

# A Planning Journey

## Roadmap for Conducting Community Assessments

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# Why This Journey

Drawing on the practical experience of **Project Maine Families**, this guide is for local leaders who want to mobilize their communities to address the needs of children and families and ultimately reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect. **Project Maine Families** is a five-year federally-sponsored demonstration project to institute a comprehensive set of prevention activities in two Maine counties, with plans for statewide dissemination. This guide focusses on a single, specific prerequisite for creating community-wide prevention plans: *the assessment of community needs*.

Its intent is to encourage leaders in other communities to undertake prevention planning and to provide guidance in determining the needs of children and families, analyzing the adequacy of existing efforts, building consensus, and deciding what programs should have the highest priority.

## Family Support: A Fact of Modern Life

One young mother is troubled because her infant spits up his formula after each feeding. Is he receiving enough nourishment? She calls her mother, herself a mother of four, for advice. A dad drops his two-year-old daughter off at a day care home each morning and she clings to him crying. Is this normal? A teenager is pregnant. She wants to keep the baby but does not want to drop out of school. Can she manage both? A mother of a colicky baby has not gotten a full night's sleep in six months. Her nerves are ragged and she is having trouble controlling her temper.

Issues such as these face parents and parents-to-be every day in every community. Some are easily resolved through a call to a relative, trusted friend or professional. Others require longer-term assistance from family or community helpers. For all families, raising children is a challenging task. Some families receive more help than others because they live close to relatives, have a circle of friends ready to support them, or have the money to hire professional help—be it

babysitters, physicians, counselors—whenever it is needed. Others need to turn to the community for support. Whichever is the case, **Project Maine Families** has learned that parents know what they need and can articulate it, even if they cannot always provide for it without assistance.

The consequences of ignoring the need for family support, in the long term, can be dire. The most palpable signs are the escalating reports of child abuse and neglect, both nationally and in Maine. Since 1984 such reports have risen about 80 percent, resulting in a growing number of children being placed in substitute care. However, many problems are shielded from public view, and their effects are less immediately apparent because they are harder to measure. They are often manifested in joyless family lives in which parents and children simply cannot meet each others' needs, or worse, in relationships which erupt into open hostility or violence. If and when these cases come to the attention of the formal child welfare system in Maine, they are classified as "parent-child conflict" or "families in crisis due to interpersonal ... problems" and are screened out from receiving assistance. In fact, over 2700 such referrals were turned away in 1991 alone. The public system simply does not have the resources to deal with them. Nor should it. Support for families is best provided in the community, not under the cloak of governmental intrusion but under the umbrella of local people helping local people, be they neighbors, relatives or employees. Different and innovative strategies are needed: using institutions, skills, dollars, programs, and services in new ways, such as bringing counsellors to the workplace, using neighbors to help neighbors, letting teen parents support teens, making schools a focal point for parent education and assistance. In the journey to improve family life, it is not sufficient to focus narrowly on a single group of parents, or a narrow range of issues. The focus must be on the *community* and all the families who live and work within it.

## It Takes a Community to Raise a Child

What is needed is a comprehensive community-wide strategy for addressing all the vital needs of modern families, a strategy that enhances their nurturing capacity, and reduces the factors that place parents under stress and put children at risk. The ways in which individuals and organizations reach out to families needs to be better coordinated. Businesses, churches, schools, civic groups and other organizations need to participate in a spirit of collaboration. Together, all of them need to find ways to help parents better understand the needs of children as they grow, reconcile the competing demands of work and home, improve their

family management skills, make constructive use of community resources, cope with stress, and offer emotional support to each other.

**Project Maine Families** has put these concepts into practice in two Maine counties. Through collaborative planning involving all segments of the community, and especially the parents, a range of programs and activities have been initiated: parent cooperatives, school-based drop-in center, parent education classes, day care for pregnant teenagers, Project SOAP, family events, community technical assistance, home visitors programs, expanded recreational opportunities.

This booklet provides a roadmap to community assessment and planning so that others can learn from and emulate the **Project Maine Families** experience.



# Creating Community-Wide Prevention Plans

## Planning the Journey

The planning process begins when one agency or a consortium of individuals or organizations decides to convene the planning process and act as a catalyst. This does not mean that the plan that results is the organization's exclusive document. Rather, the aim is to engage a widening array of institutions and organizations in making decisions about prevention, so that the plan genuinely becomes community property—the expression of the key decisionmakers in the locale, including parents themselves, about how a community-wide prevention effort will be implemented. The convening agency or consortium organizes and structures the planning process, recruiting other participants, providing administrative support, and offering technical assistance along the way.

One of the early planning steps is to conduct a *community needs assessment*. This is a process whereby the needs of children and families are identified and prioritized; the level, scope and impact of the current array of programs and services are determined; and the areas requiring concentrated effort are brought to light.

The first step in planning the assessment is to identify the uses and the users of the information that will be gathered. Then the information needed is identified, and its availability and location are considered. This leads to a set of decisions about the methods to be used in gathering and analyzing data—reviewing demographic and socioeconomic information, interviewing key informants, conducting surveys, organizing focused discussions of critical issues.

**Project Maine Families** has used what is known as a “social marketing” approach as a key component of its needs assessment process. With social marketing, data collection and analysis are organized around the perceptions,

suggestions, and preferences of people from selected family types in the community. *The underlying premise behind this approach is that the best sources of information about the needs of families are family members themselves.* Their perceptions of themselves may not be 'scientific' but, given the opportunity, they have much to tell us about their experiences as parents, their concerns, and the kinds of programs in which they would participate if they were available. Parents' views on these subjects are analyzed in relation to the statements of experts and other knowledgeable and influential people locally and elsewhere. Then, the statements are considered in light of information about current programs, problems, risk factors, and other documentary data that help planners evaluate the capacity of the community to respond, the potential demand for particular programs that might be suggested, and the areas in which early action is most likely to produce good results.

At the same time that the assessment is being conducted the convening agency or consortium should organize a community planning group to review findings and use them to prepare the community-wide plan. Members could include representatives of family day care, schools, recreation departments, clergy, businesses and parents, among others. This group develops strategies for plan development and implementation and decides who else in the community needs to be involved. The planning group authorizes and evaluates pilot projects and moves the planning process to its conclusion.

This manual describes the social marketing method of assessing community needs utilized by **Project Maine Families**.

