

Successful factors in providing services for teen dads

An exploratory case study from a Community Based Research (CBR) perspective

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## Introduction

Although teen pregnancy and teen births in developed countries have decreased significantly over the last 30 years, the problems and risks associated with teen births for teen parents and their children have not (Unicef, 2001). Teen parents face increasing financial, social, and emotional disadvantages such as poverty (Unicef, 2001), psychosocial struggle (Fergusson & Woodward, 1999) and educational deprivation (Mollborn, 2007). In an effort to improve teen families' circumstances, much research has been conducted on teen mothers and their children and many corresponding programs have been developed. Although young fatherhood is strongly associated with a variety of cumulating risk factors and poor outcomes for fathers and their offspring (Thornberry et al., 1997; Sigle-Rushton, 2005) little research has been done and little corresponding help and support to young fathers provided (Glikman, 2004; Dudley, 2007).

### *Purpose of the Study*

This article reports the findings of a Community Based Research (CBR) study in collaboration with *Terra Association*, a non-profit organization in Western Canada that supports teen fathers in multiple ways. Although *Terra Association* initially served pregnant and parenting teen moms exclusively, in 1999 it extended its services to teen dads. In light of the fact that social support services are struggling to provide appropriate services to men in general (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Long, 2003), including fathers (Long, 2003), and specifically teen dads (Smillie, 2004; Dudley, 2007), *Terra* is unique in the way that it has sustained and expanded its program for young dads under the age of 24. Despite constant challenges and barriers, such as insecure and insufficient financial funding, attached social stigma, and lack of awareness in the community, *Terra's*

services include individual counseling, crisis intervention, parenting education, subsidized housing and legal advocacy (Terra, 2008). The purpose of this study was to explore factors that were particularly successful in offering services for young dads at *Terra*. Exploring the areas in which the organization meet the participating teen dads' needs, how the association got there as well as in which areas they could improve their services will be useful as an evaluation for the organization itself and further as a blueprint for agencies that lack best practices in how to successfully integrate (teen) fathers into their services.

### *Review of the Literature*

Adolescents undergo a set of cognitive, social, and emotional changes during their transition to adulthood including forming a sense of identity, entering intimate relationships, and emancipating themselves from their family of origin (Aries, 2001). One central task in adolescence is the development of identity (Erikson, 1980), which marks a necessary turning point in the adolescent's life and can be called *crisis* (Marcia, 1980). Adolescents must re-evaluate the values they hold, reflect on which choices to make and what kind of persons they wish to be. Becoming a parent in adolescence is considered a drastic life event that disrupts adolescence and forces teenagers to prematurely enter adulthood and parenthood (Muuss, 2001). Aries (2001) states:

Adolescent parents are viewed as cognitively and emotionally immature, too egocentric to adequately assume responsibility for the care of another person, to truly understand a baby's emotional and physical needs, and to separate a baby's feelings from their own. Young adolescents may fail to realize how difficult and time consuming a baby can be and are distressed to discover how different an actual baby can be from the one who they fantasized would offer them unconditional love. (p. 515)

The new responsibility of parenting a child disrupts the former identity of a teenager due to a loss of childhood and freedom, the loss of important relationships with peers and the need to create a new identity as a parent (Brubaker & Wright, 2006). Family support, access to information, as well as new and meaningful relationships are factors that have been identified as necessary to accept and create a new identity as a parent (Brubaker & Wright, 2006). Although parenting experiences and the life situations of teen fathers have received less attention (Glikman, 2004), research suggests that teen fathers want to be significantly involved in child rearing (Rhein et al., 1997; Shannon & Abrams, 2007). However, research suggests that teen fathers struggle to “provide emotional and financial support for their children” (Thornberry et al., 1997, p. 520). Teen fathers’ vulnerability and risk factors related to early fatherhood is well documented. Teen fatherhood is found to be strongly related to involvement in risk behavior such as drug use, criminal activities, and precocious sexual activity (Thornberry et al., 1997; Slesnick, et al., 2006; Shannon & Abrams, 2007). Furthermore, young fathers are more likely to be homeless than their non-parenting peers (Slesnick et al., 2006), often face economic and educational deprivation (Mollborn, 2007), are more likely to be in unstable relationships with their partners (Thornberry et al., 1997), and lack knowledge about childcare (Rhein et al., 1997). Although the need to provide and increase support for teen fathers has been identified in research and practice (Rhein et al., 1997; Thornberry et al., 1997; Glikman, 2004; Dudley, 2007), to effectively meet teen fathers’ needs and to support them continues to be a challenge for service providing agencies (Long, 2003; Smillie, 2004). Support services seem to encourage women to seek support but do not take male experiences and men’s hesitation to look for help into consideration (Addis &

