

**Teenage parenthood:
how does it relate
to proficiency in literacy?**



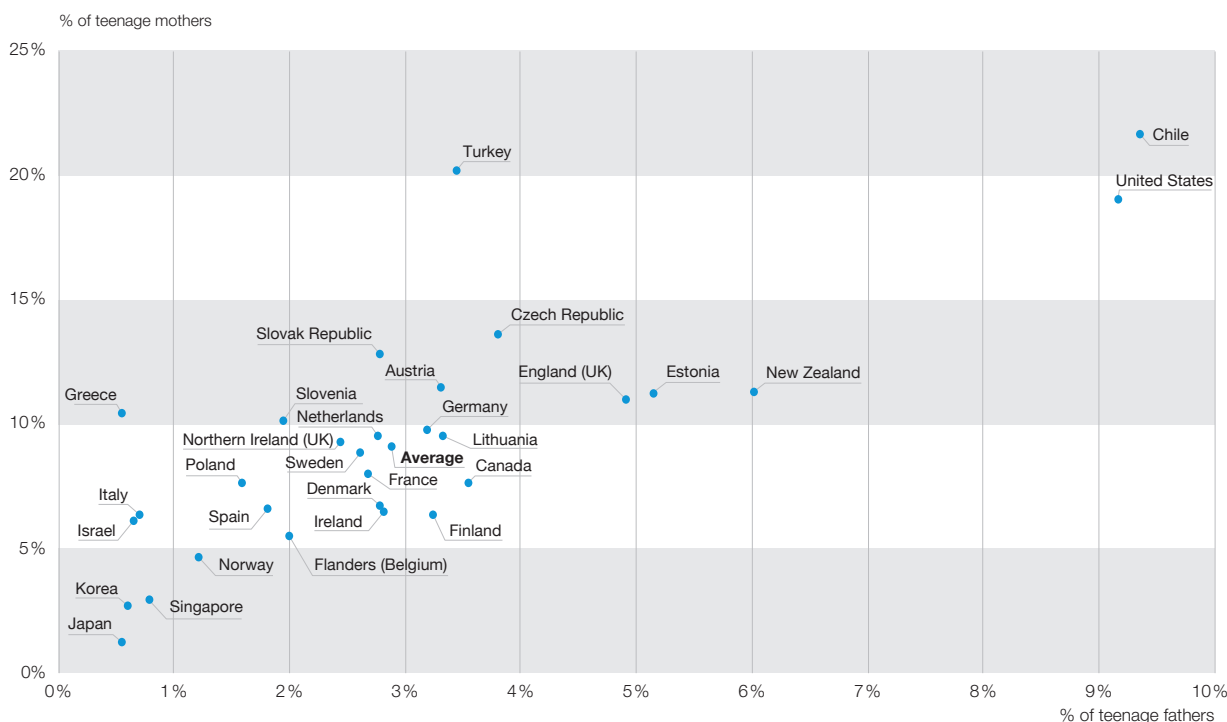
Adult Skills
in Focus #9

- Apart from in Japan, Korea and Singapore, where the phenomenon is relatively rare, a significant proportion of adults aged 16 to 65, mostly women, became parents for the first time before the age of 20.
- Although the average frequency of teenage mothers has fallen over the last 50 years, it still remains at significantly high levels in a number of OECD countries. Those where the rate is highest among 16-19 year olds are Chile, the United States, England and the Netherlands.
- Adults who had children during their teenage years usually belong to those groups with the lowest levels of literacy proficiency. When educational attainment is controlled for, the link is reduced in strength, but not eliminated.

The occurrence of pregnancy among young people under the age of 20 is identified as a risky behaviour against which adolescent girls need to be protected and the prevention of which is still a major public health issue today. In line with the recommendations of Article 24 f of the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the measures put in place by governments to combat early pregnancy include the provision of family planning services and the education of children about public health issues. Sex education classes are also organised regularly in schools throughout the OECD countries.

Considerable disparities exist in the percentage of teenage parents among the different subgroups of the population, and individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who are poorly educated are disproportionately likely to have a child before the age of 20. Understanding the links between literacy proficiency and early parenthood is therefore a crucial objective, both in order to identify the profile of the groups at greatest risk more accurately and to gain a clear idea of the difficulties that very young parents face.

Figure 1 / Percentage of 16-65 year-olds who became parents in their teens, by sex and by country



Note: The average is that of the countries participating in the survey, excluding Australia.
Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/publicdataandanalysis.



