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And Baby Makes Three: A Content Analysis of Adolescent Romantic Relationships as Portrayed on Reality Television

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AND BABY MAKES THREE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENT
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AS PORTRAYED ON REALITY TELEVISION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Applied Sociology

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Although teenage pregnancy and birth rates have been on the decline, the United States still has rates higher than any industrialized country. With several negative consequences associated with teenage childbearing for teen mothers and their children as well as for society, teen pregnancy is a social problem. Much of the existing literature focuses on the deleterious effects of pregnancy on teen mothers, but very few studies consider the effect that the transition to parenthood has on adolescent romantic relationships. The present study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the content of popular television series, namely *16 and Pregnant* and its follow-up series, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, to determine how the media depicts the changing relationships of teenage mothers and fathers during the transition to parenthood. Further, the entertainment-education model is applied to consider whether the television shows are realistic examples for discouraging uninformed sexual decision-making. Despite the racial homogeneity of the featured teen mothers, resulting overall themes portrayed by the television shows imply that raising a child is likely to give rise to conflict and volatility in an adolescent romantic relationship. The depiction of instability may persuade viewers to delay early childbearing.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy is a social problem in the United States. In fact, America has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy of any industrialized country by far (Luttrell, 2011; SmithBattle, 2012). Teen childbirth is not only costly to taxpayers (Albert, 2011), but it also has several negative consequences for the parents as well as the children. Although several of these disadvantages have been well documented, much less attention is paid to the effects that teen parenthood can have on an adolescent romantic relationship.

Studies have shown that adolescent relationships can have a lasting effect on later relationships (e.g. Collins, 2003; Downey, Bonica, & Rincón, 1999; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). According to Glenn and Weaver (1981), marital happiness is the best predictor for global happiness; thus, a rocky adolescent romantic relationship may do more damage than just causing teenage heartbreak. Conflict in a teenage romance can lead to higher likelihood of conflict in an adult romance, which may be detrimental to one's happiness.

One probable way to increase conflict in any romantic relationship is to introduce an infant to the existing dyad. In a seminal study, LeMasters (1957) established first-time parenthood as a "crisis" for married couples when he found that 83% of couples he interviewed reported "extensive" or "severe" crisis upon the arrival of their first child. Subsequent studies have confirmed LeMasters's results (e.g. Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Moreover,

a majority of those who experienced crisis indicated that their pregnancy was planned in advance (LeMasters, 1957). Imagine the crisis experienced when a resource-reduced high schooler delivers an unanticipated baby into the world. Unfortunately, many teenage girls do not consider the major responsibilities that parenthood entails, and some become pregnant intentionally, hoping that a baby will strengthen their relationship with the child's father (Frost & Oslak, 1999).

Except for a slight rise from 2005 to 2007 (SmithBattle, 2012), the teen birth rate in the United States has been on the decline in recent years (Santelli & Melnikas, 2010). One way to continue the downward trend in teen pregnancy and birth rates may be to introduce pregnancy prevention messages through "entertainment-education", which is a term used to describe "pro-social messages that are embedded into popular entertainment media content" (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p. 408). Such messages, which are not always overt, attempt to shape attitudes and influence actions by promoting healthy behaviors or demonstrating the negative consequences of risky ones (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

A possible example of the application of this technique to teen pregnancy arose in 2009 in the form of a reality television series on the MTV network titled *16 and Pregnant*. Creator Lauren Dolgen partnered with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy to produce the series with the intention of curbing teen pregnancy rates. The show, which recently concluded its fourth season, documents the lives of several pregnant teens through the first few months of their child's life. Although some critique the series for glamorizing

teen pregnancy, one study found that 82% of teens surveyed thought the show helps teens to better understand the challenges of teen parenthood (Suellentrop, Brown, & Ortiz, 2010).

Since six in ten teens have seen at least part of an episode of *16 and Pregnant* (Suellentrop et al., 2010), and the media has such a great influence on adolescent behavior (Brown, 2002) the show's depiction of the effect of teen parenthood on an adolescent romantic relationship can potentially influence teens' attitudes and sexual behaviors, possibly steering them away from hasty or uninformed sexual decisions that could result in an unplanned pregnancy. Thus, *16 and Pregnant*, as well as the follow-up series *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, have the capability to serve as an educational tool to demonstrate to adolescents that teenage parenthood is a life-altering experience. Yet the quintessential question remains: *how do these MTV series portray the transition to teenage parenthood and its effects on an adolescent romantic relationship?*

In order to investigate this research question, a content analysis of selected episodes of *16 and Pregnant* and the series' follow-up shows, *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* was conducted. The latter two shows each follow the lives of four teenage mothers from two seasons of *16 and Pregnant* as their children develop into toddlers. The shows chronicle the changing relationships between the parents of the children following their transition to parenthood, including one couple that chose adoption for their baby. Using a self-created coding scheme, I present the major themes of teen parenthood's effects on romantic relationships

as they are portrayed on *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*. Specifically, the relationship between the teen parents is observed and their changing relationship dynamics are tracked throughout the course of the series. Although the demographic representation of teen mothers is limited, the results of the current study suggest that the shows are a form of “entertainment-education” (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) that may be used as an educational tool to demonstrate the negative implications of teen pregnancy.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Negative Effects of Teen Pregnancy

The United States has the highest teen birth rate of any industrialized country (Luttrell, 2011; SmithBattle, 2012). Since the peak of teen birth rates in 1957 at 96 births per 1,000 women age 15 to 19 (Ventura, Mathews, & Hamilton, 2001), teen birth rates in the United States have mostly been on the decline (Santelli & Melnikas, 2010). Following a 24% increase in teen birth rates from 1986 to 1991 (Santelli & Melnikas, 2010), the United States continued to experience a decline in rates for over a decade until a slight rise occurred from 2005 to 2007 (SmithBattle, 2012; Ventura, Mathews, Hamilton, Sutton, & Abma, 2011). Since then, rates have continued to decrease (SmithBattle, 2012) and in 2011 reached their lowest level in seven decades at 31 births per 1,000 women age 15 to 19 (Stobbe, 2012).

Teen parenthood is associated with several negative outcomes. In a 35-year longitudinal study of white mothers, Taylor (2009) reported that mothers who had given birth before the age of twenty experienced less education, less prestigious careers, and fewer stable marriages as compared to women who had put off childbearing until at least their twenties. Additionally, the study found that around middle age, teen moms tended to be less healthy than older moms (Taylor, 2009). A 2006 report issued by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy estimated that fewer than 2% of teens who have a

baby before the age of 18 attain a college degree by the age of 30 (Hoffman, 2006). Adolescent pregnancies are also associated with lower income and greater risk of being a single parent (Clear, Williams, & Crosby, 2011). Teenage fathers are more likely to have participated in criminal activity and to demonstrate conduct disorder (Young, Turner, & Denny, 2004).

Probably due to the intense stress of teenage parenthood, and/or possibly because of a lack of parenting skills, adolescent mothers are less likely than their older counterparts to be involved in encouraging their child's development, are more likely to use physical punishment, and are less likely to talk to and play with their child(ren) (Young et al., 2004). Such deficiencies for the children of teen mothers can contribute to their already adverse existence.

Children born to teen mothers may experience several disadvantages. Before they even arrive, they are at increased risk of low birth weight, premature delivery, and fetal death (Clear et al., 2011; Ventura et al., 2011). Beyond birth, children of adolescent mothers experience lower cognitive scores and more behavioral problems (Clear et al., 2011). Into childhood and adulthood, they tend to demonstrate "lower educational aspirations, increased school failure, increased welfare dependency (as an adult), higher rates of criminality, higher rates of violent crime, and greater likelihood of becoming a teen parent" (Young et al., 2004, p. 362).

Additionally, teenage parenthood is costly to society. The most recent approximations of the cost of teenage pregnancy estimate that taxpayers spend

around \$10.9 billion annually on this social issue (Albert, 2011). However, this estimate is considered conservative, since it only takes into account the costs of public health care, child welfare, incarceration, and the loss of tax revenue due to the decreased earnings potential for children of teen parents. It does not even consider the lifetime costs for the teen parents themselves (Albert, 2011), such as the increased likelihood of welfare dependency and single parenthood (Larson, 2004). Although the reduction in teen pregnancy and birth rates has saved taxpayers billions of dollars, teen pregnancies are still an expensive social issue, especially considering that the majority of these pregnancies are unintended (Santelli & Melnikas, 2010). Teen pregnancy has major adverse effects for the parents and children involved, as well as society at large. Yet one relationship that is often overlooked when considering the negative implications of teen pregnancy is the relationship between the mother and father of the child.

Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Compared to the stages of childhood and adulthood, not much consideration has been given to adolescence as a developmental period until recently (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). G. S. Hall (1904) initiated the scientific study of adolescence with his two-volume work titled *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, in which he refers to adolescence as a time of “storm and stress.” Researchers subscribed to Hall’s view of adolescence as a troubling time until the 1970s, when normative theories of development began to emerge (Lerner &

Steinberg, 2004).

Social scientists came to realize that adolescence was not only a period of significant physical and physiological growth, but it signified a major interdependency of biology and context (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). They appreciated that, unlike children, adolescents can consider contextual situations and make their own autonomous decisions, thereby having a hand in influencing their own development (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). It was during this time that researchers began to lend more credence not only to adolescence as a developmental period but to the romantic relationships of adolescents as well.

Although previous researchers have attributed the dearth of research on adolescent romantic relationships to their fleeting, casual nature (Feiring, 1996), others argue that adolescent romantic relationships are significant developmental stepping-stones to adult relationships in general (Collins, Welsch, & Furman, 2009). Romantic relationships in adolescence are more common than was once believed: more than half of adolescents in the United States report having experienced a special romantic relationship in the past 18 months (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Not surprisingly, the proportion of adolescents who report having had a boyfriend or girlfriend increases with age (Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Additionally, late adolescent romantic relationships are longer in duration than was previously understood: almost 60% of 17 and 18 year olds say that their relationships have lasted 11 months or longer (Carver et al., 2003). Not only are they relatively common and long-lasting, but participation in adolescent romantic

relationships has been linked to enhanced self-esteem, popularity, social acceptance, and feelings of competence (Grover, Nangle, & Zeff, 2005).

Researchers have demonstrated that adolescent romantic relationships bear a striking resemblance to adult romantic relationships (Levesque, 1993; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). In line with other research on adult romantic relationships, Levesque (1993) found that in a sample of over 300 teens currently involved in relationships, the relationship components of passion, giving and getting communication, commitment, emotional support, and togetherness all correlated with relationship satisfaction. Additionally, many researchers now believe that late adolescent and adult romantic relationships are more similar than different and that these relationships are significant to adolescent functioning and longer term outcomes (Collins, 2003).

Adverse Effects of Conflict on a Romantic Relationship

When romantic relationships are progressing smoothly, they can be beneficial to both parties involved. However, conflict in any relationship can have deleterious consequences. Although the literature on conflict in an adolescent romantic relationship is scarce, studies examining the happiness and well-being of married couples demonstrate that unhappy marriages are a potent risk factor for major depressive disorder, associated with a 25-fold increase over untroubled marriages (Weissman, 1987). Marital stressors also have a direct effect on self-efficacy, which, in turn, directly affects depressive symptoms (Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1998). Moreover, controlling for race, sex, and age, a 12-year

longitudinal study found that unhappily married individuals reported poorer health, lower levels of self-esteem, happiness, and life satisfaction, and higher levels of psychological distress when compared to those in continuous marriages, participants who divorced and later remarried, or divorced people who remained unmarried (Hawkins & Booth, 2005).

Yet the presence of conflict alone does not determine distress in a relationship. Rather, the conflict strategies employed can shape the outcome and resolution of an argument or disagreement (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990). For example, Sillars (1980) describes three types of conflict strategies: passive-indirect, distributive, and integrative. Those who employ passive-indirect techniques try to avoid the conflict at all costs, instead opting to retreat from the argument or ignore the discrepancy altogether. Distributive strategies involve the use of threats, name-calling, and other negative actions in an effort to achieve an individual goal at the expense of the other(s) involved. In contrast, integrative strategies entail mutual communication, neutral or positive affect, and action from both parties with the end goal of a shared, agreed-upon settlement. In a study of verbal college roommate conflicts, Sillars (1980) demonstrated that integrative conflict strategies are associated with a greater likelihood of conflict resolution and higher satisfaction among those involved. However, integrative strategies were the least likely to be employed in Sillars's (1980) sample of college undergraduates.

In the only available application of Sillars's (1980) conflict resolution strategies to adolescents, Scott (2008) found that the attribution of responsibility was a major factor, and 14- to 16-year-olds were more willing to use integrative strategies when they perceived themselves to be at fault for causing the conflict. Conversely, the belief that someone else was solely responsible for starting the conflict seemed to provide the blameless adolescent with the authority to use belittling, hurtful communication strategies (Scott, 2008). However, one must keep in mind that the maturity level of an adolescent may prohibit a thorough consideration of the outcome of an argument and thus result in malicious verbal attacks, such as name-calling. Further, when applying conflict resolution strategies to adolescent parents, it is important to bear in mind that the introduction of the baby may not have triggered a different conflict resolution strategy; rather, the couple may have used a certain strategy prior to the birth of the child and continued the pattern.

