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Supporting adolescent mothers - psychosocial and mental health needs

It's possible for adolescent mothers to lead happy, healthy and fulfilled lives with their loved ones. And providing them with adequate support that takes their needs and desires into consideration will help to accelerate this, according to University of Cape Town's (UCT) Dr Elona Toska.

Toska is an academic in UCT's Centre for Social Science Research and one of the newest members to enter Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng's Future Leaders cohort. Toska's research to date has been focused on how to help adolescents, young adults, and adolescent mothers – including those affected by HIV in resource-constrained communities – to have healthy, safe and fulfilling relationships with their loved ones.

The focus of the research is on the sexual and reproductive health outcomes of young people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

"Since 2018, I have been focused on understanding the needs of adolescent mothers in South Africa and designing appropriate solutions to support them. Through my work, in collaboration with an excellent team at partner institutions, including the University of Oxford, our goal is to help adolescents and young adults build healthy relationships with their loved ones," said Toska.

The findings of the research have underscored the need for evidence-informed, yet locally relevant programmes to help reduce the risk of HIV among young people, especially young women who have become mothers. And to effectively support those already living with HIV to thrive in their everyday lives.

"Our work with young people affected by HIV, especially adolescent mothers in the Buffalo City District in East London, has yielded some important findings. To start with, it has highlighted the importance of addressing psychosocial issues, mental health challenges, and experiences in healthcare facilities. The majority of young people do not need to access healthcare services regularly – adolescents are resilient and not as fragile as younger children and, hopefully without the age-related disease burden of late adulthood," she added.

One of the key themes that continues to come across is that young people feel judged (shouted at) by healthcare providers for having sex or missing their medication. However, there is an acknowledgement that healthcare providers may not have actually raised their

voices or shouted. The style of communication by healthcare providers is perceived as hostile, especially by young people who are already very vulnerable, stressed and feel stigmatised about their health and life experiences. This, in turn, shapes the way they engage with healthcare workers and health services.

“We’re in the process of analysing data on the needs and experiences of young mothers and their children in healthcare facilities. Respectful, adolescent-responsive care continues to be an important driver of safe and healthy practices. We acknowledge that this can be a big ask for our over-stretched healthcare providers, and that’s the next step of our research: how to bridge the gap, and support healthcare providers and their patients to have positive engagements with each other.”

The biggest goal of the research is to help and support people working with adolescents and young adults, particularly adolescent mothers. It is also important that government policies and programmes are in line with what young people need.

Toska has also discovered that all those who work with adolescents and young adults, such as healthcare providers, social workers and teachers, accumulate myths about who young people are, what they do and why they do it. “As a researcher who tries to bring the lived experiences of young people to places where decisions are made, I would really like to use my research to challenge these myths, but to do so without negating those experiences caregivers and other service providers encounter daily.”

There’s a belief that young women become pregnant to access government’s Child Support Grant. This kind of belief gets in the way of providing services to young women who have become pregnant or to young mothers who need the Child Support Grant to support their new-born children.

“It must be said that accessing the Child Support Grant in a timely way may make a difference in supporting young mothers to return to school and to look after their children, which is critical to the long-term health, educational and socio-economic outcomes of families. Evidence from many leading South African researchers, and our work, highlights that access to social protection supports young women and their families to delay unintended early pregnancy and HIV risk,” said Toska.

Story by: Niémah Davids, UCT News.



Dr Elona Toska (centre) with fellow researchers and funding partners.

Photo: Supplied

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Nombuso Shabalala

Head: Media Liaison
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 4190
Cell: (076) 473 5882
Email: Nombuso.shabalala@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za