

ABSTRACT

Since 1989 two Saint Paul, Minnesota agencies have carried on a collaborative effort called the Befriender Volunteer Project. This project is designed to address the risk factors associated with child abuse which are often inherent in families headed by an adolescent.

Between November of 1993 and October of 1994 a self-study of this project was conducted. An important objective of this study was to determine how the positive elements of a successful relationship affected the risk factors in these young families. Consistent with what we know about the effects of successful helping relationships, most significant improvements in young mothers were found in the areas of hopefulness, self-esteem, and parenting skills. Of significant note was the observation of the various ways the Befriender/young mother relationship enhanced the young mothers' potential for breaking the generational cycle of risk for child abuse and neglect.

The Power of Special Friends: Addressing the Risk of Child Abuse Through Mentoring

Paula Vestermark, MA, with Judie Russell, LSW, and Nancy Mulvey, LSW

"I want to make a difference!" These are the words that motivate many volunteers to befriend young parents who are assessed as being at risk for child abuse. The Befriender Volunteer Project is a collaboration between agencies to provide service to such young parents. Begun in 1989, the project seeks to match volunteers in the community with young women who have elected to parent their children, most often as single parents. These young mothers are struggling to be the best parents they can be, but they often lack information and support to realize their full potential.

Study Methodology

This study is based on a series of interviews completed between November 1993 and October 1994. Since the beginning of

the Parent Befriender collaboration in 1989, 58 Befrienders had completed successful, well-bonded matches. The designers of this study sought to interview as many of these 58 volunteers as possible. In all, 26 volunteer Befrienders were interviewed on a variety of subjects. The 23 interviews which constitute the core of this study came from 21 volunteers who had completed matches lasting from 12 to 60 months, with an average length of 26 months. The five volunteers whose data were not included in this study were interviewed on topics related to early stages of match which did not come to term in the period of this study, or they were interviewed about matches that ended before the end of the one-year, formal commitment period. While further analysis of this topic is pending, we do

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know that all the interviews in this category indicate the match was terminated by the young mother because of a lack of ability to accept the help. Relationships varied considerably in intensity after the first year, yet all except two Befrienders of the 23 matches studied in depth were still in touch with the young mom in question.

The core of this report is based on 23 one-hour, live interviews done with 21 volunteer Befrienders and 18 20-minute live interviews done with 18 young mothers. These are considered to be "in-depth studies."

The in-depth study interviews covered a wide range of topics related to the relationship between the Befriender and her young mom, as well as observations of the Befriender about the young mom. Also included were inquiries related to volunteer and young mom satisfaction.

Interviews varied widely in timing relative to the occasion of the formal, first-year match. Some were done during the first year, while others ranged up to five years after the end of the formal, first-year match.

There were 18 young mothers interviewed, but 23 matches with young moms are covered in this report via Befriender observation. Thus $n = 18$ or $n = 23$, depending on the source of the information.

The 18 young mothers included in this study are all Health Start clients. The inclusion of Crisis Nursery of Children's Home Society in the collaboration is a recent event. Matches made through Crisis Nursery are not yet at a point at which they can be studied in depth. Continued evaluation is planned. The authors expect similar findings in those evaluations, since the clients served are similar, in most respects, to those served by Health Start.

The agencies involved in the collaboration are Health Start, a nonprofit maternal and child health service that provides prenatal care for low-income women, pediatric care for their infants, and comprehensive mental health and prevention services for adolescents; and Children's Home Society of Minnesota, a statewide,

nonsectarian, nonprofit child and family social service agency. Both agencies are located in St. Paul, Minnesota.

In order to document specifically the ways in which volunteer Befrienders empower young mothers and by so doing reduce the risk for child abuse, the Befriender Volunteer Project has undertaken a self-study of its processes and outcomes. The following is a report on the findings of this qualitative study. Because the object of this study was to measure the ongoing Befriender relationship, more quantifiable methods of evaluation were considered to be inadequate in meeting the ethical (as well as the internal validity) demands for non-intrusion. In reviewing some of the evaluation literature on similar projects, it was our observation that where more quantifiable objectives of study were set, the design of the program itself suffered, i.e., the special and often fragile nature of the human relationship was neglected. As a result we saw very nice statistics on not very enduring or well-established relationships.

In contrast to such evaluations, this study focuses on the observation of a well-nurtured, trust-based relationship between a young mother and a Befriender. It did not set out to ask whether the young mother was feeling helped. We knew that she did feel helped because she had remained in the relationship for at least a year. Rather, the question was this: How did the help affect the factors we know put the young mother at risk for neglect and/or abuse of her children?

