



## Introduction

**yourtown's** mission is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life. To this end, we deliver a range of face-to-face, telephone and online services to support their needs, including services tailored to specifically support young parents and families. Through this frontline service delivery experience, we have developed rich insight in the challenges young parents face in parenthood, as well as in effective ways to help support young parents and their children.

New parents find parenthood both exciting and daunting, and for many, it is both one of the hardest and most rewarding things they will do in life. For young parents, and in particular for teenage parents, parenthood often presents a range of different and complex challenges compared to those experienced of older parents. These include challenges relating specifically to their age and inexperience, and to higher correlations between young parenthood and a range of complex and often interrelated issues, such as deep and persistent disadvantage.

In view of these challenges - and importantly, whilst acknowledging their own unique parenting strengths - young parents represent a highly disadvantaged group of parents whose experience of parenthood is more likely to be more testing. The support of family, friends, the broader community and a host of diverse services is invaluable to raising happy and healthy children, but for a number of reasons, young parents are often unable to access these support networks.

To overcome the diverse, complex challenges that they face, young parents need and benefit from support services designed to meet their specific needs so they too can positively experience parenthood. Indeed, through working with young parents and their children, we see firsthand the considerable value in delivering tailored, timely and accessible support services not only to adolescent and young parents, but also to their children and babies.

Given the need for more services to support young parents, we strongly welcome this Inquiry, and in our submission, we share the experiences we have gained in delivering services to young parents and their children to help inform this important work.

## About yourtown

Established in 1961, **yourtown** (formally BoysTown) is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of young people.

**yourtown** has extensive experience in working with parents and their children, and delivers the following services to help support their needs:

- Young parent programs that offer support and develop a range of skills with families, connecting them with the community through case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children. These include:
  - **Glugor Young Parents Program** – based just north of Brisbane, Glugor supports local young parents under 25 years and their pre-school aged children (0-5). The local area is the thirteenth most highly disadvantaged metropolitan area in Australia and has a higher proportion of children and young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living there.
  - **Penrose Young Parents Programs** – based in Port Pirie, a small, regional town north of Adelaide, Penrose delivers a program for young pregnant women and young parents and carers aged up to 25 years with pre-school aged children up to 5 years of age. In addition, the Early Intervention Care Plus Program is delivered, which targets families with children predominantly aged 0-12 years, and up to 18 years. The local area is the fifth most highly disadvantaged regional and remote area in Australia and has a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living there.
- Accommodation responses to young families with children who experience homelessness and women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence including:
  - **San Miguel Family Centre** – set in the outskirts of **Sydney**, San Miguel offers short term and transitional accommodation to help young families experiencing homelessness. Residents are respected as tenants and are encouraged to participate in a range of additional supports offered on site and through referral to relevant agencies.
- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and online counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues.
- Parentline, a telephone counselling service for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory.
- Parents Next – based in Elizabeth, South Australia, this program works with parents who receive Parenting Payments to help them transition into the workforce.
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to family violence.
- Employment programs and social enterprises, which support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment.

## yourtown submission

In our submission, we respond to areas of the Committee's Inquiry in the following order: specific areas of disadvantage or challenge, the adequacy of current services and structures for new parents, and changes to current services and structures for new parents. Our focus throughout our submission is on the needs and preferences of young parents and the barriers they encounter in accessing services.

### Specific areas of disadvantage or challenge for young parents:

Parenthood often presents a range of different and more complex challenges for young parents than it does for older parents. These challenges relate specifically to their age such as their developmental maturity, lack of life experience and parenting knowledge, less stable financial situation, the social stigma associated with young parenting and resulting social isolation.<sup>1</sup> They also relate to the high correlations between young parenthood and a range of complex, persistent and often interrelated issues such as intergenerational deprivation, low educational attainment and learning difficulties, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, partner abuse, abuse in early life and family history of young pregnancy.<sup>2</sup>

From our research with **yourtown** practitioners who deliver a range of different services to young parents, we have identified the following issues - frequently interrelated - that confront young parents who access our services:

