An Intervention Program to Build Competencies in Adolescent Parents

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The efficacy of a year long peer intervention program to ameliorate stressors and enhance parent competencies among pregnant or parenting adolescent girls is described. The sample consisted of 57 pregnant or parenting girls with an intervention group of 29 subjects, mean age 16.5, and a control group of 28 girls, mean age 16.0. Peer advocates were senior level undergraduate psychology students at an urban midwestern university. Extensive demographic data and personality inventories were administered pre and post, and results supported the efficacy of the intervention program. Findings showed that the degree to which mothers were bothered by their infants' behavior increased significantly at posttest for the control group with a modest rise for the intervention group. At posttest both groups showed a decrease in the positive perceptions of their infant with the decrease being significantly greater for the comparison group than the intervention group. The implications of these findings which are attributed to the day to day reality of caring for an infant are discussed and directions for future research are presented.

KEY WORDS: Adolescent; parenting; intervention.

Social efforts to curb the incidence of pregnancy have resulted in a gradual decline in unwanted pregnancies among sexually experienced teenagers since the early 1970's. Also declining, however, is the proportion

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of pregnant youths who marry before giving birth (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1980). This burgeoning group of single adolescent mothers has prompted researchers to begin assessing mechanisms for enhancing parenting competencies and ameliorating stressors among this population. Well documented risks exist for the offspring of teenaged mothers; including low birth weight, decreased cognitive capabilities and academic success, and emotional difficulties (Rickel, 1989). The present study is one of numerous attempts nationwide to address the special needs of adolescents suddenly called upon to nurture their newborns in the midst of their own developmental crises and personal growth (Hayes, 1987).

The Detroit Teen Parent Project is a collaborative research and intervention effort between an urban university and urban school systems. An outgrowth of the Preschool Mental Health Project, it is an early intervention program for at risk three and four year olds. The program originated from the realization that by the time children become of school age many parent-child interaction patterns are already well established and resistant to change. This project aimed to intervene as early as possible by buffering the stresses of pregnancy as well as by enhancing parenting competencies in order to promote positive nurturing attitudes and behaviors.

Developed in collaboration with school personnel the intervention program was based on a peer advocacy model whereby college students were paired with young mothers for an academic year. Various studies (Carr, 1981; Garfinkel et al., 1986; Varenhorst, 1974) have shown that adolescents are more likely to disclose personal concerns to friends and peers rather than to school personnel or other adult authority figures. Further, adolescents appear to learn social skills more readily from one another (Murray, Luepker, Johnson & Mittelmark, 1984). Research on a peer counselor/advocacy methodology suggests that a trusting atmosphere develops more rapidly, and that listening and communication skills are improved when students counsel other students (Wrenn & Mencke, 1972). This may be due to the fact that the peer often assumes many roles (confidant, tutor, big sister or brother), which results in increased social/emotional adjustment for the adolescent (McIntyre, Thomas & Borgen, 1982). This type of intervention, in the context of the present study, would often take the project out of the school and into the girls' lives at home and in the community.

Existing literature suggests that teenagers tend to have unrealistic expectations of their children, to have generally more negative parent-child interactions than older mothers and are at risk for educational truncation and long term welfare dependency (Rickel, 1989). It was hypothesized that