

The Witnessing of a Dual Birth- Engaging Young Mothers in Home Visits

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Relationship-focused practice
- Pregnancy & early parenthood

Systems Expertise:

- Service delivery systems
- Community resources

Direct Service Skills:

- Observing & listening
- Advocacy
- Life skills

Reflection:

- Self-awareness
- Curiosity
- Emotional response

When working with young moms during the perinatal period, you are witnessing an amazing phenomena that Linda Gilkerson (2008) calls a “dual birth”. The journey to motherhood is a transformative experience to say the least and may be particularly intensified for young parents. This is a time filled with bodily changes, shifts in expectations, navigating relationships, erratic hormones, fears, dreams and everything in-between. For young, pregnant mothers, they are experiencing these changes amidst/in-parallel the “normal” adolescent changes physically, mentally, and socially. Home Visitors are integral supports during this period, as they support, empower, and observe the parallel growth of the young mother and their developing baby.

In Fiscal Year 2021, ECECD Home Visiting served approximately 599 teenage mothers across the state of New Mexico (UNM, 2021) and research shows the significant impact of Home Visiting services on outcomes for maternal teens and their infants’ health and well-being. Babies born to young mothers are at a much higher risk for pre-term births, low birth weight and mothers experience huge barriers in accessing prenatal care, childbirth and parenting classes. Home Visiting can help bridge some of these gaps by walking alongside mom to help her navigate systems, while scaffolding advocacy skills for herself and her expanding family. A study conducted by Jacobs et al (2016) looked at the effects of preventative Home Visiting, serving first-time adolescent parents. The impact of services was astonishing, revealing positive influence on parent stress-levels, college attendance, condom use, intimate partner violence, and curbing risky behaviors. This concretely connects the vitality of Home Visiting young parents to the Long-Term

Outcomes of Home Visiting by ensuring children and families are safe, physically and mentally healthy, nurtured and connected to resources.

The connection, consistency, trust and safety Home Visitors build with families are foundational to the relationship the true impact can only be successful from this safe space. Relationships are protective factors for these families...but how do we create and sustain them when working with young moms? The book, *Teenagers and Their Babies: A Perinatal Home Visitor's Guide* written by Cardone, Gilkerson and Wechsler (2008) is an amazing concrete resource to use when working with young parents, and is strongly recommended to support your practice. This article will highlight some of the key concepts from this guide, to help Home Visitors engage and connect to their young clients.

Draw Off Your Strengths

The first steps to establishing a safe working relationship is to first look inward and identify your personal strengths, in parallel to identifying the strengths of the client. When working with young parents it's important to take on their perspective, and ask yourself how your age, how you present yourself, and how your own personal story may influence the relationship. Cardone et al. (2008) invites the Home Visitor to be aware of their strengths and apply them to working with the teen. In regards to age, look at the "special magic of your age, no matter what age that is, and connect to the teen with this understanding in mind". As the young parent is growing, we are also growing and learning more about ourselves in relation to them. Our own "stuff" *will* come up in the work. Your personal experience as a teenager, how you parent(ed) your own teen, implicit biases, stereotypes, judgements, power-dynamics, and overall discomforts may arise, but it's what we do with them that's most important. Using reflective practice, the FAN, and exploring our activations is critical when processing our work with young families. Looking in the mirror is hard, but it is where the real magic happens and is the vessel for change.

How Are You?

Ana Medina, a Home Visitor from Taos First Steps, a leader in working with young parents reminds us to use the FAN, particularly around how we are entering visits and how we are leaving them. It is important that we employ our pre and post-contact rituals to ground ourselves before, during, and after visits so we can be present, attuned, and grounded in the moment. Ask yourself, "how am I?", "who am I presenting?", "what do I need to do to be present for this young parent?", "what am I carrying with me in my invisible backpack?". Ana stated that young mamas are constantly "scanning us and checking us out to ensure we're safe". Home Visitor, Tomi Jaramillo-Campos from Gallup McKinley Parents as Teachers program specializes in working with young parents reinforces the importance of being 'real, authentic, and treating young moms like you would any other pregnant mom...most likely they have felt isolated, and judged by their peers and family and we may be the only ones on their side'. We want to create spaces that encourage and exercise their autonomy, control and empowerment,

because in-parallel these are skills they will need in their future parenting. Tomi also reinforces how the FAN helps in working with young parents, and the sincerity of asking “what has it been like for you to be pregnant?” Giving the parent space to express their true feelings of their pregnancy, we can then begin to gather information on what the parent’s urgent concerns may be.

