The Young Parents Study documents the experiences of young parents (aged 15-24) with a variety of health, education, and social service programs and policies. Through interviews and fieldwork at Young Parent Programs (YPPs) in Prince George and Greater Vancouver, the study gathers information that can be used to improve supports for young parents and their children.

This study is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and led by Dr. Jeannie Shoveller of UBC’s School of Population and Public Health.

Participants

**Greater Vancouver**
- Young Mothers: 45
- Young Fathers: 6
- Service Providers: 7
- Total: 58

**Prince George**
- Young Mothers: 45
- Young Fathers: 17
- Service Providers: 17
- Socially Significant Others: 2
- Total: 81

139 participants have completed at least one interview since the project began in 2013
Findings

1. Childcare

Parents told us that finding high-quality and affordable childcare is a major challenge. Some YPPs provide on-site childcare and parents appreciate this support, where it is available. Unfortunately, childcare at YPPs does not meet all needs in this area. For example, many parents are unable to access childcare outside of school or business hours. This limits their job and education opportunities. High costs and long waitlists, especially for licensed daycares, also are a challenge. Some young parents have friends or family members who provide childcare, although access to this kind of support varied greatly.

A total of 113 Young Parents have completed at least one interview since the project began:

**Age**

- 23 +: 35%
- 19-22: 38%
- 15-18: 27%

**Education Level**

- Some high school: 2%
- Currently in high school: 8%
- Dogwood/Adult Dogwood: 17%
- Currently in college/university: 32%
- Graduated trade school/College/University: 41%

**Self-reported Sexual Orientation**

- Heterosexual/Straight: 84%
- Lesbian/Gay: 11%
- Bisexual/Pansexual: 2%
- Not sure/Questioning: 3%

**Self-identified Ethnicity**

Note: Participants could select multiple ethnicities

- Black: 47%
- Chinese: 2%
- Filipino/a: 5%
- Indigenous: 57%
- Latin American: 7%
- Other: 6%
- South Asian: 2%
- South East Asian: 1%
- White: 23%

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2. Infant and Child Feeding

Many young mothers want to breastfeed. Sometimes they need extra support from Labour and Delivery ward nurses. Some would like public health nurses (with special training in lactation support) to make home visits shortly after a baby is born. This would be more convenient than making an appointment to see a lactation consultant at a Health Unit, where there are often long wait-times for appointments. Many mothers also use formula. For some moms, formula offers flexibility to allow them to meet other obligations (e.g., work or school commitments). Unfortunately, some mothers said that they were made to feel stigmatized for using formula, rather than breast milk.

Introducing toddlers to solid foods is both exciting and challenging. In this study, young parents said that they frequently feel judged by service providers (e.g., doctors; public health nurses) about introducing solid foods. Mothers also heard judgemental comments from peers, family members, and the general public (especially in grocery stores) about the types of solid foods that are “best” to introduce to babies and when it is “right” to do so.

The introduction of solid foods is also affected by the cost and accessibility of foods. Many young parents in this study rely on food banks, where food selection can be limited. Cultural practices and traditions, the availability of information about age-appropriate feeding, and personal tastes and choices (e.g., organic vs. non-organic foods) are also important influences.

3. Dental Services

Dental care services are not included under BC’s Medical Services Plan (MSP). As a result, many young parents and their children do not have adequate access to dental health care. Out-of-pocket cost is a major barrier (especially for those who do not have coverage under an extended health benefits plan). Some have accessed dental services through the BC Healthy Kids program, which covers up to $1,400 in basic dental services every two years for children and youth (under 19 years old) in families receiving MSP Premium Assistance. Occasionally, public health nurses or dental hygienists will provide free fluoride treatments and drop-in consultations for preschool children at Young Parent Programs. But, this remains a major gap in care for many young parents and their children.

4. Extended Health Services

Subsidized extended health services (e.g., counseling, physiotherapy, or chiropractic care) help young parents to promote and protect their health and that of their children. However, applying for free or subsidized services is a major challenge. Many programs are not well advertised. Often, parents only learned about these supports by word-of-mouth from well-informed service providers or peers.

The application process for many extended health services is overly bureaucratic and complicated. The system has been described as very focused on the “paperwork”, rather than on helping young parents access these services. Many parents described feeling locked out of these services, if they have lost their MSP card or First Nation Status Card. Parents told us that they need help navigating the application process in order to access extended health services and many prescription drugs.
5. Mental Health

Parenting can be stressful.

Most parents in this study face major financial difficulties and this is very stressful. Some parents also felt stressed about living up to high expectations about being a “good parent” or about fulfilling their education and career goals. Some parents in the study said that they sometimes feel lonely, overwhelmed, and stigmatized (e.g., by people in their communities or some service providers).

Some new mothers told us that they experienced post-partum depression. Some young fathers expressed stress about finding employment and providing financially for their families. Parents clearly described the importance they place on caring for their own mental health and that of their children. However, serious gaps remain in terms of meeting needs in this area, including needs for more:

- Appropriate mental health supports and services for young mothers during the post-partum period; and
- Options to promote and support mental health among young dads (e.g., father-focused mentorship groups; healthy relationship programs).

6. Housing

Finding and maintaining safe, healthy, and affordable housing is a huge challenge. There are very few affordable housing units available to young parents. They also face discrimination from landlords and often experience financial insecurity.

Health and safety concerns, as well as interpersonal conflict (e.g., with housemates, neighbours, or landlords), force many young parents to move frequently. This can interrupt their schooling, employment, and childcare.

Despite these challenges, young parents remain optimistic towards their future housing aspirations. Many have plans to purchase their own homes and they cherish the possibility of being able to live in a nice, safe, and affordable place where they can raise their children.

Next Steps

We are very grateful to the participants who have generously shared their time and stories with us. The team will complete data collection in June 2017 and we will share a final report with you in 2018.

THANK YOU!

For more information about the Young Parents Study, please visit our website: http://youthsexualhealth.ubc.ca or email cathy.chabot@ubc.ca.