Creasey and Hesson-McInnis (2001) investigated the influence of attachment style in adolescent conflict and found that adolescents with more insecure attachment orientations demonstrated more difficulty managing conflict than other adolescents who possessed more secure attachment styles. Thus, perhaps healthy conflict resolution lies not only in the type of strategy employed but also in the personality traits of individuals.

Transition to Parenthood

Although understudied, the adolescent transition to parenthood is certainly one way to increase conflict within a romantic relationship. In a seminal study, LeMasters (1957) interviewed 46 married couples and found that 83% reported “extensive” or “severe” levels of crisis following the birth of their first child, regardless of whether their marriage was rated as “good” or “poor.” According to LeMasters (1957), the arrival of a first-born child triggers a recalculation of all that was previously routine, creating new dynamics and a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities. Additionally, the arrival of a third individual changes the dyad, resulting in a pair and an isolate, which may be painful for some couples and thus manifest into a crisis situation (LeMasters, 1957).

Thirty-five of the thirty-eight couples that experienced crisis after the arrival of their first child claim that the child was indeed planned (LeMasters, 1957). If married couples with a planned birth experience crisis, then we should expect teenagers who have an unplanned pregnancy to experience even more intense levels of crisis. The author points out that the severity of crisis depends on many factors, including the resources available to resolve the crisis, prior experience with crises, and the pattern of organization before the crisis (LeMasters, 1957). Thus, teens who have not completed their high school education or who do not anticipate their pregnancy are presumably at highest risk for experiencing crisis once their child arrives. More recent research confirms that the adjustment to parenthood depends on several, inter-related individual and socio-cultural factors, such as levels of parental and partner support

(Florsheim et al., 2003) and parenting stress, which may be negatively associated with age (Larson, 2004).

Subsequent studies have confirmed that the transition to parenthood is associated with declines in marital satisfaction (e.g. Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Twenge et al., 2003). Specifically, the effect of parenthood on marital satisfaction is more negative among high socioeconomic groups, younger birth cohorts, and in more recent years (Twenge et al., 2003). One study found that during the transition to parenthood, time spent on household tasks remained relatively stable for men but increased substantially for women, a trend that further increased for women with the addition of each child (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008), adding support to LeMasters's (1957) hypothesis that the transition to parenthood leads to crisis because of the reorganization of roles and responsibilities.

Despite consistent research demonstrating that the birth of a child negatively influences married couples' relationships, studies show that teenagers' perceptions about teen pregnancy are frequently positive (Corcoran, Franklin, & Bell, 1997; Herrman, 2008; Herrman & Waterhouse, 2011; Unger, Molina, & Teran, 2000). Specifically, girls who are Latina or African-American, come from lower-SES families, and/or whose siblings or mothers were teen parents are more likely to perceive early childbearing as positive (Herrman & Waterhouse, 2011).

Some teenage girls get pregnant on purpose, thinking that a child will strengthen the bond with their boyfriend (Frost & Oslak, 1999) or even “trap” them (Kegler, Bird, Kyle-Moon, & Rodine, 2001, p. 249). Frequently, teenage mothers are misled by the period of optimism and hope that surrounds a pregnancy. Once a child is born, fractured couples may make enthusiastic promises to one another, entranced by the “magic moment” of the child’s delivery (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001, p. 303). Later, however, young fathers may be unwilling to keep such promises, instead trading family time for excursions with friends or even other women (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Other teens intend their pregnancies because they come from broken or disadvantaged homes where they feel rejected; thus, they believe that having a baby will give them someone to love unconditionally, as well as someone who will reciprocate that love (Corcoran et al., 1997; Hanna, 2001; Kegler et al., 2001). Conversely, some teens recognize the detrimental effects of parenthood on an adolescent romance, specifically citing the stress and strain it could cause (Herrman, 2008).

In a study of disadvantaged mothers from low-income Philadelphia neighborhoods, Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that teenagers may not plan their pregnancies, but they also do not take measures to avoid pregnancy. For these underprivileged young women, the perceived cost of early childbearing is low, while the value they place on children and motherhood is high, as poor women “rely on their children to bring validation, purpose, companionship, and order to

their often chaotic lives—things they find hard to come by in other ways” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 171). Children can help redirect the wayward paths of these disadvantaged teens, and they also provide a relationship for the women to depend on when relationships with men, friends, and even kin may falter.

Further, for these young women, marriage is a “longed for luxury,” while children are a “necessity” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 172). During interviews with their participants, Edin and Kefalas (2005) repeatedly found that the young mothers believed a woman should wait until she is 35 or 40 to get married, because “when you get married, your life stops changing” but to have kids first is “just the way it goes” (p. 110). Marriage is certainly not a prerequisite to childbearing for these young women who have “fears about making a lifetime promise they can keep” (p. 121) and are further impeded by the limited selection of dependable, marriageable mates in their low-income communities.

Reducing Teen Pregnancy Rates

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are continuously developing new ideas to help reduce teen pregnancy and birth rates. For example, Schultz (2001) points to the importance of educators, who need to encourage teens, especially those who are underprivileged, to talk and write about their hopes and fears regarding parenthood so that teachers can facilitate an honest discussion about the consequences. Yet Schultz warns that educators must respect the perspective of students and refrain from comparing them to mainstream or conventional pathways (Schultz, 2001). Also, the author argues that more

programs should target young poor women, advocating the benefits of postponing childbearing and providing more opportunities for employment and education (Schultz, 2001).

Another suggestion for reducing rates of teen pregnancy is to implement “culturally responsive pedagogy”, which consists of using a frame of reference that appeals to ethnically diverse teenagers so that they are more interested in the subject matter and more likely to remember and relate to the material (Gay, 2002). Perhaps reality television is a vehicle through which pregnancy prevention policymakers can attract and relate to this population. Recent reports indicate that teenagers watch an average of nearly four hours of television daily (Flint, 2012); thus, television shows may be a viable way to reach the adolescent audience and convey any type of message. Lauren Dolgen chose this medium when she partnered with The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and the television network MTV to create a show that would educate viewers about teen pregnancy. Thus, the series *16 and Pregnant* was developed. Critics may be surprised to learn that the series, which debuted in June 2009, was created with the purpose of curbing teen pregnancy rates, and according to Dolgen, to demonstrate to adolescents “the honest, unpleasant truth of teen pregnancy” (Dolgen, 2011, para. 8).

Although critics say the show glamorizes teen pregnancy (Thompson, 2010), one study showed that 93% of teens who watched *16 and Pregnant* agreed (53% strongly agreed) with the statement: “I learned that teen parenthood is harder

than I imagined from these episodes” (Suellentrop et al., 2010). The same study revealed that 82% of those sampled teens who watch *16 and Pregnant* believe it helps teens to better understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood, compared to the 15% who think it glamorizes teen pregnancy (Suellentrop et al., 2010).

Moreover, one study suggests that entertainment television has the potential to function as a “healthy sex educator” for youth (Collins, Elliot, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). In fact, a whole body of literature regards such “entertainment-education” programming as a powerful strategy for incorporating public health messages into popular entertainment media with the goal of influencing behavior (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Thus, controversy aside, *16 and Pregnant* and the spin-off series *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* have the potential to act as educational pregnancy prevention tools, as long as their overall messages are consistent with reality. If the shows only portray idealistic, positive situations and interactions, they could misrepresent the true difficulties of teen parenthood and possibly convince viewers that motherhood is simple. However, if the shows accurately portray the hardships that many teen parents face, specifically in their romantic relationships, then the shows have the potential to deter early childbearing, especially among young girls who think having a baby will improve the relationship with their partner.

The Entertainment-Education Model

Entertainment-education, also known as enter-educate, infotainment, or

edutainment, is defined as “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior” (Singhal & Rogers, 1999. p. 9). The entertainment-education strategy has been employed in a variety of media outlets, including radio, television, movies, popular music, and comic books, especially in developing countries where common messages are to promote HIV/AIDs awareness, gender equality, adult literacy, and other crucial knowledge (Papa et al., 2000). Entertainment-education is such a popular method for influencing the behaviors of viewers that there is an entire undergraduate course titled “Entertainment Education for Behavior Change” (Johns Hopkins University, 2011), as well as an international conference dedicated to spreading knowledge about the method (International Entertainment Education Conference, 2011).

Although the combination of entertainment mediums with educationally-focused messaging dates back centuries to the creation of storytelling, entertainment-education did not find its way to the television screen until 1969 when a Peruvian soap opera more or less accidentally introduced the strategy. The story of a young, single mother who climbed the social ladder by attending literacy classes and showcasing her sewing skills compelled viewers in several Latin American countries to do the same, resulting in increased enrollment in adult literacy courses and boosts in sewing machine sales in those nations (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

Entertainment-education can influence people through one of two channels: first, at the micro level, messages can affect individual viewers' attitudes, ideas, and behaviors; second, at the macro level, messages can affect social policy and other group- or system-level approaches, prompting social change (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). The effectiveness of entertainment-education strategies depends on several factors, including the degree of media saturation, the credibility of the media, the placement of the program in the television schedule, the level of coordination with similar messages through other mediums (or, similarly, the intensity of competing messages within the larger social context), and other variables (Sherry, 2002; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Additionally, for entertainment-education messages to enact change, the recommended services must be plentiful enough to meet the demand (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). In the case of teen pregnancy prevention, contraception should be widely available and education regarding safe sexual health should be common knowledge as opposed to privileged information.

Entertainment-education strategies are difficult to employ on American television, due to the high degree of media saturation in this country (Sherry, 2002; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Even so, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes several successful entertainment-education outreach successes for public health issues, including HIV/AIDS and Tyler Perry's *Meet the Browns*, cancer and *90210*, and Asberger's syndrome and the primetime drama *Parenthood* (Parker, 2012). Singhal and Rogers (1999) point out that

Sesame Street is a prime example of entertainment-education for children. Documentary television shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *Intervention* teach viewers the dangers of obesity and addiction, respectively, and these series persuade audiences to avoid risky behaviors that could be damaging to one's health. The CDC highlights the power of entertainment-education, as it asserts that 88% of Americans get their health information from television (Parker, 2012).

The Influence of Media On Adolescents

The media ranks as the third and fourth most important source of sex-related information for middle and late adolescents, respectively (Brown, 2002). Additional research shows that in the absence of direct experience, we sometimes use lower-order processes such as television shows to create social perceptions (Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986). Thus, teens who do not know what teen parenthood is like may turn to a series such as *16 and Pregnant* to form their insights, making the depiction of reality extremely important for the show's viewers.

Not only is the difficulty of teen parenthood important to accurately portray on television, but parents can also use the struggles (if documented correctly) as a channel for discussing the benefits and effectiveness of contraception. Open communication about sex can help mediate the relationship between viewing sex on television and participating in sexual activity. For example, at least one study has found that children from families with an open communication style are less affected by sex on television than children in families with restrictive

communication norms (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994). Additionally, Wright, Randall, and Arroyo (2012) found that a coed's frequency of viewing *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* and her recent reported sexual contact depended on how frequently the female's father communicated with her about sex while she was growing up. That is, as exposure to *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* increased, the authors found that the probability of recent intercourse increased for females whose fathers did not communicate with them about sex as an adolescent, whereas the probability of recent intercourse decreased for females whose fathers openly and frequently communicated with them about sex growing up (Wright et al., 2012). Thus, the sexualization of the media alone is not a causal link to viewers' sexual activities. Parents can take measures to initiate the contraception conversation, and MTV's docu-reality series on teen pregnancy may be one way to educate their children about the negative implications of sex without protection.

Theoretical Frameworks

In considering theoretical bases for the entertainment-education model that seeks to illustrate the media's influence on viewers, Bandura's social learning or social cognitive theory has dominated (Singhal & Rogers, 2002). Bandura's social cognitive theory proposes that human behavior results from a reciprocal, reiterative relationship between personal, behavioral, and environmental elements, wherein agency of the individual is emphasized (Bandura, 2001). Rather than passive beings that merely receive and replicate information, Bandura suggests that, "people are producers as well as products of

social systems” (Bandura, 2001, p. 266). Symbols play a major role in the comprehension and interpretation of the environment, as exposure to symbols helps to shape individual experiences into longer-standing values, judgments, and meaning (Bandura, 2001). Additionally, people learn behaviors through modeling, but not every behavior that is observed is automatically emulated; instead, four subprocesses regulate the decision: attention, retention, production, and motivation (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). According to Moyer-Gusé (2008), motivation is the most essential of the four subprocesses to social cognitive theory, as whether or not a person performs an action depends on their level of motivation to do so. Further, motivation consists of two elements: self-efficacy and outcome expectancies. The former refers to one’s confidence in his or her ability to complete an act consistently with how it was viewed, and the latter refers to the probability of replication based on the expected result. Behaviors that result in positive consequences are reinforced in the individual, whereas behaviors that have negative consequences should decrease the likelihood of imitation (Bandura, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Further, people will be more motivated to perform certain behaviors if they perceive the actor they are emulating to be similar in disposition or if they otherwise identify with the character (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Thus, the application of social cognitive theory to the entertainment-education model is a suitable fit, as the basis for both concepts is to shape behavior by presenting positive and negative consequences in the form of models (Singhal & Rogers, 2002).

