Curbing Drug Abuse In New Mothers

Pregnant mothers are often hesitant to disclose drug use. Whether marijuana or heroin, a mom-to-be knows that while sharing that information could bring needed help, it could also trigger a Child Protective Services investigation – and possible foster care for her child. “There is real risk here,” says Dr. Steve Ondersma, whose research goal is to help at-risk moms lessen their use of alcohol and drugs. “I don’t blame them a bit for not disclosing this.”

Dr. Ondersma is an associate professor at Wayne State, jointly appointed through MPSI and the School of Medicine. His challenge was to create a screening tool and intervention that could be effective even if a woman never confesses to drug use. “Of the women in our studies, half of those who used drugs during pregnancy deny any drug use, even before becoming pregnant. This constitutes a huge sample of women who, along with their infants, are at risk of not being identified.” Dr. Ondersma’s approach identifies this at-risk group and provides an intervention that could cut down on drug use without anyone ever disclosing there is a problem.

Dr. Ondersma received $1.7 million from the National Institutes of Health for a four-year test of his new screening and intervention approach. He plans to enroll 500 post-partum women in the clinical trial, pre-screened to be at higher risk of drug use. Why post-partum? “Most women cut down or quit using drugs during pregnancy,” Dr. Ondersma explains, “but then return after.” While at-risk women may have little or no prenatal medical care, almost all women give birth in a hospital, so intervening immediately post-partum increases the numbers of women...
Postnatal Drug Use  

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who can be helped.

And while zero drug use during pregnancy is optimal, research now shows that the effects of drug use during pregnancy are more subtle than was once feared. “Drug use after giving birth is also an extremely important risk factor. Getting a mother to stop or significantly lessen her use has a major impact on the healthy development of her new baby,” Dr. Ondersma says.

Here’s how the low-cost, easy-to-administer intervention works. Post-partum women at a Detroit hospital are asked to take a brief survey on a computer. The survey is an indirect screening tool developed by the Parent Health Lab at the School of Medicine to identify women who are likely to use drugs after their baby’s birth. This high-risk group is then asked to view an interactive, computer-based motivational presentation called the “Parent Health Check-Up.” Safe relationships, emotional health, and avoiding tobacco, alcohol and drugs are a few of the topics covered. The positive messages promote ways that moms can help themselves and their new babies to stay healthy. Follow-up evaluations, including collection of hair and urine samples to test for drug use, are conducted at three and six months to assess the effectiveness of the intervention.

“Throughout the interaction, no one is accused of anything,” Dr. Ondersma explains. “We make no presumptions. We simply provide accurate, relevant information to promote healthier families, and invite women to think about ways they can enhance their new baby’s environment in each of these areas.”

Based on pilot studies, Dr. Ondersma is optimistic about the ability of this approach to reduce drug use. The emotional distance provided by a computerized message helps. “The computer makes no judgments. It’s not threatening. Maybe everyone doesn’t need help that focuses so closely on the behavior itself,” Dr. Ondersma says. “Maybe we can focus on a range of positive behaviors between moms and new babies and have even wider impact on keeping drug abuse out of families.”

Evolution  

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is now Dr. Ondersma’s right-hand assistant on current grants.

“I was the first official post-doctoral trainee at MPSI,” Dr. Beatty says proudly of her 2009 to 2011 post that ended with a position in Dr. Ondersma’s lab. “We have a good working relationship. He is supportive and always gives constructive feedback. He takes into account what’s important to me and how those goals and my strengths can best fit into the lab and the research. Plus I’m getting valuable experience writing manuscripts and submitting grants.”

Like her mentor, Dr. Beatty is interested in substance abuse and the parent-child relationship, but would eventually like to expand the use of technology to adolescent substance abuse. For her, the challenges associated with substance abuse research are not daunting – they energize her. “It’s never just the addiction,” she says, “it is the other chaotic aspects of their lives: poverty, transportation, school systems. But if we can get in touch with women during prenatal or postnatal care and make small changes, we can get the ball rolling for bigger improvements to their lives and their families.”

As the mother of a 5-year-old son, Dr. Beatty is sympathetic to the struggles these families face and can understand the reluctance to admit to drug or alcohol use. Technology opens doors to reach these people that weren’t available before. “Computers keep a safe distance,” she says. “We always build off the clinician’s skills, but putting it on a screen makes it easier than talking face-to-face for some women. They relax and can be more open to the information.”

