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Supporting Young Parents through Trauma & Healing

An Overview



Healthy Teen Network



Johns Hopkins
Center for Adolescent Health



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Young parents, or those who have their first child before the age of 24, are overwhelmingly strong, proud, and resilient. At the same time, they face a unique and complicated mix of challenges that can make life harder for them and their children. They take on the responsibility of parenting while also navigating their own transition into adulthood, adding complexity to both journeys. In addition, they may be judged or looked down on by society, may have limited access to education and healthcare, face higher risks like repeat pregnancies or violence in relationships, and may try to break cycles of trauma from their own upbringings. When they are supported, young parents can meet this set of challenges to create a better life for themselves and their children.

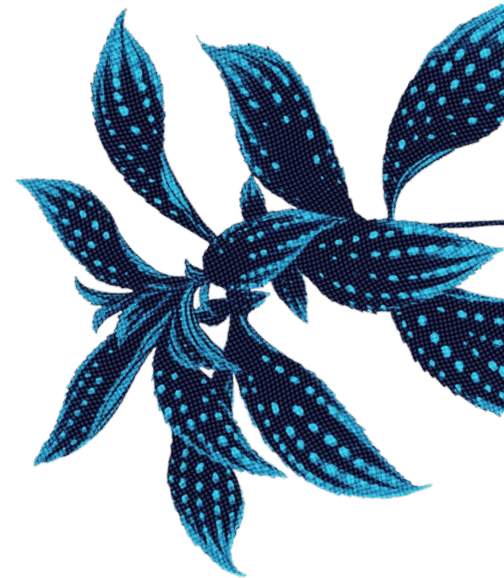
Let's dive into a few of these challenges:

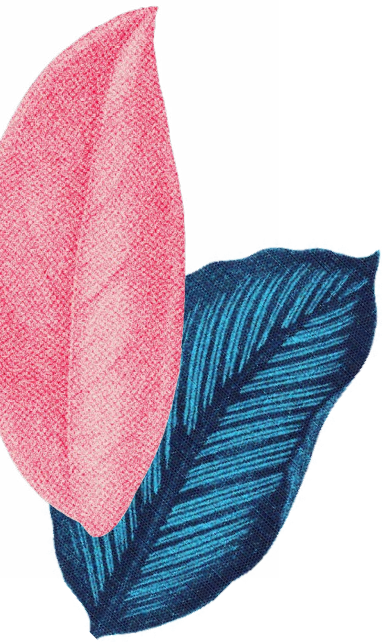
Dual Transition

Adolescence and new parenthood are two of the most significant periods of change for the brain and body, as well as socially.

Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and self-discovery. During this stage, young people explore their identities, learn to balance responsibility and autonomy, and build meaningful relationships. They also face real-world challenges like peer influence, social comparison, and systemic barriers (McNeely & Blanchard, 2010).

New parents of any age undergo incredible transformations. While this new role brings joy and growth, they also face their own set of challenges, including sleep deprivation, financial stress, fears of not being a good parent, loss of personal time and identity, relationship strain, pressure to parent a certain way, feelings of isolation, and more (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020).





Young parents sit at the unique intersection of these two identities. They face the dual transition into adult responsibilities and expectations while also undergoing brain and body development throughout adolescence.

Young parents are not only growing themselves—they're also supporting and shaping their children's development.

Here are a few ways that this challenge of dual transition can show up for young parents:

- **Expectations to “have it all together”:** Once they become parents, society, peers, and relatives may expect them to be fully mature or independent, even though they are still developing.
- **Denial of typical adolescent experiences:** They might be shamed for wanting to hang out with their friends or go through typical identity shifts that show up during adolescence.
- **Blame instead of support:** Professionals might treat them more harshly than they would treat adult parents, assuming they are irresponsible without offering guidance or resources.
- **Economic and emotional pressure:** Young parents are expected to provide like adults, even though they have less access to stable jobs, housing, etc.

“Young parents and their children are both going through the two most critical periods of development at the same time. As a young child is learning to bond and communicate, adolescent parents often lack support in their own development. Many young people are suddenly seen as adults after becoming a parent, when in fact they are still growing.” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017)

Stigma

Another unique challenge young parents face is stigma, which can show up in many forms—social, institutional, structural, and even in the media.



SOCIAL STIGMA

Social stigma includes judgment from family, peers, and the community about what is considered the "right" circumstance to have a child.

Examples: Getting told "this will ruin your life"; being excluded by their peers because of misconceptions about their responsibilities or maturity.



