

# Rise Where You Stumbled: Exploring the Phenomenon of Adolescent Parenting in the Philippines

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The study explored the lived experiences of adolescent parents in the Philippines and how they were able to transitioned from adolescence to young adulthood.

**Materials and methods:** It adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach exploring the parenting phenomenon experienced by purposively selected adolescent parents (n=24).

**Results:** Using an inductive thematic analysis of the content of the entire data set, the research identified one predominant theme: "Rise where you stumbled," along with four sub-themes of adolescent parenting experiences, namely, "a child turns our world upside down," "beating the odds," "in good company," and "our hope and joy."

**Conclusion:** This study presents a cautionary narrative for adolescent parents in comparable circumstances. It reveals its multifaceted challenges and opportunities for effectively navigating its dynamics, emphasizing the psychosocial factors that facilitated the desired behavior and the underlying motivations that drove their forced transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

**Keywords:** Adolescence; Thematic Analysis; Phenomenology; Qualitative Psychology; Adolescent Parenting

## Introduction

Teen pregnancy represents a significant public health challenge that has captured the attention of both governmental and non-governmental organizations at local, national, and international levels. It raises grave concerns regarding its social, economic, and health implications for adolescents and their families, catalyzing a comprehensive approach to systematic prevention and support. Therefore, it is important to consider what the numbers are revealing to compare results and base policies and decisions on empirical data and information.

For instance, a United Nations International

Children's Emergency Fund (1) report shows that globally, in 2022, an estimated 13 percent of adolescent girls and young women give birth before the age of 18. Worldwide, one in five girls has given birth by 18. This figure rises to over one in three girls in the world's poorest regions. Many countries grapple with this issue (2-5). It is a complex phenomenon with far-reaching implications for the health and well-being of adolescents, their families, and society.

In the Philippines, the numbers are similarly stark. According to the Philippine Statistical Authority's technical report, it ranks among the nations with the highest rates, reporting a prevalence of 5% in the population. Furthermore, in 2022, the country's number of live teenage births reached 150,000 — the

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highest among Association Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries. Encouragingly, however, there has been a decline in teenage pregnancy rates among 15-19-year-olds, dropping from 8.6% in 2017 to 5.4% in 2022, which suggests a positive impact of sexual health education. However, the PSA report also points to an increase in births among 10-14-year-olds, which rose by 11%, from 1,903 in 2016 to 2,113 in 2020 (6). In this light, it is no surprise that a large majority of Filipinos (59%) view early teenage pregnancy as a significant psychosocial issue (7).

The key drivers and adverse psychosocial effects of teenage pregnancy have been extensively studied in different contexts (1, 8-14). For example, one specific study reveals that poor life skills, weak self-efficacy, the lack of knowledge and guidance on reproductive health makes young people prone to risky behavior such as casual and pre-marital sex. Evidence shows that about 57.5% of men are said to have sex due to curiosity, while about 38% of girls confessed that it just happened, and another 12.6% admitted being forced by their partner. Peer influence also plays a significant role in adolescent sexual behavior, with a study suggesting that adolescents who associate with sexually liberal peers are more likely to partake in risky sexual activities. For instance, adolescents influenced negatively by their peers were found to be 3.84 times more likely to become pregnant. In contrast, those who avoided such associations and practiced self-control exhibited a considerably lower likelihood of pregnancy (15).

The family structure within which an adolescent resides may further contribute to the likelihood of teenage pregnancy. Research indicates that teenagers living with a single parent are 1.6 times more likely to experience pregnancy, while those with no parental presence are 8.2 times more likely to become pregnant compared to their peers who reside with both parents. This may be attributed to the potential lack of guidance and supervision in single-parent or absent-parent households, where the presence of both parents may serve as a protective factor against early pregnancy (16).

In terms of the consequences of teenage pregnancy, studies show that adolescents who experience pregnancy are more likely to face economic hardships, leading to adverse outcomes for both the young parents and their children. The likelihood of school dropout is significantly higher among pregnant teenagers, and many are unable to

resume their education. This disrupts their educational attainment and, consequently, their employability prospects. Such disruptions often result in a cycle of poverty, where adolescent parents and their families face financial difficulties that affect not only their physical well-being but also their mental health (17).

Economic strain in adolescent pregnancies is also associated with negative health outcomes. Numerous studies have linked adolescent pregnancy to a range of health complications, including anemia, chronic hypertension, inadequate weight gain during pregnancy, and increased susceptibility to sexually transmitted diseases. Infants born to teenage mothers are more likely to experience prematurity and low birth weight, which can lead to higher rates of maternal and infant mortality. Furthermore, teenage mothers are at risk of long-term consequences such as diminished productivity and earning potential, perpetuating cycles of poverty for both themselves and their children (17).

In addition to the economic and health challenges, teenage parents often face social stigma and discrimination within their communities. Owens, described young parents as experiencing judgment, hostility, and stigmatization both directly and indirectly. These individuals reported feelings of shame and being looked down upon due to their early parenthood, particularly when seeking assistance from social workers and housing officials. Some participants noted that they did not receive the same level of support or social services as older parents. One young mother recounted experiences of shame while on a bus, explaining that the bus driver looked down on her with humiliating remarks. Also, someone commented that strangers neither congratulated her nor celebrated her new role as a parent. Instead, she described an unwelcoming and harsh social environment making her feel a generalized sense of having committed a societal transgression (18).

