Deciding to Talk to a Parent about Abortion: The Experiences of Minors Before Illinois Required Parental Notice

November 2013

Introduction
Recent changes in Illinois law requiring parental notice of abortion make research on abortion-seeking minor’s behaviors timely. In 1995, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Parental Notice of Abortion Act, but it was quickly prevented from going into effect by the courts. As a result, minors have had no legal restrictions on accessing abortion services in Illinois. However, following new court rulings, minors have been subject to new restrictions since August of 2013. The law requires health care providers to give notification to an adult family member before providing an abortion to a minor (a woman under the age of 18). An adult family member is defined as a parent, legal guardian, grandparent, or resident step-parent. Alternatively, a minor can seek a judicial bypass to waive such notification. Exceptions also exist for minors in an emergency situation or for those minors who testify to family abuse or incest.

In Illinois, one-third of pregnant young women under the age of 18 obtain an abortion. As this new law is implemented, it will be critical to assess its effects on minors. Research on minors’ parental communication behaviors prior to law enforcement provides insights on motivations for informing or not informing a parent. We conducted a qualitative study to examine Illinois minors’ involvement of parents in their abortion decision in order to determine possible benefits and harms of mandated communication. This brief highlights some initial findings from the larger study.

Who Minors Tell
We interviewed 30 pregnant minors aged 14 to 17 who were seeking abortions at three Chicago-area clinics in the summer of 2010. We found that minors involve an array of individuals in their abortion decision, depending on their personal situation and relationships. In general, they tended to reach out to those who are involved in their lives and who will enable them to obtain an abortion. Two-thirds of participants ultimately involved a parent or guardian in their abortion decision. In many cases, a participant involved a parent who lived with them. The young women interviewed often gave more than one reasons for why they wanted to involve or exclude a parent.

In addition to parents, minors informed other members of their support network. More than half told a partner and/or the partner with whom she became pregnant. Many told a friend, aunt, or cousin and some told a sister, boyfriend’s parent, grandparent or teacher.

Reasons for Wanting to Involve a Parent
Young women who ultimately involved a parent and some of those who did not voiced reasons for why they would want a parent involved.

Desire for emotional or decisional support
Participants expressed wanting support in making their abortion decision and in seeking the abortion itself.

“I know she can help me…in making a decision about what to do.” - age 16

“I didn’t want to disappoint her but I had to tell her cause it wasn’t something I could get through by myself. At least that’s how I felt.” - age 18

Feeling unable to hide pregnancy
Some participants believed their pregnancy would ultimately be uncovered and others described it as too hard to keep secret in their family situation.

“She [mother] keeps up with my period because it’s right after hers, so once I missed one, she noticed and she asked me about it and I acted like I didn’t know at first. But eventually, like a couple days later, … I was tired of holding it in, so I told her.” – age 17
"...we were living with our grandparents and I couldn’t really hide it. I was sleepy, sleeping for hours, sick, I had throwing up and everything." – age 15

Close or open relationship with parent
A few participants specifically described a close or open relationship with a parent where it felt natural to involve him or her.

"Because I knew, whatever my decision was, she would support me, and...I knew not to hide—I knew I didn’t have to hide anything...we have a good bond." – age 17

"...but my dad’s like, he’s different than my mom. He loves me regardless so I wasn’t really worried about what he would say." – age 16

Seeking financial or logistical assistance
The need for assistance with costs or the practical steps of obtaining an abortion motivated participants to want to involve a parent.

"I wasn’t going to tell nobody cause it was easier but it was too late ’cause I was too far along. And that’s when I told them ’cause I knew had to get more money and stuff" – age 17

"I mean, I wouldn’t normally tell my dad but it came to a point where I needed another $50 for the abortion to be done and so I relied on daddy." – age 16

Third party led to involvement
Several participants had not wanted to involve a parent, but felt compelled to tell as a result of a third party’s actions, such as a doctor’s interference, the pressure of siblings, and believing a parent’s consent was needed.

"They [clinic staff] said, ‘you have to tell her,’ and they was in the room with me and they brought her in. I really didn’t tell her, I just kept crying and saying I was sorry, but then she figured it out afterwards." – age 15

Reasons for Wanting to Exclude a Parent
Parent not involved in minor’s life
Many discussed the lack of a parent’s role in their life, making comments like: “We don’t really communicate”, “He lives in another state”, and “I don’t know my dad”.

"He’s [father] really not that much involved with me anyway...I feel that he barely does-he barely lives up to his own responsibilities, which is me. He barely does what he has to do with me, so why should he know. That’s how I feel. Why should I tell him? He wasn’t there, so. He shouldn’t really have nothing to say about it." – age 15

Parent will interfere with abortion decision
Participants, especially those who ultimately did not involve a parent, described concerns that a parent would disagree with their decision to get an abortion and potentially persuade them against—or actually prevent them from—obtaining one.

"She just told me, like, it’s not right... and she told me like, if I did get pregnant, like, she told me she wouldn’t let me have one. She said it’s my responsibility." – age 17

"She’d probably try to push me to adoption or something like that." – age 17

"I told her that I wanted one and that I was going to get it but she told me no." – age 17

Parent’s emotional reaction
Often, participants would explain their wish to avoid a parent’s anger.

"He [father] would probably kick me out of the house and he would be really mad" – age 15

"I think he’d [father] be mad... He’d just, I don’t think he’d say anything, I think he’d just be really upset. – age 17

Some participants described how they wished to avoid causing a parent to be upset or disappointed in them.

"I’m the youngest daughter and I feel like, you know, they would just be so disappointed in me...She wouldn’t be angry, but she would really just be really disappointed and I wasn’t ready for that." – age 16.

"I really didn’t wanna upset her, you know, it- it would be hard to tell your parent something like that when they think a lot of you." – age 17

Damage relationship with parent
Some young women were concerned that by telling a parent about their abortion decision they would further damage an already fragile relationship or threaten a good relationship.

"...to me that would start a whole lot of drama and right now um, our relationship is like- is kind of on good terms but it’s not, so for me telling her this um, I think it like would go back down the drain." – age 17
“Cause it’s like, ‘man what are they going to think’ and ‘are they going to hate me for this’… that is what goes through your mind.” – age 17

Desire for privacy
Some mentioned a desire for privacy and a belief that the experience would be easier for them if parents were not involved.

"I would like to make it easier for myself to move on from this...so I won’t feel like I’m being judged and- at home, and stuff like that. Other people won’t be, you know, talking to me about it and, you know. I rather like try and forget about it myself, you know?" – age 17

Involving Other Adults
Nearly half of the minors described why they wanted to involve adults other than their parents or guardians. In these cases, the minors described close relationships, a belief that the adult would support their decision, and a history which established trust.

“My boyfriend he definitely deserves to know, and his mother, I’m pretty close to her, she’s, she’s not judgmental with me at all, so I felt that it was safe to tell her.” – age 17

“I wanted to tell my cousin because she got pregnant at 16 and I just wanted to get some advice from her. She’s 23 right now and she has two kids." – age 15

Conclusions
Research shows that minors are willing and motivated to seek parental involvement in their abortion decision when they believe they will receive support or assistance and in the context of open and engaged parental relationships.3,7 Similarly, our initial findings show that minors weigh their options and ultimately choose to involve those people who will help them, rather than those who will make the experience more difficult. When minors do exclude a parent, their reasons stem from the nature of their family dynamics or personal experiences with that parent.3,5 Laws that mandate parental involvement can ignore these complex family situations and fail to recognize the insights of young women.


References