

A F5 Contra Costa Qualitative Report:

**The Impact of Crossroads and YMCA Teen Programs  
on the Quality of Life of Participants and Their  
Families, FY 2012-13**



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# I. Introduction

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The Crossroads and YMCA teen parenting programs are funded by First 5 Contra Costa to provide services to pregnant and parenting teens. These programs offer an array of services, including parent education, child development classes, case management and counseling to help teens transition into parenthood, complete high school, and establish goals for the future.

To better understand the program activities teens engaged in and to measure their impact, videotaped qualitative interviews were conducted (see Appendix A for interview questions and Appendix B for the qualitative coding system used). Ten teen participants and three staff members from the YMCA and Crossroads programs were interviewed.

## **Crossroads High School**

Crossroads High School is a specialized high school setting that provides intensive support services to pregnant and parenting teens with young infants. Teen parents participate in small counselor-led groups and individual counseling led by a licensed counselor. Coursework offered for students includes a child psychology course and parenting and health classes. Adolescent parents and their children are connected with community services and children receive developmental screening and referrals as needed. The Crossroads program offers information around child development, parenting and family planning, and strategies for coping with and overcoming sources of stress in their lives in order to be successful parents and students. The teens from Crossroads High live primarily in the area of North Concord and Pittsburg.

## **YMCA of the East Bay**

YMCA of the East Bay (Y-Team) provides pregnant and parenting teens with a specialized curriculum of parenting and health education, along with intensive one-on-one and group counseling and case management services. The Adolescent Pregnant and Parenting (APP) classes at Richmond High School is designed to help pregnant or parenting teens stay in school and enroll in college, and include both informal counseling and case management components. Case managers provide support, resources and referrals, as well encouraging teen participants to set and monitor personal goals. The teens served by the Y-team reside primarily in Richmond and San Pablo.

Both programs seek to prevent high school dropout, delay second pregnancies, develop critical parenting skills, and cultivate positive parent-child interaction. In the long term, it is expected that these teen mothers will be able to make healthy choices for themselves and their children, build strong support networks, and pursue higher education and other personal goals.

The **interviews** were conducted on the campuses of Crossroads and Richmond High Schools in Spring 2012. The sample focused on emancipated teens and 18 year olds due to the complexities of obtaining a signed consent on behalf of a teen who no longer resides at home. The teens completed a signed consent to be interviewed on video, which in most cases included their infants. Each interview lasted between 10 and 30 minutes.

The primary aim was to surface compelling stories or vignettes, in teens own words, about how the programs have helped them, and use this information to develop a plan for ongoing evaluation activities that could be sustained by program staff. Another goal was to develop new measure(s) better tailored to each service and to two differing models.

This report summarizes the results from the qualitative interviews with teen students and staff members. It provides an overview of the challenges and successes the participants experienced as

pregnant and parenting teens, as well as staff members' observations of the teens' transition into responsible and knowledgeable parents.

## II. The Impact of Teen Programs on the Quality of Life of Participants and Their Families

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Qualitative interviews with participants and program staff in the Crossroads and YMCA teen programs yielded rich descriptions of the progress teens made while participating in the programs. These pregnant and parenting teens overcame a variety of challenges to achieve their goals and pursue better lives for themselves and their children. This section details stressors the teens faced, the support they received in the programs and the interpersonal and intrapersonal transformations experienced along the way.

### Stressors and Safety Factors

**(Teen Themes: Daily Living and Financial Situation, Discrimination; Staff Themes: Safety Concerns, Academic Challenges, Psychological Concerns, Family Stressors, Social Barriers, Financial Stress)**

#### **Financial Stress**

Staff members and teen participants indicated that the teens experience high levels of stress on a daily basis. For example, nine of the 10 teens stated that they face challenges with their **daily living and financial situation**. More specifically, the teens stated that, because they are very young, they lack the financial resources to meet their child's basic needs. Many reported frustration with their dependence on parents, boyfriends or extended family members for money to support themselves and their child. Staff members also reported that meeting the baby's basic needs is a challenge:

*They are trying to balance being in school, being a mom, trying to have a regular teenage social life, and a boyfriend. There is a lot going on, including a significant financial burden - babies are expensive. They are trying to find ways to stay in school, plus find a way to pay for diapers, formulas, medical insurance, taking babies to the doctor. Doing all those things is challenging, and they are learning all of those things.*

Staff members shared that some parents/families do not want their teen to attend high school because of **financial stress**. As families are struggling to make ends meet, they are inclined to encourage their teens to drop out of school and seek employment despite the low pay of jobs available and low income expectations for those without a high school diploma.

