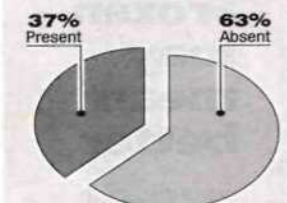


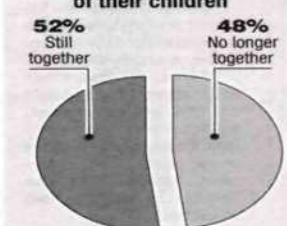
Teenage dads do stick around

Study shows many young fathers want to provide for, and relate to their children

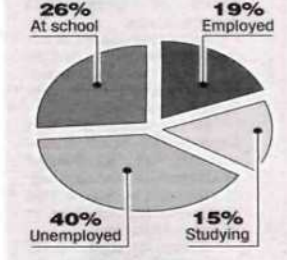
Teenage fathers whose own fathers were absent



Teenage fathers who are still with the mothers of their children



Status of teenage fathers in 2008



BIANCA CAPAZORIO

A GROUNDBREAKING new study into poverty-stricken teenage fathers has quashed the stereotype of the absent father and presented a portrait of emotional young men trying to find a balance between modern and traditional versions of fatherhood.

The study, entitled Teenage Tata Voices of Young Fathers in South Africa, was conducted among poor teenage fathers in Cape Town and Durban by researchers Sharlene Swartz and Arvin Bhana for the Human Sciences Research Council.

The study interviewed 27 coloured and African young men who had become fathers between the ages of 14 and 20, from Bonteheuwel and Langa in Cape Town and from poor areas in Durban. It presents their views on their emotions surrounding fatherhood. None use their real names.

Teenage Tata reveals the young men's attitudes to their children, the mothers of their children and their views on relationships, sex and condom use. Despite the stereotype of young fathers running from their responsibilities, many remained involved with their

SMS the Argus
SMS your views to 32027
Each SMS costs R1

children, or wanted to have a relationship with them but were prevented from doing so. In some cases, the mother of the child's family pushed the father away and in others, young fathers who had not yet undergone the traditional initiation rituals could not be involved in the so-called "damage" negotiations and so his feelings were not considered. In certain African cultures, young men are expected to pay damages for impregnating a woman before marriage.

Two thirds of the men studied had absent fathers themselves and wanted to become involved fathers as a result. For many, being a good father centred on the traditional view of providing financially. Others held the modern view of being an involved, engaged father.

Swartz said many young fathers were negotiating the differences between the two.

The ability to provide financially was of the utmost importance to the men.

"I'm a father. I can't do everything for my daughter. So



FUN AND GAMES: Teenage boys in the study said they didn't like using condoms.

I just feel like a kid. I feel small because I can't look after my baby, you see?" Luthando said.

Trevor Davies of African Fathers, an NGO promoting involved parenting, hailed the study as a "breakthrough" and said many fathers put themselves under enormous pressure to provide.

"When the sole test of 'good fatherhood' for these economically disempowered young men becomes a purely financial one they cannot live up to the expectations on them. There is a lot of ill health among young

fathers - physical and emotional - because of the stress this causes them," he said.

Of the 27 men, at the time of the study 11 were unemployed, seven were still at school or had returned to school after going to work for a while, five had jobs and four were studying. Fourteen were still in relationships with the mother of their child and 13 not (one had children with two different mothers and was still in a relationship with one of these women).

Swartz said that in presenting the study to the young men,

it was their views on multiple relationships, sex without condoms and alcohol-fuelled sex that had caused them the most embarrassment.

Swartz said for many of the men, the idea of multiple partners was not about them being "sexually insatiable, but its about always having someone to affirm them and love them".

"They say in the study that they don't have money, they don't have possessions, but they can possess women."

Lwethu, who had five girlfriends, explained the reason

was so that "if somebody drops you, you have a spare wheel".

Almost all of the men had become fathers because they had not worn condoms.

Most said they had not worn condoms because having sex "meat to meat" was more pleasurable while a few said they did not know how to use them.

Onathi, a participant in the study, said it as "like having a sweet with a wrapper on".

CEO of loveLife Grace Matlhabe said that "what seems to be a problem is that despite knowledge there is usually a greater tolerance of risk, particularly among young people in socio-economically deprived circumstances".

Alcohol also played a large role.

The young fathers also highlighted an unwillingness to attend clinics or sexual health facilities, either out of shame or out of a sense of machismo.

Executive director for City Health said while they tried to make their clinics youth friendly, and sexual education was available, only around 10% of those visiting the clinics were men, mostly for the treatment of sexually transmitted infections.

"The perception seems to be that the clinic services are

there for the women."

One surprising emotional response which arose in the survey was the fear with which the men had approached telling their parents of the pregnancy.

For many it had to do with bringing shame on their families and for others the knowledge that the mistake could cost their family financially.

"I was scared because my mother and father spent a lot of money on me. I was embarrassed because my girlfriend was still young, 16. So I was embarrassed, like what the family would take me for," Onathi said.

For one Bonteheuwel father named Marlin, the shock of being a father at 17 was compounded when he found out he had impregnated both his girlfriends and the babies would be born within a week of each other.

"It was a bit much for me. I was just confused. I wanted to get out of it. I tried not to let that get me down. I was confused because I was a bit young. I drank a lot, smoked dope. Everything."

Swartz said that while the study was too small to be statistically representative, she believed teen fathers in other provinces would feel the same.