

Renee Perez & Dr. Norma Perez-Brena

[Strengthening Relationships/Strengthening Families](#)



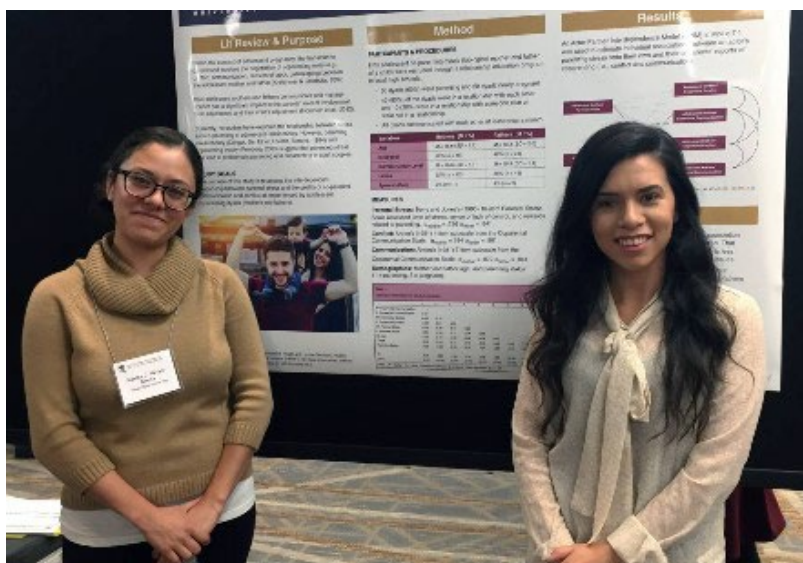
SR/SF Team



Ms. Renee Perez is an alumna of Texas State, earning her bachelor's degree in psychology and child development and a master's degree in professional counseling. Her career started at the Hays-Caldwell Women's Center (HCWC), where her work involved facilitating groups with youth from hard places, such as those in juvenile detention centers and pregnant and parenting adolescents, from 2001 to 2007. HCWC – the domestic violence program partner in Hays and Caldwell counties– trained Strengthening Relationships/Strengthening Families (SRSF)

program staff for domestic violence protocol, where Renee felt her professional experience as a sexual assault counselor and her personal experience of becoming a young parent aligned with SRSF. Renee's experience as SRSF program facilitator and coordinator paved the way for her current role as co-director to oversee the intervention and administrative teams, as well as develop tools and resources to gather data for the program.

The Strengthening Relationships/Strengthening Families program, created by Dr. Michelle Toews, is dedicated to assisting pregnant and parenting high school students by providing curriculum for building and maintaining healthy relationships and reduce intimate partner violence. Dr. Norma Perez-Brena (left of poster), a former Texas State professor now at the University of Arizona, has been the director of SRSF since 2015. Her research background is in Latino families and parent-child-family systems, with a focus on understanding how families and culture promote adolescent development. Renee and Dr. Perez-Brena have been co-directing SRSF since 2022.



Annually, this program serves 120 – 160 adolescent parents and their support network in Central Texas. The administrative team of this project is housed at Texas State and extends to surrounding schools they serve, approximately [12 different schools across 8 school districts](#) ranging from south San Antonio to North Austin. Program coordinators oversee the intervention team and program facilitators and interns are housed at partnering schools. During her time as a program facilitator, Renee had the opportunity to work with San Marcos High School alumna, Celeste Muñoz (pictured). Celeste attended SRSF as a program participant and later became a Texas State student to pursue her studies in family and child development. She was hired as an SRSF program facilitator and has been a success as a mentor to students because of her relatable experiences.



SRSF provides evidence-based curricula to pregnant and parenting adolescents and their support network during the school day to create a safe space for youth and mitigate the burden of finding the program themselves. Students are referred to SRSF program facilitators who partner with different campuses, and they serve as a point of contact for resources, such as childcare or help applying for support off-campus. The



lessons provided focus on two core components: 1) to understand what a healthy vs. unhealthy relationship is and what the students want in their family relationships to reduce the risk of intimate partner violence and 2) to promote healthy caregiving and coparenting relationships and build a collaborative network to support them in their transition to parenthood. In 2018 – 2019, they've introduced hybrid

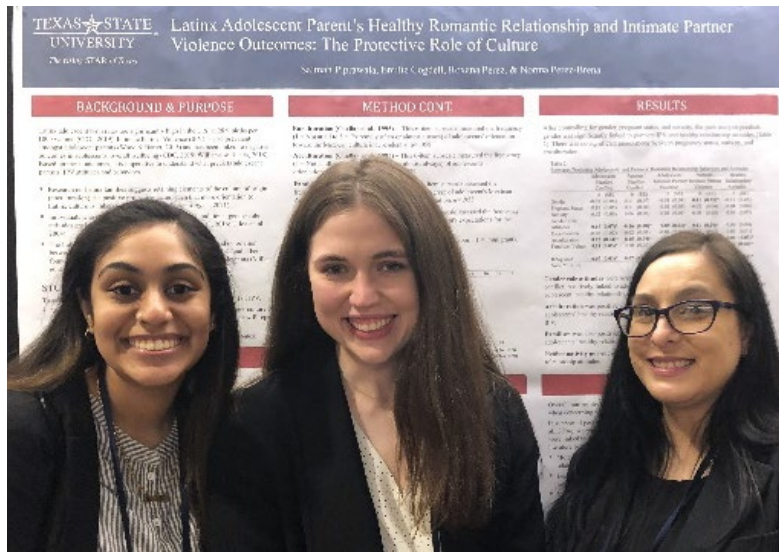
lessons via webinar to accommodate attendees, which stabilized participation during the pandemic and the 2021 snowstorm. SRSF provides additional support in their Summer Academy, a two-day program where participants are invited to Texas State to gain college career and financial literacy information. In 2020, SRSF received two additional grants to continue the program and to support implementation science, such as rapid cycle evaluations to improve programming. A youth advisory board has been established to strengthen community networking. The program directors strive to make improvements based on shifts in program and community needs.

The SRSF program implements a capacity-building model to train future generations of researchers and interventionists within the community. Interns gain valuable hands-on experience related to their degrees with curriculum application in the field. Interns have found pathways to

become program facilitators and coordinators within the project, and in other community programs. The research team consists of doctoral and graduate students who collect and analyze data for dissemination at conferences. They are supervised to



understand proposal development, ensure proper data collection, and how to turn that



data into a research project to strengthen their academic successes. Many of these research students have gone to pursue higher education from the enriching networks of support created at SRSF.

This year, SRSF aims to reach out to a greater variety of schools in Central Texas to provide valuable education and guidance for parenting teens for them to connect to potential college pathways,

postsecondary planning, and build financial stability. The research seeks to understand what young parents need to be successful to better inform future interventions and acknowledge the complexities of social context. Further planning for this project will aim to extend services beyond high school to college-age young parents who can continue to work with SRSF as they transition to other stages in their lives.

The co-directors are truly inspired by the team and the impact they have on the community and their willingness to help those in need. The team is willing to step up to face challenges without hesitation because they genuinely care about school-age parents. The SRSF program staff have built a culture of compassion to take care of their own to ensure the same nurturing environment is given to the participating students. Their hope ultimately is that these young families have the resources they need to succeed in whatever goals they have for themselves.





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