The transition to adolescent parenthood also involves navigating a range of significant changes that can affect the teenage parents, family, and immediate environment. While pregnancy typically progresses naturally, culminating in a healthy birth, it is also influenced by various emotional, physical, and social factors associated with the mother, her family, and her environment. Teen pregnancies, often unplanned and with both adolescent parents inadequately prepared, can lead to a particularly

stressful period, as both parents face psychological changes and are required to adapt to new roles. For adolescent women, pregnancy and childbirth represent a complex phase of life that can evoke feelings of pride but also lead to psychosocial stressors, including anxiety, insomnia, social isolation, and depression. If an adolescent woman experiences emotions such as fear, distrust, shame, and embarrassment, it may lead to thoughts of terminating the pregnancy. In cases where termination is not pursued, these emotional struggles may not only harm the mother but can also negatively influence fetal development. Additionally, heightened emotions during pregnancy are often linked to hormonal fluctuations, particularly in progesterone levels, which increase more than ten-fold during gestation. This surge in progesterone has been shown to amplify sensitivity to potential threats, suggesting that negative emotions during pregnancy may signal perceived threats to the survival of both the mother and fetus, thus warranting heightened attention during this period. Changes in the emotional experiences of the mother during pregnancy have profound implications for her psychological well-being, and her mental health can significantly impact the health and development of the fetus. These psychological changes in teenage women may also affect her partner that could possibly lead to conflicts in their relationship. The pregnancy may also be stressful to him due to lack of unpreparedness and if he could not financially support his partner for the needs of the family (19).

Not everything associated with teenage pregnancy and parenting is generally negative. In fact, because they pose challenges to adolescent parents, they learn how to overcome them by aspiring for a better life even against many odds. They learn to adapt strategies to cope with the difficulties becoming a better and mature person in the process (20). In one study, there is an aspiration for a "better life" emerging as a significant theme in the narratives of pregnant and parenting adolescents, reflecting a desire to overcome personal challenges and improve their circumstances. Studies have shown that motherhood often leads to positive changes, including increased responsibility, optimism, and goal orientation, particularly in relation to education and career aspirations. Despite facing social and institutional barriers, such as stigma and the difficulties of balancing child-rearing with education and work, many young mothers report enhanced self-esteem and motivation. This positive transformation is further supported by the notion of

"reparation," where young mothers aim to provide a better life for their children than they had experienced themselves (21).

In another similar study, young mothers expressed a highly positive outlook on their experiences of motherhood. Despite acknowledging the hardships they encountered and the necessary adaptations they made, they largely viewed these challenges as worthwhile in light of the privilege of having children. The mothers described the experience of motherhood as transformative, facilitating personal growth and maturity. They expressed pride in their children and a strong desire to ensure their well-being, with some indicating a commitment to providing care that differed from their own experiences of childhood. Moreover, the participants demonstrated a realistic understanding of their parental responsibilities. For those who had returned to work or education, there remained a firm resolve to continue supporting and providing for their children (22).

The current study is framed within the different studies that were just reviewed. Except that, it further investigates, in the context of the Philippines, the lived experience of adolescents as they transition from teenage life to parenthood. Notably, there is a significant lack of local qualitative studies about the nature and meaning of parenting as lived and experienced by adolescent parents in the Philippines. The underlying consequences of unplanned parenthood as experienced by adolescents are little understood (23). Understanding them based on their own lived experience allows for a greater knowledge of what really transpired and would enable us to draw lessons for future policies in teenage pregnancy care and prevention. Additionally, its impacts can evolve, making it imperative to pursue research on this phenomenon (24). This research endeavour seeks to address then, the existing knowledge gap in current studies.

One overarching question motivated this study: "What is it like to be an adolescent parent?" However, this question evolved and was refined as the study progressed, reflecting the complexities and nuances inherent in the lived experiences of adolescent parenting, which mapped onto our chosen inductive as against the deductive approach to thematic analysis (25).

## **Materials and methods**

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological

method to attain its purposes (26, 27). Phenomenology functions as a qualitative research approach that reveals the meanings individuals attribute to their shared experiences and the effects of those experiences on their lives (28, 29). It was conducted on two descriptive levels: Level I focuses on collecting firsthand accounts through open-ended face-to-face interviews with participants, who were asked to describe their experiences in rich detail, focusing on their subjective experiences. Concurrently, Level II involves the researcher reading and re-reading the content of the entire data set to obtain a sense of the whole. These initial readings provide context and prepare the researcher for a cool and warm analysis of the entire data set to gain an understanding of the phenomenon in question.

The Research Ethics Committee of the Graduate School of the University of Santo Tomas gave ethics approval for the study dated March 16, 2025 with protocol code: EX 2024-047.

#### Subjects of the Study and Sampling Method

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure a homogeneous pool of participants. At least twelve teenage parents were selected for the research via purposive sampling, continuing until data saturation was reached (Table 1). This approach was vital because the target participants belonged to a "hidden" or "hard-to-reach" demographic. Predefined inclusion criteria for selecting them for the in-depth interviews included specific demographic characteristics: both parents being at least 18 years or older, cohabiting for at least two years, residing in an urban setting, and having at least one child, while also being presumed capable and willing to provide accounts of their experiences and perspectives.

