

Paying for baby doesn't ease the guilt

# UNWED FATHERS FACE DILEMMA

BY BENJAMIN SCHLESINGER

Dr. Schlesinger is associate professor at the School of Social Work, University of Toronto.

MUCH has been written and discussed about unmarried mothers—there were 26,556 illegitimate births recorded in Canada in 1964 — but little has been said about unmarried fathers.

This lack of interest in the putative father (putative because he is assumed but not proved to be the father) is partly a result of the double standard; society always judges women more harshly than men for illicit sexual behavior.

But another reason can be that the unwed father presents a less crucial problem to society.

The woman's betrayal of the mores is obvious from her physical condition; the man shows no outward sign. The unwed father represents no financial burden to the community; the mother likely will do so.

But despite the double standard and apparent indifference, society in fact censures the unmarried father severely.

He may be regarded as so unstable that he cannot contemplate marriage, so insecure about his virility that he must produce a child to prove his masculinity, or he may be regarded as a sexual exploiter.

Society tends to stereotype him as older and of a higher socio-economic status than the unmarried mother and thus, by implication, as having taken advantage of her.

Research in England and Switzerland indicates there is usually no significant difference in the social level of the two unwed parents. Dr. Clark Vincent reported the difference is about the same as in normal dating couples; that is, the unwed father is usually older and better educated to the same extent as is sanctioned in normal dating and marriage. Dr. Vincent concluded that the term sexual exploiter is affixed to the unwed father only after the impregnation of the female.

The community often feels the putative father has let the woman down by not marrying her. However, after a study of 68 Toronto couples, we concluded that this feeling has been exaggerated. In the 68 couples, all free to marry, only 12 men had refused matrimony. In the other cases the girl refused or her parents would not permit it or the couple mutually agreed not to marry.

It is perhaps natural in a culture that over-emphasizes the married father's economic role that the law, the community and those in social work stress the unmarried father's financial responsibility. This is the state's major concern and one that frankly reveals the taxpayers' self-interest.

Here, the ambivalence of thought and feeling is revealed. On one hand, the sum may be small and the judgments enforced reluctantly; on the other hand, warrants may be issued and fathers jailed.

Payments don't always ease the man's feelings of guilt; they may increase it and they may also alter the girl's view of their relationship.

Traditionally, men have expected to pay money for illicit sex affairs and this attitude of discharging responsibility through payments may come up when the girl or her family asks for money. In effect, a prostitution pattern is symbolized and both parents then regard the child as being only the mother's. No woman wonders whether she is the mother of a child, but a man does not have that biologic certainty. In the eyes of both, the payment may seem to be for the girl as a sexual partner rather than for the child.

In contrast, men with true parental feeling may consider the payment inadequate.

Of 38 Minnesota men making payments on court orders, 16 felt they were not paying enough to care for a child. The sense of guilt may be increased when older men — lawyers or fathers — make cash settlement plans for young men. This especially applies to a young man with enough knowledge of psychology to recognize the effect of a deprived childhood. This guilt later may have a

destructive effect on his relationship with his legitimate children.

But he has trouble getting help.

One can only speculate on reasons for the lack of service to putative fathers in the past. Certainly, one reason is the shortage of trained social workers and the obvious and urgent priority of the problems of mother and child. It is also possible that society's indifference has influenced the social agencies.

Up to the present, service given to putative fathers has been largely based on the rationale that it will help mother and child.

One thing is clear. The condemning attitude that an unmarried father is a resource and not a person with needs, feelings and problems of his own must be discouraged.

The unmarried father often approaches an interview at a social agency either apologetically or defensively. He cannot talk naturally about himself and he tries to justify himself or settle the matter as quickly as possible with money.

The unmarried father could probably be helped more by a male case worker. Many fathers think a woman social worker sympathizes exclusively with the mother.

So little experimenting has been done with the idea of using a male social worker that it is impossible to know the advantages and disadvantages. But it seems worth trying.

The most detailed study of unmarried teen-aged fathers has come from the Vista Del Mar Child Care Service in Los Angeles.

In each case there, the social worker carefully discusses with the boy the implications of his attitude toward sex. The social worker answers his questions but is firm about the boy's responsibility and in no way condones his sexual behavior. He points out the reasons against premarital sex and discusses the differences between teen-age love and the more genuine relationship between persons ready to share adulthood's problems and responsibilities.

