

The importance of whānau, family in the lives of youngparents



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• **point**research

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DISCLAIMER

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Foreword

*Whaia te iti
kahurangi ki te
tuohu koe me he
maunga teitei*

*Aim for the
highest cloud
so that if you
miss it, you will
hit a lofty
mountain*

Transformational change can only occur if we embrace the notion that everyone has the right to good education, to receive timely appropriate and accessible health services, to have affordable warm housing and to be economically equipped.

The complexities of teen whānau, young parents cannot be fully explained nor understood in one text or in one research project. This research explores and touches on the encounters and experiences of young parents within the embrace of their whānau and families. The narratives shared emphasise the position of whānau, family as the backbone to engaged and supportive parenting for many young parents and their children.

The critical markers of connectedness, respect, wellbeing and children centredness are themes that underpin this rich body of work.

I am encouraged and committed to adopting many of the recommendations and would strongly urge others to use the findings of this valuable research to further your contribution to enhancing the lifecourse of teen whānau.

Nga mihi mahana



Cinnamon Whitlock

CEO, Thrive Teen Parent Support Trust

Recommendations

Recommendations from this research broadly fit into three main areas:

1. Supporting whānau and families.

This research recommends that organisations which work with young parents consider:

- implementing context driven practice, whereby the needs of young parents are considered within the context of their whānau and families;
- practising in a way which upholds and respects the significance of positive whānau involvement; understanding that there are factors which can affect the quality of whānau support and focusing on mitigating these;
- providing up-to-date accessible information and support, including connecting whānau and families of teen parents to each other and; support young people in a way which holds them in the cultural context of their whānau and communities.
- support young people in a way which holds them in the cultural context of their whānau and communities.

2. Supporting young parents.

- assist young parents to identify where they find support in their whānau or family and help them to identify where they can access this support;
- encourage young people to have realistic expectations around the quality and types of family and whānau support available;
- consider a culture of practise whereby young parents are encouraged to bring along partners and other whānau and family members to support and encourage them and; use moderated social networking to help young parents share information around communication and support within their whānau and families.

3. Developing young parent whānau-friendly communities.

The harm and the fear of social engagement experienced by young parents and their whānau could be alleviated by a community-wide response to addressing social stigma and discrimination towards young parents. Therefore, this research recommends that organisations which work with young parents:

- increase societal and community awareness around the impact of discrimination on young parents;
- build sector capacity to assist whānau and families to support young parents and help the wider sector;
- understand the important role that whānau and families play in supporting young parents.

Introduction

This research was commissioned by Thrive Teen Parent Support Trust in 2012 as part of the on-going need to develop teen whānau-centred services.

Background

First time parents in Aotearoa New Zealand as similar to other developed countries, are getting older. The average age of a first time mother in New Zealand is 30 years of age. For Māori, that age is slightly younger, at 26 years of age. Māori also have a higher rate of younger parents.

There are 4000-5000 babies born to young mothers (aged <20) each year, with this rate staying relatively stable since the mid 1990's. In 2012 there was a drop in birth rates across all ages, including young mothers (aged <20) which dropped slightly, with 3,804 babies born to young mothers. New Zealand evidence suggests that young parents and their children are more likely to experience negative outcomes which can lead to lifelong negative impacts (Ministry of Social Development, 2003), although it should be noted that many of these poorer outcomes are attributed to issues arising from wider socio economic factors, rather than solely due to the age of the parent, for example, poor mental health, family violence, drug and alcohol addiction, and poor housing.

The Government has a number of initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for vulnerable children and some of these are targeted at increasing support for young parents and their children. In addition to the Government's response, many community initiatives which support young parents have emerged across New Zealand in response to the needs of young parents. Many of these focus on the needs of young mothers and their children, although recently there has been an increased focus on the needs of young fathers.

Māori communities and iwi providers in particular advocate for the needs and wellbeing of the young parents and their children to be viewed within the context of their wider whānau. One of the Māori health models that has been widely adopted across the health sector and can easily embraced when working with young people is Te Whare Tapa Wha (Durie, 1984). The model covers the four cornerstones of Māori health and wellbeing: te taha tinana (physical health); te taha whānau (whānau or relational health); te taha hinengaro (mental/psychological health) and te taha wairua (spiritual health) (Jansen, et al., 2010). Te Whare Tapa Wha literally means “the house with four walls’ and is often symbolised by a wharenuī (house) where each of the dimensions represent a cornerstone of the wharenuī in order to illustrate how their dependence on one another (Ministry of Health, 2011).

Research Aim

The aim of this research was about identifying the support needs of whānau and how the pregnancy and parenting sector can strengthen whānau family support for pregnant teens, young parents and their children.

The priority areas considered in this research are:

1. Key characteristics of effective whānau and family support including ways whānau and family help keep children healthy and safe,
2. How whānau and family members would like to receive support and by whom,
3. Information and/or support whānau and family members need to provide effective support to young parents in their family.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study based on interviews and focus groups conducted with 10 young parents (age <20) and eight whānau and family members including parents, siblings, aunties and close family friends. We had 18 participants with an initial interest from 22 people.