A related concept that may undergird the media's influence on adolescents is that of disinhibition, or the concept that media depictions of previously-condemned behaviors become normalized over time and may even be perceived as acceptable (Berkowitz, 1984; Romer, 2008). Parents should be aware of their children's television and movie selections, as "adolescents and young adults appear to be particularly susceptible to the disinhibiting effects of media portrayals" (Romer, 2008, p. 12). One example of disinhibition is Phillip's contagion theory, which proposes that people imitate what they see and read in the media (Phillips, 1980; Romer, 2008). Specifically, Phillips (1974) found that following newspaper publication of a suicide, subsequent suicides in the surrounding area tend to increase for a short period of time; the greater the publicity, the sharper the rise in successive suicides. Additionally, Phillips (1980) found that shortly after murder-suicide stories are published, there is an increase in airplane accidents, which is best explained as imitative murder-suicide acts that are disguised as airplane crashes. Again, the greater the publicity, the sharper the increase in airplane "accidents."

Critics of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series might rely on contagion theory to demonstrate that the "15 minutes of fame" given to the pregnant teens influences other teens to become pregnant so they might have a chance at the spotlight. However, the counterargument is that the shows portray the trials and tribulations of having a baby at a young age, urging the viewers to seek contraception or avoid sexual intercourse altogether. Thus, disinhibition and

contagion theory both aim to explain the great influence of media on viewers' attitudes and behaviors.

The previous examination of the existing literature provokes a compelling question: *how do the MTV series portray the transition to teenage parenthood and its effects on an adolescent romantic relationship?* For the present paper, a content analysis of select episodes of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* was performed to determine how the shows are portraying the transition to teenage parenthood and its effects on the parents' relationships. A qualitative technique such as content analysis is appropriate to answer the research question, which calls for an independent assessment of the changing adolescent relationships from an outsider's (television viewer's) perspective.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Content Analysis

A content analysis is the primary method of data analysis for this study. With a history dating back to 18th century Scandinavia (Rosengren, 1981), content analysis is a research methodology that can be conducted with a lean towards either quantitative or qualitative methods. Some have described it as lying at the “crossroads” of qualitative and quantitative methods (Duncan, 1989). Content analysis using quantitative methods involves sorting text into categories of codes and then analyzing the data using statistical techniques (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), whereas qualitative content analysis “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Not just a process of counting words, qualitative content analysis aims to situate text (either verbal, in print, or in other media sources) within a context of meaning that frames the language for better understanding of the subject at hand (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As such, a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis tools is a suitable method for analyzing the repeated themes in *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, since the aim is to examine the messages that are most frequently portrayed to the shows’ viewers in relation to similarly-themed data gathered from researchers on the topic of teen pregnancy.

Description of Series

Each hour-long episode of *16 and Pregnant* follows a new teenager, beginning when she is already a few months pregnant and documenting her life for the next several months. Each episode concludes with the teen reflecting on the experience after the child is a few months old. The educational intention of the series is stressed near the end of every show with a commercial directing viewers to a website where they can get answers to their questions on relationships and sex and reminding them that pregnancy is “100% preventable.” The show has been a success as far as ratings go: *16 and Pregnant* ranked as number twelve on the list of most-watched original cable series in the second quarter of 2011 (Seidman, 2011), and the series has now concluded its fourth season.

Probably because of *16 and Pregnant*'s high ratings, MTV created a spin-off series, *Teen Mom*, which kept the cameras rolling on four of the first season's teen mothers as their infants grew into toddlers. Subsequently, *Teen Mom 2* debuted in 2011, documenting the lives of four more teen mothers from the second season of *16 and Pregnant*. In August 2012, *Teen Mom* concluded its fourth and final season, and *Teen Mom 2* is currently airing its fourth season. During each hour-long episode of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, the spotlight rotates on each of the mothers, updating viewers on their ventures as they work towards earning their GED, deal with changing living situations, seek

employment, and the like. By the conclusion of the fourth seasons of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, the mothers' children are approximately three years old.

Selection of Episodes

To obtain a picture of the couple's relationship during the pregnancy, eight episodes of *16 and Pregnant* were selected (four mothers from season one of *16 and Pregnant*, who became the four mothers featured in *Teen Mom*, and four mothers from season two of *16 and Pregnant*, who became the four mothers featured in *Teen Mom 2*).

Within the original *Teen Mom* series, each season contains twelve episodes, except for the first season of *Teen Mom*, which only aired eight episodes. There are four seasons of *Teen Mom*, for a total of forty-four episodes. *Teen Mom 2* is currently airing its fourth season, and once the show finishes airing, there will be a total of forty-eight episodes. However, since the focus of the research question is on the transition to parenthood, only the first two seasons of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are considered. By the end of the second season of the series, all the children are at least one year old, which covers the transitional period. Additionally, the development of the babies into toddlers would most likely elicit a different set of themes than those that emerge as the couple struggles to adapt to life with an infant.

To obtain a rigorous yet simplified sample of episodes from the first two seasons of *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*, every other episode was selected. This resulted in viewing episode numbers one, three, five, and seven for the first

season of *Teen Mom* (since only eight episodes were aired) and episode numbers one, three, five, seven, nine, and eleven for the second season of *Teen Mom* and the two seasons of *Teen Mom 2*. Finally, the series finale of both *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* was selected to obtain a concluding, “outcome” depiction of the parental relationship. However, since *Teen Mom 2* was still currently airing during the analysis portion of the current study, the latest aired episode was selected as the proxy for the “outcome” episode.

Coding

Because of the relative recency of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series, there is no existing coding scheme to analyze these television shows. Some codes (see Table 1 for the list of codes) emerged from a search of the literature, documented above. For example, the level of the mother’s education, as fewer than 2% of teen mothers earn a college degree before the age of 30 (Hoffman, 2006); the type of conflict resolution strategy employed during an argument, which can either exacerbate or appease the conflict (Sillars, 1980); the division of labor and roles that may change as a result of the transition to parenthood (LeMasters, 1957); the availability of resources and reliance on others (e.g. free daycare) that may ease the crisis of parenthood (LeMasters, 1957); plans for the future of the relationship, as some teens intend their pregnancies to bolster their relationships (Frost & Oslak, 1999); and the father’s amount of emotional support to the mother, which may or may not end with the “magic moment” of childbirth (Reichman et al., 2001).

Additional codes were created through open coding, a process whereby codes are generated while reading (or, in this case, viewing) the text (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Using simple random sampling, one episode was selected from the first season of *16 and Pregnant* (the episodes of the four girls who were later the subjects of *Teen Mom* were excluded). The sample episode was viewed two times to gather a collection of codes that emerged from the episodes, such as length of relationship prior to pregnancy, mother's previous sexual experience, age difference between the couple, number of break-ups, experience with other mates, plans to pay for baby's expenses, couple's living arrangement, and employment status. A few more codes (second pregnancy, level of trust issues, and legal trouble) emerged during the coding process of the full sample of episodes. The final coding scheme (see Table 1) was applied to the full sample of selected episodes of *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*.

Because the research question focuses specifically on the effects of teen parenthood on an adolescent romantic relationship, the only codes that are considered are ones that emerge from the dialogue concerning the teen parents. This includes conversations between the teen parents themselves, or discussions with friends, family, and other individuals in the show if the talk relates to the relationship between the adolescent parents. Additionally, the mothers' interactions with other romantic interests were also coded to consider how the series depict the effect of motherhood on experiences with dating.

Table 1.
Coding Scheme for 16 and Pregnant and the Teen Mom Series

Length of relationship prior to pregnancy
Mother's previous sexual experience
Age difference between couple
Availability of resources
Number of break-ups
Plans for future of romantic relationship
Experience with other mates
Amount of reliance/dependence on others
Plans to pay for baby's expenses
Couple's living arrangement
Father's amount of emotional support to mother
Amount of education
Employment status
Conflict resolution strategies
Division of roles/labor
Second pregnancy
Level of trust issues
Legal troubles

Analysis

For each selected episode, a new Excel spreadsheet was created with a column for each code and a row for each teen mother. During the course of the episode, any information relating to the code was recorded in the respective cell. Additionally, quotes that were especially illustrative of a code were transcribed

verbatim in a separate document. Each episode features all four mothers, but the “spotlight” rotates; a cartoon banner of the mother’s name distinctly defines each clip. To determine whether one mother received more airtime than the others, the number of airtime minutes was recorded for each mother during every selected episode, and a percentage of overall airtime was calculated. However, the differences in airtime percentages among the mothers were not substantial.

To analyze the data, the spreadsheets and episode quotes were printed and reviewed. The data for each mother were examined, one at a time, and relevant quotes were selected to illustrate common themes.

Limitations

The findings from this study should be considered in light of certain limitations. First, all of the eight mothers featured in the series are white, as are all of the eight fathers, except for Kailyn’s boyfriend Jo, who is Hispanic. The racial homogeneity of the sample limits the generalizability of the results and also narrows the range of viewers who are able to connect with or relate to the mothers, which may constrain the influence of the entertainment-education model. Similarly, the locations of the mothers are not fully representative of the country: none of the mothers in the series live in the Western or Southwestern parts of the United States. Additionally, only two of the eight mothers ever sought public assistance during the selected episodes. In contrast, when Larson (2004) asked teen mothers to state their primary source of income three-and-a-half years postpartum, nearly 65% reported that they relied on public assistance.

Thus, the sample of teen mothers in the current study may be skewed relative to socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is possible that non-white, Western, Southwestern, or low-income teen mothers have different experiences in their adolescent romantic relationships during the transition to parenthood than the demographics that were represented on the series. However, the television network chooses the series participants; consequently, the sample was already pre-determined.

A second limitation involves the choice to examine the first two seasons of each series. It is possible that changes in the teen parents' relationships occurred after the conclusion of the analysis period, but this was partially accounted for by including the series finale episode (or the most recently aired episode) in the analysis. Similarly, the choice to select every other episode during the first two seasons for analysis may have inadvertently excluded important thematic elements. However, each episode opened with a brief summary of the previous episode, and each episode concluded with a brief summary of the upcoming episode, so any major events related to the teen parents' romantic relationships that occurred during these synopses were considered and coded.

Additionally, the decision to code selected episodes from only the first two seasons limits the existing knowledge of the series' entire events. Since the shows have been around for years, I have been keeping up with most of the episodes. Therefore, I know about events or occurrences that may be included in

the analysis but may not have been revealed within the selected episodes, such as newly-diagnosed medical conditions. Such instances are noted within the text.

Third, as with any qualitative study, the chosen codes are subjective and may not be highly reliable if the study was to be replicated. Other viewers may interpret the actions and language of the couples in the show differently.

Nevertheless, the individual nature of the study required a single researcher, so inter-rater reliability is not considered to be a major factor.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

I will introduce each teen mother briefly to frame a backdrop of the demographics featured on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2*. The mothers are separated by the series in which they appeared. A lengthier description of each teen mother's experience on her show is available in the appendix. Following the biographical descriptions, I will discuss emergent themes, central and secondary, and consider them in light of the existing literature related to the themes. Finally, the chapter ends with an integration of all the themes.

Biographical Descriptions of the *Teen Mom* Mothers

First, the teen mothers from the first season of *16 and Pregnant*, who were later featured in *Teen Mom*, are briefly described in alphabetical order.

Amber. Hailing from Indiana, Amber was dating her older boyfriend, Gary, for over two and a half years when she became pregnant. After the couple's daughter was born, Amber dropped out of school while Gary supported the family as a certified nursing assistant. Amber attempted GED classes, but she later dropped out when she became overwhelmed with the stresses of motherhood. Amber and Gary's relationship was the most volatile of all the couples, as they broke up during nearly every selected episode and Amber even resorted to physical violence on more than one occasion. Although they planned to get married, Amber and Gary were no longer together at the conclusion of the series.

Catelynn. After dating her boyfriend, Tyler, for over four years, Catelynn found out she was pregnant during her junior year of high school. The Michigan couple wavered back and forth for months before deciding that placing their daughter for adoption would be the best outcome for themselves as well as their child. Both of the teenagers came from unstable backgrounds, and they wanted to concentrate on graduating from high school, completing college, and getting started on their careers before they took on parenthood. At the end of the series, Catelynn and Tyler were the only couple to remain together.

Farrah. When Farrah got pregnant as a senior in high school, she did not tell her boyfriend, Derek, since they were not together at the time. Farrah made plans to raise her daughter as a single mom, which became a reality when Derek passed away in a car accident soon after the baby was born. Although Farrah left her Iowa high school before graduation, she earned her diploma through an online, community college-based program. With some help from her parents, she was able to balance college courses and a job while raising her daughter. Farrah had several dating experiences early on in the series, but by the conclusion, she was still single.

Maci. Born and raised in Tennessee, Maci had not been dating her boyfriend, Ryan, for long when she got pregnant at the age of 16. With plans to marry and raise their son together, Maci and Ryan moved into their own apartment, but the couple soon separated and ended the engagement. Although the couple tried to reconcile, and even attended pre-marriage counseling, by the end of the series,

they were no longer together. Soon after discovering she was pregnant, Maci made plans to finish high school early, which she accomplished, and she even continued her part-time job through her pregnancy and after her son's birth. Maci later enrolled in college, where she struggled to complete her classes successfully while raising her son.