Given the phenomenological focus of the study and the absence of strict guidelines regarding participant numbers, a limited sample size was purposefully chosen to prioritize depth over breadth, with no aim for empirical or statistical generalizability. Instead, it seeks to achieve theoretical generalization (analytical generalization) by uncovering the meanings that the subjects attach to their shared experiences and the impacts of those experiences on their lives.

#### Research Site

This research drew participants from an urban village in the Philippines's National Capital Region (NCR). The NCR is vital for studying urban living complexities and societal disparities. Historically, it has had higher teenage pregnancy rates, highlighting

the need to examine relative poverty, low education, family structures and dynamics, geographic location, and childhood experiences (30). Notably, rural areas had a higher rate of 6.1% compared to 4.8% in urban areas in 2022 (6). Local health facilities provide a platform for evaluating prevention programs, and findings from the NCR can influence national policies to reduce teenage pregnancy and provide institutional support to adolescent parents in the Philippines.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants (n=24)**

Profile of Participants	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	12	50
Female	12	50
<b>Age</b>		
17	1	9
18	0	0
19	5	41
21	3	25
22	3	25
<b>Age (when pregnancy took place)</b>		
16	1	9
17	3	25
18	5	41
19	3	25
<b>Civil Status</b>		
Married	2	17
Live in	10	83
<b>Number of Children</b>		
1	10	90
2	2	10
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
Middle School	21	87
Basic Education	3	13
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Employed full time	10	42
Employed Part-time	1	4
Casual/Seasonal	1	4
Self-Employed	1	4
Unemployed	11	46
<b>Family Status</b>		
Living with the Family	10	83
Not Living with the Family	2	17
<b>Religion</b>		
Roman Catholic	11	92
Others	1	8

#### In-Depth Interview

The extensive and time-consuming fieldwork involved in identifying and inviting potential



participants, finding a convenient time for face-to-face interviews with both parents present, observing their behaviors, and occasionally engaging in informal dialogue about them and their children was carried out over a month in March 2025 until April 2025.

A two-part instrument was employed: a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule designed to “generate” an in-depth and emic corpus of data. Once rapport was established, we informed the participants about the study's purposes and the importance of their involvement, ensuring their informed consent and our strict adherence to research ethical requisites. The questions that the participants responded to allowed them to reflect on their adolescent parenting experiences and air their side. By making their meaning structures more conscious and verbal, they could gain plausible insights and hindsight regarding those experiences (31).

The phenomenological interview process was conducted in Filipino and focused on gaining as many personal, lived experience descriptions of the phenomenon as possible. In light of the original phenomenological question, we asked open-ended “how” and “why” questions, maintaining control over them while allowing participants to respond openly, assuring them that there were no right or wrong answers. The atmosphere was generally cordial and friendly, and the candid responses often resulted in bursts of laughter or tears of sadness and joy. Most spoke with maturity and confidence while fully aware of the moment, seemingly embracing an opportunity to tell their side of the story to the world, looking like someone intent on savoring things. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes, was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim (81 pages in single-spaced format with a 12-point font), and subsequently translated to English.

**Data Analysis:** The researcher utilized a systematic six-step approach to analyze the content of the entire data set via a bottom-up coding method (32). Initially, by engaging in multiple readings, she familiarized herself with the whole data set to understand its depth and range—looking for underlying meanings, patterns, and issues of possible significance. Secondly, the researcher generated preliminary codes from the subjects’ narrative responses to interviews and categorized them into meaningful groups. Thirdly, upon completing the initial coding and sampling of all significant data extracts, she completed an extensive compilation of

the codes identified within the data set. This organized list serves as a foundational element for further analysis and interpretation. This phase shifts the focus of the analysis from codes to broader themes, where various codes are sorted into potential or candidate themes, and all relevant coded data extracts are assembled within the defined themes. Fourthly, the researcher identified a set of candidate themes during which these themes are further refined in the fifth step. A thematic map of the data was also created and the themes were further defined and refined in the analysis. This involves reviewing the collected data extracts for each theme and arranging them into a coherent and internally consistent analytic narrative. At step six, when the researcher had thoroughly developed the themes, the final analysis and write-up of the report was carried out, narrating the intricate story the data conveys. Finally, the researcher shared the findings with the participants to ensure that the narrative would accurately reflect the content of the entire data set.

## **Results**

This study involved 24 teenage parents, equally divided between 12 males and 12 females. Female participants became pregnant at ages 16 (1), 17 (3), 18 (5), and 19 (3), with a median age of 17.8 at the birth of their first child. For males, fathers emerged at ages 17 (1), 19 (5), 21 (3), and 22 (3), with a median age of 21.9. This supports earlier findings that fathers are typically older than teenage mothers (33). Most participants had one child; one couple had twins. Data from the PSA (6) shows many adolescent live births involve fathers 3-5 years older than mothers, with 6-7% of cases having fathers over ten years older from 2016 to 2020. Most male participants had low-wage or no permanent jobs, with three unemployed. Like teenage mothers, young fathers often come from low socio-economic backgrounds, struggle with education, and face fewer job opportunities (33). Many were still in middle school during their pregnancies but eventually decided to drop out, albeit reluctantly. Most mothers are homemakers, while fathers typically work in construction, drive tricycles, or are delivery riders. Only two couples were legally married, and most initially cohabited and lived with their parents. All but one couple is affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.

