



PARENT LINKING PROGRAM

A Photovoice Project about how PLP builds the strengths of young parents



Support for Parents



Achieving Goals



Build Healthy Relationships



Challenge Stereotypes about Young Parents





Using Photovoice to Understand the Strengths of Young Parents:

An Evaluation of the Parent Linking Program

Final Report

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Introduction

This report details the findings of the project, *Using Photovoice to Understand the Strengths of Young Parents: An Evaluation of the Parent Linking Program (PLP)*. The objective of the evaluation was to use a participatory action research method, Photovoice (PV), to understand how PLP supports the strengths of young parents, particularly strengths related to young parents having positive relationships with their children. Prevent Child Abuse – New Jersey (PCA-NJ) contracted the Center for Research on Ending Violence (REV) at the Rutgers School of Social Work to complete this study.

The Parent Linking Program was developed by PCA-NJ in 1980 to provide services to young parents to support their academic and career goals while also supporting the development of healthy parenting skills. Since 1992, PLP has been funded by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families to expand services including school-based childcare, parenting education, parent-child interaction groups, life skills training, individual counseling, crisis intervention, and case management.¹ PLP supports expectant and parenting teen mothers and fathers using evidence-based practices that consider each individual's stage of development and promote family involvement.¹ PLP is informed by the Strengthening Families™ approach to increase family strengths through five key protective factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children.² The program's goals are to assist participants in their preparation and facilitation of parenting behaviors, to encourage healthy relationships, functioning, health, and well-being, to support individual educational achievement and career planning, and to delay subsequent pregnancies.¹

Research is clear that there are many risks associated with becoming a parent as an adolescent. The rates of teen pregnancy have declined over the years, yet annually there remains a significant number of adolescents who become parents, especially youth of color (Williams-Breault, et al., 2020). The U.S. teen birth rate in 2019 was 16.7 per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 years (Martin et al., 2019). Whereas adolescent parents report high levels of stress and are at risk for negative parenting- and child- outcomes such as child maltreatment (Cox et al., 2019; Russotti et al., 2021), PLP aims to enhance the parenting skills of these youth, reduce their parenting stress, and prevent child maltreatment. Currently, we know much more about risk factors related to teen parenting and know little about the strengths on which enhanced prevention and support programs can be built (Banyard & Hamby, 2022; Conn, et al., 2018; Ricks, 2016). Further understanding the strengths of teen

¹ Parent Linking Program (2018). Operation Manual.

² Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families: A Protective Factors Framework

parents, especially using research strategies that center on their voices and experiences, is important for advancing successful prevention efforts.

Objectives

The current project evaluated the acceptability and effectiveness of PLP by engaging a group of adult alumni of the program in a Photovoice project that gathered visual and verbal reflections about what alumni had learned and/or received from the program. This study examined how PLP strengthened the parent-child relationship, an outcome of the program that has been challenging to fully assess in previous evaluative efforts.

Methods

To achieve the goals and objectives of this project, Photovoice was used to identify how PLP supported teen parents. Adult alumni who were the beneficiaries of PLP in New Jersey within the last 7 years were eligible to participate in completing 6 PV sessions. Photovoice engages underrepresented and marginalized groups in the exploration and critical analysis of a problem their community faces (Strack et al., 2004). Participants use photographs as a springboard for analyzing the causes of the problem, reflecting on the personal meanings of the photos, envisioning solutions, and sharing them with the broader community (Lightfoot et al., 2019). Photovoice projects with youth have been used in multiple research projects e.g., to help medical professionals understand the lives and challenges of Black and Latinx youth in their communities (Irby et al., 2018; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2013) and recently in a youth-led sexual and relationship violence prevention program (Banyard et al., 2020).

