

Understanding School Dropout for Urban, Ethnic Minority Teenage Mothers with Learning Disabilities (LD)

“If you’re not strong in will and strong in whatever you believe in, yeah — you bound to drop out. Cause I was on the verge of dropping out too, but I had people behind me pushing me. If you don’t have nobody behind you, not even one person, um — you’re really not gonna make it.”

(A teenage mother with LD who did not drop out of school)

Youth who experience either LD or teenage motherhood often drop out of school. Further, about 50% of young girls with LD become mothers by their early 20s compared to 28% of young women in the general population. There is therefore a high likelihood that teenage mothers with LD will drop out of school. Dropping out of school is of concern because it typically results in a host of negative consequences, including an increased likelihood of living in poverty. Moreover, children of teenage mothers are likely to experience poor educational and health outcomes. It is therefore critical to understand why many teenage mothers with LD drop out of school in order to design effective methods of preventing them from dropping out.

The Young Moms Study explored the factors and processes related to high school dropout from the perspectives of a group of 10 teenage mothers with LD who dropped out of school, a group of 10 teenage mothers with LD who had never dropped out, and 24 of their educational and social service providers.

What led teenage mothers with LD to drop out of school?

In contrast to teenage mothers with LD who persisted in school, teenage mothers with LD who dropped out reported that they:

- **lacked support at home**, including:
 - a lack of child care assistance (e.g., no family members, boyfriends or other friends were willing or able to provide child care or help them find professional care for their children),
 - a lack of encouragement related to school, and in some cases
 - maternal interference with their school enrollment, including refusals to sign school enrollment forms.
- **lacked support at school**, including:
 - a lack of teacher support (e.g., a lack of caring relationships and a lack of needed academic support to accommodate their LD),
 - significant challenges with peers (e.g., threats of violence and ridicule), and
 - challenging enrollment and attendance policies (e.g., limits on absences, lack of ability to sign themselves in to and out of school to attend their own or their child’s appointments).

In turn, the lack of support the teenage mothers with LD who dropped out experienced at home and at school eroded and resulted in a **lack of motivation** for school.

**Quotes from
Teenage mothers
with LD who
dropped out of
school**

I never really dropped out after I had him. My mother ... pulled me out of public school in like my sophomore year.

I had stopped going to that school because of this one girl that wanted to fight me, which I couldn't do anything about it because I was 3 months pregnant, and I don't wanna lose my baby over fighting over who knows what ...

I had tried to go back and they said that since I missed so many days they just kicked me out, so I just left.

I didn't like [school] cause some teachers they didn't help you. I used to ask for help and they used to say, no ... that we can't cause we explained to you already ...

I feel bad cause I want to be a nurse ... I thought I would finish school, I thought I would graduate. I didn't get my diploma ... I thought I would graduate, get a diploma ... I thought I was going to go right back. But, it didn't work like that.

What happened to teenage mothers with LD who dropped out of school?

Teenage mothers with LD who dropped out of school:

- regretted their drop out status,
- received negative messages from others about their dropout status, and after varying lengths of time,
- were motivated to return to school to complete their secondary education so that they could be providers and role models for their children.

Unfortunately, the teenage mothers with LD who dropped out reported that they experienced enormous difficulties reenrolling in and sustaining their reenrollment in school. Only when they were able to address the factors that led them to drop out of school in the first place did they succeed.

Recommendations based on the research findings

1. Improve dropout prevention efforts.

- Improve students' school attendance.
 - Enforce mandatory school attendance laws.
 - Build school-family partnerships.
- Improve schools' effectiveness in accommodating students' needs.
 - Comply with Title IX.
 - Comply with IDEA.
 - Increase connectedness with students and their parents.

2. Improve return-to-school efforts for those youth who do drop out.

- Inform students of their legal rights related to due process of appeal.
- Offer counseling regarding educational options.
- Refer to GED programs only if appropriate for student's learning disability.
- Develop alternative programs to accommodate the needs of students with LD who are also teenage mothers.



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