

# Effective Relationship Education for Teen Parents

The United States has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy among developed countries. In 2009, over 400,000 young women in America under the age of 20 gave birth. At the time their babies are born, more than 50 percent of teen mothers are “sure” they will marry their baby’s father or think the chances of doing so are good. However, 80 percent of teen mothers ultimately become single parents.

Research suggests that children generally do best when raised by their married parents. Even if teen parents don’t marry each other or remain in a romantic relationship, it is still important that they are able to interact in a healthy way, for the sake of their child. In fact, studies have identified the relationship between the mother and father of the child as the most important indicator of a father’s involvement in parenting.

Marriage/relationship education (MRE) teaches skills that can help teens effectively parent together. These skills can also help teens prepare for their next dating relationship and avoid potentially dangerous situations. Furthermore, MRE lessons help teens develop positive relationships with friends, parents, teachers, and bosses. This Tip Sheet briefly examines issues related to teen parenting and provides MRE practitioners and program managers with suggestions for delivering services to this population.



## Keep them engaged with the material

Holding the attention of young parents can be difficult. Facilitators should enjoy working with youth, be comfortable discussing relationship issues, and be willing to share their own experiences. A facilitator will need training in the chosen curriculum and needs to be knowledgeable about other community resources. Proper training will enable facilitators to make referrals and to understand and identify the signs of dating violence and trauma. Being tech-savvy and up-to-date on popular culture is also beneficial. Here are some more tips to help keep teens engaged in your services.

- Gain trust by creating a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere in which teens feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

- Provide breaks and snacks that are appropriate for pregnant participants.
  - Invite the young people to help establish ground rules for discussion, sharing, and confidentiality. Include guidelines for not interrupting or raising voices.
  - Make sure the chosen curriculum can be tailored to young parents. Even if the curriculum has been used with teens before, review it to be sure it reflects the realities of your audience. Also, check that the curriculum is culturally appropriate and does not contain negative stereotypes.
  - Use an interactive, open, and hands-on presentation style. Creatively incorporate current events, music, movies, and magazines to make the material relevant and interesting. Include small group activities or activities that require pairs.
  - Offer time for individual activities and introspection as well. Teenagers are still trying to figure out who they are and who they want to be.
  - Ensure exercises and examples are relevant to teens who may be co-parenting but not romantically involved.
  - Try to use peer facilitators or bring in peer speakers for special topics.
  - Offer incentives such as cash or gift certificates for participation and provide child care, if possible.
  - Facilitate meaningful discussion. Don't cut discussions short—merely to get through curriculum content—if the young parents are actively engaged in the conversation. These are important “teachable moments.”
- Provide many opportunities for teen parents to practice the skills taught in class.

## Understand the circumstances that often surround teenage pregnancy

Many young parents have grown up in poverty, lived in a single-parent household, and/or have witnessed behaviors such as parental substance abuse. Furthermore, the young parents in your group may have never seen a healthy relationship modeled. You may want to consider addressing the following points in your MRE program:

- Make clear that the skills needed to create positive relationships can be learned and used by anyone. Often, youth will feel that bad relationships “run in families.” Help them realize this is not true and that they can break past cycles.
- Encourage them to set high standards for their relationships with others. Work on goal-setting exercises in class.
- Emphasize to the parents that they are the most powerful influence on their children and can model the kinds of relationships they want their children to expect for themselves someday.
- Make understanding what a healthy relationship looks like a priority for the class.

## Relationships and parenting are difficult for everyone

Teens are easily and quickly discouraged and often feel that they are just “not good with relationships.” It may help remedy these feelings if you:

- Share your own teenage relationship struggles, whether those struggles were with friends, family, or a boyfriend/girlfriend. Also, let them know your own struggles with parenting, if applicable. This will not only create common ground, but will let them know that relationships are difficult for everyone. Tell them in the first session that you will be sharing your own experiences; this will reduce their nervousness. Decide ahead of time what you will or will not share and discuss your personal boundaries with your supervisor prior to the first class.
- Look for examples of healthy and unhealthy relationships in popular culture as a way to remind teens that money and “things” do not make relationships work. These examples can also be used to demonstrate healthy versus unhealthy communication, conflict resolution, and other relationship skills taught in class.
- Explain what physical and emotional abuse look like. Establish ahead of time a protocol with a domestic violence (DV) practitioner in case anyone discloses DV to you. Also, know your organization’s and your state’s policies on mandatory reporting for child abuse.

## Be sensitive to trauma

The Journal of the American Medical Association states that 66 percent of pregnant teens report histories of abuse. Studies show that a history of abuse can make young women more vulnerable to future victimization, including unsafe romantic relationships that endanger themselves and their children. Some of the young women in your group may have experienced trauma that could be triggered by the content in the curriculum. To address these issues, you may want to consider the following:

- Watch for signs of re-traumatization such as

sudden withdrawal or emotional outbursts. Your organization should have a protocol that includes follow-up for working with a practitioner who specializes in trauma. If such a situation arises, you will also need to notify the teen’s case manager, school counselor, or private therapist, if he or she has one.

- Know your state’s laws on mandatory reporting in case there is disclosure in your class.
- On sensitive subjects, don’t require everyone to participate if you sense some people are unusually uncomfortable. Let them share when they are ready.

Healthy relationships are challenging for everyone, regardless of age, and require hard work over a long period of time. However, teen parents face additional challenges and obstacles. They must raise their children while still maturing themselves. These teens often see their friends dating and going out without responsibilities, and they may yearn for this same carefree lifestyle. However, their life and priorities must change once they become a parent and unbridled freedom is no longer possible. These conflicting desires and responsibilities may often drive young parents into unhealthy relationships. Fortunately, relationship education can help change destructive patterns. Armed with greater understanding about themselves and MRE skills, young parents can create strong, healthy relationships for themselves as well as model such relationships for their children.

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