

Guiding teen mothers at the intersection



of adolescence and parenthood

ANY PREGNANCY can present a moment of transition in a woman's life. But when that woman is a teen, the decision to have a baby and prepare to care for a child, along with the changes this will bring can be very difficult to navigate. Besides all the hormonal and physical changes, there are the many relationship changes that accompany becoming a teen parent. "What will my family and friends think? What is my future going to be like, will I be able to graduate from high school? How will I support myself and the baby?" All these questions can merge and overwhelm.

This is where YSN's Dr. Lois Sadler's work teaching both pregnancy prevention and parent education classes to inner city teens can make a difference.

Twin aspects of Dr. Sadler's clinical work are preventing primary pregnancy in teens and working with teen mothers after they have their babies. In addition, another focus of her clinical work with young mothers is preventing subsequent pregnancy. According to Dr. Sadler, "Focused, comprehensive care is key with this population, because teen mothers are experiencing unique developmental issues that emerge when two critical periods in life—adolescence and new parenthood—occur simultaneously."

Since 1979, Dr. Sadler has worked with teen parents in New Haven and currently teaches parent education classes to student-parents enrolled in the Polly T. McCabe Center, a transitional school for pregnant students in grades eight through twelve in the New Haven Public School district. The curriculum at McCabe covers nutrition, childbirth and parenting. Students are assigned a flexible schedule to keep them on track to graduate while balancing the responsibilities of motherhood.

"The goal is to keep these teens in school, moving along on a normal adolescent trajectory, because the research has documented that if they can be supported at this transitional time, teen mothers do much better through their lives—and so do their children," explains Dr. Sadler.

Ann Cowlin, an on-site childbirth educator at McCabe, agrees. Her work providing creative physical activity in combination with the parent education that Dr. Sadler presents to expectant teen mothers, helps to reinforce parenting skills, healthy coping behavior and recovery from childbirth. "There is evidence that healthy mothers have fit babies and fit moms avoid delivery complications, such as pre-eclampsia," she says. Ann explains how the McCabe Center approaches instruction for its students,

"We help to build self-efficacy skills in these teens. We also take into account ethnic background and work on self esteem issues these teens may have."

Dr. Sadler explains the link between her research on teen mothers and how these insights have influenced the development of the curriculum tailored to the complex needs of the student-mothers. "Due to the cognitive developmental stage typical of teenagers, we have found that teen mothers are best able to learn when we present topics that are immediate issues for them, as well as using examples from student mothers with older infants," she says. These discussions, along with role playing and exercises that focus on problem solving, help students navigate the bridge between experience and insight that they can then use to plan for future events in their lives and anticipate the needs of their children.

Dr. Sadler also teaches masters and doctoral nursing students at YSN in the areas of family studies, child development, pediatric health promotion, research, and adolescent primary care. Her background as a clinician and scholar enables Dr. Sadler to engage nursing students by sharing with them real-life experiences from her practice and from her scholarly work.

Dr. Sadler's research has focused on the transition to parenthood among urban adolescent mothers and their families, adolescent pregnancy prevention, and evaluation of specialized support programs for adolescent parents. Currently, she is collaborating with colleagues at the Fair Haven Community Health Center and with Drs. Arietta Slade and Linda Mayes from the Yale Child Study Center on a study, funded by the Irving B. Harris Foundation and the NIH, *Minding the Baby: Home Visiting for Teen Mothers*. She has just completed a study funded by the Patrick and Catherine Weldon Donaghue Foundation on *Clinical Care of Adolescents with Negative Pregnancy Test Results*.

She has also recently completed a number of studies centered on her work at McCabe and the parent support program of the Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven, including *Care of Adolescent Mothers and Their Children through High-School Based Child Care*, and *Ambivalent Grandmothers Raising Teen Daughters and Their Babies*, as well as *Combining Parent Education with Creative Physical Activity*, co-authored with Ann Cowlin. Dr. Sadler's recent scholarship also includes co-authoring a manual for the clinical care of sexually active adolescent women, entitled *Teen C.A.R.E.* (see box, page 23).