INSTITUTIONAL STIGMA

Institutional stigma can show up in schools, where teachers, administrators, and peers may discourage young parents from completing their education. In healthcare settings, medical providers may treat them differently, assume they are uninformed, or fail to respect their decisions and autonomy.

Examples: A doctor not including the young parent in decisions about baby's health; a counselor telling a young parent to switch schools even when their grades are fine.



STRUCTURAL STIGMA

Structural stigma includes systemic barriers, such as unsupportive policies, which can make it difficult for young parents to access childcare, affordable housing, or financial support.

Examples: Wanting to stay in school but there is no on-site daycare; on waitlists for housing and not getting prioritized.



MEDIA STIGMA

The media often portrays adolescent parents in a negative light, focusing on stories of hardship and failure while disregarding their resilience and successes.

Examples: Using shaming public health statistics; reality TV portraying young parents as reckless or always struggling.



Creating a Different Future

Many young parents strive to provide foundation and stability for their children. This is evident in their goal setting, educational and financial decision making, and for some, their desire to break generational cycles of trauma. Many young parents aren't just parenting—they're healing, unlearning, and rebuilding. They're doing the hard work of creating new patterns and opportunities, even when the systems didn't provide the support they needed growing up.



As they build a new future for themselves and their children, many young parents follow non-traditional paths to education and employment. They work toward financial stability while juggling multiple responsibilities. On average, young parents who balance school and work log about 46.5 hours a week—roughly 10% more than their peers who only work (Sandstrom et al., 2019). The lack of flexible, affordable childcare and reliable transportation makes it even harder to manage school, work, and parenting all at once (Watson et al., 2017).

"Longer hours mean parents need to find child care outside of the 9-to-5 schedule, which is a challenge because most child care centers are limited to standard hours."

(Peiffer, 2019, Navigating the responsibilities section, para. 4)

Despite these challenges, young parents remain resilient and determined. By pursuing education, working long hours, and advocating for their families—often without the support systems they need—they are reshaping what it means to be both an adolescent and a parent. Their efforts deserve not only recognition but also meaningful support from policies and programs that reflect their realities. Investing in young parents strengthens not just individuals, but families and communities for generations.



Frameworks for Supporting Young Parents

Youth-supporting professionals must view young parents through a strengths-based lens that helps them harness their resilience, determination, and capacity for growth. Supportive interventions must use trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches to ensure lasting change.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Trauma-informed programs and organizations understand that trauma is common and can affect how people think, feel, and act.

They focus on four key principles:

- Realize the widespread impact of trauma and how people can recover.
- Recognize the signs of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others.
- Respond by using trauma knowledge to shape policies, practices, and everyday interactions.
- Resist re-traumatization by creating safe, respectful environments that avoid causing additional harm.

SAMHSA's 6 Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

The trauma-informed approach is grounded in 6 main principles: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender awareness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Let's look at each principle and how it applies to working with young parents:



Applying Trauma-Informed Care Principles to Support Young Parents

Principle	Definition	Example
Safety	Young parents need to feel physically and emotionally safe in any space they're in—especially if they've faced violence, discrimination, or instability. Safety looks different for everyone, so it's important to ask young parents what makes them feel safe.	A young mom attends a parenting class where staff greets warmly, asks what she needs to feel comfortable, and does not pressure her to share personal info. She knows she can speak freely and that her boundaries will be respected.
Trustworthiness & Transparency	Being open and honest builds trust between young parents and those who work with them. Trust grows when young parents are included in decisions and given all the information that affects them.	At a clinic, a nurse walks a young parent through a medical procedure step-by-step. Then, she answers her questions clearly and checks in to make sure she understands and agrees before moving forward.
Peer Support	Young parents often feel isolated. Having a chance to connect with peers who've had similar experiences can help them feel seen, understood, and supported.	A young dad joins a support group where other young fathers talk openly about parenting struggles. They share tips and encouragement, learning from each other without judgment.
Collaboration & Mutuality	Rather than being “told what to do,” young parents should be partners in shaping their care. This means sharing power and making space for their input.	A social worker helps a young parent create a care plan based on her goals, like going back to school. They check in together regularly to adjust the plan based on how she's doing and what she wants.
Empowerment, Voice & Choice	Young parents should have a say in their own lives. A trauma-informed approach helps them build confidence and self-advocacy skills so they can make their own choices and define their own goals.	In a housing program, a caseworker asks the young parent what kind of living arrangement would work best for her and her child instead of assigning her one without asking. They also talk about her rights and how to speak up if she feels something's wrong.
Cultural, Historical, & Gender Awareness	Young parents may carry trauma tied to racism, sexism, discrimination, or cultural disconnection. A trauma-informed approach respects their identities, history, and lived experience, and works to push back against stereotypes and biases.	A young Southeast Asian mom is supported by staff who recognize how her culture and family values shape her parenting style. The staff avoids assumptions and asks how her identity and background influence what she needs.