Most teenage parents are young women

The OECD PIAAC survey is one of the few to collect information both on adults' cognitive skills (literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills) and on their family and individual characteristics, including composition of family unit and educational situation and attainment. We are thus able to identify the category of teenage parents, consisting of anyone under 20 years of age (i.e. between 16 and 19 years old), who reports having a child at the time of the survey.

Overall, the percentage of parents among teenagers is relatively low, standing at 1.3% of 16-19 year-olds for the OECD countries participating in the survey. However, young women are much more likely to be in this situation than young men. The percentage of teenage mothers is 1.9%, compared to 0.7% for the percentage of teenage fathers. In other words, teenage females are 2.6 times more likely to have a child than teenage males. The percentage of teenage mothers is particularly high in Chile, the United

States, England and the Netherlands, where it is 2.5 to 6 times higher than the OECD average.

By combining information on the respondent's date of birth and the age of his or her oldest child, it is possible to estimate the age at which the respondent became a parent for the first time and therefore the percentage of all adults aged 16 to 65 who became parents before their 20s (Figure 1). On average, 9% of women and 2.9% of men became parents as teenagers. The percentage is highest in Chile, Turkey and the United States, and lowest in Japan, Singapore and Korea.

The differences between OECD countries are considerable. In Chile, for example, the proportion of women who became mothers in their teens is 20 times higher than that in Japan. The percentage of teenage fathers remains lower than that of teenage mothers and is usually less than 4%, except in England, Estonia, New Zealand, the United States and Chile.

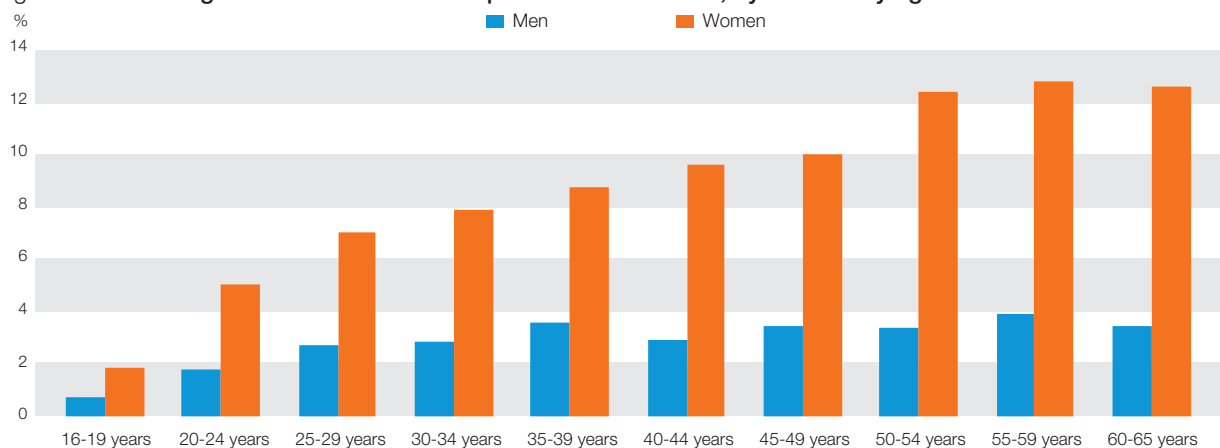
Becoming a parent in adolescence is less common among younger generations of adults

By analysing the results by age group, we can gain an idea of changes in the extent of the phenomenon of teenage parenthood over the last fifty years (Figure 2). The results show that the percentage of individuals who became parents during adolescence is much higher among the older generations than among the younger generations. Women and men over 50 are 2 to 2.5 times more likely to have had their first child under 20 than

young adults aged 20 to 24. Several explanations could account for this fall in the fertility rate of teenage females, such as the increase in the length of studies, the rise in the average age at marriage, the development of contraceptives, and the legalisation and spread of abortion.

Over the generations covered by the PIAAC survey, it is undeniable that teenage parenthood

Figure 2 / Percentage of adults who became parents in their teens, by sex and by age



Note: Excluding Australia.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/publicdataandanalysis.

is a phenomenon that has concerned and continues to concern a much higher proportion of women than men. While a gradual narrowing of the gender gap is observable in absolute terms, the inequalities show little change in relative terms. For example, among 45-to-49 year-olds, the percentage of adults who became parents as teenagers differs by 6.5 percentage points between women and men, while among adults aged 20 to 24 it differs by 3.2 percentage points.

