

HOME VISITS AND TEENAGE PARENTS

by Carol Winn

I consider my early intervention home visits as an adventure. I am invited into many different homes with a variety of environments, value systems, priorities and needs. I tell those who are curious about my work that, "There is not one day that is the same and that is one aspect of my work that I like."

The dynamics of families are somewhat different today from when I started my job journey. Now, there are two-parent families, single-parent families, grandparent families (those that are raising their grandchildren), multi-families living in the same household, and teenage parent families.

The teenage parent families are the most challenging families. The majority of teenage parents that I serve are single parents, primarily raising their child or children by themselves. Some have parental support and others have very little support at all.

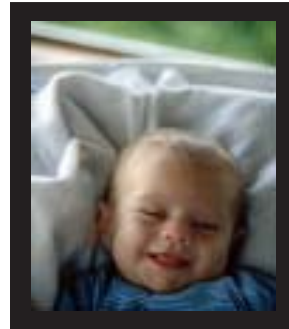
At best, the adolescent years are a time of great change, physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Most adolescents are still seeking their sense of self along with their independence. When you combine these developmental needs with a sudden role change that catapults them into the role of caregiver instead of care receiver, it can become complicated. Then add to the mix a child with a developmental delay or a disability, and it becomes more troublesome.

As I visit the homes of teenage single mothers, many of them are adjusting to abandonment by the father of their child. They lack financial stability, their once treasured dream of independence has been realigned, and the social circle they once enjoyed has shrunk to family members or work peers if they can find a job or afford child care,

I see a number of single teenage mothers living with their parents. I see great parental support. I see overly supportive parents who tend to edge out the mother and try to take on the role of parent rather than grandparent. I see some teenage mothers that are doing a great job in their new role. I also see teenage mothers who push the responsibility of their child with a disability onto their parents, because they cannot take on the reality of meeting the child's needs. I see parents of teenage parents who must step in and care for the child when alcohol, drugs, neglect or abuse are evident. I also see a teenage two-parent family staying together trying to cope and to meet their child's special needs even though they are financially overwhelmed.

So, how do I approach these teenage parents? I go into their homes with respect not with judgment. Judgment is not my job. I hope to gain their trust and show them that I care and how to enjoy their child with a disability. I try to create a teaching, not preaching environment, where they can learn by doing, one step at a time. And learn in a non-threatening situation to care for, nurture and love their child. Sometimes my visits are looked forward to, because the parents are lonely. They want to show off their baby's successes. They will ask for advice and help on medical issues and even job information. They seek approval. I try to create a sense of advocacy so they can do for themselves as much as they can. I focus on the teenage parent, giving eye contact when speaking about their child, but still interacting with others who may be present.

Some teenage parents do not want me there at first, others never do. Some are reluctant to see my visits come to an end. My heart "tugs" for those teenage parents and their child or children who do not understand the need for my services and, most of the time, are "no shows." My heart is full when I see progress in both the teen parent and the baby or toddler when transition times come. My work is finished here...as I turn and knock on another door.



Carol Winn holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education from Brigham Young University. She is an early intervention specialist employed with the Up to 3 early intervention program at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. Ms. Winn has extensive background and training in the area of hearing loss through the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind. She is a national AHEAD trainer and conducts trainings for early interventionists locally and nationally.