Mahalik, 2003). Persistent cultural, social and political ideologies and norms about men discourage them from seeking the support they might need. Addis and Mahalik (2003) notice: “Men’s difficulty with accessing health services is thus attributed to a mismatch between available service and traditional masculine roles emphasizing self-reliance, emotional control, and power” (p. 12).

Thus, the undertaking to support young fathers and effectively meet their needs seems to be a threefold challenge. First, adolescent fathers, who are typically between the ages of 13 and 19, are in the midst of developmental transitions and psychological exploration and thus lack cognitive and emotional maturity to care for a little baby (Aries, 2001). Second, teen fatherhood is strongly related to a range of cumulating risk factors and poor adult outcomes for fathers and their children such as homelessness, financial and educational deprivation and delinquency (Sigle-Rushton, 2005). Lastly, social support for teen fathers is scarce (Dudley, 2007), and less accessible for men than for women (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Dudley (2007) sums up the status quo of research concerning teen dads as follows: “The literature is still very limited about who they are, what they need, and how we can help them” (p. 171).

### *Theoretical framework*

Although support for teen fathers seems challenging for various reasons, *Terra Association* seems to provide support that meets young fathers’ needs as they have tripled their case load in 2003 and have managed to sustain it since then. To identify which factors have been successful in providing appropriate services for young dads, a Community Based Research approach (CBR) was employed. CBR engages members of the community in the research process in order to develop research questions based on

the needs of the community with emphasizing social justice and the empowerment of communities and their members (Strand et al., 2003; Weinstein, 2006). I collaborated with staff members at *Terra* involved in services for young dads in designing and conducting this study. Furthermore, CBR draws on an ecological model, which recognizes that social problems do not occur in isolation but in specific social contexts intricately interrelated with other individual, social, and political processes (Strand et al., 2003). Teen parenthood is embedded in a variety of contexts such as individual factors (e.g., age and maturity of adolescence), family environment (e.g., quality of family support, marital status, siblings), and social and political contexts (e.g., social support, acceptance or stigma towards teen parenthood, etc.). Although it is necessary to keep all these contexts in mind, the spotlight in this study is set on the social context, since factors and characteristics of a non-profit organization were explored.

## Methods

### *Participants*

*Terra staff.* On the organizational level, five staff members participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews: The Executive Director, the Senior Manager, the program coordinator, and two social workers. One of the social workers holds the position of the dads' outreach worker, and the other is the Community-Partnership facilitator and in-take worker. Although the program coordinator and the social workers were the primary contacts in designing and conducting the research, the executive director and the senior manager were frequently asked for feedback and advice.

*Young fathers.* Four former teen fathers were recruited by *Terra's* social workers. Three of these fathers has been a client for five years or longer and were a teenager

(between 15 and 19 years of age) when their partner became pregnant and when first contacted *Terra*. One father has been a client for one year. At the time of the interview they were 18 to 26 years old and each had one child aged between 2 and 7 years old. The teen fathers' assigned social worker was present for the interviews. Due to literacy concerns and to foster an informal and comfortable environment, we discussed the consent form verbally, informing them about the purpose of the study and reminding them that participation was completely voluntary. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, code numbers were used on the recorded files and the transcripts. During the interviews, I took notes and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each of the young fathers received a \$20 gift certificate to acknowledge his time commitment.

