

CHARTING A COURSE FOR ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND RESPONSIBLE PARENTING
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE **EMPOWER YOU** PROJECT

In 2020, the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) invited state child support agencies to submit applications for innovative programs that expand development of existing curricula and other interventions to educate young adults about the full responsibilities of parenthood. The main goal of the Charting a Course for Economic Responsibility and Responsible Parenting demonstration grants was to use the child support agency’s legal and financial knowledge “...to educate and motivate teens and young adults to postpone parenthood until after they have completed their education, started a career, and entered a committed relationship.”¹ These three components are commonly known as the “success sequence.”²

OCSE awarded one of nine grants to the Kentucky Department for Income Support, Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) in the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. The grant covers a three-year period, beginning September 30, 2020. DCSE partnered with the University of Louisville’s Kent School of Social Work and Family Science (UofL Kent School) to develop **Empower You**, a community-based program in Louisville, Kentucky that will accomplish the goals of the grant. **Empower You** is designed to provide 16- to 24-year-old young adults with the skills and tools needed to make positive, informed decisions about their education, career, sexual health, and romantic relationships, including when to become a parent so they can optimize their future economic stability. The program is delivered through group-based workshops, contact with peer mentors, and individualized case management through success coaching.

Overview of intervention design

In developing the **Empower You** program, the UofL Kent School and DCSE worked to prioritize the goals outlined in the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) and create components that address each of them.

OCSE Goals	Empower You Program Components
Increase knowledge of the emotional, social, legal, and financial realities and responsibilities of parenting	Group-based workshops featuring the Re:MIX and PAPA curricula (revised for Kentucky)

¹ Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting Funding Opportunity, HHS-2020-ACF-OCSE-FD-1832 Application Due Date 06/29/2020, Page 1.

² Goesling, Brian, Hande Inanc, and Angela Rachidi (2020). *Success Sequence: A Synthesis of the Literature*, OPRE Report 2020-41, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

	Connection with Peer Mentors
Plan to delay parenting for economic self-sufficiency (follow the success sequence)	Individualized case management with Success Coaches
Connect to post-high school educational and career development resources designed to promote economic self sufficiency	Individualized case management with Success Coaches Leverage existing relationships with the Louisville Urban League, Jefferson Community Technical College, and the University of Louisville

For the three-year grant, Year One is designated as a planning year to develop and design a program in coordination with OCSE. Activities included but were not limited to securing partnerships with other agencies, developing an evaluation plan, obtaining IRB approval, developing and revising curricula, staffing the program, and performing pilot testing. Years Two and Three will cover implementation, data collection and tracking, and evaluation. Those subjects will be covered in project briefs delivered by September 2023.

To achieve the goals, the **Empower You** team focused on four major tasks. These were:

1. Developing the curricula content for the workshops
2. Determining staffing and personnel needs
3. Establishing routine recruitment of participants
4. Creating an evaluation plan

Developing the curricula content for the workshops. The decision was made to combine Engender Health’s Re:MIX curriculum and the Texas Parenting and Paternity Awareness (PAPA) curriculum to be covered over the course of five workshops for **Empower You** participants. Re:MIX is a health education curriculum that includes age-appropriate, medically accurate information on topics such as healthy relationships, decision making, consent and setting limits, adolescent development, and sexually transmitted infections. PAPA is an educational curriculum for young adults focused on the rights and responsibilities of parenting and includes group activities, handouts, and workbook exercises to back up the content. The content includes topics such as paternity establishment, child support, the benefits of co-parenting and healthy relationship skills. The PAPA curriculum was revised to comport with Kentucky child support laws and policies.

Determining staffing and personnel needs. To positively affect the participants and deliver successful content and case management services, the program began with two success coaches and five peer mentors along with six practicum students (interns). The staff attended a six-week Train the Trainer course that covered key features of both curricula, roles of both success coaches and peer mentors, sexuality and gender messages, foundations of adolescent and sexual health, facilitation and inclusion strategies, research methods and a session on the Enneagram and how to use it in self-awareness and helping others. Success coaches conduct assessments, lead individualized service plan meetings, link participants to relevant community services, monitor participant progress, and facilitate the curriculum. Peer mentors come from the same

demographic as the participants and may have been prior participants. They attend the workshops to offer their experience and perspective during group discussions and help with data collection. They also encourage retention by placing reminder calls about workshops and meetings with Success Coaches.

Establishing routine recruitment of participants. Recruitment of participants happens through community events, recruitment booths and presentations at community events and using flyers, postcards, social media, word of mouth and referrals from community partner agencies. Some agencies include Healthy Start, Healthy Babies consortium, Freedom House, Jefferson County Public Schools Family Resource Coordinators, Independent Living Consortium, YouthBuild, Hope by Hope, the Jefferson County Attorney Child Support Division, and the Louisville Urban League “Project Ready” sessions.

