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## **The Education of School Age Mothers: Social exclusion, reintegration and the need for child care**

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## Abstract

This paper will present early findings from a study, funded by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, of the education of pregnant young women and young mothers under 16 in ten areas of England. The study builds on earlier research on the DfES Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant.<sup>12</sup>

Government policy is to counter social exclusion of teenage mothers and their children by encouraging their participation in education, training and employment. For the under 16s this means ensuring that they return to and complete the compulsory period of schooling, but early policy foundered on the assumption that it was pregnancy that led to disengagement from the education system, whereas many young women have "disengaged" prior to pregnancy so that a return to mainstream schooling may not work.

The current research is looking at the experiences of pregnant young women and young mothers in 10 areas across England and has involved postal questionnaires to head teachers and key professionals and in-depth interviews with 100 young women, including a sample of current pregnant young women of school age, a sample of current young mothers of school age and a sample of mothers who are now post-16 but who conceived whilst of school age.

The paper will explore what pregnant young women and young mothers themselves have told us that they want and need to help them continue their education, with a particular focus on their childcare needs.

***Publications available by request from the authors are as follows:***

1. Selman, P, Richardson, D, Hosie, A and Speak, S (2001) ***Monitoring of the DfES Standards Fund Grant: Teenage Pregnancy***, Newcastle upon Tyne, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.
2. Hosie, A. (2002) "Teenage Pregnancy in Young Women of School Age: an exploration of disengagement from the education system", ***Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Conference Chicago***, 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> August 2002.

## Acknowledgements

The research findings and quotations cited in the second half of this paper are from a research project funded by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit. The field work has been carried out in ten LEA areas in England: Bristol; Cornwall; Durham; Leeds; Liverpool; Newham; Newcastle upon Tyne; Northumberland; Norfolk; and Sandwell.

We are grateful to the Department of Health for permission to refer to some of the early findings of this study and especially to Catherine Dennison, Research Manager for the Teenage Pregnancy Research Programme for her support throughout the study.

The authors also wish to acknowledge the contribution to the findings reported of the other two members of the research team: Dr Nona Dawson of the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol and Suzanne Speak of the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Finally we wish to thank the head teachers and professionals in the ten areas who responded to our questionnaire and all the young women who have been willing to share their experiences with us.

# The Education of School Age Mothers: Social exclusion, reintegration and the need for child care

## Introduction

The SEU Report on Teenage Pregnancy followed the Unit's remit to "to work with other departments, building particularly on the work already undertaken by the Department of Health to develop an integrated strategy to cut rates of teenage parenthood, particularly under-age parenthood, towards the European average, and propose **better solutions to combat the risk of social exclusion for vulnerable teenage parents and their children**"

The issue of supporting teenage parents to return to education was raised as an issue of policy concern within the SEU report on Teenage pregnancy<sup>1</sup> with two key government aims being to ensure that all under 16 year old mothers returned to finish full time education and to increase participation in education employment or training for 16-19 year olds from 30% to 60% by 2010. Less attention has been paid to the goal of reducing social exclusion for their children and there is a need for research to look at the impact of different patterns of education and childcare on the children of young mothers.

The later part of this paper will draw on current research funded by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, which is primarily concerned with the education of young pregnant women and young mothers under age 16 but includes interviews with older young women who had become young mothers for the first time when they were of school-age. The study builds on earlier research on the DfES Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant.

## Social Exclusion and Social Policy

Before we look in more detail at the emerging policies on the **education** of young mothers, we shall look briefly at what is meant by "social exclusion" and how this has affected the direction in which the new strategy has developed<sup>2</sup>. The term is a relatively new one, the origins of which are said to lie in French policy, and some sceptics see it as an acceptable New Labour term for poverty! Just as health inequalities have been replaced by health variations. More important there is a need to recognise that its meaning and the meaning of the "solution" i.e. social inclusion are not uncontested.

