LITERATURE REVIEW

What works to promote positive parenting among teen parents?

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Adolescent parenthood places teens and their children at higher risk. Teen parents are more likely to have negative educational, relational, health, and economic outcomes and, thus, have greater need for support and education than older parents.[1] Effective programs can reduce these risks and lead to better outcomes for both parents and children.

Research suggests that parenting support and education for adolescent parents can be effective in improving parents' responsiveness to their child and promoting more positive parent-child interactions.[2] Additionally, programs for adolescent mothers are associated with improved knowledge of positive parenting behaviors and child development.[3]

Parent training programs, however, are not equally beneficial so it is necessary to carefully assess the impact of program elements on promoting positive parent-child outcomes.[4] Indeed, a process for identifying the most effective or "active" elements from these programs is necessary for practitioners looking to implement and/or improve a parenting program for adolescent parents.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVELY TEACHING TEEN PARENTS

1. Parents need practice. Make time for teens to interact with their baby as you watch so you can give your feedback on their strengths.

2. Help parents learn how to read and share emotions. They'll be more sensitive with their baby.

3. Don't short-change your program! Provide at least 1 year of programming.

4. Include more than mothers. Babies' grandmothers, fathers, and mothers' friends impact successful parenting.

5. Simplify attendance by having program and childcare at school.

6. Build peer support by holding group-based activities.

7. Do more than lecture. Put developmental and parenting knowledge into practice with parent-child activities.

8. Remember that teens are still growing. Teach to their current brain and social-emotional development.

Using Principles of Effective Programs to Refine Parent Education for Teens

Scholars have begun to identify key elements that are found across effective family life education programs.[5, 6] Programs with these key elements tend to have better outcomes than programs that fail to include these components. These key elements, such as having clear program goals and objectives or using a variety of learning approaches, deal with all aspects of program design, implementation, and evaluation. This review uses these common principles as a framework to assess what works in parenting education for adolescent parents. In particular, the key elements associated with program design and content as they relate to adolescent parenting programs will be described. Program content and design form the backbone or structure of parent education. Practitioners can compare the effective elements of adolescent parenting program content and design with their current programming to identify areas of strength or needed improvement.

Effective Programs have Clear Goals and Objectives

Clear goals and objectives are the first key element of effective program content and design. Goals and objectives define the purpose and the intended impact of a program and give practitioners tangible next steps and benchmarks for which to aim.

Programs with clearer and more specific goals and outcomes are typically better able to impact their intended audience.[5] Reducing child neglect and abuse is an important and common long-term goal of teen

parenting programs. However, programs that can also drill down to more specific intermediate-term outcomes and the short-term actions that might lead to these outcomes have a sharper blueprint to follow to meet their end goal. For instance, a program that sees improving parent-child relationships as an intermediate step in reducing child abuse and neglect might identify creating opportunities for parents to have in-class interaction time with their child as an effective action they can take to reach their long-term goal of reducing child abuse.

A common tool for measuring the impact of adolescent parenting programs is the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory V2 (AAPI2), which is a measure of adult and adolescent parent's (or pre-parent's) parenting and child rearing attitudes.[7] Since the inventory is based on known responses of abusive parents, the inventory results help measure whether a program has met the long-term goal of reducing child abuse and neglect. However, the results of the AAPI2 can also be useful throughout the implementation of a program. For instance, the AAPI2 is composed of five segments of questions; parents' responses to these individual sections can point toward change in more intermediate-term program goals, such as teaching parents appropriate expectations of child development and behavior or helping parents develop a high level of empathy toward their child. Additionally, the results of these segments can be used to suggest areas where more effective, short-term actions may be necessary.

Effective Programs are Theory-driven and Research-based

The second element of effective programs is that they are theory-driven and research-based; they take into account theories that are well supported by empirical

research. When considering effective parenting programs for adolescents (and adults), a large body of developmental theory and research points to the quality of the parent-child relationship as a central factor in children's behavioral outcomes.[8] In particular, parents' ability to be sensitive and responsive to their child is related to positive child outcomes and decreased child neglect or abuse.[9] Two key elements of parent programs – teaching parents emotional communication skills and teaching parents to positively interact with their children – have been shown to consistently support a sensitive, responsive parent-child relationship.

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Teach parents emotional communication skills. Programs that teach parents emotional communication skills show significant, robust effects on parents' positive behaviors with their children.[4] When parents are sensitive and responsive to their children, they are often using strong emotional communication skills. Both parents and children communicate emotions to each other; when emotional content is communicated and sensitively received then parent-child interactions and relationships improve. For instance, when an infant cries she is communicating a need to her parent. If her parent picks her up and tries to meet her

need by feeding, changing, or rocking her, the infant's trust in her parent grows. Teaching emotional communication includes a wide range of activities, such as training in active listening, reflecting back what the child said, training parents to help children both identify and process emotions, and teaching parents to reduce their own negative emotionality (i.e., criticism, sarcasm).