- **Family context:** Many young parents have grown up in disadvantaged families or with parents or guardians with a range of issues such as intergenerational deprivation and unemployment, intergenerational teen and young parenting, drug and alcohol use, domestic abuse and insecure housing.
- **Problematic relationships:** **yourtown** clients may experience partner violence or challenging relationship issues. In addition, or alternatively, they may mix with peers with similarly complex backgrounds, who exhibit unhelpful behaviours or are a negative influence on them.
- **Homelessness or insecure housing:** **yourtown** practitioners frequently mentioned our clients' precarious housing situation. For example, clients may have been thrown out by their parents after telling them about their pregnancy, or the relationship may have become strained due to the arrival of the baby, battles over custody or the client's partner's behaviour. With long social housing waiting lists making it difficult for them to find their own accommodation, and for those under 18 unable to sign a rental lease, many clients couch-surf or stay with friends.
- **Mental health issues:** **yourtown** clients present with a range of different mental health issues including low self-esteem and confidence, anxiety and issues stemming from drug and alcohol use, along with clinically diagnosed illnesses including postnatal depression. Moreover, clients' often experience the effects of, and have to manage, their own parents' mental health issues.
- **Social stigma:** Young parents tell us that they feel judged for being a young parent, and have encountered people in the community, including support service staff, making derogatory comments about them, being patronising or assuming that they are irresponsible and unfit for parenthood. Whilst this behaviour is displayed by a small number of our community, it has long lasting damage on young parents, who feel isolated, become more isolated and avoid seeking both formal and informal help in view of this social stigma.
- **Significant financial issues:** Many of our clients need financial assistance to cover basics such as baby equipment and clothing and transport to and from appointments. They find it particularly

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<sup>1</sup> **yourtown's** (2017) *Submission to the National Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into the Impact of Pregnancy and Parenting on Teens and Young People*

<sup>2</sup> Keatinge, D., Fowler, C., & Briggs, C. (2008). *Evaluating the family partnership model (FPM) program and implementation in practice in New South Wales, Australia.*

challenging to find employment – sometimes despite trying hard and being very keen to find work – due to their educational attainment or in view of the cost of childcare. In some cases, young parents have been unable to undertake courses due to the bureaucracy involved in applying for childcare subsidies, with the course finishing by the time they have obtained them.

- **Developmental needs:** Given that they may still be children themselves or given their background and complex needs, our young parents have educational and personal development needs of their own that need to be supported to enable them to develop into healthy and happy adults.
- **Knowledge gaps:** Young parents are often not well equipped with knowledge about parenting. They need to learn basic knowledge about pregnancy, parenting, nutrition and child development, as well as life skills such as cooking and maintaining a home, especially as they may have been brought up in homes by parents who themselves lacked these skills. Given our clients may have more children, to ensure it is through choice, knowledge about contraception is another area that often needs addressing. A number of our clients also have to manage their children's physical and intellectual disabilities, and do not know where to seek help.
- **Parent support services tailored to older parents:** There is a general feeling amongst our clients that antenatal classes, maternity services and parenting support services or networks are not inclusive of them, and instead are designed for older, more 'mainstream' parents.

It is important to note that whilst the young parents we work with share common issues and have many common needs, their specific backgrounds, contexts and challenges are different, and the issues that affect them are multifaceted and overlapping in diverse ways. Therefore, young parents require a highly personalised, client-centred approach - that effectively accommodates their needs as well as recognises and supports their strengths - rather than a one-size-fits-all approach that many mainstream services provide.

### The adequacy of current services and structures for young parents

Research has highlighted that many parents' programs are not only more accessible and attractive to female and male parents who are well-educated, financially secure, and in stable relationships, but are also less appealing and effective for vulnerable and disadvantaged families than community-based and targeted programs.<sup>3 4 5</sup> **yourtown's** experience of working with young parents supports these findings.

Our clients tell us that they often do not seek to access current mainstream parent support services as they feel that they will be judged by staff and other clients because of their age and their lack of experience and knowledge. For example, whilst health services and professionals, and family health nurses in particular, are undoubtedly vital to the parenthood journey, their structures, processes and environments frequently make young parents feel intimidated, alienated and different rather than welcomed, included and as if the service is intended for them.

