



Thriving Young Families

Safe and healthy relationships

Through our partnership with Hand Heart Pocket we are investigating what works for at-risk young parents and their children to thrive, and evaluating the effectiveness of integrated service delivery.

Our transformative approach to backing vulnerable young families wraps support around a young family tailored to their needs, goals and hopes for the future.



Issue: Unsafe and/or unhealthy relationships



Young parents are at risk of family violence and relationship conflict due to factors including developmental stage and lack of relationship experience, vulnerabilities of young parenthood, complex trauma and insecure attachments.^{1,2} Young parents may be able to identify unsafe behaviour, however can struggle to identify unhealthy relationships dynamics. They are more likely to be able to identify this in other people's relationships, but not their own.

The stress, stigma and social isolation associated with young parenthood can bring relationship tension to the forefront as young people learn to navigate intimate relationships, co-parent and raise children.

Relationships issues are common within the families linked with Thriving Young Families. When young families first join the program:



Further relationship issues often emerge once a trusting relationship has been built.

Fostering safe and healthy relationships

Thriving Young Families has the opportunity to influence the early formation of relationships in young families. The initiative aims to foster respectful relationship skills and provide support when safety issues emerge to prevent harmful relationship patterns from escalating or becoming entrenched.



Exploring what works

To better understand and promote effective practice in supporting safe and healthy relationships, we:

- commissioned Encompass Family and Community to undertake a targeted review of research and practice literature
- held a workshop with YFS staff who specialise in working with young people who have experienced or are displaying violence or coercive controlling behaviours in relationships
- engaged with other young parent programs to explore options and exchange ideas.

¹Allen, & Clarke. (2019). Expanded teen parents evidence brief. Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children. New Zealand.

²Collins, B. (2010). Resilience in teenage mothers: A follow-up study. Wellington, New Zealand.

What the research says about safe and healthy relationships

Enhancing the quality of relationship networks

The quality of a young parent's relationship network can be improved by focusing on both the size and the strength of the network.

All relationships in young parents' lives are important:

- intimate partners
- extended family
- co-parent
- friends
- broader community and cultural connections.

Having more than one or two key relationships means young parents have more access to information and a wider safety net of support.³

Strengthening any relationship in a young person's network is likely to have a positive influence on their other relationships and can help buffer against the negative effects from any damaging relationships.^{4,5,6}

Enhancing relationship network quality: Building size and strength



³AIHW. (2020). Australia's children. Canberra: AIHW.

⁴Milevsky, A. (2018). Parental Factors, Psychological Well-Being, and Sibling Dynamics: A Mediational Model in Emerging Adulthood. *Marriage & Family Review*.

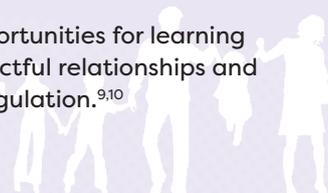
⁵Moulds, et al. (2019). The KIND Program for Adolescent Family and Dating Violence. *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*.

⁶Wilson, R.L. (2003). *The Emotional Life of Children*. Australia: Keon Publications.

Providing individualised support through a one-on-one relationship with a practitioner

Young people connect with a person, not a service.⁷ A positive working relationship with a trusted practitioner is an effective intervention, in and of itself, and a vehicle for change.⁸ Through relationship, program staff can promote engagement, healing and learning by:

- providing young parents a lived and felt experience of a healthy relationship
- role modelling 'rupture and repair', effective communication and conflict resolution skills
- offering a safe 'laboratory' for learning about and practicing relationship
- creating opportunities for learning around respectful relationships and emotional regulation.^{9,10}



Establishing a universal and early focus on relationship in support of young parents

As young people, young parents are still developing and learning about relationships – because of this, they will need active support to grow their knowledge and skills in this area. It is not a matter of 'if', but 'what type' of support young parents need to promote the safety and health of their relationships.

This requires workers to focus on relationships as an early, intentional, and proactive part of assessing, planning and delivering services with young parents.

This universal approach means intervening and building skills without waiting for problems to be identified to trigger action (such as signs of violence or coercive control).¹¹

⁷Sheeran, et al. (2016). Adolescent motherhood in an Australian context. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*. 1(3), 41.