## Conducting the Assessment

Community planners preparing to assess local needs first must come to grips with the purposes of needs assessments whatever their focus, scope, and methodology. These purposes include:

- *Establishing a common vocabulary of problems, needs, programs, and family types.* To plan effectively and collaboratively, everyone needs to speak the same language. Thinking about needs constructively requires that everyone agree on the meaning of basic terms, labels, and key phrases.
- *Developing new information.* The range of problems and needs of families and the range of programs and services presently available to address them need to be documented and codified.

- *Generating findings that will enjoy the confidence of people whose support for the community-wide prevention plan is critical.* We may think we already “know” what the needs are. But others—especially those whose professions and priorities fall outside the child welfare or social service arena—will want to know how we drew our conclusions and how we gathered and analyzed the information that gave rise to them.
- *Testing and checking assumptions.* Thoroughness, accuracy, logic, and freedom from bias are the criteria which should be checked..
- *Building community-wide awareness.* This included awareness of child and family issues and interest in, and support, for the emerging plan. Assessing the community’s needs means, in large part, talking to many people about those needs, telling them why we are asking, and explaining what we expect to do with the answers. The process is

## Unexpected Findings

As a result of its needs assessment, interventions designed for the Cumberland County **Project Maine Families** took quite a different form than what the planning group initially expected. Initially, the planning group thought it would be expanding its roster of current programs—those being conducted under its own auspices. As a result of the assessment, the idea of collaboration emerged, and the whole structure of the project changed. An array of other groups—the local public library, a public school, a day care center among them—are now sponsoring new programs, organized with the help of the **Project Maine Families** staff.

The rural setting of Franklin County made that assessment important in a different way. That planning group already knew much of what was happening in the area. Few surprises emerged. However, the assessment helped to determine program priorities and gave the planning group concrete and substantive information to work from. If people took exception to programs as they developed, it was possible for the first time to say, with confidence: “Look, this is what the community told us to do.”

Another use of the assessment is that it allowed the Franklin County Children’s Task Force to become a community resource for technical assistance. The information gathered has proved helpful in designing programs and seeking grant support. By making the information available to other agencies, Franklin County Children’s Task Force is forming a basis for collaboration on family enhancement programs on a broader scale. It will also use its knowledge of the community to help church groups or parent groups to raise funds for specific smaller scale projects they want to do themselves. This enables both community organizations and parents to identify their needs and find ways to meet them. Both Franklin and Cumberland County’s sponsors found the assessment and its findings useful when enlisting the support of other organizations. Instead of just asking for help, they can offer the results of the assessment itself as a tool for helping other organizations in their planning processes.

intrinsically interesting, and has the potential to capture the interest of many key constituencies, not the least of whom are parents themselves. Others include business and governmental leaders, service providers, and charitable organizations.

- *Organizing and displaying information about needs systematically.* Through this process the issues and problems affecting families can be viewed in relation to the programs, services, and activities now directed to meeting family needs. This stimulates creative thinking and provides a way to test ideas and assumptions against the facts.

## Methods for Collecting Data

To complete the needs assessment, four kinds of information are collected, analyzed and compared:

- Statements of selected individuals about family needs
- Inventory of current programs and services
- Secondary data—statistics, demographics, budget data, program information, problems data (abuse and neglect incidence, AFDC utilization, unemployment, teen pregnancy, school dropout, etc.)
- Information about prevention projects in other locales.

***Statements of individuals*** enable planners to explore the viewpoints of people whose opinions matter most to them—parents, experts, practitioners, advocates, community leaders and service providers. These viewpoints can be assembled and compared in searching out areas of widespread agreement on the needs. It must be kept in mind that the data gathered are hardly dispassionate in their character. They are often profoundly affected by yesterday's headlines. They will reflect the perspectives, prejudices, and interests of various kinds of people, and are therefore not "clean" in the sense that we like to believe that the secondary data sources, described below, are. But these opinions can be aggregated and compared to determine how different kinds of people view the same issues. Most important, respondents can be asked to suggest ways the community should respond. These suggestions will prove particularly useful in generating new ideas from many sources.

In our description of how to collect information from individual sources, below, we have divided the discussion between practitioners and parents. This is because a community survey employing more formal interview processes are used with the former while focus groups are used with the latter.

***Inventory of services*** allows planners to determine two critical factors: one is whether a particular kind of parent support or preventive service exists at all in the community; the second is whether there is a program, service provider or infrastructure that can logically be built upon in developing a new program which addresses a identified need.

***Secondary data*** provide a somewhat more objective way to view community problems and needs. This information—data on employment patterns, income levels, population density, utilization of programs and services, levels of social and health service expenditure and effort, human problem incidence information—are useful in defining the character of a locale, the extent and configuration of problems for children and families, and the degree to which existing programs are responding. Secondary data deepen planners' understanding of their community and provide a framework for considering the statements of individuals. But secondary data, however illuminating, cannot "tell" planners what to do.

People in the county may know that school dropout rates are higher than the average in a particular locale. However, knowing its does not lead immediately to a programmatic solution. Planners still need to consider which responses, in what combinations, are called for. Secondary data do help people to think through the feasibility of specific proposals for programs. For example, a suggestion to target teenage parents as a priority population must be analyzed in relation to the frequency of teen pregnancy in the locale and the number of teenage parents who might participate in proposed programs.

***Information about programs in other locales*** helps generate ideas that might have application in the target community. It also enables planners to contact those other programs to get a sense of the achievements and problems experienced elsewhere. Planners can compare the assumptions and objectives that influenced design of those programs to see if they have validity and promise in the target locale.

The steps, then, in conducting the needs assessment are one, gathering statements of individuals through a community survey; two, gathering statements of parents through focus groups; three, gathering information on current programs and services; four, gathering and analyzing secondary data; and five, gathering information on model programs in other locales.

## Step 1

### ***Gathering Statements of Individuals Through a Community Survey***

We have said that **Project Maine Families'** social marketing approach builds on the statements of people from selected family types, such as single parent families, families with two working parents, parents of newborns, income maintenance recipient families, and so on. This does not mean that the very first steps involve setting up extended discussions with those families. Planners must first determine the key questions that family respondents will answer, and identify which kinds of families should be included in the discussions. They also need a sense of the views of service providers, churches, and others in the community who may ultimately be asked to deliver programs or assist in their planning. To receive this input, **Project Maine Families** began by developing a community survey of key informants. Their responses helped shape the ultimate program plans. The survey also served as a mechanism for informing important individuals, including those in the business sector, about the existence of the planning process and the need for their support. To carry out this process the activities include selecting survey informants, designing the survey instrument, contacting and interviewing the people, and seeking other sources of data.