This study used a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the essential experiences of

adolescent parents in an urban village in the Philippines. Through inductive thematic analysis, a predominant theme of "rise where you stumbled" emerged, linked to four sub-themes: "a child turns our world upside down," "beating the odds," "in good company," and "our hope and joy." These thematic strands reflect the complexities of adolescent parenting and are distinct but interconnected, providing a comprehensive view of the experience. We will now discuss the participants' overall experiences that connect these thematic strands.

### **Rise where you stumbled**

This study noted that adolescent parents (AP) could still vividly remember teenagers feeling more like leisure and less like a burden. Until the unintended pregnancy, the times when they focused on their studies, engaged with social media, and lived leisurely lives bonding with their peers now seemed like a distant memory. The eventual birth of the child inevitably flipped the expected sequence of their developmental milestones: first, completing college education; second, securing stable employment; followed by marriage; and ultimately, starting a family. AP admitted that a relatively leisurely life suddenly got dizzying.

When I got pregnant, I was overwhelmed and kept wondering why I had done this. At first, I felt we had lost our way; our studies were suffering, and our dreams seemed out of reach. Although I continued studying, fear, and my parents' disappointment weighed heavily on me. I felt too young for such a drastic change, which was not easy.

At that moment, AP stood at a daunting crossroads, the air thick with tension and uncertainty. Before them lay an unfamiliar path, warning them of the awaited perils, slowly choking the life out of them. Their journey ahead was expected to be fraught with danger and unpredictability, a harsh and unwelcoming realization that most still remembered sending a shiver down their spine. They were facing reality.

Of course, when you are young, you do not know what problems you will face when you get pregnant early. I did not know what to do at that time when I got pregnant. I kept thinking, 'Why did I do this?' Of course, I was too young to be doing this. I had a tough time.

We were excited but scared when I found out I was pregnant, especially worried about our families' reactions, mainly since his mom initially did not accept me. Being teenagers, we feared how we would care for the baby and survive.

Afraid and confused, AP wrestled with the thought of abortion as a solution. However, their parents and friends' guidance and support helped them decide it was okay to keep the baby, and they gradually embraced the possibility of early parenthood. It was a point of no return.

I thought about aborting the child due to my fears and uncertainty. However, I ultimately decided against it, realizing that the child was innocent and that abortion would bring no good.

All the problems came at once. My exams were affected, which caused my grades to drop. Then, when I got home, I still had to do household chores. That is why I thought of aborting the child. However, I realized that everything would only be resolved if I did.

Despite the crippling fear and uncertainty that gnawed at their psyche, AP decided to keep the child partly because they began to see him/her as "hulog ng langit" (a gift from heaven). This leap of faith marked a turning point in their lives and helped ease their anxiety, spurring them to patiently and bravely embrace their challenges and see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I prayed for strength if this was my path. I urged my partner not to abort, believing our child is a gift from God. I learned that it is a sin to abort, which solidified my choice to keep the child. We survived by God's mercy, and our lives gradually improved.

As AP looked back on their journey, they came to a profound realization: every challenge they faced had shaped them into a wiser and more resilient person. The whirlwind of experiences, though overwhelming at times, had forged a sense of determination within them. Even in moments of doubt and struggle, they clawed their way up the steep terrain and gave themselves an opportunity for time and room to grow.

However, it was partially wrong because we learned much from our experiences. Being a young parent is difficult, but it has been the most meaningful experience of my life. My experience has been challenging but beautiful.

The Filipino idiomatic expression, "Tumayo ka kung saan ka nadapa" (literally, "Rise where you stumbled") captures the nature and significance of parenting as experienced by adolescents, highlighting the challenge of picking up their lives, working from scratch and respond to their calling. It also reflects the intricate dynamics between falling and rising, emphasizing the drastic changes and crippling

challenges often accompanying the first steps in the delicate transition from adolescence to young adulthood. This brings us to the first strand of this phenomenon.

### **A child turns our world upside down.**

The participants admitted that they got off to a pretty rough start, with many nostalgically remembering how their once leisurely daily routines suddenly changed. What used to be blight, carefree days gradually shifted into a whirlwind of responsibilities as they devoted themselves to caring for their child. Sleepless nights became the norm, filled with worry and concern whenever she fell ill, marking a drastic change in their lives. It was an unenviable situation for a romantic partnership, which most likely started so well.

Our child is the reason our lives and futures have changed. I see it almost every day. Our life now revolves around our child. At first, I thought it was like falling because our studies were affected, and our dreams disappeared. Everything was gone; everything closed down. Taking care of my child is exhausting, and I often lack sleep. It is tough to raise a child.

Secondly, they remember the days when life flowed easily, filled with laughter and camaraderie among friends and classmates. Those moments of shared experiences and carefree conversations seemed like a distant memory now. The relentless demands of round-the-clock child care-giving had anchored them at home, drastically reducing the time to connect with their peers and going through tricky spells.

After giving birth, I stayed home and shifted my focus to my child, work, and saving money, which led to a loss of social interactions. I felt isolated for two or three years while my friends continued their everyday lives. I struggled with this separation and had to let go of my old lifestyle to embrace my new role as a mother, which meant less time hanging out with friends and putting aside my old hobbies.