Healing Centered Engagement

Young parents often face judgment and are seen as “problems to fix.” Healing Centered Engagement flips the narrative, viewing them as whole people, full of potential, with complex histories and bright futures. Healing Centered Engagement goes beyond treating trauma to focus on well-being, cultural identity, and collective healing.

"A healing-centered approach views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but rather highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively." (Ginwright, 2020, para. 10)

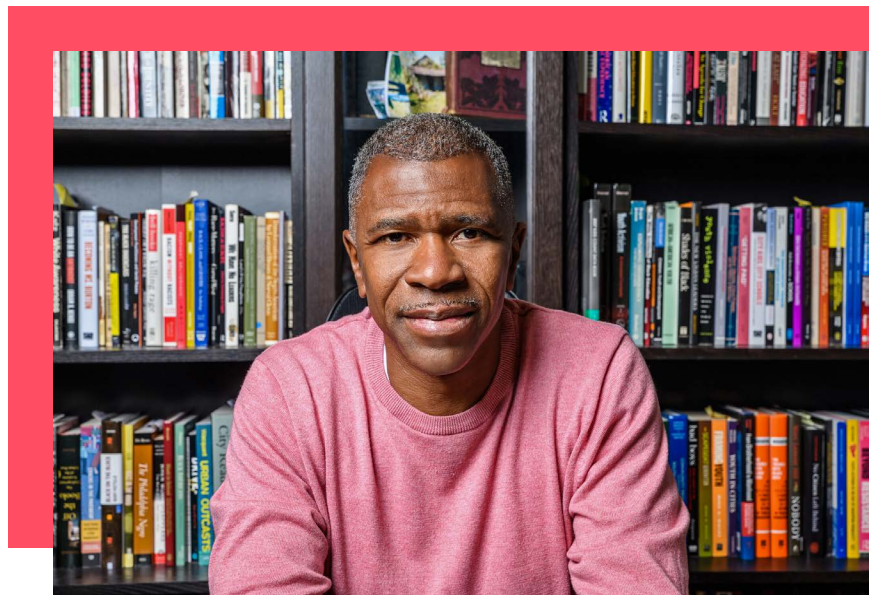
It recognizes that healing happens through relationships, community, and empowerment. It affirms people’s strengths, honors their stories, and supports them in imagining and building hopeful futures (Flourish Agenda, Inc., 2019).

Flourish Agenda’s 5 Principles of Healing Centered Engagement

The term Healing Centered Engagement was coined by Dr. Shawn Ginwright in 2018, and is based on more than 30 years of research and practice with young people, schools, probation departments, and social workers.

There are 5 principles of Healing Centered Engagement known as CARMA, which stands for Culture, Agency, Relationships, Meaning, and Aspirations. They offer a holistic approach to well-being by recognizing the importance of cultural identity, personal agency, supportive relationships, meaningful experiences, and future aspirations.

Let's look at each principle and how it applies to working with young parents.



Shawn Ginwright, featured on Harvard Graduate School of Education website (2022)

Applying Healing Centered Engagement Principles to Support Young Parents

Principle	Definition	Example
Culture	Recognizing and honoring the cultural identity, traditions, and lived experiences of individuals and communities.	A case manager working with a young Latina mother incorporates her cultural values, such as <i>familismo</i> (strong family connections), into goal setting and support planning. Parenting programs include culturally relevant examples and materials.
Agency	Empowering individuals to see themselves as capable decision makers with control over their own lives.	A staff member helps a young father map out his goals and makes sure he leads the conversation about what support he needs, rather than being told what to do. This might include choosing between GED programs or workforce training, based on his preferences.
Relationships	Building meaningful, trusting, and caring connections as the foundation for healing and growth.	A home visitor consistently shows up, listens without judgment, and celebrates small wins with a young mom, creating a safe space where she can be vulnerable, ask for help, and take risks.
Meaning	Helping individuals find purpose and connection in their experiences, even difficult ones, to support healing and growth.	In a support group, young parents are invited to reflect on how becoming a parent has shifted their identities, values, or future goals. Facilitators guide them in turning their challenges into motivation and stories of strength.
Aspirations	Focusing on dreams, hope, and future possibilities, not just survival or overcoming hardship.	A program hosts a “Vision Board” workshop where young parents imagine life five years from now—in careers, education, relationships, etc.—and then build support plans around those goals.

