

Strengthening young mothers

A qualitative evaluation of a pilot support group program

The Young Mothers Support Group program was designed to engage pregnant teens and young mothers in a youth-driven program tailored to meet their identified needs. Central to the success of the program were the premises that young women would engage in healthy relationships with adults and peers within the program, and were able to actively participate in determining program content and implementation. The evaluation describes the challenges involved in, and early successes of, implementing a youth-focused, youth-driven program.

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Rather than presenting young mothers as a health or psychological behavioural issue, Cherrington and Breheny (2005) suggested the need for systems that value mothering and provide young mothers with alternative life-course opportunities that foster their healthy development. Comprehensive, multifaceted approaches that adopt positive youth development, and socio-ecological and family systems perspectives can influence the way in which younger parents negotiate their life circumstances and raise their children (McDonnell, Limber & Connor-Godbey 2007). Given that younger mothers are not a homogeneous group, it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all intervention will meet their needs (Kulkarni 2007). A combination of professional and social support contributes to beneficial outcomes for younger mothers both in their personal adjustment to parenting and the way in which they form relationships with their children (Clemmens 2003; Fraser 2007).

This paper describes the Young Mothers Support Group program; provides an overview of the evaluation approach, aims, objectives and methods; and presents process and short-term outcome evaluation findings.

Young Mothers Support Group program

The Young Mothers Support Group program (the program) was developed by Te Waipuna Puawai Mersey Oasis (TWP), which is a community development initiative of the Sisters of Mercy New

Zealand (Te Waipuna Puawai Mercy Oasis 2007). The program began as a pilot, in response to a gap in service delivery to young mothers. TWP focuses on fostering the wellbeing of women, children and the earth within a purpose-built modern facility that allows mothers and their children to learn under one roof, but in different spaces. The program was initially planned to be eight three-hour weekly sessions but was extended to 16 weeks to better meet the needs of young mothers.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework, approach and content of the program were based on aspects of social work practice (Adams, Dominelli & Payne 1998; Payne 1997) and included empowerment theory (Burke & Dalrymple 1998), cognitive behavioural theory (Butler et al. 2006), systems theory (Baldwin 1997), a strengths-based approach (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002), a feminist/anti-oppressive approach (Dominelli 1998), evidence-based practice, task-centred practice, holistic case work and community development (Payne 1998). These theoretical approaches were incorporated in the content, design and delivery of the program and reflect a strength-building model.

on what the young mothers actually wanted to learn. In the first two sessions, time was allowed for this process of exploration, and young mothers shared their ideas and worked with the facilitator to organise their ideas into themes, which included: meet and greet; budgeting; sex and stages; social trip to swimming pool; organisational visits; cooking and nutrition; dream space and pou work¹; body image; careers; and ages and stages.

The sessions had two components, one was directed by Tara, the program coordinator, and the other was self-directed by the young mothers with support from Tara.

The program aimed to give young mothers a space of their own to learn and grow, as well as providing information, advice, advocacy and support to create resourceful young mothers. The program objectives presented through all sessions were to: encourage self-value; create individualised developmental plans for each young mother; make connections so that young mothers are supported to seek and enter into community organisations that cater for any needs they have in order to achieve their future visions; provide opportunities to develop role models and mentoring support from experienced mothers and child carers; and to meet other young mothers and reduce isolation levels.

TABLE 1 Participants' age, ethnicity, child status and relationship status

Age	Ethnicity	Child status	Relationship status
18	Maori/European	Baby – 3 months	Partner
17	Cook Island/Maori	Pregnant	Single
17	Nuiean/Maori	Baby – 1 month	Partner
16	Maori/Pakeha	Pregnant	Partner
18	Tongan/Pakeha	Pregnant	Partner
20	Maori	Baby – 8 months	Single
18	Cook Island/Maori	Baby – 1 year	Partner

Program description

Key factors chosen for inclusion in the program were identified in previous research and reports. The factors were health and personal wellbeing; developing independent thought and self value; future vision; and being a mum. While these four themes provided a framework for the program, the content of the program was based

Physical resources

The program was held in a supportive environment tailored to the needs of young mothers, and included a space dedicated for group work, a crèche, a creative art making space, and a kitchen. Two vans were used to collect and drop off young mothers and their babies before and after the group.