Recruitment and Sample

The research team met with the PLP site coordinators at one of their monthly meetings to provide information about the project and invite each site to identify potential participants. A research flyer was distributed via email to all sites to facilitate sharing information about the project with PLP alumni. Inclusion criteria for participation included: 1) minimum age of 18 years and 2) completion of PLP within the last 7 years (2015-2021). Individuals interested in participating indicated their willingness to enroll in the project by either informing a PLP site coordinator or contacting the research team. PLP site coordinators emailed the research team the names and contact information (email address and phone number) of interested individuals. Each participant was contacted via phone call, email, and text about participating in the project; those who were interested were asked to complete an online consent form and demographic and background survey. A total of 13



individuals were contacted, 10 completed the consent process, and 9 participated in at least one PV session.

To participate in the Photovoice sessions young parents completed the consent process and agreed to participate. Participants were asked to give their permission to have the “photo-discussion” sessions audio-recorded so that the facilitation and research team could keep track of the groups’ ideas. Discussions happened via an online and protected platforms, Zoom and Padlet, where only the project participants were able to share and see each other’s pictures and give feedback to their peers.

Participant Demographics. Seven of the nine participants who completed at least one Photovoice session completed the Qualtrics demographic and background questionnaire. Participants in the sample ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old with an average age of 20 (*SD* = 2; Table 1)³. All participants who completed the demographic survey were female (*n* = 7). By race and ethnicity, 86% (*n* = 6) of young adults identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and 14% (*n* = 1) identified as African American/Black.

Table 1. Age distribution (*n* = 6)

Age (years)	N (%)
18	1 (16.67)
19	3 (50)
22	1 (16.67)
23	1 (16.67)

Participants reported having 1 to 2 children each; 57% (*n* = 4) had 1 child and 43% (*n* = 3) had 2 children. First-born children ranged in age from 1.5 to 7 years old. Second-born children were all infants ranging from newborns to 10 months old. Participants indicated that their first pregnancies, on average, occurred when they were nearly 17 years old (*M* = 16.71; *SD* = 0.95; range 15 to 18 years). For sexual orientation, 43% (*n* = 3) of participants described themselves as most attracted to men, 29% (*n* = 2) only attracted to men, and 29% (*n* = 2) equally attracted to women and men. Most participants stated that they had never been married (86%, *n* = 6), while 1 individual indicated that they were currently married. All participants shared that their current partner was the biological or chosen parent of their child(ren) whom they were co-parenting with (*n* = 7).

³ A total of three individuals did not provide their ages: two individuals did not complete any part of the Qualtrics demographic and background questionnaire, and one individual did participate in the Qualtrics survey but did not indicate their age.



Participants represented 6 of 8 PLP sites serving students in New Jersey high schools:

- Camden High School (Partners in Parenting Program) in collaboration with Camden Board of Education
- New Brunswick High School (Parent-Infant Care Center (PIC-C)) in collaboration with New Brunswick Tomorrow
- Plainfield High School (Plainfield Teen Parenting Program) in collaboration with Plainfield Board of Education
- Trenton Central High School (Teen Parenting Program) in collaboration with Trenton Board of Education
- Union City High School (Le Petit Jardin) in collaboration with the Union City Board of Education
- Vineland High School in collaboration with Inspira Health Care

Photovoice Sessions and Community Forum

The young parents participated in 6 consecutive Photovoice sessions (online weekly meetings) via Zoom that lasted for approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each. Group sessions were facilitated by two project facilitators from the Center for Research on Ending Violence (REV) at Rutgers School of Social Work. All sessions were audio-recorded so that transcripts could be reviewed for the accuracy of group ideas.

Session 1: In the first session, participants were trained on how to take photos using their phones, informed of ethical and safety guidelines, and engaged in a discussion about how photographs can be a way to express thoughts and feelings about a topic via symbolism or realism. At the end of the training session, project participants decided on the topics they wanted to explore with photo assignments (see Table 1). These three assignments were guided by the overall theme of strengths that young parents possess and how PLP services worked to build and enhance these strengths, particularly those related to the parent-child relationship.

Table 1. Photo assignment for each session

Photo Assignment	Prompt
1	What support did I receive from PLP while participating in the program?
2	What did PLP help me to achieve?
3	How did PLP help me to have a healthy relationship with my child?



