

Transitional Homes for Young Street Mothers

JoAnn Ray

Background

Pat was excited about her practicum placement with NewPath, the city's program serving homeless youth. She was especially interested in the problems of youth, and this agency served really troubled kids. NewPath had an excellent reputation in the community, and Pat had heard that she could expect excellent field instruction and supervision.

Pat's first duties were to learn about the kids and their needs by doing intakes. It would give her a chance to really understand the kids and some of their situations. She was also interested in gaining experience conducting a self-help group and perhaps helping develop a new program. Pat's field instructor, Mary, had also suggested that Pat consider completing a small research project. Pat had done well in research, but the idea seemed a little scary. She hoped she could get some help if she had the opportunity to actually carry out a research project of her own. At the end of her first supervisory meeting with Mary, Pat exclaimed, "I'm so excited! I'll be getting some really valuable and challenging experiences here."

Pat learned that the boys and girls at NewPath had multiple needs. These children most often came from conflict-ridden, violent, abusive families. Their schooling was often interrupted. They frequently abused drugs and alcohol and were often involved in illegal activities. Many had lived in a series of unsuccessful foster homes, and life was difficult for them. Mary explained, "These are troubled youngsters. We try our best to meet their basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, and school. We need to do this in ways in which the kids can accept the help we offer."

Engagement

It was the pregnant and parenting young mothers who concerned Pat so deeply. Pat had recently completed an intake with Sandy, who was 15 years old, pregnant, and living wherever she could find a place. She was presently staying in the emergency shelter provided by NewPath. Foster care had not been successful, and Sandy could not return to her own abusive home. Pat agreed to help Sandy get welfare benefits, a place to stay, and medical care. Sandy had many other needs as well, such as schooling, warm clothing, baby things, recreation, and transportation. The list seemed long. Pat wondered whether she could really help Sandy enough.

What concerned Pat even more was that there seemed to be so many young girls like Sandy. This was the third pregnant or mothering street kid she had talked with this week. In one of her supervisory sessions with Mary, Pat brought up her concern.

Pat: We really should be able to do something more for Sandy and the other young mothers too.

Mary: I agree. The young mothers have special needs. We do what we can, and so do some of the other agencies. But their needs are not addressed in a comprehensive manner in the community.

Pat: What can we do?

Mary: You might want to study some of the problems experienced by these young mothers and help us develop a special program for them.

Collecting and Analyzing the Data

Pat was delighted and decided to accept Mary's suggestion that she learn more about the young mothers. Wondering how to get started, she remembered that the first thing to do when planning for a new program is to "define the problem."

Pat: First, I guess we need to review what we know about the young moms. There must be something in the literature about young street mothers.

Mary: That's a good place to start. Any ideas?

Pat: The evaluation report you gave me to read would be useful. Perhaps we could analyze the existing data in the agency files; there must be good records on these kids.

Mary: Pat, it sounds like you have some good leads to pursue. Go ahead and start investigating your ideas. If you need help or more ideas, let me know.

At the next session with Mary, Pat related what she had learned from her investigative work. Her follow-up study indicated that half of the girls who were considered street kids were either pregnant or had a child within two years of their "street status." The Program Evaluation Report on NewPath, which had been completed by Pat's research teacher Sally Smith, compared the needs and problems of boys and girls served by the agency. Girls had higher rates of sexual and physical abuse. They were more apt to be depressed and more likely to have attempted suicide. Pat

really began to appreciate the circumstances of these youngsters, and inside, she felt a deep concern for them. Pat asked her research teacher if it were possible to analyze the intake data of the agency, perhaps to get a reading on the needs of this population. Sally helped Pat generate a printout. The plight of teen mothers looked grim. Girls who were pregnant or mothering at the time of intake indicated higher rates of abuse, suicide attempts, depression, family conflict, and drug use than did non-mothering girls.

In addition to carrying out this secondary analysis, Pat talked with two of the young mothers who were "hanging out" at NewPath. The girls had come for dinner, and Pat, remembering them from the intakes, had asked them whether they would talk with her about their needs. The young mothers were eager to talk. They spoke freely about their needs and noted similar concerns, including needs for housing, medical care, financial help, day care, education, and counseling. Two comments from the young mothers stood out in Pat's mind.