Know the Teen

When working with young moms we must bear in mind their developmental level, which greatly influences how she thinks and feels. When we take the time to observe and ask questions, we can better understand the teen, tailor our home visits accordingly and meet the parent where they are. As Cardone et al. (2008) explains, “teen mothers are teens first” and we must take time to assess her thinking style, common mood states, readiness to learn and their need for autonomy. There are specific questions that the Home Visitor may ask to begin gathering this information and a great way to begin exercising their reflective muscles. *Teenagers and Their Babies: A Perinatal Home Visitor’s Guide* written by Cardone, Gilkerson, and Wechsler (2008) suggests asking mom these questions...

How She Thinks:

- “What can you tell me about yourself?”
- “What do you think makes a good mother?”
- “How has your life changed since you became pregnant (had your baby)?”
- “What have you learned about your baby so far?”

How She Feels:

- “When you looked in the mirror this morning what did your face tell you about how you’re feeling today?”
- “Let’s see if you can help me understand where that feeling is coming from.”

Follow-Up...

- “You’ve got a lot of heavy stuff on your mind right now, but you’re so good at telling me about it—that’s a really special strength.”
- “Let’s plan together how we can make this a little better.”
- (This says, “Don’t forget I’m an important resource in your life now.”)

Autonomy Check-List:

- Does the teen exhibit persistent, observable behaviors that suggest a struggle with autonomy and being her own person, such as an unwillingness to speak to you, or most any adult, or an automatic “no” response to any questions?
- Does the teen’s struggle take the form of extremes in clothes, hair style or color, or multiple piercings or tattoos?
- Is the teen easily engaged without giving any sign that she is open to advice or teaching?
- Is the teen readily engaged and open to mutual problem solving and learning?

These questions can help the Home Visitor understand the perspective of the mother, how to present information and what you might want to avoid. Just as any client, we need to pay careful attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues. Disengagement cues such as looking away, becoming fidgety, looking at their phones, etc. are all signs that we're out of attunement, and they may be checked-out of the visit. Reflection is everything, what could we try to do differently next time to meet their needs? Be aware of common pitfalls such as, falling into a teaching stance (information overload), "fixing", direct eye contact being intimidating, sitting face-to-face, staying seated for too long, or too many handouts. Some successful engagement strategies shared from the field are, going for walks, bringing adult coloring pages and pencils, using visual aids, limiting the number of handouts, using technology, giving them choice of where to meet, and most importantly upholding a respectful, nonjudgmental and authentic space. Home Visitors are powerful figures in the lives of young parents and their children. We thank you for consistently showing up and giving these families a felt experience of being heard, valued, and held...so they can in-turn do the same for their babies.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

1. What have you done to recruit young moms into Home Visiting? What might you try?
 2. What has worked in your practice to engage young moms in home visits, and what hasn't?
 3. What resources (local, state, national) do you utilize to support young moms?
 4. What are some barriers you face in working with young moms?
 5. How are you caring for yourself and the relationship? What are your pre and post-contact strategies when working with young parents?
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References

- Cardone, I., Gilkerson, L., & Wechsler, N. (2008). *Teenagers and Their Babies: A Perinatal Home Visitor's Guide*. Zero To Three.
- Cradle to Career Policy Institute. (2021). *New Mexico Home Visiting Annual Outcomes Report Fiscal Year 2021*. Annual , University of New Mexico, New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, Santa Fe.
- Jacobs, F., Easterbrooks, M. A., Goldberg, J., Mistry, J., Bumgarner, E., Raskin, M., Fosse, N., & Fauth, R. (2016). Improving adolescent parenting: Results from a randomized controlled trial of a home visiting program for Young Families. *American Journal of Public Health, 106*(2), 342–349.
<https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2015.302919>
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Resources

Catholic Charities of New Mexico

<https://www.ccasnm.org/>

Dream Tree Project- Housing and support services for youth in crisis

<https://www.dreamtreeproject.org/>

Future Focused Education

<https://futurefocusededucation.org/>

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505-259-8160

New Mexico Alliance for School-Based Health Care

<https://www.nmasbhc.org/tools-resources/recommended-resources/expectant-parenting-teens/>

New Mexico Department of Health- Teen Planning Program

<https://www.nmhealth.org/about/phd/fhb/fpp/teen>

New Mexico ECECD Child Care Assistance

<https://www.nmeccd.org/information-for-parents/>

New Mexico GRADS- State-wide, in-school program for teenage parents (childcare, career readiness, youth leadership, fatherhood programs)

<http://nmgrads.org/>