

WRAPAROUND PROCESS WITH YOUNG HOMELESS PARENTS

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The wraparound process refers to a holistic approach to client care that reflects a set of core principles. These principles include 1) gaining knowledge about a community prior to program creation and implementation, 2) interagency collaboration in service delivery, 3) participant advocacy, 4) adjustment of services based on community and agency dialogue, and 4) feedback following program implementation. Wraparound with young homeless parents was developed in response to statistics that showed that the percentage of shelter users aged 15-24 years had increased to 22%, 50% of street-involved youth were young women, and an estimated 300 births occurred among this group annually (Bernstein & Lee 1998). The Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA) network is a collaboration of over 20 agencies that began in 1997 to work with marginalized youth who are pregnant and parenting. In order to address the urgent need to cement supports for young homeless parents in Toronto, YPNFA formalized its partnership with Oolagen Community Services and Wraparound in June 2002 in an effort to engage young homeless parents in the wraparound process.

It was envisioned that engagement in this process would stabilize and assist young homeless parents during their prenatal, childbirth, postpartum and parenting periods using a strengths-based, self-driven, and coordinated approach to support. Further, it was felt that participation in the wraparound process would acknowledge the resiliency of young homeless parents and enable them to develop a life plan consistent with their needs and coherent with their life histories and experiences of abuse, placements, labeling of "behavioural disorders" and stigma in society.

The wraparound process is a way to improve the lives of children and families who have complex needs. It is not a program or type of service but rather a process used to help communities develop individualized plans of care for families with various needs (Wraparound Training Manual 2005). Each plan is developed by the Child and Family Team which is made up of four to ten people who know the child best including the child, family, informal members, and service professionals. Service professionals should make up less than 50% of the team. Families, with the assistance of their team, identify goals in various life domains (e.g., housing, social, financial), determine priorities, and develop strategies that are matched with their strengths (Brown & Debicki 2000).

The wraparound process in Ontario is governed by 11 key principles and critical elements that include individualized plans, a strength-based approach that is centred in the community, acknowledgment and incorporation of the family and child's voice,

ownership by both the individual and community, collaboration with formal and informal systems, access to flexible funding, unconditional support, measurable outcomes, and inclusion of all community stakeholders. For a more extensive description of these principles and elements see Debicki et al. (1998). Between 2002 and 2005 Wraparound,¹ housed at Oolagen Community Services, offered the wraparound process to 173 young mothers in Toronto. Seventy-three percent or 127 of these mothers used the process over this time. A qualitative research study was undertaken to assess the impact of using a wraparound process with street-involved young homeless parents.

Research study

The study on wraparound with street-involved young homeless² parents used a qualitative approach to understand the felt experiences of this population and the ways in which wraparound had influenced their well being. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to elicit discussion from parents and service providers on the challenges experienced by young homeless families, the service history and sources of help available to young parents, the effectiveness of wraparound as an intervention process, and achievements made in the wraparound process.

Sample

A total of 21 participants consented to provide feedback through either a face-to-face interview or a focus group. The researcher conducted three focus groups: one with three wraparound facilitators and two other groups attended by a total of seven service providers who were involved in needs assessment, programming, partnership building, proposal writing, and informal (non-professional) or formal (professional) team membership. Additionally, eleven participants who engaged in the wraparound process, comprised of eight parents and three service providers, opted to participate in a face-to-face interview.

1. The Wraparound Program at Oolagen Community Services helps youth and family in crisis to identify and utilize a highly individualized network of support (families, friends, community and professionals) (Oolagen Community Services 2006). The term "Wraparound" in this paper refers to the program offered at Oolagen.

2. A "homeless" parent in this study was defined as someone who did not have stable housing, could not afford to sustain housing, was forced to move several times, was staying in temporary accommodations with a friend or a shelter and had fallen into a transient lifestyle.

Profile of parents

Eight of the total 21 participants were consumers or parents who had directly engaged in the wraparound process from 2000 to 2005. Six of these parents had graduated from the wraparound process at least six months previously and two were in the process of completing the program at the time of the study. One parent who had graduated from wraparound was now working as a part-time wraparound facilitator.

