



Alberta Home Visitation
Network Association

Vol. 5 Issue 2 Summer 2010

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Visitation Services

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Supporting young beginnings

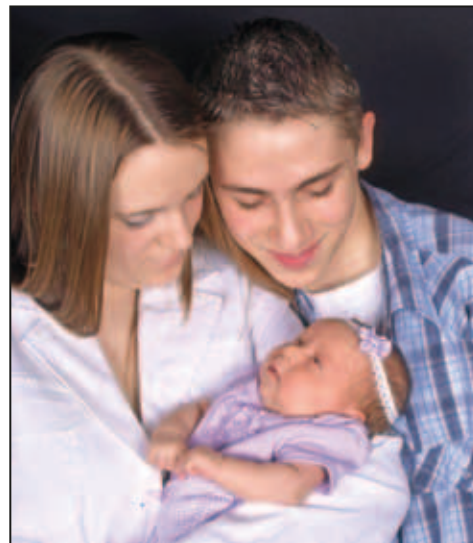
By Lavonne Roloff

This issue of Connections presents the stories of home visitation staff: their experiences of working with young parents or of being young parents themselves.

Last year over one third of the families involved in funded home visitation programs had a primary caregiver who was between the ages of 13 and 25. Being a young parent brings many challenges as well as strengths. Some still live at home and wonder who they can turn to for emotional or material support. Others will fall into the role of being a young parent with few barriers. But, all appreciate the support they receive from an objective, neutral person such as a home visitor.

Home visitors offer insight, advice, connections to resources, advocacy support, and a shoulder to lean on when needed. It takes a unique person to connect with a young parent: a professional who can drop judgments and provide practical answers. Support to young parents includes listening

to concerns, providing encouragement, and supporting problem-solving efforts. It means being the coach who is cheering for parents as they grow and learn, and believing that parents of all ages love and care for their children.



In home visitation, we support parents to be the best that they can be. This may entail providing resources, such as linking to a community agency, encouraging parents to complete their high school education, or showing parents how to play with their child.

In the long run, society benefits when we have parents and children who have a stronger understanding of who they are, and who know that they have the potential to succeed at whatever they tackle. We all play a role in ensuring that our children have the best start! ■

Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

The Community Outreach Team from Catholic Family Service

By Minh Le

"I am always worried especially at night. Can you help me calm my thoughts so I get some sleep?"

"I hate being alone, it scares me. I think something bad is going to happen. Can we work on me being more comfortable when I'm alone?"

"I am really shy. I don't want people to think I am stupid so I usually avoid people. How can I make new friends?"



Those questions are some that social workers at the Community Outreach from Catholic Family Service at Louise Dean Centre in Calgary embrace in their daily work with clients. The program supports pregnant and parenting youth through a home visitation model and collaborative community work. The team delivers services with the following principles:

- **Prevention:** Give pregnant and parenting youth the skills and capacity to attain positive and healthy futures for themselves and their children.
- **Intervention:** Assist pregnant youth and young parents in stabilizing their lives and caring for their children in the best possible way.
- **Volunteerism:** Create opportunities for them to care for one another.
- **Collaboration:** Work with other professionals and community agencies to create safe and healthy communities.

The Science of Home Visitation at Community Outreach

Crystal – I love being part of the family's growth. Seeing young moms connected with other moms (in parenting groups) and celebrating baby's first steps have been so rewarding. When my team--parenting educator and volunteer--started our parenting groups, we provided a welcoming learning and social environment for young mothers to form friendships with other young moms and connect to community resources.

Andrea – The challenges I encounter with the home visitation model are clients' engagement in an often chaotic home. There are many distractions and influences that have an impact on, and

limit the client's ability to focus solely on the identified area of counselling. Furthermore, financial constraints, family dynamics, and other factors often lead to clients frequently changing their address. To be effective, I developed a broader repertoire of engagement and interviewing skills and a comprehensive assessment. I learned that home visitation workers need to be flexible and willing to adapt to the client's natural environment to engage and intervene. Although outreach may pose many challenges, it also breaks down many barriers to reach success.

Una-Mai - Entering a client's home is entering the unknown and has risks. It also reaps therapeutic rewards. This type of intervention allows us to learn more about a family and their environment which is critical to assessment and intervention. Observing a home environment can be more telling than a counselling session. Home visitations are exceptionally important for this population as it reduces barriers such as transportation, anxiety, time restrictions, and child care crises.

