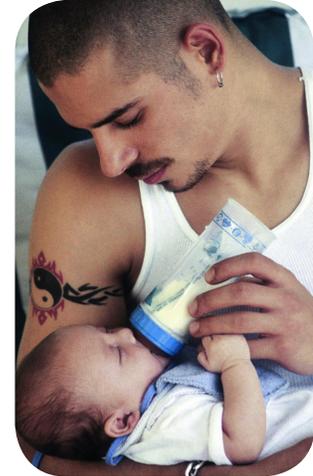




Healthy Teen Network

An American Frame: Teen Pregnancy and Parenting

Summarized from a FrameWorks Institute Report:
“Gaining Support for Teen Families: Mapping the Perceptual Hurdles”
by Susan Nall Bales and Moira O’Neil



Teen pregnancy and parenting are issues that provoke a strong, typically negative image when mentioned to the average American. The image in frame prompts Americans to instinctively think, act and react negatively toward young parents. Healthy Teen Network, in collaboration with the Frameworks Institute and a national advisory group, is working on a three-phase project to address these negative frames of pregnant and parenting teens in the United States. Phase one involved examining current frames portrayed in the media and among advocacy materials.

In their report, *Gaining Support for Teen Families: Mapping the Perceptual Hurdles*, the FrameWorks Institute surveyed newspaper articles from a two-year period (2006 –2008) to determine different frames portrayed by the media. Secondly, they examined advocacy materials from organizations serving teens and teen parents that were identified by Healthy Teen Network and the national advisory group along with those found by using internet search engines. From the news media analysis, they identified two constructive and five destructive frames most frequently presented. From the advocacy materials, they identified ten common themes which leave readers with a mixed understanding of teen pregnancy and parenting.

MEDIA FRAMES

While constructive frames in the news media are less frequent and fewer in numbers, they are important building blocks in our approach to policy makers and stakeholders. They include the *Sophisticated Analysis of Scholarly Literature* and *Teen as Active Participant*. *Sophisticated Analysis of Scholarly Literature* refers to a concise appraisal of current research that unpacks destructive frames and leads to thoughtful discussion on the issues surrounding teen pregnancy and parenting. *Teen as Active Participant* focuses on teens as engaged and responsible people in their homes and communities, while demonstrating ways structural issues cause barriers to success.

Destructive frames are much more prevalent in the news media. FrameWorks Institute identified five most common destructive frames: *Teen Pregnancy as a Moral Failing*; the *Teen Mother Bubble*; *Fuzzy Causality: Poverty and Teen Pregnancy*; *Teen Pregnancy as Disease*; and *Maverick Advocates – Not Policy – as Solutions*.

The frame of *Teen Pregnancy as a Moral Failing* uses personal stories that demonstrate teen pregnancy as a result of immoral cultural values, poor decision-making, misguided mindsets, apathy and personal moral failings. This frame leads to promoting racial and ethnic biases and preconceived notions about pregnant and parenting teens. The *Teen Mother Bubble* frame adds to the concept of the *Family Bubble*, which supports the thinking that child rearing occurs exclusively within the context of family; thus leaving experiences, environments, and institutions occurring outside the family irrelevant. The *Family Bubble* shrinks to just the teen mother when discussing teen pregnancy and its ramifications. She becomes the only person responsible for assuring her own and her child's wellbeing.

Next, the frame of *Fuzzy Causality: Poverty and Teen Pregnancy* invokes the thinking that teen pregnancy is a main cause of poverty, perpetuates the cycle of poverty, and opens the door to other social problems. This frame leads policy makers to focus on reducing teen pregnancy rates as a way to decrease poverty, crime, and school drop out rates. While these are positive outcomes that often stem from a decrease in teen pregnancy rates, it leads to a lack of empathy for pregnant and parenting teens and misses the opportunity to help them continue to develop as active members of their community.

Teen Pregnancy as Disease involves viewing teen pregnancy as a health epidemic. Pregnancy rates are often listed alongside sexually transmitted infections and other negative health conditions. This equates pregnancy as a disease that requires elimination. The final frame, *Maverick Advocates – Not Policy – as Solutions*, depicts men and women whom have risen above the bureaucratic red-tape of government institutions to help pregnant teens. On one hand this demonstrates committed individuals and their dedication to the field, but on the other hand it minimizes the perceived impact policies and institutions can have on pregnant and parenting teens, and reinforces the idea that all government systems are broken.

CONSTRUCTIVE FRAMES IN THE NEWS MEDIA

Sophisticated Analysis of Scholarly Literature

Journalist discusses research that frames teen pregnancy as one of economic inequality, rather than simply a health care crisis.

Teen as Active Participant

Newspaper article presents a teen mother and father taking intentional actions for their sexual health by buying condoms in a local drug store, while at the same time demonstrating structural system failures like having to use a call button to gain access to the condoms with no worker coming to their assistance.