Program participants

Three pregnant teenagers and four young mothers aged between 16 and 20 participated. Table 1 is a summary of the participants' ages, ethnicities, and child and relationship statuses.

Enrolment of participants

Program information was distributed through networks in the local community. Pregnant teenagers and young mothers completed a form that invited them to contact Tara to arrange a

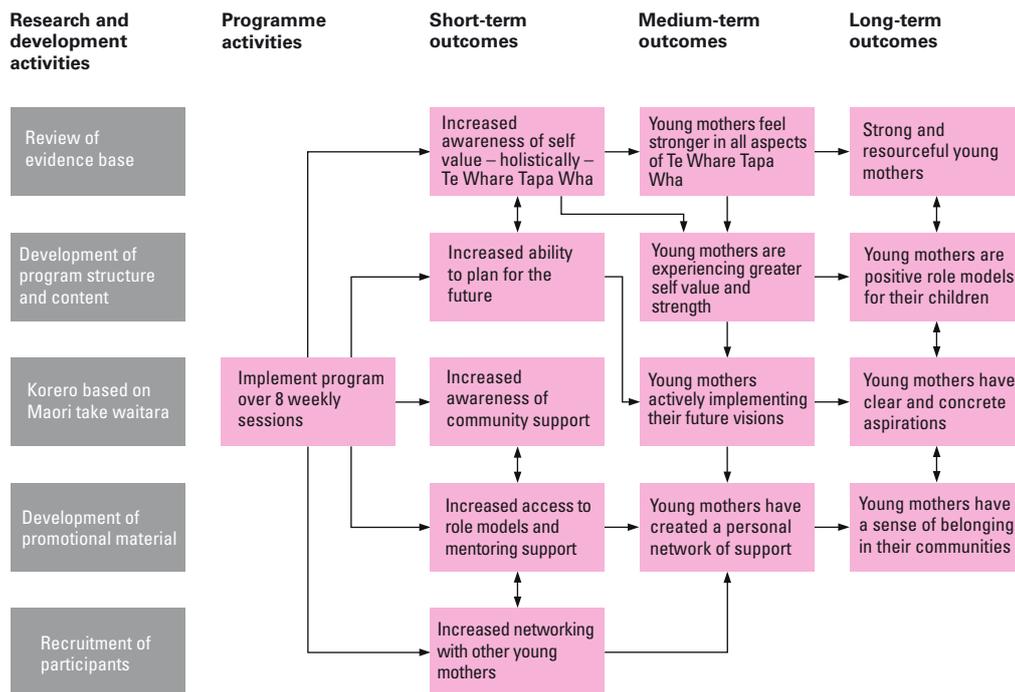


FIGURE 1 Young Mothers Support Group logic model. Note: After Julian 2005.

time to talk about what would happen in the group program. Alternatively, a mobile phone number was offered to instigate text conversations to arrange a time. An intake interview was conducted with each young woman prior to commencement. This covered basic social needs and their understanding of what they would like to get out of a program. They were asked what it was like for them to be either pregnant or a mother:

Good, but it's a little crowded at home, but we are looking for a place through Housing New Zealand – a two-bedroom home. There are four adults and four kids living in a two-bedroom home, plus someone sleeping in the lounge. My baby was three months premature, there were complications but now he is home and doing well. (Mother with baby)

It's weird, I don't really know what to do, I'm scared, but also happy about becoming a mum. (Pregnant teen)

They were also asked what they hoped to achieve from the program. Ideas included how

to care for their babies, connecting with others with similar experiences and preparing for the future.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation approach was theory-driven (Davidson 2005) and participatory (Cousins & Whitmore 1998). The logic model (Figure 1) shows how the program works through the flow from research and development activities through to program activities and outcomes (Julian 2005). Program or intervention logic is a way of clarifying and explaining the rationale or thinking behind a program, project or intervention. It sets out the intended effects or outcomes of a program or project (McKegg 2006). An outcome refers to a change in the lives of the people participating in the project and/or changes in the wider environment.

