

# Strengths of Young Parents Project

## Literature Review



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Men and women who become parents in their teenage years or early twenties face significant life development barriers. Young mothers and fathers are more likely to come from economically disadvantaged families and have lower educational attainment than other parents (Kiernan 1997). Compared to the majority of parents, younger parents are more likely to have unplanned pregnancies resulting in insufficient time for the development of parenting knowledge and skills; the arrival of a child is more likely to interfere with or obstruct the attainment of educational, housing and career goals for this group (Nichols in Donahoo, 2006). Common barriers faced by many young mothers include problems with literacy, lack of general knowledge and coping skills, inadequate family support and memories of negative, judgmental experiences with service providers (Loxton, Williams & Adamson, 2007).

Separation among young married and cohabiting couples is high and the children of young parents are more likely to grow up in a poor and mother-only family, live in a poor or underclass area, and experience high risks to both their health status and school achievements (McCulloch 2001). Child behaviour problems are one of the consequences of early parenthood (Logsdon & Koniak-Griffin, 2004; Spencer, 2001). The adverse effect of behavioural problems in a young child can have far reaching consequences not only for the child but also for his/her family and society as a whole. Poor long term outcomes have been documented for children exhibiting anti-social and rambunctious behaviour as they are often castigated by their peers, negatively perceived by their pre-school teacher and may exhibit diminished function in regard to language and cognition (Galboda-Liyanage, Prince & Scott, 2003).

Public and professional concern over the consequences of early parenthood has led to the development of services which attempt to offer social support and education to young parents in order to reduce repeat early pregnancy and to offset the potential impairment of children's development (Logsdon 2004; Spencer 2001). However, few special initiatives have

reported success in reducing the rate of young parenting and existing support services have not successfully recruited younger parents to their programs (Donahoo 2006; Nitz 2007). An important factor in the failure of programs aiming to support young parents is the lack of effective theories to guide program development and evaluation (Nitz 2007; Spencer 2001). Kretzmann and McKnight in *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (1993) highlight the weaknesses of the conventional deficit theory which is based on identified or imputed 'need' and which ignores the strengths and experiences of participants. When applied to marginalised or vulnerable sub-groups, research and program development based on deficit theory focuses on problem-oriented data collection. This approach perpetuates a cycle of hopelessness in which the participants ignore their strengths and capabilities and become reliant on government agencies to solve their problems (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993).

There is an impressive body of evidence that promotes a powerful shift away from the deeply entrenched deficit approach and towards a focus on promoting strengths, autonomy and fostering resiliency (Maton et al 2004). The 'strengths' approach offers a positive starting point for researchers wishing to define family needs in a way which does not disempower family members by emphasising deficits during the investigation (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Marsh 2003). In the case of young parents' abilities as parents, critics of the accepted, negative view of young mothers and fathers have pointed to the limitations inherent in assessing parenting quality through the identification of pathologies and deficits; they point to an alternative approach which sees young parents within a strengths and resilience model as making choices that fit within their available resources and options (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Hanna 2001).

An Australian study of self-identified strong families found eight qualities which allowed families to cope with difficulties and remain emotionally and physically close as family members (Silberberg 2001). The qualities were Communication, Togetherness, Sharing Activities, Affection, Support, Acceptance, Commitment, and Resilience (Silberberg 2001). However, while some younger families were included in the Australian study, their views were not identified separately and the strengths identified were expressed as belonging to 'the family' rather than to 'parents', making the link between parenting practices or styles and family strengths difficult to discern.

The strengths-based approach has also received recognition in the framing of community development approaches to family support programs and in professional development for social workers (Benard, 2006). However to date there has been limited investigation of how parenting styles and practices link to the more broadly conceived notions of family strengths and little discussion of how a strengths approach might be utilised outside of a service encounter (Anderson-Moore et al., 2002).

### **Identifying parenting skills and strategies within a strengths perspective**

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The connection between dimensions of negative parenting and problem behaviours among preschool age children has been well documented (Arney, 2007; Dwairy, 2008). Positive aspects of parenting found within commonly used parenting measures are conceptualized as warmth when setting boundaries, and making reasonable demands on children to comply with parents wishes (Baumrind 1996). Since disciplinary interactions identified in naturalistic observations in the home constitute less than 20% of parent–child interactions there would appear to be scope for the majority of interactions that are positive or neutral in tone to have an effect on children’s development (Gardner, 1987). Activities where the child and parent jointly undertake some task or game have been identified as an important determinant of children’s well being (Gardner, 1987; Gardner et al., 2003). Lower levels of mother–child joint activity were found to be associated with behaviour problems of preschool children after adjusting for a wide range of household, maternal and child circumstances (Gardner, 1994). In a longitudinal observation study, mother–child joint play at age 3 predicted individual improvement in conduct problems at age 4 irrespective of initial level of child conduct problems and of the frequency of negative mother–child interactions (Galboda-Liyanage, Prince & Scott, 2003; Gardner, 2004). However, what is lacking in the research literature is an adequate understanding of the nature of harmonious parent-child activities from the parents’ perspective. Gardner (1994) has provided, from a home-based observation study, indicators such as mothers’ tendency to initiate and maintain activities along with their positive affect during the play or task, and being responsive to the child’s initiatives. How the parents (particularly fathers who have not

figured in the development of parent-child joint activity research) see the purpose and implications of the joint activities is not known.

Providing encouragement and support for young parents to undertake harmonious parent-child activities would seem an appropriate strategy given that this population share many characteristics which predict poor health and well being outcomes for their children. Having a clearer understanding of how young parents see their current engagement in joint games and tasks would assist in the development of appropriate programs and services. If their views could be identified through a research process which helps to clarify the mother's and father's parenting competence rather than identifying deficiencies in their interactions, that is, from a strengths-based perspective, the knowledge gained would not be at the expense of the young parent participants.

### **Research questions**

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Based on the above discussion the following research question was posed:

How do young parents understand the child development implications of the positive interactions that they have with their children?

Sub-questions are:

- Which 'positive parenting' activities do young parents commonly perform with their children?
- Which activities do young parents see as most important for their child's healthy development?
- Which activities do young parents see as most important for their 'connection' with their child?

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