Sandy: I have welfare benefits. But it is not so easy to get along with my caseworker, and it's really hard to find someone who will rent to me. People don't want to rent to kids.

Carrie: There never is enough money, especially for baby things. I don't know who to ask for help.

Pat reflected on her conversation with Sandy and Carrie. These young moms had so many needs and seemed so alone in the world. Both the young moms and their babies were at risk for multiple problems, and they weren't getting services they needed. She brought this up to Mary in another session.

Pat: Why aren't the young moms getting the services they need?

Mary: A number of agencies serve these young mothers, but there is little coordination between agencies. Often the girls slip through the cracks.

Pat: Uh huh, how come?

Mary: And some of the agencies have policies that restrict them from serving adolescents.

Pat: And these kids have had lots of bad experiences with agencies too.

Mary: These street kids do not respond to the usual social work methods. They have learned not to trust through their life experiences, and a social worker must earn trust first by providing concrete help.

Pat: Like providing meals and clothes.

Mary: Right. As I said before, we have to find ways to reach out that these youngsters will accept. Otherwise, we become just another unresponsive agency.

Pat wondered how other social workers viewed the problems and needs of young mothers. She decided to ask them by designing an exploratory study. Pat asked Mary to help her develop an interview schedule and decide

which agency representatives should be interviewed. They decided to interview workers who worked regularly with young mothers and some agency representatives whom they thought should also be providing services.

The list of questions was not long, but the interview would be semistructured, with room for follow-up and clarifying questions. Overall, Pat wanted lots of details. Her interview schedule included:

1. Do you provide services to out-of-home teen mothers? If not, what are the reasons for not providing services?
2. What services do you and your agency provide?
3. What do you see as the needs of the young street mothers?
4. What difficulties do you or your agency experience in providing services to these young mothers? What are the major challenges you face in working with this population?

In the next few weeks, Pat interviewed several workers. There seemed to be agreement that young street mothers were very needy and difficult to reach. They reported that the girls often appeared angry or sullen. They did not keep appointments very often and were almost impossible to locate because of their frequent moves. One worker for a drug and alcohol program stated that her agency could not accept minors. A subsidized rental program had a similar policy. Overall, Pat found out that most agencies did very little for this population, especially since the young mothers appeared to be resistant to their help.

Based on her interviews, Pat concluded that the young mothers and their children were at risk for continued homelessness, drug and alcohol use, abuse by their families, and other social problems. These young women had unique problems that were not being comprehensively addressed by any one agency in the city. She also concluded that there should be a program that provides young mothers with a more comprehensive range of services.

Planning and Intervening

Pat decided to accept her field instructor's invitation and develop a plan for a program for young mothers. She discussed this with Mary at her next meeting.

Pat: How do you think I should proceed?

Mary: You might consider forming a task force composed of people interested in services for young mothers.

Pat: Yeah, I like the idea of a task force. The more input I can get from interested people, the better the program design will be.

Mary: A task force will also share the ownership with the agencies who serve these young mothers.

Pat: Who should be on the task force?

Mary: Which of the agency representatives you interviewed appeared to be most helpful or concerned?

Pat: I'll have to review my notes, but I think I can identify a few who would be committed to the purpose of the group.

Mary: Actually, the idea of group purpose is about the most important consideration you need to make. You probably need to formulate a brief but clear statement of the purpose for the group before you start to consider composing it.

Pat: It sounds like you think I need to be more thoughtful about planning for the group before I rush in without thinking.

Mary: No need to be worried; most workers don't do enough planning for the groups they lead. You have a chance here to learn how to do it right. Let me make some suggestions.

Pat: Sounds good. What constitutes a good planning process?

Mary: As I said, it begins with a clear statement of the purpose for the group. If you are not clear about that, the members will be confused. Next, consider the potential membership, but don't forget sponsorship. This means that the group should have some official sponsor, such as NewPath. You will also need to recruit and orient members and give some consideration to how you will compose the group. Finally, don't forget to prepare the meeting environment, you know, room, refreshments, and other things.