Two of the fathers were single dads, and the other two dads were able to see their child on a regular basis (between once or twice a week and every second weekend). None of them were in a relationship with the child's mother. Moreover, they all had dealt with problems beyond what an "average" teen father might be experiencing. However, their experiences might be argued to be of most interest, since they overcame exceptionally challenging circumstances such as criminal activities, homelessness, and drug issues before taking on the responsibility of being an involved father (two of them currently have sole custody). When they became clients at *Terra* two of the participants were 15, one was 17 and one was 19. Besides involvement in criminal activities and drugs, other issues were reported such as "problems with anger", living on the streets (two of them), literacy issues (two of them "could barely read or write") and none of them held a job or was attending school. Although these teen dads' lives took a turn for the better after

connecting with *Terra*, they continued to struggle with societal barriers, such as prejudices, discrimination, and social stigma. One participant illustrates this point by reflecting on how his experience with *Terra* differed from that with child welfare:

Terra was very, very friendly towards me. I feel like society and the government is kind of prejudiced against us, though. You know, it's just – just because of the way things are set up. Especially in, like, in my situation going to court and fighting for custody of my kid, was a very difficult situation. [Although] the mother had such serious drug problems at the time and it was obvious. I remember the first social worker my daughter had. And she was VERY prejudiced towards me (...). She did not want to let me see my daughter. You know? And like, her mom was a junkie. And she was getting to see her daughter three times a week. And I wasn't allowed to?! And I have a job, I have an apartment, I've got food in my fridge. What the f\*\*\* is she doing?

### *Procedures*

A qualitative study design was employed. In order to explore the different perspectives of services provided to teen dads, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with staff and clients. An interview guide was developed in collaboration with *Terra* staff around the main research question: “What are the factors that are successful in providing services for teen dads”? Two different perspectives were explored: the perspective of *Terra's* staff and the teen dads' experience with the agency. The guiding question for *Terra* was: Is the *Young Dads Program* successful? And if so, how? Which areas are less successful, and why? Subquestions included process of development, encountered challenges, differences and similarities with the teen mothers' program. The last question asked participants about how they envisioned services for teen dads in the future.

Since I had not met the young fathers before the interview, I began those interviews by telling them a bit about my own background and my research before going

through the information form and consent form. Upon officially starting the interview with the recording, I asked them to tell me a little bit about their own situation before asking them about their experiences with *Terra*.

Eight of the nine interviews took between 35 and 50 minutes, the ninth was shorter and took only 20 minutes). All interviews with *Terra* staff took place at *Terra*, whereas the fathers chose to be interviewed at their homes.

My data analysis was guided by community based principles integrating the expertise of clients and staff at a community agency in order to serve community interests and ultimately the goal of empowerment and social change (Weinstein, 2006). An interview guide was used to remain focused on the main research questions while also allowing for some conversation at an informal level. I offered each participant a summary of my interpretation of what they had said (“Self-Corrective Interview”) to give them the opportunity to correct misinterpretations and misunderstanding (Kvale, 1983). All data were analyzed and compared to identify common threads and themes. Emerging themes and subthemes were analyzed and summarized using categories and subcategories.

### Findings

The themes that emerged in the data were separated into two sections: *Characteristics of the Agency*, which includes all the successful factors related to *Terra* as an organization; and *Characteristics of the Young Dads’ Program*, which includes factors specifically related to services provided to young fathers. The attached table shows the themes and subthemes with specific examples.

### *Characteristics of the Agency*

*Mission and Values.* The strong belief in young dads and in the value of fathering is clearly one of the core values from which the agency is operating. One staff member thinks that “where we’re successful is really seeing the potential in the fathers. I think there’s a very, very strong belief in the value of fathering”. This belief in fathers and fathering is embedded in the family context, specifically in approaching fathering through the lens of the child’s best interest. “I think we truly understood and embraced that belief that for the child, we need to help the dads become involved”. Paradoxical though it may seem, sometimes this can also mean working with a father to help him realize that at certain points in time his child’s interests might be best served if he is not involved:

And I’ve also seen successes (...) when the dad realizes that the life he’s leading is not good for the baby. And he steps back. And for that time until he can get his life into a better mode, that’s also a success and people don’t often see it that way, but it really comes down to what’s best for baby.