One of the most interesting attempts to unpick this by Ruth Levitas<sup>3</sup>, who suggests there are at least 3 differing discourses around social exclusion, all of which have had some influence on New Labour thinking, and that each implies different definitions of the problem and different policy "solutions".

<b>RED</b>	Redistributionist discourse – prime concern - poverty
<b>MUD</b>	Moral Underclass discourse
<b>SID</b>	Social integrationist discourse - sees inclusion primarily in terms of labour market attachment

<sup>1</sup> Social Exclusion Unit [SEU] (1999) **Teenage Pregnancy**, London: The Stationery Office.

<sup>2</sup> The issue of social exclusion is discussed further in Selman P (2001) "Teenage Pregnancy and Social Exclusion", paper presented at conference on *Teenage Pregnancy in Context*, University of Sheffield, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001

<sup>3</sup> Levitas R. *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour*, London: Macmillan

It is apparent that emphasis on any one of these models will give a certain slant to policy - and it could be argued that the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy seems to espouse SID – witness the wording of the second goal. However, each also implies a different approach to the causes of high Teenage Pregnancy rates;

**MUD** is most clearly seen in Charles Murray and the underclass debate. In the US this became entangled with the welfare debate. This suggests a moral crisis where action is needed not so much because Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood is a problem for mother and/or child, but as part of a war against a major threat to civilisation - cf Dennis & Erdos on problems of lone parents and link to crime etc.

**SID** represents an important shift away from this towards a more humane version of welfare into work. But also implies that we have in a sense brought this upon ourselves by allowing young mothers to draw benefit and enter social housing without any obligations re education and training.

**RED** would see the roots as more structural – that the low aspirations etc which lead to high rates of teenage motherhood are inevitable in a divided and unequal society and that solutions cannot be sought in better sex education or contraception alone (although this is important as a right) but must also involve a reduction in inequalities.

In the interviews which form the basis of the second half of this paper we asked young women what social exclusion actually meant to them. Of the 70 interviews so far transcribed, only 5 young women hazarded a guess at what social exclusion meant to them and their lives. 4 of them were Sociology students!

### **Reintegration: Government policy on the education of school-age mothers**

**Point 18** in the SEU Report summary states that: *“teenagers who become parents should not lose out on opportunities for the future. Young parents should have the chance to complete their education and prepare to support themselves and their family.”*

Later in “the government’s action plan” the Report deals specifically with the importance of education for the under 16s (11.14 – Box 23 p 99) where the action points state that:

- *Under 16 year old mothers will be required to return to finish their full time education, and be given help with child care to ensure this happens.*
- *DfEE and DH will issue more detailed guidance on how to support parents of pregnant girls of school age.*
- *LEAs will, when the young parents’ families cannot help, provide support for mothers of compulsory school age, during pregnancy and after, to make sure the mother can return to full time education, either in school, college or an appropriate unit*

The Standards Fund was the Government’s main channel for targeting funds towards national priorities to be delivered by LEAs. In 2000 the Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant was launched in 48 LEAs with the explicit aim of helping to reintegrate pregnant young women and mothers of school age back into education and provide support to pregnant teenagers and school-age parents in education. The grant was subsequently made available in another 41

LEAs. We were commissioned by DfEE (now DfES) to monitor the grant in six LEAs in England<sup>4</sup>. The findings of this exercise were overwhelmingly positive. A major finding of this research was the invaluable role played by the Reintegration Officers who were employed in each area to help support pregnant young women and young mothers as a result of this funding in a number of key ways including:

- Breaking down barriers to education including issues relating to childcare and transport,
- Working with educational establishments to change prevailing negative perceptions of pregnant young women and young mothers at an institutional level and develop quick and effective methods of referral,
- Successfully reintegrating and re-engaging pregnant young women and young mothers into mainstream and alternative education,
- Working with young women to capitalise on renewed motivation to succeed for the sake of their child.

The Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant is now subsumed into the new Vulnerable Groups Grant which means there is potential for every LEA in the country to utilise this fund to breakdown barriers in relation to teenage pregnancy and education. However, the money is no longer ring fenced and therefore concern has been raised by the TPU that LEAs should continue to develop this work and LEAs new to this money should seriously consider the positive benefits of following what other LEAs have done with this money. The TPU has made use of the findings from the DfES study to encourage LEAs in this direction.

## **Barriers to education**

Part of the current project involves a postal questionnaire to head teachers and professionals in the ten study areas. The results are still being analysed by our colleague Nona Dawson from the University of Bristol, but there are some interesting preliminary findings from the survey of Head Teachers.

From the schools' point of view the main barriers to education for young mothers were noted to include:

- Childcare, including lack of childcare, location of childcare and affordability of childcare
- Lack of interest in education
- Low self esteem
- Family difficulties

From the perspective of the young women themselves, however, we found that engagement in education during pregnancy and after birth was dependent on a much wider range of factors than those raised by schools above. They included:

- Childcare
- Enjoyment of school prior to pregnancy
- School attitudes to pregnancy and motherhood – teachers and pupils
- Levels of one-on-one support from a reintegration officer (or equivalent)
- Levels of work support during maternity leave
- Alternatives to mainstream school
- Family support (or lack of it)
- Being allowed to be a mum!

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<sup>4</sup> Selman et al. (2001) **Monitoring of the Standards Fund Grant: Teenage Pregnancy**, Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle upon Tyne

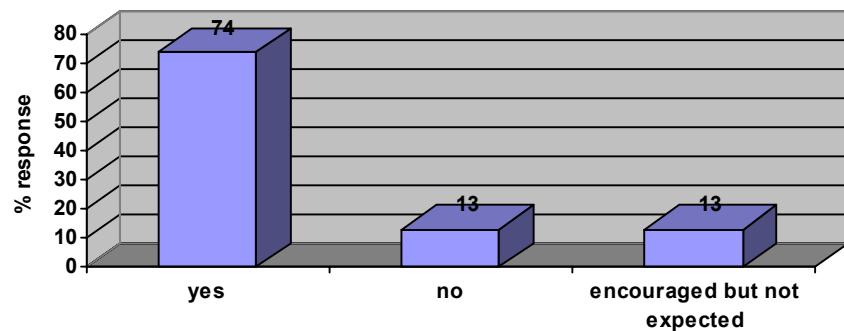
## What the young women want!

In the current TPU project two researchers (Alison Hosie and Suzanne Speak) have been asking young women what kinds of support they have valued, wished they'd had and would like to see available for themselves and other young mums of the future, to make an enjoyable continuing educational experience through pregnancy and motherhood an expectation, rather than pot luck, dependent on your school or LEA.

The sample of interviewees includes ten young women in each of the ten areas – 3 pregnant under 16 year olds; 3 under 16 mothers; and 4 young women aged between 16 and 19, who had first become young mothers while under 16. 70 of these interviews have been transcribed so far and therefore, the rest of this paper will be concerned with preliminary findings from an analysis of those interviews with a particular focus on questions about barriers to education and child care.

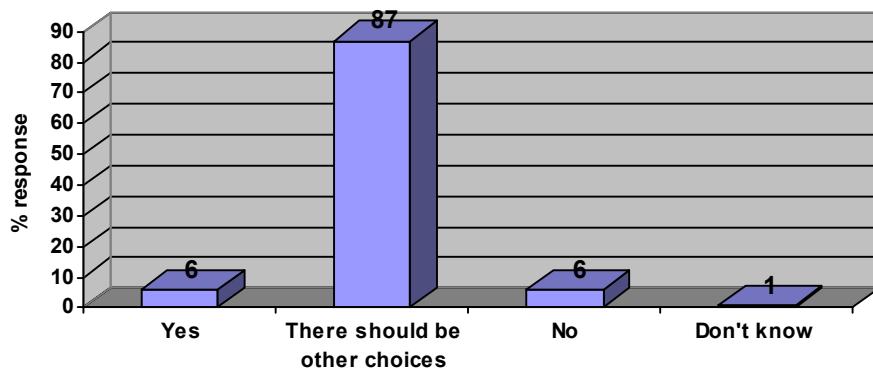
As can be seen in Figure 1, 74% of the sample of young women thought that they should be expected to return to some form of education after the birth of their child, with a further 13% saying they should be encouraged but not expected to return.

