

STEMM: Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring

By Educating a Mother, You Educate a Family

Overview

S.T.E.M.M. (Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring) was established in 2008 to meet the need for pregnant and parenting young women on the Sunshine Coast. The program aims to re-engage young mothers with education in a safe, non-judgemental environment and improve life outcomes for themselves and their children.

S.T.E.M.M.'s innovative wrap-around service model aligns with best practice research by Doctor Iain Hay (Figure 1). This is a key strategy and practice used to re-engage pregnant and parenting teenagers into education, assist them to gain independence, and improve the futures of their children. Dr Iain Hay (2008) states, 'teenagers will re-enter the education system as they consider their future and that of their child. Many of these young women lack a voice and require an agency to assist them with not feeling disengaged from friends, school and society'.

Research demonstrates that pregnant and parenting young people are less likely to finish their education, less likely to find a good job, and more likely to end up as single parents, bringing up their children in poverty (Hay, 2010).

The S.T.E.M.M. Program's approach to educating this marginalised group of young women is fundamental in implementing Education Queensland's values and mission regarding inclusive education. S.T.E.M.M. meets the Department's expectations that all Queensland state schools be supportive and engaging places for all school community members, including those who are pregnant or parenting.

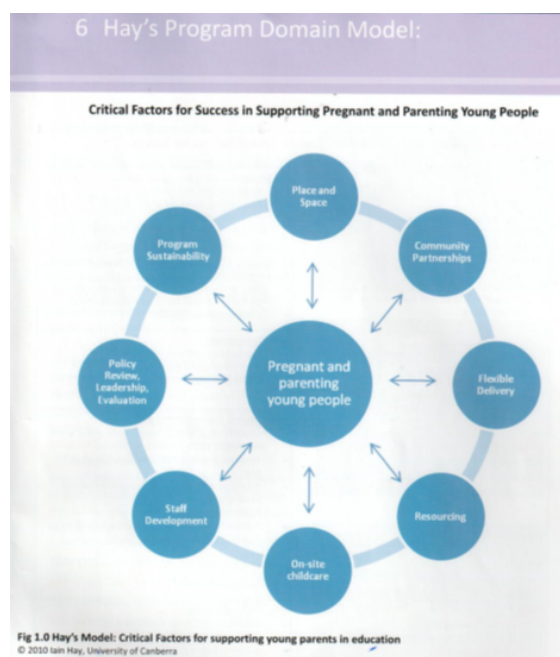


Figure 1: Hay's Program Domain Model

Our Clients

'By Educating a Mother, You Educate a Family.' This mantra provides the basis for measuring the remarkable success of S.T.E.M.M. through established partnerships with Education Queensland, Queensland Health, community and industry. S.T.E.M.M. engages students in inclusive schooling through an innovative, early intervention, wrap-around curriculum. Since 2008, S.T.E.M.M. has responded constructively to the needs of 160 educationally disadvantaged and marginalised students and provided transitions into employment or further training. S.T.E.M.M. graduates are leading inter-generational change by contributing to the Queensland economy and breaking the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency.

Statistics show that approximately 300 young women, 18 years and under, give birth in Nambour Hospital each year. Teenage motherhood is associated with significant health and social problems for the infant and the mother. Vulnerable young people who become parents also risk removal of their children into the Care and Protection System. Almost all S.T.E.M.M. students have disengaged from education and their families.

Very few school-aged mothers complete secondary school. For many of these mothers, this is because preventable barriers to continued schooling are not addressed. These barriers include inflexible school policies and procedures, a lack of adequate childcare and transportation, and other practical difficulties that make continuing education very difficult (Barling, 2007).

More than half of S.T.E.M.M. students live in unstable or unsafe situations and have experienced high levels of domestic violence. Many S.T.E.M.M. participants have histories of depression, homelessness, self-harm, intellectual impairment or have a Child Safety or Youth Justice background. More than one-fifth of participants have experienced childhood sexual assault or child abuse and/or drug addictions. Some young women have moved to the Sunshine Coast region in order to be able to access the S.T.E.M.M. program. Significantly, two-thirds of students believed they would be doing nothing without S.T.E.M.M. Many were concerned about becoming depressed, unhappy, lacking confidence and being lonely. Without S.T.E.M.M. these young women would remain uneducated and unemployed and they, along with their children, would be destined for a life of disadvantage and poverty.

S.T.E.M.M. addresses these needs and is proud to provide a unique and holistic learning hub with a focus on 'attachment', which is a critical factor for this group of 'at risk' students. The S.T.E.M.M. Program provides access to a responsive and flexible learning environment underpinned by respectful relationships. Young women can overcome the many societal and personal barriers that they encounter in a 'safe place' where they are welcomed and valued.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the S.T.E.M.M. Program are to:

- Provide a safe **place and space** for supporting young pregnant and parenting women in education.
- Develop **community partnerships** to aid funding and ensure a service delivery with the capacity to cope with the diversity and complexity of young parents' needs.
- Ensure **flexible delivery** to cater for students who are pregnant or parenting.
- Seek **resourcing** in the form of grants and funding, transport for access and program sustainability.
- Offer **on-site childcare** to enable the young women to continue to parent and learn valuable parenting skills while gaining an educational qualification.
- Support **staff development** to align with S.T.E.M.M.'s focus on attachment theory and to promote staff wellbeing.
- Arrange **policy review, leadership and evaluation** to ensure regular reflection, research and strategic planning to maintain quality outcomes.
- Plan for **program sustainability** by providing stability and seeking recurrent program funding.

