

Moms growing together: Piloting action methods and expressive arts in a therapeutic group for teen mothers

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this pilot study was to test the safety, acceptability, feasibility, and effectiveness of Moms Growing Together (MGT), an intervention to prevent and reduce psychological distress in teen mothers.

Study Design and Methods: A mixed method design was used. The primary outcomes were reported satisfaction with MGT (acceptance); successful recruitment and retention of teen mothers (feasibility); and prevention or reduction of psychological distress (safety and effectiveness). Summary scores on each of three symptom measures operationally defined psychological distress. Sixteen African-American teen mothers participated in the study: eight in MGT and eight in a comparison group.

Results: MGT was considered safe and acceptable. MGT had a negative small effect (effect size [ES] = -0.028) on decreasing depression in participants and a moderate effect in reducing anxiety (ES = 0.395) and trauma symptoms (ES = 0.521-0.554) relative to the comparison group. Prolonged recruitment limited feasibility.

Conclusion: Because psychological distress casts a long shadow on teen mothers' well-being, developing teen-friendly clinical programs that address their mental health is a high priority.

KEYWORDS

adolescent mothers, psychological distress, group therapy, trauma

Psychological distress among teen mothers is prevalent, serious, and neglected: rates of self-reported depressive symptoms are two to four times higher for teen than older mothers (Clare & Yeh, 2012) and depressed mood often coexists with anxiety and trauma-related symptoms (Glasheen, Colpe, Hoffman, & Warren, 2015). Untreated symptoms often persist or increase over time (Brown, Harris, Woods, Buman, & Cox, 2012), with lasting effects for teen mothers (Patel & Sen, 2012) and their children (Hamilton, 2009; McDonnell & Valentino, 2016). In spite of high levels of distress, teen mothers rarely seek mental health care (Glasheen et al., 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study was to test the safety, feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of an innovative, teen-friendly group intervention to prevent or reduce teen mothers' psychological distress.

1 | BACKGROUND

Teen mothers are vulnerable to psychological distress due to the synergistic effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Hillis et al.,

2004) and the challenges of parenting in the context of chronic poverty, stigma, and limited social support (Boath, Henshaw, & Bradley, 2013; SmithBattle, 2013). Researchers have consistently reported a graded relationship between ACEs and chronic mental and physical illnesses over the life-course (Felitti & Anda, 2010) and learning and behavioral problems among urban youth (Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 2011), using the ACEs tool, which focused on children's exposure to household dysfunction. The original ACEs tool omitted adversities for disadvantaged and minority populations (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2013); adding such items (e.g., exposure to community violence, discrimination) increased the prevalence of children's physical and mental health problems (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2015). The full range of ACEs are common among disadvantaged teen mothers who tend to be recruited into research studies (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016). A higher number of ACEs predispose mothers to depression (Chung, Mathew, Elo, Coyne, & Culhane, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010) and symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Gapen et al., 2011). In studies with teen mothers, persistent symptoms of distress contribute to a closely spaced second pregnancy