**Figure 1: Do you think young mothers should be expected to return to some form of education after birth?**



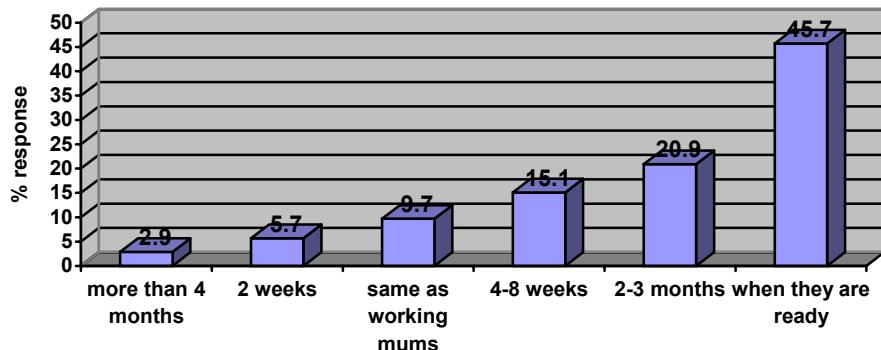
In relation to the issue of returning to mainstream school, as can be seen in Figure 2, a large majority (87%) stated that there should be other choices. Interestingly this high response level for alternatives came not only from young women who had or were currently experiencing alternative provisions but also from young women who had had very positive experiences within mainstream.

**Figure 2: Do you think the government should encourage young mothers back to mainstream school after birth?**



With regard to how quickly young women should go back to education after birth, almost 50% believed that it should be the women's choice to decide when she felt ready, recognising that childbirth and recovering is different for everyone (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: When should mothers be expected to return to education after having their baby?**



### **Barriers to education**

All young women were asked what they thought would make it easier for young mothers to return to education. As can be seen from Table 1, all felt that childcare was a key factor in making it easier for them to return to education, just as the schools' responses to the postal survey had identified. A majority (51%) thought that an alternative education site with onsite childcare would help their return. A quarter felt that it would help if they were recognised as mothers and that support from a reintegration officer (or equivalent) and positive support from teachers through one to one work were important. Other key factors cited were transport (20%) and flexible timetables (19%).

**Table 1: What help do you think young mothers should get to return to education? What would make it easier?**

Desired provision/ need	Percentage (%)
Childcare	100
Alternative provisions	51
Recognition of 'mother' status	26
Support from reintegration officer (type)	23
Positive support from teachers	20
Transport	20
Flexible timetables	19
Parenting skills support	13
Education provision with good environment	10
Child benefit & extra finance	7
Individual attention	6
Sleep-room	6

## The Need for Childcare

Due to the fact that childcare was raised as an issue by every interviewee, Table 2 was developed to explore a further breakdown in relation to the types of childcare that young women saw as most appropriate as well as highlighting other issues relating to childcare, such as cost.

