

Trauma-Informed Care: Tips for Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs A Guide for Grantees of the Office of Adolescent Health and the Family and Youth Services Bureau

Part 2

Part 1 of this series provided the rationale behind the importance for pregnancy prevention programs to build their capacity to address (including referrals) youth's exposure to violence. This included a discussion on the inclusion of exposure to violence, direct or indirect, as a risk factor for poor outcomes for youth, the warning signs of exposure to violence and some immediate steps that can be taken by programs.

Part 2 provides seven strategies that pregnancy prevention programs can put in place to help prevent, reduce and address the impact of exposure to violence.

1. Build program capacity to become a trauma-informed organization.

Trauma-informed care is not a stand-alone intervention. The following principles of trauma-informed care can be applied across the entire program:

- Understand the impact of trauma on children and their families.
- Give adolescents the opportunity to talk about what happened to them rather than immediately punish them for their behavior.
- Revisit policies and procedures, such as those that address program emergencies, crisis situations, reporting child abuse and neglect, community partnerships, resources and referrals, to be sure that they address issues related to trauma.
- Have intake, screening, observation and interview practices that incorporate strategies relevant to trauma and trauma history and that recognize trauma signs and symptoms.
- Refer adolescents who report a history of exposure to violence during the initial screening for a specialized trauma assessment. Assessments can be repeated periodically and used in treatment planning.
- Have guidelines for services that include addressing the individual needs of youth affected by trauma, providing reminders about avoiding unintentionally "re-traumatizing" adolescents in their care and supporting these teens in the program.

2. Design and implement strategies to keep adolescents engaged in the program.

Teens often have complex histories and numerous problems that make this population particularly difficult to treat. Empirically based treatment interventions may offer a good chance of success; however, many youth fail to obtain treatment, and those who enter treatment often end it prematurely. Most adolescents do not believe they need help, are

unaware of the range of services that are available, may be concerned about stigma or are hesitant to seek out an adult for assistance.

The following strategies can increase program attendance and engagement:

- Make several attempts to get and stay in touch with participants and their families. For example, call the home the day before a session and speak with the youth and parent.
- Establish trust by providing participants with a service or resource they need immediately and avoid making commitments that cannot be honored.
- Allow the youth to tell her story, reassure her and validate her feelings.
- Convey an understanding of the youth's language and culture.
- Avoid blaming. Reframe current situation in terms of relational factors rather than personal failure.

3. Respond appropriately to youth disclosures.

The most meaningful assistance staff can offer youth with a history of exposure to violence is to listen with compassion and use the power of their relationship to correct unhealthful and wrong views that have resulted from the violent event. Experts agree that a relationship with a caring adult is critical for beginning the healing process. Youth must have an opportunity to talk about what they have witnessed and how they feel in an emotionally safe space, with caring parents or adults who can listen and understand. Staff willingness to listen to a child's story can provide the foundation on which to increase resilience and personal strength.

4. Set policies and inform adolescents of the program's legal requirements.

Programs often struggle with how to comply with legal requirements without violating the trust of their adolescent clients. Programs also have to grapple with balancing respect for adolescents' growing autonomy from their families and respecting the important role of parents (and other caregivers) in their children's life.

The legal definitions of mandatory reporting of abuse and neglect, as well as the circumstances under which an adult must report (e.g., known abuse, suspected abuse, reasonable grounds to suspect), vary from state to state. Mandatory reporting requirements apply for youth who are vulnerable to abuse. Nevertheless, staff members may be concerned that reporting abuse may prevent that teen from ever trusting or opening up to another adult.

Staff can take steps to minimize the loss of trust in situations that require reporting abuse to authorities. Program staff should clearly state from the beginning the circumstances under which they must report, the purpose of mandatory reporting laws and the events that typically follow a report to authorities. These efforts will help ensure that youth are not surprised if or when there is a need to report.

5. Train and support staff members to cope with their challenging work.

For staff working with youth who have been exposed to violence and their families, the essential act of listening to stories of victimization can take an emotional toll that compromises professional functioning and diminishes quality of life. Awareness of the impact of this indirect

exposure—referred to as *secondary traumatic stress*, burnout or *compassion fatigue*—is a basic part of protecting the well-being of staff members and ensuring that youth consistently receive the best possible care from those who are committed to helping them. Supervisors and managers can use a variety of assessment strategies to help staff members identify and address secondary traumatic stress affecting them.

6. Build collaborative relationships with community agencies that are trauma informed and/or provide trauma-related services.

Young people grow up in communities, not programs. Pregnancy prevention programs can build strong collaborative relationships with community resources that are trauma informed and/or provide trauma-related services. Collaboration with schools, youth-serving organizations, faith-based institutions, businesses and government agencies, for example, is essential to expanding trauma-informed services, expertise and resources. The more systems involved in creating positive changes, the more likely the changes will “stick.”

7. Facilitate access to evidence-based treatment programs for youth exposed to violence.

Besides participating in program services and supports, adolescents who have been exposed to violence require access to specialized interventions. *Evidence-Based Practices for Children Exposed to Violence: A Selection from Federal Databases* (http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix_2011.pdf) provides a list of evidence-based programs and strategies. In addition, several websites describe interventions that have been tested with adolescents and with groups that share many of the risks of adolescents in pregnancy prevention programs: Crime Solutions (<http://www.crimesolutions.gov>), National Child Traumatic Stress Network (<http://www.nctsn.org>) and Promising Practices Network on Children Families and Communities (<http://www.promisingpractices.net>).

For more information and resources, please contact the Safe Start Center, a National Resource Center for Children’s Exposure to Violence:

Website: <http://www.safestartcenter.org>

Phone: 1-800-865-0965

Email: info@safestartcenter.org

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