



INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

ISSUE BRIEF | November 2020

Using Technology to Enhance the Arkansas Birthing Project

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

In the United States, African American/Black mothers and their infants face health disparities and barriers not faced by their white counterparts.¹ These barriers include inadequate communication, care, and health care education from health care professionals^{2,3} and lack of culturally-relevant social support based in their local community.³ The Birthing Project, USA (BPUSA) was created in 1988 by an African American woman to address these barriers disproportionately experienced by African American/Black families. The Arkansas Birthing Project, an affiliate of the BPUSA was founded in 1999 on a part-time basis and expanded to a full-time program in 2015.⁴

The goal of the Arkansas Birthing Project is to improve pregnancy and birth outcomes by providing social support to women during pregnancy and the first year of life of her baby. Specifically, the Arkansas Birthing Project (ABP) targets women who live in low-to moderate socioeconomic communities with a focus on improving their social supports, increasing their access to health services, and improving their pregnancy, birth, and parenting experiences. The ABP model pairs pregnant women known as Little Sisters with mentors known as Sister Friends in a 16- to 18-month relationship. Sister Friends receive health focused information each month and they - in turn - provide 10 to 12 hours of support and mentoring to their Little Sisters each month. Since 2015, the model has been successfully implemented in several counties in Arkansas, providing support for over 100 African American women and their babies.

The purpose of our study was to assess the effectiveness and needs of ABP and incorporate the use of technology to enhance the current model.

WHAT WE FOUND

- Effectiveness of the Program
 - Sister Friends were motivated to volunteer based on a personal experience or a personal connection, they wanted to provide support and encouragement, described personal rewards they received, such as, developing a relationship with the Little Sister, and valued feeling appreciated.
 - Little Sisters valued the relationships that was developed with Sister Friends, appreciated the Sister Friend's time, and valued being connecting with local resources.
- Needs of the Program
 - Sister Friends wanted easily accessible educational tools to enhance their own knowledge of pregnancy related social support and pregnancy and infant health needs

We conducted interviews with nine Sister Friends in the ABP program to gain insights about their motivations, facilitators, and barriers related to their mentorship experience. More than half had mentored more than one Little Sister. All met with their Little Sisters regularly in-person and checked in through phone calls and text messages. They frequently mentioned they wanted to provide support to their Little Sisters because they recognized the need for additional social support based on their own experiences. They also wanted a checklist of tasks they should support Little Sisters with during the pregnancy and postpartum period.

One limitation identified by Sister Friends was the lack of a consistent method for providing education for Sister Friends. Although this is a social support program, it is important for the Sister Friends to be informed of evidence-based pregnancy and infant care information. Sister Friends can offer this important information needed by pregnant and parenting women to make informed decisions during pregnancy and the first year of her baby’s life. Based on these focus groups, educational materials were developed.

TABLE 1A: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SF FOCUS GROUP

THEMES	QUOTES FROM SISTER FRIENDS
<p>Felt a deep connection with LS and had fulfillment through appreciation from LS.</p> <p>Positive impact on LS as they provided guidance and support throughout a difficult time during pregnancy.</p>	<p><i>“I’ve always wanted to help the next person and I just love babies...it helped me to help them.”</i></p> <p><i>“I think that, I know mine, she just appreciated it greatly, because she got to see that she, sometimes we feel like we’re the only ones that’s ever gone through something, especially when you’re in the middle of it.”</i></p> <p><i>“And you know just too, like she said, show them the right thing to do. How don’t fall into the same footsteps your parents fell into. If I’m teaching you how to do better, then I expect you to teach your child how to do better. It turns out to be a cycle. We teach, we do better because we know better, so as she knows better, we are hoping and praying that she’ll teach better.”</i></p>
<p>Wanted to have more training related to health education so that they can better guidance to LS.</p>	<p><i>“Even if it’s not something that can be printed out and just have a hard copy for everyone. Even if it’s available on the website because a lot of times they would call me and I was fortunate enough to have worked in these different areas so I could say well we should call this individual or we can get the help from here but for those who are not, or don’t have that experience, even if it was available on the website, something easily accessible.”</i></p>
<p>Wanted to have a checklist on tasks that they should support during the pregnancy and postpartum period.</p>	<p><i>“But we need a more detailed checklist or a minimum checklist. And us being parents, we knew how we did our children and what we were lacking when we were doing it so maybe a more detailed one as to from point A to point Z.”</i></p>

To capture the experiences of Little Sisters in the ABP model, we also conducted interviews with four Little Sisters. Little Sisters consistently expressed positive opinions about their interactions with Sister Friends. They expressed thanks for the support of Sister Friends which enabled them to improve how they coped with pregnancy, delivery and the demands of being a new mother and caring for their infant.

