

How one congregation's commitment to dependable day care is giving teen moms a chance to finish high school.



Care TO Count ON

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Are you sure this is something I can count on?"

It was about the fifth time Sara had asked me this question. She was a seventeen-year-old mom, and she was determined to finish high school. As is typical for many teen parents, the care schedule for her nine-month-old son, Michael, was pieced together from various family members, and it was a complicated mess.

Sara had been looking for a stable day-care option since she became pregnant. She had been making it work—but just barely. Her attendance at school and her grades were beginning to suffer as her stress level

increased. She desperately needed a better long-term solution.

Then she had found out about the child-care center at Ravenswood Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago. The Ravenswood Community Child Care Center (RC4) always boasts full classrooms and a healthy wait list, and Sara put Michael's name on the wait list as soon as she heard about us.

Amazingly, just two days after she added her son to the list, a spot opened up in the infant room. Michael was set to begin within one short week. When I called to tell Sara

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Elsa Johnson, director of Ravenswood Covenant's Parenting ProGRESS program

the news, I could feel the deep, long sigh of relief over the phone. She was so thankful for the day care that it just seemed too good to be true. I assured her each time she asked, "Yes, you can count on this."

Michael has been attending RC4 ever since. And while he receives excellent care, Sara receives further support from Ravenswood's teen parent ministry, Parenting ProGRESS, whose mission is to promote *growth*, *responsibility*, and *education* with *spiritual support* for teen parents.

The idea for a day care at the church was formed in 1973 when the Christian education wing was built at Ravenswood Covenant. At the time, it was used for Sunday school, but it was built to code for more expansive child care with an eye toward future ministry possibilities.

Almost twenty-five years later, a series of events prompted the church to revisit those plans. In 1997, the church participated in a leadership retreat where the congregation identified goals to develop children, family, and youth ministries. The vision was cast and the church went to work by intentionally contacting and connecting with community members to discuss their needs. Brian Kletzing, who was pastor at the time, set up meetings with community health-care

professionals and the principal of nearby Amundsen High School. At the time, approximately twenty students at Amundsen were pregnant or parenting, and they had few options for day care. Half of these students were from families who received government assistance. Without the means to pay for day care, half of these young mothers dropped out of school or fell behind, failing to earn a diploma. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, only 38 percent of mothers who have children before age eighteen obtain a high-school diploma. Amundsen High School had been encouraging teen parents to complete their education, but without affordable day care, the prospect was almost impossible.

Ravenswood Covenant made a decision to meet this need head-on. They would build a day care to serve teen and community parents, plus develop a program to walk alongside teen parents to provide extra support.

It was a huge task. Membership of the church was around 175, and the projected cost was \$500,000. The church approved the plan in November 1999, and an eight-person board was formed to begin bringing the idea to reality. With so many factors to consider, it was a difficult process. Church members would tell you that everything was hard starting out.

One of the most challenging pieces was fundraising. It was important that the church stand fully behind this project. The church mortgaged its property to provide a line of credit for the day care. Members gave sacrificially in order to see it completed. They also offered their services and

skills. As is true of many churches, the congregation was comprised of people from diverse professional backgrounds, so when the need came for a contractor, lawyer, administrator, fund-raiser, or real-estate agent, usually someone at the church was able to offer his or her expertise. The church body was using all its gifts and cutting down on start-up costs.

In 2001, after five years of planning and raising funds, David Koeller, the church chair, said to the congregation, "I do not know why we should be called upon to take this ministry when there are many other pressing financial needs facing our congregation. But this is the task that God has offered us. We must move forward. We need to take this responsibility on ourselves and complete the task we have been assigned." Renovations ensured that the building and its classrooms were up to code for current day-care needs.

In September 2002, RC4 opened its doors. Brian Kletzing addressed the crowd of community members gathered for the ribbon-cutting ceremony, saying, "Vision, resources, and energies have been invested by so many people to see this day arrive: members, friends, and neighbors from the church, hospital, school, and community working together, using wisdom and various gifts your Spirit offers. Each one contributes to a cause that is greater than self, in order to make Ravenswood a better place to live."

Some of the day-care space is filled by children from the community whose parents pay tuition. Teen parents receive priority on the waiting list. Up to one-third of the spots are allocated to children of teen parents who receive subsidized care through the state.