However, in these two age groups, women are still 2.8 times more likely than men to have become parents as teenagers. The constancy of this gap reflects the persistence of two phenomena: firstly, the observed trend for there to be an age difference within couples, and secondly, where there is little or no age difference, the fact that the consequences of early pregnancy tend to be borne by single mothers rather than by both biological parents.

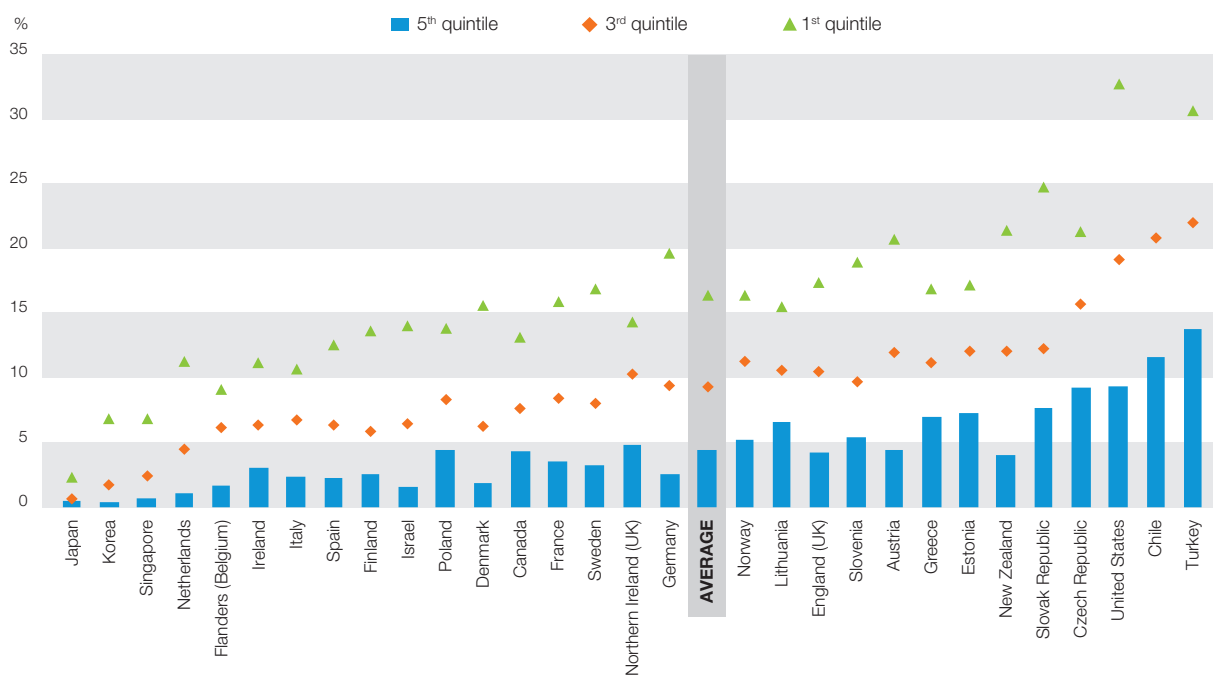
Women with the lowest literacy proficiency are much more likely to become teenage mothers

The literacy proficiency indicator used here is the national quintile distribution of adult literacy proficiency scores. In other words, the adults in the first quintile are the 20% with the lowest literacy scores, while those in the fifth quintile are the 20% with the highest scores compared to the overall population of a given country. This approach has been favoured because the aim is to identify some common characteristics of the groups most at risk of becoming parents at an early age rather than to attempt to quantify the influence of the absolute level of literacy on the likelihood of having a child as a teenager without knowing the direction of causality.

There is a strong negative relationship between literacy proficiency and the rate of teenage motherhood, which decreases as one moves up the national distributions of proficiency scores. On average, 16.5% of women aged 25 to 65 in the first literacy proficiency quintile became mothers in their teens, compared to 9.3% of those in the third quintile and 4.4% of those in the highest quintile.

The decreasing percentage of teenage mothers per proficiency level group is found in all the surveyed countries, but its magnitude varies greatly from country to country. The average inter-quintile gap, i.e. the difference between the percentages of the first and fifth quintile, is 12 percentage points; however,

Figure 3 / Percentage of women aged 25 to 65 who became mothers in their teens by literacy proficiency quintile and by country



Note: Excluding Australia. Countries are ranked in ascending order of the percentage of adults over 25 who became parents before the age of 20.
Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/publicdataandanalysis.



this difference is more than 16 points in two countries (Austria and Turkey), 17 points in three countries (Germany, New Zealand and the Slovak Republic) and as high as 23 points in two countries (Chile and the United States). The greater the difference, the more it reflects phenomena of cumulative inequality. In countries where

the inter-quintile gap is above average, being in the first quintile significantly increases the risk of early parenthood and thus adds to the vulnerability of young women whose long-term prospects (career opportunities, health, etc.) are already weakened by their low level of literacy skills.

