, respondents cited “not recognizing pregnancy symptoms, denying being pregnant, [and] fear of parents’ response to the pregnancy” as reasons for having delayed seeking prenatal care (Hughes Lee and Grubbs 1995, 38). A study of abortion patients found that teens were more likely than others to report having delayed an abortion because “it took some time before they knew they were pregnant.” On average, the teens took a week longer to suspect pregnancy than women in their early 20s (Finer et al. 2006, 343). The authors suggest this finding may point not just to a lack of knowledge about pregnancy signs but to “greater denial of pregnancy” (343). This conclusion is consistent with a qualitative study finding that teens “described the feeling of ‘knowing’ that they were pregnant . . . but described themselves as in ‘denial’ about it” (Berthin 2011, 51).

Together, these studies indicate some empirical support for otherwise intuitively plausible reasons, including fear, ignorance, and denial, for why teens might avoid or delay sharing news of a pregnancy. These findings are also consistent with the broader literature on adolescent decision making, which indicates that distressed teens often fail to “appropriately seek help” (Wilson and Deane 2001, 346) and that developmental processes unique to the adolescent brain predispose teens to “suboptimal decisions and actions” in certain circumstances, particularly those involving high emotional stakes and peer influence (Casey, Jones, and Hare 2008, 111; Steinberg 2008). Help seeking is considered to be a coping mechanism with important adaptive and protective functions (Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner 2011). However, a report from the World Health Organization found “a lack of research on adolescent decision-making, that is, how adolescents decide when, where and how to seek help” (Barker 2007, 29). Our article builds on the intersection of these disparate areas of research—namely, adolescent pregnancy, help seeking, decision making, and developmental neuroscience—to provide a better understanding of adolescents’ perspectives on the pregnancy reveal, which is one of the most important help-seeking actions a pregnant adolescent can take. It also extends the prior literature in the following ways.

First, it adds to the limited body of qualitative research on adolescent decision making by conveying teens’ perspectives in their own words, drawn from semistructured interviews in which the topics explored were

largely determined by the teens themselves. This approach allowed the emergence of unexpected and previously unexamined themes related to teens' earliest pregnancy decisions.

A second contribution to the literature is this study's focus on social support in the prenatal period, an underexplored topic relative to social support in the postnatal period, when adolescents face the challenges of parenthood. This focus supplements an emerging body of knowledge on the connections between prenatal stress and long-term health outcomes for mothers and children.

Third, in its inclusion of teen fathers, this study adds a demographic group that is underexplored in the literature on adolescent childbearing. It includes perspectives provided directly by adolescent fathers and points to the need for further inquiry in this area. This overlooked point of view is particularly important given the growing understanding of the importance of paternal involvement for children of unmarried parents. Past studies have shown prenatal involvement to be critical not just postnatally (Carlson and McLanahan 2009; Carlson and Magnuson 2011) but also prenatally, given that lack of the father involvement has been linked to pregnancy complications (Osborne and Dillon 2014).

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

This study draws from interviews with young parents who served as peer educators in a program teaching middle school and high school students about the difficulties of parenting at a young age. The program's goal was to discourage adolescent pregnancy by raising students' awareness of its many challenges, with the rationale that students would be receptive to a message conveyed by peers to whom they could relate. To provide students with a realistic understanding of parenting difficulties, the peer educators were trained to share candid anecdotes in a group-presentation format about the challenges they encountered as young parents. The program encouraged frank, genuine, and intimate storytelling, and each educator chose a different way of sharing the narrative of his or her struggles. In our interviews, we asked young parents to share the stories they routinely told during their presentations and to elaborate as they saw fit.

The analysis was based on interviews with 27 young parents. The interviews took place in 2011, at which time all of the participants were working

as paid peer educators for the teen pregnancy prevention program. All of the program’s peer educators were invited by email to participate, and two declined due to scheduling conflicts. The invitation explained that the purpose of the interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of young parents’ experiences. The invitation was written by the first author of this article, who was conducting an evaluation of the program and was introduced in that capacity to the peer educators. The supervisor of the program delivered the invitation by email. The study underwent all relevant protocols of the University of Texas Institutional Review Board process.

Study participants were drawn from three different program sites in Texas: El Paso, Austin, and Houston. We conducted all the interviews during work hours at participants’ places of work, and we compensated interviewees with the equivalent of their regular hourly wages. There were 27 participants: 19 females and 8 males. The sample comprised young adults from a diverse mix of races and ethnicities, including African American, Asian, Hispanic, and white. All were interviewed individually. No couples were included, and none of the participants were related to one another, although many likely knew one another through participation in the program.

At the time of the interviews, the group ranged in age from 17 to 27 years old, with the median age being 22. Not all participants shared how old they were when their first children were born, but according to estimates based on other information participants supplied (such as age at time of pregnancy discovery and age of children at time of interview), we surmise that participants’ ages at time of delivery ranged from 14 to 22, with the median age being 17. The majority of participants had become parents as teenagers, but four participants had been slightly older at the birth of their first child (one participant was 20 years old, one was 21, and two were 22). Although these participants were not teenagers at the time of their deliveries, they were nonetheless young and unprepared for the challenges of parenthood, as their narratives and program participation demonstrate, and their feelings about the pregnancy reveal did not differ in any systematic way from those of their younger peers in the program. Furthermore, given that adolescent brain development continues beyond the teenage years (Sawyer et al. 2018), their perspectives provide relevant insight into the challenges of adolescent pregnancy and parenting.

We conducted recorded interviews in a semistructured format. Rather than adhering to a uniform set of questions, the conversations flowed freely,

primarily directed by the information volunteered by the young parents. All participants were asked an initial set of questions about their age (and that of their child) and their current schooling and employment, after which they were asked to share the stories they typically told as peer educators—stories about their recollections of the pregnancy experience and what it was like to be a young parent. The participants largely chose which story elements to divulge and which details to emphasize. We determined follow-up questions primarily on the basis of the content of participants' stories and the need to make points of clarification along the way.

One limitation of this study's retrospective approach is that the participants' perspectives—perhaps influenced by their experiences in the peer education program—may have shifted over time, altering their interpretations of the past. However, the approach was informed by the symbolic-interaction perspective, which gives primacy to individuals' interpretations of experiences and acknowledges that those interpretations change over time (Carter and Fuller 2015). The central purpose of the interviews was to understand the teens' experiences as they understood them. Although informed by hindsight, those perspectives nonetheless provide firsthand accounts of adolescents' help-seeking rationales.

The symbolic-interaction perspective is one of the theoretical underpinnings of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990), which is the framework of inquiry that informed our interview approach. A grounded theorist does not begin a research project with a particular hypothesis but rather forms a theory based on the data that are collected—in this case, the stories provided by young parents.