Third, the mothers also spoke about experiencing significant physical changes due to pregnancy and childbirth (in local slang, “na lohang,” or lost one’s youth). Unable to hold back tears, some of them said that their bodies were not yet fully developed at that time, fearing its effect on their and their child’s health. Although some changes are more subtle, some women participants expressed laments over the fatigue and shifts in lifestyle that took a toll on their bodies.

My body has changed. I used to be sexy, but after giving birth, I regret it. I wish I were still single, that I had not gotten pregnant. If only I had terminated the

pregnancy... I feel unfortunate. (She was on the verge of tears while narrating this).

In summary, the participants experienced significant changes before and after their child's birth—when they were scared and did not know what the future would look like—is named in this study as the “*a child turns our world upside down*” strand of adolescent parenting. We will now proceed to the second strand.

### **Beating the odds**

The child's birth triggered immense challenges in its aftermath due to being too young to be parents or “*may gatas pa sa labi*” (loosely translated, still have milk on their lips) to their lack of adequate preparation and resources. Most participants said handling daily expenses for basic needs, like milk and diapers, was their most significant concern. Since their first days and weeks together, the lack of financial resources had strained their mental and relational well-being and, at times, sent them reeling, searching for means and ways to survive. They all agreed that it was nothing short of exhausting.

The expenses of raising a child. The everyday expenses. Caring for a child is physically exhausting and emotionally draining, especially when managing family expenses for diapers and milk, and worse when our child gets sick. Sometimes, there is no money or one to borrow from.

The struggles stemming from pressing financial hardships often shook the foundations of their romantic relationship, igniting tension and uncertainty. Those moments can build and fester, even if they were cleared up in the immediate aftermath. As a result, pursuing their shared aspirations became an increasingly daunting challenge, with doubts and fears clouding their ability to work together toward a shared future.

We often argue about finances related to the child and childbirth expenses. Our tight income leads to frequent conflicts over necessities like milk and diapers. As a mother, I constantly worry about meeting our child’s needs, triggering our fights. We often fight about the child and what we will need regarding money and childbirth expenses. Our income needs to be more. Sometimes, we are okay, but we fight more often.

In traditional Filipino families, the father's role is typically defined and laden with a single role as a provider: to ensure food is on the table. Since most of them lacked the education and experience, the young fathers faced formidable obstacles in the job

market. Although stereotyped as feckless mama's boys, most fathers said they checked in with a streamlined role and a keen understanding of what they had to do to survive.

Our life together has been difficult without a job, and we often need help to afford diapers and milk. Amid our monetary challenges, I worked harder and became more diligent. I used to live like a bachelor, making my own decisions, but now things have changed. I have grown and matured, striving for my family.

In contrast, the mother carries several reproductive work responsibilities as the traditional "light of the home." This encompasses the process of childbirth and the maternal role of nurturing and raising children. Between caring for her child and her husband, washing the laundry, cooking, and budgeting meager financial resources, they said they hardly have time to care for themselves.

I am just here at home taking care of the kids. Taking care of my child is exhausting, and I often lack sleep. I no longer have any personal goals for now. The only thing I care about is my child.

What made matters worse was the unsympathetic societal conventions that tend to treat young unmarried women with unintended pregnancies as either gullible victims or lax sinners. Thus, they face more significant shame, discrimination, and vilification than their counterparts and can expect to face harsher judgment and stigma characterized by labels such as "flirts," "promiscuous," or "immoral." Some mothers reported that they found it hard to handle the instinctive reaction of a judgmental public to slut-shame them as if they were the only party to the affair.

People often judge me, saying things like, "Oh, she just turned eighteen, and she is already pregnant," or "That is what happens when you are a flirt; you get married young." Many relatives suggested that my early flirting led to my pregnancy, and I faced judgment for being a student and getting pregnant. (She was in tears).

In stark contrast, men faced significantly less backlash and enjoyed plenty of free passes. Premarital sexual activity is dismissed as a normative rite of passage for them. Unlike their partners, the teenage fathers hardly reported any outright disapproval and intimidating or humiliating reactions against them, except for occasional peer teasing.

My friends laughed at me when they learned about it (laughter). They just said it was right for me to get

married so my money had somewhere meaningful to go. Before, it was just all spent on a drinking spree.

Nonetheless, several participants recalled encountering an unexpected flicker over time. They said they took their struggles in stride and refused to melt when the challenges to their well-being became more daunting by the day. Motivated by a profound parental instinct, all the participants said they learned to prioritize their child's well-being, frequently sacrificing their interests and opportunities for personal development and pulling them closer together.

I always prioritize caring for my child. I no longer have any personal goals for now. When I found out I was pregnant, the only thing I cared about was my child. I no longer have personal goals; my focus is entirely on my child since finding out I was pregnant. I always prioritize her needs.

As a result, some participants recalled when they started to partner more closely to build their family for the long haul and found their legs. They became willing to do anything, be anything with the mother as "tumayong ina" (stood up as a mother) and the father as "tumayong ama" (stood up as a father). It took some time, but the settling-in period seemed over by then, and they started to show glimpses that they would hold their nerves.

We supported each other through side jobs, but sometimes, we still struggled financially, which led to frustration and arguments. However, everything is manageable as long as we are together.

