Florida State University Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy’s Young Parents Project (YPP) is an intensive, gender-specific home visiting program that addresses the complex needs of court-involved pregnant and parenting teens and their young children. The project is unique, as there are no other programs in the state that target this population of female youth. It addresses the right to parent with support, safety, and dignity.

Working with Court-Involved Young Families

Young mothers involved in the juvenile court system must be considered within the context of broader social problems and injustices. Their histories of both risk and resilience are deeply embedded in under-resourced communities. Most often, they have grown up in poverty, witnessed family and community violence, and experienced sexual abuse and complex trauma. The obstacles faced impact the possibility of re-offending and their ability to safely protect and nurture their children.

Of the 99 young mothers who participated in the FSU Young Parents Project during 2016, 31% had been victimized by sex trafficking. Twenty-four of the 99 mothers were in the custody of the Department of Children and Families. Of this group, 19 or 79% have experienced commercial sexual exploitation as children.

Because of their extensive trauma histories, these young parents are often difficult to engage and have not been successful with traditional types of programs. The high prevalence of complex trauma impedes not only the teens’ ability to make positive life choices for themselves, but also impacts the relationships they have with their children. These young mothers who “have so little and need so much” are often invisible to the court and the community in which they live.

The commitment of the court has proven invaluable to the success of the FSU Young Parents Project. Referrals for the teens are initiated through juvenile court judges, community service providers and Juvenile Probation Officers. The current criteria for project participation include youth who: have entered the delinquency and/or dependency system; are pregnant and/or parenting (ages 13-19 at the time of intake) and have custody or visitation privileges with their child.

The FSU Young Parents Project is adapted from Yale University’s evidence-based model called Minding the Baby®. It is based on a reflective practice parenting approach designed to address trauma, promote the attachment relationship between the teen and her baby, and support both their physical and mental health needs. The model uses an interdisciplinary team of highly skilled professionals to provide home visiting services to young mothers:

- the Social Worker addresses the family’s concrete needs and provides court-related advocacy;
- the Nurse Educator targets health, family planning and the development of the teen and baby;
- and the Infant Mental Health Specialist promotes the mom/baby relationship with a trauma-focused lens.

The project also provides extensive support to multi-system youth who are served by both the Department of Juvenile Justice and the dependency system. In 2016, 25% of project participants were identified as crossover youth. YPP’s home visitors are persistent in their efforts to connect with these teens who desperately need guidance and support. Trauma-informed weekly visits and program activities are designed to support the teen’s ability to “hold others in mind” as they begin to reflect on their own growth as a new parent.
Multiple Risks

The demographic data below was collected about the 99 teen mothers who participated in the FSU Young Parents Project in Miami and Tallahassee during 2016. The data was collected at intake through interviews with the teens and clearly reveals a population that has multiple risk factors.

- Out of 95 respondents, 66% reported having anywhere from one to more than six prior arrests; 13% of the teens have extensive histories with five or more prior arrests; of the most recent arrests, 56% consisted of higher-level crimes such as aggravated assault, battery, grand theft, burglary/larceny. The average age of first arrest was 14 years.
- Out of 99 participants, 59% reported they had been involved with the child welfare system at some point in their lives.
- 40% of the teens were not enrolled in school.
- Only four (9%) of the young mothers were receiving traditional home visiting services such as Healthy Start or Healthy Families.

Promising Outcomes

🌟 **Outcome: Reduced recidivism**

Of the 99 teens, only two (2) were re-arrested during their time in the project, with charges for one subsequently dropped. Efforts to reduce recidivism require attention to the challenging circumstances faced by delinquent youth and services that can specifically address their needs.

🌟 **Outcome: Reduced number of subsequent births**

None of the young mothers (0) had subsequent pregnancies or births. National data indicates that 25% of teen parents will have a second child within 24 months of their first baby (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002).

🌟 **Outcome: Increased number of youth continuing their education**

There are multiple barriers to enrolling teen mothers in an educational program. The majority of participants are not at appropriate grade level, and often are more than one grade level behind. Of the 74 program participants in Miami-Dade County, school enrollment increased from 59% to 80% after 3 months in the project. In Circuit 2 with most participants from Leon County, school enrollment only increased from 52% to 60% after 3 months. While unique systemic barriers are faced in each location, the FSU Young Parents Project strives to support the parenting student’s academic progress.

FSU Young Parents Project data illustrates that the Minding the Baby® relationship-based intervention is key to reducing recidivism, preventing subsequent pregnancies, maintaining school enrollment, and enhancing the parent/child relationship. The project is an investment in the future of some of the most at-risk youth and aims to address systemic barriers and the intergenerational cycle of teen parenting, trauma, violence, and involvement with the courts. YPP can transform the lives of these young mothers and children through supportive relationships, advocacy and parenting support, and providing the trauma-informed intervention necessary to promote healthier, happier young families.

“I am a mother now. I have to finish school. I have to stay out of trouble. I have to be a role model. She is the reason I get up in the morning.” —YPP Mom