The interviews lasted about 90 minutes each and were subsequently transcribed. On average, the transcripts were 20.26 pages long, with the shortest interview being 11 pages and the longest being 30 pages. The word counts ranged from 5,220 to 14,943 words, with an average length of 10,127 words. Given the intimate nature of details shared in the interviews, we replaced participants' names with pseudonyms and did the same for any other people mentioned during the interviews to protect participants' identities. Other identifying features (e.g., names of schools and stores) were also adjusted as necessary. We initially coded the transcripts to identify basic themes; then MAXQDA software was used to assemble the data into categories and subcategories in an iterative process through which major themes were identified, reviewed, and refined. Consistent with grounded-theory practice, we then derived the theories we present in this article from those themes.

RESULTS

As recounted by the young parents interviewed in this study, the pregnancy reveal often took place in stages, beginning with suspicions about, or discovery of, the pregnancy. In a way, many of the participants had to reveal the pregnancy to themselves, not just in the literal sense of confirming the pregnancy with a home test or doctor visit but in the emotional sense as well: They had to learn to accept a very different reality from what they had previously known. Therefore, discovery of the pregnancy often was not a singular event but a process of suspecting, confirming, and admitting to themselves that the pregnancy was real. For some, this first stage—one of trepidation, indecision, and inaction—lasted quite a while; for others, it was short but nonetheless salient in their memories. This stage led eventually to disclosure of the pregnancy, usually to a partner or friend first (what we call the “soft reveal”) and later to a parent or other adult (the “hard reveal”). For some participants, these stages overlapped; for others, they were quite distinct. The following sections explore the stages in more detail through the recollections of the young parents.

STAGE 1: THE SELF-REVEAL

For many of the participants, pregnancy discovery was deceptively complex, in that it was not necessarily a singular event. Instead, it was a drawn-out period of personal reckoning and often denial, even as the pregnancy advanced. The following stories provide insight into the mindsets of adolescents in the period before they took action to seek help with their pregnancies, when they were delaying, wittingly or not, the inevitable. They also underscore just how long this process can take: not just days or weeks but sometimes months.

Denial

For many of the young adults interviewed, pregnancy began with weeks or even months of inaction or denial. In several cases, teenagers were not explicitly keeping the pregnancy secret; they simply were not acknowledging the situation to themselves. Veronica’s story provides a particularly remarkable example of this situation, in that her parents suspected she was pregnant—at 20 weeks along—before she realized it herself: “Four days after my sixteenth birthday, my mom came into my room, and she was like,

‘Have you gotten your period? Have you gotten your period?’ I was like, ‘Why are you asking me this? Why? Do I look like the type of girl that would get pregnant?’ I remember just freaking out and kicking her out of my room. I laid on my bed and looked at my ceiling and thought, ‘Oh my God. I have to be pregnant. I have to be because I can’t remember the last time I got my period.’”

Veronica’s story illustrates an extreme version of a fairly common reaction to pregnancy symptoms among the young adults in our study: denial. For some, denial meant ignoring missed periods or failing to seek help despite experiencing strange symptoms. “Well, my period’s never been normal,” recalled Ellen, who was 16 at the time of her pregnancy. “But after 4 months of nothing, I told my best friend, ‘I think I’m pregnant.’”

Similarly, Carmen, who was 19 at the time of her delivery, had her suspicions but postponed seeking help. “I still had my menstrual cycle,” she recalled. “I did have symptoms, and I took pregnancy tests, and they always came out negative. When I was 6 months pregnant, I felt something moving, and I was thinking, ‘What if it’s a worm? What if I’m sick? What if it’s something else?’ So I went to the doctor.”

Marisol was 13 when she learned she was pregnant. Like Ellen, her suspicions began with her first missed period. And like Carmen, she knew that other symptoms could also indicate pregnancy—but she did not have any other symptoms at first. “I knew that being pregnant, you miss your period,” she recalled. “But it wasn’t straight-up, like, ‘I’m pregnant.’ So I just put it in the back of my mind. And I knew . . . there were other things, like throwing up, being moody, sleeping all the time, and I didn’t have any of that.” Two more months passed without other symptoms. Then, on the bus to school one morning, she became so hungry that she got off the bus, went home, and ate “two big cups of Ramen noodles . . . in 5 minutes.” After that, she said, “I ended up throwing up. And right after that, I feel really exhausted. Like I’m really, really, really tired. And then I ended up going to sleep from like 4:00 in the afternoon until 7:00 the next morning. So after that day . . . it all came to me at once—I’m throwing up; I’m sleeping all day; I’m tired. Like it can’t be anything else besides me being pregnant.”

For some teens, denial continued even after confirmation of pregnancy. In these cases, it meant pretending that nothing had changed and attempting—not always successfully—to carry on with normal routines. “The first couple months . . . I was, like, in shock,” recalled Eva, who was a freshman in college when she got pregnant. “It didn’t really sink in. I really wasn’t

thinking about the future, I was just stuck on that mindset. But at this point I had already lost my job. They let me go because I was showing up to work like 5 minutes late, 2 minutes late, 3 minutes late. So after a while I guess they were like, ‘Well, it adds up.’ So they let me go, and then I’m failing three classes out of four. At the end of the semester, I lost my scholarship, so I had to move out of the dorms.”

As these stories illustrate, some adolescents do not just resist telling parents; they also resist admitting to themselves what is happening. And coming to terms with the situation often takes precious time, even as the pregnancy advances.

Partners

As demonstrated by their stories, boys may be similarly likely to downplay or ignore pregnancy suspicions—both their partners’ and their own. “She had mentioned something about how she thought she might be pregnant,” recalled Domingo, who was 16 when he learned about his partner’s pregnancy. “But we didn’t put much thought into it.”

Boys often turned to the rationalization that the baby probably was not theirs. “I was kind of like in denial, like, ‘It’s not my baby,’ or whatever,” remembered Juan, who was 16 when he learned that his girlfriend was pregnant.

It was not unusual for boys to become distrustful of their girlfriends or partners. “She looks at me, and she says, she’s like, ‘I’m pregnant;’” remembered another participant, Diego. “And I looked at her like, ‘Huh?’ And mind you, I’m 16 at the time. . . . I was like, ‘Um, get a job.’ And I walked away. I did this because I was scared. I was very scared of the situation. I didn’t know who she had been sleeping with other than me. I didn’t know if she was lying to me. There were so many other variables I didn’t know about that I wasn’t going to go off her word and trust her. So I walked away, and I started to ignore her.”

Like Diego, Domingo initially cast doubt on his partner’s fidelity. “My first reaction was I was denying the baby. It wasn’t mine,” he recalled. “It was hard to accept. I was so big into sports, and this couldn’t be happening. ‘There is no way this is mine.’ I think it was just a normal reaction for someone to have, but I just denied it, and she was just so set that it was mine and wanted me to do a test and everything. Then I actually went ahead with the tests, and then I went into kind of a depression because my mom made me give up sports.”

