FYSB Family & Youth Services Bureau

Healthy Families: Tips for Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Youth

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TIPS FOR ADDRESSING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF PREGNANT AND PARENTING TEENS IN YOUR APP PROGRAM

- Recognize that the experiences of pregnant and parenting youth will differ.

- Acknowledge the historical stigma and shame imposed on pregnant and parenting youth by systems.

- Build strong relationships between staff and participants.

- Value and support expectant and parenting youth.

- Establish community partnerships to create resource and referral networks for pregnant and parenting youth.

- Connect youth with programs and services that use a two-generational approach.

- Support their educational and career goals.

- Teach youth strategies for healthy relationships and how to communicate with their children, families, and co-parents.

- Implement curricula specifically designed for pregnant and parenting youth.

- Assess the specific needs and situations of youth and tailor approaches accordingly.

As an Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (APP) Program grantee, it is likely your program will serve pregnant and parenting youth in your program. More than 1 in 10 high school aged youth served by Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) programs had ever been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant (Mittone et al., 2023). This resource guide provides APP grantees and other youth-serving entities with resources and guidance to deliver equitable programming to pregnant and parenting youth.

> We use the terms "youth," "adolescents," and "teens" interchangeably and the terms "mothers" and "fathers" when appropriate.

OVERVIEW

People often stigmatize and shame pregnant and parenting youth. This happens at a social and structural level. Traditional APP and family planning approaches have reinforced negative social norms (SmithBattle & Flick, 2024). Negative interactions with healthcare providers or fear of being judged or stereotyped can keep young parents from seeking or continuing services (Egan et al., 2020).

Over the past 30 years, adolescent pregnancy and birth rates have declined. However, disparities persist among Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Island, and Latinx adolescents (Fuller et al., 2018; Osterman et al., 2023). These groups, along with other marginalized groups, are underserved by current sexual health programming, policies, and services (Aiken et al., 2016).

Traditional approaches often ignored the social drivers and structures that contribute to unintended pregnancies (SmithBattle & Flick, 2024). These include socioeconomic status, neighborhood, employment, social support networks, social norms, racism, and political systems.

Many pregnant and parenting youth have unique challenges and needs based on where they were born and where they live, learn, work, and play (i.e., social determinants of health). They also face systemic biases in the institutions they interact with such as education, justice, and healthcare. Programs working with this population need to actively consider this context.

Programs that promote positive outcomes for youth often use a variety of strategies and models, including one-on-one support (e.g., case management), home visiting models, school- or college-based support, and coordination between service providers (Harding et al., 2020). Combining these strategies and accommodating the individual needs of pregnant and parenting youth helps providers support youth more effectively. These strategies can bring positive outcomes to help young parents in many ways, including helping them become more self-sufficient and increasing contraception use. They can also improve socioeconomic opportunities and educational attainment, and ensure healthy child development (Egan et al., 2020; Harding et al., 2020).

FRAMEWORKS TO CONSIDER IN PRIORITIZING UNIQUE NEEDS AND SUPPORTING PREGNANT AND PARENTING YOUTH

The pregnancy planning paradigm has been widely used in the United States (SmithBattle & Flick, 2024). It assumes all youth follow a linear path, often based on middle-class standards. It suggests youth should wait until after they have completed college and established a career to have children. Youth who get pregnant outside of this timeline are then framed as failures or irresponsible. Although this approach has helped reduce adolescent pregnancy and birth rates, it is limited. It often links unplanned pregnancies only with negative outcomes for parents and children (SmithBattle & Flick, 2024). This can create stigmatizing attitudes and practices in clinics, further marginalizing pregnant and parenting youth and fostering mistrust.

Although programs using the pregnancy planning paradigm may be effective for some youth, there is need for more inclusive programs. These programs should acknowledge and support the diverse timelines and experiences of all youth. The following frameworks validate the experiences of marginalized teens, use a shame-free approach, and stress the importance of healthy relationships. Using these frameworks in sexual health programs can create strong foundations for supporting young expecting parents and helping them succeed.

Reproductive Justice framework

The Reproductive Justice framework provides a holistic approach to supporting pregnant and parenting youth by recognizing their diverse experiences, needs, and rights within the broader context of social justice. It prioritizes the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities. It also acknowledges how systematic inequalities intersect to impact access to reproductive healthcare, resources, education, and decision-making.

This framework challenges stigmatizing narratives about adolescent pregnancy and parenthood by promoting empowerment, autonomy, and dignity for young parents (SmithBattle & Flick, 2024). Using this framework in programs can empower young people to think about their own reproductive health needs. It can also create a safe space for them to explore resources.

To incorporate the Reproductive Justice framework into APP programs:

- **Challenge biases:** Rethink any biases or stigmatizing assumptions your program has related to pregnant and parenting youth (Parekh et al., 2023).