Biographical Descriptions of the *Teen Mom 2* Mothers

Next, the teen mothers from the second season of *16 and Pregnant*, who were later featured in *Teen Mom 2*, are briefly described in alphabetical order.

Chelsea. South Dakota native Chelsea had been dating her boyfriend, Adam, “off and on” for over a year and a half. After giving birth during her senior year of high school, Chelsea struggled to catch up with schoolwork but eventually dropped out. Her daughter was over two years old when she earned her GED, and she was finally able to pursue her goal of enrolling in cosmetology school. Chelsea's relationship with Adam was tumultuous, and the couple broke up four times during the first two seasons of *Teen Mom 2*. By the “outcome” episode, which was the latest episode to air by the completion of this study, the couple was no longer together, and Chelsea was contemplating moving to another state to escape the constant reminders of Adam.

Jenelle. Jenelle and her boyfriend, Andrew, had been dating for nearly three years when Jenelle got pregnant at 16 years old. While Jenelle lived in North Carolina, Andrew lived four hours away and had no job and no transportation. Although the couple talked about getting married once Jenelle turned 18,

Andrew's empty promises to move closer and help raise their son drove Jenelle to end the relationship by the conclusion of her episode of *16 and Pregnant*, and Andrew was never heard from again during the selected episodes. After her break-up with Andrew, Jenelle went back and forth between two more men during *Teen Mom 2*, and by the outcome episode, Jenelle was trying to "work things out" with the second of the ex-boyfriends. At this time she was also intermittently attending college courses while her mother had temporary custody of her son.

Kailyn. After dating her boyfriend, Jo, for nine months, Kailyn found out she was pregnant with their child. Living with Jo's family in Pennsylvania, the couple's relationship was strained, and Jo's parents often acted as mediators during Kailyn and Jo's arguments. Kailyn was the only one of the eight mothers to remain employed during the entirety of the selected episodes, and she also balanced college courses at the same time. Kailyn dated two more men after Jo, and at the time of the latest aired episode, she had asked the second boyfriend to move in with her, and they were considering marriage.

Leah. A West Virginia native, Leah got pregnant with twin girls after dating her older boyfriend, Corey, for only one month. At the time she met Corey, Leah had just ended a nearly three-year-long relationship with her high school sweetheart, Robbie. Robbie would later become a source of contention for the couple when Leah went back to high school after giving birth, and she eventually cheated on Corey with Robbie, which ended the relationship between the teen parents.

However, when they discovered one of their daughters had a mysterious medical condition, the couple decided to reunite and even got married. The marriage only lasted six months, and Corey asked for a divorce when he found out that Leah had once again cheated on him with Robbie one week before the couple's wedding. Not long after the divorce, Leah started seeing another man, Jeremy, whom she eventually married. Later, the couple would have a daughter of their own. Although Leah talked about enrolling in nursing school, her busy schedule as a mom of twins was a major obstacle, especially since one of the twins had multiple doctors' appointments. As a result, she never attended any post-secondary education classes during the selected episodes.

Primary Themes

After considering the experiences of the eight teen mothers from the *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* series, several common themes emerged related to the effect of the transition to parenthood on adolescent romantic relationships. Four themes that are central to the research question are identified: off-again on-again relationships between the teen parents, lack of positive interactions, changes in future plans for the teen parents, and differences in experiences with dating as a mother. Each of the four central themes is discussed in detail, and Table 2 provides a visual summary. Additionally, other common, but less central themes are briefly discussed. The references hereafter are included to support the common themes that emerged from the content analysis and are supplementary to the original literature review.

Off-again on-again relationships between the teen parents. Off-again on-again relationships were a common theme during the series. Except for Farrah and Jenelle, each of the other six mothers broke up with the father of their child at least once and subsequently got back together (see Table 2 for specific numbers), which is relatively commonplace for adolescent mothers (Larson et al., 1996). Frequently, the parents would attempt to give the relationship another chance “for [insert child’s name]’s sake.” Edin and Kefalas (2005) found similar results when speaking with low-income Philadelphia mothers: “Even couples who found it nearly impossible to stay together during the pregnancy will often, in the aftermath of the birth, try to mend their relationship for the good of the baby” (p. 74). Although nearly half of Americans in the early 1960s agreed that couples that do not get along should stay together for the sake of the children, thirty years later, the percentage of Americans who agreed had decreased to less than 20% (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Thus, perhaps Americans’ views on family structure are becoming less stringent.

At least one mother, namely Chelsea, acknowledged during *16 and Pregnant* that her one-and-a-half year relationship with her boyfriend, Adam, had always been “off and on” (other mothers did not specify the stability of their relationships). Yet Chelsea remained optimistic about the relationship, saying she was hopeful that “when he sees his baby, something might change.” Before giving birth to her daughter, she illustrated how fickle Adam could be: “Like, I was in the hospital, and the doctor, like, as he was telling me that I was for sure

pregnant, Adam was texting me, like, breaking up with me and saying I should get an abortion and stuff. And then the next day, he, like, completely switched. He was just being really nice and, like, happy. So I was like, OK, maybe it's gonna be good. Maybe this is gonna fix everything." During the selected episodes, the couple broke up a total of four times.

Amber and Gary had the most volatile relationship of all the couples, breaking up seven times during the first two seasons of *Teen Mom*. Though they had planned to marry at a couple of points throughout the selected episodes, Amber and Gary were often breaking up and getting back together. During one episode, while enraged that Gary would not watch their daughter so that Amber could celebrate her birthday with friends, Amber told Gary over the phone, "This is plain and simple. Get your shit and get out of my house. It's over." Moments later, Gary showed up at the house with a cake for Amber, volunteered to babysit, and the couple made amends.

While the status of Chelsea's and Amber's relationships with the fathers of their children wavered over the entirety of the series, Maci and Kailyn had ended their relationships for good by the end of the second season and started dating other men, which ended up becoming long-term relationships. It does not appear that the length of the relationship prior to the pregnancy would be a factor, since Chelsea and Adam only dated for a year and a half before Chelsea got pregnant, while Amber and Gary dated for over three years before they became teen parents, so the motivation for repeatedly trying to make the relationships work as

opposed to breaking up before the child's first birthday may be a factor of individual personality traits, such as the desire to keep the family unit intact.

Lack of positive interactions. Throughout the selected episodes, one common theme was the abundance of negative interactions between the teen parents. The few positive interactions that were portrayed mostly took place during the episodes of *16 and Pregnant*, before the baby arrived. These positive interactions usually featured the fathers caring for the mothers during bouts of physical pain or anxiety related to the pregnancy or delivery.

As an example, the short-lived "magic moment" of relationship bliss after her child's delivery was common among the mothers. Specifically, while they were still in the hospital, Jenelle and Maci both hoped the contentment would last and their boyfriends would keep their promises to "be there." Chelsea also noted that she thought having a baby would change her boyfriend Adam's errant behavior, and when it did not, she was mostly upset that her daughter Aubree would "never have a family." Edin and Kefalas (2005) observe, "Often the euphoria of the birth temporarily calms the tumultuousness of the previous nine months...Men are typically delighted by a new baby and often vow to mend their ways. Because new mothers almost universally believe that a child is better off with both a mother and a father, they often desperately want to believe this promise to change" (p. 61). Unfortunately for the mothers featured in the current study, the promises and support would not last.

Level of partner support may be an important factor in an adolescent couple's successful transition to parenthood. In a study of married mothers, Cowan and Cowan (1995) found that the quality of the relationship was the most significant predictor of women's adaptation to parenthood. Similarly, a longitudinal study of unmarried, young couples found that levels of baseline social engagement and relationship quality three years postpartum were positively associated with the father's involvement (Gee, McNerney, Reiter, & Leaman, 2007). Though most of the fathers remained in their child's life—with the exceptions of Andrew, the father of Jenelle's son, and Derek, the deceased father of Farrah's daughter—the fathers provided varying levels of emotional support to their child's mother. In particular, Kailyn's partner Jo, Maci's partner Ryan, and Chelsea's partner Adam were not emotionally supportive of the mothers' educational careers, blatantly telling them they were too lazy or selfish to finish their degrees. In most cases, such discouragement occurred during times when the couples were not currently dating, yet it did not deter the mothers from striving to achieve their goals. Although they had to drop several classes over the course of their educational careers, Kailyn and Maci were still enrolled in school during the outcome episodes and Chelsea had earned her GED and enrolled in cosmetology school by the fourth season of *Teen Mom 2*.

The strains of being a teen parent were evidenced in the amount of conflict between the parents as displayed during the shows. Specifically, the level of conflict that was depicted in the *Teen Mom* series, after the children were born,

was higher and more destructive (e.g. involved more name-calling and physicality) than conflict levels depicted on *16 and Pregnant*, when the couples were still preparing for the births. Such a conclusion adds support to LeMasters's (1957) finding that the addition of a child into an existing romantic relationship introduces conflict on a severe, even crisis-inducing level. The majority of the conflict seemed to stem from discrepancies in the division of labor. While still living with Jo's parents, Kailyn and Jo argued over who should be doing the laundry: Jo worked all day, but Kailyn pointed out that she went straight from school to her part-time job and thus was too tired to consider housework after such a long day. Maci and Ryan frequently fought when Maci asked him to stay home more and give up going out with his friends in favor of spending time with his son. Similarly, Chelsea got upset when Adam chose other activities over visiting with his daughter. When the couples got into arguments, they rarely discussed the conflict in a civil manner.

Modeled after Sillars's (1980) three categories of conflict resolution strategies, the majority of the couples employed distributive or passive-indirect tactics, whereby a common approach was either name-calling or walking away. For example, Ryan often told Maci to "quit acting stupid" or told her she was "dumb" or "selfish." Adam called Chelsea a "fat, stretch-mark bitch" in one of his text messages to her and asked where he could "sign over the papers for that mistake." Jo told Kailyn he regretted "ever meeting, touching, or kissing" her. For their part, some of the mothers were also verbally abusive (and, in Amber's case,

physically abusive as well. See the appendix). However, the verbal abuse was more likely to emanate from the fathers, except in the case of Amber, who was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Nonetheless, Kailyn called Jo a “bastard” during one argument. Maci passive-aggressively told her son, “Let’s get away from your mean ol’ dad.” Amber often called Gary “fat,” “lazy,” or “a piece of shit.” Thus, the rapport between many of the teen parents was often demeaning and hurtful.

Occasionally, the couples used integrative strategies to work towards a common goal. For instance, when Maci and Ryan were discussing visitation for their son, Bentley, they were able to come to an agreement without having to go to court. Similarly, Jo originally appealed the amount he was ordered to pay for child support, but later dropped the appeal after considering Kailyn’s financial struggles.

Catelynn and Tyler were the only couple to use integrative strategies during the majority of their arguments. The couple was very emotionally supportive of one another, and they often asked about one another’s feelings regarding the adoption of their daughter or the state of their dysfunctional households. Perhaps not surprisingly then, they were also the only couple to remain intact. Catelynn and Tyler were the only couple that chose not to raise their child, which likely removed much of the added stress that may produce negative communication strategies. Additionally, their use of positive, supportive communication tactics may have preceded the onset of their pregnancy and

could have facilitated the discussion that resulted in their mutual decision to choose adoption. That they did not experience the strains of teen parenthood could have allowed them to more easily continue such a positive rapport. Also, they were together for a longer period of time before the onset of the pregnancy when compared to the other couples. Although disentangling such explanations is not possible, *Teen Mom* depicts a positive relationship between Catelynn and Tyler after they choose adoption instead of parenting, whereas the interactions between the other couples were combative, sending the message that raising a child increases the tension placed on an adolescent romantic relationship.

As mentioned previously, the age and maturity level of the adolescents may predispose them to a more impulsive conflict resolution strategy, such as name-calling. One must also consider that the nature of the teen parents' personalities predisposed them to employ a certain strategy, which was established at the onset of the relationship. It is possible that existing communication strategies were exacerbated after the child's birth, rather than the addition of a child triggering a certain strategy. However, since none of the couples that chose to parent their children also demonstrated constructive communication and conflict resolution strategies, it is hard to assess whether the transition to parenthood introduces negative conflict strategies into a relationship or simply intensifies an existing conflict strategy.

Changes in future plans for the teen parents. For the mothers featured in the series, future plans for their relationship with their child's father repeatedly

vacillated. Marriage was mentioned as a future plan for five of the eight (63%) mothers, four of whom were subsequently engaged during the series (namely Amber, Catelynn, Leah, and Maci). Jenelle and her boyfriend talked about getting married after Jenelle turned 18, but their relationship came to an abrupt end by the conclusion of *16 and Pregnant*. Two of the mothers, namely Amber and Maci, were engaged to the father of their child more than once before ending the relationship for good.

Though one study found that 73% of unmarried mothers and 88% of unmarried fathers believed their chances of marriage were “50-50 or better” at the time of their child’s birth (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2002), other researchers point out that fewer than one in six nonmarital births will eventually end in marriage between the parents (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). For the teen mothers in the current study, one of eight (13%) relationships ended in marriage, yet entailed a successive divorce, and one of eight (13%) relationships ended with an engagement and plans for a future marriage that is expected to transpire in the summer of 2013.