Ethnicity

Many of the participants identified with more than one ethnicity. Of the 18 participants, 11 identified as Māori, eight identified as Pacific (Samoan four, Niuean two, Tongan one, Rarotongan one), five identified as Pakeha or New Zealand European and one who is Indian.

Data collection

Two specific groups were consulted during the course of this evaluation:

- Young parents who had children under five
- Whānau and families of young parents.

None of the Whānau members and young parents who participated in this research are directly related. Multiple methods were used to ensure a robust triangulation of data. The methods were inclusive and participatory.

It is important to note that the relationships that Thrive held with young parents from the antenatal programmes, parenting education, young fathers group and partner organisations assisted greatly the shaping of the research. The three young parents on staff at Thrive took a leadership role in this research as they assisted with the design of the young parent focus groups, the interview questions and the engaged of participants. Effectively, drawing on these existing relationships in the research process added real value to the quality of the conversations and enabled the researchers to engage a diverse group of participants.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held in October 2012, one for young parents and one for whānau members. The young parent focus group was held in the early afternoon at Thrive with lunch, free crèche and transport provided. The focus group for whānau members was held in the early evening and included light refreshments. All participants received koha in acknowledgement of their time and the significant distance travelled by many.

The focus groups involved interactive activities which allowed participants to define whānau and whānau support from their own perspective. The activities encouraged participants to share positive and challenging experiences and identify ways they would have liked to receive support if it was absent.

Five of the eight whānau and family members involved in this research were themselves teenagers when they first became a parent. Two participants were younger siblings, without children, both had more than one older sibling who had become parents before they were 20 years old.

Whānau and family interview

One interview was conducted with a Maori and Pacific whānau who had multiple teen pregnancies (>10) within their extended whānau living in New Zealand and Australia. The interview allowed us to explore different experiences and needs within a wider whānau context including how they provided support for those they identified as most vulnerable.

Discussion

Young parents described the positive support they received from whānau, families and others in the community as invaluable. The support is genuine, relational, focuses on their needs and the needs of their children, holds them in the context of their whānau, family and community and leaves them feeling empowered and with skills they can use in other areas of their lives.

It should be noted that during the data collection phase of the research, some participants drew on key Māori concepts to help express what was important for them. These concepts – of whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, turangawae-wae, hinengaro and wairua have been woven through the discussion, particularly as both Maori and non-Maori participants expressed a real interest in these concepts as they themselves had experienced similar outcomes.

“Hearing it from a Maori construct it fits really well with my experience as a young parent and as a mother of a teen parent and seeing the outcomes that we have had because of this and then seeing the outcomes of families that don’t have those supports in place. Even though [mine] is a Pakeha experience it was all those things you described.”

This next section explores the needs and significant role of family and whānau including key influencing factors which support them to celebrate and adjust to the new pregnancy.

Everything in our capitalist consumerism lifestyles draws us away from how important being a parent is [that’s why we say] ‘I want to travel, buy houses’, its the consumerist life. The focus from the government on teen parents doesn’t seem positive if it’s not valuing them and their role as parents.”
Young parent mentor and mother of six

Family and whānau immediate needs and key influences

TIME TO ADJUST

Most whānau and family members expressed their initial shock upon being told of the pregnancy. Some, particularly those who had dreams for the young person's future (e.g. education, travel, career and sporting ambitions), spoke about experiencing a sense of sadness when receiving the news. Some were concerned as to how the young person would cope and were worried about being judged by others.

Young parents and whānau members expressed the need for time to process the news without being judged for their reaction. Cultural, family and religious values appeared to be the main influences on how whānau came to terms with the pregnancy.

Young parents commented that whānau support was particularly important for both for them and their parents as they adjusted to the news of the pregnancy.

"My two aunties helped my mum to come around, she was so shocked and upset, mainly because she thought my sports career was over. But after talking to my aunties and my coach she realised I could still pursue my goals and look after my daughter." - Young parent

"My step mum has been there for me the whole time, it's brought us closer, she has shared all the special moments, my mum just won't do it. My dad who I am really close to can't even talk to me but my step mum has helped me so much." Young parent

"I have my younger brother, he is a sounding board and will just listen, he kind of mediates between me and mum a lot of the time." - Young parent

Family and whānau of teen parents want non-judgemental support for them and young parents and time to readjust their dreams

REFRAMING FUTURE GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS

Whānau aspirations and concerns for the young person appear to be strong motivates for them to focus on what is best for the expectant parent and their baby. The uniqueness of whānau experience means this can be very personal. Some draw on their own life experience and others draw on the support they receive from others around them. This appears to make a real difference in their ability to celebrate the pregnancy.

"I remember initially when my daughter told us she was pregnant I was really disappointed because I had thought of her doing something quite different for herself - but in the end it is what it is, let's get on with it. We had been through it, so it wasn't such a bad thing. It wasn't the end of the world, you have to grow up really quickly, there are going to be lots of things going on for you, but you wouldn't change it for the world."