Dr. Beatty hopes that over the next decade, research will find new ways to use technology to reach more people and engage them in seeking help. “We plant little seeds” to get people to consider making changes, she says. Sometime in the near future she will begin working in earnest toward a tenure track faculty placement. For now she’s enjoying the break from the intensity of graduate school. “I like being here at Merrill Palmer,” she says. “There is a sense of community, a range of people from different backgrounds with good ideas to build off. The faculty is accessible and everyone helps each other.”

“I recommend training at MPSI. There are a lot of great opportunities for learning here,” she says.
Teen Relationships and Pregnancy Rivet Professionals

Teenage pregnancy has long been a challenge for social workers, nurses and educators because it impacts the life of the teen, the health of the baby, and the dynamics of the immediate and extended family. MPSI’s annual Explorations in Development Conference rose to that challenge with a two-day program devoted to adolescent development, social relationships, risks, and the special needs of teen mothers and their babies.

Attendees came from across Michigan, including a counselor from an alternative school for pregnant girls in Bay City. “This was really good,” one of the 125 attendees wrote in her evaluation. “Knowing about the developmental tasks for teens and how they relate to the quality of the relationship with their baby is so important.” Twelve continuing education units (or 1.2 SB-CEUs) were provided for the program held in October at Wayne State’s Oakland Center.

Conference speakers included MPSI’s Dr. Valerie Simon and two professors from York University in Toronto: Drs. Yvonne Bohr and Jennifer Connolly, both specialists in developmental psychology. Drs. Bohr and Connolly illustrated the universal issues encountered when young girls become parents. They have studied teen parenting in Romania, Canada and Italy and found that all teen parents have similar worries and struggles that bridge cultural differences. They talked about the problems that arise when the developmental needs of adolescents and infants are in conflict, with specific strategies to relieve the conflict. Their final presentation was an intervention for teen moms and babies based on a tool to assess parent-infant attachment.

Dr. Simon, an expert on adolescent romantic relationships and sexual development, profiled adolescence in the context of the parenting relationship, both parent-to-adolescent and adolescent-to-infant. “Excellent training with passionate presenters,” another attendee wrote. “They were willing to listen to those doing the hard work in the field with high-risk populations.”

To join the mailing list for next year’s conference, please contact Beverly Weathington at ac8787@wayne.edu.

AWARDS & HONORS

The PNC Foundation awarded $15,000 to the Early Childhood Centers at Wayne State to fund training in an enhanced curricular approach called Visual Thinking Strategies. Designed to strengthen observation skills, verbal fluency and critical thinking, VTS uses classic works of art to spur student analysis and discussion. VTS is an excellent fit for the Early Childhood Centers because of their proximity to the Detroit Institute of Arts, whose docents are fully trained in the program. Training will include frequent field trips to the DIA, as well as studies of the digitized art collection at the nearby Freer House.

Eight student trainees at MPSI displayed their research at the Fall Lifespan Poster Day, held in conjunction with the Institute of Gerontology. Posters detailed research protocol and results, as students discussed their findings with the approximately 60 guests and three judges. Top awards went to Casey Dexter (left), 1st place for Parenting Antecedents of Parent-Infant Shared Reading Quality in a Low-Income Sample; Ann Carrellas (right), 2nd place for Feelings and Friendships: A Study of Autism, Empathy and Relationships; and Amy Loree (second from left), 3rd place for Screeners for Child Maltreatment and Parenting Risks Using Rational vs. Empirical Approaches to Test Construction.

Dr. Valerie Simon (jointly appointed at MPSI and the Department of Psychology) was promoted to associate professor with tenure this summer. Dr. Simon researches the development of adolescent peer relationships and sexuality, with special emphasis on the impact of sexual abuse and family conflict. Dr. Simon’s article Interparental Conflict and Adolescents’ Romantic Relationship Conflict was also honored as one of the year’s top ten most downloaded journal articles in The Society for Research on Adolescence.

Two parents of children at the Early Childhood Center graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Wayne State University this spring. Madelyn Tucker and Kizzy Thomas received the prestigious honor that celebrates excellence in liberal arts and sciences. Both parents are part of the Childcare Access Means Parents in Schools grant program which pays tuition for preschool children at the Center while parents complete their university degrees.
An 85-Year Commitment to Merrill Palmer

Corinne Perlis Nayer and Merrill Palmer Institute go way back. At 89, Corinne easily recalls the day in 1928 when her baby brother Sanford proudly entered the Merrill Palmer nursery school. “I wasn’t happy,” she says. “He got to go and I didn’t, because I was too old.”