Ricardo, who was 16 when he learned his partner was pregnant, maintained his disbelief throughout the pregnancy: “At that point I didn’t really know how I wanted to handle it. She wasn’t my girlfriend, so we just kept it on a friends basis, you know what I mean? . . . So I wasn’t sure, you know?”

All of the young fathers we interviewed ultimately took responsibility for their children and were actively involved in their children’s lives. (These characteristics are not representative of all teen dads but may reflect selection into or learning from the pregnancy prevention program.) Nonetheless, many admitted that their initial response to their partner’s pregnancy suspicions was not supportive or that they did not take the matter seriously. “She told me she missed her period 1 month, and I kind of blew it off,” remembered Juan. “I was like, ‘All right, that happens,’ or whatever. And then the next month she missed her period again, and at this time I couldn’t ignore it. So we got a pregnancy test.”

Others recalled that they avoided dealing with the problem out of fear or embarrassment. In some cases, months passed before a couple would attempt to confirm a pregnancy or reach out for help. Marcos was 16 when he learned that his girlfriend was pregnant. At first they both tried to ignore their suspicions, but eventually Marcos confided in his mother. “We didn’t know [that she was pregnant], but we were throwing up, and me and my girlfriend would deny it all the time because we were scared,” recalled Marcos. “Eventually I told my mom. You know, I had to tell her, even though I was embarrassed. She was like my father and my mom. So I told her, and she took me and my girlfriend to a clinic. . . . She was already 3 months [pregnant].”

Like Marcos, Dao-Ho, who was 15 when he learned his girlfriend was pregnant, let several months pass before taking action. “She misses her period for 1 month, tells me, and of course, me being in denial, I told her, ‘Don’t worry about it—something’s probably wrong with you,’” he recalled. “Second month came; she misses her period; I decide, ‘You know what, she might be pregnant.’ But it’s only a lingering thought in the back of my mind. Now she told me this, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘What if she is pregnant? Probably not.’ And I tell her, ‘Don’t worry about it; don’t worry about it; don’t worry about it.’ So we split off for the third month. She tells me she missed her period again. At this point, I knew that she was pregnant.”

The implications of a boy not reaching out about a pregnancy are not always the same as those of a girl not reaching out. As some of these stories

demonstrate, pregnant partners may attend to the pregnancy independent of a boy’s willingness to participate. However, in some cases, such as with Dao-Ho, Juan, and Marcos, it is clear that both partners’ inaction contributed to a substantial delay in seeking help from an adult. And as these stories show, there is a key similarity in the emotional experiences of boys and girls faced with a pregnancy. They may sometimes conjure different reasons to justify inaction: Girls may convince themselves that they are not really pregnant; boys may rationalize that the pregnancy is not their responsibility. But in both cases, they are likely entertaining the possibility of alternate realities for the same reason: to avoid dealing with an overwhelming situation.

Unintended Consequences

Notably, some of the young parents recalled that they intended to get pregnant or at least intentionally did not avoid it. Yet, with the exception of Angelica, who eagerly told her mother, even these young parents experienced misgivings once they were actually pregnant. Despite wanting to become parents, they, like their peers, were prepared neither for facing the challenge alone nor for reaching out to parents for help. “Whenever I found out, my heart dropped,” remembered Suki, who was 18 years old and a freshman in her first semester away at college when she and her boyfriend decided to try to get pregnant. “I wasn’t thinking [beforehand] about how should I tell my parents; I wasn’t thinking about how I’m gonna raise this child; I’m not thinking about what I’m gonna give this child. All I’m thinking about, like, this is the child for someone to, you know, something to love.”

Sergio, who was 19 when he became a father, had a similar change of heart when the realities of impending parenthood did not align with his expectations. “I wanted a baby. . . . I pretty much thought I was gonna die, so I was trying to have a kid . . . since I was 12,” he recalled. “Pretty much I was supposed to spit this kid out, then I was supposed to be out of the picture. And when that didn’t happen, I was like, ‘What do I do now?’” Sergio recalled his realization that there would be more to fatherhood than he had anticipated. “Gang bangers aren’t scared to die; they’re not scared to go to prison,” he said. “So I wasn’t scared of any of that. Scared me having to be responsible, trying to be a dad—that’s what scared the hell out of me.”

As with Suki, Teresa’s pregnancy was intentional but impulsive—a decision made by a 16-year-old experiencing an emotional crisis—and her

original desire for the pregnancy did not shield her or her boyfriend from the drawn-out personal reckoning that so many of her peers experienced, whether or not they had intended to get pregnant. “A year into our relationship, doctors had diagnosed my grandma with breast cancer, and they were giving her 1 more year to live,” remembered Teresa. “When she was in the hospital, she was saying a whole bunch of things that she wanted to see before she passed away. One of them was to see one of her great-grandchildren. And us being teenagers and making dumb decisions, we decided to make a baby for her. Two weeks later I took a pregnancy test, and it came back positive.” Once Teresa found out that she had actually succeeded in getting pregnant, she was not sure what to do next. “When I told my boyfriend, all these emotions hit him all at one time,” she remembered. “He was happy; he was sad; he was crying; he was panicking. ‘What are we gonna do? How are we gonna make it?’ So we kept it a secret for as long as we could.”

Fear of Telling Parents

As these stories illustrate, despite differences in age, sex, and even the desire for pregnancy, delayed acceptance of the situation was common among these young parents, as was a reluctance to reach out to adults for help. Some teenagers recalled the prospect of telling their parents as the most frightening aspect of the situation. “I went to my room, and I just cried the whole time because I didn’t know how to tell my parents,” recalled Mariana, who was 16 at the time. “That was my main thing—I was so scared about what my parents were going to think about the whole thing. . . . I thought my life was over; my parents would kick me out; and that school was going to be over for me.”

Fears of getting “kicked out”—often, but not always, unfounded—were common. Marisol recalled conveying this fear to her school nurse, who had encouraged her to talk to her parents. “I just kind of went off on her,” she remembered. “I told her, . . . ‘You’re crazy! If I tell my parents I’m pregnant, they’re gonna kick me out.’ . . . I didn’t want to tell my parents because I never got in trouble, so this would be like total shock, like ‘get out of my life’ kind of thing.”

Even for adolescents who had positive feelings about the pregnancy, the prospect of disappointing parents could be prohibitively daunting. “I remember I took the pregnancy test at [my boyfriend’s] house. I put it in my purse; I went back in his room; and I showed him, and he was like,

‘Whoa.’ But then he started smiling, like he was very happy,” recalled Ellen, who was 16 at the time. “It’s kind of weird. Like, he was almost crying, even. I was crying. . . . But then later on, after I knew I was pregnant, and he went through this happy thing, then we looked at abortion—because we didn’t want to talk to [our] parents.”