Teach parents to interact positively with children often. The timely and appropriate responses of parents to their children has been shown to be an influential parenting skill; when parents are responsive then children adjust their behavior to continue the parent-child interaction.[9] Teaching parents to regularly and positively interact with their children has a large effect on decreasing children's negative behaviors.[4] In other words, children who are getting attention for positive interactions are less likely to misbehave. Therefore, effective programs teach parents how to give positive attention for appropriate behavior. Parents might learn to interact on the child's level during play, let the child take the lead during play activity, and identify (and provide) appropriate play options for children. Mealtimes have also been shown to be an effective setting for parents to practice and gain sensitive and responsive interaction skills.[10]

In contrast, discipline is often conceptualized as parents' negative attention for children's negative behavior. Research shows that teaching parents to be consistent in their discipline has a large effect on minimizing children's misbehavior.[4] Thus, teaching parents how to act consistently when discipline is needed can help improve children's behavior and may minimize parent frustration. To highlight this skill, programs could teach parents to respond to the same misbehavior each

time it occurs with the same consequence. Parents then have a ready, reasonable response to misbehavior and can avoid a potentially less reasonable but more emotional response. Video recording a parent interacting with their child (either when the child misbehaves or is acting positively) is one effective tool to help parents see and potentially adapt their parenting behaviors.[11]

Parenting programs that focus on the research-proven elements of emotional communication and teaching parents how to interact with (not just react to) their children have some of the strongest effects on parent-child relationships. Parents and children both benefit from these improved interaction skills.

Effective Programs are of Sufficient Dosage and Intensity

Programs that are provided for a sufficient time and intensity meet the third key element of effective family programs. Dosage and intensity have to do with how much of a program people receive over time and how intense the sessions are. When it comes to programs that means that they provide participants with enough classes and contact time to fully convey and practice the content.

Only a little evidence exists regarding what is sufficient dosage and intensity for adolescent parenting programs. However, research does suggest that more is better in the case of teen parenting programs. Most teen parenting programs that show positive outcomes are provided over the course of at least four months to a year.[3,12] Longer-term interventions have the potential to build positive relationships between participants and staff, which can add important

support for teen parents.[13] Furthermore, the more complex the goals of the programs the longer the program often needs to be to meet these goals. For instance, a program with the goal of reducing child abuse and neglect has more information and skills to convey than does a program with the goal of teaching parents how to safely install a car seat.

While longer programs are linked to more positive program outcomes, providers' energies are likely best spent on integrating methods and activities shown to positively change parents' behavior rather than counting off the number of sessions needed to achieve success.[4]

Effective Programs are Comprehensive: Targeting More Than One Setting or Process

People are part of complex, interrelated systems. Therefore, interventions that focus on only one aspect of a system, such as changing individual behavior, may be less successful than programs that target not only individual behavior but also other aspects of that individual's environment that may affect his or her behavior. Not surprisingly, a fourth key element of effective programs for adolescent parents is that they are comprehensive, incorporate support from multiple sources, and consider multiple influences on participants' lives.[14]

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Due to the complexity of their lives, teens should be considered in the context of their environment and social relationships. Teen mothers are often transitioning to parenthood while still living in their parents' home and must, therefore, develop new ways of relating to the baby's grandparents as well as navigating their new role as a mother. Additionally, peers, the other parent, and school all continue to play an important role in the lives of adolescent parents. Programs that take these relational and contextual influences into consideration by incorporating the following techniques often have more positive outcomes for teen mothers, their partners, and their children.

Invite a member of parents' informal support network to classes. Including the baby's grandmother or father in classes may help adolescent mothers appropriately navigate their various roles as parent, partner, and child. One study found that the majority (90%) of adolescent mothers thought it would be helpful to participate in education and support programming with a member of her informal support network (i.e., baby's grandmother or the father of the child).[15] Inclusion of members of an adolescent mother's informal support network may minimize conflicting information to young mothers because the information received by mothers and given to members of the mother's support network is consistent. A young mother whose own mother participates in classes may find that her mother provides less conflicting advice after participating in programming together. Promoting positive relationships among the adolescent mother's support network can help new mothers decrease their stress; mothers with larger

social networks show less stress than mothers with smaller social networks.[3]

Adolescent mothers often feel pressure to marry the father of their child, but research shows that these early marriages are often challenging and end in separation or divorce.[1] Young parenting couples benefit more from learning how to parent together. Including fathers in teen parenting programs provides an entrée for young fathers to be more actively involved in and knowledgeable about their parenting.