Pat: Sounds pretty complicated!

Mary: Doesn't have to be. It all comes together, and planning pays off.

Mary and Pat selected four social workers from agencies that were providing services to the young mothers to be on the task force. Pat also asked Sandy, who was willing to give the viewpoint of the young mothers, to serve on the task force. The Task Force for Out-of-Home Teen Mothers consisted of:

Jennie, a social worker with Children and Family Services,

Mike, a social worker with the public schools,

Cindy, a social worker with the Health Department,

Lisa, a social worker with Family Counseling Services,

Sandy, a client from NewPath, and

Mary and Pat, social workers from NewPath.

The task force met for the first time and discussed the purpose for the group. After some preliminary discussions, they reviewed the findings from Pat's research.

Lisa: The statistics sure give a bleak picture of the young mother.

Jennie: But we don't know enough about how these young mothers are surviving on a day-to-day basis.

Cindy: That's true. We don't know what agencies are helping them, or who else is providing them with help.

Lisa: Or even what their unmet needs are.

Mike: I think we need more information before we can design a program to meet their needs.

Pat: Do you think we need to talk with more of the young moms?

Jennie: I think we need to know about how they survive on a day-to-day basis.

Sandy: I've talked with Penni and Vickie—you know, two of the young moms like me—and they said they would like to talk.

Pat: That sounds promising. What else do we need to know?

Cindy: I would like to know about the health problems experienced by the moms and their children.

Mike: Whether they plan to go to school.

Jennie: Who helps them, and how? babysitting? emotional support?

Lisa: What are their relationships with their parents and with the fathers of their kids?

Pat was a little disappointed that she had to go back to do more research. She wanted to get on with the planning. Pat met with her research teacher, Sally, to discuss the design of a new research study. Sally really sounded excited that Pat's study would be responsive to the expressed needs of the task force members, and she reminded Pat that program planning took time. She also mentioned that carrying out additional research based on the suggestions of task force members would add to the cohesion of the task force. In the long run, the research project would get the members of the task force more involved in program planning, and this was important.

Sally: What would you like to learn from your research?

Pat: I've listed the questions mentioned by the members of the task force. Here is my revised list of questions.

Sally: Those are very good questions and can probably best be obtained through qualitative research.

Pat: I think so.

Sally: Do you want to use any quantitative data, perhaps from standardized instruments, too?

Pat: I suppose it might be useful to get some measure of what services they are using, maybe from a list.

Sally: We could also use the Community Services Checklist I developed for this community. How about some objective measure of these young women's levels of depression, or how they feel about being a mother, or the types of stress they encounter?

Pat: Are there—what did you call them—standardized measures of these variables I could use?

Sally: I'll help you locate some.

Pat's questionnaire turned out to be much longer than she had anticipated. It had some really interesting questions designed to obtain qualitative data. These included the following.

1. Who helps you with all you need to be a good mother?
2. Who helps you financially? with emotional support? babysitting? advice?
3. What is a typical day like for you and your child(ren)?

4. How has your alcohol and drug use changed since you became pregnant?
5. How has your relationship with your own mother and father changed since the birth of your baby?
6. What is your relationship with the baby's father? How has your relationship with the baby's father changed?
7. What are your plans for further schooling?
8. What are your hopes and dreams for your baby?

Pat included the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale, selected items from the Kanner Daily Hassles Inventory, and the Community Services Checklist. Sandy was willing to be interviewed for the pretest, and Pat made minor changes to the questionnaire based on what she learned during the pretest interview.

Pat and another student, Theresa, interviewed 25 young mothers. The mothers spoke very freely about their situations and needs, and a great amount of information was developed. Sally helped Pat compile and organize the data and understand the computer printouts that resulted. Pat summarized the qualitative and quantitative data in a report. As she was completing the report, she wondered how to handle a detailed account given by one of the young mothers on how she was trying to survive without welfare benefits.

Sally: Your examples of what the young mothers think and feel really adds richness to your study, Pat.

Pat: I think Penni's situation is especially interesting.

Sally: Is she the young mom who is not on welfare?

