

# Four Promising Practices to Support Positive Outcomes for Pregnant & Parenting Youth



EVIDENCE  
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief outlines the importance of protective factors and summarizes promising practices to support positive outcomes for pregnant and parenting youth.

## KEY MESSAGE

**Protective factors are critical for pregnant and parenting youth.**

Pregnant and parenting youth may be exposed to factors that limit opportunities for positive outcomes, including mental health challenges, domestic violence, substance use, low self-esteem, low income and socioeconomic status, low educational attainment, and limited social supports.<sup>1</sup>

Although evidence is limited on interventions to reduce the impacts of these risks and respond to the unique needs of these young people, an emphasis on *protective factors* can make a difference – those “individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviours that reduce the effects of stressful life events. These factors also increase an individual’s ability to avoid risks or hazards, and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life, now and in the future.”<sup>2</sup>

Examples of protective factors for pregnant and parenting youth include:

- Strong support networks (family, friends, and community)
- Resilience and coping skills
- Access to healthcare
- Education and employment opportunities
- Positive relationships with partners

## SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR PROMISING PRACTICES

### 01. Create affirming and facilitative relationships.

Be attentive to how youth may internalize their experiences of discrimination due to interlocking and systemic oppressions. Support youth to establish a non-judgemental narrative about themselves as young parents and encourage their aspirations through affirmation.<sup>3</sup>

A simple yet effective approach to promoting positive self-concept is journaling, a practice that can often benefit from the use of external prompts. Since journaling provides an opportunity for real-time reflection, and is an effective outlet for stress, this approach can promote improved self-esteem and enable youth to explore the hopes that they have for their future selves and in their roles as parents, ultimately increasing the likelihood of their pursuit and achievement of these goals.<sup>4</sup>

Facilitate access to appropriate resources and supports, including clinical services and mental health and counselling services. Providers who support pregnant and parenting youth – including those in nursing, obstetrics, mental health, and social work – have emphasized mental health supports as one of the most critical for youth wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>

## 02. Facilitate social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning has been defined as a “process through which young people enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks.”<sup>6</sup>

Provide opportunities to pregnant and parenting youth for social and emotional development to build coping skills that can mitigate the difficult personal challenges they may be experiencing.

Many young parents have reported experiencing emotional and mental distress, including depression, fear and worry, guilt and shame, and conflict with their identity as they navigate new and changing roles.<sup>7</sup> Promoting protective factors – such as agency or sense of self, prioritizing care of self, and a sense of optimism – has been found to be effective in addressing this distress and fostering resilience,<sup>8</sup> which can also be important in navigating the stigma experienced by pregnant and parenting youth.<sup>7</sup>

Programs and providers assisting youth of this demographic can take steps to integrate this practice in various ways. For example, some programs offer services from a *trauma-informed* approach, which considers the mental health and lived experiences of youth, especially those who have faced marginalization. These programs help youth develop coping strategies and encourage age-appropriate activities to promote confidence, respond to trauma, and promote healthy social-emotional development.<sup>9</sup>

## 03. Encourage education and employment advancement.

Becoming a pregnant or parenting youth greatly increases the likelihood of dropping out of school, often within a short period of time, making it difficult to even begin to frame interventions to keep these young people in school.<sup>10</sup>

A high school diploma is an important credential for employment, and pregnant and parenting youth need immediate and accessible supports to continue their education – especially considering that many of these youth have high educational and career goals.<sup>11</sup> For example, one study indicated that the implementation of accessible childcare programs, including in-class childcare, increased overall graduation rates.<sup>10</sup>

Other supports that help pregnant and parenting youth achieve academic and career success include navigational guidance in planning for their educational pursuits, access to health resources, and financial literacy and career development supports. These youth also benefit from childhood development education, which provides the skills and knowledge needed to better support their children.<sup>12</sup>

#### **04. Promote positive relationships with caring adults and mentors.**

Many pregnant and parenting youth share that they value relationships with their parents and other caring adults in their lives, but are unsatisfied with the quality of these relationships.<sup>11</sup> For these young people, friends and extended family may be primary sources for support, but they can also be sources of stress.

Parents and caregivers of pregnant and parenting youth often make assumptions about their child's capacities and level of maturity, limit the co-parent's time with the child, and limit freedoms due to the young parent's age and financial dependence. These factors further challenge pregnant and parenting youth in reaching their goals.<sup>13</sup>

Ensure these youth have access to caring adults and mentors who can provide positive reinforcement and foster resiliency. Encouraging positive relationships with the young person's friends and co-parent (when appropriate) can also strengthen social support networks and improve outcomes.

#### **HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?**

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "protective factors", "pregnant youth", "parenting youth", "adolescent parents", "social supports", "mental health", "educational supports", "career development", "youth programs", "risk factors", and "parenting".

## ENDNOTES

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