#### **Daily Responsibilities**

Teens were troubled by daily stressors related to pregnancy and parenting. They reported physical and emotional discomfort in the first trimester of their pregnancy and feelings of uncertainty about how to take care of their baby. Some participants also found their daily routine difficult to manage and a negative impact on their physical well-being, as the following quote illustrates:

*I wake up in the morning at 5:00 a.m. I take care of my baby, attend to her basic needs as well as mine. I wait for a bus to get to school. Then, after school I drop my child with a friend so that she can take care of him, then go to work, and finish work at 10:30 p.m. I get home, give my baby and myself a shower and sleep at 2 a.m. as my baby is cranky being away from me. I get up again at 5:00 a.m. This is my routine daily. I feel so tired all the time.*

One staff member also described the multiple responsibilities the teens must juggle on a daily basis:

*Some of them are working, going to school, taking care of a baby, staying up, getting up in the morning, taking a bus to come to school, studying for finals, and a stroller in the rain to come to school. They are still trying to go to prom, see a movie with their friends in the weekend - it takes a lot.*

### **Academic Challenges**

Adding to the challenges of their daily routine, staff members reported that most teens **struggled academically** in middle and high school before they became pregnant. Many had poor attendance or lagged in their academic progress. Staff also reported that some of the teens have learning disabilities and others had to learn how to be students all over again (e.g., how to sit in a classroom, take notes, and complete assignments). For many teens, school induces additional stress and historically has never been a place where they could relax and learn.

### **Social Stressors**

Teens also described a variety of social stressors in their lives. Five of the 10 teens reported experiencing **discrimination** from parents, friends and others in their community. These teens said they had been subjected to insulting comments and felt ostracized from their social network due to their pregnancy. Some of the teens were told that they would never be successful because they had children at such a young age. For example, one teen shared that her family and friends repeatedly reminded her of the mistakes she has made. Other **social barriers** described by staff include pressure on teens to honor family tradition by learning about parenting in the home, rather than taking advice from the program teachers, counselors and staff. This in effect created a dynamic where some teens had one set of parenting practices at school, and another set at home. In addition to **family stressors**, the teens said they lost friends, were shunned at social events and were not able to engage in many of the activities of their childless peers. Staff also noted that many of the girls faced various challenges, lacked social skills when they entered the program, and because they had difficulty making friends, many of them felt socially isolated.



### **Violence**

Exacerbating these social stressors and the daily challenges of pregnancy and parenting, most participants live in neighborhoods that staff described as unsafe where drug sales, prostitution and gang violence are common occurrences. Many teens are impacted directly by a loss of boyfriend, other family member or friend when violence erupts. One staff member remarked on the constant presence of violence in these girls' lives:

*It is hard to imagine violence unless you are living it. This is what they go through and what they see, on a daily basis where they are growing up.*

One of the YMCA program staff reported that the school is located in a high-crime community and that student **safety** has been a constant concern. This staff member shared that in the initial years of service in the program, the school had been locked down more than 30 times, and police had a routine presence on campus. One and sometimes two squad cars had been permanently parked directly in front

of the campus front doors. The school, together with the City of Richmond, made concerted efforts to make the grounds safer by providing security gates in the parking parameter and complex of school classrooms, assigning a small force of police officers during school hours, and changing school protocol.

Although staff at YMCA report that the school is substantially safer over the last several years, staff at both high schools expressed concern about the safety of the teens and their babies, some of whom must travel 20 blocks to and from school. When working with teens who come from such living situations, staff mentioned that giving the teens and their children a place of respite and a safety buffer helps mitigate the impact of violence, and has become a program priority.

### ***Psychological Concerns***

In addition to living with violence, many of the teens come from families with a range of other hardships including domestic violence, substance abuse, immigration, and incarceration. Staff were particularly concerned about the **psychological concerns** the teens have when they enroll in the program. For example, many teen students experienced trauma earlier in their lives, which staff noted adversely affects their ability to parent. One teen also reported experiencing depression when she discovered she was pregnant and that she isolated herself in the initial days of her pregnancy. These stressors inevitably add to the burden of managing pregnancy, childrearing and staying focused on being a student.

## **Social Supports/Connections**

**(Teen Themes: Progress, Family/Friend Acceptance, Staff Acceptance, Staff Support; Staff Theme: Strengthening Relationships)**

### ***Support from Family and Friends***

While negative relationships cause stress for the teens, positive social supports and connections help them overcome some of these stressors. The infusion of positive relationships helps the teens accept their pregnancy and continue their education. Four teens said that they believe their families and friends have **accepted** them for who they are. They shared how they feel understood and have been given unconditional support and help to accomplish their goals. For example, one teen reported that her parents' assistance with getting school supplies and caring for her child allowed her to finish high school. Staff also reported that some of the participants' families were extremely supportive, calling every day to make sure their children were at school. In addition to family support, some girls find a sense of community in religious institutions, while others have the support of their boyfriends and boyfriends' families.



