

# Meanings attributed to fatherhood by adolescents

Significados atribuídos a paternidade por adolescentes

Karla Jimena Araújo de Jesus Sampaio<sup>1</sup>

Wilza Vieira Villela<sup>2</sup>

Eleonora Menicucci de Oliveira<sup>2</sup>

## Keywords

Paternity; Adolescent; Public health nursing; Maternal-child nursing; Family planning

## Descritores

Paternidade; Adolescente; Enfermagem em saúde pública; Enfermagem materno-infantil; Planejamento familiar

## Submitted

April 30, 2013

## Accepted

February 27, 2014

## Abstract

**Objective:** To understand how adolescents perceive the experience and what meanings they attribute to fatherhood.

**Methods:** Research of a qualitative method, using interviews of 25 young people who had become fathers for the first time. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, taped and transcribed in their entirety. Data analysis occurred using an initial and then an exhaustive reading of the material, synthesis of the results obtained, and identification of implicit content.

**Results:** The analysis and interpretation of this material allowed us to identify three thematic categories: the role of the young father; gains and losses with fatherhood, and solutions adopted during the experienced difficulties. It was evident that the exercise of fatherhood contributed to the assumption of masculinity, to play the role of guardian of the home and provider for the family.

**Conclusion:** Fatherhood was seen as a positive experience that transformed teenagers into adults.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Conhecer como adolescentes percebem a experiência e quais significados atribuem à paternidade.

**Métodos:** Pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa, através da realização de entrevistas com vinte e cinco jovens que passaram pela paternidade pela primeira vez. Os dados foram coletados por entrevista semiestruturada gravadas e transcritas na íntegra. A análise dos dados foi por leitura flutuante e exaustiva do material, síntese dos achados obtidos e identificação dos conteúdos implícitos.

**Resultados:** A análise e interpretação desse material permitiu identificar três categorias temáticas: O papel do jovem pai; Ganhos e perdas com a paternidade e Soluções adotadas diante das dificuldades vivenciadas. Evidenciou-se que o exercício da paternidade contribuiu para a assunção da masculinidade, ao desempenhar o papel de guardião do lar e mantenedor da família.

**Conclusão:** A paternidade é vista como uma experiência positiva que transforma os adolescentes em adultos.

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1982-0194201400002>

## Corresponding author

Karla Jimena Araújo de Jesus Sampaio  
Cel. Antônio Luiz street, 1161, Campus  
Pimenta, Crato, CE, Brazil.  
Zip Code: 63105-000  
kjajs@uol.com.br

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Regional do Cariri, Crato, CE, Brazil.

<sup>2</sup>Escola Paulista de Medicina, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil.

**Conflicts of interest:** there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

## Introduction

Adolescent parenthood is described as parenting of an individual who has not yet completed 20 years of age, regardless of the age range of the partner involved in reproduction. It promotes biopsychosocial changes and readaptations and establishes new roles in the lives of these individuals. Moreover, it contributes as an important factor in the process of entering the adult world, implying the emergence of several arrangements in their daily lives.<sup>(1)</sup>

It is the object of an increasing number of scientific publications, although in this age range, predominantly, significantly, are those related to motherhood.<sup>(1-3)</sup> With regard to rural adolescent fatherhood, no scientific production, up until the present time, was found in the local environment.

Studies about rural adolescents<sup>(4,5)</sup> showed peculiar characteristics of these subjects, such as greater religious participation, identification with agricultural work, interest in helping their parents and differences in the perception of gender roles. Moreover, gender issues were densely observed in that environment in relationship to domestic and agricultural daily duties, in which they differentiate the work of men and women. This results, therefore, in the role of the man, father provider, and of the woman, mother present and responsible for household affairs. Thus, this study investigated how adolescents perceived the experience and what meanings they attributed to fatherhood.

## Methods

This was a qualitative study conducted in the rural municipality of Barbalha, in the south of the state of Ceará, northeastern Brazil, with twenty-five adolescents in the age range of 16 to 19 years, who were experiencing fatherhood for the first time, with children already born or yet to be born.

The selection of subjects was made through the records in the computerized system of public prenatal care in the years of 2010 and 2011. We also used the family records of the family health strategy

and the “snowball” technique, where respondents indicated others in a similar situation.

Data were collected by semi-structured interviews that were taped and transcribed in their entirety. Data analysis followed three steps: a) initial and exhaustive reading of the material; b) synthesis of results obtained; and c) identification of implicit content.