Taking educational attainment into account halves the influence of the level of literacy proficiency on the risk of early parenthood

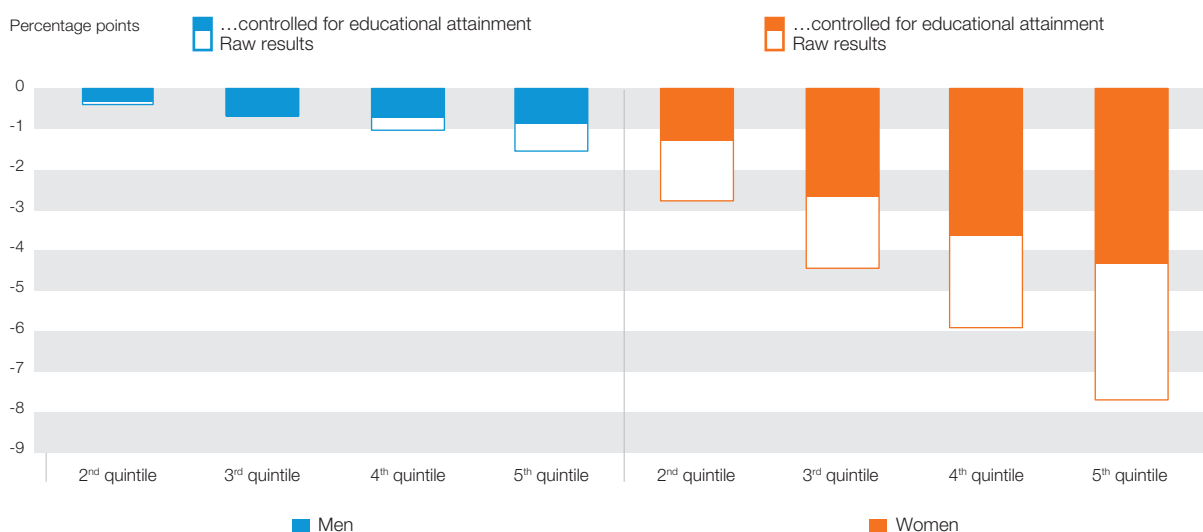
The association between literacy proficiency level and proportion of teenage parents could be explained by the level of education attained by young parents, as adults with the highest levels of education tend to have stronger literacy skills than adults with lower levels of education, and their average age when their first child is born tends to be higher.

A strong negative link between the level of qualification obtained and the probability of having a child before the age of 20 is observed, particularly for women. This finding is not surprising. First, most teenage mothers will have had to interrupt their studies on the birth of their first child, if they have not already done so before the birth. Under these conditions, the highest level of education they will have been able to attain before the birth of their first child is the completion of secondary education. Second, becoming a teenage parent creates many barriers to the continuation of education and hence to the development of young

parents' literacy proficiency. Failure to complete secondary school makes it almost impossible to progress to higher education and even, for financial and practical reasons, to resume study, especially at upper secondary level.

Unsurprisingly, controlling outcomes by educational attainment level significantly reduces the strength of the link between literacy proficiency and the probability of having a child during adolescence, especially for women. When the level of education is taken into account, the difference in the proportion of women who became mothers in their teens between those in the fifth quintile of the national distributions of literacy scores and those in the first quintile decreases from -7.7 to -4.3 percentage points. The result is still significant in terms of its magnitude since adults in the first quintile are three times more likely to become a teenage parent than those in the fifth quintile.

Figure 4 / Difference in percentage of adults aged 25 to 65 who became parents in their teens by sex and by literacy quintile, controlled for educational attainment



Note: Reference group = first quintile in national distribution of literacy scores.

Source: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015), www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/publicdataandanalysis.

The bottom line



The results of the Adult Skills Assessment confirm that there is a strong link between the level of literacy proficiency and the rate of teenage motherhood. Countries where this link is strongest could further encourage the prevention of and support with pregnancies before the age of 20 in the groups at highest risk. These measures are all the more crucial as they are about protecting not just the most vulnerable teenagers but also their prospective children against the long-term consequences of these early births.

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Jonas N. and Thorn W. (2018), “Literacy skills and family configurations”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 192, OECD Publishing, Paris.
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> **VISIT:**

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