At the conclusion of each episode of *16 and Pregnant*, the teen mother reflects on her situation and discusses her feelings about being a young parent. During this “reflection period,” three of the eight mothers (38%) specifically noted that they had to “see what the future holds” in terms of their relationships with the fathers of their children. The uncertainty of these mothers’ romantic relationships in the early months of their child’s birth alludes to the precariousness of the

future. Yet the mothers who were engaged and later ended the relationship with their child's father seemed to be far more optimistic about the future of the relationship when they were still pregnant. Once the baby came, there was more arguing and breaking up than pre-parenthood, which portrays to viewers that the baby may have been the primary factor for the increase in negativity within the relationship. The decision to end the relationship and/or engagement may depend on the length of the relationship prior to the pregnancy, as the only couple to remain intact was also the couple that was dating for the longest period of time before their pregnancy. However, this was also the couple that chose adoption, so the fact that they were not faced with the daily stresses of raising a child and instead had to deal with feelings of guilt, regret, and loss may have strengthened their bond.

Differences in experiences with dating as a mother. Except for Catelynn (who chose adoption, so she may have had a different experience anyway), each of the teen mothers had at least one date with a man who was not the father of her child (see Table 2). For four of these seven (57%) mothers, the relationships with other men would be long-lasting. Specifically, Jenelle started dating her boyfriend, Kieffer, during season one of *Teen Mom 2* and continued to see him through the final outcome episode. Kailyn dated her boyfriend, Jordan, off and on from season one through season three of *Teen Mom 2*, and she would eventually marry the second man she started dating during season four. Leah did not start dating her boyfriend, Jeremy, until season three of *Teen Mom 2*, but she would

eventually marry him and they would have a daughter together. Finally, Maci started dating her boyfriend, Kyle, during the second season of *Teen Mom*, and although they broke up by the end of that season, they later reunited and eventually bought a house together during subsequent episodes.

For Amber, Chelsea, and Farrah, the short dating experiences portrayed on the selected episodes were unsuccessful. Amber and Chelsea were the two mothers who continued to attempt reconciliation with their child's father throughout the entirety of their respective series, so perhaps their failed dating attempts were a result of their unresolved feelings for their parenting partners. After four failed attempts with different men during season one of *Teen Mom*, Farrah concluded, "Wow. I wonder if it's even possible to find a guy who will be cool about me having a kid." She gave up on dating throughout the rest of the second season to focus on school, work, and raising Sophia.

Chelsea was only shown going out on one date, and it did not take long for her to decide that most guys her age did not have the same interests as she did. While out to dinner, her date was only concerned with the score of the current baseball game as Chelsea worried constantly about checking in with the babysitter who was at home with her daughter. She later stated, "This date is a bust, and it makes it clear that being a mom and dating is going to be a lot harder than I thought."

For Amber, her one dating experience during the first two seasons of selected episodes was with a guy who was "trying a little too hard," but she still

thought it was “kind of cute.” He told Amber that the day he met her at Wal-Mart was “the best day of [his] life,” and when Amber asked what he thought about her having a daughter, he replied that he “loves her already.” Apparently, that relationship did not last, because by the outcome episode, she was dating someone new.

Overall, the teen mothers had both positive and negative experiences with dating men who were not the fathers of their children. Farrah’s dating attempts in particular were extremely short-lived, which may be related to the fact that she quickly accelerated any new relationships: she brought one man to meet her parents during their second date, and she discussed marriage and additional children with another man before they had even been seeing each other for a month. Although the relationships between the teen parents did not always work out, the teen mothers believed that having a reliable father figure was important in a child’s life. Yet Kailyn emphasized to a friend that she was not trying to replace Jo as a father: “Even though Isaac has a dad, I really hope Jordan can be in his life too.” Some of the mothers, specifically Chelsea and Leah, particularly wanted to work things out with the father of their daughters so that the children would have a complete family, something these two teen mothers felt they missed out on as children of divorce. In Chelsea’s case, this mentality may have hindered her from meeting other, more reliable men who would treat her with respect. In Leah’s case, her pursuit of a complete family thrust her into a second marriage within a year of her divorce from Corey.

Table 2.

*Summary of Major Themes By Featured Mothers, in Alphabetical Order**

	Number of breakups between teen parents	Interaction style	Plans for future of relationship between teen parents	Number of other dates
Amber	7	Volatile relationship with frequent name-calling and some physical violence.	Engaged to Gary three different times.	2
Catelynn (chose adoption)	1 (got back together)	Mostly positive interactions. Only teen parents to remain a couple by the outcome episode.	After Tyler proposed, they broke up when Catelynn admitted to lying to him, but they later reunited.	0
Chelsea	4	Adam was apologetic when first reuniting with Chelsea, but would soon revert to being deceitful and critical.	Never planned on marrying. Only tried living together for a short time.	1
Farrah	N/A	N/A	N/A	4
Jenelle	1 (did not get back together)	Jenelle had little confidence in Andrew's promises to make improvements in his life or contribute to their future; eventually their feelings for each other "dropped."	Originally planned to marry Andrew, but they split up for good by the conclusion of <i>16 and Pregnant</i> .	2
Kailyn	2	Had many heated arguments as a couple living with Jo's parents but became mostly civil after they separated and Kailyn moved out.	Never planned to marry Jo. Lived together during and after pregnancy but eventually split up.	2
Leah	2 (including the divorce)	Frequently argued over Corey's mistrust of Leah with her ex-boyfriend. Supportive of each other when discussing daughter's medical condition.	Lived with Corey during pregnancy; broke up; got married; got divorced six months later.	2 (counting the ex-boyfriend with whom she cheated)
Maci	3	Poor communication skills. Maci did not share her frustrations and the couple argued about Ryan's disengagement.	Engaged to Ryan three different times.	1
Summary of major theme	Breakups are common (average=2.86); lack of stability portrayed.	Lack of positive interaction styles depicted.	Future plans for the relationships of the teen parents vacillated for most of the couples.	All except one teen mother had at least one dating experience outside the relationship with the teen father (average=1.75).

Note: The father of Farrah's daughter passed away soon after their child's birth, so he is not considered in the themes that involve the teen parents.

*The data take into account the selected episodes from the first two seasons of each series as well as the selected outcome episode.

Secondary Themes

Teen fathers somewhat older than teen mothers. Although the age differences between the couples were not all explicitly stated, the age differences that were given confirmed previous research findings that teenage fathers tend to be older than their female co-parents (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007; Larson, Hussey, Gillmore, & Gilchrist, 1996). Specifically, Leah was two years younger than the father of her children, Corey, and Amber dated her older brother's friend, Gary, insinuating that Gary was somewhat older than the mother of his child. While two of the other girls, namely Kailyn and Maci, were in high school, the fathers of their children were working full-time, so unless the males had dropped out of high school to pursue employment, it may be inferred that these fathers were also older.

Mother's lack of previous sexual experience. For at least four (Amber, Farrah, Kailyn, and Maci) of the eight mothers, the father of their child was the man with whom they lost their virginity. As for the remaining four mothers, Leah had only one previous "serious" boyfriend, and Catelynn and Tyler started dating in seventh grade, but the other two mothers (Chelsea and Jenelle) did not mention their previous sexual or relationship history. The duration of the couples' relationships before pregnancy ranged from one month to four years in length. Parallel to previous research suggesting that the majority of late adolescents experience relationships lasting eleven months or more (Carver et al., 2003), five of the seven mothers who gave information about their relationship history had

been dating their partner for at least one year before they got pregnant: Amber and Gary for two-and-a-half years, Catelynn and Tyler for four years, Chelsea and Adam for one-and-a-half years “off and on,” Jennelle and Andrew for three years, and Maci and Ryan for at least one year (she noted that he “went after” her during her sophomore year, and she got pregnant during her senior year). Kailyn and Jo were dating for nine months before they conceived Isaac, and Leah and Corey were only together for one month before finding out Leah was pregnant with their twins. Farrah did not mention how long she was dating Derek before she found out she was pregnant.

In a previous study of 719 teen mothers who identified as African-American, Caucasian, or Mexican-American, researchers found that nearly one-third of participants had been dating their partner for at least twelve months at the time of their child’s delivery, and relationship length was an important predictor of the father’s emotional, informational, and financial support across all racial groups (Wiemann, Agurcia, Rickert, Berenson, & Volk, 2006). For the sample in this study, relationship length was not such an important predictor of the father’s support: Jenelle and Andrew dated for nearly three years before Jenelle got pregnant, and he was not a part of his child’s life until he re-appeared in season three after the selected episodes when his son was almost three years old. He had not visited or sent a child support check in over two years. On the other hand, Corey and Leah were only dating for a month before Leah got pregnant with

twins, but Corey played a large role in his children's lives throughout the entirety of the series.

Unstable living arrangements. Not only were the teens' relationships volatile, but their living situations were also unpredictable. Not one of the girls stayed in the same place during the entirety of the two seasons of *Teen Mom* or *Teen Mom 2*. Each one of them moved at least twice during the first two seasons of the show, which approximates the first year of their child's life. During the series, six of the eight mothers (75%) lived with the father of their child at one point or another. Only Farrah and Jenelle did not cohabit with their child's father, but Jenelle did sporadically live with her boyfriend, Kieffer. However, by the conclusion of the second season of the series, none of the teen mothers were cohabitating with their child's father, which contrasts with the research of Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004), who found that approximately 75% of unmarried couples that were cohabitating before their child's birth were still living together one year later, and almost 16% of the couples had married. One explanation for the discrepancy in numbers may be that the mothers in the Carlson et al. (2004) study were already cohabitating before the advent of their pregnancy, whereas the mothers featured in the shows decided to move in with their partners after discovering they were pregnant. Additionally, the parents featured in the Carlson et al. (2004) study were not all teenagers; some were over thirty years old.

Other research shows that race may be a factor, as African-Americans are less likely than Hispanics or whites to cohabit with their child's father around the time of the child's birth and are also less likely to marry, even with income and other demographic characteristics held constant (Graefe & Lichter, 2002). Since all of the mothers featured on *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* are white, the racial homogeneity of the teen mothers in the current study does not allow a comparison to Graefe and Lichter's (2002) findings.

Unequal division of roles/labor. Consistent with previous research (Baxter et al., 2008), the teen mothers experienced increased household duties during the transition to parenthood, while their counterparts' duties remained relatively stable. For Amber and Maci in particular, the additional responsibilities associated with mothering coupled with their boyfriends' lack of engagement led to depression and anxiety in Amber's case and resentment in Maci's case. Lack of communication was not to blame, as both mothers made their feelings clear. Chelsea also commented that she did not "get to do those things" when Adam was out with his friends or spending time fixing his car, as she stayed home all day watching their daughter, Aubree. Similarly, Leah talked about wanting to get a job because she was "going stir crazy" being at her house all day with her twin daughters while Corey was working. The teen mothers were expected to care for their children while the fathers worked, or in some cases, chose to go out with friends instead. As noted previously, this was a major source of contention for the couples and may have contributed to their break-ups.

Integration of Themes

Taken together, the themes depicted in the series portray an overall feeling of instability for the teen parents. Their relationship statuses were frequently fluctuating, they were often changing residences, and their interactions were often negative and sometimes hurtful (both emotionally and physically). Several of the themes that emerged from the codes were interrelated. For example, the unequal division of roles/labor was a common instigator for the negative interactions between the teen parents. Specifically, Maci and Ryan got into several arguments because Maci felt like she was the only one caring for their son or completing household duties, such as cleaning the bottles. Amber blamed her depression and anxiety on Gary's lack of consideration to her loneliness: she resented him because she felt "stuck" in the house all day with no human interaction while he worked full-time. The teen mothers were unhappy with their insufficient social lives and the uneven distribution of domestic responsibilities, which resulted in many arguments.

That the mothers did not have much previous experience with serious relationships may explain why the couples frequently broke up and got back together. At least four of the mothers explicitly stated that they were virgins before they started dating the father of the children, which may have compelled them to try harder to make the relationships work, since they felt a special attachment to that particular person. However, the fact that the men were also

the fathers of their children probably also played a large role in the repeated attempts at reconciliation.

The on-again off-again nature of the relationships between the teen parents feeds into another central theme: the changes in future plans for the relationships. Specifically, Amber and Maci were engaged at least three different times to the father of their children. The couples would split up, end the engagement, and subsequently get back together and continue wedding plans. Many of these break-ups also resulted in one of the parents moving out if the couple was living together, which contributed to another secondary theme: unstable living arrangements.

Overall, the overarching theme of the series was the depiction of instability and volatility within the adolescent romantic relationships of the teen parents. Only one couple was still together by the end of four seasons, and that was the couple that chose adoption for their child. While the teen mothers who are portrayed on the shows may not be fully representative of teen mothers in the United States (in terms of region, race, and socioeconomic status), the shows send a clear message that is consistent with the literature: the transition to parenthood introduces extreme hardship to the relationship between the parents.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study has considered the themes depicted in MTV's docu-reality series *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* to determine how the media portrays the transition to parenthood and its effects on adolescent romantic relationships. Since the media is a chief source of information for adolescents, the dissemination of realistic material is essential. Further, the entertainment-education model suggests that television has the ability to influence viewers' attitudes and behaviors, especially regarding health-related decisions. Applying this entertainment-education model to *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, the shows possess the potential to demonstrate the negative effects of teen pregnancy on an adolescent's romantic relationship and perhaps encourage viewers to make responsible sexual health-oriented decisions.