This strand highlights the "*beating the odds*" aspect of adolescent parenting. It showcases the young parents' determination to find their footing in a challenging situation and keep going despite the odds to start anew. As a result, they focused on what they could control, and everything else followed. Next, we will explore the third thematic strand.

### **In good company**

In Filipino culture, family is the core social unit, fostering solid support systems among extended relatives. In times of trouble, one's blood ties and personal bonds can be expected to provide an added layer of protection and safety. Amidst an array of life's vicissitudes and the terror resulting from our awareness of vulnerability and death, the Filipino family will always provide shelter and a resting place, significantly improving our fighting chances not only to survive but also to thrive.

The female participants said their parents were surprised when they revealed their pregnancy. However, most recalled almost instantaneously



recovering from their shock and dismay, extending them moral, emotional, and financial support. They said the assistance became more substantial after their child was born, helped them settle their nerves, and gave them the boost they needed when the odds seemed stacked against them.

My parents supported me throughout my pregnancy. When I told them, they cried but did not get mad. They emphasized caring for my child and always offered moral support without judgment. They also provided financial help, and my mother took on extra responsibilities, like washing clothes and caring for the child. It was tough, but I managed, thanks to their unwavering support.

Parenting is not taught in school; you learn on your own. However, I find comfort in my family's support, regardless of what others say.

The encouraging words from their elder siblings also significantly boosted their decision to embrace what was before them. The mothers revealed that their sisters' kind words, shared experiences, and genuine excitement allowed them to get through the rough patches, thus making starting a family even less daunting.

My older sisters supported me amidst that turmoil. Their reassuring voices gently urged me to reconsider and embrace the journey ahead. I found solace in the guiding presence of my sister, who stood steadfast by my side, along with my parents. Together, they formed a nurturing circle, lighting our path with their wisdom and unwavering support.

It is also interesting how the experience of teen parenting provided an opportunity for them to know who their true friends are. Amid loneliness and isolation, most participants said their solicitude and encouragement relieved them and fueled their determination to walk on with courage and hope when unsure about the way forward.

While I miss my friends, they understand my decision. They helped me become more committed and confident in my choices.

The teenage parents recalled with gratitude the support they received from the people around them during challenging times. However, as they gradually found their footing as parents, they, ironically, felt the need for autonomy, wanting to carve their paths rather than rely too heavily on others, seeking to walk on their feet toward their journey to adult parenting.

The drive to be on our own was important—we would instead provide for ourselves than request help from them. Through our experiences, especially as we

grow older, we learn the importance of responsibility and standing on our own two feet. We are determined not to ask our families for help. We will prove to ourselves that we can succeed on our own.

In summary, representing the immensely valuable and unconditional support their parents, siblings, and friends provided during the most defining moments of their journey that facilitated their oft-time transition and made them sturdy enough to stay the course is titled the "*in good company*" strand of adolescent parenting. Now, let us shift our focus to the fourth and final strand.

### **Our joy and hope**

Although the young parents did not initially expect to be pregnant early on in their romantic relationship, their children quickly became the focal point of their lives, representing a fresh beginning, hope for a brighter future, and a reason to strive for personal growth and stability. All the participants said that caring for their children allowed them to land on their feet and turn around to reconstruct their lives around them. The child becomes the heart of who they are and what they do, with their love for the child informing much of their actions, allowing them to do.

Our life now revolves around our child, who is my blessing and brings me lots of joy. Despite the challenges of motherhood, seeing her makes all my exhaustion disappear.

The time they shared with their child sparked a deep emotional bond and became a vessel of joy and healing. Amid daily struggles, this connection strengthened their romantic ties, filling their days with laughter, affection, and an unwavering sense of purpose. They said the growing child inspired them deeply amid their lingering doubts and fears.

The arrival of the child brought us so much joy. Being a young parent is challenging, but it is the most meaningful experience of my life. My experience has been beautiful. We are delighted with the arrival of our child.

When the child was born, despite the difficulties, there was joy in their arrival. Work is hard, but when I see the child, my exhaustion and problems disappear.

Their child reflected their identity, aspirations, and values, fostering a sense of accomplishment and investing hope in their contribution to life. Now that their past is water under the bridge, many expressed the hope that they will survive and thrive. Dreaming of a future centered on their child's well-being, they realized that their child's milestones, development, and accomplishments reflect their unflinching

determination and hard work as young parents.

While we cannot undo our past, we want to do everything we can and set aside our personal goals to promote our children's future and well-being. I am so happy. I also hoped our child would not be like us, who could not finish school.

In summary, to highlight the moment when their past trials and tribulations slowly faded into a memory against their small daily triumphs and reliefs from the burdens of parenting, inspiring adolescent parents to anticipate the hope that somehow, someday, their future might still get better is labeled as "*our hope and joy*" strand of teenage parenting. Let us now get into some thoughts and observations.

## Discussion

This study explored how a select group of participants from an urban village in the Philippines experienced and made sense of parenting as adolescents. It aims to address the fundamental phenomenological question of the nature and meaning of the phenomenon of adolescent parenting as a distinctly human experience (29). It is a story waiting to unfold. Where relevant, the researcher broadened the analysis, moving from a descriptive to an interpretative level and related the discussion to existing literature pertinent to provide broader analytic statements about the totality of the circumstances surrounding the themes that reveal the nature and significance of adolescent parenting in the Philippines.