*Terra* staff emphasized that in order to connect with the dads initially and to maintain that connection with them the agency undertook major revisions to make the agency a more father-friendly place. “We re-did the mission (...) we have to be inclusive of dads”. The process included re-branding to change the former feminine logo – a mother figure holding a baby in burgundy- into a more neutral (orange-green) and father including logo:

[S]o our logo changed (...) The logo is very much of new growth and it symbolizes a seedling, but it has two leaves, and in those two leaves there’s a mom and a dad [as] a symbol [in] the holistic circle (...). But when we did that, it very much was taking into consideration that we do services for young dads and how do we holistically approach the whole vision of moms and dads.

Other changes included putting up pictures and posters of young men and fathers with their children in the agency and internal conversations during staff meetings about male-inclusive language. When young moms call in for services they are also informed of the father's program if a partner is involved.

I'll say, you know, is there a partner involved and are you aware that we offer supports for young dads and would you like me to mail you out some services? So if he's interested, all he has to do is call back and talk with one of our dads' workers.

For the engagement with *Terra* and receiving of services to be initiated, a first positive experience in the agency seems to be even more important for fathers than for mothers. Staff explains:

When a guy walks into this building and he's asking for support, that's huge. It's scary, it's terrifying, and if he came in and met a whole bunch of women that were not male friendly, that were not inviting (...) he would not be here, he would not stay, he would not ask for help. And asking for help is huge for any man to do. For any young woman too, but [for] our young men it's even harder.

*Terra* emphasizes the open and friendly atmosphere that they have actively created for young men:

[T]hey always know that Terra's doors are open and that we never judge what situations they're in, but we're always willing and wanting to support them in whatever they're facing. So I truly believe that it's always been that open door policy that we have here and also the fact that the organization really strives on being father friendly. [H]aving that environment makes it much more comfortable for a young father to walk in here and share his stories without feeling judged or without feeling persecuted.

The four interviewed clients perceived the first contact with *Terra* as very positive. One participant reflects on his first visit as follows:

There's no worries once you walk in their door. I know the first day I was going there, I was very worried on how they were going to look at me and if they were going to judge me, or whatnot. There was no judgments or worries after I talked to them, and they were just like, we want to help you and it was very, very nice and smooth and easy.

*Social workers.* Among *Terra* staff, there is broad consensus that having male, skilled social workers plays an essential part in reaching out to and connecting with young dads. First, *Terra*'s social workers reported satisfaction in their work and a positive work attitude. For instance, one social worker reported: "I take pride in my work. This is not just a job for me." Moreover, both social workers brought experience and adequate training. One social worker mentioned: "I'm constantly in workshops and seminars to help improve my skills and my toolbox (...) to help me working with the clientele I work with now". A staff member said the following about one of the social workers: "He came in (...) with a lot of wisdom, with a lot of experience".

Second, it seems that it is easier to talk to and disclose to another male who is close in age and hence understands some of the trends, lifestyles and "some of the stuff they're going through". Since the social workers are male and young themselves, they are closer to the reality of male clients and are sometimes able to act as role models for them:

A lot of our young dads (...) have never experienced a positive role model in their life. Some of them have grown up in the system; some have just never had a father figure. So how do you become a father when you've never experienced that? And so, I think, one of the big successes [is] that we hire MEN to work with our young dads. Because that connection is different. (...) [T]hey build trust, they build a relationship, they can have those hard conversations and they can have role modeling. That's huge.

Besides the fact that these social workers are male, skilled, and well trained, they are often more sensitive to barriers that are very specific to young men and try to meet

their needs in very creative ways. One of the social workers went beyond his call of duty in the following example: “Food Bank is the last thing that they want to do. So (...) I used to go (...) to pick up the food [and] dropped it off at their house”. Although the Food Bank initially disapproved, he persisted until they allowed him to pick up the food instead of the young family. Currently, this connection still exists and is very helpful.

### *Characteristics of the Program*

Two components were identified as important elements of the program: one is the flexibility of the program, the other the content of the program. The establishment of the dads’ program was considered a continuous process of ‘trial and error’. Initially, the agency applied its teen moms’ programs to teen dads. Since this was unsuccessful, the *Young Dads Program* was developed and modified over time. One staff member thinks back:

What we were doing with our moms was not going to work with our dads. Our dads did not want to come to group programming on life skills. Even though we felt that perhaps that was a good thing for them. They didn’t want to sit around and have coffee and be relational.

