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PROMISING TEEN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS: INITIAL EVIDENCE LESSONS FROM EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

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Background

What makes for a good teen fatherhood program? The timing of fatherhood is a powerful organizer of the paternal roleⁱ. Early entry into fatherhood is a non-normative event and often accelerates role transitionsⁱⁱ. Even before they become fathers, teen fathers are a particularly vulnerable group of males whose family backgrounds and life-stressors tend to differ from older men and men who do not become fathers during adolescence.^{iii,iv} For many years, teen fathers were either overlooked or blamed for their role in teen pregnancy. However, interest in designing programs to reduce teen pregnancy, and to enhance outcomes for babies and children as well as meet the needs of this vulnerable population has increased in recent years.^v To date, few teen fatherhood programs have been evaluated and even fewer have undergone rigorous (i.e., experimental) evaluations. Fortunately, much can be learned from examining program practices across those existing teen fatherhood programs that have adhered to specific rigorous evaluation research criteria as are described below. This brief identifies ten characteristics of “model” and “promising” teen fatherhood programs using rigorous evaluation criteria.

Criteria for Rating Effective Teen Fatherhood Programs

Only rigorous evaluations of programs can provide evidence of whether or not programs actually have a desired effect. The evidence base on the effects of programs on outcomes for teen fathers and their families varies widely, as does the quality and rigor of research methods. In general, results from well-designed programs that have been rigorously evaluated should be taken more seriously than results from less well-designed and evaluated programs. Several principles of rigorous research often yield high quality results making for effective programs. *Of the 18 teen fatherhood programs considered in this review, only four met these criteria. These programs met some of these criteria:*

“**Model**” fatherhood programs included in this review are defined as those that:

- Had been experimentally evaluated (randomized controlled trial study);
- Had been evaluated by an independent, external evaluator with publicly available evaluation results;
- Had a sample size for evaluation that exceeded 30 in both the treatment and control group;
- Retained at least 60% of the original sample for the evaluation;

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- Had at least one outcome that was positively changed by 10% and;
- Had at least one outcome with a substantial effect size that was statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

“Promising” teen fatherhood programs included in this review:

- Used quasi-experimental design (comparison group);
- Had been evaluated by an independent, external evaluator with publicly available evaluation results;
- Had a sample size that exceeded 15 in both the treatment and control group;
- Retained at least 50% of the original sample for the evaluation;
- Had at least one outcome that was positively changed by 5% and;
- Had at least one outcome with a substantial effect size that was statistically significant at the 0.10 level.

Ten Promising Practices of “model” and “promising” Teen Fatherhood Programs

Eighteen fatherhood programs were assessed and, of these, one was identified as a “model” program and three as “promising” programs. These programs shared 10 common features. These features reflect different aspects of teaching and the particular content of programs. There is no evidence to suggest which combination of these characteristics contributed to the overall success of these programs, nor is there evidence that each program had each of these characteristics. Effective teen fatherhood programs:

1. Partnered with community organizations such as schools, pre-natal clinics and programs for teen mothers to help recruit and engage teen fathers
2. Had program staff develop one-on-one relationships with teen fathers, either in small groups, through individual case management, or through mentoring services
3. Offered a comprehensive array of services to teen fathers that went beyond only parenting information
4. Began with a theoretical program model and used theories of change or logic models that were effective with adolescent parents
5. Delivered services in engaging and interactive ways.
6. Conducted needs assessments and/or used participant feedback to provide teen fathers the services they wanted
7. Hired professionals who were experienced, empathetic, enthusiastic, well-connected in the community, and carefully matched to participants
8. Incorporated teaching methods and materials that were appropriate for teen fathers and their culture and age.
9. Used an incentive with teen fathers and their families
10. Mentored teen fathers

Promising Practice #1. Effective programs partnered with community organizations such as schools, pre-natal clinics and programs for teen mothers to help recruit and engage teen fathers.

Three of the four “model” and “promising” teen fatherhood programs partnered with a wide variety of community agencies (e.g., prenatal clinics, support programs for teen mothers, schools) in an effort to recruit fathers.