Because of their fear of telling their parents, many young adults resolved to keep the pregnancy secret, though they were not always successful. “They weren’t supposed to find out, because I was planning on telling them that—at maybe 6 months or so—that it was an immaculate pregnancy, that she was like the Virgin Mary,” recalled Dao-Ho. “I don’t know,” he added. “That probably wouldn’t have worked.”

Similarly, at 21 years old, Josefina, whose parents lived out of state, intended to keep the pregnancy secret:

JOSEFINA: I felt like eloping would make things better. And we hid the pregnancy.

INTERVIEWER: You did? You just said, “I got married”?

JOSEFINA: Exactly. But, you know, you can’t hide things from moms. So she knew.

Some teens hid the pregnancy until it was no longer physically possible to do so. “I was pregnant during the winter, so I would wear [my boyfriend’s] sweaters, his jackets, like nobody would think anything of it,” remembered Teresa. “So I was able to keep it a secret until I was 5 months pregnant. Once I turned 5 months, it was like I swallowed a whole watermelon. Like I didn’t chew it; I didn’t cut it; like I just swallowed it whole like that.”

Natalia, who was 17 when she learned she was pregnant, also hid her pregnancy for a long time. “I didn’t tell his family or my family until I was 5 months,” she remembered. “I went and bought a bunch of the stuff you wrap your knees with when you have a sprain, so I could wrap them around my stomach so nobody could tell. There are a lot of pictures that I’m really 5 months at that point, and you can’t tell—my stomach is completely flat.”

In some cases, avoiding parents may have meant delaying medical care well into the second trimester. For others, such as Eva, who lived in a dorm, it meant estrangement from the family. “I had to move in with [my boyfriend’s] family,” she remembered, “because at this point my parents don’t

know that I'm pregnant; they don't know that I'm failing; they don't know anything."

When she learned at 15 that she was pregnant, Martina had already run away from her family to live with her boyfriend, whom she later married. She waited 8 months to tell her parents about the pregnancy but lied about how far along she was and was afraid to call them once she had the baby. "My husband was like, 'Are you going to take our son to see your parents?' I didn't want to, because when I told them I was pregnant, it was a month before I was due," she recalled. "They thought I was 3 or 4 months pregnant, thinking, 'How could you do this to me?' But it was too far along for me to do something about it, so that's when they said they didn't want to hear from me. When I was giving birth, [my husband] asked if I wanted him to call my mom, and I said no, because I knew even if I did, she wouldn't come."

Summary of the Self-Reveal

Regardless of circumstance, these adolescents reacted in remarkably similar ways when faced with pregnancy. They not only delayed reaching out for help but also sometimes delayed even admitting to themselves that there was a problem. In most cases, desired pregnancies did not preclude regrets and reluctance to reach out. Similarly, boys were typically as ill-prepared as their partners to face pregnancy or ask for support, and the initial support they provided was often inadequate. For some participants, there was a long period of inaction between initial suspicions of pregnancy and actual confirmation, a period during which adolescents not only kept their suspicions secret from adults but also often avoided thinking about them altogether. Others continued to stall even after confirming their suspicions. These findings suggest that adolescent pregnancy discovery may be a process, rather than a singular event, during which adolescents undergo a self-reveal as they come to terms with a new reality. All the while, their pregnancies advance—in some cases, well into the second trimester.

Among the 27 participants, 16 indicated that after suspecting or confirming pregnancy, they delayed sharing the news with parents for some length of time. (In some cases, they never shared the news—instead, parents found out independently.) The exact timing of the pregnancy reveal was not always discussed explicitly. Among all participants, there were eight cases in which the timing could not be determined at all. However, seven participants recalled that their parents learned the news within the

first trimester (because the teen or someone else told them); 12 participants indicated that the reveal took place sometime after the 3-month mark. It was not clear how far past the first trimester some of these conversations took place. However, in four of those cases, we determined that parents did not learn the news until 5 months into the pregnancy or later.

STAGE 2: THE SOFT REVEAL

Although pregnancy discovery can be a kind of reveal, it is not in itself a help-seeking action. For the adolescents interviewed here, help seeking began with the reveal of pregnancy suspicions or discovery to someone else, be it a partner, friend, family member, health practitioner, or other adult. In most cases, the first person from whom teens sought help was anyone but their own parent. Most often, it was a partner or peer. This section explores this soft reveal in more detail.

Participants who suspected they were pregnant commonly enlisted the moral support of a peer when buying or taking a pregnancy test. Often the peer was a partner, but sometimes the peer was a friend or, as in Marisol’s case, a cousin of about the same age. “So I ended up saving up my lunch money that my mom gave me,” Marisol recalled. “I went to Walmart with one of my cousins, and we bought two pregnancy tests—took them at Walmart because I couldn’t take them at home. They both ended up coming out positive, and then after that, I’m like, ‘I’m pregnant. I’m for sure pregnant.’”

Some young parents described a scenario in which the partner, friend, or both waited impatiently, sometimes right outside the bathroom door, as the teenager took the test. In these stories, it is often the friends’ anxieties, not those of the pregnant teens, that convey the emotional tension of the experience. “I took the pregnancy test, and [my boyfriend] was outside the bathroom with my best friend,” recalled Teresa. “I just remember they kept knocking on the door, ‘Are you done yet? Are you done yet?’ . . . Once I opened the door, I didn’t tell them anything, and they both just ran straight to the test.”

Angelica’s story reflects similar themes: a trip to the store and an anxious friend whose nervous excitement sets the tone of the experience. “We got a pregnancy test from the 99-cent-only store, and those things work. So I took it, and my friend was with me,” recalled Angelica, who was 19 when she had her baby. “She was my age, and she had been my friend since

fifth grade. She was like, 'I want to tell you; I want to tell you.' So I was sitting on the toilet, and she was like, 'Oh my gosh, you are so pregnant!'"

Once Angelica confirmed her pregnancy, the next person she told was her boyfriend. "March 30th is [my boyfriend's] birthday, so I was going to tell him on his birthday, like, 'Happy birthday, I'm pregnant!' But I couldn't hold it," she said. "I just told him."

Although teens most commonly told their partners first, sometimes, as in Angelica's story, they told a friend first and their partner second. Ellen's story offers another example of a teen enlisting a friend's moral support when she suspects pregnancy, then sharing the news with her partner once she has confirmed it. "I told my best friend, 'I think I'm pregnant,'" Ellen recalled. "She didn't believe me, so we got the [pregnancy tests] from the store. . . . And I took them at the same time, both of them. And one said yes, and one said no. So we got another one, and it said either, 'Pregnant' or 'Not Pregnant'—and it said 'Pregnant.' So I took that second one to show [my boyfriend], and he—actually, I told him [about the test], and he was like, 'What?'" After sharing this news, Ellen took the pregnancy test again, this time at her boyfriend's house, so that he could see the results for himself.