*Flexibility of the program.* Since the agency tries to meet teen fathers’ needs on various levels, their program is flexible and tailored to the individual needs of their male clients, and needs frequent re-evaluation and adjustment. One of the social worker holds the point of view that:

[W]e are providing a great service and we’re continually changing, both to meet the needs of our clients and both to meet the needs of the changes in the city and of the province. So we are constantly adapting and re-modifying our program.

Essentially, *Terra* is very creative in helping young men in whatever way they can. A client thinks back: “[T]hey were very open to new ideas. They asked me what sort

of things [were] going on in my life and what they could do to help me with them”. One staff expresses *Terra*’s perspective on this issue:

What we learned is if we can connect with them the first time they identify a need, so they don’t have food and they call us and we can help them get food. Or they need a bus ticket to go to a job interview. If we can get them something for that immediate connection which is our real focus at the front end, they come back.

Since teen moms often stay home with their babies whereas teen dads are at work, flexibility regarding time plays a larger role in staying connected with men than with women. Staff perceived that clients were “living in the moment” and that flexible times were important to give male clients the opportunity to ‘drop in’ or ‘drop out’ when needed: “We have a very broad spectrum of how we can provide support to them. So they can come once, they can come twice, they can leave for months, they can come back. This policy was well received. One young dad said: “We give them a call (...) and they actually wait around for us. They work around us. Not us around them.”

*Content of the program.* Since the interviewed teen dads struggled with so many issues, it was important for *Terra* to adequately meet their needs on different levels. In the interviews, the young dads emphasized that *Terra* provided them mental and emotional support, but also strongly action-orientated assistance in the way that staff would actively help them to shape their future.

Mental support seemed to be important for them to “re-think” and to look at things from another perspective. One teen dad thinks back: “We would sell drugs. And beat up people (...) It didn’t work (...) Terra helped me realize that’s not the life I wanted; for me or my son”. Another father stated: “Mental support was the biggest thing. Like – I was just really unsure about, like what the most important things in my life had

to be. And [name of the social worker] was really good about that.” Although communicating and reflecting was very important to the teen fathers, it seems that they were only to do so because they felt safe at Terra. One staff at *Terra* stated:

[T]hey would look at that and say ‘this is a safe place to be’. And they come back again, and again, and again, and even ones who’ve been away from Terra for years when their life sort of goes into a struggle, you know, Terra’s that safe place to come back to and that there’s people here who care.

There was broad consensus from clients and staff on how important it was for young fathers to feel emotionally safe and accepted in the agency. All fathers expressed in some way or another how emotionally close they felt to staff working at *Terra*. One of the subcategories that emerged from the emotional support category was nurturance of clients. This was probably the most surprising finding in this study and seems to be one of the key elements in connecting with teen fathers and meeting their needs. One of the social workers in particular functioned as a “secure base” and a “safe haven” for his clients. The “secure base” and the “safe haven” are key elements of parent-child attachment, and describe “how the parent serves as a secure base from which the child can explore and as a safe haven to which the child can return in times of trouble” (Hoffman et al., 2006, p. 1018). In our case, the social worker provided emotional security, which allowed his clients to explore their issues and re-frame their situations from a secure base. At the same time, he did not let them down when they got into trouble. The senior manager described these relationships as follows:

[N]ot that he’s God or anything, but what he provided for the dads was that immediate connection. He really focused on their strengths and he was, for lack of a better word, nurturing them (...). So these young dads probably have never been nurtured, they’ve never been parented well. And so he connected to them (...), so he in essence was parenting the parent.

From a professional perspective, but that's what he provided them and that emotional state.

The four teen fathers expressed the emotional safety they felt when talking about their disclosure to staff: "Yeah, there [were] things that I couldn't talk to anyone else about. And I could talk to [the social worker] about them". Another one expressed his relationship with *Terra*: "[They are] making me feel like a part of a community or a small family that is always there for you. No matter what".