Creating an evaluation plan. Upon receiving IRB approval, staff turned to creating and finalizing an Evaluation Plan for the project. The plan is described later in the brief under “What’s Next.”

Program Planning and Collaboration

The Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting grant differs from other federal grants in that it is a cooperative agreement. OCSE works closely with the grantees during the planning year and beyond to help in refining the program’s design. Toward that end, OCSE offers monthly Learning Community Calls (LCCs) for technical assistance from the Office of Grants Management and other educational or resource calls touching on varied topics, including presentations by Power to Decide, Child Trends, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the South Carolina Center on Fathers and Families, and other grantees on their projects. Monthly status meetings are held with each grantee to review progress and offer support. These steps have been invaluable in developing and finalizing our program design.

Early in the process, we identified Healthy Start as a partner. Healthy Start has moved toward including fathers into their programming and the Louisville office recently hired a staff member dedicated to bringing in fatherhood initiatives. As we continued the process of finalizing the content and method of delivery, other partners became just as important. Partners and their roles are listed in the table below:

Partner	Role
Healthy Start/Healthy Babies Louisville	Participant referrals and future home for the program
Neighborhood Place	Meeting space and direct line to community resources and referrals
Jefferson County Public Schools	Participant referrals from Family Resource Coordinators
Louisville Urban League	Employment, job training and career development resources
JCTC and University of Louisville	Post-secondary education

Further, a Resource Guide that lists local agencies and their services compatible with the FOA was developed for participants. We also reached out to staff from the Texas PAPA program and received a specialized training session. The guidance was used to help us complete our participant and facilitator manuals. We also met with other grantees to offer advice and obtain more information about their programs.

There have been bumps along the way. The project had to overcome delays due to the hiring process for staff and COVID-19 restrictions. Another issue familiar to most grantees is that young men and fathers are a harder group to reach and retain.

In June 2021, however, we were ready to hold focus group meetings. At the meetings and through on-line surveys, staff received input from young adults on our logo, colors, marketing material, and curriculum content. There were also questions on attitudes, knowledge of myths and information gaps related to romantic relationships, parenting, child support, sexual health, family court, post-secondary education, and career exploration.

A total of 131 participants who were an average age of 20.69 years (range 16-24) responded to at least one question. Most participants (127 of 128 or 99.2%) reported not having children at the time of data collection. Between 60-70 respondents answered most of the closed ended questions. Tables 1-4 below summarize the responses to several of the multiple-choice questions.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Variable	Category	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Male	56	49.5
	Female	53	46.9
	Transgender Male	4	3.5
Race	White	107	81.6
	Black/African American	12	9.1
	Other	12	9.1
Education	Has not yet completed HS/GED	11	8.4
	HS Diploma/GED	40	30.7
	Current college student	70	53.8
	College graduate	9	6.9
Employment	Unemployed	25	19.2
	Unable to work	10	7.6
	Employed	95	73.0

Table 2. Romantic Relationships

Variable	Category	<i>N</i>	%
Participants' Relationship Status			
	Yes	33	68.7
	No	12	25.0
	It's Complicated	3	6.2
Friends' Relationship Status			
	All of them	12	22.2
	Most of them	24	44.4
	Some of them	13	24.0
	None of them	5	9.2
Friends' Relationship Assessment			
	Healthy	30	54.5
	Unhealthy	16	29.0
	Neither Healthy nor Unhealthy	6	10.9
	I don't know	3	5.4

Table 3. Participation in Previous Programming & Parental Support

Variable	Category	<i>N</i>	%
Previous Sex Education			
	Yes	48	92.3
	No	4	7.6
Previous Healthy Relationship Education			
	Yes	39	75.0
	No	11	21.1
	I'm not sure	2	3.8
Do Parents Support You Receiving Sex Education?			
	Yes	57	81.4
	No	6	8.5
	I'm not sure	7	10.0
Do Parents Support You Receiving Healthy Relationship Education			
	Yes	46	56.7
	No	19	23.4
	I'm not sure	16	19.7

Table 4. Risk Assessment

Variable	Category	<i>N</i>	%
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Do you consider yourself to be at risk for pregnancy/impregnating someone?			
	Yes	29	55.7
	No	21	38.1
	Not sure	2	3.8
Do you consider yourself to be at risk for a STI?			
	Yes	26	50.0
	No	20	36.6
	Not sure	6	10.9
How much do you think about pregnancy when making sexual health decisions?			
	Rarely or never	6	6.8
	Sometimes	35	40.2
	Very often	19	21.8
	Always	27	31.0
How much do you think about child support when making sexual health decisions?			
	Rarely or never	10	12.9
	Sometimes	22	28.5
	Very often	27	35.0
	Always	18	23.3