Sessions 2 to 4: In the 2nd to 4th sessions, participants met to discuss the photographs they took. Each participant uploaded 1-2 photos per assignment via Padlet, an online platform that was privately maintained for access by project participants and the research team. During each session's group discussion, each participant presented their favorite photo (of the ones they submitted), and then the group voted on 1-2 photos to discuss further. As a group, participants reviewed the 1-2 chosen photos and engaged in a SHOWED discussion about: 1) what was **Seen**, 2) what was **Happening**, 3) how the depiction related to **Our lives**, 4) **Why** the issue/circumstance exists, 5) How they can become **Empowered** by this understanding, and 6) what we can **Do** about it (how PLP can apply this). During each session, the research facilitators summarized the previous session's discussions and ideas. The group considered the photo assignments developed in the 1st session and finalized a photo prompt for the next session. In the 4th session, the group considered whether the three assignments completed fully captured the strengths of young parents and the development of healthy parent-child relationships, or if another assignment was needed. The group determined that the repetition of some themes suggested that they had comprehensively considered the topic. The group voted to use the 5th and 6th sessions for forum organization and planning.

Sessions 5 and 6: In the 5th and 6th sessions, participants met to plan the community forum. The group discussed the themes emerging from each photo assignment and those themes extending across all assignments, including a discussion about the photo gallery. The group created a PowerPoint presentation for the forum that outlined the Photovoice process, photo assignments, themes, advice for other young parents, messages for the PLP staff, and community ideas.

Community Forum: A virtual forum was held with PLP site leaders, including PCA-NJ administrators, and the New Jersey Department of Children and Family partners using Zoom. One of the participants presented the group's work in a PowerPoint exhibit of themes, narrative illustrations, and photos. The objective of the forum was to allow PLP staff to hear directly from participants about what they gained from participation in the program and what experiences and perceptions they had about PLP's ability to support healthy parent-child relationships and other strengths of young parents. Project facilitators and the participant then led a group discussion and question and answer period with attendees.

Themes

Three major themes emerged within each of the group discussions: 1) Support: "I personally felt lucky," 2) Achievement: "We were able to do the impossible in an impossible situation." 3) Parent-Child Relationship: "That helped me a lot to create a healthy relationship." Further, two overall themes related to



combating the stigma of teen parenting and breaking the chain emerged across all the sessions. Below, we present the overarching themes followed by a more detailed look at the three major themes.

Overarching Themes

As the young parents described their involvement in PLP and their life circumstances, two main concepts were repeatedly identified across all of the specific sessions – 1) young parents face stigmas and stereotypes and 2) young parents are working to break the chain of circumstances. Young parents were keenly aware of **stigmas and stereotypes associated with teen parents**. Participants identified societal beliefs about young parents being incompetent, unprepared, and failing:

- “. . . not knowing anything, doing things wrong”
- “. . . a child raising a child”
- “. . . she’s ruining her life”

Participants were aware that the public often perceives young parents as irresponsible and shameful, stating “they look more down on you” and “people often humiliate like teen moms and teen dads.” Participants described how PLP was helping them to challenge these erroneous perceptions. One participant shared,

“. . . what I see in the picture is people are now coming to like, I guess you could say, facing reality and seeing their own, basically, being a teen mom is not as taboo as it was before. It’s basically showing right on the subject that teen moms are capable of doing more than what people expect of us.”

Another participant shared thoughts about what society might expect of the children of teen parents and what she aspires to promote in her daughter,

“But you know I just feel like I’ll be like oh wow like her daughter’s different because I feel like people put like the negative connotations like all their kids are bad, they’re going to be cursing, they’re going to be doing this, they’re going to be doing that . . . But you know, I just want her to be different, and I want her to live her life, and like just be as humble and as happy as possible.”



Young parents also talked about their efforts to **break the chain** of circumstances among their families, particularly, previous generations. One participant reflected upon another participant's achievement by describing how young parents challenge stereotypes. She said,

I see that she made it into the paper and that's a really good accomplishment because a lot of people feel like as young parents that we cannot achieve that certain goal of graduating high school and she is showing that we broke that cycle.