Pat: Uh-huh. But I'm afraid that in a city this small, she might be identified based on what she has said. I don't think I can guarantee her anonymity if I quote her statements.

Sally: Yes, the report will be made available to the community.

Pat: Maybe I'd better delete that vignette on how Penni is making it without welfare benefits.

Sally: I agree. We need to respect our clients' confidentiality and privacy. In addition, we guaranteed anonymity

to your respondents, and to violate this would be a serious breach of research ethics. It would also destroy the rapport we all have worked so hard to establish. I'm really glad you picked up on this issue.

The research findings indicated that the young women were very proud and devoted mothers. Most had some parental support, especially from their mothers, and most had friends they could depend on. Only about half of the young women had a relationship with the child's father, and in many cases this was filled with conflict. They were living on welfare, at a poverty level, and lacked money to cover daily needs. Many experienced health problems, as did their children. Most were receiving social services, most often welfare, public health, and emergency services. They experienced a high level of stress, often related to economic, social, health, and personal concerns. Many were depressed, some seriously. They were experiencing the stresses of trying to raise a child at such a young age with limited income and support. All had common goals for their children, including a life better than their own. Most wanted to complete school or a training program so they could become independent.

The task force thought Pat's research was extremely helpful in identifying the needs and wants of the young mothers. They spent a good deal of time reviewing the findings and discussing what they could do about them.

Pat: What kinds of services do the needs of these mothers suggest?

Sandy: I seem to be very much like the other young moms. I need housing especially and help with my child, more money, and training. I want to think about my future and the future of my baby. But I'm also caught up in daily survival issues.

Mike: Let's diagram the needs of the young teen mother.

The group developed a map of the factors affecting the typical street kid mother. (See Figure 4.)

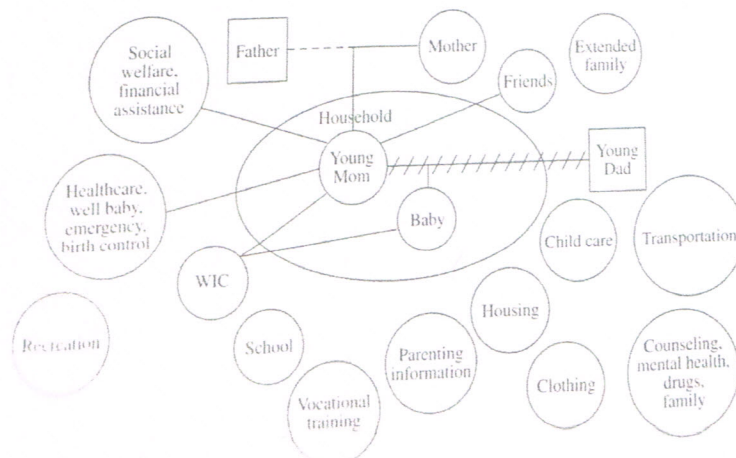


Figure 4

Intervening and Ending

The task force settled quickly on the need for designing a comprehensive program for the young mothers. They would plan to provide a transition living situation supervised by a social worker. The transition home would provide six young mothers with a place to live while they improved their own independent living skills. There would be classes on parenting, communication skills, job readiness, and self-esteem building. Day care would be offered. Pat and Mary wrote a grant for federal funding for the project. The data from the intakes at NewPath were useful in establishing the need for the program.

Federal funding was obtained after a rewrite of the grant request. The funding source was especially impressed with the research needs assessment that supported the proposal. Nancy, a local newspaper reporter, heard about Pats research and the grant that Mary and Pat had written. The newspaper article suggested that interested citizens could help with the project through donations. Mary and Pat made several presentations, and two church groups decided to help furnish the NewPath Transitional Home. Pat completed her Practicum, and, once the proposal was funded, she accepted the position of social worker for the transition home.

Answer the following three questions: Minimum of 2 paragraphs each.

What social work roles besides researcher, did Pat play in the Vignette?

Based on your knowledge of human behavior, what kinds of needs would you expect most pregnant homeless teens and homeless teens with babies have?

If you were designing a program to serve this population, what kinds of services would you provide? Would your services be available for free, at a low cost, or paid for fully by the users? Explain your answer. (I would like my answer to be free)