

# Introduction and Overview of Intervention Design

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Parenthood Can Wait Program  
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## Introduction

The Missouri IV-D Family Support Division received a three-year, \$1 million grant from the Office of Child Support Services in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for the Charting a Course for Responsible Parenting and Economic Mobility Demonstration to fund the Parenthood Can Wait (PCW) program. This program focuses on teen parenthood with a core focus on improving youths' lives.

The primary goal of PCW is to leverage the child support program's expertise on the legal and financial responsibilities of parenting to educate and motivate teens and young adults. The PCW program provides activities and curriculum designed for at-risk youth in high school and youth in the custody of the Division of Youth Services (DYS), and offers learning through various educational strategies, including presentations, classes, pictures, case studies, experiential learning, assessments, videos, peer discussions, and other activities.

The curriculum consists of at least thirteen units. Each unit takes about one hour of instruction time, with time allowed for open discussion and input from students about delivered topics. The overall curriculum derives from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and introduces students to topics such as friendships, bullying, human needs, goals, social media, confidence, self-esteem, conflict and anger management, time management, financial responsibilities of parenting, and child support. The program's curriculum and activities help young adults gain the knowledge, skills, and access to resources likely to lead to success in pursuit of life goals, economic mobility, and responsible parenting. The core curriculum covers six units of personal development material, six units of financial literacy and one unit of child support information.

The Missouri IV-D Child Support Program uses the PCW program to address teen parenthood issues by targeting at-risk teens, who are enrolled in an alternative school or in the custody of the DHS. The program teaches high school age students to think about the choices they make about relationships, finances, and parenting. The curriculum is concept-based, engaging, research driven, interactive, thought provoking, and educational. By offering various parenthood curricula, including independent living skills, child support education, financial literacy, and mentoring services, the Missouri Child Support Program hopes to change teens' behavior and mindset to reduce the likelihood that they or their children will live in poverty. This program offers pre-parenthood content aimed at youth who are not yet parents and a teen parenting program for those who are already parents.

The thought is that the child support program can help prevent future need for its services by raising awareness and promoting responsible parenting. Increasing understanding of the financial costs of parenthood can be persuasive in helping teens

make responsible decisions around parenting. This includes gaining the knowledge and skills to become self-sufficient and maintain healthy relationships through adulthood.

Interventions designed to address teen parenthood may, in the long run, reduce rates of teen parenthood for multiple generations. Any strategy that increases the proportion of children growing up in stable two-parent families will help to reduce the rates of pre-teen parenthood in the next generation. Continuing to reduce teen pregnancy will help sustain the recent decreases in poverty, especially persistent child poverty.

## Overview

This brief focuses on the intervention design, program planning, collaboration, and overview of the target population chosen for the funded grant activities. Recipients of the PCW program are residents of a DYS facility or attendees of an alternative school or program.

Alternative schools in Missouri typically serve a small percentage of students compared to a regular public school system, but these students have elevated needs for individualized support and programs, and need a much higher teacher-to-student ratio to be successful. The focus of many alternative schools is also on helping the student develop the skills they need to reenter regular public schools when appropriate. Alternative schools provide a different educational approach for students who have had difficulty in mainstream schools or those whose needs typically cannot be met in a regular school. They serve students who are disengaged, disenfranchised, or disciplined by offering learner-centered alternatives to traditional schools.

According to the Missouri Department of Youth Services Deputy Director, Missouri has experienced falling numbers of youth requiring residential DYS care over the last few years. In 2021, 366 youth were committed to DYS. Of these, 88% were male. The average age of committed youth was fifteen years old. On average, these youth had attained 9.3 years of schooling at the time of commitment. Thirty-one percent of those receiving educational services were identified as having an educational disability, 48% had a history of mental health issues, and 45% had a history of substance abuse. Fifty-eight percent of youth were committed from metropolitan areas. This may be a direct effect of DYS' focus on providing individualized, comprehensive, need-based services that enable youth to successfully integrate or re-integrate into their home and community.

Incorporating two types of educational institutions allows us to compare and contrast the results of program delivery within two distinct environments which may provide additional value-added understanding and lessons learned.

The PCW program is delivered by trained facilitators who have experience delivering education to at-risk youth. Training of these facilitators was affected by COVID prevention efforts. To help address the situation, several Family Support Division staff effectively used their expertise to create and adapt learning modules for students and learning materials for facilitators. This represents a substantive effort on their part, not made easier by the fact that the Learning Management System (Canvas) experienced two major upgrades in the fall of 2021. The 102-page digital training manual developed by the Family Support Division for use by facilitators in the PCW program, along with in-person and virtual training sessions, supported facilitators as they learned to effectively deliver student educational content.