Integrate parent training into parents' existing social ecology, especially the school setting. School-based parent training programs are a promising model for successful parent support and education for adolescent parents. Although returning to high school is related to adolescent mothers' long-term success, lack of access to childcare is often linked to mothers missing school.[16] Adolescent parents benefit when their conflicting needs to continue their education but also care for their child can be resolved in the same location. Programs that provide childcare in the school setting remove the barrier of finding consistent, quality childcare and, when paired with parent education, have been shown to have positive impacts on parental competence, child outcomes, and long-term birth and educational outcomes.[16] Since school-based programs intersect with adolescent parents' existing environment, they may minimize barriers to and maximize positive outcomes from parent training programs to adolescent parents. In addition, (as noted later) opportunities to interact with and practice new skills with their child while receiving helpful guidance is one of the most effective ways young parents learn. Having parents and children in the same location allows for this type of interaction.

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Group-based programs provide opportunities for peer support. Group-based programs for adolescent mothers report more positive maternal impacts than one-to-one programs[12] and may increase the opportunity for an adolescent parent to form a supportive relationship with a peer.[3] Feelings of acceptance and support from other program participants and facilitators appear to relate to adolescent's success in parenting programs.[2,13] However, group-based programs may inhibit some adolescents, especially those with low self-esteem, from actively participating.[3] These adolescents may need additional support through one-on-one visits and interactions. Mothers typically express clear preferences for one type of approach (i.e., classes, home visits, and neighborhood groups), which suggests that a one-size-fits all approach may not be most effective.[15] The type of program a teen prefers is likely to be highly personal due to different learning styles and circumstances. If an individual teen is not thriving in a group-based approach, a conversation about the teen's preferred approach may be beneficial.

Group-based programs within the school setting are not without challenges as the setting may increase teens' anxiety related to privacy and confidentiality of what they share during parent training. Delatte, Orgeron, and Preis[17] conducted counseling for adolescent parents in a school setting and made the observation that the school setting made developing trust difficult among group members because adolescent parents worried that information shared in group might not be confidential and might be shared throughout school. However, given time and repeated situations where confidentiality is maintained, trust and group cohesiveness can grow.[13] Programs offered over the course of a year by well-trained and committed staff especially have the potential to build trust and nurture group interaction. Despite possible challenges in building trusting group relationships in school settings, school-based programs can be highly beneficial for both parents and children because they meet many intersecting and overlapping needs, such as school attendance and childcare, in one setting.

> *Effective programs do more than share information; they also provide opportunities for practicing skills - ideally in realistic contexts. In particular, hands-on learning that allows parents to practice with their own child in the presence of a teacher or facilitator who can correct or reinforce behavior is most effective.*

Effective Programs Use a Variety of Learning Approaches

Applying diverse learning approaches is another key element of effective family programs. Using a variety of learning approaches, especially active learning, has been found to be an effective practice across educational settings. Not surprisingly, this holds true in parent training and educational settings as well. Effective programs do more than share information; they also provide opportunities for practicing skills – ideally in realistic contexts. In particular, hands-on learning that allows

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Incorporate parental practice with child. Although sharing child development information is often a central element of parenting programs, it appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for changing parenting and/or child behaviors. While studies have found that parenting knowledge can be gained through a classroom curriculum[18], knowledge change is typically modest and not related to programs' long-term effect.[4] Child development knowledge is most valuable for parents when it is paired with parents practicing certain skills related to the child development information, such as how to respond when a baby cries or a toddler has a tantrum. Kaminski et al.[4] elaborate on the value of integrating child development knowledge and behavioral practice:

> ". . . in order to teach parents to interact positively with their child or to respond effectively to a 2-year-old's temper tantrum, a program may explain the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral

capabilities of typical toddlers. It is possible that components focused solely on learning about child development are less critical to program outcomes than components that translate such knowledge into concrete, developmentally appropriate parenting behaviors and skills." (p. 581).

In other words, parents need to know developmental information in order to effectively interact with their child, but actually practicing the skills of parenthood through interactions with their child has a larger, longer-lasting effect on parenting behaviors than does a lecture about development or parenting.[4] Interestingly, although homework and role-play are both examples of active learning, parents benefit the most from actually practicing skills with their child. To have the biggest impact, a parent needs to practice a skill with his or her child, such as directing the child through an activity while the program facilitator observes and coaches.

In-person, facilitator-led opportunities for parents to interact with their children are the

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RESEARCH IN ACTION

The Parents as Teachers (PAT) curriculum for teen parents provides many ideas for how educators can help parents practice positive interactions with their child.