TABLE 1B: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SF FOCUS GROUPS

THEMES	QUOTES FROM LITTLE SISTERS
Overall, LS had positive experience with their SF	<p>“She encouraged me to do better, eat right, and just encouraged me to do better with my health and stuff.”</p> <p>“I thank my SF for all the improvement that she taught me.”</p>
Appreciated their SF for their effort and time spent with them.	<p>“Always being there when they needed her, she was always there.”</p>
Received tangible benefits from SF such as providing them access to needed resources.	<p>“They gave us pampers and stuff like that, that my child needed, wipes.”</p>

WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Based on the input we received from the interviewed Sister Friends, we developed structured, web-based modules and videos for Sister Friends to share with Little Sisters during one-on-one interactions or at group events throughout pregnancy and the first year of the baby’s life. The interactive modules and videos were developed collaboratively with the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Telehealth Maternal Education Program and the Arkansas Birthing Project to ensure they were socially and culturally relevant. The modules touch on all major aspects of pregnancy and the first year for new mothers including preparing for delivery, safe sleep, breastfeeding, infant crying, and car seat safety. The modules provide standardized, easily accessible education and include pre- and post-knowledge assessments. Sister Friends and Little Sisters can access these modules and videos anytime via electronic tablets, smart phones, or computers at the UAMS patient education website patientslearn.org and at Arkansas Birthing Project’s website arkansasbirthingproject.org.

Access to these educational materials was shared with the larger network of The Birthing Project USA affiliates as an additional resource for Sister Friends and Little Sisters nationwide.



Sister Friend and Community Partner



Annual Arkansas Birthing Project Meeting, September 2019



Educational Module

MORE ABOUT THIS STUDY

In part, because of the work we did to enhance the education delivery provided through the ABP, The Birthing Project USA recognizes Arkansas as a program training center for the organization.

This study uncovered several important findings about the process for conducting good community-based participatory research. Researchers must expend time to establish trusted relationships with all participants and community members must feel empowered—as equal partners in the research process—to give honest, frank feedback. Also, measures important to researchers are not necessarily important to community members on a community-based research team. Researchers must be willing to change their research format and/or purpose if partners point out items that hinder the administration of existing program policies and practices. Future research projects that involve community members as full partners in the research process can have very positive impacts if these steps are included.

“The changes we initiated have the potential to positively affect the health of women and babies of color served by Birthing Project, USA through its numerous affiliate organizations.”

—Zenobia Harris, MPH, DNP, Executive Director, Arkansas Birthing Project

SOURCES

- ¹ Petersen EE, Davis NL, Goodman D, et al. Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Pregnancy-Related Deaths — United States, 2007–2016. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2019;68:762–765. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6835a3external icon>
- ² Scott KA, Britton L, McLemore MR. The Ethics of Perinatal Care for Black Women: Dismantling the Structural Racism in "Mother Blame" Narratives. *J Perinat Neonatal Nurs*. 2019;33(2):108-115. doi:10.1097/JPN.0000000000000394
- ³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Birth Settings in America: Outcomes, Quality, Access, and Choice*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25636>.
- ⁴ Birthing Project USA <https://www.birthingprojectusa.org/>

STUDY CONTACT INFORMATION:

Dr. Hari Eswaran (eswaranhari@uams.edu), Dr. Zenobia Harris (zharris@prodigy.net) and Dr. Sarah Rhoads (srhoads@uthsc.edu). For more information about the Arkansas Birthing Project please contact Dr. Harris and more information about the research study contact Dr. Rhoads. This research was conducted as part of their distinguished fellowship in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders program from 2016 to 2019.