Tools for Teaching

Empowering Teens: Real Talk about Real Life

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Abstract

The author presents three worksheets that have been found to be useful in working with pregnant adolescents. Use of these worksheets is discussed.

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"I don't know if I'd still be alive if I hadn't had my baby. . . ."

—17-year-old mother

Voices: The Reality of Early Childbearing video

Overview

Reaching out to adolescents during an often-unplanned pregnancy requires a deep appreciation of adolescent culture as well as adult linkages to early childbearing (e.g., sexual abuse, poverty, adult partners, and societal pressure). Childbirth educators working with teens must focus on hope. Setting goals, making decisions, and solving problems are intricate components of curriculum for teens.

One of the most vital areas an educator can focus upon is empowerment. Like all women, pregnant teens face many choices in preparing for birth and parenting.

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Considering those choices can be frustrating to a teen who has little voice in her daily life. The challenge of three-generational living can present incredible stress for a new teen parent. Her support system may not be self-evident. Instead of hearing congratulations and good wishes from family and friends, she may have kept the news of her pregnancy secret for months, spending untold hours alone and afraid of the future. Her own denial may have preceded that silence.

The role of the teen outreach educator is rich and varied. It is common for a childbirth educator to assume the roles of advocate, friend, listener, educator, mentor, doula, and confidante. Regardless of an educator's role, an undercurrent of all our contacts with young parents must be empowerment. The foundation of all we do rests in our ability to reinforce the teen's right and power to set goals, make choices and decisions, and move toward independence.

Real Talk about Choices

Accompanying this article are three worksheets that have been helpful to me in empowering teens to make their own choices. These exercises are part of ongoing mentor/mentee relationships that include a minimum of weekly contact (many of our teens see us three times a week). Adaptation of these concepts into a six-week series of childbirth education would involve some one-on-one time.

Individual Worksheet Explanation

Three "Choices" worksheets are included in this article. These worksheets represent only three areas in which the concepts of *choice* and *empowerment* are included in our curriculum. Other areas include early choices, caregiver selection, birth options, feeding the baby, parenting the newborn, school goals, healthy living, and planning for the future.

Real Talk about Your Choices—Support 1

This worksheet is intended for use during one-on-one sessions with a teen (see Worksheet A). A basic reality that needs to be acknowledged in teaching teens deals with the very real lack of support that the teen may have in her home or school environments. However, working

with hope and striving for a positive future requires the following:

1. The teen's acknowledgment and expression of support needs;
2. Discovering areas where support already exists;
3. Assistance with areas where support is weak or nonexistent;
4. Communication of needs to those people most likely to fulfill them;
5. Filling in the gaps with concrete, realistic offers of support from staff and the community.

Simple acknowledgement of the need for support may be a major hurdle for some adolescents. Past history of abuse, neglect, or denial of needs will cloud this discussion. The worksheet should ideally be introduced gradually and over a number of sessions. Support-system players may change over the course of a pregnancy. For example, the father of the baby may be an important means of support at the onset of a pregnancy but may be replaced by another partner as the birth draws near. Relationships with parents, friends, and school will undergo changes as well. A caring educator can be a constant in this sea of change. Returning to the worksheet, making changes, and verbalizing feelings about decreased or increased support allows for articulation of internal pain. The educator should allow for time to process disappointment, frustration, and anger. Follow-up to these sessions is of utmost importance. With few exceptions, this support worksheet should not be introduced when there will be no follow-up contact with the teen.

Real Talk about Teen Choices—Support 2

This is a professional worksheet that accompanies the teen worksheet (see Worksheet B). This chart gives teen outreach staff a concise accounting of the interventions and contacts made with the teen's support people. Working with adolescents should not exist in a vacuum. Even if nonattentive, the people listed on this worksheet impact the teen's life, her choices, and her ability to have hope for the future.

As her advocate, the educator is in a position to cultivate relationships with people who can be enlisted for

Worksheet A Real Talk about Your Choices—Support 1

Name: _____
Date: _____

Real Talk about Your Choices – Support 1
Find Your Support System

It All Starts With You!
Put Your Name Here

Your School
I want my School to: _____

??

I also want support from:

Your Faith Leader
I want my Faith Leader to: _____

Teen Outreach
I want Teen Outreach to: _____

Your Baby's Dad
I want my Baby's Dad to: _____

Your Mom
I want my Mom to: _____

Your Friend(s)
I want my Friend(s) to: _____

Your Family
I want my Family to: _____

Your Doula
I want my Doula to: _____

Your Dad
I want my Dad to: _____

Your Support Person
I want my Support Person to: _____

Your Caregiver
I want my Caregiver to: _____

Instructions:
1. Use this worksheet to help discover your support.
2. Our staff will help you "fill in" weak areas and communicate your needs to your supporters.

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Worksheet B Real Talk about Teen Choices—Support 2

Name: _____
Date: _____

Real Talk about Teen Choices – Support 2

Professional Support System Sheet

Teen's School

PPT Intervention:	

Teen's Partner

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Faith Leader

PPT Intervention	

Father Of the Baby

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Mom

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Friend(s)

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Family

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Doula

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Dad

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Support Person

PPT Intervention	

Teen's Caregiver

PPT Intervention	

Instructions:

1. Use Worksheet #1 to discover Teen's support.
2. Record dates and interventions on this sheet.

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"PPT Intervention" is the name of a state-funded program offered by the author's agency. "PPT" stands for Pregnant and Parenting Teen.

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support. Meeting one-on-one with the parent of a pregnant or parenting teen, for example, can ease some of the tension of three-generational living. If a teen is in foster care, arranging meetings with the foster family is

vital. These meetings fulfill two functions: the family of origin or foster family can be educated about the teen's changing needs throughout her pregnancy, and the family can perceive the teen outreach worker as an ally, not a competitor for the allegiance of the teen parent.

Real Talk about Your Choices: Class Topics

This worksheet lists the primary topics of need in a prepared childbirth class (see Worksheet C). A similar worksheet is available for parenting that includes parent-

Worksheet C Real Talk about Your Choices—Class Topics

Name: _____
Date: _____

It's Up to YOU!

Real Talk about Your Choices – Class Topics

*What do **You** Want to Learn?*

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Instructions: Number the topics in the order of your interest. Add new ideas – it's up to YOU!

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The empowerment that exists when one teen helps another is an intangible, but life-affirming, outgrowth of an active teen class.

ing information as well as teen-sensitive topics such as avoiding subsequent pregnancies (decision-making, refusal skills, prevention information, communication with one's partner) and legal concerns (custody, visitation, parental rights, the role of grandparents). The teen chooses the topics in which she is most interested. Teens in a group not only respond well to this freedom of choice but also can be elicited to prepare a short activity for a topic. Peer teaching is amazing. The empowerment that exists when one teen helps another is an intangible, but life-affirming, outgrowth of an active teen class. Top-

ics for the next week should be selected in advance. Volunteers may be solicited at this time to help prepare a short lesson, activity, game, or story-telling session. Vesting teens in the next class, both as presenters or active participants, will cut down on absenteeism and encourage active learning.

Conclusion

Empowering teens in a childbirth class is a vital aspect of our mission to youth. The late writer and editor, Elbert Hubbard, said, "The object of teaching a child is to enable him to get along without a teacher." Empowering our young parents with hope and goals for the future is, to me, the highest calling of a childbirth educator. I invite you to contact me at podmj@healthyteens.com for sharing and support! I also invite you to share the sentiments of my slogan: One Kid at a Time!™