One activity invites parents to hand a toy or object to their baby and then wait and see what they baby does in response. Facilitators ask parents to imagine an "invisible string" linking each new action in play. By following the path of the "string," parents can wait for the "string" to return to their child more often and learn to let their child take the lead in play.

gold standard in active learning for parents, but recent research suggests that opportunities to indirectly observe high quality interactions, such as the parent watching a video of themselves interacting with the child, can also improve the quality of their parent-child interaction. Pempek, Demers, Hanson, Kirkorian, and Anderson[19] found that parents who co-viewed *Sesame Street Beginnings* videos with their infant increased the quality of their interactions with their baby. Similarly, in a study of incarcerated teen fathers, Barr and colleagues[20] incorporated clips modeling positive parent-child interactions from *Sesame Street Beginnings* with lessons on relationship, communication, and emotional enhancing techniques; at the end of their ten-week study they saw increased emotional responsiveness suggesting more positive parent-child interaction. It should be noted, however, that during the actual video viewing parent-child interaction quality decreased; thus, videos should be used in conjunction with other methods, such as in-person parent-child interaction. Substantial viewing time alone could be detrimental to the parent-child relationship.[19]

Effective Programs are Developmentally Appropriate

Finally, we know that effective programs are developmentally appropriate. In the case of interventions for adolescent parents this means that programs are developmentally appropriate for both the current development stage of the child and for that of the adolescent parent. Adolescent parents experience a dual developmental challenge as they face the developmental tasks of adolescence while also trying to

support the growth needs of their child.[12] Teen parents are negotiating educational, workforce, economic, and familial considerations in addition to parenting.[1]

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Adolescent brains are also still developing. Due to their developing brains, teens are more susceptible to stressors such as lost sleep, which may affect their interactions with other caregivers and their child.[21] Moreover, brain development means that adolescents are less accurate in reading emotions than adults[21]; and may need additional help with learning how to read emotions, such as differentiating between their child's emotional expressions or cries. Reviewing case studies, in particular, has been suggested as one effective method for helping teens gain empathy for their child.[13] Reading these stories about other teen parents and their children gives teens a chance to think deeply about parent and child emotions without feeling attacked in their own personal choices and behaviors. Teens also need developmentally appropriate learning strategies, such as opportunities to safely explore learning or offering learning choices.[13] Thus, to teach essential parenting skills, such as empathy, parenting programs for teens may need to incorporate additional practice opportunities and utilize best practices for engaging adolescents from literature on general adolescent education.

Linking Effective Program Elements and Evaluation

Most programs take time to develop and need to be constantly revised and adjusted to work most effectively. Effective programs obtain program feedback on an ongoing basis to learn about how the program can be continually improved.[5] Practitioners looking to improve their program through feedback can compare their program with the principles listed in this review. For instance, does the program have clear goals and objectives? Is it theory-driven and research-based? Does the program seem to be of sufficient dosage and intensity and also be developmentally appropriate? Finally, is the program comprehensive and include a variety of learning approaches? Alternatively, practitioners can also consult results of evaluation tools, such as the AAPI2, and match areas of poorer scores with additional elements of effective family programs.

Once missing or less effective program components are identified, then evidence-based actions can be taken. For instance, if evaluations consistently show that parents rely on their child for friendship rather than other adolescents or adults, then actions related to the parents' social network might be the next step. A program with these results may need to more comprehensively include people from parents' informal social networks in programming. Adding grandmothers, fathers, or peers to classes and teaching mothers how to positively interact with these people may give mothers the skills and relationships to look beyond their child for friendship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, support programs for adolescent parents require multi-faceted approaches and continual reassessment and review. In particular, evidence suggests that to foster appropriate expectations of child development and behavior, help parents develop a high level of empathy, and encourage alternatives to corporal punishment, practitioners should 1) aim to be developmentally appropriate for both parents and their children, 2) incorporate parent-child interaction, 3) teach emotional communication, and 4) promote skills that lead to parents' positive interaction with their children. Teaching emotional communication can also help adolescent parents value the independent voice and perspective of their child. Finally, appropriate family roles in which parents do not rely on their child for friendship can be promoted by 1) including members of the teen's social network in classes, 2) integrating programming within teens' existing networks, 3) considering group-based programs to encourage the development of peer-support relationships, and 4) providing the program for at least a year to fully build a sense of support.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, adolescent parents learn the most when they have the opportunity to actively practice parenting skills and positive communication with their child. Facilitators enhance this experience even more by providing constructive, positive feedback on how the adolescent parent is succeeding in this practice and how he or she could strengthen their approach.

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