In describing her accomplishment of graduating from high school, one participant shared,

"So I took the pictures because the diploma meant so much to me, and especially to my family because I broke the chain of not graduating and I graduated with a whole kid something that my sisters, it was impossible for them, you know they didn't finish, but I broke it for them, so technically I graduated and my sisters graduated with me that day, and then they were cheering me on that day. Yeah."

Another participant recognized how building a strong relationship with her child was important for changing outcomes. She said, "And then they can build that healthy relationship, or they can end that cycle of like, like bad relationships or negativity, and continue to do good." For young parents, breaking the chain was an important process, often marked by personal and familial accomplishment, that refuted society's misperceptions about young parents.

Challenging stigmas and stereotypes and breaking the chain were supported by PLP raising awareness about important issues and shifting youths' perspectives. One participant shared how program discussions about new topics, violence, and



current events helped her to realize that “. . . the rules” that maintained certain behaviors were “. . . all wrong.” She described feeling like “we gotta go, we gotta go away from him [an abusive father]” and she stated,

. . . I realized that whatever I was learning from school, from this program, and all this means we’re actually improving our family, but not only for her, but all of us, and now we all know to like give ourselves respect, care for ourselves more than anything else.

Emerging Major Themes

A set of themes were drawn specifically from individual Photovoice topics that participants chose as the framing for each specific photo taking and discussion session. As a reminder, participants chose the following photo assignments: 1) What support did I receive from PLP while participating in the program? 2) What did PLP help me to achieve? 3) How did PLP help me to have a healthy relationship with my child?

I. Support: “I personally felt lucky.”

In response to the first photo assignment regarding the types of support PLP provided, participants described multiple forms of social supports and guidance toward their personal growth and development as parents. In their descriptions, young parents recognized that there were parallel supports operating throughout their engagement with PLP whereby individual and parental needs were met – their needs as young adults and their needs as parents or more specifically, the needs of their children. One participant described this as “they [PLP] don't really just focus on like the kids they also focus on like the mothers as well.” Consistently participants described ways that PLP helped them with their personal goals while also helping them develop as parents, which meant making sure their children were taken care of and that parental interactions optimally supported their children’s well-being. Young parents described their involvement in the program as inspiring hope and influencing their perspectives:

- *“what the program gave me is hope...”*
- *“Like I see the bright side of most things because before I would always think about the negative and the worst-case scenarios, but they helped me see always a focus on like the light side of things.”*



The specific types of support described by participants included **emotional, informational, and practical resources**.

PLP promoted community among young parents in similar situations; they formed a social network that provided **emotional support and encouragement**. One participant stated, "...like she said that she lost all her friends during her pregnancy, and she gained new friends... And I like felt that because not that I lost a lot of friends, but I did gain some new friends coming into PLP, especially because like they kind of understand what you're going through and you just have someone that you can like lean on or talk to, and you don't feel lonely...". Others said they felt like their feelings were validated and "the mentors, they were able to give me motivation."

Much of the **informational support** described by participants was related to child development and parenting. A young parent reflected, "So like sometimes I just feel like people need information about like what at this age what they understand you know, or what they are trying to do, or you know." Another parent stated that she would participate in group meetings and "talk about important topics." These topics ranged from childcare to healthy child development. The information provided to young parents was presented in caring, non-judgmental ways. A participant summarized, "But also like to add on they never made me feel like I was dumb or like, if I had any questions that like I was like wrong or like I shouldn't be doing it."

Finally, participants described receiving **practical support** via basic supplies. One parent shared, "when I need clothes and foremost for my baby, they gave me clothes or diapers for like things like that." Another shared how she "... got a highchair because I would say that my son was eating with me on the couch

and they said that was like a choking hazard, that he needed somewhere to sit while eating, so they gave me a highchair for him to eat.”



As young parents reflected upon what PLP’s support meant for them, one young mother shared,

I personally felt lucky, because I know a lot, especially like I got pregnant at 16 not everyone has as much support like I truly, I feel blessed because I did get, have a lot of support and especially with the PLP like backing me up I just felt like I can do this, and I can conquer the world honestly at that point, because I was being told like ‘you, now your life’s over like you can’t do nothing’ like, especially from my family they took it hard so I feel like with them, they did give me like the upper hand because I feel like, without them, I probably wouldn’t be where I am today.