- The *Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships* program recruited at eleven sites (four community based organizations and seven alternative schools) in order to attract eligible teen couples to the program.
- Some “model” and “promising” programs partnered with community organizations in order to access a specific expertise (e.g., mentoring) or physical resources (e.g., better facilities). *STEP-UP* formally partnered with the Valley Big Brothers/Big Sisters (VBB/BS) because of VBB/BS’s expertise in providing mentoring services to young men.

Promising Practice #2. Effective programs had program staff develop one-on-one relationships with teen fathers, either in small groups, through individual case management, or through mentoring services.

Three of the four “model” and “promising” programs worked closely with each teen participant. This one-on-one work often allowed programs to create individualized service plans to meet the needs of teen fathers.

- Each participant in the *Young Dads* program worked closely with a case worker who helped participants to recognize their strengths and talents, find work, and who served as a major source of emotional support.
- Mentors and case managers in the *STEP-UP* program were able to overcome young fathers’ initial mistrust of authority figures through the development of close personal relationships.
- The small size of the groups in *Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships* helped to create a safe environment in which parenting teen couples felt more comfortable sharing intimate stories.

Promising Practice #3. Effective programs offered a comprehensive array of services to teen fathers that went beyond only parenting information.

There is evidence to suggest that providing teen fathers with parenting information alone is insufficient to positively impact the lives of teen fathers and their families.^{vi} Our review found that three of the four “model” and “promising” teen fatherhood programs offered a comprehensive set of services, including employment, education, and counseling components. Additionally, case managers or social workers working in effective programs knew where in the community to refer participants for services that the program was unable to provide.

- *STEP-UP* offered participants counseling, case management, mentoring, and educational services and supports.

- Although the focus of *Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships* was risky behavior and disease prevention, small group time was also used to discuss the development and maintenance of healthy relationships, romantic and otherwise, and theories of gender and power.

Promising Practice #4. Effective programs began with a theoretical program model and used theories of change or logic models that were effective with adolescent parents.

Few teen fatherhood programs have been replicated. Among those “model” and “promising” programs reporting positive outcomes, however, two of the four used theoretical perspectives or theories of change and approaches that had been found to be effective in work with adolescent parents.

- The curriculum used in *Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships* included HIV prevention activities from the program *Be Proud! Be Responsible!*^{vii} and program activities were integrated and implemented based on a theoretical framework.^{viii}
- The curriculum used in *A Prenatal Education Intervention* was also developed based on the theories regarding the emotional and educational needs of teenage fathers.^{ix}

Promising Practice #5. Effective programs delivered services in engaging and interactive ways.

None of the “model” or “promising” programs for teenage fathers relied solely on a traditional lecture-style presentation of materials. There was a large diversity in the method of delivery of program services across and at times even within programs. Examples included:

- Small and large group discussion (*Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships*, *A Prenatal Education Intervention*);
- “Hands-on” activities such as letter-writing to children (*Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships*) and developing ten-year plans (*Young Dads*);
- Workshops on topics such as avoiding legal hassles and stress management (*STEP-UP*);
- Case management (*Young Dads*);
- Mentoring (*STEP-UP*);
- Audiovisuals aids (*A Prenatal Education Intervention*);
- Skill-building activities (*Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships*); and
- Family-oriented activities (*STEP-UP*).

Promising Practice #6. Effective programs conducted needs assessments and/or used participant feedback to provide teen fathers the services they wanted.

All four “model” and “promising” programs incorporated some level of flexibility in their service delivery that enabled them to tailor their intervention to meet the individual needs of fathers.

- *Young Dads* utilized individualized case management techniques, through which the program was able to identify the specific needs of each father and provide services accordingly.
- Prospective fathers involved with *A Prenatal Education Intervention* were given time at the end of every sessions to discuss individual concerns with the rest of the group.
- Case managers involved in the *STEP-UP* program worked closely with participants to assess and meet their individual needs.
- The *Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships* program held focus groups and interviews before solidifying their curriculum in order to assess the needs of adolescent couples in the community.

Promising Practice #7. Effective programs hired experienced professionals who were experienced, empathetic, enthusiastic, well-connected in the community, and carefully matched to participants.