Corinne may have aged out of the nursery school experience, but she took full advantage of the Merrill Palmer summer camp at age 11 (brother Sandy got to attend that, too) and the after-school program at age 12 and 13. “They held the after-school camp in those gorgeous Victorian houses across from the Freer House,” she remembers. “We went on field trips, learned handiwork, visited Pewabic Pottery.” She and Sandy ate supper there and then walked to Woodward to catch the bus home. “I loved it.”

The summer camp, held in Oxford, Michigan, meant six full weeks away from home with only one visit from mom and dad. “That was fine with us,” she says. “I don’t remember feeling homesick.” Sandy learned to drive a truck at the camp, though he was only 11. (“Don’t ask,” she says, smiling.) The camp was a training ground for Merrill Palmer students and faculty, directed by Charles Wilson, M.D., who lived on site with his family. Corinne’s parents were so bonded to the Institute that when Corinne’s first child, Susan, was born they made only a quick visit to the hospital to see the mom and new baby. “A visiting professor at MP was returning to Australia,” Corinne chuckles. “My parents didn’t want to miss the going-away party.”

Considering the attachment, it was no surprise that Corinne wanted her own children to experience the MP nursery school. “My husband Harry wasn’t all that interested in the kids going to nursery school, though. He thought starting Susan at 18 months was too early. But we always had a love of learning in our family, so I talked him into it.”

Harry, an attorney, quickly transformed from doubter to chief advocate. He not only embraced the nursery school for both children, he befriended several of the professors including Irving Siegel, Dorothy Haupt and Marjorie Sanger. The Nayers car-pooled with the Siegels. “Harry and Irv’s wife got into political arguments all the time,” Corinne says. “It was intense but good-natured.

“Students were always coming to our house to observe us. They were like big sisters to the children.”
– Corinne Nayer
Harry loved these folks. We spent a lot of time together over the years." Coincidentally Marjorie and Dorothy retired to the same town in Massachusetts where Susan and her family live and remained close to Susan until their deaths.

Corinne also has fond memories of Dr. Keith Osborne who taught the youngest children at the school. “Everyone loved him,” she recalls. Corinne met Director Pauline Knapp (who had an MP building named after her) and remembers hearing Margaret Mead, a visiting lecturer at MP, speak a few times. “We didn’t know history was being made,” she says. Harry passed away in 1972 at age 54, well before his time, but Corinne has maintained her ties with MPSI through the newsletter and alumni events.

**Kids Say the Darndest Things**

Corinne remembers several funny stories of life at Merrill Palmer. Ms. Breckenridge was the school’s nutritionist and often interviewed the children separately about their eating habits. One day, she asked Corinne’s 3-year-old daughter Susan if she liked cheese. “Yes,” Susan replied.


“So what kind of cheese do you like?” a frustrated Ms. Breckenridge asked.

“Well . . . my father and I prefer a nice Camembert every night before we go to bed,” she said.

Corinne’s son Seymour barely spoke as a toddler. At age 3, teachers at MP voiced concern, but doctors found no impairment. “Then one day the family was riding in the car when suddenly Seymour yells, ‘Stop the car. Stop the car.’ We couldn’t believe it was him and turned to stare. ‘I gotta go nurinate’ he said clearly. So we stopped the car,” she says. “He’s been an excellent talker ever since.”

The Merrill Palmer nursery school experience laid the foundation for professional success in Corinne’s family. Her brother Dr. Sanford Perlis practiced psychiatry in Connecticut and was an associate professor at Yale University. He passed away in 1994. Her son Seymour is a partner with law firm Plunkett Cooney in Bloomfield Hills. Her daughter Susan Nayer Kesner is a director at Copyright Clearance Center near Boston. Corinne worked at the Franklin Settlement House (another early preschool in Detroit) before she married, stayed home to raise the children, then re-sparked her career running the Physician Assistant program at University of Detroit Mercy. She wishes her grandchildren could have attended Merrill Palmer, but they lived too far from the school.

Corinne believes that the hands-on, play-based yet structured approach offered by Merrill Palmer (and continued today) forms the perfect lattice for learning and socialization. “Early education enhances all that comes after,” she says. “Merrill Palmer was one of the first preschools in the world to maximize that experience. We were lucky to be a part of it.”

To learn more about the Early Childhood Center at MPSI, visit [www.mpsi.wayne.edu](http://www.mpsi.wayne.edu)
Over the past year, a variety of new projects and accomplishments have advanced the Freer House restoration and public education goals. First and foremost, construction was completed on a new historically appropriate cedar shingle roof, copper gutters and downspouts, as well as the cleaning of the exterior masonry, thanks to a commitment of $750,000 from the WSU Board of Governors.