II. Achievement: “We were able to do the impossible in an impossible situation.”

Participants excitedly identified graduation and future planning as achievements made while in PLP. One young parent stated that she had “zero clue” about what her future was going to be like. Then, “once I got pregnant, I just felt like . . . I need to get my life together. Like, what am I doing with my life, and I feel like they [PLP] made me realize like I need to get my stuff together.” Personal achievements were tied to PLP providing education and increasing participants’ awareness about options and resources. One participant stated, “. . . if it wasn’t for them, I probably wouldn’t like really like known how to apply for college, because I’m the first like generation like I’m the first person in my family to graduate.” Another participant stated that the photo of someone else’s graduation reflected achievement in their own life, “Because it shows that we were able to do like the impossible in an impossible situation.”



Participants described developing skills as young parents that made them feel successful. One parent explained,

...but they also helped me like you know learning how to take care of my child more, while I was doing also my high school, I was able to learn and now I feel that with my other baby I'm going to be more prepared that's a goal too, that's I mean, that's an achievement.

Young parents highlighted how personal and parental achievements led to establishing healthier relationships with their children, improving upon the previous generation's success. One participant described,

Like communication. Because growing up me and my mom well I didn't know, I was just always really scared to tell my mom things and I realized like I didn't want that, I don't want that relationship with my daughter, I would be like 'oh snap!' as this happened, I can't tell my mom, or I don't want my mom and my dad to find out. Where in contrast like I want my daughter, to be like to think of me, as a first person like, no matter what like emergency, she can come to me, even if she knows I will be upset or not I want her to come to me and ask me to confide in me because that's something that I didn't have with my parents growing up.

The achievements described by participants were important for making them feel empowered. One young parent said, “yeah I think it made me believe in myself more and like it just they proved to me that I'm stronger than I think I am.” Young parents described experiencing pride in their accomplishments. They were also aware that their success served as a source of pride and role modeling for their children, peers, and others in the community.

- *...they were able to just help me achieve that goal that I really wanted to achieve to help my son so that he can see like wow my mom graduated high school with me.*
- *Like if a teen mom from her high school feels like she can't anymore and if she sees this like she's going to feel like 'Oh, I want to do it like she did it and, like . . . she's like an example for others teen moms to not give up. it's like not only her feeling proud or other people, but she can also make other people proud of what she did.*





III. Parent-Child Relationship: “That helped me a lot to create like a healthy relationship.”

Participants recognized that being a new parent was stressful and that they were often unprepared for parenting. One participant shared how she initially wanted to cry when she was with her baby because she “was not feeling like [she] was able to understand him.” However, PLP showed her “how to treat him” and she said,

That helped me a lot to create like a healthy relationship, because you know, there are some mothers, like, because they don't know how to create that relationship with babies. You know all they do is like treat them like they are big. Not at the age we are supposed to treat them, like they are, you know.

Learning about appropriate child development was a large part of young parents’ growth as strong parents. One participant shared how the program supported age-appropriate interactions where parents and children were “just bonding and spending time together.” She stated,

We were in activities with the PLP program. And so, we're spending time with the babies. So in the school, they have like a small park. So, they used to take the babies out, and so I think that was an activity we have during school, so we went out and like we were playing with them and sharing time with, with, uh, with other moms.





All parents described how PLP's presence on high school campuses helped them to develop important bonds with their children. One participant shared,

PLP gave us an opportunity to bond with our kids even while we're in school like we're there with them and we could go down as I'm sure like whenever we had the chance to go down and I felt like it's just more about bonding with your child and getting to understand like knowing their cues and just like grow together.