Young parents sometimes have difficulty in understanding the concepts and terminology used when clinicians tell them about their health or their baby's development, or the care and treatment they need or are receiving. Indeed, sometimes clinical and care staff themselves present with attitudes and behaviour that perpetuate the stigma of being a young parent or young and pregnant, and this exacerbates the unwillingness of our young parents to seek help. In addition, some young parents may have identified their pregnancy extremely late, having not been aware of the link between sexual activity and pregnancy.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Wilson, K. R., Havighurst, S. S., Kehoe, C., & Harley, A. E. (2016). *Dads tuning in to kids: Preliminary evaluation of a fathers' parenting program*. *Family Relations*, 65(4), 535-549.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Wilson, P., Rush, R., Hussey, S., Puckering, C., Sim, F., Allely, C. S., Gillberg, C. (2012). *How evidence-based is an 'evidence-based parenting program'? A PRISMA systematic review and meta-analysis of triple P*. *BMC Medicine*, 10(1), 130-130

<sup>5</sup> Shonkoff, J., & Fisher, P. (2013). *Rethinking evidence-based practice and two-generation programs to create the future of early childhood policy*. *Development and Psychopathology*, 25(4), 1635-1653.

At the same time, our work confirms research findings that demonstrate that when they receive the right support, parents display better parenting skills as well as significant stress reduction, increased confidence, better mental health and better emotional regulation.<sup>6</sup> We also know that these benefits translate into a range of positive outcomes for their children. Children have better familial relationships and long-term education and health outcomes. They also have a lower likelihood of engaging in anti-social and criminal behaviour across their life course and of being subjected to physical and verbal abuse.<sup>7 8</sup> In addition, there are significant benefits for the community, including ending entrenched cycles of disadvantage, which not only have lifelong social and economic costs for the individuals and families involved, but for society more widely.<sup>9</sup>

In the following two sections, we draw from our experience and the approaches we employ in our work with young parents to highlight service principles and approaches that we have found work to successfully support disadvantaged young parents.

### **Changes to current services and structures for young parents**

**yourtown** provides a number of different services designed to support young people including programs and helplines specifically tailored to meet the needs of young parents and their children. Each program or service we have developed is based on a number of evidence-based principles, which effectively meet the needs and preferences of vulnerable young parents.

Below, we set out four key principles that we feel are critical to supporting young parents and would recommend that they be mapped, and if lacking, applied to current services and service structures so as to provide better support to young parents throughout their parenthood journey.

#### **Principle I: Ensure services are easily accessible by young parents**

As young parents may not be willing or able to access mainstream services, it is important to understand the barriers they face and design services to help them overcome them. Appropriate responses or considerations for enhancing the accessibility of current service provision include:

- Developing purpose-built facilities and a welcoming environment for the whole family including young parents – both mum and dad - and their children. Incorporating child-friendly spaces is important so that parents not only can bring their children, overcoming childcare issues, but also so that their children can receive the support they require at the same time.
- Providing options for anonymous and confidential help-seeking so parents can effectively overcome the fear of being judged. This can be through delivering services online or by telephone.
- Delivering outreach services so young parents can receive support in their own homes, and without feeling concerned for encountering people they may know.
- Building an application or portal service for young parents and pregnant women which holds details of the full range of services that they can access in their local area.

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<sup>6</sup> Porzig-Drummond, R., Stevenson, R., & Stevenson, C. (2014). *The 1-2-3 magic parenting program and its effect on child problem behaviors and dysfunctional parenting: A randomized controlled trial*. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 58, 52-64.

<sup>7</sup> Whittaker, K. A., & Cowley, S. (2012). *An effective programme is not enough: A review of factors associated with poor attendance and engagement with parenting support programmes*. *Children & Society*, 26(2), 138-149.

<sup>8</sup> Chen, M., & Chan, K. L. (2016). *Effects of parenting programs on child maltreatment prevention: A meta-analysis*. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 17(1), 88-104.

<sup>9</sup> Whittaker, K. A., & Cowley, S. (2012). *An effective programme is not enough: A review of factors associated with poor attendance and engagement with parenting support programmes*. *Children & Society*, 26(2), 138-149.