Despite critics' arguments that the television series glamorize teen pregnancy, the results from the current content analysis suggest the opposite: that having a child as a teenager puts a strain on the romantic relationship of the adolescent parents and often results in conflict, multiple break-ups, and unstable living situations. Such a conclusion is in line with previous research, which suggests that the introduction of a child into an existing dyad is likely to create intense levels of stress and conflict between the parents and may lead to the reorganization of roles and responsibilities (LeMasters, 1957). In particular, new

mothers are likely to experience a disproportionate increase in household duties, which is documented in the literature (Baxter et al., 2008) as well as depicted in episodes of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series. The shows' portrayal of the transition to teen parenthood parallels other existing research as well.

For example, several of the teen fathers demonstrated the "magic moment" of bliss following the baby's birth that abruptly ends after leaving the hospital when fathers may escape the responsibilities of parenthood in favor of more pleasurable activities (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Reichman et al., 2001). Further, the instability of the teen parent relationship as evidenced in the shows is also noted in the literature (e.g., Larson et al., 1996). Consistent with previous research findings that adolescent relationships are long-lasting (Carver et al., 2003) and that one-third of adolescent mothers dated their partner for at least one year before their child's delivery (Wiemann et al., 2006), a majority of the mothers featured on the shows had long-term relationships with the father of their child before becoming pregnant (lasting nine months or longer). Additionally, in keeping with previous research (e.g., Fagan et al., 2007; Larson et al., 1996), at least half of the teen fathers featured on the shows were older than their partners.

However, one major contradiction is that only two of the eight teen mothers featured in the shows took advantage of any form of public assistance, which is at odds with other research findings that nearly 65% of teen mothers rely on such support (Larson, 2004). Such incongruity between what is portrayed on

television and what we find in the literature could potentially distort reality for viewers, leading them to mistakenly believe that raising a child is not a costly endeavor. The skewed representation of socioeconomic status portrayed on the shows also hinders the ability of some viewers to connect with the teen mothers they see on television. Yet for the most part, the shows portray an accurate representation of the transition to teen parenthood that is consistent with existing research, which adds to the reputability of the shows as a vehicle for entertainment-education.

That the shows depict a high level of negative conflict without many positive interactions between the teen parents is a testament to the shows' potential as an entertainment-education tool to illustrate the negative effects of parenthood on an adolescent romantic relationship. Because the selected episodes of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series portrayed highly destructive and combative relations between the teen parents, it is unlikely that the shows were camouflaging or sugarcoating the reality of the mothers' situations. Although it is possible that the shows' producers chose to highlight conflict between the teen parents to boost ratings, the viewers still receive the overall message that is being portrayed: having a baby as a teenager places a strain on one's relationship. Additionally, it may be insinuated that the child is the root of the conflict and negativity between the parents, because the couples were more positive and optimistic in the episodes of *16 and Pregnant* that took place before the birth. Since the media can heavily influence young people who do not

have such experiences to draw upon, the message of relationship instability may shape the thoughts and attitudes of viewers who believe raising a child might not be so difficult.

The only relationship to survive the first two seasons of the series, which approximated the first year of the children's lives, was the one couple that chose an open adoption instead of parenting. Such a finding suggests that adolescent females who do find themselves pregnant unintentionally may benefit from exploring options other than parenting the child. Further, young girls who are under the impression that having a baby may improve the relationship with their current boyfriend might re-consider their thoughts after seeing the shows, which depict the parents' relationships as volatile and contentious. Viewers who are exposed to such instability as is portrayed in the shows get a glimpse of what teenage parenthood might inflict on their current relationships. The portrayal of the negative effect on the relationships may encourage viewers to take steps to delay early childbearing.

The purpose of the entertainment-education model is to entertain viewers and educate them about an issue, as well as persuade them to alter their attitudes and behaviors regarding the issue. In the case of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series, creators of the shows intended to curb teen pregnancy rates by depicting the hardships of teen parenthood. Keeping in line with the research question and focusing solely on the adolescent romantic relationships, the creators were partially successful in their goal. On the one hand, the shows

emphasize the instability and insecurity of the teen parents' relationships. Yet on the other hand, the limited generalizability to the larger population presents a challenge to the effectiveness of the entertainment-education model. Since only white mothers are featured, young people from other racial backgrounds may have a hard time relating to the mothers, and thus may not be as influenced by the educational messages. Similarly, the portrayal of all the mothers as suburban teens may hamper the perceived identification for urban teen viewers, who in turn may not be as motivated to change their attitudes about teen parenthood.

Moyer-Gusé (2008) suggests that motivation is the most important process in social learning theory for the entertainment-education model, as it determines whether or not a viewer will adopt the educational messages. Viewers who do not identify with or relate to the characters or actors in an entertainment-education message may not be persuaded to change their thought processes. Even if the target audience for the shows' network is white, middle- to upper-class females, the demographics of the teen mothers should be more diverse if *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series are expected to serve as an entertainment-education model, especially since the population who may benefit from the messages to delay early childbearing the most (low-income, minority teens) are not represented in the shows.

Future Implications

Results from the current study suggest that *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2* may be suitable forms of entertainment-education that function

to change any positive or neutral perceptions and attitudes of teen childbearing by demonstrating the negative effects of the transition to parenthood on adolescent romantic relationships. While the somewhat limited demographic of mothers depicted in the series may hamper certain viewers' perceived relatability and likelihood of making a personal connection to the mothers, the inherent messages are still compelling enough to at least initiate the contemplation of various viewpoints related to sexual health. Future series should focus on expanding the racial and economic characteristics of teen mothers that are portrayed on television.

The shows in the current analysis were created with the intention of curbing teen pregnancy rates. While these television shows may not single-handedly alter the social perception of adolescent parents, they do act as a starting point for opening sexual health communication channels. Morgan J. Freeman, producer of *16 and Pregnant*, notes that he is sure to include the “blind spot” for each featured teen mother—that is, how the adolescent found herself in her current situation, whether she only had unprotected sex once, did not have access to contraception, or did not believe she could get pregnant the first time she had sex (Miller, 2010). Such information can help to dispel popular myths or even inform young girls who do not receive sexual education information elsewhere.

Indeed, Farrar (2006) found that college females who viewed television shows portraying condom use in their sexual scripts reported more favorable

attitudes towards condoms than females who viewed shows including depictions of sexual intercourse with no mention of condoms. Including safe sex messages in the scripts of popular television shows may help shape attitudes and even behaviors of young, impressionable viewers (Stern & Brown, 2008). Rarely are the “three C’s” of sexual health brought up in today’s media: commitment, contraceptives, and consequences (Stern & Brown, 2008). Television (and other media) producers have the opportunity to promote the three C’s and inform viewers of the benefits of safe sex. MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series are an ideal platform for advocating the three C’s of sexual health.

Further, the findings regarding the conflict resolution strategies that the couples employed are worth considering. The couple to most frequently use integrative strategies, which have been shown to result in the most successful outcomes, was also the only couple that chose adoption. Whether they used such constructive communication strategies because they did not have to deal with the tangible stress of raising a child or because they had always used positive conflict resolution strategies as a couple is unclear. However, the point is that since the transition to parenthood is known to induce crisis in a relationship, how a couple chooses to deal with the new conflict is important. Young people can eliminate the increased likelihood of the conflict brought on by parenthood if they practice abstinence, use contraception, or choose adoption or abortion, but for teens who do choose to pursue parenthood, teaching them how to resolve the

impending conflict in a positive way (using integrative strategies) may result in more teen parents staying together to raise their child(ren) cooperatively.

Finally, the popularity of *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series may encourage conversation about seemingly taboo topics, such as contraception and family planning, not only between teens and parents but also with practitioners and policymakers. Entertainment-education techniques are most effective when paired with curricula and social programs that share a similar message. Thus, the collaboration of educators, administrators, parents, and youth development leaders is essential for the integration and spread of sexually responsible attitudes and behaviors. After-school programs, especially those involving service learning, have shown to be effective in reducing teen pregnancy rates, since they engage at-risk youth and provide opportunities for fulfillment and reciprocal affection, the very emotions that some young mothers seek when they intend pregnancies (Kane & Sawhill, 2003). Including low-income teens may be particularly important, as they may not perceive many educational or career opportunities and thus are less inclined to postpone motherhood (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Increasing access and availability to such social programs may be a beneficial complement to using *16 and Pregnant* and the *Teen Mom* series as entertainment-education to demonstrate the undesirable consequences of having a baby at an early age.

APPENDIX

DETAILED BIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF TEEN MOTHERS

Teen Mom Mothers

First, the four mothers from the first season of *16 and Pregnant*, which later became the four mothers featured on *Teen Mom*, are presented in alphabetical order.

Amber. When Amber became pregnant with her daughter Leah, she was a sophomore in high school. Amber lost her virginity to the father of her child, Gary, whom she had been dating for over two and a half years. Their families were not very supportive of their relationship since Gary is a friend of Amber's older brother. Early on, the couple had plans to get married once their daughter was born, and Gary even proposed to Amber on *16 and Pregnant*. Living in a small town in Indiana, money was tight for the couple, but Gary had a full-time job as a certified nursing assistant, and Amber was employed part-time during her pregnancy. They were able to scrape up enough money to afford an apartment together, but their parents did not offer much financial or emotional support. However, Gary's mother did offer to care for Leah while Gary was at work and Amber attended GED classes, since she dropped out of high school after Leah was born.

Arguments between the couple were mostly over money or Gary's perceived laziness. Amber noted that, "Even with Gary picking up extra shifts, money was still tight, as we had all sorts of new expenses. Formula, diapers,

clothes, and toys. Add to that constant cleaning and lack of sleep. I found myself on the verge of losing it.” At one point during the first episode of season one of *Teen Mom*, Amber even sought prescription medication for anxiety and depression. Although Gary was helpful at first, making bottles and changing diapers, Amber blamed Gary for her anxiety, since he worked all day while she had to take care of their child, leaving no time for herself. She told him that he was “97% the reason why [she’s] stressed.”

Amber’s conflict resolution strategies were distributive, as she frequently called Gary names such as “jackass” and even resorted to physical violence twice during the first two seasons of *Teen Mom*. During one argument, she shoved Gary up against a wall by his shirt collar, slapped his face, and demanded he apologize to her father. During another argument, she actually punched him in the face and arm and shoved him out of the doorway. Gary utilized more passive-indirect strategies, as he would frequently leave the room during arguments with Amber. His constant departure is a sore subject for Amber, who frequently fears that Gary will “just leave again.”

The relationship between Amber and Gary was the most volatile of all the couples. During the first two seasons of *Teen Mom*, Amber and Gary broke up and got back together during almost every selected episode, sometimes more than once per episode. Amber would break up with Gary, and Gary would show up with a gift and try to persuade her to work things out. The couple usually agreed that they needed to work things out “for Leah’s sake.” Yet by the end of

the second season, Amber had moved into her own apartment with the help of government assistance and told Gary she only wanted to be friends.

On episode one of season two, Amber and Gary had a pregnancy scare. Amber admitted that she was not on birth control when she had unprotected sex with Gary, and after she started feeling sick she compared the feeling to the beginning of her first pregnancy. But to their great relief, a trip to the doctor confirmed that Amber was not pregnant. Subsequently, she vowed to go on birth control.

During episode eleven of season two, Amber went on a date with a man she met at Wal-Mart. During their first dinner together, he tells Amber that meeting her was “the best day of [his] life.” When she asks how he feels about her having a child, he responds, “I love her already,” even though he has never met her. Amber admits that he might be “trying a little too hard, but it’s kind of cute.”

By the series finale, Amber and Gary were no longer a couple, and Amber was dating someone new. Gary was upset to hear the news of Amber’s new relationship, as he still “wanted to be with her.” He told a friend that “no matter what,” he’s “gonna have feelings for [Amber] for the rest of [his] life.”

During this final episode, Amber signed over custody of Leah to Gary so that the court would drop a no-contact order that was put in place after Amber was charged with felony domestic battery for hitting Gary. Although Amber was skeptical, and her family was upset that she was “giving her daughter away,”

Gary promised that Amber could see Leah at any time and promised her overnight visitation as well. By this time, Amber was living in a place on her own, with no mention of employment or attending school.

Catelynn. The only couple to choose adoption for their child, Catelynn and her boyfriend Tyler were juniors when Catelynn got pregnant. Together since seventh grade, the couple decided their lives in Michigan were not stable enough to raise a child. Tyler's dad, who married Catelynn's mom after Tyler and Catelynn started dating, was in and out of jail, and Catelynn was frequently moving for reasons not stated (she did note, however, that by the time she enrolled in high school, she had lived in thirteen different houses). One of the main reasons the couple gave for choosing adoption is that they could not afford to raise a child, and they also wanted to finish high school and college before they started a family of their own. At the time of the show, Catelynn was living with her mother and Tyler was living with his mother. The couple lived together with Tyler's mother for a short period, but Tyler felt the relationship would be more pleasant if they had "some time to miss each other." Eventually, Tyler proposed to Catelynn at the end of the first season.