***Selecting survey informants*** Interview subjects may be drawn from the following groups:

- Providers of services to children and families—social service organizations, public agencies, hospitals and health care providing institutions
- Persons knowledgeable about children and family issues and problems—sociologists, child welfare and public health experts, advocates and advocacy groups
- Influential community leaders—elected officials, clergy, other shapers of values and opinions
- Educators and school officials

Selection of particular people from each of these categories should follow from answers to the following questions:

- Who is most knowledgeable about the needs of children and families in this community?
- Whose opinions and viewpoints have the greatest influence?

- Who is most likely to put assessment findings to effective use?

***Designing the survey instrument.*** The purpose of the community survey is to capture the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the issues and problems confronting families in the locale. The survey instruments should make it possible to determine (1) the relationship of the respondent to family issues (e.g., service provider, policymaker, government official, funder, educator), (2) the respondent's perception of family problems and needs, (3) the extent to which the respondent is associated with current efforts to support family well-being and the nature of that association, (4) the respondent's views of the most compelling needs, (5) the respondent's ideas about the characteristics of families in need, and (6) the respondent's views of the most important programs required to address these needs.

The survey instrument should be in a uniform format, with questions specific to various respondent types

## Service Provider Assessment Form

1. Does your agency currently offer programs which assist families and/or address family problems:  
If yes: what are they?
  - a. Are any of these programs set up specifically to address child abuse and neglect prevention?  
  
Which ones?  
  
How?
  - b. Do any other programs not designed to address child abuse indirectly impact on the problem?  
  
How?
  - c. Did your agency ever offer any child abuse prevention programs?  
  
What were they?  
  
Why were they discontinued?
2. What do you see as the major problems and concerns facing the children and parents among your clients?
3. What kinds of programs or services do you think are needed to address these concerns?

placed in an optional questions sector. It should be possible to complete the instrument during a single face-to-face encounter lasting no more than one hour. Telephone interviewing is an option if there is a need to save time and money in this process. The organization of the questions should facilitate easy coding and sorting of responses.

***Contacting and interviewing key informants.*** The people interviewed, for the most part, will be busy people: program directors, business executives, educators, day care center owners, managers of social service agencies, government officials. To facilitate their constructive participation, their needs must be kept in mind and their time must be well and efficiently spent. The following key steps will help to ensure an efficient process: (1) send a letter to the potential interview subject explaining the project, the uses, purposes, and methods of the community survey and a request for an interview; (2) have a follow-up telephone conversation to answer questions and establish an interview date; and (3) conduct the interview itself. The burdens on the respondent should be minimized as much as possible; that is, the schedule should fit his or her needs, not yours, and the location should be convenient for the person being interviewed. If conducting a telephone interview instead, it may be possible to do the interview in the first call if you catch the person at a good time. Otherwise, two calls will be needed, one to set up the telephone appointment and the second to conduct the interview. Occasionally, people will ask to see the questions in advance so they can think about their responses or check with other individuals whom they represent. There is nothing wrong with providing the questions in advance.

When interviews take place, respondents should be invited to ask questions and seek clarification concerning the uses of the information they are going to provide. They should also be asked whether they are interested in participating in the planning process, and what they think they might contribute. The interviews should proceed from the survey instrument, each question presented in order. A place on the form should be allocated for additional comments and suggestions.

## Assessment for Businesses

1. Does your organization currently offer programs which assist families and/or address family problems?

How about:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> EAP                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Daycare; on-site     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wellness Program          | <input type="checkbox"/> Referral             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FLEX/PART-TIME            | <input type="checkbox"/> SLOT PURCHASE        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FAMILY MEDICAL LEAVE      | <input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY LEAVE       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS     | <input type="checkbox"/> PARENTING LEAVE      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> STRESS REDUCTION PROGRAMS | <input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PARENT/CHILD PHONE CALLS  |   |

- a. Are any of these programs designed to address child abuse and neglect prevention? If yes, which ones? How do these relate to child abuse and neglect? If no, do you think any others relate to child abuse and neglect?
- b. Did your organization ever offer any of these programs? What were they? Why were these programs discontinued? Please complete an inventory sheet for each one.
2. What do you see as the major problems/concerns facing the children and parents in your organization?

How about:

- | <b>Personal</b>                          |   | <b>Social</b>                                |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day Care        | <input type="checkbox"/> Sick Leave       | <input type="checkbox"/> Child Abuse/Neglect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stress          | <input type="checkbox"/> Job Security     | <input type="checkbox"/> Substance Abuse     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finances        | <input type="checkbox"/> Dependent Care   | <input type="checkbox"/> Teen Pregnancy      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing         | <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting        | <input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Afterschool Care | <input type="checkbox"/> Neighborhood Safety |

3. What kinds of programs do you think are needed by families in your organization to address these concerns?
4. Would your organization or someone in your organization be interested in joining community efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect, i.e.?:
- Host an on-site training?
  - Sponsor a Council event for families?
  - Participate in a Council committee?
  - Sponsor a community forum on child abuse and neglect?
  - Prevention month (April) activities?

***Seeking other sources of survey data.*** These might include selected segments of the community at large—targeted ethnic or racial minority constituencies, specific neighborhoods, or, alternatively, a random sample of all households. Mail surveys can be expected to generate a low rate of return unless considerable follow-up efforts are made. Telephone surveys do much better, but the effort is labor intensive and requires that interviewers be trained in ways that avoid biased or skewed findings. **Project Maine Families** elected to confine its community survey to selected key informant categories only.

One inexpensive way to garner broad community input is to get the local newspaper to publish the survey questions and invite the community at large to respond. These responses cannot be viewed as representative of community opinion, since only the most motivated readers will elect to fill out and submit the surveys. But the effort will publicize the planning process, and the information collected will offer a perspective on the attitudes and views of highly motivated newspaper readers.

## *Step 2*

### ***Gathering Statements of Parents Through Focus Groups***<sup>1</sup>

This is the key component of the needs assessment—gathering and analyzing the statements of representatives of selected family types concerning their experiences as parents, the problems they encounter in raising children, the strategies they use to make family life satisfying and rewarding, and the programs they think are most needed. These statements can be compared *within* parent types (e.g., teenage parents) to get a sense of the range of perceptions and ideas from any one group. They can also be compared *across* parent types (e.g., teenage parents, working parents, one-parent families) to determine areas of widespread agreement and identify issues specific to type. And they can be *compared to the perceptions of key informants* to identify similarities and differences.