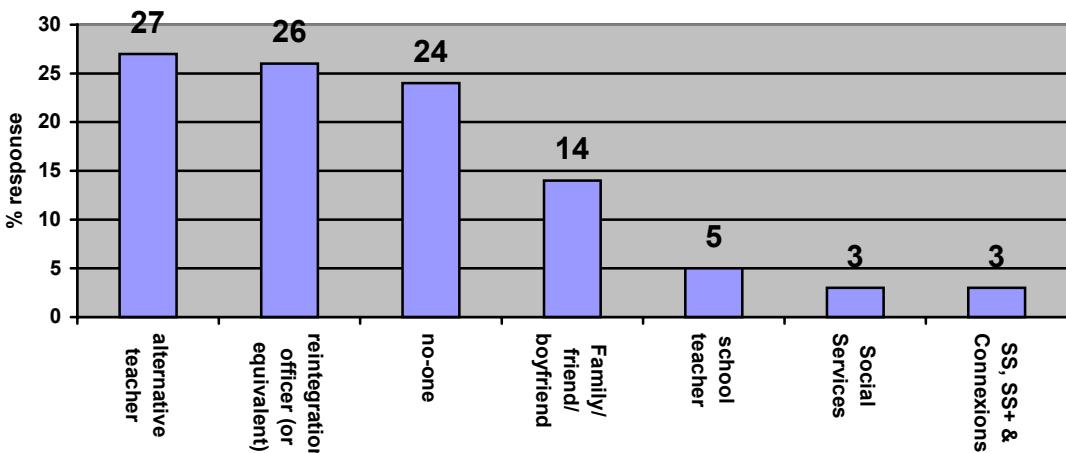
**Table 2**

Childcare provision, choices and issues	Percentage (%)
Alternative education site with onsite childcare	53
Childcare (general/nursery/crèche)	36
School onsite	19
Childcare (general) if you don't have family	17
Easier access to childcare	14
Free/ low cost	14
More childcare choices	13
Near to education site	4
Homework time childcare	3
Safe childcare	3

Whilst these were the choices and issues raised by the young women regarding what should be ideally available for all, the following graphs highlight what the childcare usage and choices were of our sample.

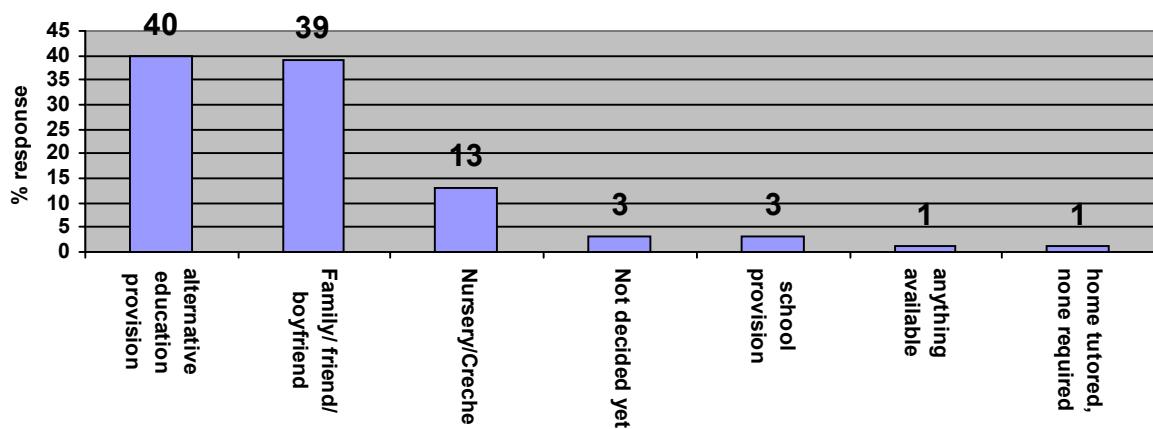
The key people who talked to the young women about their childcare needs were the teacher from an alternative site or the re-integration officer but 24 per cent said they had talked or received help from no-one. However, the majority of those responses came from young women who were pregnant at the time of interview and may simply not have been asked yet. Perhaps of greater concern were the very low responses relating to conversations with Sure Start, Sure Start Plus and Connexions.