The effectiveness of the Parent Befriender model depends on the creation of a trusting relationship between the Befriender and a young mother. This strong and trusting relationship is the tool that reduces risk. From a survey of the literature (Egeland, B., Erickson, M. F., and Pianta, R., 1989; Egeland, B., Jacobvits, D., and Sroufe, L. A., 1988; Erickson, M. F. (ND); Mueller, D. P., & Urbain, E. S., 1991), combined with an analysis of clinical assessment practice at Health Start, the authors

determined the following risk factors related to child abuse to be directly addressable through the mentorship relationship: social and psychological isolation and inability to develop support; inability to cope with stress; difficulty in sustaining a positive relationship; low self-esteem; hopelessness; limited social skills, and limited parenting skills. The authors were also interested in determining what effect, if any, the Befriender relationship might have on breaking the generational cycle of abuse.

In order to assure a strong relationship, the Befriender model sets the following three objectives: (1) to identify young mothers who lack sufficient support and who are willing and able to work effectively with a volunteer Befriender; (2) to establish a year-long relationship (once-a-week contact is recommended) between the volunteer Befriender and the young mother; (3) to recruit, train, and support those volunteers as they fulfill their commitment. (All volunteers attend 17 hours of training. While peer experience as a young, single parent is not required or even necessary for success, most volunteers do have some common experiences that help them connect to the young mother.)

This study shows that the Parent Befriender model has its strongest outcomes in the following three areas: it *increases hopefulness* and the related capacity to set and carry out goals; it also *enhances self-esteem* and results in *positive changes in parenting skills*.

Study materials confirm the fact that young moms at risk for child abuse often come from a background where hopelessness is endemic and, therefore, the skills, models, and general environmental context for goal setting, exist only in limited ways.

When young moms were asked how the relationship with the Befriender affected their capacity to think about the future in a new way, several patterns emerged. Some interpreted this question to mean, "Did the Befriender help me develop mental

skills or imaginative abilities, so I could think about the future?" Several young moms responded that they had learned to anticipate and plan ahead. One learned to think of acting in stages ("chunking it down") as a means of controlling anxiety about the future. Several mentioned specifically how the Befriender worked to inspire and motivate them to plan further education: "She taught me to think about schooling and then I made my choices." For others, the peer experience and role model presented by the Befriender helped the young mom to think of the future in a more positive and hopeful way: "When I look at [my Befriender] I know that I can accomplish something, because she came a long way from 16 to now."

Significantly, a majority of Befrienders said they observed improvements in hopefulness. In accordance with the young mothers' perceptions stated above, the Befrienders saw their young moms respond positively to having a role model who shared peer experiences and who offered support and guidance. The Befriender attributed increases in hopefulness to a combination of increased support and subsequent personal accomplishment. For example, the young mother became more hopeful when, with the support of the Befriender, she succeeded at better management of relationships with male partners.

As is illustrated in the following Befriender remarks, once the young mom became more hopeful she was better able to set goals and to act.

[When I first met my young mom] she was very depressed and had no mature person in her life. She was trying to break an unhealthy boyfriend relationship and had no parental support. She has a mother who doesn't like her and her father is deceased. As we talked and shared time together, she became more confident and in turn her self-esteem grew. She now is living in a nice apartment building away from her boyfriend. She has nice, trustworthy

friends. She is working at a job to get off welfare and is making a life for herself and her two children. She is proud of her accomplishments.

Increases in hopefulness and the capacity to set goals and follow through on them appear to be closely tied to an observed increase in self-esteem. After at least one year in a relationship with a Befriender, the young moms described themselves as less depressed, more confident, more motivated, better parents, with a stronger sense of having a place among women who have had children at a young age themselves and who have raised them successfully.

Three-fourths of the Befrienders interviewed corroborated the young mothers' self-perceptions. They said their young moms developed a stronger capacity to view themselves as having some power over circumstances; that is, the young moms improved their sense of self. Befrienders expressed stronger sense of self with these words: increased independence, self-confidence, self-esteem, security, assertiveness, goal-setting capacity, ability to plan, cope, persevere and be patient. Underlying these remarks, there is a change in the young mom that can be paraphrased thus: I am someone who fits in with others. I see what these others have been able to do. I see now that I have a chance to succeed in what I want and need to do.

Self-esteem appears to nurture sense of self as sense of self in turn nurtures self-esteem. It is common to see this empowering process begin with the establishment of a strong and trusting Befriender/young mother relationship.