Father of a young parent

"Raising a child was never meant to be done on your own, never, ever, ever was it meant to be done. It's not just about grandparents it's about big extended family and friends - there is a saying 'he taonga te mokopuna', no matter what, every time, these [babies] are a treasure. The minute they are there, they are a treasure."

Young parent mentor and mother of six

"I just want her to be a happy, loving, caring person - believing in herself. I am a big believer in self-belief because yes you do have a family but you have to spend a lot of time with yourself and you have to be happy with what you're doing with your life."

Father of a young parent

Saying "congratulations" on the news of unexpected pregnancy

Telling my work mate I was going to be a grandmother & she shrieked, jumped up & gave me a genuine, excited hug!
Being able to congratulate my daughter

"What worked well for me."
Young parent

WHANAUNGATANGA

The concept of whanaungatanga (cooperation, togetherness, strong relationships) provides the foundation for many of the young parents in this project. Many of the young parents spoke of deep and abiding support from their whānau and families which helped them both practically and emotionally and which supported them on their parenting journey. All participants identified at least one significant person who provided extensive support and the majority could identify more than three. For many this support was unique to the person who was offering it and their relationship with the young parent and their child. Some were existing close relationships within families and others developed a closer relationship over time.

This section considers the people whom young parents believed they received the most support from and the types of support given by these people.

SUPPORT FROM OUR ANCESTORS

Over half of the young parents involved described receiving significant support from their ancestors and deceased loved ones. There was a general sense from Maori, Pacific and Indian participants that this was a common experience and that it appeared to have a significant impact on their sense of wellbeing. It is worth noting that the young fathers spoke about this extensively. Young parents describe being able to talk to their ancestors, gain emotional and spiritual support, gain inspiration about raising children, draw on cultural values and they often thought about how their loved one would approach a situation.

"That's me being shadowed by everyone in my whole family [see picture], they are

right beyond me. My grandparents are dead now but their support began way before I became a father. So the strong influences they had over me as a child has led me into the kind of father I am now."

Young Father

Others felt they experienced similar spiritual connections with deceased whānau who continue to influence their parenting:

"[From my Nan I get] peace and clarity in my decision making (and) what I see in life, and that builds into my kids."

Young mother

"I get support from my birth father who has passed away and my father who whangai(ed) me. I know what it feels like to be loved; I feel their love and the importance of having a close relationship with God."

Young father

INTERGENERATIONAL PARENTING Many of the young parents described the benefit of having support from grandparents, great grandparents and other elders in their whānau, many of whom helped the young parent adjust to parenthood, and provided practical help and assistance as well as on-going emotional support:

"We live with my parents and grandparents, they just help us out, they have been there for us since the beginning. Especially my nana who in the first few weeks looked after me, helped me to get used to being a mother."

Young mother

"My father-in-law also comes home and gives me a little break, he is very helpful. He plays with our baby and I have some time to myself"

Young mother



"I remember when I told my mum when I was pregnant [as a teenager] and there were things she said to me like 'we will support in any way we can but this baby is your responsibility'. That was such a gift that mum gave me. We said the same to [our teenage daughter when she told us she was pregnant] but we also said we could whangai if she wanted. We wanted her to know you wouldn't have to do it on your own." **Grandmother and mother of five**

"I remember I was getting ready to go out with my friends, and I remember my Great Aunt asking me who was looking after baby. I said I was going to have her in the car asleep and check on her. Aunty replied, 'It's OK love, I can have her and anytime you want to go out you can just ask me or one of the other aunts'. Looking back on it, the way she dealt with it was amazing, I always asked and they always said yes." **Mother, who was a young parent**

SUPPORT FROM WHANAU LIVING OVERSEAS

The departure of family overseas can remove an essential source of immediate support for young parents, however many of the young parents interviewed talked of receiving significant support from whānau living overseas. Often this is their main support for working through problems and they cherish these relationships and being able to talk things through with them.

"One of my aunts in Canada she is very close to me. She is like a friend to me - if I have anything I will go straight to her. Though my parents are in Fiji they call me [all the] time and my mum talks to me about how to be a mum, how to deal with problems and things like that."

Young parent

"My friend has moved to Australia but she still rings me. When you have a baby you lose your friends. She has stuck by me. She is good to talk to."

Young parent

SUPPORT FROM SIBLINGS AND CLOSE COUSINS

Siblings and close cousins were identified by both young parents and whānau members as significant support of young parents. Often friends move away and the young couple or pregnant young can become increasingly isolated. Siblings and close cousins appear to provide support and friendship. Once the baby is born they often build a strong bond with the baby and provide emotional and practical support. It was evident that siblings who have a close relationship often picked up on early signs of stress and encouraged the young parent to accept and seek help from others.