Focus groups are also used on an ongoing basis as a tool to generate program ideas, verify perceptions and design specific interventions. The bottom line is that focus groups provide an excellent mechanism to test the assumptions of program planners. To carry out this process the activities will include selecting parent types,

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<sup>1</sup> **Project Maine Families** has published a companion book, *Focus Groups: An Effective Marketing Research Tool for Social Service Agencies*, Portland, Maine, 1992 which provides more detail on this subject. Call 1-800-HELP KID for ordering information.

developing the focus group agenda, writing the focus group questions, recruiting focus group participants, selecting meeting locations, selecting the focus group discussion leader, and conducting the focus groups. Analyzing the information is described in a subsequent step below.

**Selecting parent types.** This step involves examining the statements of key informants interviewed in the community survey concerning what kinds of parents are most in need of community support. Secondary data on poverty, incidence of single parent families and teen pregnancy, and patterns of employment (i.e., material collected from secondary sources, described below) will also prove useful here.

Many parents will fall into overlapping categories, e.g., a single parent may also be a working parent; a teenage parent may also be a parent of an infant; a working parent may also be a member of a blended family. The richness of the responses obtained in focused discussions is enhanced as a result.

Not all significant family types can be included. You need to decide which of them are most important and focus on them. For those family types that cannot be included, it may be possible to gather useful information in other ways—by reviewing the existing literature or consulting with knowledgeable experts.

**Developing the focus group.** This activity involves identifying the major issues to be addressed by thinking through the things you want to find out during the discussions.

## Target Parent Groups

**Project Maine Families'** local sponsors each selected three separate kinds of focus group participants in their respective counties. Franklin County selected AFDC recipients, working parents, and new parents. Cumberland County selected teenage parents, working parents, and single parents. Three separate groups were recruited from each family type for focused discussions.

**Project Maine Families** decided that they wanted parents to discuss:

- Their experiences as parents—whether they were prepared to become parents, where they turn for help when they need it, what kinds of issues and concerns affect them most
- What problems families face in this community
- What kinds of programs are needed most
- What strategies—sponsors, participants, marketing, program development—they would recommend.

***Writing the focus group questions.*** The questions must be clearly stated in ways that parents at all educational levels can understand easily. Word selection should be from everyday English usage and terms specific to the fields of psychology, sociology, and social work should be avoided. The questions should be organized and ordered to get participants comfortable with one another and with the focus group discussion leader, to enhance the prospect for straightforward, candid responses, to encourage participants to think about their experiences in new ways, to generate useful, constructive observations and suggestions, and to make the experience positive and rewarding for everyone involved.

The questions should be limited in number and offer a framework for open-ended replies. **Project Maine Families** asked five clusters of questions, allotting one and one-half to two hours for participants to address all of them. The early portion of the discussions looked at

## Sample Focus Group Questions

1. When you were growing up, what do you think were the hardest things about being a parent? What kinds of problems and needs did parents have then? Where could people turn for help?
2. Now let's consider being a parent today in \_\_\_\_\_ County, Maine. Is it harder or easier raising kids than it used to be? What kinds of problems do you think parents have now, particularly parents in your circumstances (e.g., of newborns, teens, working parents)? How do people handle problems like that today? Is that the best way?
3. I'd like to find out more about this community. Suppose a friend of yours wanted to ask someone for advice about how to handle a problem with one of their children. Who would you suggest they talk to? Where could they go?
4. What's missing that parents need or could use in raising families? What gets in the way of making these things available, in your opinion? If such things were available, would you use them yourselves? Do you know other parents who would?
5. When you think about what parents need in this community, who do you think should provide it? Why? How would you organize something like that? Who needs to be involved?

participants' experiences as children, asking them to consider the problems and stresses their parents confronted. Next, the emphasis shifted to the participants themselves, looking at how their experiences were similar or different from that of their parents, and why. Then they began thinking about the community: if someone they knew had a family crisis, where would they send them? What would they recommend? How well does this community support family life; what is needed to improve things? At the end, participants were given a sheet with a list of twenty program ideas compiled by program planners. They were asked to add other ideas and then select their favorite five program statements.

***Recruiting focus group participants.*** Recruitment can be done through the existing social service network in the locale, through newspaper announcements and advertisements, and via public service announcements on broadcast media. No more than twelve participants should participate in any single discussion. If possible, a stipend should be paid to participants to encourage participation and express the message that the experience has significance and value to the sponsors. Once recruited and scheduled, sponsors should mail reminder postcards to recruits one and one-half weeks prior to each event and then telephone everyone the day prior to meetings to find out if they need transportation.

***Selecting meeting locations.*** Meeting locations can be symbolic to participants and therefore must be chosen with care. For example, some parents prefer not to go to the state human services agency. Some do not feel comfortable in alien environments. Churches, businesses, and social service organizations often have conference room space they will make available free of charge. The selected facilities should have separate but immediately adjacent spaces where children of participants can be dropped off. Providing transportation to the meeting location, or at least offering it, as well as child care during focus group meetings is vital, and participants must feel at ease leaving their children in pleasant, well supervised environments. It is also a good idea to have refreshments available.

***Selecting the focus group discussion leader.*** The leader should have experience in facilitating group discussions, be capable of establishing an atmosphere of trust, and be able to respond sympathetically and respectfully to verbal and nonverbal cues from focus group participants. It is probably desirable that he or she have experience as a parent. It is generally preferable to have one person conduct as many of the sessions as possible to assure consistency and uniformity of presentation and to limit bias associated with the different styles and interests of different leaders.

***Conducting focus groups.*** Each session should have a recorder as well as a group leader. The recorder takes detailed notes and summarizes them after each meeting, highlighting common themes and preserving specific quotes of participants which are particularly colorful or illustrative of the themes. Under no circumstances should the meetings be tape recorded to protect the confidentiality of participants. No other persons should be permitted to observe the meeting.

When the group has convened and is ready to start (participants settled and in their places, children at play or at rest in the adjacent drop-off center) the group leader should explain why the meeting has been organized. He or she should emphasize the importance of parents' perceptions and recommendations to the creation of the community-wide plan and urge that everyone be as frank and candid as possible. The fact that none of the names of participants will be used outside the focus group meeting room should be underscored. (At the meeting people are identified by their first names only.) Participants should be encouraged to ask questions about the meeting and its uses at any point—before the discussion gets underway or at any subsequent time.

