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Talking Realities ... young parenting: A peer education program

The Talking Realities...young parenting peer education project is based at the Adelaide Central Community Health Service, The Parks and is a division of the Central Northern Adelaide Health Service. The project is funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy's Local Answers initiative. The other funding bodies include: the South Australian Government; the Adelaide Central Community Health Service; the Children, Youth and Women's Health Service; and Parenting South Australia.

The project was developed to provide both an early intervention and a prevention focus. It aims to influence the health and wellbeing of young parents primarily (19 years and under) and their children. This is achieved by providing accredited peer education training and support to young parents to increase their life skills, knowledge and capacity to parent effectively. The project employs young parent peer educators to present the Talking Realities presentation to adolescents with the aim of increasing their capacity, to make informed choices regarding parenting and health.

The information that follows is based on the Talking Realities program established in the western suburbs of

Adelaide. The learning and evaluation findings from this program have assisted in the development of materials and quality assurance mechanisms, required to establish and maintain consistency and effectiveness for the following outreach programs in South Australia:

- 2002 Riverland Regional Health Service Inc (approximately 200 kilometres from the GPO Adelaide)
- 2003 Whyalla Community Health Centre (approximately 390 kilometres from the GPO Adelaide)

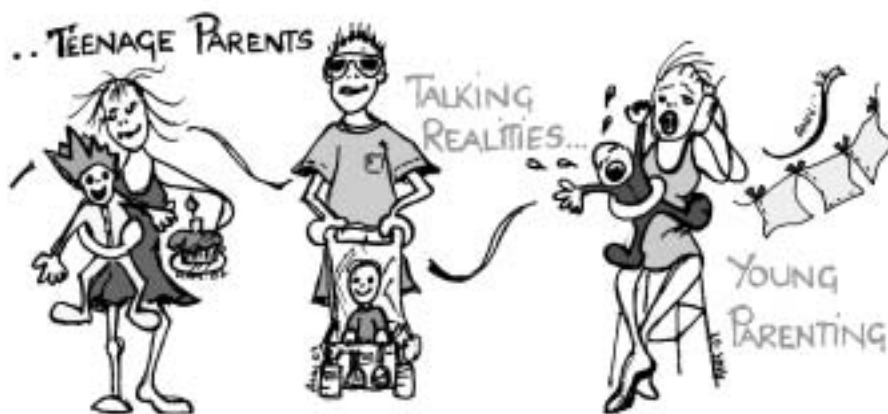
- 2004 Para West Adult Campus, Faculty of Family Learning (northern suburbs of Adelaide)

The South Australian outreach programs are documenting and experiencing similar outcomes and opportunities for young parents and young people in their regions.

Talking Realities has received a large number of requests from interstate agencies about accessing the program materials. Recently, a resource kit, which includes the training manuals,



Top row left Michelle McIntyre peer support worker and peer educators Kahla with daughter (April, 9 months) and front row Emma with daughter (Taya, 10 months), Jasmine with son (Emilio, 7 months) and Nicole.



banners and icons have been made available (for further information and conditions, please contact the program manager). Two agencies in Perth (Trinity Learning Centre) and Melbourne (Kingston Bayside Primary Care Partnership) are currently piloting the program with the Talking Realities resource kit.

Why peer education?

The program began with four teenage parents advocating that adolescents in secondary schools needed to be educated about the significant social risks attributed to early parenthood (that is, interruption to schooling, reduction in career prospects, interruption to the process of transition to adulthood, potential poverty and social isolation). With the assistance of a project worker they developed the content of the Talking Realities ... young parenting presentation with support and funding from Parenting South Australia. The presentation focuses on all aspects of the responsibilities of young parenting (that is, change in lifestyles, financial and educational implications, children's developmental needs, housing issues and sexual health). The information is presented through an interactive presentation, using descriptive "icons", superimposed over a transportable banner designed by an artist in consultation with the young parents.