All of the parents who participated in this study were female, single or separated/divorced from their partners, and all were under 30 years of age, with the exception of one parent. The parents had between one and five children ranging in age from three months to 13 years. Two parents had some high school education and the remaining group had completed a high school diploma. Three parents had taken some college level courses. All of the parents were unemployed and had a family income of less than \$19,000 per annum.

Profile of service professionals

Thirteen service professionals provided their input on the wraparound process with young homeless parents. They identified themselves as wraparound facilitators, community health officers, social workers, public health nurses, program supervisors, office clerks, and addiction therapists. Their collective agencies engaged with about 35 social service and community organizations in Toronto including government ministries, funding agencies, public health services, mental health agencies, addictions services, school systems, child protection services, shelter systems, maternity homes, social assistance programs, daycare services, vocational services, child, youth, and family service agencies, housing services, community associations, food banks, and private enterprise.

Findings

The data gathered indicated four categorical and several sub-categorical themes in the experience of the participants. The four central categories that emerged revolved around these themes: 1) parents have control of the process, 2) approaches are tailor-made for families, 3) families are empowered through a strength-based approach, and 4) communities where families exist are expanded through the wraparound process.

Theme 1: Parents have control of the process

In the first category of findings, two thematic subcategories demonstrated how parents had control in the wraparound process. These subcategories related to the use of a self-driven process of goal setting and planning, and the privileged voice of the parent being heard in team meetings.

Self-driven process. The participants stated that the parents drove and guided the wraparound process. In so doing they considered the things in their lives that they wanted to work on: "I picked schooling;" "I picked going back to work;" "I picked legal status;" "I spoke about safety." This self-determination is an empowering opportunity to exercise self-agency as "their lives have very much been mediated and driven by other social services...and they have not had that opportunity to look at their lives and say this is how I see things going and this is where I need them to move or change."

Parents identified their needs at initial meetings with their facilitator: "At the first meeting we went over my life domain areas...like what I needed help with." At monthly meetings the team, along with the parent, developed plans: "I had to put different plans together for my family...I want to go back to school...certain things we were going to do for [my son]." They also assisted with implementing goals: "[they] help[ed] me to get different resources outside."

Hearing the voice of the parent. Privileging the voice of the parent in the process was an essential ingredient to wraparound. It allowed the parents to be part of the decision-making process when giving them the opportunity to agree or not with any plans, to feel heard, and to bring forward their issues, other than those identified by their formal and informal systems. One parent commented, "I'm the one being heard, not everybody else, it's me being heard."

The parents felt the power of an audience when giving voice to their strengths, which, in turn, motivated them to work through the process with the team. The parents could exercise choice regarding their team members and the wraparound facilitator. Parents can hire and fire their facilitator at any time: "[they can] fire the facilitator so they don't have to have that person if they are not working for them." Using their voice meant that the parents were taking ownership of the process and its outcome.

Theme 2: A tailor-made approach

Within the second thematic category, relating to a tailor-made approach, participants spoke about the process being individualized, holistic, and flexible.

Individualized service. A key factor of success mentioned by the participants was the effort made to "fit the services to that young mom as opposed to young moms to services." As a result, the plan for each parent was individualized according to the needs, cultural norms, and lifestyles identified by each family in the process.

Working with the parents in a sensitive and individualized manner was achieved by using an informal, client-centred approach. This approach allowed the parents to connect with their facilitator at a very real and genuine level as opposed to experiencing a more arm's length relationship between worker and client. The client-centred approach seemed to take on a different feel for the parent as the meetings could happen in their homes, food was often involved, and informal language was used when developing a plan. It was always important to acknowledge when a decision made in wraparound was not working, especially when it pertained to an individual's cultural norms. A good fit between the parents' needs, the plan developed, and the services being coordinated cannot be achieved if teams are not sensitive to a family's cultural norms and beliefs.

Holistic perspective. In order to custom-fit the wraparound process to the individual, the team considered the stressors in the parent's individual, family, and community systems. For example, "we look at the situation from a systemic point of view with the family so it's not just one area of dealing with counseling." Incorporating a holistic perspective necessitates the engagement of others, be it significant persons in the family system or service

professionals such as child protection workers. The work within the process, then, requires handling conflicting perspectives from these systems while maintaining the focus on the needs of the parent/child.