The early discussion questions and the conversations they generate are not intended primarily to produce findings or program recommendations. Rather, they help get parents to talk about emotionally charged subjects, to become comfortable sharing experiences with one another, and to think about parenting afresh. Each question should be treated not only as a subject to be examined in its own right, but also as a bridge to the next set of questions. The recorder and group leader should keep track of time as it passes to leave enough leeway for all the questions to be addressed adequately.

The mid-to-latter portion of the discussion should generate a rich cluster of problems and needs statements and program ideas and recommendations. The group leader should be careful not to let his or her preferences, perceptions of need, or biases influence the direction of the discussion. But he or she may harken back to earlier statements to stimulate a flagging conversation (e.g., "Sally, you said before that when you were a kid your cousins and grandparents often stepped in and gave your parents breaks from child-raising, and you said that's not available to most families anymore. What can be done to make up for the loss of that kind of help?")

If you decide to ask people to rank problems, or identify a priority list of programs, this should come at the very end, when people have had a chance to develop their ideas and have listened to what others have to say. The lists should be easy to fill out and should not require more than five to ten minutes to complete.

### Step 3

#### ***Conducting an Inventory of Services***

During the first step, gathering statements of individuals through a community survey, people will learn about programs and services which exist to assist families and/or address family problems. In this step, additional information will be gathered about these programs and services so that an inventory can be developed. The inventory serves several purposes. First, it can be used as a reference guide for agencies who refer parents to community services. Second, it can serve as a baseline document. That is, it can describe how fully a community is responsive to child and family needs at the beginning of a broad-based family support effort and then can be revisited after a number of years to determine what changes have been realized. Third, it can be used to help identify gaps in community services. As needs are identified, the Inventory tells to what degree, if any, the need is already addressed by existing programs.

For each identified program being offered by day care centers, businesses, churches, civic organizations, social service providers, or others the following questions can be asked to complete the inventory:

1. What type of organization sponsors the program?
2. What type of program is it?
3. What level of prevention/family support does the program address? (primary, secondary or tertiary)<sup>2</sup>
4. Who is eligible to participate?
5. What number of people can be served at a given time?
6. How long does the program or service last (if there is a specific duration)?
7. What is the geographic area covered?

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<sup>2</sup> Primary prevention programs are available to all parents without regard to presenting problems—examples are Family Fun Days and parent education; secondary prevention programs are available to parents who may be experiencing some problems for which they want help—examples are individual counseling and group sessions; tertiary prevention programs are available to parents who have experienced an abuse or neglect problem and want to prevent it from occurring again—examples are sex offender programs.

8. Is there a waiting list? How many people are on it? How long does it take to obtain the service?
9. How many staff (if any) are employed by this program?
10. What information (if any) is available on the outcomes or results of the program?

Once the information is gathered, a one-page format can be completed for each program which will be used for referral purposes. In addition, the information should be aggregated for report-writing purposes.

#### *Step 4*

#### ***Gathering and Analyzing Secondary Data***

Secondary data sources are helpful in developing a reasonably objective profile of community characteristics and factors affecting the quality of family life. You will be particularly interested in data that shed light on risk factors for children and families and other evidence of family dysfunction. Most experts in child abuse concur that no single factor places a family at high risk of abuse. However, the presence of multiple factors in combination with one another often does.

*Risk factors for parents* include:

- History of abuse as a child
- Poor self-image
- Teenage parenthood
- Abuse of drugs and/or alcohol

*Risk factors for children* include:

- Premature birth
- Low birth weight
- Parents' perception of child as 'different'

*Risk factors for parent/child* combination include:

- Presence of nonbiological parent or unrelated adult
- Persistent family conflict
- Poor knowledge of child development
- Poverty

*Risk factors in the community* include:

- Social isolation of the family
- Economically depressed area/structural unemployment
- Widespread acceptance of corporal punishment
- Reluctance to intervene in parent-child relationships

Much of this information such as poor self image or parents' perception of a child as difference, would be available in case records only and could not be aggregated. Other information such as poverty, low birth weight and structural unemployment can. In addition, you may want to collect information on educational achievement including school drop-out rates, presence of affordable housing, prevalence of children with handicapping conditions or other special needs, incidence of family violence, incidence of abuse and neglect, number of children in state custody, and incidence of juvenile delinquency. The illustration below shows how **Project Maine Families** displayed some of the data it collected.

The point of the search for this kind of information is not to produce a comprehensive, finished document that addresses all these factors in neat order. Rather, it is to assemble and analyze as much available data as possible so that it can be used to inform and support decisions about which parents to target for focused discussions, how many there are in the community, and, later on, to frame the development of the prevention plan.

People occasionally find that data on the same subject from different sources seem to present conflicting information. This may be because the data were collected at different times and for different purposes, because populations were differently defined, because different methods of gathering information were used, or because the presentations have somewhat different meanings. For example, data on utilization of AFDC benefits can be displayed in several ways: (1) in terms of number of families served over a 12 month period; (2) in terms of the number of families served, on the average, at any single point in time during the year; (3) in terms of the average span of utilization of benefits, and so on. Your task is not to try to reconcile these variations. Rather, it is to search for indicators of risk that are reliable and help you make good decisions.

Information about risk factors often can be obtained by contacting the sociology or social work department of a local university or college, city or county government, departments of health and human services, agencies of state government, particularly planning offices, chambers of commerce, the census,

# POPULATION

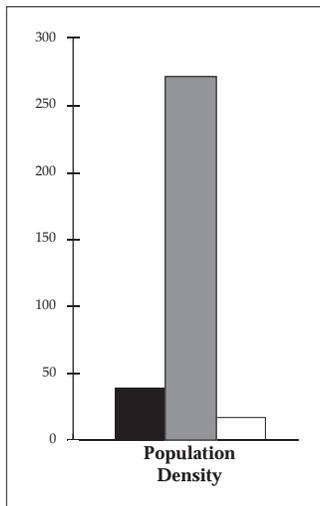
## Indicators

Population Characteristics |

Vital Statistics |

Income |

Household Measures |

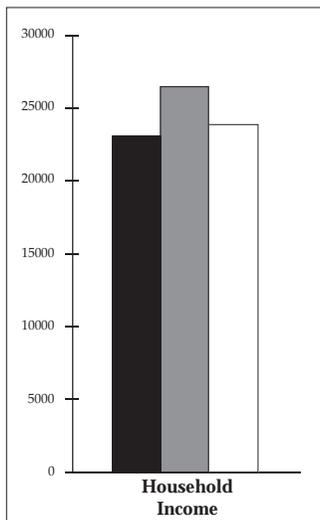


### Maine

Population (1990)	1.2 million
Density	39 per square mile
Minorities	1.16%
Marriage rate	10.8 per thousand
Divorce rate	5.0 per thousand
Median household income	\$23,079

### Cumberland County

Population (1990)	237,950
Density	272 per square mile
Minorities	1.29%
Marriage rate	11.1 per thousand
Divorce rate	4.9 per thousand
Median household income	\$26,589 - county \$21,447 - Portland



### Franklin County

Population (1990)	29,950
Density	18 per square mile
Minorities	.35%
Marriage rate	10.3 per thousand
Divorce rate	4.6 per thousand
Median household income	\$23,960

local public libraries, and general assistance offices. School districts are obvious sources of information on school dropout incidence data, if only because they have to keep it for school lunch programs. State departments of education are another reliable source for this information.