Minh – The science behind the Home Visitation Model at Community Outreach is not new. Many other programs in the province have been in operation for years and the process is similar. The program intervention begins in pregnancy and continues through the preschooler years. We strive for flexibility and tailor intervention to family needs—the duration and frequency of visits and types of services provided are adjusted to the family's needs and risk. Our staff promotes positive behaviours and a healthy lifestyle. They conduct a comprehensive assessment taking into account the broader social, educational, and economic environment that clients engage in. The services are delivered through a spectrum of modalities from individual, couple, and family, to group work in collaboration with parent educators. The team has focused on assisting clients integrating their development and growth into communities. As a result, we have collaborated with community resources to ensure successful integration. ■

Minh Le, MA, RSW, is supervisor of Community Outreach Services, Catholic Family Service at the Louise Dean Centre in Calgary, Alberta.



"It is good that visits are in the home as transportation is difficult. I learned a lot about babies. I had lots of questions for which I was given answers. It gave me security to know I can ask someone. I also had good feedback as to how I was doing with my baby."

Working with Young Parents

By Roberta Wells, Linda McNeil, and Kim Pender

Teen parents, like adult clients, require time to form working relationships and to develop a feeling of safety and trust. They need to be treated with respect, listened to, and viewed as having knowledge about parenting. They may, however, need a slightly different approach to service delivery than adults to accommodate their developmental stage.

Because teens are in a developmental state where they consider peers a more important influence in their lives than adults, it may be difficult to engage them as parents. Typically, most teens make quick decisions about adults. They assess whether they can trust you and rely on your support by judging how genuine you are and whether you engage in honest and straightforward conversation with them.

Sometimes teens also need nurturing support from a professional. Because stigma is often attached to their age, young parents often need strong advocates. Outreach workers who advocate on behalf of teen parents can model how parents can advocate for their children. If you are non-judgmental, nurturing, and reliable, parenting teens soon learn they can count on you.

Engaging Teen Parents

Start with building a relationship.

Show genuine interest in their lives and experiences. Use humour and listen to what they have to say. Providing teens with a bit of extra support goes a long way in assisting with relationship development: offer a ride to an appointment, have coffee, or help do the dishes.

Engage in fun activities.

Professionals can provide parenting information and guidance to teens while they are engaged in something they enjoy. You can offer parenting advice as part of a fun activity (e.g. at a parent and tots swim).

Let the teen parent initiate discussions.

If the teen is interested, the professional can slip parenting information into conversations. Be upfront. Do not try to sugar coat messages or tell teen parents only part of the story because they will pick up on what is unsaid. Confront or inform the parents immediately after they have said or done something inappropriate, but also take the opportunity to teach them other ways of behaving or speaking, leaving their integrity intact. Positive reinforcement can be your best tool. When you tell clients they are doing something right, they are more likely to repeat that behaviour (Gail Clarke, Healthy Families).

Understand that even small tasks may be difficult for teen parents.

Ask teen clients if they need help and provide it in the moment. For example, ask "Can I help you call the doctor? Let's do it right now." Deal with non-engaged teen parents by reaching out to them more than once and in more than one way. Call them more than once, give options for meeting times and places, mail or drop off a note of encouragement, let them bring someone with them to a meeting, drop in at school, start with an invitation to an agency or community activity, or help them meet some basic needs. When you've tried enough, try once more and give them the option to re-engage when they are ready. Some do come back.

Determine whether you are able to work with teen parents.

Examining your belief system regarding adolescents is the first step to working effectively with this demographic group. If you can see beyond the adolescent behaviours, and be open, positive, supportive, and knowledgeable about teen development, you will be able to help teen parents build inspirational and rewarding relationships. ■

Roberta Wells, Coordinator, Services for Young Dads

Linda McNeil, Coordinator, Healthy Families
Kim Pender, Coordinator P.A.T.H.S.

Terra Centre for Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Edmonton

Helping Young Parents Through Reflective Practice

By Nicolette Sopcak, Karen Cook, and Berna J. Skrypnek

Public opinions about teen parents are anything but positive. The newest UNICEF report about teen parents in the industrialized world states,