⁸Grealy, et al. (2008). *Urbis, Practice guidelines: women and children's family violence counselling and support program*, Department of Human Services, Victoria.

⁹Beauchamp, T. (2020). Improving outcomes for young parents and their children. *Effective policy settings and program approaches*. Literature review. Research and Social Policy Team, Uniting, Silverwater NSW: Uniting.

¹⁰Hoffmann, H., & Vidal, S. (2017). Supporting teen families: an assessment of youth childbearing in Australia and early interventions to improve education outcomes of young parents.

¹¹Beres, M. et al. (2020). *Youth Healthy and Safe Relationships: A Literature Review*. University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand



Including fathers

Historically, fathers have been relatively ‘invisible’ to family support services. Yet, a young father’s ability to communicate and resolve conflicts with the mother of their children supports the wellbeing of all family members.^{12,13,14}

Strategies to be more father-inclusive include:

- support fathers to meet their individual support needs
- focus on the strengths that young fathers bring to their families
- help fathers to recognise how their role is different to mothers, but still important
- provide some separate ‘father-only’ activities
- link fathers with good male role models they can relate to
- seek and value feedback from young fathers.^{15,16}

When intimate partner or family violence is an issue for young families, a ‘father-inclusive’ perspective aims to hold men accountable for their violent and controlling behaviour, while working with their trauma to support change for more positive relationships and behaviour.¹⁷

Challenges

Working with young families experiencing unhealthy or unsafe relationships is challenging. There are a number of tensions in practice:

- managing competing needs and interests of young mothers and fathers
- understanding that young people can be both a victim and perpetrator of violence
- building young parents’ awareness and agency around unhealthy relationship dynamics can inadvertently increase safety risks.

Responses to relationship and safety issues are on a continuum, requiring a different focus and approach at different points.



MAIN FOCUS

At risk of unhealthy relationships

Relationship education and skill building

Early signs of coercive and controlling behavior

Explore and reflect on relationships and underlying values

Active domestic violence

Safety planning and risk management

MOST SUITABLE APPROACH

Actively trying to engage both young parents

Co-working, where two staff may be needed to work with the young family

It might not be possible to work with both parents. Specialist interventions may need to be called in.

Early outcomes

Participating young parents reported improvements in safety and relationships:



We hope to see greater improvements with a continued, dedicated focus on this important area of young families' lives.



Opportunities

It was originally envisioned that safe and healthy relationships would be a specialist function in the program, however, it has become clear that it needs to be embedded in existing roles (with the exception of interventions with young men who are using violence, which is likely to benefit from specialist approaches).

Family Resource Practitioners are in the prime position to support safe and healthy relationship skills and knowledge through relationship-based work.

Next steps

Staff engaging with young families affected by unhealthy or unsafe relationships need targeted training and supervision. For Family Resource Practitioners, this will include training in:

- Safe & Together, which aims to build skills for workers to partner with survivors/victims of domestic violence whilst holding to account and working with the perpetrator of domestic violence.
- Love Bites, an early intervention response focusing on respectful relationships education and skill-building program for young people.

Other components of the program will also support the strengthening young parents' relationship skills, for example by:

- Building peer support through groups (including young father specific activities)
- Exploring and reflecting on relationships and values through counselling and other therapeutic support.

¹²Niland, K., Selekmán, R. (2020). Challenges and Successes of Pregnancy Assistance Fund Programs Supporting Young Fathers Journal of Maternal Child Health J 24, 178-182.

¹³Office of Adolescent Health. (2017). Co-Parenting: Resources and Best Practices for Service Providers.

¹⁴Office of Adolescent Health. (2016). Resources for Serving Young Fathers. Department of Health and Human Services, USA.

¹⁵Healey, L. et al. (2018). Invisible Practices: Intervention with fathers who use violence. Sydney: ANROWS.

¹⁶Meyer, S. et al. (2019). Walking with Dads Trial Evaluation. Final Report Summary. Mackay: Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research, CQ University.

¹⁷Mandel, D. and Rankin, H. (2018). Working with Men as Parents. Ohio Intimate Partner Violence Collaborative, Safe and Together Institute.

We will continue to explore specialist approaches to young men using violence.



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