Another element of the program that seems to have been successful is the action component, called "Action orientation" by one of the social workers. It encompasses all the activities around meeting teen dads' acute needs such as providing bus tickets, food, clothes, a reference letter, etc. It further implies creating an action plan, based on the young dads' strengths and targeting future wishes and visions. One social worker explains:

[W]hat it means is, you speak less, you do more (...). They like you to say 'we're going to do this, we're going to do the action plan'. It [can] take us a year and we do it and it's done and then we talk a bit. So we reflect upon it (...) Dads speak very little. But when they say something, you better listen.

These actions are an important complementary part of mental and emotional support in the program. By focusing on clients' strengths, short-term and long-term goals are developed and planned. One social worker expressed it as giving young fathers "a vision". At the same time, *Terra* remains closely involved and actively helps young fathers deal with some of the challenging issues they bring with them, such as going to court with them for child custody, but also supporting them in facing lawsuits. *Terra* calls it "Supporting. Lobbying. Those are some of the key things we do". "We go to court with

them”. In addition, experienced legal advocates are referred to young dads to provide adequate legal support. Having this support relieves some of the stress for the father, but also expresses the belief of an agency in the potentials of a young father.

### Discussion

Framed by Community Based Research principles, this study qualitatively explored the perspectives of receiver and providers of services, to better understand which factors are important when attempting to reach teen dads, connect with them, and provide the support they need. One limitation of the study is that the sample size is small, did not reach saturation, and was recruited through the community agency meaning that the fathers who were willing to participate and share their experiences with me were only young fathers who have had very positive experiences with the agency. Unfortunately, it was not possible for me to include fathers who have had less positive experiences or who have left the agency unsatisfied. It is therefore possible that less positive experiences of young fathers were not adequately addressed in this study.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study are significant in that they show that even young, high-risk fathers, who bring a variety of problems with them, can strongly profit from *Terra's* services in numerous ways and are able “to come back to a regular person,” as one teen dad expressed it in the interview. Moreover, the findings are useful to gain a better understanding of the ways in which agencies, programs and staff can offer appropriate and meaningful services for young dads and consequently learn a bit more about “who they are, what they need, and how we can help them” (Dudley, 2007, p. 171). On the agency level, these findings suggest that the staff’s belief in and friendliness towards fathers, as well as, its flexibility in services are key elements in successfully

meeting teen fathers needs. On the program level, social workers are needed who are male, skilled, highly motivated, and able to provide sensitive mental and emotional support as well as the “action component” tailored to young fathers’ needs.

Despite societal and financial barriers, *Terra* went (and is still going) through a long, constant learning process in figuring out how to best meet young dads’ needs. Their engagement with young fathers is exemplary and contributes an important piece of the puzzle that is the complex phenomenon of supporting teen parents and their children.

### Implications

Although these findings cannot be generalized, they identify potentially critical factors in delivering services for young dads. The insights gained will be useful for *Terra* in evaluating which factors and strategies are more and less successful. Moreover, some of *Terra*’s approaches may aid other agencies in implementing or improving support programs for young fathers and fathers in general. In both cases, this could lead to more effective support strategies decreasing costs for agencies and society, and may contribute positively to young fathers’ and their children’s lives. While conducting this study, it also became obvious that the greater Edmonton area is in dire need of appropriate services for young fathers, since currently the *Young Dads’ Program* is the only program in this region and cannot cater to the amount of young parenting and expecting fathers. One of the main factors contributing to the striking lack of such services is the continuing prevalence of societal barriers and prejudices against young fathers. It is high time, however, to realize that young dads don’t exist in isolation but must be considered in the context of their (new) family, including a young mother and their common child. If we want to effectively support young families we need to recognize, accept and support

young dads. To conclude this article, I will share one of the social worker's optimistic outlook of society relinquishing the "deadbeat dads" prejudice and acknowledging young dads' potential, and ultimately their contribution as fathers:

[I]t's starting to open a lot of people's eyes that they [say], 'hey, look at the amount of dads that are taking on that care-giving role' (...). It breaks down all those barriers and those stereotypes and I'm very happy to be a part of the process of breaking down those barriers and stereotypes and saying dads do matter and dads need to be appreciated and dads can do the job.

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