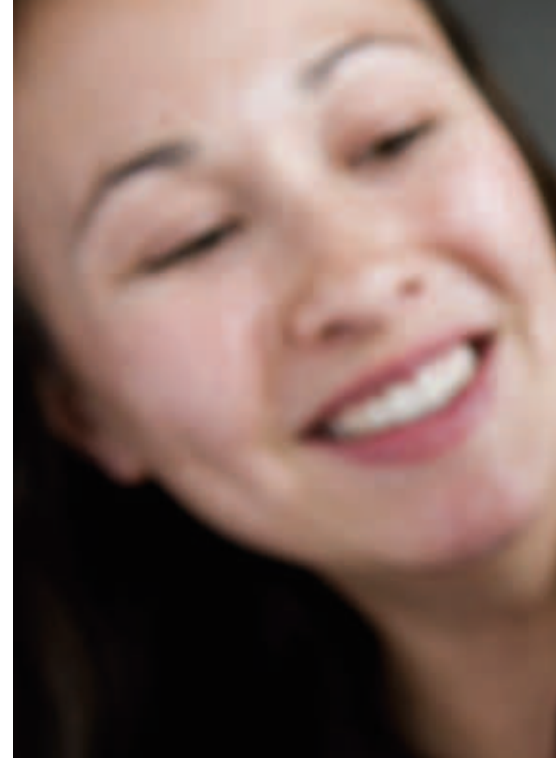
“Teenage births are today seen as a problem. And they are seen as a problem because they are strongly associated with a range of disadvantages for the mother, for her child, for society in general, and for taxpayers in particular.”

How do teen parents feel about such statements and opinions? Teenagers, who are in the process of developing their own identity and hence are more sensitive and vulnerable, will not feel supported by societal judgments of this kind. They likely expect that the majority of adults, including helping professionals, hold these views.

Dr. Wendy Luttrell, a professor from Harvard, found that “the pregnant girls with whom [she] worked were keenly aware of stereotypes about them. Most girls believed they were viewed to be “irresponsible” and “unprepared” for motherhood. They want to be treated in a more balanced way, for who they had been, for who they are now, and for who they are becoming.”

The combination of societal judgments and teen parents’ vulnerability create more challenges for helping professionals who are striving to build strong working relationships with these young parents. This means we must work extra hard to ensure that a young parent *feels* unconditionally supported. How can we create the same kind of safe supportive working relationship with a teen parent that we would with an adult? Developing a working relationship where the teen parent truly feels supported and trusts us will take extra time and patience on our part.

“With my home visitor I have someone who tells me I am doing a good job. She gives me advice and updated information on child development and community resources. She reassures me when I am unsure.”



Core Conditions for Building Relationships

Carl Rogers, an influential psychologist, defined three core conditions for developing a strong helping relationship: unconditional positive regard, empathy, and genuineness.

- **Unconditional Positive Regard:** Young parents should feel respected by us. This is not simply us believing that we are respectful, but also that the young parents *feel* this respect. We need to let them know their goals and opinions are important to us, give them the feeling that we will be there for them, and accept where they are at regardless of their behaviour.
- **Empathy:** Our young parents should be able to share their stories without feeling judged. We must hear their story from *their* perspective and they should feel safe and understood. We must give them time to tell their story and allow them to feel heard through our active listening.
- **Genuineness:** The young parents we work with should know us for who we are as helping professionals, and perceive us as open and honest, making us more trustworthy. This requires that we be transparent in our interactions, and communicate openly where appropriate.

Perceptions About a Young Mom

By Alanna Landymore

As a home visitor, I am writing about a mom that I have been working with for the past several months. Now 21, this young woman gave birth to her son when she was 20 years old. When I scheduled the initial visit, I truthfully went in with a preconceived notion. It went something like this: Well here I go to begin visits with a young mom who is still growing up herself and is now raising a baby. She will not want to hear what I have to say about babies, child development, and parenting. She will likely come off as knowing it all and will be highly disinterested in the knowledge (and wisdom) that I have to offer.

Well, I couldn't have been more wrong!

From the very first visit she was very eager to meet with me and wanted all the help and advice I could dole out. She does not miss any visits. When I am there I have her full attention at all times. She asks questions about her little guy and actively listens to my responses. She has no problem letting me know that she is scared and unsure of herself. Often she will plan the next visit by asking "Do you think next time we can work on -----?"

This is a mom who has the best interests of her baby in mind at all times and it shows. Her little boy is one of the happiest and healthiest babies I know. It is an honour to work with this young mom. ■

Alanna Landymore is a home visitor with Children's Cottage Healthy Families Program in Calgary.



Supporting young parents can be very challenging, especially when our goal is to do so unconditionally. Although Roger's core conditions may lay the foundation for the relationship and the work that we do, our experiences and relationships with young parents can challenge us emotionally. This may get in the way of us supporting them effectively. An important practice that can help to ensure that we work genuinely and unconditionally with the young parents we are supporting is *reflective practice*.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice allows us to positively integrate our knowledge, experiences, and challenges into our work. Mark E. Young suggests that "being a reflective practitioner means that you make a commitment to personal awareness of your automatic reactions and prejudices by taking time to think back on them and perhaps record them in a journal or discuss them with a supervisor or colleague" (2009, p 2).