Partners

Boys told similar stories. Dao-Ho remembered taking his girlfriend to the store to get some pregnancy tests and then, seeing them in his hand, "wondering where we should go and use this." After rejecting the grocery store bathroom, as well as his house ("I have siblings who will tell on me"), they settled on his girlfriend's house, where he anxiously waited outside the bathroom door for the results. "The first test came out as a positive test. This is where I stand up. I tell her, 'Why are you showing me this? This is the cheap test. I bought two tests for a reason. This might be the flawed one; this might be broken; this might be wrong. You should go back in the bathroom and take the next one.' . . . So she went straight to the bathroom again. At this point, I stood up; I started pacing back and forth. I walked; I walked; I thought, 'Now I do not know what I should do. What if she is pregnant? I might need to leave school; I might need to work. I just turned 16; I just got my license. I can't really support a life just yet.'" Finally, his girlfriend emerged from the bathroom with the results of the second test. "It had a smiley face," he recalled. "So my thought, the smiley face meant I was supposed to be smiling. I thought that the smiley face meant that

she wasn’t pregnant, because—for some reason that’s what I thought. She tells me that it meant that she was pregnant, and at that point my whole world stopped.”

Dao-Ho’s story, with its conspicuous juxtaposition of juvenile attitudes and challenges with adult-like worries and responsibilities, provides a remarkably candid perspective on both the logistical and emotional trials of the adolescent self-reveal. Juan told a similar story. Like Dao-Ho, he helped his girlfriend buy the test, but once she got the results, he was unsure how to read them. “So we got a pregnancy test, and like, it was supposed to have like two lines, but she took it, and at first it didn’t have anything,” remembered Juan. “And so we could kind of forget about it, and when she goes back to look at it, she was like, ‘Come here!’ And it had one red line and the other was like pink. So I was like, ‘What is it trying to say?’ So I go show my sister. . . . She was like, ‘She’s pregnant, stupid.’” These stories show how peer support, however limited, can nonetheless play a crucial role in the pregnancy self-reveal. By assisting with the pregnancy confirmation process, peers help pregnant teens with the difficult challenge of acknowledging the pregnancy.

Although teens often enlisted moral support from friends and partners before taking a pregnancy test, some teens confided in peers only after they confirmed their suspicions on their own. “I was at home in the restroom,” remembered Mariana. “After looking at the results, I went to my room, and I just cried the whole time because I didn’t know how to tell my parents. . . . I told one of my friends first, then I told my baby’s dad.”

Like Mariana, Martina took the test alone before reaching out to anyone. “I was already irregular, and I was feeling unusual, and food wasn’t tasting or smelling the way it used to,” she remembered. “So I took a test. Then I said [to my boyfriend], ‘You have a surprise waiting for you,’ and I told him.”

Josefina, who lived alone, told a similar story. “So I had to call [my boyfriend] at 2:00 in the morning, because I just couldn’t wait—I had to take the test,” she said. “The one I had taken previously wasn’t very clear. It said you might be off by a few days, so wait another day to take the next test. So I did, and it was just positive. So I called him, and I said, ‘I need you to come here now.’”

Although teens typically confided in peers by choice, sometimes they did so by happenstance. In two cases, participants recalled taking a pregnancy test not because they suspected they were pregnant but to provide

moral support for a friend who was taking the test. In both instances, it was not the friend who turned out to be pregnant.

Together, these anecdotes underscore the importance of peer relationships in the earliest stages of these young parents' pregnancies. Friends often were a source of emotional support as teens sought means of coping with their fears and anxieties. They did not provide the type of help, such as medical advice, that one might expect from adults, particularly parents, but they did help with pregnancy confirmation—an important step in the self-reveal. And as stories in the following sections demonstrate, friends sometimes played an important role in connecting teens with adults so that they could get the additional guidance they needed.

Reaching Out to Adults

Not all teenagers turned only to peers before parents. Some told partners' families before telling their own. Among the 15 young adults who discussed this issue in the interviews, just under half (five teen mothers and two teen fathers) reported that their partner's family learned about the pregnancy before their own family did.

Among the seven cases in which the partner's parents learned first, not all represent instances in which the teen told the partner's parents directly. In some cases, the partner's parents may have learned indirectly, or the partner—not the teen who was interviewed—separately told them first. Only in four cases was it clear that teens themselves told a partner's family before telling their own. For example, Suki, who had planned the pregnancy, took the pregnancy test at her boyfriend's apartment while his mom and brother were visiting. "I was in the bathroom; they were in there [the apartment]," Suki recalled. "It was just after [a holiday], and the next day was his mom's birthday, and the following day would be [my boyfriend's] birthday. So, I took the pregnancy test in the bathroom, and it came out with two lines."

Martina also told her partner's family before telling her own. In this case, she was living with her boyfriend's family when she got pregnant. She had run away from home and was living with her boyfriend's brother, who was married with children. She remained there, with her boyfriend, throughout the pregnancy. Eva, who was a freshman in college when she got pregnant, moved in with her boyfriend's family early in the pregnancy because she was afraid to tell her own parents that she was pregnant and had been kicked out of her dorm after failing several classes.

Some participants also confided in another adult, such as a teacher or counselor. For example, Josefina and her boyfriend hid the pregnancy from her parents but still sought other sources of guidance early on: “The following week, we went to a crisis pregnancy center that he found online. . . . They just gave us the right resources,” she recalled. “And then that afternoon we went downtown and we got married.”

By the time Marisol confided in her mother about the pregnancy, she had already shared the news not only with her boyfriend and cousin but also with several adults, including her boyfriend’s mother. “His mom was the first one that we turned to,” she recalled. “I actually called her—she didn’t want to call her.” Marisol then turned to a mentor at school. “The closest adult at the time was my dance teacher,” she said. “When I told her, she kind of looked at me like, ‘Are you for real? Are you really telling me this?’”

Summary of the Soft Reveal

These stories suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly, that adolescents are more likely to share news of a pregnancy with peers than to reach out to their parents first. Although peers in these stories did not appear to play a role in helping teens seek medical care, they often provided much needed emotional support and camaraderie, a finding consistent with the literature on the role of peers in the social-support networks of pregnant and parenting adolescents. Moreover, they often helped with pregnancy confirmation, which is an important step in acknowledging a pregnancy. In this way, the self-reveal and soft reveal can be seen as potentially overlapping, and peers can be seen as an important part of both processes.