Tyler was very emotionally supportive of Catelynn, even when their families were not. While struggling with the decision of whether or not to choose adoption, Catelynn's mother and Tyler's father made it very clear that the couple would be "giving away" their own flesh and blood, a choice that was incomprehensible to the couple's parents. The couple held each other during the

emotional time when they had to say goodbye to their daughter, and Tyler supported Catelynn's decision to participate in a weekend retreat for adoptive mothers. He was excited to hear about what she learned, and Catelynn helped him find an adoptive father with whom to connect and share his story. The couple even sought counseling when they were feeling guilty about enjoying themselves after having given up their daughter to another couple. Tyler was often the first person Catelynn called when she got into an argument with her mother, and he would help calm her down.

Tyler and Catelynn used integrative conflict strategies when they argued, often asking one another how the other was feeling and rarely raising their voices. They did not call each other names during any of the selected episodes of the first two seasons. There was one incident during which Tyler lost his trust in Catelynn: he found out that she had been talking to her ex-boyfriend at a time when Catelynn and Tyler were not together. She lied about having contact with her ex, which caused Tyler to question his own relationship with her. He told her that "trust [was] at a bare minimum" at that point, "lower than it's ever been," but they eventually worked it out and decided to remain engaged.

There was no mention of employment for either Catelynn or Tyler during the selected episodes of the first two seasons, but it seemed the couple was focused on graduating from high school. At the end of the second season, Catelynn learned she would not graduate on time, but she was determined to stay in school and earn her degree.

By the conclusion of the series, the couple remained engaged, and Tyler and Catelynn had moved into a place of their own. During this final episode, Tyler was struggling with deep-rooted emotions related to his father's abandonment. Tyler realized that he had to sever all ties with his father if he was going to be happy in his own life, and he admitted to a counselor and later to Catelynn that his relationship with his dad was a major part of his decision to give his daughter up for adoption: "I was literally petrified of being the shitty dad that my dad was. I just knew – I just was like, I'm not screwing her life up. It's not fair." Although the couple discussed their occasional regrets about not choosing to parent their daughter, they realized she had a much better life with her adoptive parents, and their choice allowed them to achieve much more: by the series finale, they had graduated high school, found employment, and enrolled in college.

Farrah. Because Farrah's parents did not approve of her relationship with her child's father, there was not much talk about him. Farrah was a popular cheerleader at her high school in Iowa when she found out she was pregnant. As a senior in high school, Farrah broke up with her boyfriend during her pregnancy as he was "jealous and immature," and she did not tell him she was expecting their child. She planned to raise her daughter, Sophia, as a single mom, which became a reality when she revealed during the second season that Sophia's father passed away in a car accident not long after she was born.

Even though she did not have her child's father to depend on financially, Farrah's parents seemed to pay for all the baby's expenses while Farrah lived

under their roof. Farrah's mother even did the laundry and offered to help care for Sophia when Farrah returned to school. Yet Farrah repeatedly stated that she wanted to be independent, which she was for a while when she got her own apartment with the help of a part-time job. However, she fell victim to an online scam while trying to sell her car for a more reliable one, and she had no choice but to move into the guesthouse across the street from her parents' house during season two so that she could save up money.

During *16 and Pregnant* and the first season of *Teen Mom*, Farrah attempted dating four different guys. One of them never showed up for a date, one was seeing another girl at the same time as he was seeing Farrah, the third said Farrah was "too mature" for him, and the fourth questioned her role as a mother, since she was relying on her own mother to watch Sophia while she was out. Farrah seems to give up after the latest dating attempt, saying, "Wow. I wonder if it's even possible to find a guy who will be cool about me having a kid." She does not go out on any more dates in the selected episodes for the remainder of the first two seasons.

By the conclusion of the series, Farrah was living, working, and studying for a bachelor's degree in culinary management in Florida, far away from her parents in Iowa. She had sent Sophia to live with Farrah's parents for a month so that she could focus on school for the quarter, which paid off: Farrah earned all A's that quarter. Farrah made no mention of a romantic interest during the final episode, but she did get emotional when talking with her newly engaged sister

about the time Sophia's father proposed to her and she declined. She told her sister she "blew her chance" at marriage and would probably never be proposed to again. But if someone did propose, she would jump at the chance, because according to Farrah, "It's better to have a ring and work through things" than to regret what could have been.

Maci. Maci had not been dating her boyfriend Ryan for too long before she found out she was pregnant at the age of 16. Both their parents were supportive when they decided to get engaged and move into their own apartment in the couple's Tennessee hometown. Ryan's mother even offered to pay for pre-marital counseling and a honeymoon for the couple. While Maci worked a part-time job and strove to finish high school early, Ryan was employed during the night shift as a diesel mechanic. Their relationship seemed questionable from the start, as Maci worried about Ryan's flagging interest in fatherhood: "I know Ryan is dreading this baby, but would it kill him to pretend to be supportive?" Once their son Bentley arrived, Ryan added support to the "magic moment" theory when Maci noted in the hospital bed that "Things haven't been this good since before I was pregnant. I just hope it lasts." Unfortunately for Maci, the magic moment was over soon after they arrived home.

After Bentley was born, Maci tried to juggle school, work, and a spot on the dance team. Although she could rely on "free daycare" from her and Ryan's parents, she soon had to quit the dance team because she was also balancing all the household and baby-related duties. Even though Ryan had switched to the

day shift and was home from work by late afternoon, he was often seen giving up time with his son to spend nights with his friends instead. This led Maci to resent him, and she broke off the engagement and moved back home with her parents at the end of *16 and Pregnant*. However, the couple got back together during the first episode of *Teen Mom*, and the wedding was on again as they tried “to work things out for Bentley’s sake.” During episode three of season one, the engagement was called off, only to be re-instated by episode five. Finally, the couple called off the engagement for the last time during the first episode of season two, and both Maci and Ryan started seeing other people.

The couple’s fights often centered around Ryan’s unwillingness to participate in raising Bentley. Not only did he avoid spending time with his son, but he also complained to no end when asked to feed, change, or watch after him. Ryan resorted to distributive strategies, often calling Maci “dumb,” “stupid as hell,” or “selfish,” and frequently telling her to “shut up.” Maci mostly used passive-indirect strategies, either walking away from Ryan or telling her infant son, “Let’s get away from your mean ol’ dad.”

Overall, Ryan rarely showed much emotional support to Maci. He was often sarcastic and rude, and dragged his feet whenever Maci wanted to participate in family activities, such as taking pictures for a family portrait. She seemed to predict the future when she remarked, “If Ryan can’t even look happy in a photograph, we’re really in trouble.” When Maci had to drop her classes during her first semester of college, Ryan called her “lazy” and told her she made

“too many excuses” so she would probably never finish college. Maci’s response was that she “wouldn’t need to drop [her] classes if [she] got more support from Ryan.” The couple did try pre-marriage counseling when they were engaged, but the communication strategies they learned in the one session they attended did not seem to last, as they were no longer together two episodes later. Bentley was the only force tethering them, as they both agreed if they “didn’t have a kid, [they] wouldn’t be together.”

During the third episode of season two, Maci started dating a new mate, Kyle, who was actually a friend from grade school. He lived two hours away, but after a few special trips to visit him and introduce Bentley to Kyle, she decided to move to Kyle’s city to be closer to him. Maci warned Kyle that he had to “realize what [he’s] getting into,” but the couple decided to end their relationship after two months when Kyle felt stifled, telling Maci she went from being two hours away to being “in my pocket.” The final selected episode of season two ended with Maci saying to Kyle, “If we break up, then we can’t go back and forth. If it’s done, it’s done. Because I have a child that needs to have stability.”

By the series finale, Maci and Kyle had reconciled and were living in a house they had purchased together, while Ryan had a girlfriend of his own. Ryan visited his lawyer to inquire about the process of obtaining fifty-fifty custody of Bentley, and his lawyer told him, “I frankly have a concern with her living with somebody she’s not married to with this young child. We need to put an end to that, not only for your sake but for Bentley’s sake.” However, when Ryan asked

Maci for Bentley's birth certificate, which he would need to file a petition, Maci began to suspect his intentions to gain more time with Bentley and force Maci and Kyle to live apart, and she told Kyle that was "not gonna happen." After discussing her apprehensions about giving Ryan the birth certificate, Maci's mother shared words of wisdom:

"Since Bentley was born, you've been trying to change [Ryan's] reaction, change how you think he needs to respond, how he needs to behave. I'm not saying he hasn't changed, but what you've done has not changed him... You're gonna be around this dude for the next 15 years minimum, and you know it's not just the next 15 years. It's when he graduates from college, whatever; it's literally for the rest of your life... Let Bentley make his own decisions about what he thinks about how he was raised."

Maci begrudgingly agreed and retrieved the birth certificate.

During the final episode, Maci was still attending school, where she was earning good grades and was hopeful of completing her degree soon. She did not mention employment, but Bentley was enrolled in daycare. She noted that she could focus on her studies much more clearly when she just "let go" of Bentley, knowing he was in good hands with his daycare providers.

Teen Mom 2 Mothers

Next, the four mothers from the second season of *16 and Pregnant*, which later became the four mothers featured on *Teen Mom 2*, are presented in alphabetical order.

Chelsea. When Chelsea, a South Dakota native, got pregnant during her junior year of high school, she had been dating her boyfriend Adam "off and on" for a year and a half. Chelsea's family, especially her dad, was not supportive of her

relationship with Adam, as he was constantly disappointing and disrespecting her. Yet Chelsea remained optimistic about the relationship, saying she was hopeful that “when he sees his baby, something might change.” During *16 and Pregnant*, Chelsea illustrated how indecisive Adam could be: “Like, I was in the hospital, and the doctor, like, as he was telling me that I was for sure pregnant, Adam was texting me, like, breaking up with me and saying I should get an abortion and stuff. And then the next day, he, like, completely switched. He was just being really nice and, like, happy. So I was like, OK, maybe it’s gonna be good. Maybe this is gonna fix everything.”

But soon after Chelsea gave birth, Adam was right back to his unreliable ways. Their daughter, Aubree, was born five weeks premature. Though Chelsea was constantly at the hospital and was looking forward to bringing Aubree home, Adam did not show up for Aubree’s ride home from the hospital, and he asked if Chelsea’s mom could babysit so they could go out during Aubree’s first night home. Adam frequently ignored Chelsea’s phone calls and text messages and chose to spend time with his friends instead of his family, demonstrating his lack of emotional support.

The couple mostly fought about Adam’s absence and lack of contribution as a father. When Adam and Chelsea started to argue, Adam would often walk away or hang up on Chelsea if they were arguing over the phone. Thus, their arguments never seemed to be fully settled. Although they mainly used passive-indirect conflict resolution strategies, Adam frequently resorted to distributive

strategies such as name-calling. He even sent Chelsea an emotionally abusive text message, calling her a “fat, stretch mark bitch” and asking where he could “sign over the papers for that mistake.”

Although Adam’s comments devastated Chelsea, she proceeded to take him back every time he apologized. As a child of divorce, Chelsea’s desperation for a complete family unit was obvious: “I just want a mom *and* a dad for [Aubree]. I just want it to work so bad.” During the selected episodes of the first two seasons of *Teen Mom 2*, the couple broke up and got back together a total of four times. Chelsea only went on one date during the first two seasons, which was clearly a bad experience: “This date is a bust, and it makes it clear that being a mom and dating is going to be a lot harder than I thought.”

Though her love life was problematic and her relationship with Adam was erratic, Chelsea’s family life was consistent. She was not employed during the majority of the first two seasons, so she relied on her parents as well as Adam’s child support for income and resources. When she could not finish high school on time to graduate, Chelsea’s dad offered to pay for all of her living expenses as well as provide her with an allowance under two conditions: she studied to get her GED and she did not allow Adam to move in with her. Her father’s rules were easy to follow when she and Adam were not together, but as soon as the couple tried to “work things out,” Chelsea found herself inviting him to move in during episode five of season one, much to the dismay of Chelsea’s roommate. However, the living arrangement did not last long, as Adam had broken up with

Chelsea and moved out by episode nine, and he was living with a new girlfriend by episode eleven. Yet their relationship saga continued, and Adam and Chelsea got back together during the third episode of season two, only to break up again by the ninth episode.

The fourth season of *Teen Mom 2* is currently airing and is not expected to conclude until after the completion of this study. Thus, the episode selected for the “outcome” measure is the latest aired episode. In this episode, Chelsea completed her GED and was enrolled in cosmetology school to become a hair stylist. She and Adam had recently slept together while she was not on birth control, and she found herself worried about a second impending pregnancy. However, to her great relief, she later determined that she was not pregnant. Less than a month after moving into her current residence, Chelsea’s landlord informed her that the house was going to be put up for sale and that Chelsea needed to relocate within a matter of weeks. Frustrated and annoyed that she and Aubree were shuffled around so frequently, she told her dad she wanted to move out of South Dakota to get away from the familiar faces who often updated her about Adam’s antics. He later convinced her that she should stay for at least a year so she could finish school and then focus on settling down somewhere new.