He also points out the obvious risks of premarital sex, such as acquiring a venereal disease or impregnating a girl — dangers that most boys are well aware of — and the less known risk, impairing sexual adjustment later in marriage.

Most of the boys seem genuinely concerned about achieving a good marital relationship in later life. As they discuss the responsibilities associated with fatherhood, they suddenly seem to realize the overwhelming implication of what they are involved in.

Occasionally, a boy has not been told of the pregnancy, or has been aware of it but has not emotionally received the message that he is about to be a father.

"Me, a father!" one 15-year-old said. "You're kidding." Others have said over and over: "I can't believe it."

At Vista Del Mar, teen-aged fathers are usually given a chance to see their babies, either at the hospital or at the agency. They react with both disbelief and concern. "Did I really produce that?" "I can't believe it's real." "Is it getting good care?"

Many stare at their babies as though transfixed. One boy was worried because his baby had a facial rash and drew it to the attention of a nurse. Another wanted to hold his baby.

Seeing his baby makes the boy sharply aware of the reality of problems resulting from his sexual behavior. He often asks for assurances that the baby will receive the best of care. The discussion of his aspirations, his relationship with the girl, marriage and the alternatives in planning for the baby takes on greater meaning.

Vista Del Mar used a male social worker on the grounds that the boy would talk more readily with a man. The social worker represented, in a sense, a father figure to the troubled boy.

Getting the boy to the agency was less of a problem than expected. He either came spontaneously or readily accepted an appointment when it was offered. His parents

and the girl's parents were approached by the agency and the work done with the boy and his family paralleled and was integrated with the work done with the girl and her family.

Almost all the studies on putative fathers in Canada have been done by graduate students in schools of social work.

Gordon Howden interviewed 11 putative fathers at a social agency in Ontario. Here are some of the comments of the fathers:

— Mr. A., 24, single, knew mother 18 months: "First they wanted \$200 cash and now they have come down to \$150. It is like they put a price tag on it. They want you to pay and then forget about it. I don't think this is right. They talk too much about money."

— Mr. B., 18, knew mother four months: "Yes, I have to pay money and it is on my mind about the trouble she is going through and how she feels about me. I wonder how her parents feel about me. I think of her having the baby."

— Mr. C., 19, knew mother one year: "I do want to see my baby. I do not approve of the child being cared for by her parents. They are not fit to bring up the child."

— Mr. D., 22, knew mother 14 months: "I wanted to be sure that the money I pay goes to pay for the baby. Her mother told me I had to pay as soon as she found out her daughter was pregnant. I quit school, got a job and began to pay four months before the baby was born."

— Mr. E., 20, student, knew mother 13 months: "Keeping it quiet was nerve-racking. I tried not to think about it but I spent 90 per cent of my time worrying. She kept saying she wasn't pregnant, but when we were sure, I had to do something."

One unmarried father gave advice to others: "See it through. Don't say 'prove it.' If you don't mind going to bed with a woman, then you shouldn't mind taking the consequences."

Mr. Howden's study showed the average length of acquaintance between the parents was about 13 months, that six men considered marrying the women before pregnancy and four after, that six still planned to marry them and that nine are still seeing them.

This seems inconsistent with the stereotype of the putative father as having a one-night fling with little concern for the unmarried mother.

If the man has a longer acquaintance and a deeper involvement with the mother than has been supposed, he may have a greater influence on her decision than has been suspected. The fact that he is not involved by the agency in the decision may mean he is supporting the panic-button solution of relinquishing the child for adoption.

And the fact that many plan to marry the mothers indicates an area for research on whether the father should be more involved in decisions about his child's future.

All 11 men in the Howden study showed interest in the child and 10 wanted some rights regarding the baby. Three were willing to rear the child themselves.

All expressed problems — about conflict with their families, feelings for the child, relationship with the mother, the effect on their jobs and finances and concern for the future.

It is therefore evident that the putative father does not necessarily escape the effects of illegitimacy. Although he does not bear the child, he has other problems created by the situation. These problems will continue to involve him in difficulty, to cause him unhappiness unless he can face them and is helped with them.

We may find that by working sympathetically with both unwed parents, we can avoid more adoption placements. We may even help to establish new families whose principals began their life together as separate entities and saw nothing ahead but censorship, separation and adoption.

Reprinted From  
The Globe And Mail

Drawing By Huntley Brown