Flexible approach. A flexible approach in wraparound was used to sustain the integrity of an individually-tailored plan from a holistic perspective. Flexibility meant that there was no set time assigned to an individual referred to wraparound. The process was geared to the individual's pace, understanding that a client may take two steps forward and two steps back. Regardless of the pace, the process continued for as long as the individual engaged in the process and was moving forward to accomplish goals. We recognized that sometimes parents needed a break; consequently, they were not put back on a waitlist if they required some time away from the process. In addition, flexibility was woven into when, where, and how often the meetings were held. Furthermore, the parent could choose to work on one or several goals and shift their focus at any time throughout the process if their needs changed.

Theme 3: Empowerment

In the third thematic category, focused on empowerment, the key elements identified by the participants were using parent strengths and leveraging a supportive environment.

Parent strengths. Identifying individual strengths early on in the process served to replenish hope in what seemed like a hopeless situation. This exercise highlighted the positives and created a significant shift for the service professionals whose work has focused traditionally on negative aspects of homelessness. For the parents themselves, a talk about and reflection upon their strengths seemed to offer a much needed boost. As one parent described, "When you see that list [of strengths] up there you say, 'Wow!' That's really neat, because you don't think of the positive things about yourself... unless you had that fortunate [experience] growing up."

Leveraging a supportive environment. Once a foundation had been created by the parent, facilitator, and others on the team, the remainder of time in wraparound focused on building supports and strengthening skills so that parents could move towards a changed environment. When clients felt empowered, the facilitators could step back, allowing parents to make good use of available resources more independently. In order for this independence to happen, a team and network of support needed to be created around the parents.

A challenge in the wraparound process was to create a team of informal and formal supports who could stay the course with a parent. One difficulty was to identify individuals from the parents' informal network who were positive and committed to the process. Struggles with birth/adopted families in childhood and severed links with kin, coupled with a lifestyle of street involvement and homelessness, can make informal supports limited. Furthermore, current friends who are engaged in lifestyles that do not match the new goals that the parents in wraparound are trying to achieve can impede team building. As a result, parents often had small teams with more formal (such as, shelter worker, addictions therapist, Children's Aid worker, social worker, youth

worker, nurse, probation officer, therapist, and counselor) than informal supports. Consequently, the wraparound team needed to consider ways of enlarging the team with informal supports acquired in a somewhat different manner. For example, previous, or even present, shelter workers might become an informal support. An informal member was trusted as a friend, based on a relationship with the parent that had been nurtured over time. A few parents had the support of kinship, such as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, boyfriends, and brothers.

Team members created a network of support, advocacy and expertise for parents by brainstorming ideas, navigating systems, locating resources, and suggesting coping skills that parents could implement. Team member activities took a variety of forms: writing letters, making phone calls, teaching budgeting skills, helping to secure a babysitter, providing food vouchers and public transportation tickets, offering accompaniment to appointments, finding a shelter or housing complex, connecting with a church/clergy, researching resources in the community, advocating for child custody/visitation, completing forms, moving, and helping in a crisis.

Theme 4: Expanded Community

In the fourth thematic category of expanded community, participants identified improved service coordination, increased access to community resources, and reconnections with social networks as prominent sub-themes.

Improved service coordination. Improved service coordination was realized through both the YPNFA partnership and the use of the wraparound process. The YPNFA partnership created a network with approximately 20 community agencies that could develop joint programs through a more coordinated approach. In their discussions on partnering with the YPNFA network, service professionals indicated that it took a considerable length of time for partner agencies to develop trust, bridge their methods of intervention, and overcome the skepticism around using a wraparound process with street-involved youth. Partnerships within the network were ultimately solidified, however, given several factors including good communication through regular meetings, sharing of resources including proposal writing and seeking out new sources of funding, implementation of pilot projects (e.g., respite care and housing), the development of a community resource team represented by all levels of professionals involved with young homeless parents, training in the philosophy of wraparound, greater awareness of what other agencies had to offer, knowledge of helpful and unhelpful services for young homeless parents, group conferencing to brainstorm strategies for complex cases, availability of funds for incentives and unique requests/needs such as transit tickets, food vouchers and frequent visiting, and the ability of professional peers to support each other in this very difficult work.