For instance, instead of just meeting with a new young family and seeing how things develop, reflective practitioners first reflect on their assumptions, feelings, and prejudices. They ask "Am I in a good position to meet this family for the first time? Is there anything that I need to reflect upon or process in supervision so that I am able to be present and genuinely support them?"

As we continue to work with our young families, we will continue to reflect and ask questions: "What do I feel when I go out to see them? Why do I feel this way? What do they need at this moment? How can I best support them?"

Reflective practice allows us to look at the same situation from multiple points of view. This puts our assumptions and prejudices in perspective, and prevents societal judgments from influencing our work. We thereby create a mental and emotional space to fully support our clients when they struggle emotionally. Through reflective practice, we are freed to engage with our clients in a way that is genuine, accepting, and empathic - core conditions that form the basis for working with young families in a meaningful way. ■

Nicolette Sopczak is a PhD candidate in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include teenage parenting, fatherhood, and parent-child attachment.

Karen Cook is a Registered Psychologist and PhD student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Her academic interests focus on attachment and parent-child relationships. She works with young children experiencing social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, and their families.

Berna Skrypnek is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta. Her work focuses on parent-child attachment, parenting, and supports for vulnerable families.

Where There is Hope

By Devon Eisentrater-Read



In 1996, I went from cap and gown graduating with my high school classmates to uncomfortable stretchy pants, maternity bras, and stretch marks. At the age of eighteen, I was pregnant, single, and scared. I remember being introduced to Best Beginnings by my primary doctor and when asked if there was anything or anyone else I could talk to, my doctor stated he could refer me to a free clinic counselor.

In 1997, I gave birth to my own son and got a visit from the public health nurse. Again, I asked if there was a program I could access to meet other mothers and learn about my baby and how to be a good mother. To make a long story short, I was given the phone number of various counseling agencies and a couple of vouchers for free milk. What I really needed at that time was to be heard and told I was not alone and that there were people and places that cared about me and my child. I felt lost, overwhelmed, and ashamed.

Flash forward 12 years later. I am now working at The Salvation Army Healthy Families program. As a home visitor, I have a variety of clients from all over the world ranging in ages from 18 to 45 years. My soft spot, though, is working with young mothers and their families. Visiting young parents, especially young mothers, is extremely rewarding for me – an opportunity to let the parents I work with know that there are people that care a great deal about the emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing of their families.

"I can tell my home visitor things I am too ashamed to tell my mom. My home visitor gives me information to help me become a better parent and I don't feel like an outcast anymore."

As home visitors we must develop a strong and consistent trusting relationship with all of the families that we work with. The foundations for building that trust with young or teen parents can be very challenging as so many face poverty, abuse, low self-esteem, and low self-worth.

To help alleviate some of the stressors, home visitors can help by recommending community resources that fit the family's individualized needs for parenting and child development groups, educational facilities, and basic living. There are some days, however, when visits can be best described as having a cup of coffee with our families and listening to their hopes and dreams for the future.

"Sara" (not her real name) describes what it is like having a weekly home visit. "I look forward to the visits. I can tell my home visitor things I am too ashamed to tell my mom. My home visitor gives me information to help me become a better parent and I don't feel like an outcast anymore. In September, I am going back to school because I want to be able to buy a nice house for my daughter and be able help other people in the future. I have hope now and so does my daughter." ■

Devon Eisentrater-Read is a home visitor with the Salvation Army Healthy Families program in Calgary.

Calgary Resources for Young and Teen Parents

Best Beginning – Maternal newborn services offered by Alberta Health Services. www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/maternalnewborn/bestbeginning.htm

Birthright – "Support to girls and women who are distressed by an unplanned pregnancy". www.birthright.org

Elizabeth House - Home for pregnant and parenting teens. 403-228-9724. www.rcdiocese-calgary.ab.ca/elizabeth_house

High Banks Society - Independent living for parenting youth. 403-521-0082. E-mail: cecilia@highbanksociety.ca. www.highbanksociety.ca

Kara Program - Program for pregnant and parenting students in Calgary Catholic School District. 403-500-2836. E-mail: elizabeth.macdonald@cssd.ab.ca

La Leche League Canada. Calgary teen mothers' group. 403-697-8186. www.lllc.ca

Louise Dean Centre - Calgary Board of Education - Educational program for pregnant and parenting teens ages 14-19 years old. www.cbe.ab.ca/schools/view.asp?id=182

Fort Saskatchewan Young Parents Group

By Jacquie Senchuk

The Young Parents Group in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, is for parents who are 15-25 years old. The group meets once a week and includes childcare, supper, and a craft for the parents to do with their child. A different topic is discussed each week, sometimes with a guest presenter. This group is so successful and runs extremely well because the parents determine what we do from week to week. They also help decide how they would like the group to be run. Every September and December, we discuss what the participants would like to learn about or discuss in the weeks ahead. Everyone's opinions are heard and considered.

