



Implementation of a journal prototype for pregnant and parenting adolescents



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ABSTRACT

Teenage pregnancy and childbearing remain pressing public health issues that have garnered attention from public health officials and social services agencies. This paper reports on the initial implementation and formative evaluation of a journaling program used as a means of communicating health information to pregnant and parenting adolescents (young women age 15–19) while also providing participants with a means of self-expression. The journaling prototype was implemented in a community-based agency in the Midwest by Family Support Specialists (FSSs) who made home visits on a monthly basis to assist pregnant and parenting adolescents ($n = 52$) with successful family planning and public health education. A mixed method approach of qualitative (analysis of journals, field notes, and responses of semi-structured interviews with FSSs) and quantitative (questionnaires from pregnant and parenting adolescent respondents) data with purposive sampling was employed to evaluate the implementation of the journaling intervention. Twenty of the 52 study participants were pregnant when the journaling intervention was implemented, while 32 were not pregnant, but recently had a child and were currently parenting. Two core themes emerged from analysis of the data after the implementation of the journals: (1) usefulness of the journal and responsiveness to participants' information needs and (2) functionality challenges. The results offer practical starting points to tailor the implementation of journaling in other contexts. Further, areas for improvement emerged regarding the distribution timeline for the journal and the content of the journal itself. As such, we discuss the lessons learned through this collaborative project and suggest opportunities for future phases of the journal intervention.

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Although teen birth rates have been on the decline for several decades ([The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2010](#)), adolescent pregnancy and childbearing is still a major concern for public health officials, sexual health educators, and social service agencies across the United States. In fact, the U.S. has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy among developed countries ([Hamilton & Ventura, 2012](#)). Children of adolescent parents are more likely to face barriers in accessing adequate health care resources and are at risk for a variety of health conditions that necessitate long term care, such as cerebral palsy,

mental retardation, and respiratory problems ([Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, & Kirmeyer, 2006](#)). Teenage mothers must also adjust to the responsibilities and demands of parenting, often in the context of economic and social disadvantage, burdens leading to adverse mental outcomes. For example, adolescent mothers experience significantly higher rates of depression (both prenatally and postpartum), suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder than adult mothers and their nonpregnant peers ([Hodgkinson, Beers, Southammakosane, & Lewin, 2013](#)).

In response to these concerns, a number of public health campaigns and interventions have been developed with the aim of reducing incidents of teenage pregnancy (e.g., [Doniger, Adams, Utter, & Riley, 2006](#); [Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald,](#)

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2008; Roberto, Zimmerman, Carlyle, & Abner, 2007). For example, interventions using computer and Internet-based programs have been successful in increasing adolescents' knowledge of the benefits of delayed sexual activity and improving their confidence in negotiating condom use with sexual partners (Roberto et al., 2008). Such education efforts are indicative of campaigns that combine a goal of deterring adolescent pregnancy with other health-related goals like encouraging safer sex practices and reducing rates of sexually transmitted infections among teens. Yet practitioners and health officials must address not only the prevention of teen pregnancy, but also the health of teens who are already pregnant or parenting, and the well-being of their children. Addressing these needs also provides opportunities to gain a better understanding of the experiences and aspirations of teen parents as they experience this role in their lives. A considerable need exists to implement a tailored program that enables pregnant and parenting adolescents with the flexibility to express their perspectives, while at the same time promoting public health resources and services (Busum & Mattke, 2013; De Meij, van der Wal, van Mechelen, & Chinapaw, 2013).

To that end, the Maternal and Child Health Division (MCH) of the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) created The Pregnant and Parenting Adolescent Support Services (PPASS) program to promote the development of integrated systems of support services for pregnant and parenting adolescents and their families. Based on the most recent available data, the teen birth rate per 1000 population in women ages 15–19 in Indiana was slightly higher than the national average (37.3 in Indiana, compared to 34.3 on average in the U.S.), and while the U.S. teen birth rate declined 17% between 2007 and 2010, in Indiana it declined only 13% (Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). Via a 2010 internal survey of its agency partners, MCH identified a lack of community resources, family support barriers, and awareness of resources as the most significant challenges in the promotion of the health and well-being of pregnant and parenting adolescents. MCH then funded a series of research studies to evaluate various means for communicating health information to teens regarding pregnancy, prenatal care, and parenting. As part of this funded research series, we implemented a journal program for pregnant and parenting teens in a local context in order to perform a formative evaluation of this type of intervention.