### *Step 5*

#### ***Gathering Information On Model Programs in Other Locales***

One immediately useful source of information on other community-based programs is the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C.. The National Center provides grant support to **Project Maine Families** and eight other community-based prevention demonstration projects around the United States.

Information on programs in other areas can also be obtained by contacting your local university library and asking for a search through its computer network. You need to provide a set of key words and phrases (e.g., “child abuse/neglect prevention,” “parent support,” “family support,” prevention education,” and so on). A social services computer network known as HANDSNET serves as an ongoing computer compendium of programs, articles, and prevention topics.

#### Using Community Needs Data in the Planning Process

As the planning journey approaches its completion, the next phase is to convert the information collect to a useful form for analysis and planning. The steps of data analysis include (1) sorting and comparing community survey responses—within respondent types and across types, searching for areas of agreement and disagreement on issues, concerns, problems, and program suggestions; (2) reviewing focus group participant statements—within type (if three different teen parents focus groups were convened, compare responses among these groups first) and across type; (3) comparing statements of parents to respondents in community surveys, searching for areas of consensus; (4) selectively considering program suggestions and perceptions of community problems in relation to secondary data on the presence of risk factors in the locale; (5) gathering information on model programs in other locales that address priority concerns identified during the needs assessment.

Some of the survey information can be analyzed quantitatively, primarily by counting responses and converting them to percents. For example, what percent of the responding companies offer Employee Assistance Programs (number offering EAPs divided by the total number surveyed). Other information requires qualitative analysis. The most common form is content analysis. Some definitions of content analysis are “making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorf, 1980:21), “objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952:489); and making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within the text” (Stone et al., 1966:5). In short, content analysis requires a person to read through responses and categorize them. They then determine the prevalence of each type of response and determine which is most frequent, second most frequent, and so forth.

Information can be summarized in narrative form and should also be displayed graphically to permit easy identification of major patterns. Pie charts, bar charts and line graphs all provide useful means of communication.

Findings from the five areas above, displayed in this fashion, will enable planners to proceed systematically to develop the community-wide plan. The following insert displays how **Project Maine Families** assembled all the referenced information to plan programs for a particular target group, that of Teen Parents.

# Topic: Teen Parents

Project Maine Families (PMF) conducted three teen parent focus groups for a total of twelve parents who participated. Because teen parents did not respond to our normal recruitment procedure, newspaper ads, fliers and posters, we used a slightly different strategy. PMF called social service agencies asking them to recruit directly from their current or past client list. Whenever any teen mother called in with an interest in participating, we asked her to bring any friends and acquaintances to participate as well. (After the first focus group with teens, PMF asked the participants to help recruit others which was our most successful strategy.) The teen mothers told us that their initial reluctance to participate was due in part to suspicion of our motives, their embarrassment about their parenting, and their general distrust of social service agencies. Fortunately, once the group was assembled and the questions asked, the discussion was lively, provocative and informing.

Of the twelve women who participated, many lived alone with their child, a few lived with their parents, the parents of the baby's father, or foster parents. Fewer still lived with the baby's father or another male partner. Most had no outside employment; the few who worked were employed by fast food restaurants and worked irregular and unpredictable shifts. Some received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Others were dependent on their partner's salaries, or parental support. All but one participant had one child. Most grew up in Maine and had some extended family in the state. Many came from abusive and neglectful families and limited their contact with them to protect themselves and their child. No one was currently enrolled in high school and many had dropped out before their pregnancy. A few were earning GEDs and two had a diploma. The group as a whole was reflective of the majority of teen parents in Cumberland County.

## Facts About Teen Parents

- 8.6% of all births in Cumberland County in 1990 were to teen mothers.
- Most teen parents have only one child. Less than 20% of teens have two or more children.

Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

In the focus groups adolescent parents reported being overwhelmed and unsupported in their attempts to define themselves as parents.

*I think the hardest thing about being a parent is frustration. You do the same thing day in and day out. There is no one there to tell you that you are doing a good job because the kids are too young to tell.*

*I think that every mom feels like she's not doing enough, not doing it right. I love to talk to other mothers so you can see that you are not the only one who feels like that. Parents' meetings and support groups help. You have to like yourself to be a good parent. At one point I felt like I was going crazy.*

*It was great being a parent for a while, but then you start to miss the sleep, the freedom, etc. Sometimes you just need a break — every parent does.*

*My baby is colicky and cries all the time. I have no friends and can't attend school.*

### Facts About Teen Parents

- Nearly 80% of all teen parents in Cumberland County were not married at the time of their child's birth.

Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

- Many pregnant and parenting teens drop out of high school. This means they are more likely to be unemployed. Less than half of the teens in Maine without a high school diploma are employed compared with 75% of employed teens who have a high school diploma.

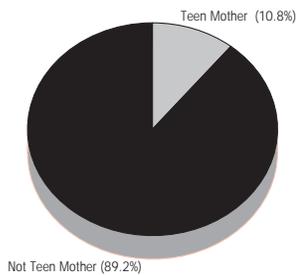
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990

**Most teen parents are single, do not have a high school diploma and do not have a job.**

Figure 1

#### Births to Teens in Maine

Total Number of Births = 17,314

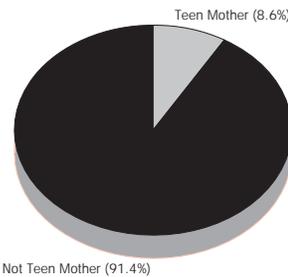


Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

Figure 2

#### Births to Teens in Cumberland County

Total Number of Births in Cumberland County = 3,515



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

They described being without work and without necessities, like diapers, Tylenol, telephones, and food.