- Providing specific services for young parents (e.g. Melbourne Hospital and Redcliffe Hospital have delivered antenatal groups specifically for young parents).
- Delivering integrated services, so that young people do not miss out on important support steps in their parenthood journey, and are not put off by disjointed and complicated services and structures that are difficult to navigate and require them to repeat their stories several times, which may be difficult for them given their complex backgrounds.

#### **Models of support: yourtown helplines**

**yourtown's** Kids Helpline (Australian-wide) and Parentline (Queensland and the Northern Territory) are free, professional and confidential counselling services designed to support the needs of children, and parents respectively. Since their establishment (Kids Helpline in 1991, and Parentline in 1996) they have evolved to adapt to changing technologies and now offer telephone, email and web counselling services, as well as substantial online support resources and tip sheets as well as a referral database.

Kids Helpline (KHL) is a 24/7 counselling and support service for children and young people aged 5-25 years. Parentline's telephone and email service operates between 8am-10pm, seven days a week, with web counselling available from 11am-2pm, Tuesday and Thursday. The different channels through which children and parents and carers can contact **yourtown's** helplines, and the availability of phone, email and web counselling and support ensures that young parents can choose a method of contact that best suits their needs or is available to them. For young parents in rural and remote areas, we know that our helplines increase access to support; providing vital assistance outside of local face-to-face or mainstream service delivery hours. For example, over the past 20 years, nearly 40% of contacts to Parentline were from parents and carers living in rural and remote areas.

#### **Principle 2: Provide for the holistic needs of young parents**

Given the complexity of challenges faced by young parents, services need to consider their holistic needs – and provide wrap-around services that are equipped to manage multiple issues. Holistic service delivery includes:

- Providing early intervention support to optimise the impact of support in terms of equipping parents with the skills and resources in a timely manner and of providing support to their children at key foundational and developmental stages.
- Delivering a wide range of services for young parents to access in a coordinated way including support to develop personal skills and capabilities not just in areas of parenting and child development, and specific child needs (e.g. in learning difficulties) but also in life skills such as budgeting, maintaining home, cooking, shopping and developing healthy and safe relationships and social and peer networks. They also require support to help them develop employment skills, search for work or continue education, psycho-education and emotional wellbeing support, and transport and guidance in relation to accessing services and attending appointments so they can fully understand the processes, information and terminology involved in their care, support and treatment.
- Training staff to deal with the full range of complex and inter-related issues that young parents have, and to be able to uncover information about their background and understand their current situation to work out what services they require. Staff cannot assume any knowledge of the young person and instead provide basic information in a non-judgemental and non-patronising manner. We have found that currently some support staff may not understand the complexity of the challenges and barriers that young parents may face. For example, one of **yourtown's** program participants was banned from accessing another organisation's services as they 'made a scene' as a result of their mental health and parenting issues.

- Facilitating collaborative work and an integrated service support network amongst local service providers so that young parents do not fall through service gaps in critical times of need.

#### **Models of support: yourtown's young parents programs**

**yourtown's** young parent programs – 'Glugor' just north of Brisbane and 'Penrose Port Pirie' north of Adelaide - offer holistic support and help to develop a range of skills with families. Activities that we undertake in these programs include:

- weekly workshops, courses, and activities for parents and children on a wide range of issues including:
  - healthy child-parent relationships, child safety and protection, and child social and emotional development
  - respectful partner relationships and parent self-care
- social, emotional and cognitive skill development activities for children delivered by dedicated skilled workers in early childhood- including our highly specialised expressive therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence and applying the Early Years Learning Framework
- workshops based on theories of attachment and trauma- informed practice
- practical life skills development support e.g. on budgeting, nutrition, hygiene, parenting, employment and training preparation
- appropriate referrals to address the broad range of needs of young parents and children, including child, family, maternal and at time child protection agencies
- opportunities for children to develop socially, emotionally and physically at an appropriate and individual rate
- opportunities for young parents and children to interact in small groups and be exposed to and share their own approaches to responding to young children
- transport to and from our centres given many of our young parents do not have driving licences and/or cars

We also promote community involvement and links to local informal networks e.g. playgroup, school communities, neighbourhood connections so that our young families have wider support networks and do not come to overly rely on one support partner.