Apart from the benefits gained from the YPNFA partnership, both parents and service professionals in this study concurred that the process itself had been very effective in coordinating services from all different areas. This process helped to streamline the workload, reduce the stress of dealing with complex needs, improve the line of communication, and bring greater clarity in how the network was supportive. As service professionals said,

"I didn't feel so overwhelmed with my workload;" "It was a lot more clear what everybody around the table was doing to support this person;" "We could accomplish a lot more things when we worked together;" and it was a way to "encourage [the parents] to get involved in other agencies that could help them." For the parents, the wraparound process reduced the repetition of services, brought the network of services to them, reduced stress, and eliminated the confusion caused by conflicting messages given by several service providers to a young parent. One parent noted, "...because you don't have to take 15 buses a week to 10 different appointments...being told how to hold your baby...hold the bottle, then another worker will say this is how you do it so there were like two or three different people giving information."

Increased access to community resources. Expanded community was identified as parents being able to access several resources in the community. The two major resources that parents accessed were 1) housing and 2) income. Housing was a major struggle that homeless parents faced. In the absence of affordable housing, parents were advised by system professionals to "stabilize" in a shelter. Shelters are a temporary measure, however. Therefore, the goal within wraparound was to settle parents and their children into appropriate housing in the community. As well, parents stated that finding appropriate housing was a requirement of CPS (Child Protection Service) plans in order to have their child returned. However, finding affordable housing is a particular challenge given waitlists of almost ten years. With this challenge at the forefront, the wraparound team helped to contact agencies to update files for subsidized housing. The teams also helped the parents to transition into independent living.

Restricted finances were a major barrier to sustaining housing. Hence, a second major resource accessed by parents was income support that involved planning for and engaging with employment, education, social assistance, and legal services. Being poor created many obstacles for parents, particularly for those who were raising their children alone, and who were unemployed, and on social assistance. One parent expressed an intense preoccupation with poverty and its profound effects on her family by saying, "You can't always deal with food banks, you do not know when they are open or when they don't open like twenty-four hours or every day of the week...so if you are poor tomorrow and you don't have food or money it is hard — you can't support yourself, you can't take care of your kids, it's terrible, it's like another third [world] country where you can't even eat one meal...I had to let go of my two kids. I had to do that because I did not have...what I needed to give them."

In spite of poverty and feelings of helplessness, parents expressed their dreams for themselves and their children. Parents reported that they just wanted to help their children and be financially stable because they knew first-hand the implications of being poor. Consequently, the wraparound team took measures to ameliorate the financial burden on parents and their families by facilitating access to resources that could change their income levels. Parents were connected to financial (e.g., social assistance, child support, school grants, subsidized day care), vocational, educational, and legal (e.g., immigration, custody) supports in the community.

Reconnection with social networks. Many participants in the study spoke about valuable connections that happened for parents who were involved in the wraparound process — connections with their children, family/kin, friends, and service professionals. A major goal for young homeless parents was eliminating the risk of their children being removed from their primary care or increasing the chances of reunification with children who had already been placed. Participants noted that involvement in the wraparound process seemed to result in more children remaining with their parents than otherwise might have been the case. There were several situations where CPS workers had expressed concerns about the families' current living situation and alternative placement was a strong likelihood but the effort of the parent, facilitator, and team averted this outcome.

For some parents, their family members were integral for providing the supervision, temporary care, and permanent care for their children. Having the children stay within the family/kin network gave greater access to the parent to see their children and not lose permanent contact.

Wraparound also helped to cultivate more positive relationships with professional service providers. One parent reflected on an earlier experience with a child protection worker before being in wraparound: "I think some of what happened to my other two kids was because I didn't open up to CAS as much as I should have to let them know that I was going through a lot and the person that I was living with was verbally abusing me and managing our money in a way where we couldn't do what we were supposed to do — such as paying our bills and feeding the kids." The wraparound process enabled both the parent and system professional to see that their goals were actually the same.

