

Teen Pregnancy Part 2: Talking with Teen Parents

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Could Vineland's Parent Linking Program be a national model for mitigating the effects of teen pregnancy? Part 2 of 2

by Blake Christy

Asia Brown's life has not gone as she planned. At 18 years old, she has a child. Her new role as a mother made her think she could be independent, so she and her daughter voluntarily moved from home. The move was unsuccessful, and Brown ended up in a homeless shelter. "I spent Christmas [at the homeless shelter]... it was—numbing," she says. "It was just numbing."

Eventually, Brown gave in to her family's plea and moved back home. But despite the pressure and anxiety of being a teen parent, Brown always has a smile on her face. Looking at her daughter Aaliyah, who has refused to take off her tiara since her first birthday just a few days ago, Brown says, "She's everything, she's my mini me."

Aaliyah is munching on Froot Loops and playing peek-a-boo with her mom. She wobbles around and slumps onto a couch in the IMPACT Parent Linking Program's (PLP) childcare center, indifferent that this is a classroom and not a living room. Brown and her daughter seem to be more than comfortable here.

"It was very nice coming [to PLP]," Brown says. "They were very open and very honest, I couldn't trust anybody better to be with my daughter."

The Innovative Model for Preschool and Community Teaming's (IMPACT) PLP is a unique program for pregnant or parenting students at Vineland High School. Almost 20 years ago, in 1997, Inspira Health Network and the Vineland Board of Education collaborated to establish PLP, a reaction to the high teen pregnancy rate in the city. The program is still vital today.

Cumberland County has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the state of New Jersey. According to the 2016 County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, Cumberland County has a teen pregnancy rate of 59 for every 1,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 19. This is the same rate of adolescent pregnancies that the World Bank estimates the entire world averaged 18 years ago. And, it is triple the state of New Jersey's current average.

Teen pregnancy is categorized as a health behavior, meaning that its existence is shaped by culture, family life, and the socio-economic makeup of the community. Lowering the teen pregnancy rate may be difficult, but PLP is being proactive to mitigate its effects. The program provides childcare and parenting classes so young parents can graduate from high school. On average, only 40 percent of teen moms will finish high school, according to research done by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies.

Executive Director of IMPACT Kimberly Friddell notes that at PLP that statistic does not hold up; this year 100 percent of PLP's participating seniors graduated. Of those 14 seniors, 12 are heading on to higher education. A total of 42 students took part in the program this year (six were males).

PLP has been an important part of Brown's support system. When Brown spent time in a shelter, it went unnoticed by many of her friends. "A lot of people did not know that I was in a shelter," she says, "so when I would say [after school], 'OK, I am going home,' I was not actually going home."

At PLP, Stephanie Lang and Talliba Bentley-Fonville, are like Brown's second family, so they knew something was up when Brown was not living at home anymore. "Mrs. Bentley and Mrs. Stephanie actually noticed a difference in

me about two to three months [after] I came into the program,” Brown says. “I was a lot quieter, and I have a big personality, so if I am quiet usually something is wrong. I would talk with them; they helped me out a lot.”

Lang and Bentley-Fonville were also teen mothers. IMPACT gave them the opportunity to eventually become the support system they needed when they found out they were pregnant.

“Eleven years ago, I was in their shoes,” Lang says. “I know what [being a teen mom] is like. Every step they are going through, I went through, from their thoughts and feelings, to deciding if they are ready for a baby, weighing their options for abortion and adoption, and then telling their parents when they decide to keep the baby. [I know what it is like] to be scared to tell your parents, and how it is to deal with their disappointment. The whole process, it is like I am reliving it, and that is what gives Talliba and me an advantage. The girls take you more seriously because they know you know what it is really like.”

