For the Field

Teen Parents and the Public Library: Supporting Teen Parents with Programming and Partnerships

Teen parenthood places young adults in a tough position; while they are not yet adults, they must take on the responsibilities and challenges that parenthood entails. Libraries can be an invaluable resource in guiding teen parents to unlock their potential and achieve their goals, while providing them with tools that empower them to be the best parents they can be. Programming and resources at public libraries can make a tremendous difference in the lives of teen parents and their children. Libraries can provide a welcoming and inclusive space in which teen parents feel accepted without judgement, and, equally as important, they can offer teen parents access to relevant resources through programming and partnerships with community organizations. In this paper, I will explore best practices around serving teen parents at the public library and point to what some public libraries are already doing to help teen parents and their children. A list of online resources for librarians serving teen parents will be included at the end of this paper.

In the United States, over 300,000 babies are born annually to teen parents, notes Carrie Rogers-Whitehead (2014), a teen services librarian who often works with overlooked populations. Only half of teen mothers graduate from high school, and their children are also statistically less likely to reach this milestone (Rogers-Whitehead, 2014). This can have long-term implications for their futures; in addition to obtaining lower levels of education, teen parents are more likely to be unemployed or

incarcerated (Rogers-Whitehead, 2014). Ellin Klor (2012), a family literacy librarian, notes that “teen parents can face issues that would be difficult and challenging for competent adults: chaotic and unstable environments, poverty, and unsafe neighbourhoods with limited transportation, access to social services, or access to healthy food” (p. 19). Klor (2012) argues that “while libraries cannot mitigate all these problems, our programs can help by supporting teen parents in their personal development and in their role as their child’s first teacher” (p. 19).

Teen parents face the challenge of navigating their own journeys into adulthood while also being caregivers to their own children. Kathryn Woody (2018) notes that teens do not simply stop being teens once they become parents. Their dual status often makes teen parents feel vulnerable and isolated. However, Woody (2018) points out that libraries are uniquely placed to help teen parents succeed. She notes that adolescence—without the added challenge of caring for children—is already often a physically and mentally difficult time for many teens. As Klor (2012) notes,

finding the balance between providing the stability and unconditional love needed by a child for healthy development, and the tasks of adolescent growth—formation of identity, establishment of independence, and development of meaningful peer friendships—is the challenge of being a teen parent. (p. 19)

By helping teen parents navigate their dual identities, libraries can empower them to be strong role models for their children, help them learn life skills, promote lifelong literacy for both parents and children, and strengthen community bonds (Woody, 2018).

When working with teen parents, flexibility and empathy are key. Library staff should keep in mind that teen parents have many obligations and challenges in their lives and may not always be able to attend library programs regularly. Teen parents face many issues that can affect their ability to attend library programs, including a lack of transportation to and from the library, restrictive scheduling, and other events in their lives (Klor, 2012, pp. 19-20). Therefore, Klor (2012) argues that creativity and adaptability are required skills for those serving teen parents in the library (p. 20).

Partnerships

Community partnerships are essential for public libraries that want to work with teen parents. Klor (2012) recommends that libraries seek out community partners that work with teen parents, such as those that offer teen parenting classes, health support groups, or high schools that have centres for teen parents (p. 20). The partnerships a library chooses depend largely on the social resources available in the community and on recommendations made by members of the community. For example, in a presentation on the Hamilton East Library's program for teen parents, Fay and Mehan (2010) note that the library formed local partnerships with high school counsellors, a probation officer, and a representative of Healthy Families—an organization focused on the health and well-being of children. These partners were recommended by community leaders because of the expertise that they could provide through their work with teen parents. The Hennepin County Library (HCL) also partners with local high schools to provide outreach to teen parents, with a focus on helping them obtain their high school diplomas (Barrack, 2016). Barrack (2016) notes that as a result of this collaboration, librarians meet with students about once a month at their schools. The program

provides special opportunities for teen parents that would not otherwise be available to them. In fact, one high school partnering with the HCL was able to hire an author to facilitate a workshop with the teens, which gave them each the opportunity to create their own illustrated picture book (Barrack, 2016).

Libraries may also collaborate with community partners to host events that introduce teen parents to services that the library can offer them. Rogers-Whitehead (2014) writes about a partnership between the Salt Lake County Library Services and the Granite School District Young Parents Program. The two organizations hosted a “teen parent picnic” at the library, which resulted in young parents signing up for library cards, participating in storytime, and otherwise learning about the library (Rogers-Whitehead, 2014). Rogers-Whitehead (2014) notes that this was an expansion of an already existing partnership that was formed to provide books and early literacy materials to young parents; the library wanted to introduce teen parents directly to the library, as many did not have a library card or know about the services available at the library.

Programming

In addition to community partnerships, in-house collaborations are key for libraries designing programming for teen parents and their children. Klor (2012) notes that “children and youth services staff can provide early literacy and parenting programs and services, reference staff can develop information literacy on topics like employment and vocational training opportunities, and literacy staff can offer reading and writing support” (p. 20). In addition to offering recreational programs such as crafts and self-care, libraries can host experts on topics such as nutrition and parenting. Library programs

that parents can do with their children and that are mutually beneficial include early literacy storytimes and organized play activities. Libraries can also provide teen parents with pertinent resource lists. An example of this is the DC Public Library's webpage for teen parenting resources, which points teen parents to resources such as community-based supports, facts and statistics about teen pregnancy, and other health resources such as Planned Parenthood (DC Public Library, n.d.).

Libraries can look to programs developed by other libraries for guidance on this topic, as some libraries have developed comprehensive programs specifically to serve teen parents. Woodland Public Library's Skills for Teen Parents (STeP) program is one example of a program that aimed to guide teens through many different aspects of adolescence and parenthood. The STeP program consisted of ten workshops that were taught by different experts, and each workshop was designed to teach teen mothers practical life skills. Themes for these workshops included parenting, nutrition, education and employment-based future planning, and legal and financial issues (Woodland Public Library, 2016a). The parents who participated in the program were also able to attend a graduation ceremony to celebrate successful completion of the program (Woodland Public Library, 2016b).

Online Resources

A variety of libraries and librarians have created resources for working with teen parents and have made them available online for others to consult and learn from. I have compiled a list of some of these resources here:

Cuddle Up & Read: Storytimes for Pregnant and Parenting Teens is a webinar by Anna Hartman and Kirby McMurtis (2011), which provides libraries with an overview of

some of the challenges teen parents face and guidance on how they can serve this population.

The *Every Child Ready to Read* initiative (ECRR) is a literacy program developed by the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service for Children, and it aims to teach parents and caregivers how to support their children's early literacy. The Library of Michigan's bulletin, as part of the ECRR initiative, provides a list of useful resources dedicated to helping teen parents (Nespeca, 2017).

The San Antonio Public Library provides a handout for their early literacy program for teen parents that offers resources for libraries, practical advice on getting started, and best practices when working with teen parents (Sanchez & Gonzalez, n.d.).

The blog of the Young Adult Library Services Association offers a list of young adult (YA) novels featuring teen pregnancy. Seeing themselves represented in popular media can help teen parents overcome feelings of isolation (Lind, 2014).

Conclusion

Investing in programming and resources that target teen parents can be an impactful endeavour for libraries to engage in for several reasons. In supporting teen parents, libraries can give teen parents and their children the chances they deserve, while also helping their communities grow and flourish. Through the creation of programming designed to teach teen parents practical skills, the formation of relevant community partnerships, and the guidance of other libraries who have successfully worked with teen parents, libraries can help teen parents and their children thrive.

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