The program logic is presented as a diagram with arrows showing the linkages and relationships between components. The logic model outlines a predicted course of events – if we undertake a particular activity, then we

expect certain short-term outcomes, and if these are achieved, then certain medium-term outcomes should follow, and so on. The lines and arrows are important because they represent the assumptions and theories of change that underpin the project. For example, if this program has appropriate content and is well-designed and implemented then it is reasonable to expect that young mothers will, in the short-term, increase their awareness of self value, be able to plan for the future, become aware of community support, gain access to role models and mentoring support, and increase their networking with other young mothers.

The boxes in the first column of Figure 1 represent project development activities and are not linked to the other boxes. They indicate the sorts of tasks that need to be undertaken for successful implementation of the program.

Aim of evaluation

The evaluation aimed to assess the quality of components of the Young Mothers Support Group program (process evaluation) and the extent to which short-term outcomes were achieved (outcome evaluation).

Methods of evaluation

Program logic

The logic model was used to focus the evaluation. For example, the process evaluation focused on the quality of the content, design and delivery of the program and the outcome evaluation focused on the short-term outcomes and the extent to which these were achieved.

Evaluation activities

The process evaluation activities included: reviewing course materials; a brief evidence review of local and international literature; observation of program sessions; feedback sessions with young mothers; and session reflections documented by Tara.

The outcome evaluation activities included follow-up interviews with young mothers three months after program completion to identify any changes that occurred as a result of their participation. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and analysed themati-

cally. The thematic analysis involved becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; and reviewing, defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Evaluation findings

Program quality and evidence

In order to assess the extent to which the program was based on available evidence, the evaluation drew on findings from the literature reviewed for this project. The key components of the program were compared against evidence for effective programs. The rubric (see Table 2) indicates the program's quality performance standards.

The theoretical framework, format and content of the program were assessed against evidence for effective programs described in a literature review conducted for the evaluation (Dickinson 2008). This aspect of the program was rated by the evaluator as excellent. An additional contributing factor to excellence was that the program was culturally appropriate and relevant to the New Zealand context. Each young woman was asked to rate the program on the following factors: opportunity to learn and practise new skills based on their needs; the flexibility of the program to their needs; and how engaged and interested they were. All young mothers rated the program as excellent:

It was an excellent experience, really good to be with other young mums and girls in the same position as me. I learnt how to cook and do budgeting.

In summary, the program was found to be based on existing evidence for effective programs. The young mothers' rating of the program as excellent in meeting their individual and group needs also supports the quality of the program.

Quality of program implementation

The information below is drawn from Tara's reflections and interview data, participant interviews, a group interview with young mothers and the evaluator's observations. A key assumption of the program is that group work is an effective way of working with young mothers (McDonnell, Limber & Connor-Godbey 2007). This assumption is based on the belief that groups provide a social and

learning environment for young mothers appropriate to their developmental needs (Funk 2002). Therefore, process evaluation questions included assessing how well the group was implemented.

Program implementation strengths

Evaluation findings indicate that the program had a number of important strengths including being flexible and needs based, having a youth development focus, involving group work and being characterised by quality facilitation, good organisation and physical resources. These strengths relate to the evidence for effective programs and are also supported by the interview data.

Once the young mothers felt comfortable in the group they appreciated having input into the content of the sessions. They valued the program being flexible and needs based:

She [Tara] wrote all our ideas up and we decided what we need for the next session.

Tara usually asks us what we want to do so we kind of put our ideas together and it's kind of what we want to do, so that was good and she organised it for us.

Tara also emphasised the need for flexibility in supporting and being involved in the lives of the young mothers, in order to meet their individual needs:

TABLE 2 Young Mothers Support Group quality rubric

Rating	Explanation
Excellent	The theoretical framework, format and content are evidence based. The content provided opportunities to learn and practise new skills based on young mothers' individual and group needs. All young mothers participating found the program engaging, interesting and flexible to their needs.
Very Good	The theoretical framework, format and content are mostly evidence based. Most young mothers were able to learn and practise new skills based on their individual and group needs. Most young mothers found the program engaging, interesting and flexible to their needs.
Good	The theoretical framework, format and content are mostly evidence based. Most young mothers were able to learn and practise new skills although some learning did not meet their specified needs. Most young mothers found the program engaging and interesting.
Poor	The program shows very little linking to available evidence or most young mothers' individual needs were not met or the content did not enable them to learn and practise new skills based on their individual and group needs.