## **Background**

The Missouri IV-D Family Support Division and the PCW program's mission and vision directly align. The mission is to empower youth and young adults to become self-sufficient, resilient, and responsible citizens. The vision is to provide youth with parenthood curricula and financial literacy to delay parenthood until they have completed their education, gained financial independence, and entered a committed relationship.

Across Missouri, the teen birth rate has dropped over the last several years, although it is still higher than desired. According to Powertodecide.org, in 2020, Missouri ranked 12th highest in the nation for teen births. Most of these births were to older teens (age 18 and older), but many births were to teen parents for whom this was not their first child.

Missouri ranks 22nd overall in the United States in terms of the prevalence of mental illness among youth. This problem is further compounded by lower rates of access to appropriate care. The rate of Missouri youth with an emotional disturbance as the underlying reason for an Individualized Education Program is higher than the national average. Within the population of youth served by DYS, recent data suggest that around 16.2% of these youth had a diagnosed psychological or psychiatric disorder, but were not receiving appropriate treatment. About 31% of youth at the same point exhibited behavioral indicators of a psychological or psychiatric disorder not yet diagnosed. Around 36% had been diagnosed with a psychological or psychiatric disorder and were receiving appropriate treatment. Twenty-eight percent of youth had no history of psychological or psychiatric disorder and no indicators that an evaluation for such was needed.

Like many Midwest states, Missouri provides services to youth across the continuum of rural environments to densely populated urban areas. While most of the youth committed to DYS residential facilities are from urban areas, the relatively diffused population of the rural areas means that the rate per population count is similar.

Rather than using a traditional correctional style model, DYS uses a therapeutic youth development approach focusing on prevention and early intervention for youth at the front end of the system and provides a comprehensive and integrated treatment approach for those youth who have progressed in the system and are at greater risk of reoffending.

## **Procedures**

An array of strategies were incorporated to achieve the goal of the PCW program. The prominent student engagement strategies and evaluation strategies are detailed below as excerpts from the facilitator training materials.

## **Goals**

Overall, goals for this program include non-parent teen students receiving pre-parenthood curriculum regarding the benefits of delaying parenthood and teen parents within the chosen facilities receiving responsible parenting lessons regarding the benefits of delaying the births of subsequent children. Another overall goal is to provide curriculum on financial literacy where teens are taught how to manage their own financial future through the Junior Achievement financial literacy lessons.

## **The successful delivery of the PCW curriculum depends on reaching several interim goals including:**

- *Establishing action plans with partners* to develop a step-by-step plan that will be used to execute each partner's roles and responsibilities for the duration of the life of the grant.
- *Developing curriculum with partners* to develop the learning tools and topics for the PCW Program.
- *Implementing Pre-Parenthood Curriculum to non-parent youth* in conjunction with partnering agencies to implement the 13-week, one hour curriculum for teen participants.
- *Implementing Parenthood Curriculum to participants with children* in conjunction with partnering agencies to implement the 13-week, one hour curriculum for teen parent participants. These lessons will focus on responsible parenthood and financial literacy.

## Target Population

The program is designed to meet the developmental needs of middle (6th-8th grade) and high school (9th-12th grade) teens. The program has been designed for urban and rural school districts that support students with alternative education programs and within the Department of Youth Services' facilities.

The Missouri IV-D Family Support Division actively partnered with school districts to identify targeted cohorts of students that could benefit from the program's objectives. The identified participants are all at-risk students or students that have shown a need for mentoring or assistance in personal development skills. Specific populations of youth in DYS care were selected by those facilities. These schools and facilities include:

### *Alternative Schools*

1. Marshall High School Marshall, MO
2. Frederick Douglass High School Columbia, MO

### *Division of Youth Services*

1. W.E. Sears Poplar Bluff, MO
2. Sierra Osage Poplar Bluff, MO
3. Girardot Center for Youth and Families Cape Girardeau, MO
4. Fulton Treatment Center Fulton, MO
5. Camp Avery Troy, MO
6. Sikeston Hope
7. Sikeston, MO

## Student Engagement Strategies

### Strategy 1: Focusing on Learning Goals

- Inform students of learning goals. As you begin your classroom work, as well as each time you start a new lesson, state the learning outcomes clearly for students. In student-friendly language, discuss what the goals mean and why a person would want to know about this content.
- Invite self-assessment. Before launching a lesson, find out what students already know about a topic and what they might like to know. This could be done in written form, or in small or larger group discussions. Document and discuss their background knowledge, as well as their questions.
- Frame activities in the context of learning goals. As you invite students to engage in a learning activity, clearly describe or invite student discussion about how the task relates to the stated learning goal of the lesson. Students will gain most

benefit from the activities when they understand the purpose in terms of their own learning.

