Towards an arts-based intervention for pregnant adolescents: Improving safety, maternal sensitivity, HIV outcomes, and mental health

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In South Africa, 16% of young women are pregnant by the time they turn 19.¹

Two-thirds of adolescents report physical, emotional or sexual violence by family or a partner.²

Young women are at disproportionately higher risk of acquiring HIV.²

Adolescent pregnancy and early motherhood are associated with increased levels of mental health problems in low-and-middle-income settings.

Yet virtually no packages of care are tailored to them. There are few psychosocial interventions in healthcare or community settings.

1. Stats SA. Demographic Health Survey. 2018
Methods

- We piloted 6 sessions of an arts-based approach to working with pregnant adolescents experiencing past-year IPV or rape.
- Adolescents were recruited from public antenatal clinics in Johannesburg by our community advisory board of 4 young mothers.
- Individual and group sessions comprised arts-based interventions, including projective tools and storytelling, psychoeducation, self-regulation and safe parenting skills.
- For those HIV+, there was focus on treatment adherence.
Methods

• The intervention was delivered by 4 art therapy masters students who received 40 hours of training, individual supervision from a registered art therapist, and group supervision including response art.

• We assessed feasibility through focus group discussions with participants and interventionists.
ALL SESSIONS: - Mindful self-regulation - Psychoeducation - Safety planning - Warm referrals (as needed) - PMTCT check in (for HIV-positive)
According to me, I think the best situation now is that I would love to be happy for my beautiful sons, to love people and give them more happiness.

Right now I'm at a bad time, because of things I've been going through. Since I'm pregnant.

My solution to this challenge is talking to my mother.
Dancing for a Song

NGILIMELE

By

n=108 Adolescent pregnant women in Johannesburg

Median Age: 17 years (range 12-18)

Gestation: 26 weeks

19% Shack
29% Single room

n=22 HIV+

30% on ART

29% Food insecure

Median monthly income

R2,000
AIM 1. Of n=108 participants in QUANT

- high levels of social and psychological co-morbidity
- violence exposure predicts depression, anxiety and PTSD

22 participants agreed to join the intervention arm of the study – parental consent was secured

ANC environment not adolescent friendly; judgmental service provision; high levels self stigma and community stigma

Participants initially hesitant and distrusting – especially first meeting at Lefika – CAB bridge
For me, telling someone who doesn’t know about this place, I would tell them they should come here because this place is not like the others. You can be free here, you can talk to people about the things that are bothering you, you can talk, no one will judge you. Your issues are private...this place helps with your self-confidence even if you did not have it, it helps you think about other things, or how things happened. You do not care what other people are saying, you just continue with your life, you can even raise your child well and bond with your child.
OK: Ya, because you end up seeing a skill you didn't know you had.

LN: It's different from us just talking looking at each others' eyes, but when we create something and then talk about it, it becomes better to talk about it.

ZN: When I was doing it, I had no idea what I was doing, but when I was done there was a picture. Ok, and I learn things about myself in it.

QN: ...remember the time we did the drawing and pasting? It would show your true self, the thing you did not know about yourself. You end up explaining about yourself, even things you weren't aware of.
L: I think it's valuable and if we can do more a lot of young people could engage in this. They could process a lot of what's happening to them. One participant said “when you do this activity, for some reason it's just an activity, but given an opportunity to actually reflect on it, you actually realize you processing things about what's happening in your mind and what you thinking” and I think when I heard her say that I was like “Aha, we did the right thing” this is exactly what we want them to think about and process about themselves.
What we learned…

• The engagement in non-verbal processing facilitated through arts-based methods led to increased insight into personal experience.

• Exploring materials and partaking in a spirit of non-judgement and curiosity, regardless of artistic ability, seemed to spur active involvement, increased reflective functioning and creative problem-solving.

• Participants reported valuing individual sessions; they were able to talk openly to a caring adult, alleviating stigma and mental health burden. Group sessions helped draw from other adolescents facing similar challenges, but several reported reticence around self-disclosure in this space.

• Art-making was reported by adolescents and interventionists as an enjoyable and “containing” approach to dealing with strong emotion and trauma-related stories, serving a regulating function.

• Interventionists required consistent supervision to manage complex, often shocking, narratives of violence among this highly vulnerable population.
Response art of interventionists

- Process of creating an artwork in response to a session – deeply personal and used as a point of reflection (process vs. product)
- Artmaking ability not as important as the ability to activate non-verbal means of reflection and meaning making
- This creative process turns purposeful, it becomes a form of living inquiry and a great reflexive tool for clinical supervision and qualitative research
The white bear.

Time Too much ... too much?
Hungry
Wait, wait, wait, wait

It's too long
Hungry
Still something?

Relax... My life ... Nurture...
Shy... My story... open... My resilience...
Love... My challenge... My desire to do wise...

My best...
Our qualitative reflection on a pilot arts-based intervention suggests this is a feasible and acceptable means of working with pregnant and parenting adolescents.

Both participants and interventionists reported on the therapeutic advantage of using non-verbal methods.

Further research to assess whether arts-based methods improve health, wellbeing, and reflective functioning for adolescents in LMICs would be valuable.
Warm thanks…

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Our interventionists:
Linda Mazibuko, Lauren Ross, Alexandra Zimeray & Kerryn Irvin

Our community advisory board:
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Our investigative team:
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Our mentors:
Nicola Christofides, Suzanne Maman