Jenelle. As a 16-year-old high school student, Jenelle found herself pregnant by her boyfriend of nearly three years, Andrew. Though he had previously worked as a model, during Jenelle’s pregnancy, Andrew was unemployed, lacked his

own transportation, and lived with his parents four hours away from Jenelle's home in North Carolina. Jenelle's father was not involved in her life, but Jenelle's mother was dissatisfied with Andrew's behavior and did not believe he would be a suitable father figure for his son, Jace. At one point, Jenelle's mother referred to Andrew as "just the sperm donor, really" and told Jenelle she should "start puttin' him behind [her]."

During *16 and Pregnant*, the couple had plans to get married when Jenelle finished high school and turned 18. Andrew told her they would "never split up," and when he surprisingly showed up to the hospital for their son's delivery, Jenelle noted, "It's nice to see Andrew actually care about our baby. I hope it lasts." However, by the conclusion of *16 and Pregnant*, the couple had split for good. Andrew's empty promises to buy a car, find a job, and move closer to Jenelle and their son were the main sources of their arguments. The couple mainly demonstrated distributive conflict resolution strategies, including name-calling; Andrew told Jenelle she was a "piece of crap" and a "child" who would "never grow up."

Not surprisingly then, Andrew's emotional support for Jenelle was basically limited to the few days surrounding their son's birth. Andrew neither called nor showed up for Jenelle's baby shower, which greatly upset her. After Andrew returned home following the birth of their son, he waited three weeks to call her and see how she and the baby were doing; he also informed her during this phone call that he had been arrested for a DUI, which did not faze Jenelle,

since she knew he had a drinking problem. The end of the relationship did not bother Andrew, who was “only in it for the baby” and said his feelings for Jenelle had “dropped.”

By episode five of the first season, Jenelle had started dating an unemployed vagrant named Kieffer, whom she met at a party. Although Jenelle’s mother, Barbara, warned Jenelle that Kieffer was “nothing but trouble,” Jenelle continued to see him against Barbara’s wishes and eventually was arrested with Kieffer for trespassing and possession of marijuana. The couple broke up three times during the two seasons: once when Kieffer was physically violent with Jenelle, shoving her into a car and then pushing her to the ground; a second time when Kieffer found out Jenelle had been communicating with other men while Kieffer was in jail for domestic violence; and finally, the couple decided it was best to end the relationship when Jenelle was sentenced to one year of probation during which she was not allowed contact with any convicted criminals, including Kieffer.

Jenelle heavily relied on her mother to help take care of Jace. Yet Barbara was employed full-time, so Jace started daycare when he was three weeks old while Jenelle finished high school. After she graduated high school, enrolled in a community college, and began working as a waitress to help her mother with expenses, Jenelle realized that Barbara was probably more fit to raise Jace, so she signed over temporary custody to her during episode three of season one. Barbara retained temporary custody throughout the first two seasons.

Jenelle's living situation was probably the most unpredictable of all the teen mothers. Barbara kicked Jenelle out four times during the first two seasons, so Jenelle would bounce from one friend's house to another, usually with Kieffer in tow. The couple would "wear out [their] welcome" at one friend's house, so they would ask another friend for a place to stay for a few weeks at a time. At one point, Jenelle and Kieffer planned to use Jenelle's leftover student loan money to move an hour away where they assumed jobs would be easier to find. However, when Kieffer still could not find a job and the remainder of Jenelle's student loan money was sparse after paying for tuition and books, the couple's hopes of living in their own place were dashed. Fortunately for Jenelle, Barbara would always allow her daughter to move back home.

The second season ended with Jenelle admitting herself to a rehabilitation facility for her addiction to marijuana. Her lawyer was able to obtain a scholarship for Jenelle that would cover the costs of the treatment, which took place in California. Jenelle was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder in rehab.

By the latest aired episode, Jenelle, who just completed her probation, had reunited with Kieffer after he was released from prison. Jenelle recently had plastic surgery and was expecting him to help her recover, but Kieffer "whined and complained" when Jenelle asked for assistance. Jenelle's ex-boyfriend sent flowers as a get-well gift, and when Kieffer found out whom the flowers were from, he "flipped out" and Jenelle asked him to go back to his home state of New Jersey. At the conclusion of the "outcome" episode, Jenelle was seen

reconnecting with the ex-boyfriend. She did not mention whether or not she was still enrolled in school or had a job. Her mother still had temporary custody of Jenelle's son, Jace, but Jenelle was living in a house with roommates trying to regain custody.

Kailyn. After dating her boyfriend Jo for nine months, Kailyn was a senior in high school when she found out she was pregnant. Since her father was not involved in her life, and her mother was struggling to find employment and a place to live, Kailyn moved in with Jo and his parents at their home in Pennsylvania during her pregnancy, where she remained for the majority of the first season of *Teen Mom 2*. Kailyn worked hard to graduate high school early, and she started classes at a community college by the first episode of the first season. Both Kailyn and Jo were employed throughout the first two seasons, but Kailyn still relied on either her mother's friend or Jo's brother to watch her son, Isaac, while she attended school and went to work.

The couple's arguments, according to friends, occurred because they spent too much time together, being that they lived together. However, during her pregnancy, Kailyn started one fight when she was upset that Jo "doesn't want to go out and do anything ever" with her, yet he planned to go pick up his friend from work one night instead of spending time with her. Jo's parents often played the mediators during the couple's conflicts, which originated when Jo forgot to put Isaac's milk back in refrigerator or Kailyn failed to do their laundry after returning home from a long day of school and work. Their conflict resolution

strategies tended to be distributive, as they would often engage in screaming matches, telling each other to “shut the f*** up.” Yet their arguments were never truly resolved, because they did not communicate well. At one point, Kailyn asked, “How are Jo and I going to raise a baby if we can’t even talk?”

By the conclusion of her episode of *16 and Pregnant*, Kailyn and Jo were no longer a couple, which made living with him and his family an awkward situation when she wanted to start dating other people and was “worried that [she’d] get kicked out”: “I don’t want to have to choose between dating and having a home for me and Isaac.” After Jo and his parents found out she was seeing a co-worker, Jordan, they explained to her that she should not be dating while living under their roof. Thus, Kailyn and Jo gave their relationship another try “for Isaac’s sake.” However, not long after, Kailyn realizes they just “want different things” and “need space to figure it out.” She starts secretly seeing Jordan again, and is finally kicked out of Jo’s house when she admits to him that she is dating again. Kailyn goes to live with her mother, who is staying with a boyfriend, but she eventually finds an agency that provides rent-free housing to teen mothers, and she is able to move in during episode three of the second season.

Jo was not very emotionally supportive of Kailyn. Although he was helpful with Isaac, waking up to take care of him when it was his “turn,” his disregard for Kailyn’s feelings was evident when he told her she’s “not stable financially or anything else for that matter” after she decided she wanted to find a place to live

on her own. Jo did not believe that she could make it through school either, and he called her a “bad mom,” a “whore,” and told her she “picks [her] boyfriend over her son” when Kailyn admitted to him she was seeing Jordan again. When Kailyn told Jo she found a second job to help support her and Isaac, Jo replied with a hateful text message, in which he said he “regrets ever meeting, kissing, or having a baby” with Kailyn.

Kailyn’s relationship with Jordan involved much less conflict. Kailyn was surprised when Jordan even asked to spend more time with her son and take him trick-or-treating. When Kailyn’s friend asked if she ever sees Jordan becoming more of a father figure, Kailyn’s response was, “Yes and no. ‘Cause I mean, Isaac already has a dad.” The friend agrees, adding insight: “He doesn’t resent Isaac either. Like, some dads, you see them not liking the kid because they’re from somebody else.” Kailyn acknowledges that such acceptance is “really important.” Later, Kailyn asked Jordan if he “feels pushed into” being a father figure, to which Jordan declined. The couple even saw a future together: when they were opening Christmas gifts, Kailyn was “pretty sure [they’d] be together” the following Christmas, and Jordan agreed that, “It’s a good possibility.”

However, Jordan became uneasy when Jo asked for weekday visitation with Isaac at Kailyn’s house. Kailyn tried to reassure Jordan that she did not want to be with Jo, but Jordan did not trust her: “You’ve had chemistry in the past. What makes things different now?” After one uneventful visitation alone with Jo,

Kailyn started to wonder if her feelings for him may have returned. In discussing her confusion with her friend, he told her, “There’s always gonna be a connection with you guys, ‘cause that’s the father of your baby.” Jordan’s apprehension was justified during the final selected episode of the second season when Kailyn admitted to him that things between her and Jo “went too far” during one of his visitations.

During the latest aired episode, Kailyn had moved into her own rental house. She was still on track to graduate, but was only taking a couple of classes each semester so that she could focus on working and raising Isaac. She was seeing a new boyfriend, Javi, whom she asked to move in with her during the outcome episode. According to online sources, Kailyn and Javi later married in a small, private ceremony and are planning a bigger family for the fall of 2013 (Stiehl, 2013). Jo was happily involved with his own girlfriend and had moved out of his parents’ house to a nearby state where he could still have weekend visits with Isaac.

Leah. Leah was dating her new boyfriend, Corey, for only one month when she found out she was pregnant with fraternal twin girls. After breaking up with her previous boyfriend of almost three years, 17-year-old Leah met 19-year-old Corey when he drove her home from a party and “one thing led to another.” Although her parents were disappointed at first, they grew to accept and support the couple’s relationship, and Leah’s mom even provided free daycare once Leah had to return to finish her senior year of high school.

Natives of West Virginia, the couple lived apart at first but found a “fixer-upper” of their own during their episode of *16 and Pregnant*. Though Corey worked two jobs, the couple had a hard time making ends meet; one scene demonstrated Leah’s disappointment at a home improvement store when she realized they could not afford paint for their new home. Leah did not have a job during the first season of *Teen Mom 2*, so she was responsible for the household duties as well as raising the couple’s twin daughters. During one telling scene, when Leah left Corey to babysit while she went out for a few hours with a friend, Corey was constantly calling her, asking where to find baby supplies in their house and requesting that she “hurry up” because he did not know how to entertain his own children.

Although they had financial struggles, the core of their arguments stemmed from Leah’s return to high school. Corey knew she would be back in the presence of her ex-boyfriend, Robbie, who was a major source of contention for the couple. The couple demonstrated a combination of distributive and passive-indirect conflict resolution strategies: when they argued, they would yell at each other for a moment, and then Leah would tell Corey to “just stop talking.” Thus, their issues were never fully resolved. During one argument, Leah told Corey she could not stand him. When Corey asked, “Why are you with me then?”, Leah replied, “Because I have two kids with you.” Leah’s own family experience clearly affected her decision to remain with Corey: “I didn’t have my dad at all [growing up], and I don’t want my kids to go without that and not see us

together.” Later, Leah stated, “I don’t want my kids to grow up without their dad, so even though we’re still getting to know each other, me and Corey need to stay together.”

However, the couple broke up at the end of *16 and Pregnant*. Though never directly stated, it was implied that Leah cheated on Corey with her ex-boyfriend. She “blame[d herself] for ruining their family.” Yet by the third episode of season one, a medical issue with one of their twins brought them back together, and even though Leah worried they were rushing things again, they were married by the end of season one. Sadly, the marriage did not last through the second season of *Teen Mom 2* as Corey asked for a divorce when he heard from friends that Leah had cheated on him one week before the couple’s wedding with the same ex-boyfriend. Once again, Leah felt that the couple was moving too fast: “I feel like he’s making irrational decisions. Like, I feel like all of this is just way too fast. We could’ve thought about things, we could’ve went to counseling, we could’ve seen if we could work it out.” Though at her lawyer’s office, when she finds out Corey has not yet filed for divorce, Leah is the first to pull the trigger: “I wish I didn’t have to do this, but since Corey doesn’t want to work things out, I need to make sure I keep my girls.”

Before their marriage ended, the couple demonstrated a unique form of emotional support for one another, because one of their daughters underwent several medical tests to investigate developmental issues. Though Corey did not like to discuss the possibility that their daughter may never walk or function like

her twin sister, he attended almost every doctor's appointment and helped comfort Leah when she cried about having to anesthetize their daughter for two MRI scans. At one point, prior to the divorce, Leah commented to Corey's parents, "Like we lean [on each other]; we talk to each other about it. Ya know, we might get upset but, it's like, we're there for each other through it all. 'Cause if it wasn't for us loving each other and loving our family, we probably—I wouldn't see how we could've made it through." Regrettably, resurfacing trust issues would later end their marriage.

By the latest aired episode, Leah had become engaged to a different man, Jeremy, got pregnant with Jeremy's child and then later miscarried, broke up with Jeremy to pursue a relationship with Corey, decided that Corey was "not fighting for his family," and then asked Jeremy to take her back. During the outcome episode, Leah asked Jeremy for her ring so they could continue the engagement. The couple discussed buying a house together so they could expand their family. An online source confirmed that Leah and Jeremy married in April of 2012 and welcomed their first baby girl, Addalyn, in February of 2013 (Stiehl, 2013). During the latest aired episode, Leah did not mention any plans to enroll in school or seek employment. Corey bought a house of his own but did not reference any new relationships.

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