The Effectiveness of Project Promise on the Parenting Skills and Hopelessness of Adolescent Mothers

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Introduction

Teenage pregnancy rates in the United States are high, but fortunately have declined in recent years. There was a live birth rate of 25.3 per 1,000 in the United States in 2015, which represents an 8% decrease from 2007 (Hamilton et al., 2016). This trend is influenced by several factors, such as access to reproductive health services and educational opportunities. The United States, like many other countries, has a high rate of teenage pregnancy, which can have negative consequences for both the mother and her child.

Considering these negative outcomes, it is not surprising that programs are being developed to help support adolescent women who become pregnant. For example, Ditmer & Ruppaul (1997) evaluated a 12-week program aimed at reducing child maltreatment among families with teen mothers. Participants were African American mothers between ages 11 and 21. Participants in this program were compared to a non-intervention control group. The results of this study indicated that there were significantly lower rates of child maltreatment for the intervention group compared to the control group (Ditmer & Ruppaul, 1997). Similarly, Kay, Ogbonniah, March, & Rossiter (2008) assessed the effectiveness of a school-based program for teen mothers with the following three components: meeting with a school-based social worker, weekly support group meetings, and medical care. Results indicated that there was a 50% rate of reduction in subsequent teen births. Although graduation rates were still low, there was a 22% reduction compared to the school's average rate of graduation for the teen mothers involved in the program (Kay et al., 2008, p. 399). These two studies show that intervention programs can improve the life outcomes of both teen mothers and their children, particularly in low-income, minority populations.

Much like the programs studied by Ditmer & Ruppaul (1997) and Kay et al. (2008), this study aims to assess the effectiveness of an intervention program for teen mothers being implemented in the city of Geneva. Project Promise is an organization that provides programs to help improve the quality of life for teen mothers and their children. The four programs offered are the Teen Moms Club, Baby Club, and Literacy programs (i.e., language-literacy programs for parents and children), clutter Class, and Cooking Class.

This study focused on the Teen Moms Club, a group that provides support and training for parenting skills. The primary purpose of this study was to assess whether the mothers experienced improvements in their beliefs of hopelessness and their parenting skills as a result of participation in the program during the 2012-2013 school year. In addition, this study examined whether there was an association between length of involvement in the program and weekly attendance.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 19 young women from Geneva, New York, who were between the ages of 14 and 24 years. These women had either become pregnant at some point during their adolescence or were currently pregnant at the time of their enrollment. Some women were enrolled before high school, some had completed high school, some had earned their GED, and a few were enrolled in college courses. The majority of participants were African American (12), but other races were represented as well, including Caucasian (6) and Latino (1). They were recruited through the local high school and hospital to participate in Project Promise.

Measures

The Hopelessness Scale is a 20-item self-report survey, featuring questions aimed at exploring seven dimensions of hopelessness. Items are scored on a 4-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater levels of hopelessness.

Parent Self-Assessment is a 15-item self-report survey to assess how often participants use certain parenting skills. The survey was developed by the Child and Family Resources Center at Geneva. Its purpose is to assess what the parents learn from parenting classes. Each item is assessed with the question, “how often do you?” and then rated on a 4-point scale.

Length of Involvement in the Program was assessed by determining how many months each participant had been a member of the Project Promise organization.

Attendance was taken at each program between September 2012 and April 2013. A total number of 12 programs across various programs offered through Project Promise was tallied for each participant.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed during several Teen Moms Club meetings. The Teen Moms Club meets on the second Wednesday of each month and meets from 6:30 to 8:30 pm. The women typically arrive at the Child and Family Resources Center and drop their children off with daycare providers. At one particular meeting during October 2012, surveys were distributed and all of the women were seated into the meeting room. It was explained that the purpose of the surveys was to assess the quality of the program and evaluate any need for improvement. Considering the differing educational backgrounds of the women, all items on the survey were read out loud by the program's coordinator. The first round of surveys was distributed in October 2012, only 2 months into the program. Both the Beck Hopelessness Scale and the Parent Self-Assessment were given at this time. The second round of surveys was completed in March and April 2013. The Beck Hopelessness Scale was given in March and the Parent Self-Assessment in April.

Results

First, it is important to note that a significant amount of data was missing because there were very few participants who completed the surveys at both time points. Only six participants completed the Beck Hopelessness Scale at both time points, and four participants completed the Parent Self-Assessment at both times. Length of Involvement in the program and Attendance information was available for all participants. The data collected was analyzed using correlations and dependent samples t-tests. Key results are as follows:

- Although not statistically significant, a pattern was seen in the positive correlation between Length of Involvement in the program and the Parent Self-Assessment. This is a greater number of months in the program was related to more frequent use of parenting skills (r = .47, p < .05).
- There was also a positive correlation between hopelessness and parenting skills. At each time point, higher levels of hopelessness were associated with more frequent use of the parenting skills (r = .37, p < .05 at Time 1; r = .64, p < .05 at Time 2). Although not statistically significant, these results do show an interesting trend.

In addition, there was a significant positive correlation between Length of Involvement in the program and Attendance. That is, women who had been in the program for a longer period of time attended more Project Promise activities this year (r = .745, p < .01).

- T-tests showed that the women's levels of hopelessness did not change from Time 1, t(5) = 0.60, p > .05.
- T-tests also showed that parenting skills did not change significantly from Time 1 to Time 2, t(4) = 0.23, p > .05.

Discussion

The results of this study provide preliminary evidence that participation in Project Promise can lead to improvements for some mothers in this program. One pattern noted in the data was that the longer the girls went in the program the more likely they were to use the parenting skills taught at the Teen Moms Club. Interestingly, the significant correlation between amount of time involved in the program and attendance indicates that the longer the mothers are members of the club the more likely they are to attend all of the Project Promise programs. This preliminary evidence for the organization as a whole, such that once the young women feel comfortable they will continue to come and gain support as well as provide support to younger members. The results of this study are in agreement with previous research indicating that increased programs for teen mothers improve the quality of life for both the mother and child (Ditmer & Ruppaul, 1997; Kay et al., 2008). Based on this research, programs for adolescents should be further developed and made more readily available.

There were many limitations to this study that should be taken into consideration. The Teen Moms Club was only held once a month and attendance varied greatly each month. Many women moved away or did not attend monthly meetings consistently. Thus, there was variation in the attendance across the programs. Surveys were distributed during several of the questionnaires administered in this study. In addition to the small sample size, another possible reason why significant results were not found on the Parent Self-Assessment is that not all classes were attended regularly during these classes. Some classes included other important information such as birth control and daycare services. Also, there was a large amount of time between meetings and it is possible the women forgot parenting information during this time. Another limitation of this study is that there was no control group for comparison. Future research should continue to assess hopelessness of adolescent mothers to pinpoint which aspects of the program improve this particular factor. It is possible that an individual intervention would be needed to show significant improvements in hopelessness. Future research should also follow families across time to assess the long-term effectiveness of interventions like Project Promise for teenage parents.