Of 27 participants, 18 told a peer about the pregnancy before telling a parent. (Of those participants, 9 told a partner, 6 told a friend, and 3 told a sibling or cousin.) Six participants told another adult before telling a parent (4 of those told someone in the partner’s family), and 5 participants never told their parents directly. In six cases, we could not determine from the interview who had been the teen’s first confidante. Four participants told their own parent first.

STAGE 3: THE HARD REVEAL

In the following stories, the hard reveal is sometimes not really a reveal at all. It is, instead, the story of parents learning of the pregnancy on their

own or through other means. In other cases, it is indeed “hard”: The participants remember it being a difficult and emotional situation both for themselves and for their parents.

Parents First

Among all participants, only four—Marcos, Reshaunda, Ricardo, and Diego—recounted confiding in their parents before telling anyone else. For example, Marcos reached out to his mother when his girlfriend began having pregnancy symptoms, and his mom took the couple to a clinic, where the pregnancy was confirmed. However, Marcos admitted that his mother had probably already noticed that his girlfriend, who had been spending a lot of time with his family, was experiencing morning sickness.

Reshaunda’s story is more complicated. She received a phone call at home from someone who announced herself as her boyfriend’s other girlfriend. The girl explained that she was pregnant and also had a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that may have been transferred to Reshaunda. “So I woke my mom and my grandma up,” she recounted, “and I told them, ‘I’ve been having sex—I might have an STD.’” At the doctor’s office, Reshaunda, who was 18 at the time, learned that she did not have an STD after all but that she was, in fact, pregnant. “So I was like, ‘Oh, that’s worse,’” she recalled. “And so, when I told my mom, she thought I was making it up just to be with him because the other girl was pregnant.”

For several reasons, Reshaunda’s story is unique among those told by participants. First, she learned of her pregnancy sooner than many of her peers. “I found out pretty early,” she recalled. “I think I was 4 weeks.” Second, she did not express fear of telling her family, despite having admitted that she was embarrassed to talk to them about sex. “Nobody in my family knew I was having sex at all. . . . Everybody thought I was a virgin because when they would talk to me about guys, I would be like, ‘Oh, that’s nasty.’ I would always put on that ‘Oh no, never’ kind of act,” she recalled. The first time she approached her family about sex was when she woke them in the middle of the night to discuss the STD. “And so they found out,” she said. Nonetheless, even in Reshaunda’s case, the initial reveal was not intentionally about pregnancy at all; it was about an STD.

Like Reshaunda, Ricardo told his parents before telling anyone else. However, he may have had little choice. His parents were home when his partner’s family showed up at his house to tell him the news. “I was

standing at the door talking to them,” he recalled. “I couldn’t have been like, ‘I don’t know who that was—they had the wrong house!’”

Meanwhile, it can be inferred that Diego confided first in his mother because there were few others left to tell: His partner had told everyone herself. “As I started ignoring her, she tells our mutual friends that she’s pregnant. She starts to let everybody know she’s pregnant,” he recounted:

She tells her sister; she tells all her friends. So people started coming up to me in school: “Hey, you got this girl Breanna pregnant. Breanna says she’s pregnant by you; she’s gonna have your baby,” etcetera, etcetera. So I was denying it, of course. I was like, “No, no, no.” The counselor even brought me into the office and spoke to me about it, and I was like, “I don’t know what she’s talking about,” etcetera. But eventually the pressure of my peers coming to talk to me and the pressure of everybody telling me this started weighing on me. So I figured if she is pregnant with my child, I should definitely let my mom know out of my mouth, instead of a third party.

Ultimately, even though Diego told his mom before telling anyone else, his mother was likely still among the last to know of the pregnancy. Notably, in each of these stories, outside factors, such as the logistical inability to keep the secret or the fear of having an STD, appeared to compel the reveal.

Ripping Off the Bandage

Only two participants, Juan and Angelica, provided examples of immediate and fully intentional reveals to parents. Notably, even in these cases, the first reveal was not made to parents. For example, Juan confirmed his girlfriend’s pregnancy when his sister helped interpret the pregnancy test, meaning his parents were second, not first, to know. At that stage, Juan’s girlfriend wanted to keep the information secret. “She said, ‘Well, I’m not gonna tell them [my parents] till a couple of months,’” he recalled. “I was like, ‘Well, I’m gonna tell my parents tonight, and I suggest you do the same thing.’” After telling his parents, he called his girlfriend’s house. When he learned she had not given her parents the news, he told them himself.

Similarly, when Angelica learned she was pregnant, she told her mother right away—after first telling a friend, then her boyfriend. “When I got

pregnant, I expected it to be happy,” she recalled. Angelica had been dating her boyfriend for only a short while, she said, but she felt she was in love, and the couple had planned the pregnancy, albeit without her family’s knowledge. “I couldn’t keep it to myself. I had to tell my mom,” she said. “I wanted a baby shower, I wanted people to be happy—and people were not happy. . . . My mom—she had this look on her face as if someone had shot me.”

Compelled to Tell

A more common narrative was one in which teenagers confided in parents only because they felt they had no other choice. Like Diego, who feared his mother would find out from someone else, Cyiarra—who was 21 when she had her baby—felt she had to tell her mom once her partner’s mother knew. “His mom found out before I was ready to tell anyone,” she recalled. “And that made everything escalate. Everything blew up because then my mom had to know.”

Others told parents once they believed they could no longer physically hide the pregnancy. For example, Ellen recalled that at 4 months pregnant, not long after telling her best friend about her pregnancy suspicions and then taking a pregnancy test at her boyfriend’s house, she was sure her mother would figure out her secret: “The only reason I told her was because my stomach—nobody else in the world could have known except for me, but I could see it, and I was like, ‘Oh no, they’re gonna see!’ But thinking back, I’m like, they wouldn’t have noticed by then. Anyways, I told her because I was scared she was going to notice.”

In another case, the school nurse gave Marisol an ultimatum: If she did not tell her parents, the school would. Marisol had first confided in several people, including her cousin, her boyfriend, and his mother. When she told her dance teacher at school, the teacher told the nurse, who called Marisol into her office. “She started asking all these questions about my life and about him, and what was going on, and was there a situation,” Marisol remembered. “And then she asked me about my parents and if they knew—had I told them. I told her I hadn’t told them, and I wasn’t planning to until a couple months. And so she said, ‘This is really serious—you need to tell them.’ She said, ‘Either you go home and tell your mom you’re pregnant tonight, or tomorrow we can have a meeting with her—me, the principal, and you—and let her know.’”