The skills promoted in PLP including childcare, healthy eating, and even opportunities to pursue CPR, helped young parents feel prepared and capable. Parents also described learning important lessons about parenting which helped them to prioritize their children while balancing various demands. One participant described this as, "No matter like how busy or how important I feel like it is like I have to drop everything to give her that time and attention that she needs." She elaborated how doing so was about learning "100% time management." Relatedly, young parents talked about how important establishing routines were for structuring time with their children. One parent said:

Every night like I learned like I said I'm going to read a book with him every night, so I said he's going to sleep at nine so at 8:50 I'm gonna read to him and then I'm gonna put him to sleep.





As children age, young parents increasingly described having quality relationships with their children, relationships where children could come to them to talk about difficult things. As participants developed in their roles as parents, they recognized that healthy relationships with their children involve teaching important lessons like coping when things don't go your way, establishing limits and boundaries, and providing unconditional love and support. Parents described the development of healthy relationships as one that evolves and may include mistakes, but also a larger community of support. One parent summarized,

And pretty much I feel like this program has taught us like a lot of stuff especially like you know you can make mistakes everyone's not perfect, you can do . . . like your child is looking up to you, you get help with that.

Recommendations

Alumni of the Parent Linking Program offered valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives of engaging with the program. Based on participants' feedback, several recommendations can be shared. PLP is an important program that supports the development of strong parents and strong parent-child relationships.

1. **Educate to build awareness and foster positive behaviors.** As young parents identified, to foster healthy relationships among young parents, the program should continue to “start with [the] parents” by helping them to “[identify] . . . values and experiences, recognizing what is healthy and what is not.” The variety of topics covered by the program address multifaceted needs, from those of the individual to those relating to child development, parenting, and relationships. Having time to talk about and explore a variety of topics offers an opportunity for personal growth through awareness, knowledge, and skill-building.
2. **Provide support.** Young parents need help and resources (and in this way they are no different from all new parents in many ways). Participants described how much they didn't know and weren't prepared for parenting in part because adults often didn't talk to them about sexuality, problem-solving, or the future. Participants clearly recognized how not having support to foster positive change could perpetuate personal and familial difficulties. Support across the social ecology – individual, family, community – is often necessary and may include supporting both young parents in their co-parenting efforts and their families of origin in their understanding of how to develop healthy relationships and use community resources. PLP is clearly an important resource hub for young parents.



Access to PLP should continue and be increased to reach more young parents.

- 3. Challenge stigma and strengthen new generations.** PLP was described as an accessible and local program that is invested in challenging stereotypes about young parents by helping them and their children succeed. Participants recognized that the dominant public perception of young parents is negative and particularly critical. Moreover, participants identified how PLP helps them to overcome stigma and stereotypes by building a stronger generation of parents and parent-child relationships that improve upon earlier generations' strengths. PLP's interactions with local communities can help to shift perceptions of young parents and help young individuals who are not pregnant or might get pregnant again plan for future pregnancies so that they can have families when they are most prepared. Participants suggested that PLP provide more information and education to their families so that their immediate family members better understood the program and could be more supportive. Participants described how PLP was a key part of their ability to achieve their own personal goals and their goals as parents. A key piece of this is being part of a program that sees them as having positive goals and strengths.

Conclusion

The Parent Linking Program strives to strengthen families through a protective factors framework that targets five key areas: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children. The results of this study indicate that young parents who participate in PLP clearly experience many strengths and protective factors that nicely map onto the five key protective factors. Young parents demonstrate parental resilience in efforts to manage parenting and life stressors and seek help. Young parents demonstrate social connections in building positive relationships among program participants and the wider PLP community. They also described how their children built connections to teachers and other children in the program. Young parents demonstrate knowledge of parenting and child development in their attunement to their children and positive interactions and described how this new knowledge not only created healthy relationships with their children but helped them be different and more effective parents than their own parents. Young parents demonstrate concrete support in times of need by navigating through social service systems like PLP and being resourceful. Young parents demonstrate social and emotional competence of children by having positive parental attitudes and applying many positive parenting approaches that promote the child's well-being. This study adds to the evidence suggesting that supporting young parents with strengths-based programming can promote healthy



parent-child relationships, individual and family protective factors, and reduce the risk of adversities.



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