To summarize the changes in the young mom's behavior that reveal increased sense of self/self-esteem, Befrienders reported the following:

- The young mom was able to act as a more effective parent.
- She was better able to express her feelings and set boundaries with a male partner and friends.

- She was able to solve the child care problems and look for work.
- She was able to improve her schooling.
- She was better able to recognize the validity of other peoples' needs and show empathy.

The following account illustrates some of the elements that characterize a successful first-year match:

In the beginning of their match, Joan, the Befriender, was concerned about Sue's compulsive and volatile relationships with men. Sue already had two children and she seemed to have no idea what she might want for her future with them. It was difficult at first for Joan to find the right balance between speaking up to set some limits where Sue's children were concerned and remaining nonjudgmental enough for trust with Sue to become established. But Joan was successful in developing this balance and the relationship between her and Sue deepened. After the first four months, Joan saw Sue focus with more interest on their own relationship. By the end of the first year of the match, Sue was beginning to think about school and has now recently graduated with her associate of arts degree. Sue now describes herself before and after having met Joan: "Before I was very depressed ... thinking of myself as going nowhere. Now ... I'm really motivated, and I'll be working in June because I graduate from college."

This story typifies the increase in sense of self/self-esteem the authors often observe in the course of a match.

Obviously, while the increases in self-esteem and hopefulness are significant in and of themselves (especially in view of the young mothers' youth), a primary focus of observation and concern was in the area of parenting skills. Several Befrienders remarked that the young mom was good at "taking care of the basics,"

which implies a perception that the young mom still needs to improve in the area of recognizing some of the more subtle needs of a child.

She's a good parent. She takes care of the basics really well.... Again, the harder things have been saying "No," and making it stick, and listening to her [the baby] fuss for a little while, and taking a little more of the long view in parenting.

While Befrienders often observe moderate risk associated with parenting styles, more than half of the Befrienders (61%) reported marked improvements in the young mom's parenting ability over the course of the relationship. This meant they saw the young mom become more sure of herself, more realistic in her expectations of the child, more patient, a better disciplinarian. The following anecdote illustrates some of these points:

Early in the match, Lisa, the volunteer Befriender, came to support group meetings expressing concern about her young mom, Yvette. Yvette seemed unable to relate maternally to her infant son. She would care for the infant's physical needs, but then put him down on the sofa and walk away. Also, Lisa observed, there were no baby toys around. In the course of the conversation at support group, it became clear that Lisa could model the kind of relationship with the baby she knew he needed. She told us that in the work world she was a salesperson, and she knew how to communicate and teach in an indirect way. She had watched her own mother do this, and she herself had been successful with her own daughter. So Lisa started bringing toys with her to Yvette's and playing with the baby. And Yvette began to catch on:

Kind of my attitude [changed], because I would talk to her and I would listen.... Like when I said my son was bad, she said, "No, he's not

bad, he's just at that age." And I thought, "Yeah, but he's still bad." And she said, "My daughter's at that age," and I can hear how her daughter was. And I'll ask her questions. Like, "When's my son going to say 'Momma'? Every time I say 'Momma' he'll say 'Dada.'" I used to get mad, because his dad wasn't really around, so where'd he get that from? She said, "Well, the 'd's are easier to say." I was like, "Well, yeah, because he can say anything that starts with 'd'."

The above is an example of the young mother making a crucial developmental shift. This young mom is beginning to discern the reality of her child as a separate self with a different dynamic from hers. Once she begins to make this distinction, she can move to making a distinction between her needs and her child's needs, and thus provide appropriately for those needs.

Within the relationship of trust with the Befriender we see this young mother lower her defensiveness. The Befriender is present physically and emotionally, ready with support and information, and because of this the young mother is able to take advantage of the learning moment when it arises.

Furthermore, both the Befriender and the young mother are conscious of the significance of this event since both reported it independently of one another. Because the experience exists consciously for both, it becomes an event to build upon. Here there is solid evidence of the kinds of changes commonly observed and which can be expected within the context of the Befriender/young mother relationship.

Some characteristics of individuals in a population at risk for child abuse include hopelessness, lack of capacity to set and follow through on goals, low self-esteem, and poor parenting skills. Since these characteristics are often the result of each

parent's own history of poor nurturance, neglect, and abuse, any intervention that attempts to reduce risk of child abuse must also address the element of ongoing, generational cycles of inadequate parenting and abuse where it exists.