This personal relationship that PLP’s staff forms with the women and men in their program is one of the many reasons IMPACT’s PLP is the best in the state—in fact, the only one of its kind—in New Jersey. While many high schools offer parenting classes and some may offer health care, IMPACT’s PLP goes above and beyond state requirements. Thanks to a grant by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, PLP is able to offer free childcare. In order to receive the childcare, one of the parents, mom or dad, must attend 80 percent of the parenting classes that are taught for academic credit, maintain a C average, and not have a repeat pregnancy—stipulations that most teen parenting programs in New Jersey do not have. Going beyond what the State requires is something that Executive Director Friddell is proud of. “The State requires 30 group meetings a year, [meeting] once a week,” she says. “So we, in just a month-and-a-half, meet the grant level of service because we meet every day.”

The free childcare makes it possible for the women and men to stay in school; the parenting classes ensure that their children are being taken care of properly when they go home. While PLP helps teen parents in Vineland, it does not mean that it is any easier. Friddell says, “We are not advocating for teen pregnancy. But since they are pregnant, we want them to be successful parents, understand child development and behavior, and most importantly prevent a repeat pregnancy.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says one in six teen pregnancies are repeat.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies estimates that “the average annual cost to taxpayers associated with a child born to a teen mother each year from birth to age 15 is about \$1,682.” Ensuring that students will graduate with their high school diploma decreases the chances that they will need to rely on public welfare services. Supporting programs like PLP can help to decrease those costs.

When Naya Lopez found out she was pregnant, her mom was disappointed, but that became her motivation: “[My mom and I] got back from my first appointment with the obstetrician [and] she said of the doctor, ‘That could’ve been you.’” Lopez, who always dreamed of being a neonatal physician says, “That hit me. My mom gave up on my dream. She thought I wasn’t going to be able to achieve anymore.”

Lopez graduated this year from Vineland High School and PLP. Humbly, Lopez says, “I have a 4.1 GPA. I take college physics. I was scared that class would be hard, but it was easy. I also take gym, and Advanced Spanish 4. I take AP Bio, and AP Literature and Composition. What else do I take? Oh, Medical Terminology and Pre-Calculus. And no lunch.”

Lopez has a support system at home to take care of her daughter, Jasmarie. Still, Lopez takes advantage of IMPACT’s parenting classes because she was nervous about being a good mother. IMPACT has been a safe place for Lopez to turn.

“It’s somebody who really understands what you’re going through,” she says, “especially from Stephanie who’s a teen mom herself. It’s good to have people who don’t judge you.”

Having the IMPACT community has helped Lopez to continue to succeed. She will be pursuing an undergraduate Biology degree at Rowan University this fall.

Without the IMPACT program, it is possible that many young women and men who were in the program would not be as educated as they are today, a fact that Fordham University Professor of Economics Dr. Kristine Angela Kintanar says could further inhibit economic growth in Cumberland County.

“Economic growth is a function of labor and capital,” Kintanar says. “However, the quality of labor is also important, and that is why investment in human capital is always an important determinant of rapid economic growth... A high [teen] pregnancy rate may contribute to the economic stagnation of the community, since it may take people away from educational and professional opportunities.”

Supporting programs like IMPACT ensures that more of the labor force is educated, Fridell says. “When you drop out of high school, it is more difficult to become employed,” she says, “and you become part of the system that the taxpayers as a whole are paying into to support their fellow person.”

Lopez’s success story may make it seem as if raising a child and trying to graduate high school is easy, but she is aware that she is not the norm. “Just because I have a 4.1 GPA...and I’m a teen mom doesn’t mean it’s easy for me,” Lopez notes. “I have a lot of help, but not everyone has a lot of help.”

Unlike Lopez’s seemingly successful ride through high school, Asia Brown has had to take a less conventional path to a high school diploma. Brown dropped out of Vineland High School in March to meet the financial burdens of raising a child, but she is still determined to earn her high school diploma. Brown studies and works at the Vineland Youth Corps and is planning on graduating at the end of this year. Lang, Bentley-Fonville, and the rest of the IMPACT team are guiding Brown through and making sure that she does not become another Cumberland County statistic.

You can find Part 1 here: <https://snjtoday.com/teenpregnancy/>

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Naya Lopez and her daughter Jasmari at Vineland High School graduation.