Conclusion

The majority of the participants in this study judged the wraparound process to be effective in helping parents to address identified needs and stabilize their family situations to a level where they could assume a normal life. At the very least, it gave parents a chance to identify and acknowledge their needs, issues and goals that perhaps had not been clearly client-centered prior to wraparound. Even for those who relapsed after being in a wraparound process "it at least gave them that opportunity" to experience a different process and begin to improve their lives.

Apart from the benefits accrued, participants identified some limitations to a successful wraparound process. Success depended on the motivation of parents in a process that was voluntary, parents having the emotional and mental capacity to take ownership of the process and having the energy to do their share of the work, the motivation of the community to address the structural barriers that affect this population, the creation of a dynamic wraparound team with a good balance of informal and formal members, and the availability of resources to meet the priorities set in family plans.

Regardless of the challenges identified, however, all of the participants in the study strongly urged that young homeless parents and their children be allowed to participate in a wraparound process so that they can endeavor to embark on a life of normalcy. This

was poignantly evident in one parent's comment: "If it was not for this [wraparound service], I wouldn't be here right now — I would be back in the dumps."

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SUPERIOR DADS: Celebrating and supporting Northern fathers

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All new parents, both mothers and fathers alike, expect health and social service professionals to provide them with the most current, evidence-based information about parenting. When we develop and share appropriate parenting resources and services with new parents, we can generate confidence in their knowledge and skills, reinforce their strengths, and ultimately foster positive attachments with their children.

Historically, prenatal and parenting classes have focused on the mother's educational needs around preparing for childbirth and adjusting to parenthood. Recognizing that a knowledge gap existed for expectant and new fathers, Algoma Public Health introduced several fatherhood initiatives from 2001-2006. These initiatives included 1) adding a fatherhood component to a prenatal class, 2) integrating a character education program into our community education project for young parents, 3) creating family sessions for partners of women with postpartum mood disorders, and 4) producing two print resources for expectant and new fathers. Funds to hire a male facilitator and to develop these resources were provided by the Early Child Development (ECD) Initiative from the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services.

Prenatal class fatherhood component

The last prenatal class of our series is entitled *After the Birth Day* and examines the topics of early brain development and attachment, the role of fathers, postpartum changes, newborn safety, newborn care, and community resources. After discussing principles of attachment with the whole group, mothers and fathers separated into different groups. The male facilitator met with the fathers and reviewed signs and symptoms of postpartum depression, ways to support the mother, and how to be an involved father. At the same time, the public health nurse met with the mothers to discuss physical and emotional changes

during the postpartum period. Afterward, everyone reconvened to discuss the remaining topics. Evaluations completed by the male participants indicated that the fathers-only component of the prenatal class was helpful and worthwhile.

Engaging young parents

Young Parents Connection is a unique collaborative education and support initiative targeting parents ages 21 and under. It was piloted in 2006 and evolved when numerous service providers expressed similar challenges around engaging young parents in prenatal and parenting programs. This initiative is led by Algoma Public Health and the Ontario Works Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) Program and is supported by community partners such as the YMCA, Canadian Red Cross Society, Ontario Early Years Centre, The Pregnancy Centre, Sault College, Algoma Family Services, Children's Aid Society and the public library, among others. Once a week, young parents meet at the YMCA to enjoy a free supper break for themselves and their children. Parents then attend a one-hour session on prenatal, postnatal, toddler parenting, or fatherhood, or partake in a Community Kitchen. Every four to six weeks, a guest speaker addresses the entire group about a particular topic. Afterward, they are encouraged to use the YMCA facilities for a workout, to participate in an organized sport in the gym, or to swim with their child. Participants in the LEAP Program benefit from free transportation home and other incentives, including subsidized YMCA memberships. The male facilitator implemented the Father Involvement—Building Our Children's Character Program (FI-BOCC) with these young fathers and received encouraging feedback from this high risk group. He was surprised that participants attended regularly and willingly disclosed personal information about their life experiences and thoughts on fatherhood and parenting.