Empowering the Girls at Gwen’s Girls

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What is BTG?

- BTG is an interdisciplinary internship for health sciences graduate students at community based organizations that serve vulnerable populations.

- Each site has two community health interns who work together to create a project that benefits the site. Community and faculty mentors provide support.

- Weekly reflective sessions with all interns are held to discuss topics related to community health.

My BTG Team:

- Janelle Whitney
  - Partner
  - University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine

- Lynn Knezevich
  - Executive Director, Gwen’s Girls
  - Community Mentor

- Denise McGill
  - Group Home Manager, Gwen’s Girls
  - Community Mentor

- Dr. Elizabeth Miller
  - Chief of Adolescent Medicine, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
  - Faculty Mentor
Community Site: Gwen’s Girls

- Founded in 2002 by Gwendolyn J. Elliott
- Aims to empower girls and young women to have productive lives through holistic, gender-specific programs, education, and experiences
- Offers several services for girls ages 8 - 21, including:
  - Foster care
  - After-school
  - Summer camp
  - Prevention
  - Reunification
  - Group Home
- 10 Life Domains
The Group Home

• Beds for up to 15 girls, ages 13-21
• All court-ordered for placement
• Predominantly African American
• Only group home in Allegheny County that provides specific services for pregnant and parenting teens
Talking with the girls...

- Conversations about where they are from, why they are here, their definition of health, their goals for the future
- Health conversation touched on:
  - diet and nutrition
  - exercise
  - relationships w/ family and friends
  - stress
  - school
  - social support
  - mental health
  - self-esteem
  - visiting health
  - pregnancy/parenting
  - professionals
Talking with the girls...

- **Food**
  “There’s nothing to eat here. It’s all fried. I’m just getting fat.”
  “[The group home] needs more fruits and vegetables and less fried food.”

- **Activities**
  “I hate it here. There’s nothing to do around here. I like to do things, but I feel bored.”
  “They tell us to go here, do this, do that. But when you’re stressed, you don’t want to do all that. You just want to do something fun.”
Talking with the staff...

- The girls have no interest or experience
  “These girls don’t do nothing. They don’t like to read. You can’t get them to do anything.”
  “They don’t know anything. They don’t know how to feed a baby, to dress a baby, they don’t...nothing. And you can’t tell them anything, either.”
  “These are Gwen’s Girls, but they’re different.”
- Could benefit from additional training on mental health issues and trauma and defense mechanisms.
Our Projects

• Improve the quality of food at the site

• Incorporate activities into the routine

• Encourage an interest in learning about health

• Create a handbook for pregnant and parenting teens
The Food

• Cook lunch for the girls on Thursdays to introduce them to new foods
• Switch food orders from once a month to twice a month to allow for more fresh produce
• Create sample menu with simple changes that were healthier, cheaper*, and more “WIC friendly”
  - Sausage with roll
  - Sausage
  - Pierogi (fried)
  - Baked potato
  - Fruit Cocktail
  - Broccoli

*making changes on five dinners, we tripled the number of WIC foods in the menu and cut the cost from $153.21 to $89.38
Activities

• Craft time on Mondays

• Outside time on Tuesdays

• Wii on Thursdays
Health Education

- Informal conversations with the girls
- Healthy Tip of the Week

Healthy Tip #3: SLEEP

Most teens need AT LEAST 9 hours.
Not getting enough sleep (being sleep deprived) can cause you to feel sad or moody, eat too much food, and even get pimples (or real!!!)
Parenting Handbook

• Asked staff for recommendations on content
• Content based on best practices
• Edited by staff and girls
• Includes sections on:

  Pregnancy
  Labor and Delivery
  You After Baby

  Baby Care
  Safety
  Growth and Play
Parenting Handbook

- Currently no standard of care for pregnant and parenting girls (mother’s wit instead of best practice)
- Handbook will serve as resource guide for both girls and staff
- Will be incorporated into larger parenting program
Healthy People 2020 Goals Met:

- Promote health and reduce chronic disease risk through the consumption of healthful diets and achievement and maintenance of healthy body weights.
- Improve the healthy development, health, safety, and well-being of adolescents and young adults
- Improve the health and well-being of women, infants, children, and families.
- Increase the quality, availability, and effectiveness of educational and community-based programs designed to prevent disease and injury, improve health, and enhance quality of life.
Our Recommendations

- Hire a cook to prepare healthier meals that follow a menu using “WIC standards”
- Have a designated Activities Coordinator, and include a weekly “Gwen’s Girls’ Night” to be organized by the girls
- Create a model of care for pregnant and parenting girls
- Evaluation of pregnancy and parenting handbook
- Educate the staff on trauma-informed care.
Thank you, thank you, thank you...

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- To the Bridging the Gaps crew, especially Thistle and Jessie
- To all the staff of Gwen’s Girls, especially Ms. C, Ms. Chantal, Ms. Eunice, Ms. TaShay, Ms. Tiffany, Mr. Will, Ms. Crystaline and Ms. Shelly
- And most especially to the beautiful girls of Gwen’s Girls