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Partnership approaches that put children and families at the centre: Addressing adultism and empowering young parents

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Background/Issue

Young parenthood is often accompanied by stigma, which research identifies as a major barrier to engagement with essential supports and services (Corney et al., 2022). This stigma manifests in assumptions about incompetence and irresponsibility, leading to practices that undermine autonomy and erode trust. While service providers may intend to be youth-friendly, adultism, defined as attitudes and behaviours that privilege adult perspectives and diminish youth agencies, often persist in subtle forms (Bell, 1995; Kennedy, 2019). Adultism is reinforced through institutional structures, deficit-based language and tokenistic consultation, all of which limit young parents' influence over decisions affecting their lives.

Kennedy (2019) argued that adultism operates at attitudinal, institutional and internalised levels, shaping interactions and organisational culture. Marginalised young parents are particularly vulnerable, because these dynamics compound existing social disadvantage and can negatively impact self-efficacy and identity formation. Despite evidence that authentic youth-adult partnerships improve outcomes, adults frequently struggle to share power and foster genuine collaboration (Hall, 2019). This challenge is amplified in complex service ecosystems where time pressures and risk aversion lead professionals to override youth decision making 'for their own good'.

Action/Response

Brave Foundation's Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program exemplifies a relational, autonomy-supportive approach designed to counter adultism and centre young parents' voices. Brave, a national organisation founded, designed and led by individuals with lived experience of young parenthood, operates within a multi-sector environment encompassing health, education, housing and social services. Its Model of Mentoring positions mentors as allies, advocates and system navigators, roles that prioritise trust building, co-created goals and supported decision making designed to build autonomy in young parents.

Key strategies include:

- Relational, trauma-informed practice: mentors engage in non-judgmental listening, validate lived experience and co-design action plans that reflect parents' aspirations (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2023; Raposa et al., 2019);
- System navigation and advocacy: mentors help young parents interpret service systems, advocate for their needs and build confidence to engage independently;
- Cross-sector collaboration: Brave partners with schools, maternal health services, housing providers and youth agencies to align responses and reduce duplication; and
- Evaluation and learning: guided by theory-driven (Donaldson, 2021) and utilisation-focused principles (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2022), Brave co-develops Theories of Change with young parents and frontline staff to ensure monitoring and evaluation frameworks reflect lived realities.

Evidence supports mentoring as a protective factor against isolation and a catalyst for social–emotional development. Brave embeds mentoring within a holistic, wraparound model that integrates service coordination and governance practices, emphasising shared control with young parents.

Lessons learned

The following lessons emerged from Brave’s experience in implementing youth-centred partnership approaches.

- Adultism hides in plain sight. Even well-intentioned professionals can perpetuate adultist norms through deficit framing, overprotection and privileging professional expertise over lived experience.
- Language and power matter. Shifting from deficit-based narratives to strengths-based language signals respect and fosters agency.

- Authentic partnership demands structural change. Organisations must redesign governance and decision-making processes to distribute, not merely delegate, power.
- Mentoring is most effective when integrated. Embedding mentoring within coordinated service ecosystems enhances continuity of care and amplifies impact.
- Evaluation should centre lived experience. Brave’s MEL framework operationalises participatory evaluation, ensuring measures of success reflect what matters most to young parents (Brave Foundation, 2023).

Ultimately, partnership approaches that place young parents at the centre are not optional; they are essential for meaningful, sustainable change. When young parents’ voices, choices and strengths drive service design and delivery, outcomes extend beyond program metrics to transform systems and challenge entrenched inequities.

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