

Being a teenage mum in York



**Qualitative research on teenage mothers in York
Summary report for participants
May 2009**

Department of Social Policy and Social Work
University of York



This report is based on interviews and focus groups in which young women in York took part.

It has helped to highlight a number of areas of concern and areas in which services in York could be improved.

YOU TOLD US

- **The sex education you received in school was not that useful and could be improved.**

You said this could be done by including more information about relationships and being given some skills to help you resist pressure to have sex at an early age. You also said you wanted more knowledge about the impact of pregnancy, abortion, child birth and looking after young children. Some of you thought that if you were involved in peer education projects this might help in the future. Many of you also agreed that you would be willing to take part in this, maybe talking to other young people about pregnancy and parenthood.

- **Becoming pregnant often resulted in you leaving school and stopping your education.**

You felt more could be done to help you with alternative educational options so you could continue with your education and career plans when you were ready.

- **Many of you described your feelings on discovering that you were pregnant as “devastated”, “shocked”, and “confused” and you felt you needed more support at this stage.**

Some of you reported being under pressure from others to either have a termination or to continue with your pregnancy. There was a clear need for you to have someone you could talk to about this who would both give you honest information and remain impartial and non-judgemental.

- **One powerful message you told us concerned the stigma that you felt was heaped upon you for becoming pregnant while still a teenager.**

Some of this came from the unsympathetic treatment you received from professionals. You felt more could be done to avoid it and to offer support for young people especially when they may feel vulnerable already.

- **You also spoke of a clear need for support throughout pregnancy.**

There was widespread praise for ‘Mums 2B’ and many of you said it was important that there was a support group dedicated to young mums and that you would not have attended (or felt comfortable attending) ante-natal classes in which older mothers had been present.

- **There were calls for more help and support immediately after the birth of your baby.**

Although family members (and mothers especially) were important, some of you told us that these relationships were sometimes strained, which risked both your own and your babies’ well-being.

- **Housing issues often became chronic after the birth of your child.**

You thought much more could be done to support this vital aspect of your lives, which had such a crucial impact upon the welfare of you and your child.

OTHER THINGS YOU TOLD US

The most common words used to describe your feelings when you discovered you were pregnant were **“shocked”** and **“devastated”**. Virtually all the pregnancies you talked about you said were **unplanned** and **what most of you feared most was telling your mother**.

The responses of parents, partners, friends and family were often much more positive than you had expected and this seemed to have an impact upon your decision to continue with your pregnancy.

For some of you, decisions to continue with your pregnancy were straight forward as you were **strongly opposed to abortion**. For others, the decision was more complicated and involved recognising that **you really did have a choice**, albeit sometimes a difficult one.

Many of you told us about being made to feel the **“shame”** associated with teenage pregnancy, even though some of you tried to fight or resist this. **This stigma seems to come from a variety of sources**, from everyday encounters with members of the public out on the streets, to your dealings with professional workers (especially health workers). Some of this was so subtle that you told us that sometimes **you could hardly believe what you saw or heard**.

Some of you were clearly affected by fears of being stigmatised by **negative images of “teenage pregnancy” held by the public and portrayed in the media**. For some of you this meant you were reluctant to join groups which may have been able to offer support.

Most of the support you talked about was from mothers and other family members. But not all relationships within families remained positive—indeed some were the reverse. For some of you **the birth of your child led to the breakdown of family relationships**.

A number of you were **living away from home when you discovered your pregnancy**, suggesting that living away from home at an early age may increase the likelihood of early, unplanned, motherhood.

Most of your partners were not described in very favourable terms. Many of them were significantly older than you, few were in any way

supportive and some, you told us, were manipulative and abusive. **Many relationships seem to break up within a short time of pregnancy being first discovered**.

There were some exceptions to this, including some who told us that they thought that, **had they not continued with their pregnancies, they would not still be with the baby’s father today**.

There were many stories of **good support from a range of different services**. The most widespread positive comments were about ‘Mums2B’. Others mentioned support from midwives, from Sure Start and from Connexions workers.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, you talked most extensively about **your experiences of labour and the birth of your child**. Experiences varied considerably: for some, labour was lengthy, difficult and traumatic but for others it was short and sweet.

Behind the individual stories you told are indications of some of the problems faced by young mothers and their **(mis)treatment by professional workers**. Because so many of your stories were so negative, it is difficult not to conclude that **the treatment of young mothers by health professionals further compounded the feelings of stigma you felt before the birth of your child**. This has been made clear to the appropriate authorities and we trust **things will improve because of what you told us**.

Whilst many of you told stories about how it was a hard life being a young mother, many also talked about how **becoming pregnant had been a turning point in your lives**. You described how it had made you set aims for the future, and gain a clearer sense of purpose. Often this took the form of **ceasing a lifestyle you now regarded as harmful**. Motherhood also seemed to make you realise that you would have to **“grow up fast”**. But while some of you talked about the way it led to leading a less harmful and more responsible life-style, **this was not always the case**.



Some of you reported that you were all too aware that your pregnancy had resulted in **much less scope for getting a good job** and secure career prospects. However, some of you also reported that, despite this, you had become **much more dedicated to life with your partner**.

Some of you were bluntly honest about some of the **negatives associated with being a teenage mum**. Some of these were to do with **physical changes to your bodies** which you did not like. Among the other things you found difficult was **finding and sustaining appropriate accommodation** in which to bring up your child.

Even those of you who found motherhood hard still found positive things to say about **the way your life had changed**.

Reflecting back on the **sex education** you had experienced, you had many useful comments on **how this could be improved**. There was some discussion of how **more realistic and effective communication** could take place within schools, including questions about whether **you yourselves would be prepared to help in promoting this**.

Some of you talked about **the pressure you felt under to have sex**. Sometimes this seemed to come not from their friends and partners but from others, including mothers and other adult relatives.

Clearly, knowledge of, and attitudes towards, contraception have an impact on the likelihood of becoming pregnant and having a child. But interesting in your accounts was the fact that **having a child had made you increasingly aware of the importance of using reliable contraception** and your knowledge about this.

You had a range of different views on abortion. Some were against it and wouldn't in any circumstances contemplate a termination of a pregnancy. The majority view, however, was much more complex, with **many of you who ruled it out in your own case, not being against it in principle and being sympathetic with the view that it might depend upon circumstances**.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

■ Sex and relationships education

We are consulting with young people in schools about the sex and relationships education they receive, and the information they want. This is so that when they are ready, they will have the information they need to make informed choices about their relationships and sexual health.

■ Education

We have identified a named person who will be responsible for helping teenage parents continue with their education up to the birth of their baby and beyond until they feel ready to return to mainstream education.

■ Support during and after the birth of your baby

We will be assessing services through the *You're Welcome* quality criteria to ensure all services used by young people are friendly and accessible.

■ Helpful and friendly staff

We are providing information and training for the young people's workforce to ensure that they can quickly and appropriately signpost young people to the services they need. There should be 'no wrong door'.

We are supporting the facilitation of young parents' groups in our Children's Centres and throughout the city, to give information, advice and guidance on a variety of issues that are pertinent to young parents.

■ Listening to you

We will continue to ask your opinions about the issues that concern you, in order to improve the outcomes for you and your children for generations to come

Thank you to all the teenage parents who contributed to this report, and to staff from Young People's Services and the Children's Centres who supported young parents.

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