Condon, Donovan and Corkindale (2001) argued the vital missing ingredient in pregnancy prevention programs is the "creation of a realistic awareness of the potential short and

long term consequences of pregnancy and parenthood". Furthermore the research indicated the most effective way of diminishing adolescents' idealisation about parenthood is through the delivery of "presentations involving peers", with which the adolescent can identify.

Over recent years the project has demonstrated innovation and excellence through the development of a peer education model, to provide accredited training at TAFE Certificate 3 and 4 level for young parents. The young parents' commitment, and ability to share their knowledge, experiences and stories with their peers, has resulted in the Talking Realities program becoming a valued educational resource to provide a range of services in the community. For example peer educators:

- act as role models and take an active leadership role in encouraging and supporting young parents to access health, educational and community services;
- have assisted with the establishment of outreach programs by promoting, recruiting and training young parents in these areas;
- have fulfilled a number of requests to tailor the Talking Realities presentation to meet the needs of young people in primary schools, residential care units and secure care/training facilities;
- are invited to discuss their peer education and leadership experiences with a range of health professionals to explore ways of enhancing and making services more relevant for youth; and

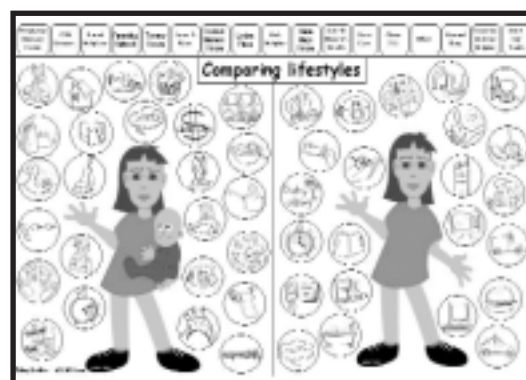
- are sought after – youth advisory committees, other peer education programs, guest speakers.

We have found over the last several years that the peer education learning modality is a successful way in providing information and increasing young parents' parenting knowledge and skills. This is because the focus is on strengthening and expanding the young parents' own parenting knowledge to provide education to their peers. This strengths-based approach helps young parents reflect and develop their own parenting while providing valuable information and modeling to other young people in the community.

Developments and ways forward

Centacare Staff with funds from Uniting Care Wesley Port Adelaide, and from the Australian Government Department of Families and Communities' Stronger Families and Communities Strategy *Communities for Children* initiative will work in partnership with Talking Realities project staff and a peer leader to provide an intensive support playgroup program, developed to provide free supported playgroup sessions for children 0 to 5 years and their families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The aim is to continue to build on the youth participatory model within the program. In doing so, we engage and foster young parents' strengths and commitment to become actively involved in identifying their children's needs, in addition to their own. Furthermore, processes enable young parents to take a lead role in the development and implementation of appropriate programs to meet identified needs. For example:



- Friday Fun Group developed as the initial entry point into the program as a result of evaluation and consultation with stakeholders. Our work with the young parents identified that many participants could benefit from some preparation to develop social and group work skills to participate effectively in the formal peer education training process. The Friday Fun Group provides art, craft and social opportunities. Participants are also involved in group work skill building and some early childhood development activities. These groups also provide opportunities for peer educators who are seeking a leadership role to be involved in mentoring, recruiting and supporting young parents into the program, along with planning and co-facilitating activities.
- The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy *Local Answers* Grant funding was recently obtained to develop further curricula and visual aids, responsive to participants' learning styles and literacy skills. This component of the program is aimed at increasing parenting support, early childhood development and wellbeing outcomes for the young families accessing the program. The development will provide an opportunity for young parents to

increase training opportunities and diversify the peer educator role. They will co-facilitate workshops with project staff at the Friday Fun Group and for other young parent programs in the wider community.

- Centacare staff will work in partnership with project staff and a peer leader to provide an intensive support playgroup program. This will provide free supported playgroup sessions for children 0 to 5 years and their families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- A recent partnership between Central Northern Adelaide Health Service and Children, Youth and Women's Health Service will provide an additional program component. Young parents will have the opportunity to undertake further training and skill building to provide a peer educator role within the context of the South Australian statewide Child and Youth Health, Family Home Visiting.