The first insight from this study is that adolescent parenting essentially revolves around transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood while simultaneously giving care to their child. At the same time, it can be contended that the challenges faced by teenage parents closely parallel those encountered by adult parents; it is essential to recognize that the former are still in their formative years and must face the dual responsibility of searching for their identity — daily while laying the groundwork for a safer and more secure future for their children (34). While adult parents can manage an arguably leisurely transition to their following developmental stages, the myriad of psychological, social, and developmental challenges and complexities are significantly amplified for adolescents who became parents before experiencing the expected sequence of their formative milestones.

The Filipino idiom "*hinog sa pilit*" (literally meaning "ripened by force") underlines the experience of being thrust into maturity before its opportune time. One concern stems from the fact that

by skipping the normal transition process, adolescent parents may risk experiencing unresolved issues or behaviors they missed during their teenage years that are crucial for exploring and establishing a clear conscious sense of self or ego identity. While Erikson (35, 43) believed that each stage of psychosocial development was critical, he emphasized that the development of ego identity helps guide individuals' actions, beliefs, and behaviors as they age. He suggests that if this vital process is rushed or neglected, it might resurface later in life, potentially leading to confusion about one's role or identity in adulthood. The local proverb, "*Ang bunga ng hinog sa pilit, kung kainin ay mapait,*" (The fruit forced to ripen will taste bitter), exemplifies the significance of waiting for life's natural processes to progress in their appropriate time. It underscores the notion that endeavors pursued with patience and by the rhythms of nature are more likely to yield enduring and satisfactory outcomes. Such insights reflect a broader ethical perspective that values the importance of timing in pursuing personal and communal goals.

Related to the above insight, teen parents, despite their precarious situation, steadily learned to adapt to changes and manage to beat the odds perhaps faster than anyone could have predicted. The decision to focus on their child's well-being and future could have been the deciding factor or antidote against all the obstacles they faced. The Filipino word "*pinakatawanan*" (to embody an idea or value with determination and commitment in one's actions or behavior

@ <https://www.tagalog.com/dictionary/pangatawanan>) captures this observation. In line with previous research, this insight affirms that adolescent parenting may likewise open a pathway to transformative changes other than insurmountable roadblocks that can impede their transition to the next level of their developmental stage (36-39). For instance, Bommaraju (39) suggests that policy frameworks must focus on the beneficial aspects of teenage parenting, pointing out that it can foster a dedication to education and improve employment opportunities for both parents needing stability.

The second insight reveals the considerable influence of social stigma and discrimination on mental health, particularly within the context of adolescent parenting (40, 41). Discrimination plays a significant role in the experience of being a young parent (36). Often suffering in silence, it is the mothers who have to endure more significant

emotional strain than the fathers under a cultural lens that tends to focus on their weaknesses and imperfections instinctively. While such harsh judgment occasionally diverted attention from their immediate responsibilities, it also triggered an increase in “lakas-loob” (inner strength) and “tapang ng hiya” (courage in shame) to deflect thinly veiled misogyny. These traits are characterized by a steadfast determination to withstand and heal the wounds of undeserved negative feedback and threats to their mental health. Ultimately, this healing process helps them incorporate the traumatic experience into forming their ego identity.

The third insight highlights the supportive networks of their family, peers, and community—a significant contributing factor that helped them navigate the pitfalls of adolescent parenting. In particular, the parental moral and financial support enabled them to find new gear at another level, especially when their finances were all over the place. A Filipino idiom demonstrates the unconditional love of the parents, who, even when hurt, choose to understand and care for their children: “Matitikis ng anak ang magulang, ngunit di matitikis ng magulang ang anak.” (Children can turn their backs on their parents, but parents cannot turn their backs on them).

Previous research has shown similar findings (42, 43). Better outcomes are achieved when teen parents live with their mothers (41). Financial challenges are an inherent aspect of conjugal relationships; however, the financial needs of adolescent parents are particularly critical compared to those of adult parents. This heightened significance stems from the fact that the economic instability of adolescent parents may quickly and adversely shape both the dynamics of their relationships and overall well-being (44-46).

The cultural practice of “sakop” (inclusion), which emphasizes group harmony over individualism and the maintenance of “pagkakaisa” (unity) and “pakikisama” (cooperation), partly explains the Filipino trait of collaborative effort within a nuclear family (47). Ironically, while they were grateful for their family's support, the young parents also felt a firm desire to live separately from them and assert their financial and moral autonomy— in Filipino, “magsarili” (to be on one's own) or “bumukod” (to be independent or live separately from one's family). Steadily growing into their voice, the teenage parents in this study were quite surprisingly eager to “magsarili” (not independent or self-sufficient but to

be autonomous or self-directed) once they gained some footing, indicative of their growing “tiwala sa sarili” (self-confidence). Mercado (47) describes “sarili” as self, manifesting in the form of freedom, such as in “sariling pagiisip” (autonomous thinking), “sariling paraan” (one's way), “kasaranlan” (freedom, autonomy), “sariling sikap” (self-persistence), and “kaya ang sarili” (self-sufficiency) or “tumayo sa sariling paa” (stand on one's own feet). This observation mirrors the considerable influence of the urban ward movement, particularly among the youth, which has resulted in a notable enhancement of their autonomy from parental authority and influence (48).

