



THE UNIVERSITY OF
**WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**



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Dear Megan Mitchell

RE: Types of early interventions for young parents and their children.

Recent qualitative research in the Peel region of Western Australia captured a richer understanding of teenage pregnancy and young motherhood. This research was conducted over a period of seven months of participant observation fieldwork and in-depth interviews with pregnant and young mothers who attended the Eyes Wide Open (EWO) program (please see information on program attached).

A number of related publications attached describe in depth some of the detailed and nuanced findings that emerged from this research. These findings elicit an alternative account of young peoples' experiences which challenges the more accepted norms and beliefs that often hold sway in the community at large. In particular, Scaffolding young Australian women's journey to motherhood; a narrative understanding (Appendix A) describes the contribution of the Eyes Wide Open program in supporting young women's experiences as they transitioned to motherhood. This role was captured in three metaphorical themes, *finding a circle of friends*, *weaving a tapestry* and *turning the page*. The Eyes Wide Open program also provided a setting of judgement free spaces and supportive relationships that helped in developing positive motherhood identities that promote personal narratives of hope, autonomy and enhanced agency.

Another publication titled "You don't know half the story": deepening the dialogue with young mothers (Appendix B) captured young mothers' transitional journey in a number of metaphorical themes: *Picking up the Pieces*; *Walking a Narrow and Familiar Path*; *Jumping over Puddles*; *Riding the Rapids to Motherhood*; *Living with Dirty Looks*; and *Asking for Directions*. In stark contrast to the wider community held deficit view and stereotypes of young mothers, young motherhood meant taking a stand against community stigma; appreciating motherhood as a major turning point in their lives, one that opened doors to a different and more meaningful life.

Finally, in a selective literature review on how health professionals support pregnant and young mothers in the community (Appendix C) we claim that the negative social construction of young motherhood influences global health and social policy which in turn shapes current community health models of practice and care for young mothers in the community. Moreover, the need to revision the 'deficit view' of young motherhood was highlighted through qualitative research that



privileges young women's voices emphasizing this as an important step in the process. Collectively these findings enhance our understandings of the young mothers' lives by widening the lens to diverse realities that exist in young mothers' lives and present a strong case for social and health services to adopt more bottom up approaches that builds capacity, social capital and resilience in young parents. This requires a profound shift in public policy thinking away from the discourse of 'what is wrong with you?' to 'how can we best resource you?'¹, p. 189.

Based on this research we offer a number of key recommendations:

1. Current health care policy and practice which has narrowly focused on universal interventions to solve the "problem" of teenage pregnancy needs to shift to a relational approach that consults, considers and values young parents as the 'experts' of their own lives. Such an approach is much more likely to foster a stronger sense of personal agency in young women.
2. The training of current and future health professionals needs to change from a focus on universal prescriptions based on stereotypic notions and diagnostic frameworks of teenage pregnancy to skills in deep listening and fostering safe spaces for trusting, respectful and non-judgemental relationships to form.
3. Social and health services need to adopt strengths based approach that values and prioritizes relational, intangible approaches (like narrative and social learning) that occur in spaces like the Eyes Wide Open program.
4. The right type of community services can provide early and timely support where young parents can access an alternate stock of positive experience and knowledge (including health literacy) that not only mitigate the effects of wider community stigma but also buffers the young mother's changing circumstances and realities and inspires the construction of more empowering narratives from those that dominated the past.

Warm Regards

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¹ 1. Wierenga, A. (2009). Young people making a life. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.