
**WORKING WITH TEEN PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN:
THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS AND
GUIDANCE FOR CHILD CARE PROFESSIONALS IN THE FIELD**

A Briefing Paper

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INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper was developed to support trainers of Massachusetts' Services to Teen Parents and Their Children Program (STPC). It draws heavily from remarks made by Susan Batten, Senior Program Officer, Center for Assessment and Policy Development (CAPD) at the April 1996 Training Kickoff for STPC child care providers.

Many of the facts and remarks made by child care providers included in this document come from CAPD's current School-Based Initiative for Adolescent Parents and Their Young Children, an effort to expand school-based services for teen parents and the children of teens across the country.

WHY A SCHOOL-BASED APPROACH?

Using a school-based approach to facilitate good outcomes for both teen parents and their children has the ability to benefit two at-risk populations. Programs that include a range of services to young parents and quality child care in-school or linked to schools have the following benefits for teen parents and their children.

FOR TEEN PARENTS

- ***School-based programs provide a potential for early intervention, before a teen parent drops out***
 - using schools as the locus of intervention can link pregnant and parenting students to critical services before they drop out and become alienated from the educational system and their educational goals.
- ***Interventions after receipt of welfare are less effective***
 - research on the New Chance Demonstrations, a series of programs across the country aimed at facilitating self-sufficiency of young families, suggests that waiting until after a teen becomes dependent on welfare to link them with critical services does not affect desired education and self-sufficiency outcomes (Polit, et al., 1988; Maynard, 1993; DeParle, 1994).

- ***Providing services on-site may achieve more positive outcomes than programs that do not provide services in schools***
- ***Research on Ohio's Learning, Earning and Parenting Program (LEAP) Program suggests that efforts in the state aimed at increasing the attendance and retention of teen parents were most effective when child care and case management services were provided on site (Bloom, et al., 1993; Chira, 1994).***

FOR CHILDREN

- ***Forty-seven percent of all poor children under the age of six have mothers who were adolescents when they first gave birth and poor children are more at risk for poor health and development outcomes***
- ***School-based programs can link at-risk children to quality child development and preventive services***
 - designed correctly, school-based programs can facilitate positive outcomes for teen parents and their children. Not only can these programs help teen parents graduate from school and transition to further education, job training or employment, they can also facilitate the school readiness of their children. This can be done by providing quality infant development programming (stimulation, etc.) and access to basic preventive health services.

GENERAL LESSONS LEARNED

Identifying ways in which schools across the country have expanded the scope and scale of school-based programs for adolescent parents and their young children generated several lessons about this population and the programs which serve them. They include:

- ***Adolescent parents are often an invisible population***
- in many communities, teen parents are not a high priority for schools and other community agencies. Oftentimes, this population is not the subject of intervention until they encounter the welfare system. Research suggests this is not a promising strategy.
- ***Many school-based programs lack the full array of services needed to facilitate good outcomes for teen parents and their children. There are several reasons why this may be the case:***
 - challenges to program expansion including barriers to providing quality child care on or near schools; the difficulty of providing flexible, quality education for pregnant and parenting teens; the difficulty of providing support services to this population and barriers to obtaining stable, sufficient funding to support comprehensive services;
 - the lack of outcomes orientation where programs put in place services and supports that have been proven effective in attaining outcomes of interest for teen parents and their children; and
 - the lack of mechanisms to share effective strategies for expanding school-based services across communities.
- ***The opportunity for a two-generational impact is often overlooked***
- many programs, given their link to schools, are better equipped to address the needs of teen parents, including providing educational and support services for these students, than addressing the needs of their children. Some programs do not know where children of teen parents are during the day. Others may service children in formal child care arrangements that do not adhere to professional standards that facilitate quality and child development.
- ***Few programs collect sufficient data***
- while some programs do collect basic demographic data on the teen parents and the children of teens they serve, many do not have information on program use and outcomes which help illustrate program benefits and support program planning. Those that do often have this information for parenting students, but not their children.
- ***Community-wide partnerships are necessary***
- schools or child care providers cannot improve outcomes for this population by themselves. To sufficiently support young families, whole communities — including the education, early childhood, health, business, government and social service communities — must make teen parents and their children a priority and commit to developing a continuum of services to meet their needs.

