

healthy care

briefing

Supporting young parents enables them to care for their children. Looked after young people who become parents need support and targeted programme because they often have less emotional and practical support than those who are not looked after.

Healthy Care

This briefing is for all who are involved in Healthy Care Partnerships, Children's Trusts and other strategic partnerships and:

- identifies what is known about young parents who are looked after or leaving care
- describes young parents views of their experiences and support needs
- provides examples of how healthy care can support young parents who are looked after or leaving care
- offers signposts to guidance and further information.

The Healthy Care Programme, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, is a practical means of improving the health of looked after children and young people, in line with the Department of Health Guidance *Promoting the Health of Looked After Children* (2002) and the Change for Children Programme. Through partnership working, policy development, and with the participation of looked after children and young people, it will ensure that services are child-focused, provide a healthy care environment and support the National Healthy Care Standard.

The National Healthy Care Standard is based on a child's entitlement to:

- appreciation, love, respect and consistency
- a safe, protective and healthy care environment
- opportunities to develop personal and social skills to care for their health and well-being now and in the future
- effective healthcare, assessment, treatment and support.

Supporting young parents who are looked after or leaving care

Young parents who are looked after or leaving care

Some looked after young people and care leavers will make a positive choice to become a parent once pregnancy is confirmed. They may see it as an opportunity to have someone to love and care for and as giving them a sense of purpose and direction in their lives. Some will experience difficulties in parenting their children and most will face practical and financial difficulties.

The evidence

The teenage pregnancy and early parenthood rates in the United Kingdom are among the highest in Europe, and are associated with poor health, social and economic outcomes. This is well documented elsewhere (see Swann and others 2003 and Dennison and others 2004 and the Teenage Pregnancy Unit website www.dfes.gov.uk/teenage_pregnancy). As would be expected given the vulnerability of children and young people entering care, the rate of teenage motherhood is higher among looked after young women than in the general population. This higher prevalence is reflected in statistics and research evidence on teenage motherhood among looked after young women.

This section provides a brief overview of the evidence about parenthood among looked after young people and care leavers (a more detailed description can be found in a research review by Chase and others 2003).

- Recent statistics show that around 4.1 per cent of looked after young women aged 15 to 17 years were teenage

mothers. This compares with around 2.3 per cent among all young women aged 15 to 17 (DfES 2005a).

- Looked after young women are more likely to become young mothers than the general population of young women aged 16 to 24 years (Biehal and others 1995; Corlyon and McGuire 1997 and 1999).
- Looked after young mothers are much less likely to have the support of a family (Haydon 2003).
- Looked after young men are more likely to be become young fathers than their peers who are not in care (Gelder 2002).
- Young parents who are care leavers report wide variations in support (including access to sexual health services before they became pregnant). Many fear involvement with services in case it leads to their child being taken into care (Chase and others 2004).
- A small study has shown that more children of care leavers are taken into care than children of non care leavers (National Foster Care Association 1997).
- Eighty three per cent of care leavers who were young mothers had no qualifications compared to 65 per cent of care leavers without children (Biehal and others 1992).
- Young parents who have been looked after or are care leavers, especially young men, are often keener to marry or co-habit than those who have not been looked after. They may also see becoming a parent as a chance to make up for their own, often negative, experiences of being parented (Corlyon and McGuire 1999; Chase and Knight 2006).

Young parents' views

An unplanned pregnancy does not mean that the baby is unwanted. Many young people whether looked after or not, make a positive decision to continue with their pregnancy and become a parent. Many studies note how resilient and determined young mothers are to do the best for their child (Dowler 1999).

'Giving birth was one of the best things ever. I'm really proud of my son and of myself for the way I've brought him up and the fact I've done it myself.'
(Young woman, age 18, parent at 15 years, one child)
(Chase and Knight 2006)

Some young people describe becoming a parent as a critical point in their lives, a reason for making positive lifestyle changes and moving away from destructive influences. Their main concern is to be good parents and good role models for their children. Fostering Network (2006) found they want help and support to do this but many do not receive it.

Many looked after young people already have negative views about professionals (and sometimes carers), feeling they have been let down, and regard professionals as intrusive and uncaring. Consequently they can be distrustful of services and reluctant to engage with them or see them as a source of help and support. They also worry that these services will judge them as unfit parents and that their child will be removed from their care.

'Social services should only get involved when the parents need them or if there is a serious problem. They are too much in your face and are always expecting you to make a mistake.'
(Focus group interview, Fostering Network 2006)

They thought social services judged them more harshly than young parents who had not been looked after and were more interested in the baby. Although some service managers and professionals recognised that looked after young people have to achieve independence more quickly than their peers, young parents thought they were unsupported and the expectations placed on them were too high. They report that foster carers say that caring for the baby is the young person's responsibility. Foster carers were however generally acknowledged as being supportive, and this seemed to work well when clear boundaries were established about caring for the baby (for example, being clear about who would look after the baby and agreeing times to go out for the evening). Young women in mother-and-baby homes were frequently positive about the support they had received from well-established

and supportive leaving care teams. Young parents found consistent, holistic and non-judgmental support most helpful. They often talked of a key person who acted as a friend, advocate and mentor and who could help them access services:

'She (leaving care worker) takes me shopping every week and helps with the decorating and with the child. A good worker is someone you can relate to and talk to, and they don't act like they know better.'
(Young woman, age 19, parent at 17, one child)
(Chase 2006 forthcoming)

Support for young parents

The National Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (Social Exclusion Unit 1999) aims to provide better support for teenage parents in order to reduce social exclusion. This has led to research and learning about effective ways to support teenage parents.