"I have my sister on speed dial"

Young parent

"I always asked about their goals and their careers, I am the bossy one so I would always give advice, sometimes my parents say that's enough advice. Also practical support like looking after baby so they could go to a job interview, or get nana to look after baby and I would take them out to get a break because I know I can do that more often. They live in Aussie now and I still have that close relationship ... I am out there doing education and I am the youngest so there is that extra pressure on them, in a good way."

Sibling of young parents

"I would take [baby] for a walk when he was crying so my sister could get some sleep. Just cuddle him and rub his back or push him in the pushchair until he fell asleep."

Sibling of a young parent

Contact with siblings and close cousins can help reduce isolation and improve support. For one whānau, this contact is in the form of social networking as a family group.



"My dad has moved to Australia and my brother and mum are moving there quite soon. I am quite worried about how I am going to cope once they have gone."

*“The love, caring and playfulness my teenage son shows [my grandson] whenever he comes over. My heart swells.”
Father of a young parent*

“(My children who are young parents) have had to rely on Facebook to have that support network going on. We were talking about it one day and I said why don’t you all just Facebook each other. You all seem to be on your phones, talk about things, talk about your relationships and parenting stuff. They have gone from five being in the group to 45 and it goes from Australia back to New Zealand.” Grandmother and mother of five

Two siblings who had multiple young pregnancies in their family and who had provided practical hands-on support from a young age spoke about the impact of their older sibling’s experience on them and their career decisions; both went on to further education and careers without having children themselves.

Whānau support can come from multiple people in different ways. It works best when it builds young parents’ confidence and helps them feel supported to gain new skills.

Evidence for this research would suggest whānau support initiatives need to consider the diverse cultural and geographical contexts of family and whānau members. It would suggest whānau support initiatives need to be non-judgemental, highly responsive to different whānau members and attuned to the likelihood of changing circumstances of where whānau support may come from.

In this next section we will look closely at the key characteristics of effective support which make a real difference for young parents and their whānau and families, as well as where young parents found support and the impact of this support.

Key characteristics of effective family and whānau support

When considering how whānau and families support young parents, it is tempting to simply focus on practical help, such as child-minding, providing a place to live and financial assistance. Whilst this is certainly an important part of supporting young parents, many of the young parents and their families and whānau in this research identified the emotional support as that which made the most difference to their overall wellbeing.

When Courtney was in hospital affirming Williams with his ability to support & comfort her.

This research found that the most effective support whānau and families can give young parents is by:

- providing stability, connectedness and wellbeing,
- offering them a trusted person to talk to,
- showing kindness, respect and humanity
- monitoring risk factors

Help out if I need a break. Even if it's just 5 minutes!

In turn, there is some support that can be offered to whānau of young parents, including:

- giving them time and space to adjust
- not stigmatising or judging the young parent they are supporting and
- understanding that they may need to reframe their goals and aspirations for their children

PROVIDING STABILITY, CONNECTEDNESS AND WELLBEING

It was evident that young parents and their children benefitted from stability in the immediate and wider whānau or family. Young parents noted that openness between families, positive relationships amongst family members, healthy family environments, access to good role models, potential for the young parent to live with whānau or family, good communication within the whānau and having confidence to work through challenges and changing expectations all helped to provide them with a sense of stability, connectedness and wellbeing.

Practical support was highly valued by young parents and memorable for both them and their family. Practical support often facilitates handing down of parenting knowledge, maintains family traditions, enriches relationships and responds to the changing needs of the young parents and their child.

“Talking with [my daughter] about healthy eating and what was going to happen. Passing down my own pregnancy books from when I had her.”

Mother of a young parent

“When [my grandson] was a little baby, I sang the sleeping song to him that I sang to all my kids for the first time. [The impact] it made my heart swell and I like to think to give a sense of connectedness.”

Father of a young parent

“In the first month [my nephew] was crying and nothing could console him but my sister holding him. She was tired so I told her I’d look after him. I became her ‘stunt double mummy’. I could help my sister get some well needed sleep.” Sibling of a young parent

HAVING A TRUSTED PERSON TO TALK TO

Young parents, particularly those who deal with on-going tension within their whānau and families, found that one of the most effective strategies is having a trusted person to talk to, who listens and helps them to develop helpful strategies, who looks after the young parent’s spiritual and emotional aspirations and who actively cares for their mental health and wellbeing:

“It’s just having someone reliable and committed and supports around the young parent to uplift their hinengaro [psychological health] and wairua [spiritual health] ... encouraging them to be responsible and caring to others in their community and giving them that responsibility.” Young parent mentor and mother of six

A number of young parents talked about experiencing tension when dealing with different family expectations and parenting styles, either within their own family or their partner’s family. For many, these tensions passed as the families adjusted and they felt more confident with managing relationships and expectations. Others, however, had to deal with on-going tension within their whānau and families and found that having a trusted person to talk to made a positive difference to how they approached the situation.

“I could see [the tension] was really affecting him because it was his mum, she never said anything to me directly but it really affected him. I did feel the hurt of them speaking about me and I needed my family support. [My family] said to just ignore it. Their advice was helpful.”