WHO ARE ADOLESCENT PARENTS?

Understanding the characteristics of teen parents and the challenges that face them can help service providers design programs that meet their specific needs. Factors to consider when developing programs for this population include:

- ***While they are parents, they are teens***
- adolescence is a dynamic stage of human development full of physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes. These changes are coupled with the need for a teen to become more independent, connect with his or her peers and exert more control and power over his or her life.
- changes occurring during adolescence facilitate risky behavior. Smoking, abusing drugs and in some cases, sexual activity are the result of a teen's emotional development evolving independence and self-power.
- teen parents struggle with the dual challenges of being an adolescent and a parent. Programs that serve them must strike a balance between addressing their needs of being a parent while providing the services and supports needed to adolescents
- ***Nationally, teen parents are more likely than other teens to:***
 - have poor basic skills, One half of poor teens have low basic skills and one in five poor female teens of all ethnic groups with low basic skills is a teen mother (Children's Defense Fund, January 1987).
 - leave school before completion. In one state-wide study, the number one reason cited by females for dropping out of school is pregnancy and parenting responsibilities (Brindis, 1988). Regardless of background factors, teenage parenthood is a direct cause of "truncated" schooling, a factor that causes teenage fathers to occupy blue collar jobs and to enter the labor force earlier than their non-fathering classmates (Robinson, 1988).
 - live in poverty. Teens from poor families are at greater risk of early parenthood than are teens from higher income families (Children's Defense Fund, November 1986). Given the link between poverty and female headed households, these girls are often growing up in fatherless families that do not offer positive models of healthy, adult men.
 - received welfare for long periods. Studies of the nation's welfare population have shown that while teen parents make up a small percentage of the caseload, families started by young parents tend to stay on welfare longer than those started by older parents.
 - suffer from low self-esteem. The effects of poverty and school failure (as well as other factors described below) facilitate low self-concept and esteem.
- ***Among teen mothers:***
 - many are impregnated by older men. In 1992, men over the age of 20 were responsible for almost 70 percent of teen births (to girls under 20). Fifteen percent of these births were fathered by men over 25 years of age. In California, studies have shown that as many as half of births to teens ages 10-15 were fathered by men over 20 (Males, 1996).
 - many are victims of sexual abuse. In one study, 62 percent of pregnant teenagers have been victims of molestation, attempted rape or rape prior to their first pregnancy (Boyer, 1992).
- ***Childbearing behaviors and trends among teens and adults are similar (teens do what adults do)***
- while actual rates are different, trends in pregnancy, abortion, births and unwed births among teen and adult women are similar. That is, when these rates rise or fall for adult women, they tend to do the same for teen girls (Males, 1996).

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN OF TEENS?

It is equally important to understand the characteristics of children of teen parents to design and develop programming for this population. Critical factors include:

- ***Many are born at low birthweight***
- it is estimated that between 11 percent to 17 percent of low birthweight babies are born to teen mothers (California Department of Education, 1996).
- ***Children of teens tend to have more physical, emotional and intellectual developmental problems than children born to older mothers***
- children of parents 17-years-old and younger have lower cognitive scores than children born of parents 18-years-old and older (Baldwin, 1981).
- children whose conception had been mistimed or unwanted exhibit higher levels of fearfulness and lower levels of positive affect before age two and, by preschool age, they have lower scores on verbal development tests even though they have no deficit of verbal memory (Brown, 1995).
- as a result of these issues, children of teen parents may tend to be sicker and sick more frequently than children born to older women.
- ***Many of these factors are directly related to the circumstances of the mother***
- the health and developmental problems facing children of teen parents are linked to both the age, but most importantly, the poverty status of the mothers

STPC CORE OUTCOMES AND SERVICES TO ACHIEVE THEM

Services to Teen Parents and Their Children (STPC) seeks to achieve certain outcomes for parenting teens and their children. Given outcomes of interest, the program includes specific services and supports which can facilitate these outcomes. Outcomes and services include:

- **Outcomes**

- completion of high school
- increased parenting skills
- reduction in repeat pregnancies
- a healthy start for infants and toddlers of teen parents
- achievement of appropriate milestones for children

- **Services**

- case management
- peer support groups
- counseling
- nutritional services, counseling and health screenings
- family planning counseling
- transportation (when appropriate)
- child care

Providing comprehensive services of this nature will require child care providers to work closely with various community institutions including schools, and the health and social service communities.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Discussions with child care providers serving children of teens have identified some guidance for others preparing to work with this population. They include:

- ***Many of the issues related to serving the children of teens are common to all first time mothers***
- teen parents, similar to older parents, are often hesitant to leave their children with a new child care provider
- clearly articulating the rules and policies (i.e., drop-off and pick-up of children; visitation, etc.) of the center are important for all parents
- ***Styles of communication are important when working with teens***
- teens are concrete thinkers and, as a result, tend to take things very seriously. Simple, direct and frequent communication may work best.
- there is some evidence that mutuality approaches and communication styles (those that respect and give equal weight to a teen's opinion) are more effective than paternalistic approaches (styles which are more directive and give less weight to an adolescent's opinion) in working with teens (Kinny, et al., 1994).
- ***Celebrating successes and providing support is important when working with teens***
- -adolescent parents are often the subject of criticism by adults, including teachers, medical professionals and other service providers.
- while many are in supportive families, some teen parents are not. In these situations, teen parents may lack the critical praise and support from adults.
- programs that serve this population should take the time to celebrate small successes which help build confidence and motivation.
- ***Respect for parental role***
- teen parents struggle with being both an adolescent and a parent. While service professionals are older, more experienced and modeling important parenting behavior, it is important to remember that they are parents. Programs must find ways to balance respecting the rights and wishes of young parents with doing what is best for the child.
- ***Expect conflicts of authority***
- child care providers can expect tension with teen parents around particular issues including appropriate discipline, feeding (i.e., when to introduce solid foods) and how to attend to a crying baby.
- in some respects, conflicts with child care providers are ways in which teen parents exercise the power that they are encouraged to exert regarding their children. Adolescent parents are repeatedly told to take responsibility for their children and child care providers may be one of the few groups of people with whom they can exercise this power.
- ***Focus on peer involvement***
- acceptance and approval by their peer group is critically important to adolescents. Many have lost their old friends and are isolated and depressed. Focusing on activities that involve their peers helps address this isolation and learn from each other.
- ***Realize here and now is important***
- overtime, adolescents move from concrete to operational thinking where they begin to focus on their future and consider the long-term implications of their current actions. Professionals working with this population should expect some frustration when asking teens, particularly younger adolescents, to plan ahead.

Insights from the Field (continued)

- ***Be patient and accessible***

- trusting relationships with adults are important for all adolescents. However, it takes time to build trust and providers must find time to develop these relationships. This requires a certain level of flexibility to accommodate the teen's schedule.

- ***Don't expect praise***

- while providers working with this population go out of their way to be understanding and flexible, these behaviors are expected by teens and they may not show gratitude. Overtime, adolescents begin to understand the impact that adults have had on their lives; however, as teens they (and their friends) are the center of attention.

- ***Counsel them on quality***

- many teens do not know what to look for in child care. These skills are important so they can make good choices for their children in the future. Child care providers should take the time to point out why their programs are of high quality.

- ***Prepare for emotional, behavioral, developmental issues***

- children of teen parents will be sicker and sick more frequently than other children. They also will develop slower. Child care providers should be trained to identify delays, look for signs of illness and develop strategies to work with teen parents and community service providers to address these issues.

- ***Prepare for dealings with other family members***

- child care providers report some tension between the teen mother and grandmother (the teen's mother) around child rearing practices. Issues of "who is the real mother?" may come up. Strategies to work with grandmothers and teen parents must be developed which respect the roles of each and their love for the child.

- ***Have fun***

- teen parents are children themselves and need and want to have fun. Providers should have a sense of humor and enjoy the time spent with this special group of young people.

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