Flexible, needs-based, youth-development focus

The program was flexible to the needs of young mothers. Tara took note of the young mothers' feedback and reflected critically on each session. The following excerpt shows how Tara was able to adapt the program to ensure the involvement of young mothers:

Overall, I think the session went a lot smoother than the first session ... Comments from the youth were that they did like what we covered, but would also like more work. They have chosen to look at budgeting next week so I am intending on giving out a lot of tasks and work for them to look through and complete.

The girls are really open about what they do and don't like ... We've all been very flexible. At the very beginning I've wanted a once a week program for two hours, you pick the girls up, you drop them off ... whereas what I am doing now is quite different to that. I'm very much involved in their life and I'm doing social work with them quite intensely.

Group work

Once the group had formed, the young women enjoyed being together and having support and social contact with peers in similar situations. Mid-group discussions and individual interviews post-program indicated the value

Tara's decision to provide more directed activities was reflected in feedback from the young mothers who preferred a combination of directed and self-directed activities.

that young women placed on being able to participate in the group, which included it being helpful and somewhere relaxing to hang out without pressure:

It's somewhere to hang out, it's relaxing and stuff. It is hard-out fun.

The evaluator was also able to observe the group on two occasions, once after four sessions and again eight sessions later. On the first visit there were four young women present and all were focused on the task of preparing their names for the dream wall.² While they were working on this creative activity, they commented that the practical advice on budgeting and family planning was extremely useful:

In the group we have free services on budgeting advice and family planning, that there is free treatment and we learn about these.

On the second visit the evaluator observed the young mothers all working together as a group to prepare lunch. They cooperated with and helped each other and sat down and ate together. This was a positive sign that the group had solidified:

I loved the cooking session. I learnt about measurements and how to read words in a cookbook properly.

Quality facilitation

Evaluation findings indicate that Tara's level of skill and personal and professional qualities were critical to the success of the program:

She's (Tara) cool. She just helps everyone in the group. She's supported us one on one and she's been there for us.

Several young women expressed appreciation of the way that Tara worked with them individually as well as in the group:

She's (Tara) really fun. She makes everything fun. She's helped me through a lot like I went to WINZ³ appointments and stuff like that. She's not just a mothers' group, she comes and helps me out with the baby as well. She's really good.

Organisation

Tara spent considerable time planning and preparing for sessions. Tasks ranged from room setup, picking up the young mothers and babies, to visiting the crèche to arrange for some babies to be placed there. In addition to this pre-group organisation, Tara reflected critically on each session. This helped her make decisions regarding subsequent session content:

In session one I was all flustered about what to cover and what not to cover due to the shyness of the girls. Any open questions were left unanswered, with the young mothers passing blank stares between them, and any closed questions were met with a nod or shake of the head ... I felt absolutely shattered ... I don't know what else I could have done better to prepare before the session to better equip myself. I realised that I need to pull back and give them boundaries and ideas of what they could want and how we can get there together.

Tara's decision to provide more directed activities was reflected in feedback from the young mothers who preferred a combination of directed and self-directed activities and enjoyed tasks being set for them to achieve:

Well today was more progress, more talking, more doing work. The art time was pretty cool and I thought we had more options to do and more things to think about and that was pretty cool.

Challenges

Challenges related to early sessions while the group was being formed and included Tara's workload, open versus closed group format, the youth development focus and the nature of being a young mother.

Workload

For Tara, the amount of work involved in preparing for, setting up, implementing and tidying up after the group was a significant challenge. She expressed her desire for an additional facilitator to share the workload:

I need more support so I'd like to have a support person on. I'd love another social worker but I

don't think that's going to happen, but another support person to help with the driving and to actually just be in the room to help.

Open versus closed group

The program was implemented as an open group. However, on reflection, Tara found this challenging:

The first group was an open group and that was hard, just trying to create a group formation like that is hard.

Tara commented that groups are now closed and that she was firm about that:

We keep it closed and the girls like that ... They are always half way through the group and have a couple more girls who want to join. I say it's a closed group; she can come next time, sorry.