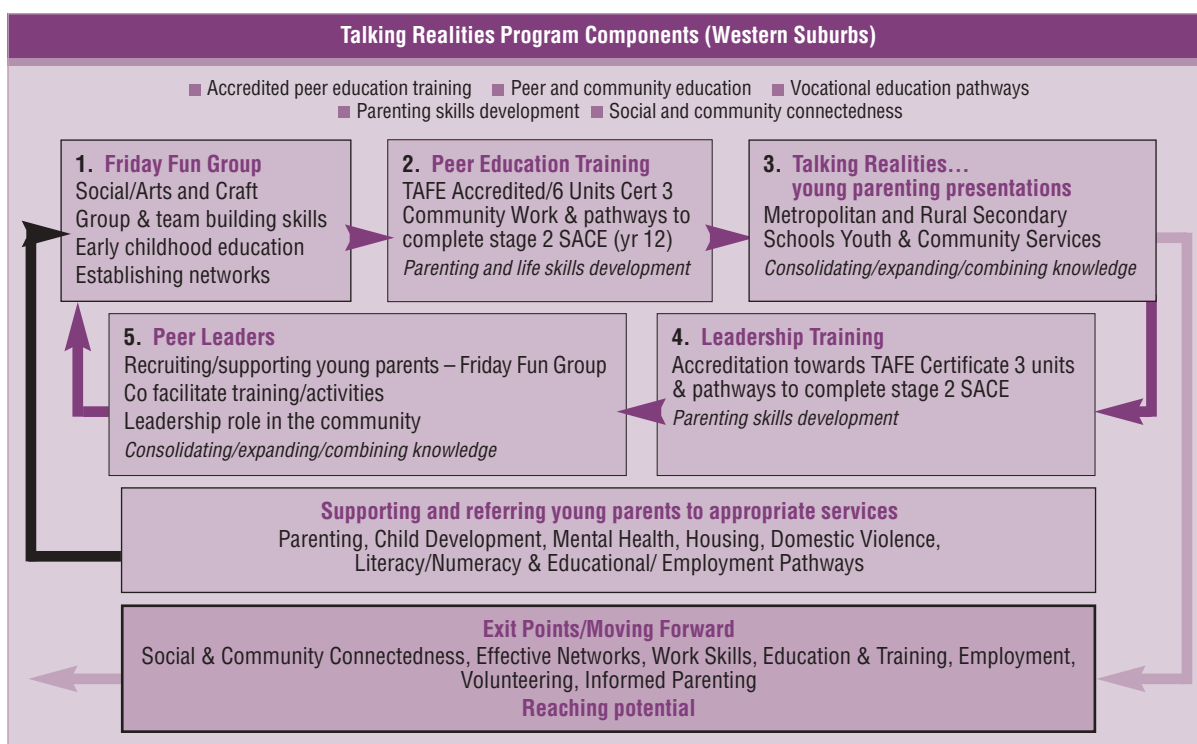
The project will continue to work towards increasing and diversifying pathways and opportunities to enhance the capacity of young families to participate more fully in education, training, employment and civil life. Consultation will continue with metropolitan and rural projects to ensure materials developed are

relevant and available for use by all Talking Realities programs. In this way we can assist to reduce the structures required to implement the program statewide.

Recent funding by, the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services and under the Stronger Families and Communities' *Local Answers* initiative, has enabled a peer support worker and two project workers to be employed until October 2006. Peer educators volunteer for many of the tasks associated with the running of the program.

A work plan has been developed which encompasses a wide range of tasks including:

- the co-ordination and management of the western-based project, representation on the Talking Realities management committee and other relevant forums;
- managing the consultation processes, planning and development;
- writing of training packages, presentation materials, promotional materials and the resource kit;
- seeking and writing grant submissions;
- writing reports and assisting in the Talking Realities program's evaluation processes intra- and interstate.



Recent funding has enabled project workers to provide a more focused role in supporting young families and assessing the social determinants contributing to their health, in order to link into, and refer to appropriate social services.