Measurable Outcomes

Measurable outcomes of the implemented initiative are that:

- S.T.E.M.M. students have graduated with one or more certifiable educational qualifications.
- S.T.E.M.M. graduates have and will as they progress, transition to employment and increase their likelihood of becoming economically secure
- Through health support services and parenting education, there will be a removal of the risk that these vulnerable young women will lose their children into the Care and Protection System. No S.T.E.M.M. baby has gone into foster care whilst its mother is a part of the S.T.E.M.M. program.
- A young mother now knows how to take care of and love her child.

Our data shows that S.T.E.M.M. has achieved a significant increase in the participation rate of pregnant or parenting students in education by providing this unique learning environment model that recognises the need for inclusive delivery of learning. S.T.E.M.M. has improved the parenting skills of its participants and their abilities to balance education and family, while also increasing awareness for safe and supportive parenting, and relationships that promote parent and child wellbeing.

Young women who participate in S.T.E.M.M. are able to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage that many of them have endured during their lives. They experience increased attachment with their child and become strong, proud role models for their children and families. They defy societal expectations of unmarried and teenage mothers.

They need the support of S.T.E.M.M., the community and the Government to allow them to gain the skills and knowledge that will enable them to lead their family into a positive future.

As depicted in Figure 2 below, S.T.E.M.M. has had significant success in re-engaging its clients into either work (fulltime or part time) and or study (full time or part time). Of the 140 young women who we have tracked since leaving STEMM, 51% are working and a further 34% are studying in tertiary institutions. Many of the girls disclosed that STEMM gave them not only the skills but also the confidence to apply for and gain employment and entrance into Tertiary Institutions.

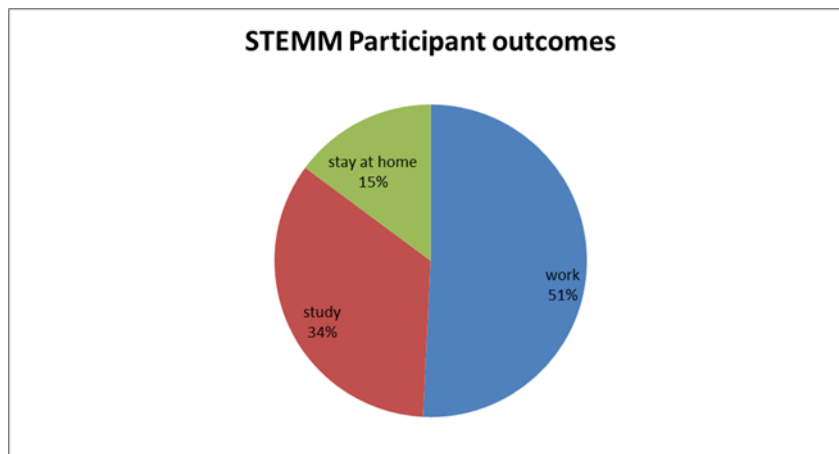


Figure 2: S.T.E.M.M Participant Outcomes

A baseline actuarial valuation of the lifetime liability of the income support system by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in conjunction with Data Analysis Australia (DAA) identified young parents as an area for further investigation. This report indicated that:

Young parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• About 1,500 females entered the system as young parents between the ages of 14 and 18 during 2015. Our analysis indicates that this group will have an average lifetime cost of around \$540,000, due to the level of payments made and their likelihood of becoming long-term welfare recipients.• This group are worthy of further investigation to understand what early interventions could be applied to improve their probability of becoming self-reliant in the future.
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Figure 2: Economic value of education for alienated girls.

2016 - 2017 S.T.E.M.M. graduation data to date shows that five young mums have finished their tertiary education and are now working in the industries of Education, Health and Community Services. Another four young mums have graduated from a Certificate Course and have gained employment. Based on these nine graduates, the S.T.E.M.M. program has saved the government in excess of 4 million dollars.

Social Justice

The [Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians](#) declares that 'all Australian governments and all school sectors must provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location.'

The S.T.E.M.M. Coordinators were involved in writing Education Queensland's Pregnant and Parenting Policy for Queensland Schools, as well as being founding members of the Australian Young, Pregnant and Parenting Network in 2009. They also participated in a national forum in Canberra in 2010 to implement the Federal Government's Young Parents Policy. In June 2013, S.T.E.M.M. coordinators were guest speakers at the Economic Security for Women (eS4W) Forum that focused on how women and girls are fairing in education today and identified the important issues that needed to be raised with the Australian Government and the wider community.

Additional industry research that supports the need for the S.T.E.M.M. program includes:

- Teenage parenthood is one challenge that can have a considerable impact on a young person's life and is associated with a number of adversities. For example, it is more likely to occur for young people from a low socio-economic background, who are under-achieving in their education, who misuse drugs and/or alcohol, or who engage in antisocial behaviours (Woodward, Horwood & Fergusson, 2001).
- In turn, young parenthood can act to further entrench some of these problems and perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage for both the young parent and their child. For example, by limiting the young parent's ability to engage in education, it can lead to further underachievement in education (Fergusson & Woodward, 2000; Jaffee, 2002).