### ***Strengthening Relationships***

For some teens relationships improved over the course of the program. For instance, three teens reported finding new partners who are accepting and helpful with the child. Another teen described progress in gaining support from family members.

*Initially, I had only my mom to support me. No one believed I could graduate, sometimes even myself! Now, things have changed after I have graduated. I have support from my father, brother and other family members.*

Staff members reported that teaching teens to **strengthen relationships** is a vital component of the program. The program helps them build and sustain new and existing support systems. Teens also shared that their journey taught them the importance of family support. Both teens and staff stress that this support is vital for the teens to make **progress** in the program.

### ***Program Staff and Peer Support***

Beyond the care they receive from friends and family, teens indicated that they experience valuable **support from staff and fellow participants**. In fact, staff members mentioned that the program is sometimes the only reliable, consistent source of support for the teen girls. Two of the 10 teens interviewed said that staff demonstrated unconditional **acceptance**, while three teens spoke of how staff members have supported them every step of the way. The staff provide instrumental assistance—housing, supplies for the baby, immigration, counseling and tutoring—but they also help the teens realize that they are not alone. Teens reported that the staff never criticize or judge them for their mistakes, but rather focus on celebrating their achievements:

*They let us know that we are good moms and it is so good to hear it.*

A few teens also reported not feeling alone because other participants in the program were also pregnant or parenting. As one teen noted:

*I really liked it when I first came here, as everyone is the same, they had kids or were pregnant. I was comfortable from the day I joined.*

The teens indicated that they were able to understand and support one another through their shared circumstances and challenges. Staff members similarly witnessed these students build a community of their own. Staff stated that some students reported only having friends from the program because they had lost other social supports after they became pregnant.

### ***Support from Program Graduates***

Former program participants also are a source of support and encouragement for the participants. Teens reported that seeing others complete the program motivates them to remain committed to finishing it themselves. Staff also shared that teens find it easier to adopt healthy behaviors when they see their peers and former participants able to do so. Staff said they are thrilled when graduates return to visit and are now in healthy relationships, holding full time jobs and successfully caring for their child. These successful students are role models to new program participants. One staff member noted that graduates of the program who return to meet with the teens make success appear attainable:

*I love showing the current girls what they are going to be in 3-4 years and it gives them real hope as it is tangible and they can see this mom with a 4 year old, who is doing big things with her life. So this is what you can be and where you are going to go, you just got to hang in there and keep working at it.*

## **Teen Learning and Program Services**

**(Teen Themes: Education, Progress, Resiliency; Staff Themes: Opportunities, Empowerment, Stress Management)**

### ***Parenting and Child Development Education***

Staff members reported that the comprehensive program addresses multiple aspects of teens' lives and that it is critical to provide teens **opportunities** they wouldn't otherwise have to focus on parenting issues. Both programs teach parenting skills and academics, and also provide one-on-one and group

counseling, healthcare and onsite childcare. Staff members indicated that during the course of the school year, students are given a wealth of information, from labor and child delivery to what to expect once the child is born. All of the classes are taught by experienced teachers who strive to work with students in non-threatening and non-judgmental ways. Staff believed these classes change the mindset of the teens, by **empowering** and helping them transition to adulthood as a parent of a young child.



The interviewed teens reported that the program teaches them valuable skills to support their child. In their child development classes, for instance, participants reported learning how to feed their baby (including how to add vegetables and fruits into babies' food), what to do (and not do) when the baby is sick and how to calm a distressed baby. They learned how to help their babies establish a regular pattern for eating, sleep routines and how children's needs change as they develop. In addition, the teens indicated that they learned how to ask for help. They reported feeling comfortable asking questions during classes or counseling sessions.