Young mother

One of the strategies teen parents found helpful to deal with on-going tension was having a trusted person to talk to, who listened and helped them to develop positive strategies.

MANAAKITANGA/KINDNESS, RESPECT AND HUMANITY

Many whānau members were conscious of wanting to give the young person space to make decisions and learn from their experiences. On-going practical and emotional support such as this appeared to make a real difference for the young parents involved in this research.

"For me it's about [my daughter] is now a mother, and it's now for her to live her own life. Not in a way of not being involved, it's that we are always there. We have certain traditions within our family. We may not see everyone all the time but we always get together ... in our family, in both sides. You're a mother now it's important to me that you go off and makes your own mistakes and not be judgemental about those things."

Father of young parent

"From my cultural viewpoint and experience it is the parents that are responsible. I had to be very careful not to put in what my beliefs, because that's their path. And I think that was about me, [my husband] was more accepting than I was. I can now see how they [daughter and her partner] have done a brilliant job."

Mother of a young parent

Some whānau members showed support by walking alongside their young parent, not only supporting their decisions but also helping them find information to support the decision-making process.

"There was the realisation for me that things have changed, like childbirth. Reading up with her and admitting that there were some questions I couldn't answer because it is quite different today."

Mother of a pregnant 16 year old

Whanau showing respect to their partners was very important to some of the young people.

"I had to say something to my mum – she was real good and took what I said seriously. Mum and I became closer because she started to show more respect toward my partner." Young father

To be most effective, respect has to work both ways. As most young parents do not want to risk losing the support they receive, they prioritise the preservation of family relationships and address ongoing tension directly or through the development of coping strategies such as conceding to parents or adopting a positive focus.

Expectations are quite high - of what others think I am going to achieve in a day, caring for baby, housework and cooking. My partner doesn't like arguments so we give in a lot to my mother in law. I just go to my room, have a drink of water and come back and focus on the positive. I do feel upset, though.

Young mother

WHANAU AND FAMILY VALUING YOUNG PARENTS PARENTING ROLE

Young parents involved in this research strongly value the support they receive that encourages them to be good parents. They felt there were many ways family members value and support them as parents and can be good role models for them and their children. Some of the examples from the research data include family members investing time building a relationship with their child

- Having other adults reassure what they are doing is right for them and their baby
- Offering advice but not forcing it on them all the time
- Praising them for being good parents

Tell me how family Breastfeeding was for Oua whanau.

Teach me
Self Care After birth

- Sharing their own parenting stories
- People seeing them ask for help as a strength
- Family and partners being understanding and non-judgemental
- People not encouraging or rewarding negative behaviour.

Don't laugh
when she swears!
Don't teach her
how to swear!

They felt this support helps them develop strategies to mentally prepare to be parents and give them confidence as a parent. All the whānau members expressed a strong desire for them to be good parents and many admired their commitment and parenting skills. A key part of effective whānau support is valuing and supporting their role as parents.



*"I want more
thrive programmes
to be out in the
community"*
Young parent



I want to study &
and live a happy life
with my kids. So I
can better their
future (1)

VALUING YOUNG PARENTS FUTURE DREAMS AND GOALS

Many of the young parent participants involved in this research held future goals they want to pursue such as having a career. Leading fulfilling lives appeared very important to all participants, including being a good parent and having other ambitions. Some had let go of their dreams once becoming a parent and others had people within their family who encouraged them to pursue their other ambitions. All attributed the support they received from whānau as been critical to being able to do both well.

YOUNG PARENTS HAVING ACCESS TO POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Losing their peer group is a common experience for many young parents. Many spoke of feeling social isolated, in this case siblings and close cousins took up a crucial support role, providing both friendship and practical support. Some friends make a conscious choice to keep up their relationship and this can make a real difference for the young parent. Others described finding it difficult to make new friends who share similar values and interest. Young parents who had access to positive peer relationships within parenting support groups felt more connected and less isolated than those who felt they had less in common with the others in the group, for example, if others in the group were less positive about being a parent or if they were more focused about getting a new partner.

*"I want to make
new friends that
can relate to me
and want better."*
Young parent



Keeping children safe

Evidence from this research indicates the majority of the participants demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility to identify risk and to keep children safe. It was evident this responsibility underpinned many of the practical support strategies offered to young parents and developed by young parents, for example:

- encouraging bonding and attachment
- focusing on the needs of children
- listening and sharing hot tips
- helping parents anticipate potential risk
- responding to parental stress
- being good role models and
- helping young parents gain confidence in making good parenting decisions.

There were also some participants who had real concerns around safety and young parents. What was most important to these participants was having a clear goal to keep children safe, having support from others, looking for positive family connections where possible and family members dealing with the underlying problems for example addiction, mental health or family violence.