- **Adopt an intersectional approach:** Pregnant and parenting youth hold many identities that interact and shape their experiences in the world. Intersectionality helps us understand that a white pregnant or parenting youth from a low-income background does not experience the world like a low-income pregnant or parenting youth who is black. To meet youth's needs, tailor your approaches to consider multiple identities.

- **Train staff and volunteers:** Ensure they approach youth respectfully and nonjudgmentally (Michaels et al., 2023; Parekh et al., 2023).

Positive Youth Development framework

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework suggests programs must work with youth to improve their assets, agency, contribution, and environments to help them become healthy, productive, and engaged (YouthPower, n.d.). Using a PYD lens, interventions for pregnant and parenting youth focus on promoting resilience, self-determination, and meaningful community participation. They foster a sense of agency and empowerment as youth navigate parenthood (Pressfield et al., 2020).

To incorporate the PYD framework into APP programs:

- **Use a strengths-based approach:** Build upon the strengths of pregnant and parenting youth. Offer opportunities for skill-building, leadership development, and goal setting to empower young parents to overcome challenges and achieve their goals (YouthPower, n.d.).

- **Provide mentorship and peer support:** Offer mentorship programs and peer support groups where pregnant and parenting youth can connect with positive role models and peers who understand them. Create safe spaces for youth to share their stories, seek advice and receive encouragement from others who have walked similar paths (YouthPower, n.d.).

- **Involve youth in program evaluation:** Seek input and feedback from youth to ensure that services meet their needs and preferences (YouthPower, n.d.).
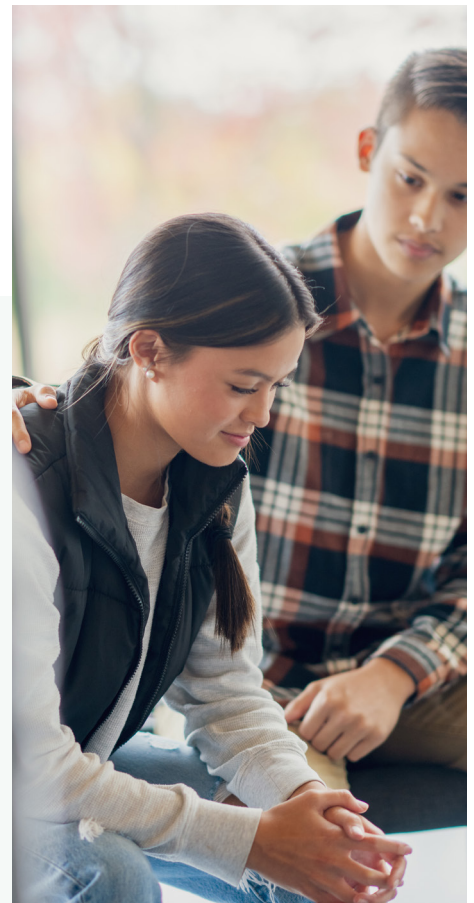
STATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING PREGNANT AND PARENTING YOUTH IN ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY PREVENTION PROGRAMMING

Adolescent parents have their own physical, mental, social, and educational needs. As parents, they must also provide a healthy and nurturing environment for their children. Pregnant and parenting youth face many responsibilities. Supporting their health requires a multi-pronged approach.

Organizations supporting adolescent parents should consider offering programming that addresses health, social-environmental, educational, and parenting domains. Approaches can include implementing curricula specifically designed for pregnant and parenting youth, adopting a framework that prioritizes their needs, and using best practices for working with this population. To be most effective, organizations should assess the specific needs and situations of the young parents they serve and tailor their approaches accordingly.

APP programs may need to adapt or change the curricula they are implementing to those designed for pregnant and parenting teens. The Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review includes five effective programs that are intended for pregnant or parenting youth: AIM 4 Teen Moms (AIM4TM), Be Proud! Be Responsible! Be Proactive!, Generations, Teen Options to Prevent Pregnancy (T.O.P.P.), and Vision of You.

Here are some practical strategies APP programs can take to address unique needs:

DOMAINS	STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES TO INCORPORATE IN YOUR PROGRAMMING

Health
 	
• Providing access to prenatal, postnatal, and child healthcare
 	
• Addressing depression and past trauma
 	
• Providing access to contraceptives and family planning services
	• Develop community partnerships to create and share resources and referrals for pregnant and parenting youth. Be sure to include health clinics, MIECHV and other home visiting programs, lactation and nutritional support, and community-based doula programs ⬈ in your resource and referral network.
	
	• Teach youth how to prioritize their physical health. Share stress reduction strategies for emotional coping.
	
	• Equip or connect youth with access to contraceptives and family planning resources. Encourage them to choose the options that best fit their needs and desires.
	
