

# *Teenage Pregnancy Research Programme*

*research*

# briefing

## *The Education of Pregnant Young Women and Young Mothers in England*

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What is the experience of pregnant young women and young mothers of compulsory school age at school? What factors and forms of provision determine both attainment and broader success in returning to or continuing with education? Researchers from the Universities of Bristol and Newcastle used a number of methods to explore these questions in 10 English Local Education Authorities (LEAs).

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## Key Findings

- Less than half of the pregnant young women and young mothers interviewed said that they were attending school regularly at the time they conceived.
- A majority of the young women reported improved attendance and a greater willingness to engage with education following pregnancy.
- The suitability and acceptability of different forms of educational provision during and following pregnancy was influenced by a range of factors including: the young woman's health, previous educational experiences, her relationships with peers and the setting's ability to accommodate her changing needs and recognise her new status as a mother.
- Most of the young women who had had a positive experience of schooling and had been regular attendees with good academic achievement prior to pregnancy continued to have good attendance and achievement, whether in mainstream schooling or alternative provision.
- Those who had been poor attendees or excluded prior to pregnancy benefited greatly from attending specialist units or other education facilities outside of mainstream school.
- The benefits of specialist units were seen to be the provision of onsite childcare; the academic, practical and emotional support offered; and their consideration of the young woman as a parent.
- Those young women living in areas where there was a re-integration officer or equivalent felt better supported and had been enabled to make appropriate decisions about how best to continue education after their pregnancy.
- Young women, schools and professionals saw a lack of affordable, accessible and suitable childcare as a major barrier to young mothers continuing in education.

## Background

In 1999 the SEU Report on Teenage Pregnancy noted that "teenagers who become parents should not lose out on opportunities for the future" and that "young parents should have the chance to complete their education and prepare to support themselves and their families". This was translated into the specific target of "getting more teenage parents into education, training or employment to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion" (SEU 1999).

In 1999 a *Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant* was introduced for areas with high teenage pregnancy rates to encourage the reintegration of school age mothers into education. In 2003 this was absorbed into the wider *Vulnerable Children Grant* offering the opportunity for extending this support to school age parents in all LEAs.

Additional support is available through a range of initiatives such as Connexions and Sure Start Plus

In 2001 DfES published guidelines (DfES/2001/0629) on the education of young mothers of school age, which stress that pregnancy is not a reason for exclusion from school and that LEAs have a duty to provide suitable education (at an individual level) for all who become pregnant while of compulsory school age. From August 2004 the *Care to Learn* scheme has made funds available to enable all young parents under 19 years old engaged in learning or training to access childcare and transport.

It is against this background of evolving policy for the support of young pregnant women and young mothers that this research sought to explore the experiences

and needs of pregnant young women and young mothers of school age.

## About the study

The research was carried out in ten LEAs in England selected to represent a range of educational provision for young mothers; availability of relevant government initiatives; varying levels of teenage conceptions and deprivation; different geographical and demographic characteristics. The research used three main methods: collection of baseline data on pregnant and parenting young women; interviews with 93 pregnant young women and young mothers, of pre and post compulsory school age, to explore their educational experiences; and, a postal survey to which 138 secondary schools (51% response rate) and 106 professionals (70% response rate from key professionals such as re-integration officers, teenage pregnancy co-ordinators and workers from Sure Start Plus, Connexions and FE colleges) responded.

## Findings

### *Educational experience prior to pregnancy*

For many of the pregnant young women and young mothers, disengagement from education occurred prior to pregnancy with less than half of the young women attending school regularly at the point of conception. Difficulty with work, bullying from pupils and lack of encouragement from staff, as well as a sense of failure, often led to truancy. However a majority of the young women reported improved attendance and a greater willingness to

engage with education following pregnancy, especially if offered appropriate non-judgemental support.

#### *Provision for young mothers in mainstream school*

Young women who had had a positive experience of schooling and had been regular attendees with good academic achievement pre-pregnancy were more likely to be met by a supportive attitude by their schools when disclosing their pregnancy. Most continued to have a good record of attendance and achievement, whether in mainstream schooling or alternative provision. According to the young women the most valuable ways in which a school could encourage a pregnant young woman to remain in school were by: openly discussing her fears and needs; being generally supportive and encouraging, rather than judgemental; and allowing her choice in how her education is handled.

Schools themselves had had varied experience of school age mothers, with two thirds reporting no more than one young mother in years 7-11 in the previous year and 30 per cent with none. At the other extreme, twelve schools (9%) reported three or more school age mothers in the previous year and five schools (4%) had had five or more. Most schools said that they saw the continuing presence of young mothers in classes in positive terms, indicating the caring nature of the school. However, this was not the experience of many young women, half of whom reported negative attitudes from their school.