Teens learned about their child's illnesses and how to support their child's developmental needs. For example, one of the teens reported that when her child was diagnosed with asthma, program staff, counselors and doctors taught her how to recognize her child's asthmatic symptoms, when to take the child to the emergency room, how to administer the child's medication and how to avoid activities or environments that might trigger an asthma attack. Likewise, another teen described learning how to address her child's delayed language development:

*Child development classes were very helpful; as my child was lagging behind in talking, they taught me how to read and talk to him more often, show him more stuff, so I started doing that. I noticed that he is learning to talk more and tell me what he wants. Before the classes my son used to only point to stuff, but now he talks more. I feel I understand everything what he needs now.*

Staff indicated that the programs' parenting classes help teens become aware of the unhealthy parenting practices they may have been exposed to in childhood and teach the teens how to parent in healthier ways. For example, the teens learn about positive discipline to address challenging behaviors:

*Through attending the classes they learn positive ways to discipline children, and that they don't have to hit to control their child, much as they have been controlled by their parents.*

Over the course of the program, staff witnessed teens beginning to realize that the strategies they were learning in parenting classes are effective. The teens also reported that the child development education they received allowed them to make decisions and advocate for the baby's welfare without needing to rely on advice from their family (which sometimes did not match what they had learned in the program). Ultimately, the program helps the teens to trust their own parenting abilities:

*I am really confident about my parenting now.*

### **Stress Management**

Teens shared that the program taught them how to manage stress. For example, talking with counselors helped the teens cope with anger, frustration and depression, and taught them to notice the positive

aspects of their lives. They also acquired tools to manage stress in healthy ways, such as listening to music, going for walks, dancing or asking their boyfriend or a family member to watch the baby when they need a break. Participants believed that the program not only helped them take care of their child, but also contributed to their own growth and well-being.

Likewise, the staff mentioned that the programs give teens emotional support and a space to work through stressful issues. The program creates an environment where teens felt secure and listened to. As conflicts arose among peers, teens had the option to use the counselor for anger management issues, allowing the teen to cool off before entering the classroom and engaging with teachers and other students. Staff described the school environment as a refuge for the teens and indicated that **stress management** and other counseling services are critical to participants' progress:

*Counseling gives the opportunity to pay attention to the student intensely. All their needs get addressed as somebody is listening to them. That is healing in itself, when someone is noticing you. This attention is new to the teens and it heals them.*

In addition to one-on-one counseling with each of the students, the program offers several workshops on self-esteem, relationships and stress management. In these workshops, teens are taught how to identify their emotions and their behavioral responses to those emotions. Many teens had a history of unhealthy emotional responses (e.g., hitting others, starting fires and throwing things), and they often came from families in which violence was an accepted response to negative emotions. However, in the program, the teens learn to take a moment, process their feelings and think about the consequences of their behaviors. One staff member tells students:

*You are going to feel angry, upset and frustrated as a parent or in your life, but what you do about that is your decision.*

The staff shared that once positive stress management approaches are internalized by the teens, they can utilize these tools wherever they go.

## Transformation, Teen Success and Changes in Family Life

**(Key Themes: Change, Progress, Opportunities, Resiliency, Fulfilment, Preparing for the Future; Staff Themes: Empowerment, Transformation, Accomplishment, Achievement)**



Teens reported that their lives **changed** tremendously over the course of the program. Initially, they were frightened and faced numerous challenges without any support. Some were in relationships or had family members who were opposed to their pursuit of education and independence. However, once enrolled in the program, the teens began to feel supported through positive relationships, and the **progress** they made over the course of services gave them a sense of confidence and **accomplishment** and let them feel more **resilient**.

Several teens reported progressing from being unmotivated and aimless to being driven and goal-oriented - critical transformations that contributed to their success. They reported seeing **opportunities** to improve their lives from the very first day of school and they now encourage new students to take the program seriously. One teen described how these opportunities helped her succeed:

*I worked hard and made use of all the support and opportunities that were given to me. I graduated. I have been offered a job, which I will be starting very soon. I am so thankful to all the staff.*

Six of the teens observed that after starting the program, they began wanting to go to school every day and were more motivated to study. One teen shared that her grades and school attendance were poor before she got pregnant, but after enrolling in the program, she began to take her education seriously and looked forward to graduating, finding a job and living independently. Nine of the 10 teens shared that the programs also helped them **prepare for the future**. They said that they never before imagined that they would graduate, but the program helped them meet this goal and consider their post-graduation options. Many of the teens identified careers they would like to pursue after graduation, including cosmetology, physical therapy, and nursing.

Staff members also shared that it was amazing to see how the teens became more **empowered** and independent over the year. Once the teens delivered their child, staff saw in them an urgency to change and to want a better life. Staff reported being in awe of how hard the teens worked to be good mothers, students and employees. They were impressed by how they have dealt with death, loss, abandonment and other stressors and still came to school every day with the hope for something better. It took determination for these teen mothers to graduate and raise a healthy baby; seeing their students complete the program and graduate brought staff members great pride.

Finally, teens reported that, over the course of the program, they began to enjoy pregnancy and motherhood. In particular, they enjoyed singing, playing, reading and engaging in other pleasant activities with their baby/child. Teens also felt happy to have a healthy child that they could call their own. They found joy in loving their child and felt secure in knowing that they and their child were going to be there for each other in life.