Third Party

In several cases, teenagers never told their parents at all. Instead, a friend or even the teenager’s partner told them, as was the case with Juan, who told his girlfriend’s parents, against her wishes. Similarly, Domingo’s partner told his mom. His partner first told Domingo she “might” be pregnant, he said, “but we didn’t put much thought into it.” Then, one day, he was called home from track practice. “The minute I got to my house, my mom was there, and she just hit me so hard, and I fell on the floor because it was so unexpected. I just remember seeing black,” he recalled. “She was yelling at me and screaming, ‘I can’t believe you, I’m so upset!!’ She was furious. . . . I told her, ‘I have no idea what you are talking about,’ and she was like, ‘She is pregnant.’ I said, ‘I don’t even know who you’re talking about, I’m not even with anybody.’ And apparently she had told my mom that she was pregnant before she had told me.”

For Eva, who was living with her boyfriend’s family, it was her friends who finally told her parents. “My parents found out through my friends that I was pregnant because [my friends] were very concerned,” she remembered. “So they went and told my parents for me. And I felt really bad—it was my responsibility to let them know.”

Anita was about 2 months along when her sister discovered her secret. “My sister—my oldest sister—she knew about it. I don’t know how she knew about it. So she told my parents,” Anita recalled. “She didn’t tell me, she told my mom and dad. . . . My mom told me in the morning while getting ready to go to school; she said, ‘You’re not going [to school].’ I was like, ‘Why?’ She was like, ‘We’re going to the doctor.’”

In other cases, news simply traveled through the grapevine. “So one night my girlfriend was depressed,” remembered Dao-Ho. “I was like ‘You can talk to me. I’ve been here for you—always have been, always will be.’ She tells me, ‘I’m sick of you.’ At that point I was wondering, ‘What do you mean?’ And then I realized I’m the only one that knew about the pregnancy. So I decided, ‘You know what, go ahead and talk with your other girlfriends.’” Once Dao-Ho’s girlfriend told a friend, word traveled back to Dao-Ho’s girlfriend’s mother, who was a friend and coworker of Dao-Ho’s mother. “Her mom finds out; her mom goes back to work; stands outside the door,” he recalled. “Now there’s a door in the hallway between my mom and her. As soon as my mom opens the door, before my girlfriend’s mom could say anything, my mom says, ‘I know it. She’s pregnant, isn’t she?’”

Parents as Detectives

Sometimes, when parents or other family members suspected pregnancy, they initiated the first conversation with the teenager. When first asked by a family member, Ellen and Jada both denied they were pregnant. “My grandmother asked me one morning, when I spent the night at their house, if I was pregnant,” recalled Ellen. “Because I guess I was on the computer one night, and I left in the search bar something about how to know if you’re pregnant. So she asked me, and I said, ‘No, I’m not.’ I didn’t know for sure yet.”

Jada, who was 18 when she had her baby, told a similar story. “Unlike most [pregnant] moms who figure it out first, [my mom] probably knew, but wanted me to tell her first,” said Jada. “But my dad was the one to ask me. I didn’t know yet, so I told him no.”

In other instances, when family broached the subject, teenagers admitted they were right. “My mom, she actually came up to me on my seventeenth birthday, and she asked me if I was pregnant,” recalled Teresa, who had hidden the pregnancy for 5 months. “I told her ‘Yes’ because I couldn’t hide it anymore.”

Kasandra told a similar story. She had just given the news to her boyfriend, and the pair had decided they would go to a clinic the next day. “Ironically, then my mom confronted me and told me, ‘You’re pregnant,’” recalled Kasandra. “I was like, ‘No, how do you know?’ I was still in denial. I was like, ‘Wow, this is really happening to me. It happens.’ So I asked my mom to come with me instead.”

Although Anita’s mother approached her first, it was her sister who first figured out she was pregnant. Anita and her mom argued about it, but her mom interrupted: “She was like, ‘I already knew you were pregnant,’” Anita recalled. “I was like, ‘No you didn’t—Maria told you.’ And her silence said everything. I knew it was her.”

Strategies of Resistance

Even when teens did tell their parents the news themselves, strategies of resistance were evident in the approach. Two teenagers wrote letters rather than telling parents face-to-face. Others concocted schemes designed to mitigate the fallout. “I ended up telling her when she was about to go to sleep, and she had taken her medication, and she was watching her soap operas,” said Marisol, recounting the story of how she told her mother. “So

I’m like, ‘Ok, I’m gonna wait for her to doze off, and you know, let that do the trick, and she won’t even notice that I’m telling her that right now.’”

Similarly, Diego came up with a plan to mollify his mother’s reaction: “My mom, she’s a real short Mexican lady, but when she gets angry, she likes to throw shoes and whatever she can get her hands on,” he said. “I decided to tell her when she’s driving, so that when she gets mad she can’t hit me.”

Two of the reveals to parents were accidental. Just 3 months after giving birth, Marisol, who was 13 when she learned of her first pregnancy, became pregnant again. Convinced her parents would throw her out if they knew about the second pregnancy, Marisol managed to hide it for 6 months before spilling her secret:

So we were having dinner, and we started arguing, and then [my mother] said, “Yeah, and look at you: You’re so fat; you look like you’re pregnant.” And I thought I heard, “Look at you: You’re fat; I know that you’re pregnant.” So when she said that and everybody was at the table—I kind of looked at my dad to see what his reaction was, and he was just like whatever. So I looked at her, and I was like, “Mom, how did y’all know? I didn’t know that you guys knew.” And she looked at me, and she was like, “What? What are you talking about?” And I’m like, “Didn’t you just say you know that I’m pregnant?” And she was like, “No!” And oh my God, all hell broke loose, like literally.

Although Veronica’s mother figured out that she was pregnant at 20 weeks, Veronica continued to keep the news secret from her stepdad. “We were already gonna have a baby shower,” remembered Veronica. “My mom was like, ‘You have to tell him!’ I think disappointing him meant more than it did my real dad.” Ultimately, she withheld the news nearly until the end of the pregnancy. “By 9 months I was huge, everywhere,” she remembered:

My belly was really noticeable. I’m the only girl, so I was constantly trying to gross my brothers out, and they were always like, “Ew, he’s kicking you!” One of the times, it was around 3:30, and I’m thinking, “My brother is getting home from school anytime. I’m going to gross them out with my belly.” I was laying on the couch. My stepdad wasn’t expected to be home until 9:00. I lifted my shirt so he could see my belly button popped out. I turned around, and I was like, “Ew! Look at . . . Ew!” trying to gross my

brother out, and it's my stepdad standing at the door. I, like, ran upstairs, freaking out. "No, he can't know; he can't know! Oh my God!"

Summary of the Hard Reveal

Rather than resolving to share the news of a pregnancy with parents, these stories suggest that adolescents more often let circumstances do the work for them. They did not seek help so much as help sought them. Friends, family, and parents played instrumental roles in drawing out the secret, an event that often was followed by a trip to the doctor.