The development of the study followed the national and international norms of ethics in research involving human beings.

## Results

The age range analyzed varied from 16 to 19 years. The predominant religion was Catholic, with 20 individuals, plus three evangelicals and two declaring no religion. Sixteen individuals were in a consensual union, five were married, and four were single. Five had completed high school, while the others were at lower levels of schooling.

After content analysis the following core themes emerged: experiences and feelings about fatherhood, with the following subcategories: role of the young father; gains and losses with fatherhood; and solutions adopted during the difficulties experienced.

### Experiences and feelings about fatherhood

The feelings experienced by the respondents oscillated between joy and fear during the notification of the pregnancy. Fatherhood was seen as a great responsibility, and the main reason reported for this was the need to assume the situation, working to sustain the family, care for the woman and the child.

### The role of the young father

Many subjects revealed that they were concerned about their future; positioning themselves as providers, they expressed the need and desire to work in order to maintain the family, as observed even in the words of those who were unemployed or had never worked. In conjunction, the responsibility

for education arose, along with the guidance and preparation of the child for the future.

### Gains and losses with fatherhood

The main onus referred to was the loss of youth, expressed by the impossibility of going to parties and hanging out with friends as a single person, as before. The new routine separates them from the behaviors of single people, and two distinct worlds are glimpsed: those who have and those who do not have responsibility.

Other losses less often cited were the renunciation of other activities, the postponement of dreams, and abandoning school.

In the observed population, this fact preceded the experience of fatherhood, due to the low socio-economic status of the individuals that led them to procure work as a way of sustaining or supplementing the family income.

### Solutions adopted before the difficulties experienced

Other difficulties referenced were: inexperience in performing activities related to the home and child care, relationships with an older partner, suffering discrimination from family and friends, and difficulties with the possibility of being dominated by a partner.

With a routine, difficulties arose in the conjugal relationship, such as conflicts of ideas, arguments and jealousy. Living together made differences and defects evident. These difficulties, sometimes, induced adolescents to regret having joined with the partner.

When the partners go out with friends was also considered a cause of tension between the partners.

In the course of time, the impasses were overcome, depending on their choices, dialogue of the couple with their parents or a more experienced person. After conversing, generally the couple chose to make peace. In order to reconcile, dialogue was essential. Having made peace, the feeling of regret disappeared and normality returned.

Family collaboration in child care, domestic activities and financial aid were essential for the confrontation of the difficulties experienced.

Another way of facing adversity was behavior change, hanging out with friends and collaborating in child care.

## Discussion

The analysis of the interviews enabled the identification of the profiles of these subjects, their views and opinions about what teenage fatherhood represented, how to see themselves as fathers, how to perform this role, their feelings, gains and losses, changes in life after this experience, relationship with the partner and family, and the solutions adopted during the difficulties experienced.

The group of individuals studied was characterized by being predominantly composed of Catholics, with conjugal relationships that were consensual unions, low educational level and significant school dropout. Low educational level and greater participation in religious activities in residents of rural areas have been reported in the literature.<sup>(4,5)</sup>

Fatherhood was identified as a major responsibility, the duty of assuming responsibility for his child and wife, with the consequent need to work to support himself and the new family (behavior observed even among the unemployed and those who had never worked), as well as for taking care of his woman and child. They expressed responsibility for education, guidance and preparation of the child for the future.

Other authors have also shown the same feelings of responsibility and duty to materially provide for their children in young parents.<sup>(6)</sup> Work became a greater good, an important element in the construction of their masculine identities.<sup>(7)</sup>

As has been described, the positioning assumed about fatherhood showed it to be a social attribute, and the term “responsibility” represented greater significance in terms of the acquisition of a new social role in and of itself, than as a space of emotional involvement with the child.<sup>(6)</sup>

In the view of the study respondents, fatherhood turned them into adults, with the need for progressive learning to do so. Some of them believed that their age was not ideal, that it was too early and it

would have been better if it occurred later. In this respect, it is referred that when teenagers became heads of families, they perceived the exchange of roles within the home: they assumed responsibilities incompatible with their age and special condition of subjects in development.<sup>(8)</sup> For some of the lower classes, the assumption of fatherhood was claimed as proof of maturity and responsibility.

