Evaluation Report
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South Australian Community Health Research Unit
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Talking Realities is a joint initiative between the Commonwealth Department of Family & Community Services, Parenting SA and Adelaide Central Community Health Service
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About the SA Community Health Research Unit

SACHRU provides advice on research and evaluation to a range of groups including community health services, community organisations and primary health care projects. In addition the Unit conducts research and evaluation projects that are either funded from its core budget from the Department of Human Services, or from external sources. SACHRU runs training seminars on topics such as Needs Assessment, Program Planning, Questionnaire Design, Report Writing and Evaluation. Other activities include writing peer reviewed articles, and disseminating information to the community through publication.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>CAMHS</td>
<td>Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHS</td>
<td>Community Health Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>COPE</td>
<td>Centre of Personal Education</td>
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<td>CYH</td>
<td>Child and Youth Health</td>
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<td>DECS</td>
<td>Department of Education and Children's Services</td>
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<td>DETE</td>
<td>Department of Education, Training and Employment</td>
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<td>DHS</td>
<td>Department of Human Services</td>
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<td>DMIT</td>
<td>Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology</td>
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<td>FaCS</td>
<td>Family and Community Services</td>
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<td>FAYS</td>
<td>Family and Youth Services</td>
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<td>SACHRU</td>
<td>South Australian Community Health Research Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHine SA</td>
<td>Sexual Health Information, Networking and Education SA</td>
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<td>STI</td>
<td>Sexually Transmitted Infection</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education</td>
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Executive Summary

The Talking Realities project employs young parent peer educators to present a program to students and other young people with the aim of increasing their capacity to make informed choices regarding parenting and health. The program's content is designed to create a realistic awareness of the potential short and long-term consequences of pregnancy and parenthood for male and female adolescents. It challenges young people's attitudes and beliefs about pregnancy and parenthood and the consequences that occur for young parents. The presentation focuses on all aspects of the responsibilities of young parenting (i.e. change in lifestyles, financial and educational implications, children's developmental needs, housing issues and sexual health). The content highlights the emotional and social consequences of young parenting as well as children's needs and responsibilities in children's development.

Since 2001, the Talking Realities program has been presented 176 times at 115 sites. The sites include metropolitan, rural & remote schools, TAFE, education training centres & FAYS client groups, other young parent programs, human service providers and conferences. The presentations have been seen by around 5,600 students, other young people and service providers.

Students and young people

Findings show that over 97% of surveyed students learnt 'heaps' or 'some' about the responsibilities of being a young parent. Qualitative responses focused on caring for and loving the child, putting the child's needs first and careful budgeting. About two-thirds of students reported learning 'heaps' or 'some' about services and places to go for information about parenting. Older students in particular demonstrated most understanding of the impact on the young parents in terms of loss of educational opportunities, social life and time and money to spend on oneself.

Sixty-four teachers (74%) indicated strong support for the program in terms of the perceived benefits for students, with all remaining teachers agreeing that the program is beneficial for students. Teachers perceive that the 'lifestyles' and 'cost of living' topics have the greatest impact on students, in terms of challenging some of the misconceptions and conveying the realities of parenting at a young age. Almost all surveyed teachers (89%) indicated they would recommend the program return the following year. The remaining nine teachers commented that they would recommend that the program return every second year. All interviewed teachers agreed that Talking Realities fulfils a need in school and youth services. It reinforces and extends other curriculum topics in a realistic way that teachers are not able to do.

Peer educators

Another major aspect of the Talking Realities program is to provide opportunities for young parents to develop skills and knowledge in parenting, child development, community resources, sexual health and life skills and to increase self-esteem and positive decision-making. The program logic suggests that enhancing the capacity of
young mothers to participate more fully in education, employment and civil life will have positive benefits for the young parents and for their children.

Most stakeholders discussed the huge impact on the peer educators in terms of their increased confidence and personal development. Many of the peer educators had moved from being vulnerable and ‘at risk’ to confident and assertive young women who were able to take control of their lives and contribute to society. The positive impact on the peer educators was believed to flow on to their children.

Stakeholders were very positive about the quality of the training and the accreditation process. They commented that many of the peer educators had gone on to further education or employment.

Most stakeholders discussed the opportunities to broaden the program to other population groups (for example, young men, Aboriginal communities, care providers) or geographic areas (for example, the wider metropolitan area, regional South Australia, state-wide, interstate).

The peer educators themselves identified similar benefits in increased self-esteem and confidence. They believed the support they received from the program and their peers had enabled them to construct new lives, sometimes escaping from an environment of violence or drug abuse. The peer educators also valued the opportunities to further their education and gain formal credit for the work they were doing on the Talking Realities program. Most of the peer educators have been successful in gaining access to further education, employment or other activities.

The peer educators assert that their children have benefited from the increased parenting skills and social inclusion of their young parents and by the developmental opportunities provided by access to good quality child care.

Significant achievements nominated by program staff included: increased well-being of peer educators, development of the pathway model, networking and production of resources that are replicable in the development of new programs.

Program staff stressed the years of development that have now gone into producing the very positive outcomes from Talking Realities and that there is no other similar service for young parents. The program breaks the stereotype of young parents and provides training and support in a non-judgemental way. For many young parents this program offers a sense of hope for the future. It provides an appropriate way back into education and participation in community life.

**Conclusion**

While it is not realistic to expect the Talking Realities program to have a measurable impact on the number of teenage pregnancies, the project aims to increase young peoples’ knowledge and awareness of the issues facing young parents and the
responsibilities that go with having a child. The peer educators demonstrate the real issues facing young parents and help to dispel the notion that having a baby is all fun.

The program has successfully increased young peoples' understanding about the responsibility of parenting. The peer educators have made significant gains in social, psychological, educational and vocational domains. Moreover, they are quick to identify the gains for their children from their enhanced parenting skills and the increased sense of social connectedness and the greater optimism with which they now view the future.

Peer education is increasingly being used as a health promotion strategy as the evidence base for this approach is strengthened. This unique approach to recruit, support and then train teenage parents to present to their peers in their own language, on all aspects of being a teenage parent, is highly valued by students and their teachers and has continued to develop and flourish in a less than ideal funding environment.

Health promotion programs such as Talking Realities face huge barriers. Funding is insecure and subject to the priorities of funders rather than the community. Even when resources have been dedicated to evaluation, as in this case, the results are seldom given much weight in decision making processes. Long term planning and commitment to the community is difficult under these circumstances.

The evaluation of the Talking Realities project has adopted a collaborative action research approach that embodies a continual process of planning, action and reflection. By necessity, the evaluation has focussed on process and short term outcomes for students and peer educators. Some of the learning that has occurred during the project includes the recognition that the life course outcomes for the peer educators and their children should be researched and documented. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the program has a life-changing impact on the young parents who undertake the peer education training and that this has cumulative benefits for their children. To this end, funding is needed to undertake research that has a specific focus on the medium and longer-term outcomes for young parents who participate in the Talking Realities program, and their children.