- Create opportunities for self-assessment and reflection. Invite students to assess themselves after they finish each learning activity. Remind students of the learning goal and invite a discussion about what learners do or perhaps do not yet understand based on their own experiences.
- Above all, support students by providing them with a sense of purpose – why they should know this, why they should do this, how it relates to their own lives – by talking about how the content relates to your life.

## **Strategy 2: Managing Learners**

- Make connections.
- Set a positive tone. Let students know that you are sacrificing time from your own schedule to work with them and that you are doing so because you care about their future.
- Expect respect.
- Give immediate, clear feedback. When students are on-task, engaged and cooperating, clearly state what you appreciate about those learners' behavior. At the same time, do not hesitate to gently but directly address students who are making unfortunate choices.

## **Strategy 3: Facilitating Discussions**

- Empathetic tone. When students feel safe to share their ideas and confident that divergent opinions will be respected, they will comfortably share their thinking with the larger group. You can create a safe space for discussion by emphasizing the value of respecting peers' thinking.
- Open-ended questions. Open-ended questions could be answered with a variety of multi- word responses; rather than a quick yes or no, these leave most room for students' original ideas and personal insights.
- Unbiased facilitation. After a student shares, resist the temptation to affirm or disagree with their comment – instead, turn that job over to the group. This keeps the discussion rolling and delegates the thinking and evaluating to the students.
- Patience. Research shows that if we offer students time to think after asking a question, we will be rewarded with more thoughtful, more complex responses. Even if a few hands are promptly in the air, feel free to pause before calling on anyone.



## Strategy 4: Positive Reinforcement

- Prompt. Students have the greatest opportunity to respond to and integrate feedback if they receive it promptly. Catch them in the act of being effective learners and share that information publicly. This will motivate students to keep up the good work and remind others of the task at hand and the expected behavior.
- Specific. When offering positive reinforcement, we are most effective when we describe what we see and appreciate about students' behavior, rather than using vague descriptors like, "Well done," or "Good job."
- Authentic. Be truthful with students about what you observe; false flattery will not help your credibility.

## Evaluation Strategy

The overall scope of evaluation for this project is underpinned by several evidence-based practices and theories. The evaluation uses the change theory identified in the logic models in the awarded grant and accurately reflects the state of development of the project including evaluation of short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. Data collected for this program is kept in the secured Learning Management System (LMS). Any additional data used for the evaluation is collected and maintained on a level-four secure server with all required physical security access mechanisms in place.

This goal-based evaluation focuses on capturing data about specific changes in the target population, including data regarding what knowledge and skills have been gained and to what degree, and what behavior, or beliefs participants have changed related to their education, work, or health status. This assessment will cover both knowledge gain and changes to beliefs and behavior that can then reliably assess the changes that have been a function of participation in the learning/knowledge-based training provided by the project.

The evaluation is planned to include a strong assessment of the utility of various content delivery methods and modes of the target student population and with facilities to help in further adaption of the curriculum to meet divergent needs. The evaluation is structured to provide data and knowledge needed to address feasibility issues, including the best ways to replicate the program.

The evaluative approach incorporates mixed methods with qualitative methods predominately used to assess the value project participants gain from the project. Qualitative methods used to collect data include, but are not limited to case study, interviews, naturalistic inquiry, focus groups, and surveys/polls. Qualitative data will be primarily used to provide value-based understanding and as an important

complement of the quantitative data collection and analysis. Qualitative and quantitative data are consistently collected through structured data collection tools, such as pre and post evaluation enabled by an LMS. Qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis are conducted at the individual participant level and then be aggregated to provide successively higher-level views of the data (individual course level, individual facility level, facility district level, etc.)

Specific goals for the evaluation include:

- Comprehensive assessment of program and its outcomes, including fidelity to the curriculum
- Multi-level evaluation, including evaluation at the program level, individual facility level, at the individual content module level, at the individual facilitator level, and at individual student level (which can be aggregated by demographic features, for example)
- Basic, reusable evaluation strategy leveraging LMS capacity
- Cost analysis (focus on strategy requiring a minimum of resources and as little manual entry of data by program staff as possible)
- Extensible (evaluation can be easily used as the program is offered in other facilities and other types of sites without substantive adaptation)
- Scalable (evaluation can be extended to larger than expected numbers of program participants)
- Useful to underpin evaluation of cost effectiveness of the program
- Serve as aid to replicability of similar efforts
- Enable sharing of lessons learned, including perhaps publication or presentation
- Aid in determining or refining logistical considerations, for example, optimal timing for participant success.
- Reduce dependence on alternative sources of data which can reduce both costs and errors related to data matching.

Evaluation is planned to allow for expansion based on the number of facilities hosting the program and on changing eligible student populations.