

Does Early Childhood Education Facilitate Participation and Retention in a Comprehensive Program for Adolescent Mothers?

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Introduction

The Middle Tyger Community Center (MTCC) is in its 3rd year of OAPP funding to provide and evaluate comprehensive services to a diverse population of adolescent parents and their children in Lyman, South Carolina. The goals of the MTCC Care Program are to: 1) increase educational attainment, 2) prevent repeated pregnancies, 3) increase healthy births and immunizations, and 4) foster developmental assets among participants. The program aims to achieve these goals by providing comprehensive services including weekly parenting classes, monthly home visits, monthly case management sessions, daily early childhood education, and semi-annual family forums.

MTCC set out to explore the impact of the early childhood education component on participation rates, retention, and program outcomes by comparing the participants enrolled in two different versions of the intervention (one with early childhood education and one without early childhood education). Although MTCC hoped that participants in both interventions would benefit equally from the program, we hypothesized that mothers who had the option of enrolling their child in a full-day low-cost early childhood education program may be more motivated to participate and remain enrolled in the program in order to maintain their child's enrollment in the education program. This poster will present findings from our 2nd full year of OAPP funding (2007-2008).

Methods

MTCC is using a quasi-experimental, longitudinal research design including two intervention groups and one control group. Participants are assigned to each group based on the school district they live in. The first intervention group consists of enrolled participants who live in School District 5 and receive all components of the intervention including early childhood education. The second intervention group consists of enrolled participants who live in School District 2 and receive all components of the intervention except for early childhood education. The control group includes adolescent mothers who live in School District 1 and receive little to no services because no comprehensive program for adolescent mothers exists in that district. All three school districts are located in rural areas of Spartanburg County, South Carolina and have fairly equal population demographics.

Process measures for this study include participation rates, duration of enrollment, and program completion for each participant. Outcome measures for this study include educational achievement, repeat pregnancy, immunization status, and birth outcomes which are assessed by the CORE Instrument, and internal and external developmental assets which are assessed by the Developmental Assets Profile. These measures are also supplemented by educational records and immunization records. Participants from both intervention groups completed a baseline assessment of the CORE Instrument and the Development Assets Profile shortly after they enrolled in the program. From that point on, participants are administered follow-up assessments of the same instruments within two weeks of their child's birthday. The same data collection procedures are used for the control group. Our poster will report descriptive analyses of enrollment, participation, and preliminary outcome data for both intervention groups. Control group data will not be included in this poster.

Results

During 2007-2008 program year, the program served a total of 39 adolescent mothers across the two intervention groups including 25 mothers in District 5 and 14 mothers in District 2. Few differences were found between the intervention groups with regard to participation rates and duration of enrollment. Specially, 100% of participants in both District 5 and District 2 participated in at least 70% of the parenting services offered to them in the Fall 2007 semester. However, 82% of students in District 5 attended at least 90% of the services, whereas 60% of the participants in District 2 reached 90% of service participation. Both groups demonstrated stronger participation rates in the Fall 2007 than they did in the Spring 2008 semester. Both groups also showed similar average duration of enrollment (9.28 months for District 5 and 9.1 for District 2) and similar completion rates (92% in District 5 and 100% in District 5). Preliminary outcomes also appear to be comparable across groups. For example, 36% of District 5 participants and 43% of District 2 participants completed an education milestone during the program year. No repeated pregnancies were reported in either intervention group and 100% of the children of mothers from both groups have received recommended immunizations.

Discussion

Preliminary descriptive findings do not reveal striking differences between the intervention groups with regard to participation rates or duration of enrollment. Both groups are attending at least 70% of services at equal rates which suggests that early childhood education is not a critical factor in reaching this rate of participation. District 2 participants were less likely to attend more than 90% of services which could be due to the fact that fewer time options for parenting class were offered to District 2 participants. Lower rates of participation during the spring semester may be due to greater academic concerns leading up to the end of the school year. A few participants chose to prioritize their academic classes over parenting classes during the spring semester to meet their graduation goal or to ensure that they progressed to the next grade level. The small sample size of each intervention group is a limitation of the study. We will use a cumulative sample over the remainder of our funding which we expect to be sufficient for further statistical analyses.

Implications

After a year of full implementation in both school districts, MTCC appears to be successfully engaging mothers from both districts with or without the child care component. This is not to suggest that early childhood education does not play a critical role in the lives of young mothers and their children, but simply that it may not be necessary in order to engage adolescent mothers in parenting services. High quality early childhood education is a costly endeavor. Therefore, it is imperative to know whether this service benefits adolescent mothers and their children above and beyond other services that are typically offered to teen parents. This study will help us determine the added value of offering this service as a part of a comprehensive program for adolescent mothers and their children.

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