In establishing our Penrose program, older first time parents also asked to be included as there is no specific support in the community for their needs.

#### **Principle 3: Identify a dedicated point of continued, coordinated and trusted support for young parents**

We have found that building a trusted relationship with young parents seeking support is critical to effective outcomes. In **yourtown**, we do this in a number of ways, including through:

- Allocating a case manager to the young pregnant woman or parent to provide a consistent contact point, providing wrap-around and coordinated care throughout their interaction with us. The case manager assesses and monitors and reviews the young parent's needs throughout and becomes a trusted source of support for the young person. The case manager also acts as a one-stop shop for the young person, and therefore, it is also important that they have access to information on, and work well with, the full range of referral services as they can help young parents build rapport and learn to trust and access other support services in the local community.
- Providing long-term support, rather than short interventions, to help build trust and to effectively address the complexity of the issues young parents can face. This includes, providing continued

support to the young person – through phone or home visits - as they transition from the service or program to other services or as support is withdrawn/ends.

#### **Models of support: San Miguel Family Centre**

San Miguel offers a holistic and integrated system of practical and emotional support and education for parents aged 25 years or younger, and their children, who are experiencing homelessness. Support services delivered include onsite accommodation, access to legal, employment, training, education and medical support, training in life skills such as budgeting, hygiene, health and parenting, access to housing and tenancy information, transport to attend referral appointments, social integration activities and support, expressive therapies for children and their parents, individual activities for children linked to developmental assessment and support for children's education (e.g. supported playgroups, enrolment and homework club, after school activities, school readiness program for under 4 years old).

To ensure that young families feel able to fully engage with the full range of activities we offer, we build trust through ensuring that every individual's needs are assessed, monitored and reviewed by a dedicated case manager who supports the family's transition from supported housing to independent living. We also deliver a significant number of these activities onsite in an environment within which young families feel safe and comfortable. Case managers will also accompany young parents to external appointments to further ensure that they feel able to access the important services that they need, and so that they have good experiences with these external services so they can build a wider support network and feel able to interact with the wider community when they leave San Miguel.

#### **Principle 4: Identify and work with young parents' individual strengths**

Services and programs designed for young pregnant women and parents should adopt a strengths-based approach. This approach is underpinned by the firm belief that every individual and every family has potential, and it is their experiences and capabilities – not their limitations – that will determine their future and define their journey as individuals and as a family. From our experience, as many young parents are affected by low self-esteem and confidence in particular, supporting them in a way which enables them to identify their strengths and empowers them is critical to them becoming a confident and capable individual and parent. To this end, services should focus on:

- Providing personalised and flexible support that is focused on strengths, skills and self-determination rather than pathology, and recognises every individual's and family's inherent capacity to grow, learn and change.
- Helping young parents to identify their own resources and strengths, and setting high aspirations and expectations for themselves.
- Recognising young parents bring their own expertise and capacities that they can share with their peers (e.g. increased energy and interest in play).

#### **Models of support: Parentline**

In 1995, prior to the creation of Parentline, close to 10% of calls in Queensland to Kids Helpline were from parents and carers asking for help in relation to being a parent. As a result of this demand, **yourtown** established Parentline to provide evidence-based, counselling support to help parents and carers to enrich their parenting strategies and skills by:

- obtaining a better understanding of the way their family works;
- believing in themselves and their own skills and strengths;
- developing strategies for changing how things are done in their family to suit their family's needs.

## Recommendations

In the following section, we summarise some of our key recommendations for delivering effective support services to young parents:

- Employ a highly personalised and integrated service delivery approach – that puts the young person at the centre of the services they need and coordinates holistic support around them
- Ensure the support system, services and staff are tailored to or trained to recognise and manage the complex and interrelated needs of young parents
- Map and apply the following principles to current services and structures for pregnant women and parents:
  - Services are easily accessible by young parents
  - Services provide for the holistic needs of young parents
  - A dedicated point of contact for the young parent provides continued, trusted support
  - The young parents' individual strengths are recognised and used to build their confidence
- Ensure that young parents' views and preferences inform the services and systems that they access both through formal and informal processes
- Invest in a number of different models of support, delivered through many modes, so that young parents are able to find and access services that meet their specific needs and preferences.