One participant, who is an aunty of a young mother, had had real concerns for the safety of her 14 year old niece and her child. These concerns stemmed from serious underlying social issues within her sister’s family and the potential impact on the children living in their home. These concerns motivated her to stay involved:

“[My niece] didn’t need to have the baby. Her maturity level is not there. She has gone quite reclusive. She has lost those four years of her life. For one she was really young, the dad took off, the in-laws didn’t come back, my sister was sick [mental illness] and her partner was an alcoholic. My niece took on

looking after the siblings as well as having a baby. I had to say to my sister [who is the mother of the teen parent] ‘enough is enough the next time CYFS come in they are going to take custody of the grandchildren’. In the end my eldest daughter took care of the baby for the first 6 months.”
Mother of eight

When there are serious family issues, the subsequent lack of whānau support and connection can cause great distress to young parents. In cases such as these, young parents need and want on-going, intensive support to create a strong network of people around them as well as a plan of how these supports are going to help them and their children.

This research would suggest future whānau support initiatives needs to promote positive whānau support in a way that allows family and whānau to recognise their strengths and identify where they might need additional support. It would be recommended the voices of young parents and whānau themselves be used to promote key characteristics of effective whānau support to increase the impact with key audiences.

IMPACT OF POSITIVE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Evident from this research suggests whānau support is significantly impacted by the quality of health and social services the young parent receives and their experience of community wide attitudes towards young parents.

Both young parents and whānau expressed the need to have access to high quality youth and whānau-friendly community support. There is evidence that positive community support, such as that provided by neighbours and health carers can contribute to positive outcomes of young parents, their children and their whānau. Many of the participants could recall instances in which a small act of kindness from just one member of a community had made a huge difference to them and their families.



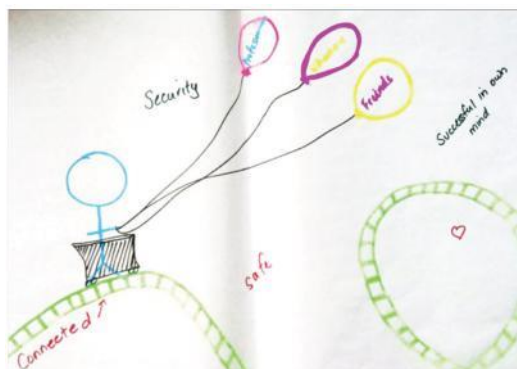
Family and whānau play an important role in helping young parents keep themselves and their children safe. Whānau need opportunities to be involved, support from neighbours and friends and access to good information and support.



Others talked of positive experiences with reaching out to health professionals or neighbours:

"My daughter thought I could just deliver her baby, I had to push her to connect with a midwife. Her midwife became an essential support for us making the whole experience positive. She built a relationship with us, explained things clearly for her and encouraged her to make decisions all the way through. She is a really good mum"

Mother of a 17 year old young parent



"I remember this real estate guy, I was a young mum and I didn't have a car so he drove me and my kids around to see the houses he had, he

said he knew how important it was to have a good home. I will always remember his kindness."

Mother of six

"I went and introduced myself to my niece's neighbour and asked if the neighbour would keep an eye out for my niece and if she could let me know if she had any concerns. I introduced them ... they became a great support for her and her children. I asked them if they wanted to be more involved. They would go over because they heard the baby crying and would hold the baby so my niece could have a sleep. It doesn't have to be family."

Aunty of a young mother

For one participant, community support was about ensuring that young parents have a turangawaewae, a place to stand spiritually and physically. They noted the benefits to a number of young parents in their community who belonged in a local kapa haka group:

"(It's about) ensuring that they feel part of something in their community, for example, in Manurewa the local Marae has become a turangawaewae and their Kapa Haka group is not just a Kapa Haka group - it's a way of life. It's where they find connection, support and positive role models." Young parent mentor and mother of six



IMPACT OF NEGATIVE SOCIAL STIGMA

All participants (young parents and whānau members) involved in this research described experiencing social stigma and discrimination on an on-going basis. Whānau members expressed strong views as to how changing social values underpin social stigma and had observed a number of negative impacts on the young parents they support, for example:

- Reduced self-confidence
- increased social and emotional isolation
- increased stress
- hesitation to seek support
- a sense that children of young parents are undervalued in society
- contributing to financial hardship.

These negative impacts pose a significant challenge to whānau who are trying to support young parents as their support often has to be redirected to respond and reduce the impact of this social stigma and discrimination. Notably, most whānau members reported that judgement came from the general public, professionals, from within their own communities and some amongst their peer groups. Many whānau noted negative experiences when accessing health services.

"It was as if they were saying my grandchild is going to be a statistics."

Mother of a young parent

Stigma.
"No its not a cycle."

Whānau members described needing to redirect their support to deal with the impact of social stigma and to protect the young parent from future discrimination.

"There was one situation where she went in on her own and she was in tears. She looked like a tiny little girl at that time and they saw her as defenceless and helpless and they thought somebody might have raped her. She said, "No, I gave consent and my parents knew". I didn't want my daughter alienated because she was pregnant.