- Staff working for all four of the “model” and “promising” programs were usually experienced professionals (e.g., a registered nurse-specialist led the sessions for *A Prenatal Education Intervention*, social workers served as case managers for *Young Dads*). Additionally, experienced Big Brothers/Big Sisters staff prepared volunteer mentors involved with *STEP-UP* to work with young fathers, and mentors were carefully matched with participants.
- Staff and mentors in successful programs “understood” or were empathetic toward the teen fathers whom they served as well as being excited and enthusiastic about the fatherhood program itself.
- In fatherhood programs with an employment component, it was important for at least one staff member to be well-connected in the community in order to help participants find jobs. One of the social workers involved with the *Young Dads* program was successfully able to network with local politicians and business owners in order to help participants find work.

Promising Practice #8. Incorporated teaching methods and materials that were appropriate for teen fathers and their culture and age.

Our review suggests that “model” and “promising” teen fatherhood programs tailored their materials to meet the needs of teen fathers and their families and programs were culturally sensitive in the provision of the various services and components.

- The *Young Dads* fatherhood program targeted African-American adolescent fathers and used male social workers who were thought to be better equipped to serve young fathers. Staff who engaged fathers were often targeted to be within the same cultural

group or from a similar living environment, so that they could better relate to program participants.

- The framework that guided the *Respecting and Protecting Our Relationship* program based its curriculum in culturally rooted concepts and indigenous values of the Chicano, Latino, Hispanic and Native American peoples.

Promising Practice #9. Effective programs used incentives with teen fathers and their families.

Two of the four “model” and “promising” programs used incentives to motivate teen fathers and their partners to participate.

- *STEP-UP* offered child care and transportation support to participating fathers. Additionally, families were invited to celebratory events, such as the Family Training Camp.
- In addition to holding program sessions close to participants’ homes, *Respecting and Protecting our Relationships* also offered child care to participating couples.

Promising Practice #10. Effective programs mentored teen fathers.

Teen fathers often lack positive role models and have few people to whom they can turn. Two of the four “model and promising” programs provided included a mentoring component.

- *STEP-UP* attempted to address these issues by adding a mentoring component to its programming. Mentors were “empathetic adult men with successful life experience”^x and were either professional case workers or trained volunteers.
- Case workers involved with *Young Dads* were seen by participating fathers not only as someone to turn to in a crisis, but also as role models.

Conclusion

Because the responsible fatherhood movement is relatively new, rigorous evaluations on teen fatherhood programs are currently limited and only a handful of program evaluations currently exist. For this report, to derive a subset of “model” and “promising” teen fatherhood programs, 18 programs were reviewed and four fit the criteria. It is important to note that the promising practices presented above are suggestions, based upon existing research. We cannot say which combinations of these strategies will work. A more detailed report that provides descriptions of a larger number of teen fatherhood programs mentioned in this brief is available at www.fatherhood.gov.

“MODEL” AND “PROMISING” PROGRAMS

“Model” Teen Fatherhood Programs:

- (1) **Young Dads** worked with African American adolescent fathers to help them become more responsible fathers.

Source:

Mazza, C. (2002). Young dads: The effects of a parenting program on urban African American adolescent fathers. *Adolescence*, 37(148), 681-693.

“Promising” Teen Fatherhood Programs:

- (2) **A Prenatal Education Intervention** worked with unwed, prospective, adolescent fathers to help teach them about human sexuality, pregnancy and prenatal care, labor and delivery, and infant development and care as well as promote supportive behaviors toward the mother and expected infant.

Source:

Westney, O.E., Cole, O.J., & Munford, T.L. (1988). The effects of prenatal education intervention on unwed prospective adolescent fathers. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 9(3), 214-218.

- (3) **Respecting and Protecting Our Relationships** worked with inner-city Latino adolescent parenting couples to help them develop and maintain healthy relationships as well as prevent HIV infection.

Source:

Koniak-Griffin, D., Lesser, J., Henneman, T., Huang, R., Huang, X., Tello, J., et al. (2008). HIV prevention for Latino adolescent mothers and their partners. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*. Retrieved May 19, 2008, from <http://wjn.sagepub.com>

Source:

Lesser, J., et al. (2005). Respecting and Protecting our Relationships: A community research HIV prevention program for teen fathers and mothers. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 17(4), 347-360.

- (4) **STEP-UP: Mentoring for Young Fathers** worked with young fathers to help them achieve self-sufficiency and effectively take responsibility for their families.

Source:

STEP-UP with Mentoring for Young Fathers. Retrieved May 20, 2008, from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/rpt/fth/fth_b.htm

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