Of course as with any other group, guidelines are essential. For example, the group has a very strict "leave all gossip at the door" guideline. This is critical because the environment in which the group takes place needs to be safe and enjoyable. The other guidelines are about confidentiality, asking questions, respect, and equality.

Activities are diverse

No two days at Young Parents Group are ever the same. Whether we have a presentation or discussion, learn to make something new, or play a game, there is always laughter and learning. In the past, we have enjoyed presentations given by Triple P seminars, a dental hygienist, speech pathologist, yoga instructor, family school liaison First Nation Métis Inuit worker, and others on a variety of topics.

We have also introduced a family game night which has become very popular. The parents pick which game they would like to play, such as Cranium which is a favourite among many! In the past six months, we

have also introduced family fun nights. On these evenings, we do family activities that are either free or very reasonably priced such as outdoor skating, sledding, and swimming. These nights have been very popular. They help show the parents they can have great family fun on a very limited budget. The question box is also a big hit. Parents write a question about parenting in general or something they are struggling with as a parent. The facilitator then reads out the questions allowing the entire group to give answers or suggestions to resolve the issue. This gives the parents a chance not only to gain but also share their knowledge.

Easy nutritious meals are always provided with favourites being foods parents can make with their children such as pita pizzas, subs, and tacos. Making these foods together helps the parents learn to interact with their children in a different way.

The community of Fort Saskatchewan is a wonderful place for the young parents group. Its connectivity and community spirit offers us support through presentations and teaching new skills. As well, the Fort Saskatchewan Christ Lutheran Church has generously given us space for the group to run, along with a separate room for

our child care, a storage room, and use of their kitchen. Without the help from the community and the church, this group would not be as successful.

One of our regular young parents shared that she looks forward to Thursdays so she can come to group. For many, once they come, they are hooked and they come again and again. A few participants even drive in from outlying areas.

Working with young parents can be difficult at first but also very rewarding. Unfortunately, many of our young parents have been judged or stigmatized and, therefore, many have their guard up.

As group workers, if we have an open mind and are persistent, we find that guard is lessened and these young parents become a wonderful rewarding group of people to work with—a group that has so much to give us in return. ■

To learn more about the Fort Saskatchewan Young Parents Group, call Fort Saskatchewan Families First at 780-998-5595 ext 224.

Jacquie Senchuk is a home visitation worker with Families First Society in Fort Saskatchewan.



Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on substance/alcohol abuse and/or overcoming substance abuse. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by October 15, 2010.

Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any comments to Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, by phone at 780-429-4784 or by email to info@ahvna.org.

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Photography: istock, photos.com

Design and production: Don Myhre

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Publications Mail Agreement No. 41387565

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A Young Mother Appreciates Home Visitation Services

When I found out I was pregnant at 20 years old, my self-confidence plummeted to a new low. I didn't think there would be any way I could bring my child into this world with the life skills I had. Beyond that I also had no place of my own or a stick of furniture to put in it. The future of my new family looked dismal to me. A few months later, my son was born. My boyfriend and I managed to find an apartment and scrounge together a few things, but I still felt incompetent as a mother. I was speaking with my nurse at my son's first check-up and she mentioned Healthy Families had services to help me cope with being a new mom.

I soon found out their in-home visits were extremely helpful in charting the rough waters of parenthood. The visits included an overview of the milestones I should be watching for, current health concerns, and very useful advice on how to help my child develop mentally. Another perk is the infinite access to support programs. My in-home worker helped me to find a baby first aid class, nursery rhymes class, access to donations, and more. She helped me with things I had no clue about or was a little scared to ask for.

The fact that she herself comes to my house is far more convenient than me hopping on a bus to some office half-way across town. Also, she always is professional and casual so it's easy for me to talk. If I am feeling down, she doesn't make me feel guilty, or feel like I am confessing to a horrible crime. Her excellent training shows when I have thousands of questions and she can help me work them out into something I can wrap my head around.

I now feel comfortable as a mom because of her friendly encouragement. I don't sweat the little things any more because where I might lack wisdom, my wonderful

Healthy Families worker fills the gap. I always look forward to seeing her and appreciate her commitment to me and my family. ■

Note: author's name withheld for confidentiality.

Submitted by Alanna Landymore, home visitor with Children's Cottage Healthy Families program in Calgary.