We gave a lot of support and I screened a lot of people. She became isolated there for a while. I actually cut my work right down to be around and linking her up."

Whānau member

"A lot of the opinions were that she has made a terrible mistake. She is going to be a terrible parent. Where do you go to when you know that sort of judgement is going on?"

Whānau member

Changing negative attitudes towards young parents could make a real difference to them and their Whānau.

One parent who is a qualified social worker was horrified by the way she and her daughter were treated early on in the pregnancy and she describes the impact it had on the whole family.

"The nurse screened her and I heard her saying 'Is your mother going to beat you up? Are your family going to hurt you? Are you sure you don't want us to help you? Are you sure there is no violence in the family?' My daughter said 'No, my mother is here and she is very supportive.' When they walked around the corner I said 'You shouldn't be so judging, I can hear you ... You should be asking her if she is in need of help.'" Whānau member

It would be recommended further whānau support initiatives include a community wide response to improve societal attitudes towards young parents and improve young parents' access to high quality health and social services.

Future considerations

The future consideration from this research broadly fit into three main areas; suggestions of how others can support whānau of young parents, ways others can support young parents to identify and maintain positive whānau connections and ways to influence community attitudes and approaches toward teen parents.

Supporting whānau

The experiences of many of those involved in this research indicate that whānau support can improve outcomes for young parents and their children. Organisations which work with young parents should consider implementing the following into their practice:

connect with whānau

- Acknowledge the essential role that whānau members play in supporting young parents
- Involve whānau members in practice development, for example a whānau committee or reference group
- Continually check with whānau as to what is working and get feedback to inform future practice.

context-driven practice

- Consider the needs of young parents within the context of their whānau e.g. whānau who have other circumstances which mean they are less likely to cope without wrap-around support need more intensive support and tailored information
- Practice in a way which upholds and respects positive whānau support and doesn't try to replace or undermine it
- Understand that the maturity of the young person, existing relationships within the whānau, concern over effect of pregnancy on younger siblings, stability of the family and the anticipated response of the community can all affect whānau support

information and support

- Provide up-to-date, accessible, information on parenting, financial support, practical support, antenatal care, support lines, services for young parents and the rights and responsibilities as families
- Acknowledge that some whānau may require more intense support than others, particularly those who are finding it difficult to adjust to the pregnancy and/or baby
- Provide hot tips and information using the words of family and whānau
- Give whānau a safe space in which to talk about their concerns and reaction to the baby and/or pregnancy, without judgement or recrimination
- Consider asking whānau members who have effectively supported a young parent to volunteer to support other whānau of young parents
- Help whānau understand what effective support looks like, e.g. evidence from this research would suggest that effective support:

Is respectful

- Respond respectfully to news of the pregnancy and support other members of the family or whānau to accept and celebrate the new baby.
- Respond to questions and issues in a way which respects that your child is a parent as well as a young adult
- Be a good role model for the young parent and their child
- Be open and respectful to their partner and build relationships across both families

Is responsive

- Where possible, whānau and families respond to the needs of young parents
- Respond to moments of parental stress in a kind and genuine way
- Become conscious of your expectations and respect the young parent's choices

Involves talking and listening

- Have good, open communication so that young people can talk about things they are concerned about
- Be a sounding board, listen to young parents about their feelings, thoughts and ideas

Provides guidance and affirmation

- Allow young parents to make their own choices and learn from their experience
- Give guidance and look for opportunities to respond e.g. parenting support, practical support breastfeeding, bathing
- Affirm and praise the young parent when you think they are doing a good job

Is supportive of practical needs

- Support young parents to access services e.g. scans, ante-natal
- Offer practical support (e.g. food, shelter) where necessary
- Help the young parent seek help when needed

Keeps babies and children safe

- Don't minimise safety and risk concerns – deal with issues as they arise, particularly issues which may put the young person and the baby at risk e.g. drug and alcohol, mental health, family violence.

- Help young parents develop confidence to anticipate potential risk and develop strategies to minimise risk to themselves and their child e.g. who they are living with, babysitters, other people around the child
- Reach out if you think the young parent is at risk or not coping
- Allow the young parent to build strong attachments to their child

Encourages strong peer and family relationships

- Acknowledge the role that siblings can offer in providing support
- Encourage positive peer relationships within the whānau or family or with other young parents

Inspires them

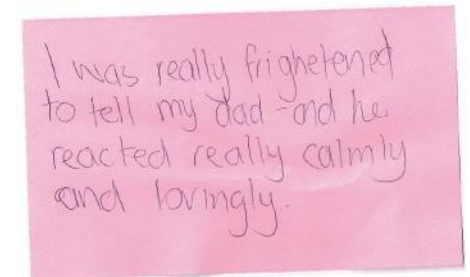
- Help the young parent hold on to their dreams and aspirations e.g. career, parenting, education, sports
- Talk about their experiences of parenting as a way of teaching and learning from family experiences including talking about cultural values, and special traditions they want to share e.g. language, celebrations