Fatherhood produced positive changes, such as: responsibility, joy of being a father, work, reduction of the consumption of alcoholic beverages and drugs, and avoidance of risky behavior. Some authors describe it as a disruption in the maturity process, a sudden process, and a quick step to adulthood.<sup>(8-10)</sup>

Contradictory feelings were detailed, although they were pleased to join with their partner, to assume parenthood and to be in the home with the child. Now trapped in another reality, they could not “live” their youth, they felt they had lost their liberty, they reported changes in socializing with friends. The new routine took them away from past behaviors, and they glimpsed two distinct worlds: those who have and those who do not have responsibility.

Some of them complained about losing the privilege of being the one who was supported and cared for. With fatherhood, the need arose to renounce leisure for work, to sustain him and the new family. At certain instances the observation of losses led to regret. The abandonment of dreams and plans, adolescent leisure and other experiences have been described in the literature.<sup>(7-10)</sup> They also mentioned the story of young parents, according to whom they should have waited for a better moment, thought more, and taken precautions to prevent pregnancy. Parenthood meant for them the need to assume many responsibilities at a phase in life in which they did not yet feel prepared.<sup>(11)</sup>

Other authors identified the recognition of a personal conflict in this period, a mixed experience of positive and negative feelings.<sup>(10-12)</sup> However, this did not prevent the respondents of this study from seeing fatherhood positively, despite the losses, they recognized gains. After all, the child brought happiness and formalized the desire of being a father. The

literature also reported this fact: young people satisfied by the marvelous condition of being parents, realizing a lifelong dream.<sup>(11)</sup>

In the exercise of fatherhood, several difficulties were observed: assumption of responsibility while still being inexperienced, financial difficulties and clumsiness in performing activities for the home and childcare. Considering the problems encountered, being inexperienced and financially dependent, mostly on their parents, they needed family support.

In this context, the families proved to be strong supporters. They collaborated in various ways in the financial, emotional and affective aspects. This support was essential from coping with the news of the pregnancy, to the birth, and continued in the experience and practice of fatherhood. Family support is cited as an effective factor in the performance of adolescent parenthood; it represents an important support network for the new couple, welcoming them into their homes, collaborating on expenditures, as well as child care.<sup>(7,13)</sup>

Adversities are also noted in the conjugal relationship, such as conflicts of ideas and arguments, which sometimes led the adolescent to regret the union with the partner. A particular difficulty was described in the case of a relationship with a much older partner, where the youth suffered discrimination from family and friends, and difficulties with the possibility of being dominated by her. Given these dilemmas, dialogue played a decisive role in the reconciliation, although it did not occur with all couples.

The change in behavior of the young father, when he devoted himself to work, collaborated in the home and stopped hanging out with friends, was a preventive factor for disagreements, and was important in coping with difficulties.

The conjugal life of these adolescents happened as a result of the pregnancy. They confronted this union with the weight of other adaptations: the transition to adulthood, of the pregnancy and of social relationships, further aggravated by the economic factor. Some relationships were tense and difficult to maintain, and lacked an established

emotional basis; suffering arose related to their own insecurity, and also other external factors.<sup>(13)</sup>

Dialogue with these young people allowed us to capture experiences and meanings they attributed to pregnancy and fatherhood at this phase of life. The findings revealed an adolescent, satisfied and proud to be a father, who at the same time recognized the losses, difficulties and responsibilities related to the fact.

When considering sociocultural factors inherent to the exposures experienced by these young rural fathers, one sees a non-stereotyped image of this phenomenon, without the bias of abnormality.

However, in the situations observed in the subjects studied, in general, the outcome was of acceptance, because a selection was not made of subjects with a significant number of refusals, disagreements, or pregnancies not carried to term for several issues, which might identify different behaviors. Therefore, such analyses become necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The study adds a little noise to this silence, calling for the need for better understanding of this phenomenon, to provide opportunities to participate in the systems of health and education, on an equal basis, with a view to the inclusion of the fact of, and the pursuit of a broader interest in, these actors.

## Conclusion

Fatherhood was seen as a positive experience that transformed teenagers into adults.

## Collaborations

Sampaio KJAJ collaborated with the project design, analysis and interpretation of data; writing of the article and critical revision of intellectual and relevant content.

Villela WV contributed to relevant critical review of the intellectual content and final approval of the version to be published. Oliveira EM participated in the critical review of the relevant intellectual content and final approval of the version to be published.

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