Of the 27 participants, only 16 told a parent directly about the pregnancy, and of those participants, 6 were compelled to do so. Of the remaining 11 participants, 8 reported that their parents learned of the pregnancy independently, either because the parents figured it out themselves (4) or because a third party told them (4). In three cases, we could not determine how participants' parents learned the news. These figures do not reflect second reveals (cases when pregnancy was revealed to one parent after the other—nearly always the father after the mother) or reveals of pregnancies following the first.

DISCUSSION

The stories shared here suggest that adolescents' deliberations about how and from whom to seek support with a pregnancy unfold in a somewhat predictable series of stages that are sometimes distinct but often overlap. Stage 1, discovery of the pregnancy, is often accompanied by indecision and denial. In many ways, this stage is not just about confirming the pregnancy literally; it also involves accepting the pregnancy emotionally. The salient finding from the stories about this stage is that this process can substantially postpone help seeking, which is important given the crucial role that social support plays in adolescent pregnancy and parenting.

For most of the participants in this study, help seeking began with a soft reveal in stage 2, which usually involved enlisting the help of peers who could provide emotional support and often helped with pregnancy confirmation. These peers, however, were usually unprepared to provide more substantive guidance. Help seeking from a parent—stage 3, the hard reveal—often took place long after the adolescent first suspected or even confirmed the pregnancy. This finding held true for participants across

subgroups: for both boys and girls, for those who did and did not plan the pregnancy, and for the youngest and oldest participants. As such, the pregnancy reveal may be a juncture with the potential to forestall important considerations related to time-sensitive matters such as prenatal care and abortion. As fraught and consequential as this juncture can be, however, research to date has overlooked this dimension of the teen pregnancy experience.

The stories of how participants’ pregnancies were ultimately revealed to parents also provide useful insights into the adolescent pregnancy experience. For example, these stories suggest that in addition to learning of pregnancies belatedly, parents often do not receive the news directly from their daughters or sons but through other people or by figuring it out themselves. This discovery supports the findings of previous literature on the importance of support networks to pregnant teens and demonstrates the powerful role peers and family can play in offering help even when none is explicitly sought.

It is also notable that most of the participants felt comfortable telling peers (sometimes including siblings or cousins) about their pregnancies and that in some cases those peers were instrumental in telling a parent. It may be that peers, despite their youth, are in a position to think more clearly about help seeking because they are less emotionally invested in the situation than the pregnant teens themselves. Perhaps this insight is something parents, educators, and health practitioners can keep in mind in their conversations with young adults about sexual and reproductive health and about what to do if a friend reaches out for help.

The stories recounted here are particular to the young parents who shared them. Nonetheless, they provide a deeper understanding of the cognitive and emotional barriers, such as fear and vulnerability to denial, that anyone might encounter when reaching out about an unintended or impulsively instigated pregnancy. Given what is understood about adolescent brain development and young adults’ reluctance to seek help, these stories may be useful in pointing the way toward a better understanding of the teen pregnancy experience in particular.

LIMITATIONS

Given this study’s grounded-theory approach, we did not conduct the interviews with our topic of the pregnancy discovery and reveal in mind.

Instead, these themes became apparent in the subsequent examination of the data, and this article attempts to more closely explore them through a literature review and analysis. As a result, this study has several limitations. For example, participants were not all asked the same questions, with the exception of the initial introductory prompts, nor did they all provide relevant commentary on every aspect of this study's central themes. As a result, we could not explore all the topics relevant to these themes. These drawbacks impose limits on the data analysis. For example, it is not possible to identify all potential repercussions of delayed help seeking, link the delay with specific outcomes, or identify statistically meaningful differences among subgroups within the study (e.g., boys vs. girls). In addition, given the original focus on young parents, the sample did not include all teens, such as those who chose to have an abortion or give up a child for adoption, whose perspectives might yield different results.

Another limitation to consider is that these young parents' participation in the teen pregnancy prevention program may indicate that they were different from adolescent parents who did not choose to be peer educators. And it is likely that our interviewees' attitudes toward their pregnancies were shaped by their participation in the program. The stories they shared, perhaps including the pregnancy reveal, certainly were informed by the experience of participating in the program. In light of these limitations, the participants may not be representative of adolescent parents in general.

That said, it is likely that the circumstances of the participants' pregnancies and the challenges they faced in becoming adolescent parents, which were the primary focus of the interviews, did not differ in any systematic way from those of other teens grappling with pregnancy. Overall, the participants' stories provide important insight into a major event in the teen pregnancy experience and suggest that further, more systematic inquiry into this topic is warranted.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As we noted, the teen pregnancy reveal was not our area of focus at the outset of this study. This approach had an advantage in that it facilitated the discovery of a potentially important yet overlooked aspect of the teen pregnancy experience. However, it also limits the types of analyses to

which the data can be subjected and prohibits us from drawing conclusions about pregnant teens and their partners more generally. To better understand the topic, more systematic research focused explicitly on adolescent decision making about the pregnancy reveal is necessary.

Further research is needed, in particular, to determine the prevalence and typical duration of delays in teens’ help seeking for pregnancy. In addition, a larger and more diverse sample, including adolescents who did not go on to become parents but instead chose abortion or adoption, would provide richer insights into the topic while allowing for broader generalization of the findings. Moreover, such a sample would provide the opportunity to examine potential differences in the experiences of subgroups (e.g., boys vs. girls and younger vs. older adolescents). More research is also needed to understand the outcomes associated with delayed help seeking for pregnancy and with different methods of the pregnancy reveal. For example, do the timing and method of the reveal affect the nature of parents’ subsequent support? Do these factors affect birth outcomes? Finally, given the potentially negative consequences of delayed help seeking, research is warranted on interventions that might help pregnant teens and their partners seek adult guidance in a timely manner.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

We have touched on the importance of social support and the potential implications of delayed help seeking during pregnancy. A better understanding of the prevalence and extent of delayed help seeking is pertinent to parents, educators, and health practitioners who are in a position to provide teens with guidance about sexual and reproductive health. Findings from this study suggest that conversations about pregnancy prevention may benefit not only from a focus on how to avoid pregnancy but also on what to do if confronted with pregnancy, and advisors should be prepared to explain why early medical attention is important. Also, from a developmental perspective, adolescents are expected to practice more autonomy than ever before in their young lives. For this reason, adults might reflect on their attitudes toward help seeking in general and consider conversations about the virtues of both help seeking and independence within various contexts. Finally, given that peers are often the first to learn of a pregnancy, a corollary topic to help seeking is giving help. Parents and practitioners might consider empowering adolescents with the understanding

that their help plays a crucial role in connecting pregnant adolescents with the adult guidance that they need.

NOTE

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