Supporting young parents' whānau connections

Effective, positive whānau support was strongly valued by the young parents involved in this research. Good support during pregnancy helps them mentally prepare to be parents and, after the baby is born, gives them confidence as a parent. There are many ways in which young parents may be assisted, including:

identify positive whānau support

- Assist young parents to identify where they find support in their whānau and help them understand that this support may change over time
- Understand and acknowledge that interdependent relationships may come from unexpected places, e.g. people who live overseas, whānau who have passed away
- Encourage young people to identify their expectations of their whānau and families and encourage them to have realistic expectations around the quality and types of whānau support available



information and support

- Give young expectant parents opportunities to talk about the initial response from their whānau to the pregnancy and the effect this had on their family and relationships
- Offer multiple ways in which young parents can access information and support e.g. anonymous, one-on-one or in a group setting
- Consider a culture of practice whereby young parents are encouraged to bring along partners and other whānau or family members to support them

young parents, as with all parents, need to know their rights and be confident to not be discriminated against.
when thought
← life →

- Understand the role of positive peer relationships and how positive connections between young people can build positive support, however, also be aware that for some young parents, being placed in a group with others who don't share their values, interests or aspirations, can be destabilising
- Use moderated social networking to help young parents share information around communication in families, healthy relationships, tips for dealing with living with extended family/shared housing, and things that help them share issues and resolve problems.

Developing a young parent whānau-friendly community

Evidence from this research would suggest that some of the harm experienced by young parents and their whānau could be alleviated by a community-wide response to addressing social stigma and discrimination towards young parents. Such a response may include:

Utilising a social campaign approach

- Connect with media to highlight the impact of social stigma on young parents and their children
- Share key messages of how public support can positively impact on the lives of young parents and their whānau
- Increase societal and community awareness around the impact of discrimination on young parents
- Include the use of social media and information technology.

A key to improving outcomes is building sector capacity to support whānau to support young parents.

Building capacity in the sector may include:

- Sharing the findings of this research with professional bodies responsible for professional development of staff that are in contact with young parents or who deliver services to young parents
- Working with the sector to develop professional development frameworks
- Addressing practice experience in order to improve outcomes for young parents who engage with services
- Build key performance indicators into practice which demonstrate how, and in what ways, whānau have been engaged.

Helping the wider sector understand the important role that whānau play in supporting young parents may assist in:

Influencing social policy

- Build strong relationships with funders to understand the needs of whānau
- Advocate for the needs of whānau supporting young parents
- Align strategically with funders who understand what is involved in a whānau-centred approach.

Conclusion

From the research data it is evident that positive whānau support makes a significant difference to the wellbeing of teen parents and their children. It is evident culture and life experiences are strong influences to how whānau and families adjust and celebrate the new pregnancy. This process is made much smoother when whānau members and young parents have access to caring non-judgemental support.

NEGOTIATING EXPECTATIONS AND VALUING YOUNG PARENTS PARENTING ROLE

Where there are existing social issues within the immediate family (for example, addiction, family conflict and/or mental health issues) comprehensive support is needed to help the family address social issues. For whānau who are supporting vulnerable young parents they need access to additional support from the wider whānau, community agencies and the general public for example neighbours, landlords and peers. Whānau also need access to positive messages of how they can help young parents manage risk and keep their children safe.

Overall, this research found that whānau and families want help and support to adjust to the practical realities of supporting young parents. Their support needs include:

- recognition of the importance of their role in supporting the young parent
- non-judgemental support
- connection with other whānau and family of young parents
- time to adjust to and process the news of the pregnancy/birth
- accessible information and support
- opportunity to reframe their future aspirations for their young person.

The young parents who participated in this project had at least one person in their lives who showed them significant support. They were most likely to turn to parents, grandparents and great-grandparents as well as siblings and close cousins for immediate support; however they also talked of feeling supported by whānau and family who live overseas, as well as deriving a sense of wellbeing from thoughts of their ancestors and deceased loved ones.

Overall the research found that the most effective support whānau and families can give young parents is:

- to provide stability and connectedness, and support wellbeing
- being a trusted person to talk to
- to show kindness, respect and humanity
- monitor risk factors around the safety of the young parent and their child/ren.

Evidence from this research indicates that the majority of participants demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility in evaluating risks to keep children safe. This responsibility underpinned many practical support strategies, which are offered to and developed by young parents. For example:

- encouraging bonding and attachment
- focusing on the needs of children
- listening and sharing hot tips
- helping parents anticipate potential risk
- responding to parental stress
- being good role models
- helping young parents gain confidence in making good parenting decisions.

All participants involved in this project have been negatively affected by social stigma and discrimination. Whanau and family members identified a number of factors that have a negative impact on the young parents they support, such as:

- reduced self confidence
- increased isolation
- increased stress
- a hesitation to seek help and support.

These factors pose a significant challenge to whānau supporting young parents, as their assistance often has to be redirected to respond to and reduce the impact of this social stigma and discrimination.

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Notes

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