Salient Quotes from Focus Groups

- “It’s a hassle and a way of trapping someone. It’s often viewed as a negative thing for the mom to do to get back at the father.” (response related to thoughts on child support)
- “You must take on someone other than yourself and be considerate of their feelings too. It can be tedious. You might be worried about what might happen, especially if you’re traumatized from past experiences, you have to keep your guard up so you don’t get hurt.” (response to question on romantic relationships)
- “They break up families.” (perspective on family court)
- “It’s expensive and it takes a lot of time out of life. There’s a lack of maturity where babies are bringing babies into the world.” (on teen pregnancy)

- “It was convenient. It’s more for entertainment and then turned into something longer. I was looking for something to kill time and more of a situationship.” (on decision to enter into romantic relationship)

Based on the planning activities and resources given in Year One along with the focus group information, a pilot cohort group with nine participants began attending workshops on February 19, 2022. The curriculum schedule was as follows:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
<u>Exploring Gender and Values</u> -Pre-test survey -Intro to Empower You -Introducing Re:MIX -Getting the Gender Message	<u>Relationships, Communication, and Consent</u> -Understanding relationships -PAPA: Choosing Healthy Relationships -That’s What I am Talking About -Consent & Setting Limits	<u>The ABCD’s of Prevention</u> -PAPA: Recognizing Relationship Violence -Becoming An Adult -Condoms & Contraception -The Final Stage	<u>Planning for the Future</u> -A Baby Today/PAPA: The Cost of Parenting -PAPA: What is a Parent -PAPA: Establishing Paternity -PAPA: Benefits of Legal Fatherhood	<u>Commitment to the Future</u> -PAPA: Child Support -PAPA: Parents who don’t pay -PAPA: Parenting as a Team -Commitment to the Future -Post-test -Exit surveys

Target Population and Ongoing Grant Activities

Throughout the planning process, recruitment activities occurred through referrals from Healthy Start, the local community college system and various agencies represented in Neighborhood Places along with the groups mentioned. Presentations at community-based programs and events, such as the Kentucky Fatherhood Summit happened regularly, and flyers and brochures were widely distributed. The **Empower You** website was created to provide information to participants.

Initially, the target population consisted of young adults ages 15-19 years. The advantage of this cooperative agreement through Year One planning and collaboration with OCSE confirmed for our team that offering the program to 150 participants ages 16-24 years would be our final target population. Outreach to recruit, screen and enroll participants is ongoing.

As of February 10, 2023, 256 people have been recruited and 83 participants have completed the program. The ninth cohort began on January 21, 2023, with 16 participants, the largest group yet. The tenth cohort is scheduled to start on February 18, 2023. Content from the workshops is used to populate our social media sites and videos using staff and participants are being produced.

What's Next

The **Empower You** evaluation staff is continuing its work on collecting data and conducting interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of this program. The research questions are:

- How does providing young adults with an intervention featuring group-based child support and healthy relationship workshops, as well as individualized case management and peer mentoring impact their knowledge of the legal and financial implications of parenting?
- How does providing young adults with an intervention featuring group-based child support and healthy relationship workshops, as well as individualized case management and peer mentoring impact their current relationship intentions and behaviors?
- How does providing young adults with an intervention featuring group-based child support and healthy relationship workshops, as well as individualized case management and peer mentoring impact their attitudes toward postponing future parenting until they complete their education and enter into marriage?
- How does providing young adults with an intervention featuring group-based child support and healthy relationship workshops, as well as individualized case management and peer mentoring impact their post-high school educational or career development plans?

Evaluation staff will use a mixed methods design that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. Data will be collected pre-intervention, post-intervention, at three months, six months, and 12 months. Interviews with participants are transcribed and coding is ongoing.

The team will release two more briefs covering implementation lessons, challenges, successes, and replication guidance as well as intervention impacts on participants. At the end of the project, a program replication toolkit will be produced so that our partners can continue to deliver this important program to young adults.

Conclusion

The **Empower You** project provides young adults with an opportunity to make positive, informed decisions that will lead to greater economic mobility and responsible parenting. The goal is to set young adults on the path to a success sequence in their lives. In evaluating the project, it is our hope and intention to provide evidence that **Empower You** has positively affected attitudes to delay parenthood and that young adults will achieve their aspirations in finding a career, a healthy and happy relationship, and parenthood when they are ready.