



Teen parent program adopts LENA Start to grow connections between clients, children

Young parents in Boulder County, Colorado, have a unique resource available to them: GENESIS, a home-visiting program for women who have become pregnant before age 20, which helps families support the arrival of a healthy baby.

Each family is assigned a caseworker who helps to connect them with community resources and parenting education.

Realizing that a home-visiting model provided limited opportunities for families to connect with each other, GENESIS partnered with the Outreach United Resource (OUR) Center in Longmont to offer LENA Start classes, which are delivered to parents in a group setting.

"We're excited about LENA Start because we know it's a research-based program that is geared towards communication," Mary Faltynski, Public Health Nurse and GENESIS Coordinator said.

"We know that kids of teenage moms have lots of risk factors, so we wanted to engage them in a program to help them be more ready for school."

LENA Start classes teach parents how to increase interactive talk with children, a key factor in early brain development. The program is scalable, cost-effective, and designed to increase social capital.

Addressing the achievement gap

The idea to offer the classes was born out of a conversation at a Boulder Valley School Board meeting that Faltynski attended.

"The data director was sharing information illustrating that the delays that are present in children at third grade never improve," she said.

Studies show that's the case not just in Boulder, but across the United States. Reading proficiency in third grade — which is built upon the foundation of early language skills — is a strong predictor of high school graduation rates.

Seeing the data, Faltynski realized she needed to act.

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Though she was nervous to launch LENA Start, describing the program as “a little ambitious for us” compared to the monthly group outings GENESIS historically offered for families, the potential benefits justified increasing the scope of the program.

Benefits for children

At weekly classes, parents attending LENA Start learn practical strategies for interacting with children, like getting down on their level and following their lead.

“Since we’re kind of running a little day care while the parents are in the class, the children are getting socialized. They’re getting used to separating from mom, being in a safe environment, then rejoining with mom. Those are skills that they’re going to need in child care, Head Start, or school,” Faltynski said.

Benefits for parents

Many of the moms enrolled in the GENESIS program attend LENA Start classes with their partners, strengthening the entire family system.

“We’ve seen some really interesting progress already. Many of the families who are coming to the LENA program at the OUR Center are some particularly high-risk families,” Faltynski said.

People who become parents before age 20 face a unique set of challenges. They may be ready to live independently, but lack the financial resources to do so. Others are working to graduate from high school, while also managing a full-time job. Often, young parents lack the family support that they desperately need, Faltynski said.

Participant Mathew Spar had his first child at 19, which, he noted, was older than any of his siblings were when they became parents. Though he was thrilled to welcome a baby boy, he and his wife suddenly found that they were doing very different things than most people their age.

“We have friends who are 21 who are out drinking, they’re all in college, and my wife stays at home and I’m a machinist,” he said. “My wife’s confidence went through the roof when we came to LENA Start and she realized that there are other people our age who have children.”

The three-month format gives families an opportunity to build real friendships, beyond what an occasional group outing could facilitate.

“A lot of teen parents are isolated. They can’t hang out with their friends like they used to. Often people lose the friends that they had before they were pregnant,

so they need to meet other teen parents to have a peer group that they can relate to,” Faltynski said.

LENA Start classes encourage community and lay the groundwork for long-term connections. For example, several families met people in the program who live nearby, meaning their children will likely enter kindergarten at the same neighborhood school together.

A friendly competition developed in the classes as parents received their feedback reports with the amount of conversational turns, adult words, and TV/electronic noise their children experienced. They tried to increase the numbers from week to week.



Young moms have the opportunity to make new friends with similar stories at LENA Start classes.

“Being part of the LENA program has been pretty great. It’s been nice to quantify the data of how much you’re talking with your son and how much he’s talking back to you,” Spar said. “The second graph on that paper shows that your kid is responding to the things that you say — and that’s a great feeling.”

Local stories, national results

Nationally, the LENA Start program has been replicated in more than 20 communities across the country and has reached over 2,200 families. Results from initial implementations show an 80 percent graduation rate, with improvements in key areas.

More than 70 percent of families are having more conversations with their babies. Families report reading 56 more with their children by the end of the program. And children’s language scores are growing almost twice as fast as comparison groups.

Parents also complete a survey on their perceptions of parenting at both the first and final sessions. At graduation, parents showed increases on items related to having a deeper understanding of child development, decreased stress, and increased self-efficacy.

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The Genesis Program is excited to see those results locally for both parents and children as LENA Start expands in Boulder County.

"This program is something that parents felt comfortable with, they're engaged, and they're coming week after week," Faltynski said. "And we're already seeing that the children seem to be exhibiting more verbal behavior — we're hearing more words."



Children whose families are enrolled in LENA Start are developing language skills almost twice as fast as children in comparison groups.

Learn more about LENA Start!



LENA Start is a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk in order to close the early-talk gap, support kindergarten readiness, and build stronger families.

Visit www.lena.org/lenastart for more information.