**Figure 4: Did anyone talk to you about/ help you with your childcare needs?**



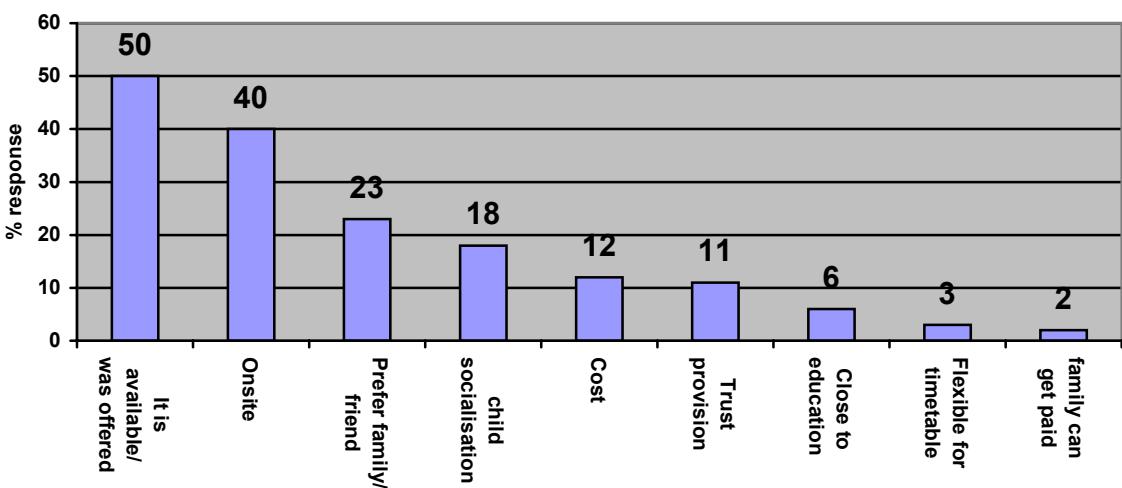
Asked what sort of childcare they had used or were intending to use (see Figure 5) , 40 per cent of the young women cited nurseries at alternative sites with a similar proportion saying their family, a friend or a boyfriend.

**Figure 5: What childcare did you/ are you going to use?**



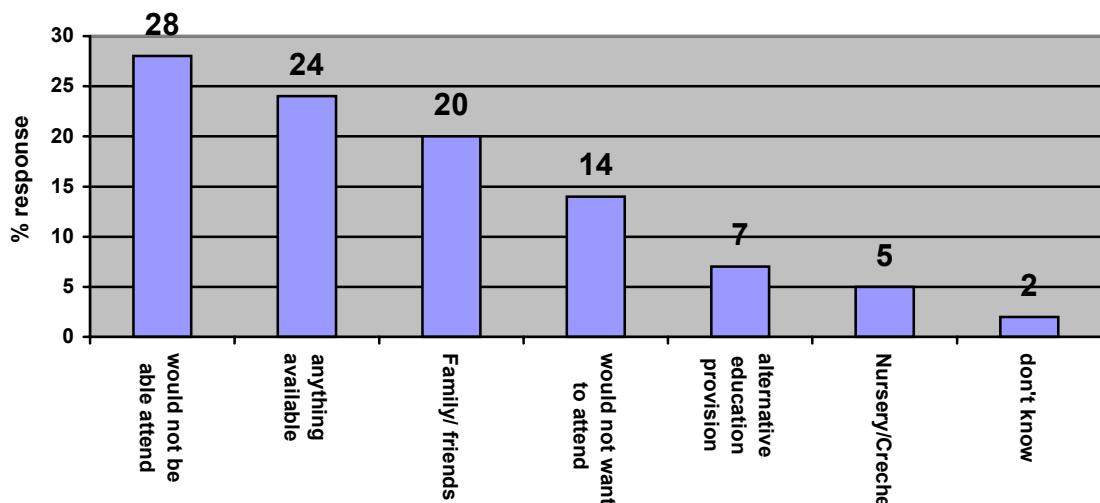
As can be seen in Figure 6, for half of the interviewees, their choice of childcare was determined by the availability or offer of the particular type used, especially where it was part of on-site provision, but 23 per cent said they preferred family or friends. Other factors influencing choice included cost (12%) and the feeling they could trust the provision (11%).

