ACCESS AND UTILIZATION OF PROFESSIONAL ORAL HEALTH SERVICES: 
PERCEPTIONS OF PREGNANT AND PARENTING ADOLESCENT WOMEN

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Purpose: While it is clear that adolescent maternal oral health plays an important role in general and pregnancy health and well-being, many adolescents do not visit a dentist or oral health professional during the perinatal and postpartum periods even when oral problems are obvious. When oral health services are not obtained adolescent women may be omitting vital preventative oral health screenings and education. Lack of access and utilization of professional oral health services may exacerbate existing oral health problems and subsequently interfere with dietary quality and appropriate oral health self-care practices important for maternal and child health. In addition, adolescents may face greater challenges to access and utilization of professional oral health services than their older counterparts. The purpose of this study was to explore potential barriers to access and utilization of professional oral health services among pregnant and parenting adolescent women.

Methods: Study participants were recruited from a larger mixed-method study examining oral health status among pregnant and parenting adolescent women. A qualitative descriptive design was used for the qualitative component of the study. The sample consisted of 24 school-based adolescent women (7 were pregnant and 17 were parenting). Participants ranged from 14 to 18 years of age (M = 16.3, SD = 1.23 years). Three racial/ethnic groups were represented; three were White (12.5%), three were Black/African American (12.5%), and 18 (75%) were Hispanic/Latina. Manifest and latent content analysis were conducted by hand with data from face-to-face interviews, observations, field notes, and reflective journaling.

Findings: Analysis generated several categories and subthemes germane to access and utilization of professional oral health services. Participants described cost, language difficulties, cultural differences, and lack of awareness related to oral health care systems as barriers to accessing and utilizing professional oral health services. Further, inconsistent practices among oral health care professionals thwarted utilization of oral health services where there was access. Because these barriers were often difficult to navigate, adolescent women and their families discovered alternate sources for obtaining oral health services, such as traditional healers and dental clinics located in the border regions of Mexico.

Conclusions: Barriers to access and utilization of professional oral health services existed and were influenced by many factors. Thus, alternate sources of oral health services were obtained by pregnant and parenting adolescent women and their families. Given the importance of maternal oral health to general health, pregnancy health, and well-being, these factors should be considered when delivering care, designing future research and planning policy related to the priority population. Researchers should explore the use of alternate oral health services among pregnant and parenting adolescent women within the context of culture. Health care providers should assess for the use of alternate oral health services, acknowledge those services if they exist, and integrate them into traditional professional care are if deemed safe and appropriate.

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