Research shows which life events and therapeutic interventions are known to break the cycle of abuse. In their article, "Breaking the Cycle of Abuse," Egeland, Jacobvits and Sroufe (1988) find that certain relationship variables can reduce the individual's potential for perpetrating abuse. These include:

- Availability of an emotionally supportive relationship with an adult other than the abusive parent during the mother's early childhood.
- Mother's participation in an ongoing relationship with a professional.
- The quality of the mother's relationship with her primary partner during adulthood.
- Finally, the quality of emotional support received by the mother.

Of these four factors, one is directly addressable by the volunteer mentorship model. "The quality of emotional support received by the mother" (Egeland, Jacobvits and Sroufe) is enhanced by the volunteer. If early abuse and neglect are a factor, the Befriender volunteer works to provide nurturance and a degree of "reparenting" within the boundary of the mentor relationship. The positive effect is readily apparent in most relationships within the first year of the match, as we have seen in the materials discussed above.

Furthermore, as the relationship between the young mother and the Befriender grows and develops in quality, that process has an observable effect on two more variables. There is evidence that the Befriender's presence affects to some degree the "quality of the mother's relationship with her primary partner" (Egeland, Jacobvits and Sroufe, 1988). The evidence for this appears in the Befriender's observation that, in some cases, young moms

were better able to express their feelings and thus set boundaries with male partners and friends. Also, perhaps because they were not observing a woman who had experienced satisfaction with single parenting, some young mothers appeared to become less male dependent.

Most significantly, the Befriender/young mom relationship affects, to some degree, "Mother's participation in an ongoing relationship with a professional..." (Egeland, Jacobvits and Sroufe, 1988). Five young moms did receive counseling help in the period studied. The story of one of them is particularly interesting:

Carol was angry, distrustful, and manipulative when Sandy, the volunteer Befriender, first met her. Their early meetings were more like chaotic struggles than social gatherings. But Sandy was patient, leaving when the shows of distrust became too unacceptable, but always returning and following through on any commitment. Gradually, Carol came to trust, love, and thoroughly enjoy Sandy's presence. She began to plan a future and to be more positively involved in effectively disciplining and showing affection to her own children. When the end of the first year came, Carol wanted Sandy to stay on as her Befriender. So an agreement was made that if Carol would begin counseling, Sandy would extend her match and continue to be Carol's Befriender. Since that time Carol has continued to thrive.

Despite this success story, what in fact is indicated in the study material is this: often young moms are distinctly unready either to comprehend, accept, or make use of professional counseling help. In these cases the Befriender may be especially important. It appears that the Befriender serves a direct therapeutic function in several ways. First, she is ready to listen and to judiciously help the young mother think about "deep structure" issues as distinct from surface events and

behaviors. Pipher (1994) defines "deep structure" as "the internal work—the struggle to find a self, the attempt to integrate past and present and to find a place in the larger culture." In an everyday way, this part of the Befriender relationship can break ground for the type of cognitive and emotional work done in professional counseling. Second, the trust relationship the Befriender builds with the young mother may be the forerunner of the trust needed in a professional counseling relationship. Furthermore, the Befriender offers information about counseling and tracks readiness for professional help. When depression and anger and conflict are apparent, the Befriender has some leverage in getting the young mom into counseling.

The best hope for bringing a young mom into professional therapy is illustrated in this Befriender remark:

I now feel [my young mom] trying to get some direction by her counseling. She recently said, "I have to stay in counseling." She dropped out for a while and I didn't push it. I just thought, "Well, she has to want to go." So she called me and said, "I want to go to counseling. I realize now I have to stay in, because if I don't, everything just goes crazy." Then I thought, "Okay, then we will go."

SUMMARY

The results of this study illustrate how the Parent Befriender model makes a significant impact on the life of a young mother. In this study we have seen the young mothers change within the context of trust in relationship. The special friendship the Befriender offers creates the relationship as a context for change. The specialness of the friendship lies in the Befriender's ability to accept the young mom as she stands and her willingness to offer a successful peer model that becomes the source of hope. From the relationship established by the Befriender with the cooperation of the young mother comes the power to make a difference.

In conclusion, the Parent Befriender model is based on a deep insight into the context in which human change takes place. Everly (1964) said it well:

We have to reach those we meet [at the place] where they were given up as hopeless, and so withdrew into themselves and began to secrete a protective shell because they thought they were alone and no one cared. They have to feel they're loved very deeply and very boldly before they dare appear humble and kind, affectionate, sincere and vulnerable.

When the Befriender offers her care, the young mom is free to grow beyond her defenses. When she has a trusted friend, there is a better chance that she will thrive. And when the young parent thrives, her children also will prosper.

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