The participants indicated that the program gave them strength and proved to them that with hard work they can achieve anything. Seven of the 10 teens reported feelings of **fulfilment** after successfully overcoming challenges and making positive changes in their lives.

### III. Summary

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Teen students who attended the Crossroads and YMCA High School programs believe that it has been very effective in transforming their lives, a belief that is shared by staff members. Staff and participants feel that the programs equip students to become more confident, independent and empowered, able to finish their education and pursue careers.

Both teens and staff members reported that financial stress is the most common challenge teens face on a day to day basis. Their dire financial situation is further complicated by social stressors and unhealthy environments. Participants and staff agreed that building, strengthening and sustaining social supports are very important to overcoming these challenges.

In addition to encouraging teens to build strong social networks, the programs provide a range of supports and services to the teens, from baby supplies to counseling to tutoring. They learned about staying healthy, taking care of their baby, managing their emotions, completing course credits, preparing for job searching and having healthy relationships. Teens reported feeling accepted and supported by the school programs, while staff indicated that the education and opportunities provided to students in the program help the teens feel empowered to make positive changes in their lives. Staff shared that the programs transformed teens, helping them accomplish their goals and manage their stress.

Teens also described feeling better prepared for the future and more resilient in the face of hardship after going through the program. They also shared that, over the course of the year, they began to find motherhood fulfilling and enjoyable. Each of the teens expressed confidence in their ability to be successful in life and that this was possible thanks to the YMCA and Crossroads programs.

## IV. Appendices

### Appendix A. Question Banks

#### 1. Question Bank: Staff Questions

Question No.	Respondent	Question
Q1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> <li>Case Manager</li> </ul>	What sort of stressors are teens dealing with when they first come to high school pregnant or as teens?
Q2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> </ul>	Describe teen parent's social supports. What strategies are working around building supports?
Q3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> <li>Case Manager</li> </ul>	How have teen stories changed from entering the program and then after participation?
Q4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> <li>Case Manager</li> </ul>	What do they learn about being a parent?
Q5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> </ul>	Describe the issues that teen parents face on a daily basis in school.
Q6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> </ul>	Why is your program important?
Q7.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> </ul>	How do you feel about this program?
Q8.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counselor</li> <li>Case Manager</li> </ul>	What do you want someone to know about this program?
Q9.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case Manager</li> </ul>	Describe the safety here at school.

#### 2. Question Bank: Pregnant and Parenting Teen Questions

Question No.	Respondent	Question
Q1.	Teen	What was your first impression when you came into this program?
Q2.	Teen	What kinds of things were you dealing with when you first came here?
Q3.	Teen	What have you learnt from this program that has helped you in delivering and/or raising your child?
Q4.	Teen	Who are in your support system and how much support you need to be a parent?
Q5.	Teen	How has your story changed since you have been here?
Q6.	Teen	What is the most stressful or difficult thing about being a mom?
Q7.	Teen	What are your plans for the future?
Q8.	Teen	What do you like best about being a mom?
Q9.	Teen	What is your recommendation to someone coming into this program?

## Appendix B. Summary of Categories and Themes

Code	Category	Code Description	Teen Themes <sup>1</sup>	Staff Themes
S	Stressors	Environmental, financial and social stresses impacting teen parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily living and financial situation - 9</li> <li>• Discrimination - 5</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic challenges</li> <li>• Psychological concerns</li> <li>• Family stressors</li> <li>• Social barriers</li> <li>• Financial stress</li> </ul>
SF	Safety Factors	How staff views safety in the school or community environment	--	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety concerns</li> </ul>
SS	Social Supports/Connections	Family, friends and school supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/friend acceptance - 4</li> <li>• Progress - 10</li> <li>• Staff acceptance - 2</li> <li>• Staff support- 3</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening relationships</li> </ul>
PS	Program Services	Services that school provides teen parents	--	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> </ul>
TL	Teen Learning	What teens learned while enrolled in the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education - 10</li> <li>• Progress - 10</li> <li>• Resiliency - 7</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress management</li> </ul>
TC	Transformation/Change	How teens change following birth of baby/resiliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change - 2</li> <li>• Progress - 6</li> <li>• Opportunities - 6</li> <li>• Resiliency - 4</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformation</li> </ul>
TS	Teen Success	Graduation and continuing education stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing for future - 9</li> <li>• Progress - 6</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement</li> <li>• Accomplishment</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> </ul>
FL	Family Life	Thoughts about being a mom/motherhood, the future comments about child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fulfilment - 7</li> </ul>	--

<sup>1</sup> Number of teens who have mentioned a particular theme.