

What happened to the children?

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Jamaica: Teenage Mothers programme
Storytime for toddlers; the breadfruit tree providing shade

This article has been adapted from a tracer study of the Teenage Mothers Project that was based in May Pen in the rural Jamaican parish of Clarendon where there was a high rate of teenage pregnancy. The project operated from 1986 to 1996 and had three overall objectives: to decrease the number and frequency of teenage pregnancies in and around Clarendon; to address the development and training of the teenage mothers; and to lessen the likelihood of repeat pregnancies, thereby improving the life chances of the young child. The study was a follow-up to an earlier piece of research that traced the impact of the project on a sample of 10 mothers and children who were participants between 1986 and 1989, and compared these with ten other mother and child pairs who had not been in the project.*

The Teenage Mothers Project (TMP) tracer study followed up on an earlier study that concluded that the children under TMP care not only did much better than the control children, but were performing well by any standard.

An important objective of the tracer study has been to determine the extent

to which the early developmental difference noted in that first study may have been sustained, given the natural impact of environment, schooling and the fact that the TMP children would have left the TMP environment when they were aged three or four years, despite occasional home visits that continued afterwards.

The principal instrument used to assess whether the difference has been sustained was the School Performance Report, which comprised the final page of the children's questionnaire and which was completed in the interview with each child's teacher. Eighteen of these reports were completed. The two that were not completed were for

Paprika, the infant, and Vanilla, whose school in Florida had not returned her form. To some extent, the reports cannot be said to have the standardised base of a research instrument because different teachers could have given different values to the questions and assessments. However, teacher responses are considered a valuable component of

the earlier research and as a result, their use in this study has validity.

The teachers were all asked to score their student's academic achievement on the basis of a scale from five to one, where five is 'excellent' and one is 'weak' and the results confirm the findings of the earlier testing. In fact, they say more: not only did the early stimulation programme component of the TMP daycare put the babies ahead of their peers developmentally, but this superior performance has been sustained to the upper levels of Primary and All Age schooling.

Special note must be taken of the fact that at this stage in schooling in Jamaica, young adolescent males are known to 'fall off' in their performance when compared to girls. However, there is no difference in the performance of the four TMP boys in the sample when compared to the girls, which is remarkable!

Teacher interviews for several of the children revealed emerging leadership skills as well as outstanding language abilities (even if this sometimes presents a problem for a teacher in a

class of 50+ who says the student chats **too much**):

She is very articulate, speaks well. She displays leadership skills, but tends to chat.

She has leadership skills. She can be depended on to organise the class.

There were also children in the comparison group with satisfactory performances. However, in two cases, teachers could identify nothing outstanding about the student. In addition, the teachers of other students said:

She is inclined to provoke other children. She does not settle to her work.

He keeps on hitting and fighting the other children.

He hardly made one know he was in class.

The report of the original research refers to the rigid context of the traditional classroom as having a negative impact on TMP children (and,

no doubt, all children). This negative impact can only have been diminished by the strong developmental base the children received in the early stimulation programme and by the continuing influence of one other variable – the mother. The single variable that would have continued to influence the TMP child and enable good to excellent academic achievement in all cases but one, would have been the TMP mother, doubtless encouraging, insisting and motivating her child to perform well in school, to read, to attend school regularly. Apart from the early stimulation programme intervention, no variable can have created such a marked impact and contrast to the comparison group's academic performance as that of the TMP mother herself. ○

* Degazon-Johnson R (2001), *A new door opened: a tracer study of the Teenage Mothers Project, Jamaica*, Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections No. 13 (see page 58).



Jamaica: Roving Caregivers programme
Caregiver on homevisit.
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