Strategies for Fostering Healing & Resilience for Young Parents

Professionals and organizations can support young parents by adopting these strategies to foster healing and resilience, and help young families thrive.

Interpersonal Support

These are individual, relational, and day-to-day practices that professionals can implement directly with young parents:



USE A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

- Highlight what's working, validate effort, and focus on goals and potential.
- Acknowledge that young parents are juggling so much, which shows real strength.



BUILD PARENTING SKILLS WITHOUT SHAMING

- Teach or model child development and parenting techniques in respectful ways.
- Reinforce young parents' role as the expert on their child.



SUPPORT EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Normalize mental health struggles and teach healthy coping mechanisms.
- Refer to mental health counseling and offer emotional check-ins.



ENCOURAGE POSITIVE COPARENTING AND PARTNER INVOLVEMENT

- Engage all caregivers, if possible, or coach the young parent on healthy coparenting communication.
- Offer flexible schedules to include fathers, partners, close friends, and any other members of a young parent's support system.



BUILD TRUSTING, NONJUDGMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Communicate with care by actively listening, showing empathy, and speaking clearly and simply. Respect autonomy, reinforce strengths, and offer consistent emotional support.
- Choose trauma-informed language that avoids blame or shame and helps build trust and safety in your interactions.



CENTER YOUNG PARENTS' VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

- Support them in setting their own goals and making choices in their care plans.
- Involve them in decisions about services and in providing program feedback.

Organizational Support

These are organization-wide practices and structural decisions that create the foundation for healing and resilience among young parents:



ENSURE ACCESS TO WRAPAROUND SERVICES

- Offer or connect young parents to housing, childcare, transportation, health care, and legal help through partnerships.



ADDRESS STIGMA AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

- Train all staff on anti-bias practices. Advocate for policy change (e.g., access to childcare, education, health care for young families).



BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS INTO PROGRAMMING

- Structure services around protective factors, such as parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting, concrete support, and children's social-emotional development.



PROVIDE FLEXIBLE EDUCATION AND CAREER PATHWAYS

- Design programs with built-in childcare, online options, or career coaching for young parents.



DESIGN SPACES THAT HONOR AND INCLUDE YOUNG FAMILIES

- Ensure physical spaces meet the needs of young families (e.g., posters of young families that look like them, age-appropriate toys for their children, a private space for feeding, etc.)



CENTER YOUNG PARENTS' VOICE AND LEADERSHIP (ON A PROGRAM SCALE)

- Involve young parents in advisory boards, curriculum design, and peer mentoring roles.



When professionals and organizations intentionally build support systems around the real needs of young parents, they create environments where healing, growth, and long-term success become possible. These structural changes are not just about service delivery—they're about dignity, equity, and empowerment. By prioritizing wraparound services, inclusive spaces, and youth leadership, organizations can help dismantle systemic barriers and promote resilience. Ultimately, supporting young families through thoughtful, trauma-informed and healing-centered practices lays the groundwork for stronger, healthier communities.

"I feel like the best thing for me was opening up to receiving help because it is only going to help [my kid] and me and achieving goals and just building this life that I envisioned for us. So, receiving help was one of the biggest lessons that I learned when I became a parent."

Maile, Young United Parents (YUP!)



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About Thrivology

Every young person has a right to sexual health and well-being. To realize these rights, young people need access to sexual and reproductive health programs and services that are safe, honest, healing-centered, and trauma-informed.

Youth-supporting professionals—teachers and educators, counselors and clinicians, caring adults—work hard every day to make this happen. With easy access to the latest research, along with practical, helpful opportunities and resources, youth-supporting professionals are better supported and able to provide young people with the very best care and education they deserve.

That's why Healthy Teen Network and Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health have partnered to create Thrivology.

Thrivology creates resources based on the latest research on how to provide the very best sexual and reproductive health education and care, so young people may thrive.

Thrivology is a research-to-practice center funded by the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of Population Affairs. In collaboration with our Research Alliance of experts in the field and Thrivology Youth Leaders, we work to expand the delivery of trauma-informed, healing-centered practices in adolescent sexual and reproductive health programming and care.

Learn more at thrivology.com.