An ambitious project to restore the severely altered former “Whistler Picture Gallery” was launched with a benefit concert in March. A major goal for 2012 is to raise funds for a professional planning study to guide the restoration of this historic gallery into a future meeting, conference and exhibit space. Earlier in Merrill Palmer’s history, this room served as a children’s play space.

The Americana Foundation funded the development of a basic Interpretation Plan for the Freer House to improve the visitor experience. Planning began in May with design consultants Staples and Charles of Alexandria, VA. New displays highlighting the rich histories of Mr. Freer, the Freer House and the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute will be part of Phase I of this public education project.

With underwriting from the Americana Foundation, the Freer House lecture series drew capacity audiences with talks ranging from Freer’s 1910 Exhibition of Oriental and American Art at the University of Michigan to a unique concert and theater event on the theme of “Freer and Whistler.” Students from Wayne State, the University of Michigan, and the College for Creative Studies are conducting Freer House research and documentation projects, including a comprehensive effort to document historic furniture that once belonged to Charles Freer and is now in the private collection of Dr. Thomas Brunk, Freer House historian.

Anyone can become a Friend of the Freer House. Your support makes our accomplishments possible. Membership costs only $35 per year ($10 for students) and includes free or reduced admission to Freer House lectures and events. To join, contact Rose Foster at 313-664-2500 or rmfoster@wayne.edu.

Eighty-five people attended Carole McNamara’s lecture on “Whistler’s Seriousness,” which examined the earnest side of the artist known for his brilliant wit and rapier criticisms. Dr. McNamara is the senior curator at the University of Michigan. Above, left to right, William Colburn, Denise Stein, WSU Provost Ron Brown, Director Peter Lichtenberg.

Right, bedroom dresser owned by Charles Freer, now part of the collection of Dr. Thomas Brunk being documented by a team of university students.

Upper right, decorative detail of one of the Freer House’s new copper downspouts installed in 2010 along with the cedar shingle roof.

To learn more about The Charles Lang Freer House visit www.mpsi.edu/about/friends-freer.php
40 Years Later, Merrill Palmer Bond Still Strong

Ghosts of memories past haunted the grounds of Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute over Halloween weekend as 20 alumni and spouses returned to the school where they trained in child development 40 years ago. During that era, students applied from all over the world to spend a semester or two learning at the internationally recognized Merrill Palmer Institute. Today, the trainee program is reserved for pre- and post-doctoral students at Wayne State University.

Jan Bogrow of Chevy Chase, Maryland, organized the event to reunite the Merrill Palmer class of 1971-72. Guests flew in from as far away as Seattle, Washington; Portland, Maine; and Chico, California. They lodged at the Inn on Ferry bed-and-breakfast across from the Institute, in restored Victorian homes that had been their dormitories when they trained here as students. “They didn’t look this good when we lived in them, but I definitely recognize the rooms,” said Doug Babkirk. “They are beautiful now.”

Doug and classmate Pam Avriett were two of the first to arrive and attended the MPSI Research Poster competition on Friday afternoon. The caliber of student research impressed them. Saturday morning the group met with Director Peter Lichtenberg for an update of MPSI’s evolution and achievements and a brief tour of the Freer House. Here are comments from alums who reflected on their time here:

“The MP experience was truly transformational in my life; I learned how to think analytically and intuitively here.”

“The relationships we developed here were intimate, genuine and lifelong.”

“This was a place where I could bring my authentic self without the masks I used to wear; I was free to live an undivided life here.”

Some alums were sad to learn that MPSI no longer offers undergraduate internship training like the type they received, but understand that programs must change with the times. “Our Merrill Palmer is no longer in existence,” said Jan, “but it certainly sounds like Peter is the right person to keep the momentum of the new Merrill Palmer going and growing.”

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To learn more about MPSI programs, visit www.mpsi.wayne.edu
The Giant Step Teen Conference received a $5,000 grant from the DTE Energy Foundation to fund conference materials and outreach to enroll additional under-represented minority students. DTE has been a supporter of Giant Step for more than a decade, encouraging employees to volunteer at the conference and providing cash assistance. Giant Step's 2011 conference – in its 28th consecutive year – drew more than 250 students from 40 different schools. The Foundation’s support helps MPSI continue to offer Giant Step free to all students.