As part of this formative evaluation, we identified both facilitators and barriers related to the implementation of the journaling prototype for pregnant and parenting teens. Implementation, defined as a particular set of activities designed to put into practice a program of specific dimensions, is a complex enterprise (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). There are often disconnects in the process of developing a program or intervention, its evaluation, and its implementation in a real-world setting. Failure to evaluate implementation practices in early phases of a program can lead to participant disengagement, thwarting the potential public health impact of health behavior research (Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Tse, Nansel, Weaver, Williams, & Botello-Harbaum, 2014). Kitson, Harvey, and McCormack (1998) indicated that the overall practice environment can influence the implementation of programs. How health-promotion programs in general, and journaling programs for pregnant and parenting adolescents in particular, operate under real-life conditions have rarely been evaluated (van Nassau et al., 2013). When programs are introduced under less controlled conditions, as similar to the present study, insight into factors influencing the implementation of these programs is crucial for translation into practice and systematic planning of dissemination strategies (van Nassau et al., 2013). Consistent with the implementation science literature, we aimed to capture in-depth information on participant and contextual

factors in a complex setting that facilitated or hindered successful implementation. Practitioners and scholars can then draw on these factors to enhance future implementation efforts to tailor programs and interventions to be more congruent with and accommodative the needs of the clients being served (Jolley, 2014; Stetler et al., 2006).

The following sections describe the implementation of the journal prototype, the context where the program was implemented, the results of the formative evaluation of the barriers and facilitators of the initial implementation, and the conclusions drawn about usefulness of the journal for future interventions. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate the program as implemented.

1. Program development and implementation

The development and evaluation of the journal was carried out by a diverse, interdisciplinary team of researchers in the fields of Communication Studies, Sociology, Geoinformatics, and Visual Communication Design. The research team collaborated closely with an Indianapolis-based design company for journal design and development.

1.1. Rationale for selection of a journal modality

During the first phase of this project, the researchers and designers conducted focus groups with pregnant and parenting adolescents to compare a variety of modalities for communicating health information related to the goals of the PPASS program (see Chumbler, Sanematus, & Parrish-Sprowl, *in press* for a complete description of the methods, analysis, and results of the focus group sessions). The modality options included a customizable journal, a mobile bus unit designed to travel to various locations, and an interactive kiosk. During the sessions, participants were able to test and compare the three prototypes and to ask questions of the design team who had created the three options (Chumbler et al., *in press*). Feedback from participants suggested a strong preference for the journal as a means of both conveying and gathering information. Participants were drawn to the journal as a way to gain information about pregnancy and parenting and as a mechanism for fostering self-expression. They were especially enthusiastic about the idea of other people reading their journals, including institutional representatives like social workers and even the researchers themselves. The participants articulated a strong desire for others to understand their point of view and wanted to reduce the social stigma surrounding teenage child-bearing (Chumbler et al., *in press*).

Moreover, personal writing and self-expression have a long history of use as tools for self-understanding and improvement, and research has pointed to the effects of writing in improving health and psychosocial well-being (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). One formative study examining the benefits of journaling found that students who wrote about traumatic events had fewer visits to the campus health services over the subsequent six months than those who did not write about such events (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). And Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) have argued that: "Extensive research has revealed that when people put their emotional upheavals into words, their physical and mental health improves markedly" (p. 1244). Long-term benefits of expressive writing include greater self-awareness and confidence, reduced stress and anxiety, improved mood, improved physical health, a better understanding of the life event, and the development of a conduit for improving communication with a counselor (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

While we have not seen published studies on the benefits of self-expression with pregnant and parenting adolescents, several

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