One of those spots has been filled by Ashley for more than five years. Her mom, Jacky, was fifteen when she enrolled her six-week-old daughter

at RC4. Jacky finished high school and has continued on to college with hopes of becoming a pediatrician. RC4 and Parenting ProGRESS have become a part of her life as a supportive community. Ashley's teachers have watched her grow from a newborn to a wonderful little girl ready for kindergarten. Parenting ProGRESS and the church have supported Jacky as she has navigated her way through high school and now college while parenting. We proudly watch her as she continues to grow into who God has called her to be.

Recognizing the need for a compassionate and comprehensive

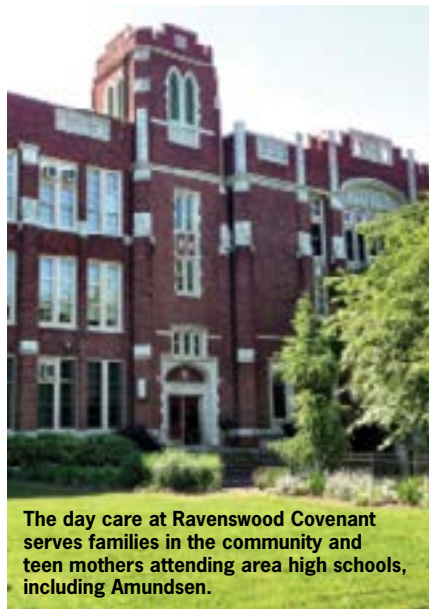
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approach to addressing the major life roles of the teen parents, the church initiated Parenting ProGRESS as a faith-based program to supplement the services provided by RC4 and local high schools. It was launched to provide extra support to the parents.

Parenting ProGRESS is operated and funded by Ravenswood Covenant, with some financial support from private foundations. As director, I am employed by the church, and supported by an advisory board, along with the invaluable help of many volunteers. Currently we serve eight families from RC4, and throughout this year we have served approximately fifteen parents through our programming. We offer support through one-on-one and group services, which include monthly life-skills workshops led by community professionals, donations of baby items, bus passes, assistance with securing and maintaining state-funded subsidies for day care, goal setting, referrals to community resources, college and

financial aid assistance, education support, employment support, and other support as needed.

Some days we might accompany a parent to a doctor's appointment, or help her file taxes or child support. Other days we might facilitate a meeting between both parents to ensure that the needs of their child are being met, or help parents find a church. Parenting ProGRESS moms also have the opportunity to build relationships with mentors from the church and the RC4 community.



The day care at Ravenswood Covenant serves families in the community and teen mothers attending area high schools, including Amundsen.

The congregation donates items and time, serves on the advisory board, becomes mentors, leads workshops, etc. We work closely alongside RC4 and connect with many other community organizations to ensure that our participants receive the support they need—and not duplicate services. We want to help participants learn skills that will equip them to do well now and in the future.

When new participants are welcomed into the program we explain that Parenting ProGRESS exists because there are many individuals in the church who want to see them and their families cared for. The relationships formed through this ministry can be transformative—sometimes

the parents we work with do not have one other single person in their life they can count on. We strive to demonstrate Christ's love to each parent, and when they ask why, we are ready with our answer.

Last September Parenting ProGRESS celebrated ten years of serving teen parents, their families, and the community. One church member says that it is the best thing to ever happen to the church. Another member says that the experience of creating the day-care and teen-parent program was a spiritual highlight for him and could serve as a model for other churches. The success of the day care is in part due to the great relationship it shares with the church. They operate independently but work well together.

In ten years we have seen many teen parents graduate from high school, continue in their education, accomplish many of their positive goals, and build a great foundation for their future. It has not always been an easy road, but it has been worth the difficulties. The program's longevity is largely credited to a church dedicated to serving the needs of their community in a meaningful way. This ministry is a testimony to the fact that when churches work together with community leaders to assess needs and fulfill them, they can have an incredible impact on their community and transform lives.

Sara's son has been attending RC4 for fifteen months now, and Sara is on track to graduate from high school. It is a joy to see Michael's smiling face in the halls and witness how he is flourishing and learning. The care he is given and the support Sara receives answer that question again for her—yes, Ravenswood Community Child Care Center is something she can count on. Yes, this church is something she can count on. Yes, this God is someone she can count on. ■