#### *Importance of re-integration officers*

Whether in mainstream school or alternative provision, those young women living in areas where there was a re-integration officer or an equivalent felt better supported and had been enabled to make appropriate decisions about how best to continue education after their pregnancy. The role of re-integration officers was, therefore, crucial and was particularly effective where they spent a significant amount of time working with mainstream schools. Thus it was important for schools to develop their role alongside specialist units rather than assuming that all young mothers were best served by such alternative provision.

#### *Alternatives to mainstream school for young mothers*

The suitability and acceptability of different forms of educational provision during and following pregnancy is influenced by a range of factors including: the young woman's health, previous educational experience, her relationships with peers and the setting's ability and willingness to accommodate her changing needs and recognise her new status as a mother of a young child.

#### *Advantages of specialist units*

Those young women who had been poor attendees or excluded prior to pregnancy benefited hugely from attending specialist units or other "education other than in school". Specialist provision for pregnant young women and young mothers was most likely to lead to such young women continuing with their education post 16, as well as leading to much improved attendance during and after pregnancy.

The features of specialist units seen to be of particular importance by the young mothers and professionals who worked in or with the units included: onsite childcare facilities; academic, practical and emotional support offered; and the capacity to deal with post-birth issues (such as ill-health of mother and/or baby). Other features identified as important by those attending such units were that they were respected and treated like adults; allowed to be educated at the same time as providing for the needs of their children, in many cases alongside them; able to have more flexible timetables; there was more one-on-one teaching; and they had the ability to play an active role in decisions about their education.

#### *The importance of childcare*

Young women, schools and professionals saw a lack of affordable and accessible childcare as a major barrier to young mothers being able to continue in education. The majority of young mothers interviewed used either on-site crèche facilities or their family as their main childcare source and reported satisfaction with these. Where choice was available, family was often not the desired option. A key element in their childcare preference was wanting their babies to be near to them, especially if they were breast-feeding.

### **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

The findings show clearly that for many of the young mothers disengagement from education began much earlier and was often a key factor in their pregnancy. Policies to encourage the re-engagement of young mothers must, therefore, address problems

experienced prior to pregnancy. Although many schools expressed a positive attitude towards the retention of young mothers in mainstream schooling, there is still more to be done in improving the attitudes of some and this may need to be addressed at teacher training level.

The role of the re-integration officer was crucial in the areas where they were in place, especially if they made a significant input into mainstream schools. It is vital that funding for these posts should continue and that more LEAs establish such posts.

The suitability of different forms of provision for different young women is influenced by a range of factors. For this reason young women should be offered a choice between a return to mainstream schooling and alternative forms of education outside school. Specialist units or other non-mainstream flexible provision should be available in all LEAs. They should be seen as a method of inclusion, rather than exclusion. For areas where specialist units are not practical it is essential to incorporate the positive features of these units into other alternative forms of provision but there are also many lessons for mainstream schools. This means listening to the views of the young women in terms of their need for a supportive non-judgmental ethos, ideally combined with a flexible approach to timetabling and the availability of acceptable childcare. Consideration should also be given to the possibility of young mothers continuing in these units after the age of 16, where there is a lack of alternative provision.

The Government must build on the Care to Learn Initiative to ensure all young mothers have access to affordable and

appropriate childcare, including access to transport. It is also important to acknowledge young mothers' preferences for particular types of childcare, noting the positive attitudes towards on-site childcare in specialist units and FE colleges and the preference of many for provision by their family.

## The authors

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## How to obtain further details

Copies of the full report are available to download at

[www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk](http://www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk)

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## About the programme

The Teenage Pregnancy Unit, in partnership with the Research and Development Division, Department of Health commissioned a major programme of research under a number of themes in order to inform implementation, and development, of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy.

Five themes were identified through consultation with the Teenage Pregnancy Unit's policy team, other government departments, the research community and practitioners:

- The impact of growing up in rural and seaside resorts on the sexual behaviour and life-chances of young people.
- Attitudes and behaviour of black and minority ethnic young people relating to sexual activity, contraceptive use and teenage pregnancy.
- Black and minority ethnic young people's experience of teenage parenthood.
- Educational experiences of pregnant young women and young mothers of school age.
- Long term consequences of teenage births for mothers, fathers and their children.

Reports and research briefings from all nine projects commissioned under these themes are now, or will shortly be, available from [www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk](http://www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk).

The views expressed in this report are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills or the Department of Health.