Forming the group and attention to group process

There were initial challenges in forming the group due to the lower numbers attending the first session and the phasing in of new group members during subsequent sessions. Typically, feelings of apprehension, nervousness and shyness were expressed by the young mothers on starting the new group:

Today I felt nervous of starting, and something else I would like to say is I think I am going to enjoy this program.

Youth development focus

Tara found the youth development focus more of a challenge than did the young women. She had planned for the group to be fully youth owned and controlled. In the first session it became apparent that the young women needed more direction from her:

My program was designed to take in so fully the youth ownership and full control of the program that I hadn't developed a concise back-up plan if the young mothers decided that they wanted me to be the one in control and this was what these young mothers wanted from me. They wanted direction, not youth driven. They wanted answers, not more questions. I felt that we ended up both staring at each other going "What now?".

Tara shared her insights from the first session with a view to her being able to reach these shy young women:

I have realised that although young mothers want more control and responsibility ... they are also just teenagers who don't have a clue about what to do in their life and how they are going to get anywhere.

Being a young mother

The nature of being a young mother has implications for parenting programs. The fact that young mothers are at a different stage developmentally to older mothers impacts on their parenting. Challenges experienced by Tara and TWP related to their need to understand the way in which young mothers behave and interact in the centre and with their babies:

I think as time went on we kind of figured out what the challenges were ... the girls in the crèche needed to know exactly what was going to happen when the girls come in and they also understand that teenage mums aren't like their other mums and that they'll come in three or four times before they'll even put their kids down and they probably won't let their kids stay there for the whole time so all of that and they assume that everything is accessible to them so they'll walk into the crèche and they'll change baby or they'll walk into one of these offices and start breastfeeding a child and they think it's okay and it is okay but it's taken a bit of adjustment for everybody. So that was quite challenging to start with and then they kind of settled in.

In summary, the strengths and challenges of developing and implementing the program show the complexities of working with young mothers. Flexibility has been a key factor in being able to meet individual and multiple group needs. Tara recognised the challenges early on, reflected on these and made changes as the group progressed.

Early successes

This section presents evaluation findings relating to the short-term outcomes outlined

in the logic model. Three outcomes focused on support for young mothers. One outcome relates to young mothers' increased ability to plan for the future and the other related to their increased awareness of self value.

Support

The program has been successful in connecting young women to a group of peers in similar circumstances and introducing them to key community agencies and services, which has increased their confidence in approaching various services for support. Findings for each of the support outcomes are described below.

Increased networking

Each of the young mothers considered that being connected socially to other young mothers was the most important aspect of the group. They looked forward to attending and some remained connected after the group finished:

It's been really good just to meet new friends as well because I came up here and I didn't have any friends and I've made a lot of friends through the mothers' group and I still hang out with them and stuff, so that's really good and just knowing that there's support there if I needed it, with my son especially – my first child.

Increased awareness of community support

Each young mother reported gaining better knowledge, skills and access to services in their communities as a result of their participation:

We accessed support from Plunket⁴, WINZ, the midwife and the IRD⁵ – they helped me draw up a budgeting plan and what would be available to me and helped me out with finances and talked about a weekly budget.

Tara also considered that community support for the young women had been achieved through their connection to a range of organisations and services:

They know the budgeter... Same with Plunket. They know where they are, they know they can walk in and just talk to somebody. We had CADS⁶ come in, Alcohol & Drugs Services and she was really friendly, so that helps with the face of CADS, it being an approachable place.

Increased ability for future planning

Tara described the dream concept as one of the most successful aspects of the group and considered this an important focus for the young mothers:

I think the biggest thing is the dream concept ... A lot of girls when they start, and in particular looking at that first group, either have dreams that are unattainable or they don't have dreams, and they have never thought about the concept of dreaming. You know ... that progression from dreaming and the ability to dream and progressing that to aiming for those dreams and then that progression down again to goal setting.

