Partnership Approaches that Put Children and Families at the Centre: Engaging Young Parents Through Autonomy-Supportive Practice

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OPEN Symposium

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Our Objectives for the session

- Understand stigma as a barrier to young parents' engagement
- Explore Brave Foundation's Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program – which is a 12-month, national mentoring program for young parents
- Define practices that support autonomy and relationship building
- Identify cross-sector collaboration strategies for holistic support

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‘Adultism’ & The Engagement Barrier

- Stigma around young parenthood undermines confidence and trust
- Young parents often feel judged or unheard by professionals
- Adultism attitudes reduce young parents to their deficits, dismiss their expertise, and centre adult control
- Traditional service models can unintentionally reinforce power imbalances
- Engagement drops off when autonomy and strengths are not leveraged

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Brave's Flagship SEPT Program

- We provide support for expecting and parenting young people up to 25 years
- We are embedded within health, education, housing, and community service networks
- We offer one-to-one mentoring, group workshops, and service navigation
- Our practices are grounded in relational approaches and cultural safety principles

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SEPT Model of Mentoring: Foundations of Practice

Ethical Practice for Working with Young People

These principles are based on human rights and promoting the voice of our young parents to ensure best possible outcomes for them and their families.

- Empowerment
- Participation
- Safety
- Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation
- Anti-Oppressive Practice
- Connectedness

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Empowerment

- Mentors prioritise the interests, hopes and wishes of the young people they work with.
- Mentors use their skills to be curious and explore these hopes in establishing goals for their work, and to building capacity with young people to be self-determining and empowered in making their own decisions and choices.
- Mentors use strength-based approaches founded in a positive youth development perspective, whereby mentoring provides a resource in promoting inner resourcefulness and developmental assets.

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Participation

- Brave's Model of Participation outlines our commitment to working in partnership with young people, learning from the experience, views, opinions, and perspectives of those engaged with our services to better inform our decisions about service design and delivery.

- A core part of this is our Empowering the Voice of Young Parents (Lived Experience) Advisory Group. Which meets monthly and provides advice and innovation ideas to our team.

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Safety

- All Brave mentors are open and honest in their communication with young people, ensuring that they are involved in all aspects of their program and any decisions being made about them.

- Brave mentors maintain clear boundaries, acting with integrity and adhering to practice responsibilities within their profession.

- Mentors understand and ensure that the privacy and confidentiality of young people is respected and protected according to legal obligations.

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Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation

- Mentors reflect on and are aware of their own personal beliefs and biases, and challenge themselves to ensure that all young people, regardless of race, gender, religion, ability, identity, have the right to be treated fairly and with respect.

- Mentors recognise the importance of their own self-care and sense of control over their own behaviours, feelings, and responses.

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Anti-Oppressive Practice

- Brave recognises the structural and systemic disadvantage often experienced by young people.

- Mentors ensure equality of access to our services, and respect and encourage young people in their own choices, cultural backgrounds, and identities.

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Connectedness

- Brave's mentors support young people to build positive connections with other people, community, and services. This is an important developmental task for young people.

- These bonds create a sense of belonging and increase the potential for community participation, including with schools, work, and other support organisations.

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Model of Mentoring as a Relational Bridge

- Mentor role: ally, advocate, system navigator
- Weekly one-to-one meetings focused on goals defined by the young parent
- Coordination with other service providers to align supports
- Continuous reflection on power dynamics and partnership quality
- Mentors guide young parents through referrals, eligibility, appointments
- Role-play exercises building confidence in professional interactions
- Advocacy for young parents' voices in case conferences and planning meetings

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Cross-Sector Collaboration

- Co-design pathway plans with young parents that align with schools, maternal child health, housing agencies, youth services goals
- Regular inter-agency meetings to review cases and share insights
- Co-location of mentoring sessions with partner sites
- Information sharing (with consent) to reduce retelling of story

Promoting young parent voices & Advocacy

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PARTICIPANT JOURNEY MAP

Adultism Attitudes to Watch Out for:

attitudes to avoid and watch for that lean into Adultism

- **Deficit framing** — assuming young parents lack skills or insight
- **Tokenistic involvement** — involvement that looks participatory but keeps decision power with adults
- **Overprotection** — limiting choices "for their own good" rather than offering supported options
- **Gatekeeping expertise** — privileging professional knowledge over lived experience

"…people are unwilling to believe us to be honest. There's the belief that teen mums are reckless & stupid…"

"…like people won't allow me to work with them because I am young."

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Antidotes to Adultism: Autonomy Supportive Practices

- **Non-judgemental listening** and validation of lived experience
- **Co-creating** goals and action plans with young parents
- Encouraging **choice** and **agency** at every step
- Balancing **guidance** with **respect** for parents' decision-making

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9EHOBrw4MQ

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