DESTRUCTIVE FRAMES IN THE NEWS MEDIA

Teen Pregnancy as a Moral Failing

"Stable black families are the norm again... All because black teens decided that their lives matter. Because they said yes to education and no to drugs. And because they waited until they were grown-ups to have kids." (The Washington Post Oct 31, 2007)

The Teen Mother Bubble

"Adolescent mothers frequently compromise not only their health but also their future, dropping out of school and struggling financially. Their babies are at greater risk for a host of problems." (The Washington Post Oct 29, 2007)

Fuzzy Causality: Poverty and Teen Pregnancy

"Washingtonians are more aware today than 10 years ago that, like nothing else, teen pregnancy opens the door to neglect, abuse, poor educational attainment, future criminality and a variety of other social problems." (The Washington Times Nov 2007)

Teen Pregnancy as Disease

"Teen pregnancy is a public health epidemic in this country. This year, more than 750,000 teens will become pregnant and nearly 4 million will contract a sexually transmitted infection." (The Boston Globe July 2, 2007)

Maverick Advocates – Not Policy – as Solutions

"That's when I (the Maverick advocate) realized I had to do something; we were having a group of teens who were falling through the cracks because of government bureaucracy." (The Boston Globe Nov 15, 2007)

FRAMES IN THE FIELD: ADVOCACY MATERIALS

Ten common themes were found in advocacy materials discussing teen pregnancy and parenting. The FrameWorks Institute found that advocates' materials tend to focus narrowly on individuals and specific groups, leaving out external forces that shape communities and adults in those communities. Attacks against the common frames in the media only led to keeping the conversation within these frames. While there were many quality sections within materials, they were not consistent enough or strong enough to present an impacting counter-frame.

Most Common Advocacy Themes

Advocacy Material Themes and Main Points

1. Finding information about the array of policies affecting teen parenting is not easy
 - » The stories portrayed are too complex and disorganized
 - » Few materials offered new information within the context of a big picture explanation of teen parenting
 - » Prevention is the major focus, leaving teen parenting as a secondary plot
2. Counting them – up or down-- leads to crisis as the frame
 - » Focusing on the rise and fall of teen pregnancy rates leads to a rise and fall of perceived importance of the issue
 - » Focusing on the crisis takes the spotlight away from the solution
3. Consumer frame and the public pocketbook
 - » Describes the argument that teen pregnancy prevention has enormous potential for cost savings
 - » This argument is rarely a catalyst for public support when used with other issues
4. At risk for everything – vulnerable or disconnected youth
 - » Supports the frame of teen pregnancy leading to “other immoral” actions, like dropping out of school and crime
 - » Links the risks to the individual teen and their child, not to the community as a whole
5. Who is responsible?
 - » While personal stories create a connection with the audience, they continue to promote the *Teen Bubble* and *Moral Failings* frames over community responsibility, fairness and equality frames
6. What works to what end – sanctions, services, and support
 - » Materials list policies, practices, and services that experts agree would make an impact (The “What Works”)
 - » Often these lists are not well connected to an explanation of why or how they would make a difference (The “To What End”)
7. Who is in the picture?
 - » Pictures within advocacy materials often show young girls alone, inadvertently supporting the frame that she alone is responsible
 - » Even when a group of people is used in visuals, they are most often all teens, supporting the notion that peers are among the negative influences impacting young people
8. Adolescence as a stage of development
 - » The case for youth development rarely occurs in advocacy materials
9. The child's development
 - » Focus is often on preventing children among teens over a concern for helping these children succeed
 - » When mentioned, only the negative outcomes for children of teen parents are presented
10. Places, not people
 - » Socioeconomic determinants are often described as attributes of people and not the places they live
 - » By focusing on the person, it eliminates the environment as a possible intervention point

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

As youth-serving professionals, researchers, stakeholders, and citizens interested in this field, your work is important to the lives of pregnant and parenting teens.

1. Conducting a self-evaluation of the feelings the frames invoke personally, along with an organizational assessment of the frames in use in your programs and materials are important to begin a shift in the public's frame on this issue.
2. Be aware of the common frames in the media when crafting your message to the public and responding to news interviews.
3. Put the solution upfront in the discussion so it does not get buried in the details.
4. Pursue new research questions and sources of data that can replace flawed frames currently in use."
5. Avoid using stories or demographics that "otherize" pregnant and parenting teens; that is make them seem apart from their peers because they are parents.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Person	Action
Researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pursue new research questions and data sources that work to create new frames• Become an active voice in news media and public messages
Youth Services Provider & Medical Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be a public voice on the issue• Put the solution first, then discuss the problem
Advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review current materials for constructive and deconstructive frames• Put solution first, not the problem• Encourage more non-familial adults to be the voice of the message
Citizens - Adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct internal reflection on own frame• Be a public voice on the issue• Encourage discussion in your community
Citizens - Teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be a public voice on the issue - highlight successful relationships with mentors and the community

NEXT STEPS

Healthy Teen Network is collaborating with state leaders to work toward next steps. Phase 2 involves the creation of new frames to be tested in the field through a series of focus groups among a cross section of US citizens. New frames being proposed include youth development, educational equity, fairness and justice, and parenting supports. Once a new set of frames are identified and agreed upon, Phase 3 begins—the development of educational and supportive resources and their dissemination to the field.

For more information, contact pat@healthyteennetwork.org.

This summary was written by Mark Humphrey MD, MPH for Healthy Teen Network.

Visit www.HealthyTeenNetwork to download the FrameWorks Institute Report:

"Gaining Support for Teen Families: Mapping the Perceptual Hurdles"

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