Dr. Sadler's research, in turn, has helped to inform her practice and to improve care for pregnant teens and teen mothers. "At the Yale School of Nursing, scholarship is energized by the interchange between practice and knowledge, based on the belief that theory develops from practice and then, in turn, influences it," explains Dr. Sadler. "This is very true of my own practice and scholarship."

Dr. Sadler's research work, combined with her practice in the community, ends up having a net social effect, as a steady stream of young women emerge from the McCabe Center prepared to make educated choices about their lives and empowered to take responsibility and control for themselves. She says, "My work is about helping young mothers succeed in their own life courses and become nurturing and competent parents."

The bond of sisterhood



The Connecting Sisters project hosted a conference this past November at YSN, consisting of a keynote address, panel discussion and breakout sessions (above). According to Dr. Knobf (right), the conference was designed to bring African American breast cancer survivors and key stakeholder groups together to share knowledge gained from survivors within the community.



Each year, about 200 women of African descent in Connecticut have a common experience; they are diagnosed with breast cancer, according to YSN Associate Professor Tish Knobf. But once that diagnosis is made, each of these women may feel alone in the experience of breast cancer treatment, as they join support groups only to find few other black women at their side. As Dr. Knobf explains, that's because even though breast cancer occurs at the same rate in blacks and whites, as a result of overall demographics, the overwhelming majority of breast cancer diagnoses occur in white women.

Dr. Knobf is Principal Investigator of an ongoing research study that seeks to develop an academic-community partnership to address the unique needs of this group of women in Connecticut. The project is titled "Connecting Sisters: Women of Color with Breast Cancer" and is funded by the Yale-Howard Partnership Center to Eliminate Health Disparities (see box).

Dr. Knobf describes examples of concerns that are distinctive to this community of breast cancer survivors, such as the need for appropriate wigs and special consideration for the effects of radiation therapy on dark skin, as well as ways that ethnic dietary preferences can be taken into account by oncology providers.

The Connecting Sisters project is based on the philosophy of Participative Inquiry, which helps groups explore problems from their perspective, produce knowledge directly useful to the group, empower them in the use of the knowledge and generate ideas to manage or resolve problems. As the initial project focus groups were formed, relationships with existing support groups were forged, such as with the Hartford area's Witness Project, which had already brought together members of one church community who were breast cancer survivors to help spread the word and influence others to seek cancer screenings.

According to Dr. Knobf, focus group participants talked of a "bond of sisterhood"

in describing the cultural connection of black women who often times attend church together and have similar life experiences and viewpoints. As a result of these initial statements by participants she says, "We saw the importance of providing resources and mechanisms to connect black women, so they could provide support to each other in ways that would be culturally sensitive and more meaningful to them as black women."

Dr. Knobf says, "As information and resources for breast cancer specific to women of color become more known and available, this knowledge will be shared with families—sisters, daughters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts and cousins—and with all women of color to better serve their unique needs as they fight breast cancer."

Additional Partnership Center Studies

In 2002, YSN and Howard University's Division of Nursing launched the Yale-Howard Partnership Center on Reducing Health Disparities. The Center is funded for 5 years, and builds on the collaborative work of YSN and Howard faculty. In addition to the Connecting Sisters project featured here, the following pilot studies are described further on our website at <http://nursing.yale.edu/Centers/YHP/Research/>:

- Menopause and Midlife Health Risks: Black Women's Views
- Colorectal Cancer Self-Management in African Americans
- Diversity, Poverty Initiative Title Management of Severe Asthma
- Self Management in African American Women with Diabetes
- Locus of Control and Factors that Influence African American Women's Breast Cancer Experience
- Preparing At-Risk Youth for Success (PAYS)
- Nursing's Impact on the Quality of Life Outcomes in Minority Family Caregivers
- Successful Aging with Sickle Cell Disease