*I'm trying to find a job right now but it's not easy. Finding transportation to the job and finding good hours is not easy.*

The parents described delaying payment of electricity and telephone bills to pay the weekly expense of laundry. When their phone bills became too high, their service was terminated. Being without a phone cut off contact with others and added dramatically to their isolation. Another problem for these young parents concerned their health insurance: with a Medicaid card, they were unable to get even the most common over-the-counter medication like Tylenol, so when their infant or toddler ran a fever, they could not treat it but rather had to go through a long involved and stressful process just to obtain basic needs. One mother described a situation where she had to wake a neighbor, use his telephone and call an ambulance to get to the emergency room where, after a long wait, a nurse gave the child Tylenol and told them to go home. Once dismissed by the hospital staff they had to find their own transportation home, by getting a ride from a friend, using one of the hospital's scarce taxi vouchers or walking. (An ambulance or police car might take them to the hospital, but would not return them home.)

### **Limited Resources for Teen Parents**

- A single parent with one child who qualifies for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) can receive a maximum monthly payment of \$337 (1993).
- The number of teen parents on AFDC in Maine is increasing. In 1989, 5.2% of cases were to teen parents compared to 6.5% in 1991.
- The monthly allowance of food stamps for a single parent with one child is \$142. That's only \$67 for mother and child every month for food. A family of two could easily spend that much in one week on groceries!
- The average amount a woman in Cumberland County receives per month on WIC (Women Infants and Children Program) for herself is \$30. For an infant, the mother can get an average of \$65 per month. For children one year and older that amount drops to \$31 per month. WIC provides only for limited needs. Milk, cheese, cereal, juice, peanut butter and eggs are items that can be purchased with WIC. Women who breast feed can get a few other items such as canned tuna, carrots and beans.

Source: Maine Department of Human Services, 1993

**Imagine being unemployed and trying to raise a child each month on AFDC, Food Stamps and WIC. You would never have enough money for even the basics.**

The participants reported feeling judged by the world and not respected because of their age.

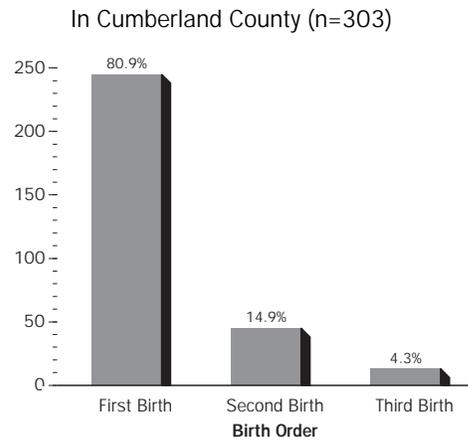
*Society makes me mad. They look at me like I'm a weirdo because I'm young and have a kid. They think that I don't know anything. They look at me and see a "teenage mother" and so they don't take me seriously. Even when I bring my daughter into the doctor's and tell them that she has an ear infection, they think that I don't know what I'm talking about. But she's my daughter and I know when something is wrong.*

Mothers reported going to school and being tired, because they'd be up all night. They reported having teachers penalize them for late assignments, or feeling badly that they'd have to leave the baby with someone they didn't know well or trust so they wouldn't miss a class.

Like other parents these mothers described the stresses on their lives and their need for occasional breaks. They wished for a good safe place to bring their child so that they might get some respite, work, attend to their housings needs, catch-up on sleep, have fun or do laundry.

The most consistent message from these young women was that they

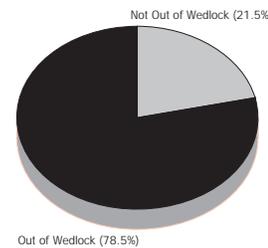
Figure 3  
Birth Order of Children Born to Teens



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

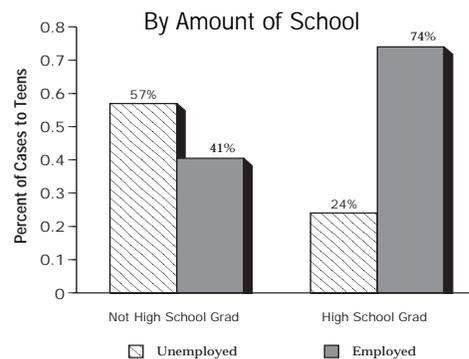
Figure 4  
Out of Wedlock Births for Teens

Total Number of Births (Cumberland County) = 303



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

Figure 5  
Employment Status of Teens in Maine



Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990

wanted to be good parents; to be better to their child than their own parents had been to them. While they may not have grown up in supportive environments, they did not want the same thing to happen to their own children.

*My son is someone I can count on. I know that he will always love me.*

*I was happy when I found out that I was pregnant. She (my daughter) relies on me for everything and I know that she is always going to love me. It is like a “guaranteed love.” She makes me feel important. I don’t want my daughter to feel the way I did.*

While the community does respond to some of these needs with housing subsidies, teen health clinics, a comprehensive teen parent program at the YWCA, day care vouchers, and foster grandparents, many teens do not use these services because provider agencies often require strict compliance with rules and regulations and offer few choices (see page 31 for a list of programs that serve parents in Cumberland County). The agencies are often hard to get to with children or require long waiting periods which is difficult with young children. These community programs have good intentions but do not always have the tremendous flexibility and patience these young and often chaotic families need.

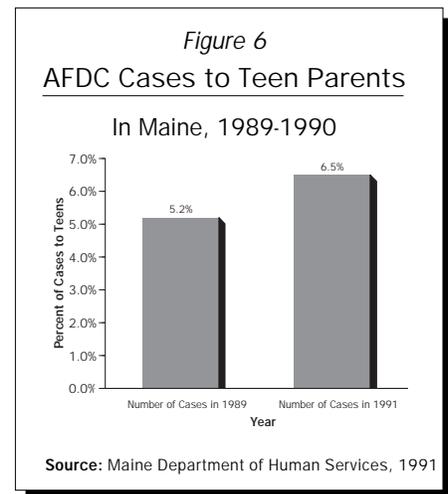
## Project Maine Families Responds

Based on the information from teen parents and other sources, Project Maine Families has tried to meet some of the needs of teen parents with two specific programs: **Deering Family Day Care** and **Project SOAP**.

The **Deering Family Day Care Program** provides teen parents with free child care while the parent is in school. Teen parents can also take part in a specialized course designed to help them as they try to parent and finish school.