Each of the young mothers reported being able to explore options for the future. Some considered courses they could do for further training. However, most were adjusting to becoming mothers and wanted to wait until they were comfortable about childcare. Achieving more immediate goals was a priority for the young mothers. For example, important goals were learning how to manage financially, accessing appropriate and affordable housing and obtaining a driver's licence:

I've been planning for the future and one of my goals was to get a house and I've had a Housing New Zealand appointment which is really positive and I am getting my own house. It was one of my goals. I've also got my licence and I am saving up for a car – it all happened because of the group. Tara [the facilitator] came with me to the group.

Increased awareness of self value

Most young mothers reported increased confidence in their ability to manage their lives and their babies, access services, communicate their needs and take steps towards a positive future. Tara observed changes in the young mothers' confidence:

I saw a lot of confidence to actually do things. Confidence to get to WINZ to get on the right benefit, confidence on what they're doing, the right kind of parenting and feeling able to ask for help when they knew they needed to do work on something. I think confidence is another big one.

Where to from here?

Since the first group, an additional three groups have been implemented at TWP. Tara has incorporated the lessons learnt from Group One, which has led to changes in the way groups are established and implemented. These include addressing the self-directed and directed focus, undertaking more individually focused social work, mentoring as needed and selecting young mothers for the groups.

By the end of October 2008, considerable progress had been made in the development and implementation of the program. To date 38 young mothers have participated. There is evidence that the program is well placed to achieve the short-term outcomes specified in the logic model (Figure 1). For example, it can be argued that as a result of their participation in the program there is already increased social support, community service and agency support for young mothers. These are key protective factors. This is a significant outcome, which could be reasonably expected to lead to the achievement of medium-term outcomes, such as young mothers creating a personal and sustainable network of support. Thus policy and practice that increase young mothers' access to supportive relationships and practical support are needed. The program warrants further evaluation and follow-up regarding the achievement of medium- and longer term outcomes.

Notes

1. The Pou represents a place that the young mothers can call their own. The origins of the Pou are based in Te Ao Māori (Māori world view) – Pou are traditionally found within Wharenui on marae (the meetinghouse on sacred ground), and tell a story of the people's ancestry. This program's Pou is material in form and was designed by the whanau (family) of the program coordinator as a gift for the young mothers who take part in the program. There are four main images on this Pou that depict the stories of four wahine (women) within Maori traditional history – Papatuanuku (mother earth), Hine Ahu One (daughter of the dust/ the first woman), Hine Ti Tama (daughter of the dawn/ daughter of Hine Ahu One) and Hine

Nui Te Po (daughter of the night/ Hine Ti Tama transformed). These wahine resemble the first female entities: first motherhood; first relationship between mother and child; and strength, courage, disaster, despair, endurance and beauty. They are examples within Māori culture of dedication and motivation to be all one can be – as women and as mothers. Hanging alongside this Pou is a second Pou with images drawn by each group that has attended our program. This second Pou is a space where the young mothers can place their own mark and say, "I am here. I belong here. I am proud to be here".

2. One element within the program is "future visions". It is not only a subject covered in goal setting and career planning or similar, but also an activity termed "dreaming". Young mothers are often so wrapped up in the day-to-day needs of living that they forget to dream. The dream board is a space where they can physically place their dreams – in images, words, colours or statements. All inhibitions are dropped, all barriers fall and all presumptions are forgotten. The young mothers are encouraged to dream big and they are supported to create anything they desire to display on their dream board. This sets the tone of all sessions, no barriers, anything is possible, one step at a time.

3. Work and Income (WINZ) is a New Zealand Government agency that provides financial assistance and employment services throughout New Zealand (Work and Income New Zealand nd).

4. "Plunket is a national not-for-profit organisation, community-owned and governed." It provides a "professional well child and family/ whānau [family-centred] service" and is "committed to providing universal access to services for all children and families regardless of ethnicity, location or ability to pay" (Plunket nd).

5. Inland Revenue (IRD) is the New Zealand Government's department that collects "most of the revenue that government needs to fund its programmes". It also administers a number of social support programs (Inland Revenue 2009).

6. Community Alcohol & Drug Services, Auckland (CAD), offers "free services, funded through the Waitemata District Health Board, to anybody in the Auckland region wanting to talk about an alcohol or drug-related question, issue or problem" (Waitemata District Health Board 2004).

Each of the young mothers considered that being connected socially to other young mothers was the most important aspect of the group.

AUTHORS

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