**Figure 6: Why chose that childcare?**



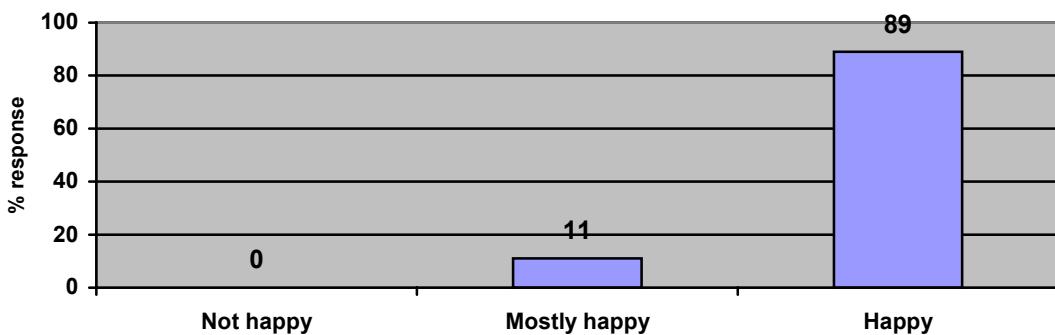
42 per cent said that if the childcare they wanted was not available they would either not be able to attend or not want to, but a quarter said they would take anything available and 20 per cent that they would turn to family or friends.

**Figure 7: If that was not available what would you use?**



Overall there was a high level of satisfaction with the child care they had used or intended to use.

**Figure 8: How did you feel about your childcare?**



### Future developments in childcare for young mothers

The summary of responses outlined shows clearly how central child care is to any attempt to increase the number of young mothers returning education. An important new initiative to improve the availability of child care is the DfES programme **CARE TO LEARN: childcare for young learners**, which aims to provide up to £5,000 a year funding, which will not be means-tested, for young parents returning to education. Initially this will be for young parents aged 16 – 19, who start learning after 1 August 2003 or are a continuing student in school sixth form or sixth form college but it has been agreed to include Year 11 under-16s and from 1 August 2004 the scheme will provide for all young parents under 19 and continuing students who started their course before they reached 19. The success of the scheme will depend on many things including, close cooperation between childcare providers and learning providers and the support offered to young mothers in making decisions and completing the application forms.

Most importantly however, is the recognition of the different types of childcare that young mothers have said that they will and will not use. In all the talk of childcare in this paper it may have been noticed that the word childminder was not mentioned once. This is because not one young woman mentioned the choice of a childminder as an option that would be used. In fact they were mentioned solely in terms of what childcare they would not use. For some this was due to bad press around childminders in the media and for others because the young women did not want another adult forming a strong one-on-one relationship with their child. Therefore listening to what young mothers are telling us is acceptable childcare to them is of equal importance to the finance being made available to fund it.

### **Consulting Young Mothers**

In closing, one final issue that was raised by a number of young women was a general lack of consultation with them and straight talking by government to them. One of the young women in particular summed up quite well their issues with government:

*And also, don't you know what I think about the government, well it's like good what you're doing now actually asking us what matters, but I think they need somebody, Tony Blair would be nice! or whoever to sit down and actually ask us, because sometimes they make all these decisions and they don't actually speak to us. And it's important that they meet people like me so those narrow minded people who think oh well she's a teenage mother she won't amount to anything can actually meet people have done it or are doing it and see that it can be done. Because otherwise we all get labelled and once you're labelled, that's it, people treat you differently and you think well why do I bother?*

***Young mother aged 18, trainee legal executive.***