**Project SOAP** provides teen mothers with the opportunity to do their laundry free of charge once a week with a group of other teen mothers. It also provides lunch, child care and activities, free of charge, each week. Another benefit is the informal support found in sharing information and talking with other teen mothers.

A more in-depth review of each of these programs follows.



# Deering Family Day Care Program

## Overview

The Deering Family Day Care Program provides teen parents with free childcare while the parent is in school. Teen parents can also take part in a specialized curriculum designed to help them as they try to parent and finish school.

## History

The Deering Project began as a result of Project Maine Families' focus groups with teen parents. Teen parents told us that they wanted to be in school but could not afford childcare, or maintain the traditional school schedule. It began in 1992 with three licensed day care homes and three teen mothers.

## Community

Deering is one of two high schools in Portland, the biggest city in Cumberland County. It has approximately 900 students. In 1989 in Cumberland County there were 299 births to adolescents each women under the age of 20. In 1992 there were 13 teen mothers enrolled at Deering High School. In September 1992 there were 5 pregnant teenagers known to the school and 4 teen mothers currently attending.

## Program Components and Services

- Free childcare
- Flexible schedule for teen parents
- Potential credit for teen parents if he/she works with the day care home in a supervised approved way.
- In-school support group with other teen parents
- Parenting class for credit
- Support for day care provider

## Participants

Participants are students attending Deering High School who are parents.

## Staff

There are three licensed day care providers. The school nurse and social worker facilitate the support group and make referrals. The home economics

teacher is the principal contact for the teen parents and the parenting class instructor. Project Maine Families provides ongoing support to teen mothers, school staff, and day care providers.

## Outreach

The school nurse, social worker and home economics teacher meet with pregnant and parenting teenagers to inform them of the project and its opportunities.

## Evaluation

Questionnaires are developed to be administered before and after a student participates. In-person exit interviews with participants are conducted by Project Maine Families staff.

## Funding

The first year of funding was provided by Project Maine Families. In the second year, a local social service agency, (DHRS) providing family day care services received a grant to fund the three slots. The school provides all the overhead costs.

## Highlights

The school administration and staff responded to the program by initiating curriculum changes which directly benefit teen parent students. Students have more flexible schedules enabling them to take their children to day care and not miss important class time. The community sees the needs of these parents and is willing to begin to address them. A work group made up of interested community people dedicated themselves to this population and their children.

## Suggestions

Find a responsive school person. Meet with teen parents and find out what they need to stay in school. Explore other community agencies to see what they can provide teen parents. Build in a means of "on the spot" feedback, both verbal and written. Create a work group of community people with diverse and varied interests to "oversee and critique" the project's development.

## Project SOAP

### Overview

Project SOAP provides teen mothers with the opportunity to do their laundry free of charge once a week with a group of other teen mothers. It provides free lunch, free childcare and free activities weekly.

### History

After a comprehensive community assessment in Cumberland County revealed parent education and parent support as the primary direction to take to prevent child abuse and neglect, several focus groups were held with parents from Cumberland County. These groups were to determine just what support and education would need to look like if parents were to really benefit. Adolescent parents were targeted as particularly at risk and three focus groups were comprised of only teen parents.

In these focus groups it became clear that all of the participants had chosen to become parents. These women had very few financial and emotional resources and none felt comfortable in traditional support settings or parent education settings. They missed their peers and felt that being with other teen mothers would be helpful.

### Community Demographics

In Maine, 1,869 women under the age of 20 gave birth in 1990. In Cumberland County there were 303 births; 8.6% of all births to women under the age of 20.

### Program Components

On Fridays:

- Free laundry for young parents with free transportation and free childcare
- Free lunch
- Free activities at the YWCA teen parent services program
- Informal parenting support and information

### Participants

Services are available to young parents. Participants may refer themselves or be referred by another participant or any community person.

### Collaborators

PROP, Regional Transportation, the YWCA, Foster Grandparents, Project Maine Families, local businesses and individuals are using their resources effectively. The program lasts from 9:00 - 2:00 each Friday. The only staff paid specifically for this program is a young woman who was a former teen parent.

### Highlights

We have been pleased by the consistency and responsibility shown by the participants. They are providing each other with informal support, information and material goods.

The young mothers are learning how to use a childcare facility responsibly, through their weekly contact with the Y's childcare professionals. For many of the children who are spending time in the day care, this is their first experience in a group of other children.

### Funding

Funding for the laundry and childcare comes from Project Maine Families. The transportation costs are covered through the providing agencies' budgets. The Y provides overhead costs as well as lunch.

### Suggestions

Talk to teenage parents and find out what they need and want. Tailor programs to those specific needs. Start small, be patient, introduce new ideas slowly and listen to "on the spot" feedback.



# Decisions Arising from the Planning Process

While the primary purpose of this book is to provide a roadmap for conducting community needs assessments, we thought the reader would be interested in some of the projects that were ultimately designed and developed in Cumberland and Franklin Counties in Maine following a similar process. That is the purpose of this section.

## Parenting Coops—A Network of Parent Support Groups

Parent Coops were designed to offer parents opportunities to share common experiences of raising children. Coops are based on concepts of empowerment, self-sufficiency and mutual respect. Ten coops were established throughout Franklin County in one year.

## Parent to Parent Programs

These link first time parents with trained and supervised volunteer mentors, offering support through regular and frequent contact. In one year seventeen volunteers were recruited and trained. They were put in touch with new parents.

## Children's Festival

This annual celebration of children and families provided an opportunity for hundreds of families, especially those of limited means, to come together during the bleakest month of winter to share experiences and have fun as families.

## Project SOAP

Project SOAP provides teen mothers with the opportunity to do their laundry free of charge once a week with a group of other teen mothers. Please see page 31 for a more complete description of the project.

## School Family Community Events

These events are designed by community members with the assistance of **Project Maine Families** staff to engage the community in supporting families. Examples are an intergenerational dance; a scavenger hunt; a free family dinner; a family fun fair; Mr. Bear & Company, a lively show of stories, poems, original skits and audience participation; a performance by a female illusionist; and a free family game fiesta accompanied by a Mexican dinner.

## Jack Family Center

Located at an elementary school where there are many transient parents, this center provides families with a physical place within the school dedicated to making them feel welcome and a part of the school community. Parents gather to share common concerns, to attain information about children and child rearing, to get peer support, and to develop a partnership with the school and community.

And the journey to healthy family life continues....