A large aspect of the project worker's and peer support worker's role is promoting and liaising with schools, organising presentations, supporting the peer educators facilitating the school presentations and taking on leadership roles. In addition, the worker provides a range of administration tasks, plans, co-ordinates and co-facilitates the Friday Fun Group and the accredited training program.

The planning for longer-term sustainability through the development and maintenance of partnerships is an ongoing role. For example the training component in the western suburbs is supported by a Memorandum of Understanding with Douglas Mawson Institute Technology TafeSA, for the purpose of auspicing the accreditation of the training program. The Wyatt Benevolent Institution provides funding for payment of participants TAFE fees, SHine South Australia provide trainers and curriculum materials for the sexual health component, Parks Crèche provide free child care. Parenting Network and several other agencies are involved in referring clients, are/or have been involved in the facilitation of segments of the training and providing group rooms and transport facilities.

Program evaluation

Talking Realities...young parenting presentations have been conducted in 73 secondary schools in metropolitan, rural and isolated regions of South Australia. The South Australian Community Health Research Unit has acted as an independent evaluator since February 2000 preparing two reports – one in 2001, the other in 2004 as well as an interim report in 2003. The 2004 evaluation report includes the period February 2002 to November 2003 (Jolley and Masters 2004). The data collection involved questionnaires, focus groups and phone interviews with stu-

dents, teachers, stakeholders and young parents. This long-standing relationship between the evaluators and the projects has assisted an action research approach to the evaluation. This included skill development for some of the peer educators in data collection and data entry. This collaboration is in accord with the primary health care approach embedded in the program. The 2004 evaluation found that:

- Over 97 per cent of surveyed students learnt “heaps” or “some” about the responsibilities of being a young parent. Older students in particular demonstrated understanding the impact on the young parents in terms of loss of educational opportunities, social life, time and money to spend on oneself. Qualitative responses focused on caring for, and loving the child, putting the child's needs first and careful budgeting;
- Sixty-four teachers (74 per cent) indicated strong support for the program in terms of the perceived benefits for students, with all remaining teachers agreeing that the program is beneficial for students. Teachers perceive that the “lifestyles” and “cost of living” topics have the greatest impact on student's in terms of challenging some of the misconceptions and conveying the realities of parenting at a young age;
- Eighty-nine per cent of surveyed teachers indicated they would recommend the program return the following year with remaining teachers indicating every second year. All interviewed teachers agreed that Talking Realities fulfills a need in school and youth services. It reinforces and extends other curriculum topics in a realistic way that teachers are not able to do (Jolley and Masters 2004).

The research suggests that the program has a significant impact on the peer educators in terms of their increased confidence and personal development. Stakeholders report that many of the peer educators had moved on from being vulnerable and “at risk”, to confident and assertive young women, who were able to take



Peer Educators from left Michelle, Renee, Stacey and Caras (Students Roxby Downs Area School)

control of their lives and contribute to society. The positive impact on the peer educators was believed to flow on to their children. Stakeholders were very positive about the quality of the training and the accreditation process. They commented that many of the peer educators had gone on to further education or employment.

The peer educators also identified similar benefits in increased self-esteem and confidence. They believed the support they received from the program and their peers had enabled them to construct new lives, sometimes escaping from an environment of violence or drug abuse. The peer educators also valued the opportunities to further their education and gain formal credit for the work they were doing on the Talking Realities program. Most of the peer educators have been successful in gaining access to further education, employment or other activities. The peer educators assert that their children have benefited from the increased parenting skills and social inclusion of their young parents and by the developmental opportunities provided by access to good quality child care.

References

- Condon J.T., Donovan, J. Y. & Corkindale, C.J. (2001), “Adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about pregnancy and parenthood: Results from a school-based intervention program”, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, vol. 9, pp. 245-256.
- Jolley, G. & Masters, S. (2004), *Talking Realities Evaluation Report (2004)*, South Australian Community Health Research Unit: Flinders Medical Centre, Flinders, South Australia.

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