	    – *Example:* The Teen Options to Prevent Pregnancy (T.O.P.P.) program provides teen parents with assistance from trained nurse educators in creating a birth control plan.
	
	• Connect youth with programs that provide case management or healthcare services using a two-generational approach.
	
	    – *Examples:* The Massachusetts Pregnant and Parenting Teen Initiative (MPPTI) offers behavioral health assistance, helps secure housing, and conducts child development screenings. The Healthy Generations Program ⬈ at Children's National Hospital is a "teen-tot" program that offers healthcare and related services for teen parents (through age 21) and their children.

DOMAINS	STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES TO INCORPORATE IN YOUR PROGRAMMING

Social-Environmental
 	
• Providing housing supports
• Promoting financial security
• Providing job training
• Creating a support network
	• Establish partnerships with businesses that are supportive of hiring pregnant and parenting youth.
	• Partner with organizations offering social services such as housing support, health insurance, and cash assistance.
	    – *Example:* The Adolescent Family Life Program (AFLP) in California links teen parents to legal resources as part of their programming.
	• Provide concrete support to address barriers to parenting youth's participation in programming. This may include childcare, food, diapers, gift cards, maternity clothes, car seats, and transportation.
	• Offer supports that focus on the dual needs of young parents and their children.
	• Inform teens about social safety net programs (e.g., TANF, SNAP, WIC). Help them identify eligibility criteria and apply.
	• Encourage positive peer relationships through activities like parenting groups, wellness groups, check-in questions at the start of each class, and social activities for youth who are pregnant or parenting.
	• Teach youth how to create a spending plan that aligns with their resources, priorities, and incomes. The plan should account for having a baby (see the Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide for examples).
	• Provide accessible and affordable childcare services.
	    – *Example:* The Teen Parent Assessment Program (TPAP) in Washington, DC, assists youth with locating childcare services and obtaining daycare vouchers.

Educational • Furthering education • Fostering career development	• Partner with schools and other youth-serving organizations to help youth meet academic needs. • Implement educational programs that assist young parents with furthering their education. – *Example:* Generation Hope's Scholar Program ⧉ provides teen parents with mentoring, career readiness support, academic support, and tuition assistance. • Collaborate with school personnel (e.g., guidance counselor, social worker, school nurse) to prioritize the needs of pregnant and parenting teens. • Help pregnant and parenting youth find reliable childcare so they can attend school. See the Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide for examples. • Provide information and support for post-secondary educational planning. • Advise youth on career planning to help them identify suitable jobs.

DOMAINS	STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES TO INCORPORATE IN YOUR PROGRAMMING
Parenting and Coparenting • Ensuring a safe and nurturing environment • Reducing child maltreatment • Stimulating language and cognitive development • Managing child behavior	• Teach youth strategies for healthy relationships and how to communicate with their child(ren), partners, and co-parent. See the Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide for examples. • Role-play with teen fathers who may not live with the mothers of their children or their children. Use effective communication scripts for taking responsibility, asking for help, providing support, and finding common ground with the mother. See the Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide and the Supporting Positive Engagement among Young Fathers and their Children webinar for examples. • Teach youth how to communicate expectations. See Using Conceptual Models to Tailor Programming on Adulthood Preparation Subjects to Pregnant and Parenting Youth for examples. • Connect youth with child development and family support services, such as Early Head Start programs and child care providers. • Support the social and emotional health of young parents' children by teaching teens how to play and read with their children. – *Example:* Generation Hope provides a parenting program for youth in their Scholar Program that focuses on providing robust literacy, academic, and social/emotional support for their children.

RESOURCES

General supports for working with pregnant and parenting teens

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Working With Pregnant and Parenting Teens
- Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation: Using Conceptual Models to Tailor Programming on Adulthood Preparation Subjects to Pregnant and Parenting Youth
- HealthyChildren.org: Caring for Teen Parents and Their Children
- Child Welfare Information Gateway: Expectant and Parenting Youth in Child Welfare
- Promising Futures, a Futures Without Violence project: Teen Parents
- Youth.gov: Expectant and Parenting Young Families
- Child Trends: Supporting Young Parenting Students with Navigation Services
- Child Trends: Community Colleges Can Help Parenting Students Succeed by Creating Supportive, Welcoming Environments
- Office of Population Affairs: Evidence-Based Programs for Expectant and Parenting Teens Profile Guide

Health

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Youth: A Focus on Substance Use
- Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation: Preventing Rapid Repeat Births Among Adolescent Mothers: Implementing Steps to Success in San Angelo, Texas
- National Home Visiting Resource Center: Meeting the Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents Through Home Visiting
- Office of Population Affairs: Reproductive Health Services and Resources

Parenting and coparenting

- Office of Adolescent Health: Co-Parenting: Resources and Best Practices for Service Providers
- Family and Youth Services Bureau: Supporting Young Fathers' Engagement with Their Children

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