Erikson theorized that this scenario represents a conflict between intimacy and isolation that influences people aged 18 to 35 through the initial phase of adult development (49). Dating, marriage, family, and friendships are essential during this stage in their lives. Based on this theory, building intimate relationships and nurturing supportive social networks are vital for improving physical and mental health outcomes. During adolescence, individuals frequently encounter what Erikson refers to as an identity crisis, characterized by a transitional phase in which they are no longer children yet have not fully transitioned into adulthood. This complex developmental stage is marked by a desire for autonomy from parental authority and a sense of self (50). Identity formation during adolescence is a pivotal aspect of human development, wherein individuals cultivate a coherent understanding of self. This stage integrates various components, including the physical self, personality traits, potential roles, and occupational aspirations, all distinct from their earlier attachments (35).

The fourth insight is that, upon discovering the unplanned pregnancy, the participants in this study felt a wave of mixed emotions regarding parenting. This aligns with findings from previous research, highlighting the complexity of emotional responses to such circumstances (43, 51). On the one hand, teen parents feel joy, hope, gratitude, and love for their children; on the other, they grapple with fear, anxiety, and self-doubt. However, rather than being overwhelmed by swirling negative thoughts and emotions, the participants in this study instead focused on the positive ones. In that way, they became a foundation for meaning, resilience, and deeper self-awareness.

One of the most significant research-based models regarding positive emotions is Barbara Fredrickson's

broaden-and-build theory, which has dramatically enhanced our understanding of how positive emotions influence our thought processes and interactions with our surroundings (52, 53). It shows that focusing on positive emotions, or even intentionally creating more helpful attitudes, can benefit people's physical and mental health. According to Fredrickson, positive emotions such as joy, hope, and contentment can expand people's immediate thought-action possibilities and develop their lasting personal resources, including physical, intellectual, social, and psychological assets. She succinctly put it: "It is good to feel good."

In summary, the insights from this phenomenological study characterize adolescent parenting as a transitional phase between adolescence and young adulthood, exemplifying an emotionally turbulent stage through numerous challenging and multi-layered experiences. They catalyzed the resilience and adaptability of young parents, which were fostered by their social capital and focused on positive emotions. As they navigated the complexities of parenting as adolescents while confronting their own developmental needs, the resilience and family values of the young parents were tested, sparking an oft-time personal growth and maturity. Each moment holds the potential for deep learning and self-discovery, profoundly shaping their identities in ways they might not have imagined when they started a journey comparable to a long trek in the desert or a perilous voyage in the sea.

**Limitations:** The findings documented in this study should be understood in the context of three limitations. First, the researcher conducted her analysis based on interviews with 24 teenage parents from an urban village in the Philippines' National Capital Region. This sample was considered sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation and provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon; the experiences of teenage parents from different demographic backgrounds may still differ from those represented in this study. Secondly, the interviews took place at least three years after the participants had cohabited, which could have influenced the accuracy with which they recalled the details of their experiences and insights. However, this also provided some time for the participants to recover from the emotional trauma they had experienced. Nevertheless, the in-depth interviews allowed them to reflect on their experiences and provide valuable insights and hindsight (29). Thirdly, translating

certain Filipino words or phrases into English can sometimes lose important meanings or emotional tones. This is especially true in a phenomenological study, where capturing the participants' unique voices matters. To address this issue, the researcher collaborated with an experienced bilingual translator who understands both cultures and contexts, and confirmed the translations with the participants to ensure accuracy and add authenticity to the narrative.

## Conclusion

This phenomenological exploration highlights the critical need to address a significant knowledge gap regarding the experiences of adolescent parents in the Philippines. Unlike their adult counterparts, adolescent parents face unparalleled challenges, often exacerbated by a lack of maturity, financial and emotional instability, and a low level of education. Various sociocultural factors, such as discrimination and misperceptions, particularly against the mothers, can also compound their sense of uncertainty and vulnerability. However, the study also shows that adolescent parenting is, first, an opportunity to protect and promote their and their child's well-being; second, it is seldom solitary but often shared with their families, peers, and communities that help them overcome their obstacles, deal with negative emotions, and achieve short- and long-term goals.

Most importantly, this study supports the notion that adolescent parenting need not be exclusively characterized as a traumatic and damaging phase in the lives of young parents. Nonetheless, we hasten to add and clarify that this perspective does not seek to romanticize or idealize the phenomenon of adolescent parenting. Indeed, entering into parenthood at an immature age is typically not a decision made lightly or without considerable consequence. A Filipino proverb emphasizes the seriousness and commitment required in such a state of life, comparing it to something that cannot be easily undone: "Ang magasawa'y di biro, di tulad ng kanin iluluwa kung mapaso." (To be husband and wife is not a joke; it is not like rice that you can spit out when it burns). Regardless, this study showed that, although fraught with dangers, this oft-time transition period can also serve as an opportunity, albeit forced and oft-time, for growth and development, provided that the adolescent parents remain firmly committed to their child's well-being and receive adequate support from their families, peers, and broader communities.

This study offers a cautionary narrative for



adolescent parents. It explores their diverse challenges and opportunities while identifying dispositional and situational factors to cope, adjust, and thrive in their new roles. Understanding the implications of adolescent parenthood is essential for developing supportive and protective policies and interventions that address their unique needs and circumstances. After all, and like everyone else, adolescent parents also deserve a second chance in life.

## Conflict of Interests

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

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