



Florida State University Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy **Young Parents Project**

The Florida State University (FSU) Young Parents Project is a unique home visiting program that addresses the complex needs of court-involved pregnant and parenting teens and their young children. Project participants include teen mothers from seven Florida counties that have extensive trauma histories, deeply embedded in under-resourced communities. Most have experienced victimization due to violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation. The high prevalence of complex trauma for these young parents impedes not only their ability to follow-through with positive life choices, but also impacts the relationships they have with their children.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) scores, used to measure the cumulative effects of traumatic stress in childhood, are highly prevalent in delinquency youth. Data collected at the time of intake about the 38 teens that were admitted to the FSU Young Parents Project in Miami and Tallahassee during the 2019-20 fiscal year demonstrated: 100% of the girls were involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice, with an average age of first arrest at 15 years; 58% had been involved with the child welfare system at some point in their lives; half, 50%, self-reported family members having problems with the police and/or courts; and 39% were not enrolled in any type of educational program. In addition, there were concerns that 34% of the youth had experienced human trafficking. Multiple ACES put these teen mothers at high risk for physical and mental health issues and ongoing involvement in the criminal justice system.

Many programs within the juvenile justice system cannot provide the individual approach that is critical to meeting the complex needs of teen mothers. Most of the parenting youth have not been served by traditional home visiting programs and require the ongoing persistence of YPP staff to engage and encourage their on-going participation. Gender-specific services are critical for girls to be respected and valued for their strengths and are fundamental to preventing deeper involvement with the justice system.

The FSU Young Parents Project is adapted from Yale University's evidence-based model called *Minding the Baby*®. The model uses a reflective practice parenting approach designed to address trauma, promote the attachment relationship between the teen and her baby, and support both their physical and mental health needs. The program has found that young mothers typically express a deep commitment to making life different for their children. Building parenting capacity, while also attending to the dual developmental needs of both the teen and baby, is key to this challenging work.

The project uses an interdisciplinary team of highly skilled professionals to provide weekly home visits and extensive follow-up services. The team includes:

- a Social Worker that addresses the family's concrete needs and provides court-related advocacy;
- a Nurse Educator that focuses on the medical home, health education, family planning and the development of the teen and baby;
- an Infant Mental Health Specialist who promotes the mom/baby relationship with a trauma-focused lens.





The FSU Young Parents Project also works with multi-system youth whom are served by both the Department of Juvenile Justice and child welfare system. The project's home visitors are persistent in their efforts while using a relationship-based approach. Trauma-informed weekly visits and program activities are designed to support the mother's ability to "hold her baby in mind" as she begins to reflect on her growth as a new parent. The focus is also directed towards the teen's ability to make good life decisions without further criminal involvement.

For the 38 teens enrolled in the project during the fiscal year 2019-20:

- ★ **Reduced recidivism.** Only one (1) teen had a new law violation during her time in the project. Efforts to reduce recidivism require attention to the challenging circumstances faced by female youth that can specifically address their needs.
- ★ **Reduced number of subsequent births.** Only one (3%) of the young mothers had a subsequent birth; whereas national data indicates that 25% of teen parents will have a second child within 24 months of their first baby.
- ★ **Increased number continuing their education.** There are multiple barriers to enrolling teen mothers in an educational program. The majority of participants are not at appropriate grade level, and often are more than one grade level behind. Of the 38 program participants a small increase was noted in youth school enrollment from 61% to 68% after 3 months in the project. The high rates of child welfare involvement and human trafficking impact the teens' school enrollment and academic progress. The FSU Young Parents Project strives to support school enrollment and is increasingly working with school districts to provide specialized services that these young parents need.

Data from the project illustrates that the *Minding the Baby*® intervention is essential to reducing recidivism, delaying subsequent births, continuing school enrollment, and enhancing the mom/baby relationship. The FSU Young Parents Project works at the intersection of infant mental health and reproductive justice, and includes the right to parent with safety, support, and dignity. It is an investment in the future of complex young families and aims to address systemic barriers and the intergenerational cycle of trauma, violence, and involvement with the courts. The project can transform the lives of these young mothers and children through supportive relationships, advocacy and parenting education, as well as providing the trauma-informed intervention necessary to promote healthier, happier families.

"I am a mother now. I have to finish school. I have to stay out of trouble. I have to be a role model. She is the reason I get up in the morning."

Young Parents Project Mom

