

Title: A child abuse prevention strategy: Supporting pregnant teenage moms

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Abstract:

In marginalized communities across South Africa, accessing education is already fraught with challenges, and the likelihood of children staying in school has worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic (World Vision, 2021). This is especially true for girls, who are facing an increased risk of not completing their education following the rise in teenage pregnancies that occurred during 2020 and 2021 school closures. Although South Africa has many well developed programmes, widespread access to contraceptive services, and exceptionally liberal abortion legislation, it is unfortunate that social norms, stigmatisation and other practices create barriers that ultimately result in pregnancy being an end to education (Sefoka et. al, 2021). Teenage pregnancies that are unwanted and prevent girls from completing school in marginalized communities affected by poverty, together constitute a devastating combination of factors for babies' and children's risk of abuse and murder in South Africa (Abrahams et. al, 2016). Reducing the incidence of teenage pregnancy, as well as the impact it has on young girls, their children and their communities is a critical public health issue, especially in light of the estimated 65% increase in teen pregnancies across sub-Saharan Africa following the Covid-19 school closures (UNICEF, 2021).

Teddy Bear Foundation has designed and piloted a sexual and reproductive health programme that incorporates family planning education and school-based support services as an approach to intervention and long-term prevention. The long-term goal of the programme is to contribute towards breaking the cycle of child abuse that is exacerbated when teenage girls have unwanted pregnancies, receive inadequate support services and are unable to complete their schooling.

An overall strength of the programme is its recognition of the value of an inclusive whole school approach to preventing teenage pregnancy and supporting teen moms. However, a glaring weakness is in the extent of specialized resources required to implement the programme, and the resulting challenge of developing a sustainable model for scaling. This presentation provides a descriptive account of the programme, as well as some preliminary findings on the impact it has had on the young people, families and schools where it has been piloted. It also presents a critical discussion of the implications for practice and scaling, highlighting the importance of a robust monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.

Key words: Teenage pregnancy, child abuse, prevention