Most young parents who have been looked after or are leaving care report being shocked to discover that they or their partner was pregnant; this is despite the fact that most were not using any form of contraception or using it irregularly (Chase and others 2003). This would suggest that advice and support on sexual health and relationships has been absent or ineffective for this group. The Teenage Pregnancy Unit guidance on providing sex and relationship education (Teenage Pregnancy Unit 2004) clearly defines social care practitioners' role (including foster carers) in helping young people access confidential sexual health advice and supporting young parents. The Healthy Care Briefing on Sexual Health (NCB 2005) provides information about looked after young people's sexual health and the importance of addressing this through timely and effective sex and relationship education. Young parents need advice and support to avoid future unplanned pregnancies and to promote their sexual health.

Young people reported receiving little support in making a decision about what to do once a pregnancy was confirmed, and many reported being under pressure to have a termination, either from foster carers, social workers or birth parents (Corlyon and McGuire 1997 and 1999). Once a pregnancy is confirmed, few services have guidelines or procedures for carers and professionals, leading to inconsistent approaches and missed opportunities for the young people. Some looked after children's services are starting to develop guidelines to ensure that once a pregnancy is confirmed young people receive consistent and timely support with access to counselling and advice in order to consider their options.

The framework in the integrated children's system (DfES, *Every Child Matters* website) requires that the needs of this group of young people are assessed on an individual basis so that support can be provided, if necessary, to help develop parenting skills and to enhance the life chances of both the young mother and her baby. Where care leavers are parents, their pathway plans must provide information about the assessment of their parenting skills and the needs of their child along with any related parenting support that they should be offered.

There is evidence to suggest that some interventions improve outcomes for young mothers and their babies:

- Good antenatal care improves outcomes for young mothers and their babies.
- Home visiting and emotional support reduces incomplete immunisation, severe nappy rash, hospitalisation in the first years of life, childhood injury and the numbers of suspected victims of child abuse.
- Parenting education (individual or group-based), improves mother–infant interactions, language development, parental attitudes and knowledge, maternal mealtime communication, maternal knowledge and self-confidence.
- Improved housing for young parents and their children increases their health outcomes.
- Support for young parents to continue education improves education and employment outcomes for young parents, mother–child interaction and social outcomes for children.
- Early educational interventions for disadvantaged children can improve long-term outcomes.
- Clinic-based healthcare programmes for teenage mothers and their children can improve their health outcomes. (Swann and others 2003; Dennison and others 2004)

Child protection assessments cause intense concern and distress to the young parents. Young parents do not understand the process, and fear of sparking child protection procedures is often a reason why young parents do not seek help from services. Child protection assessments need to be more transparent and efforts made to ensure young parents understand what is happening and why (Chase 2006). Some services are now providing intensive support to vulnerable young parents, for example, providing specialist foster care placements to help young parents develop parenting skills and working with young parents who have a child placed on the child protection register. Many areas provide groups for young parents: midwives and health visitors may attend the group, parenting skills courses may be provided and it is a place

to meet friends and learn to cook a healthy meal. A crèche for babies and children ensures the young mothers get a break. In addition these services often provide advice on benefits and welfare rights, support to return to education or training and most importantly a non-judgemental listening ear. Many leaving care services are developing such groups for the young parents.

The Teenage Pregnancy Unit has produced a range of guidance documents on supporting young parents, including those who are looked after or leaving care and these are listed under useful resources at the end of this briefing. Sure Start Plus, a pilot programme for teenage parents, funded to 2006, identified the role of the Personal Advisor, who provides a holistic package of support to young parents, as key to engaging with and supporting young parents. *Sure Start Children's Centre Practice Guidance* (DfES 2005b) includes information about providing targeted support to teenage parents.

Useful websites

www.ncb.org.uk/healthycare

Information about the National Healthy Care Standard, resources and briefings on key topics.

www.brook.org.uk

Confidential sexual health advice and contraception for young people up to age 25 (including a helpline).

www.fpa.org.uk

fpa provides resources and training for sex and relationships education (including training for carers of looked after children and young people).

www.nhs.uk

Provides links to NHS services across the UK, plus health advice and campaigns.

www.parentcentre.gov.uk

Information and support for parents.

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

UK charity offering support to anyone parenting a child.

www.ruthinking.co.uk

Teenage Pregnancy Unit sex and relationships website for young people, provides signposts to local services and the Sexwise helpline.

www.dfes.gov.uk/teenagepregnancy

Teenage Pregnancy Unit guidance for professionals and carers, research and publications.

www.surestart.gov.uk

Information about Sure Start including practice guidance for Sure Start Children's Centres.

www.rhn.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

Resources and information from The Who Cares? Trust for looked after children and young people.

Skills and Education Network

<http://senet.lsc.gov.uk/guide2/hardmothers/index.cfm#teen>

Skills and Education Network guide to engaging young mothers.

The National Healthy Care Standard

A child or young person living in a healthy care environment is entitled to:

1. feel safe, protected and valued in a strong, sustained and committed relationship with at least one carer
2. live in a caring, healthy and learning environment
3. feel respected and supported in his/her cultural beliefs and personal identity
4. have access to effective healthcare, assessment, treatment and support
5. have opportunities to develop personal and social skills, talents and abilities and to spend time in freely chosen play, cultural and leisure activities
6. be prepared for leaving care by being supported to care and provide for him/herself in the future.

Examples from Healthy Care Partnerships of action to support young parents

Policy

- The development of a local sexual health policy that included partnership working, consultation with young people, parents and carers, needs assessment, practice issues and outcomes.
- The development of guidelines to help carers offer consistent support to pregnant young women; young people contributed to the guidelines.

Partnership

- A young mothers supported housing unit includes young women leaving care or who have been looked after, and links with leaving care teams and looked after children's nurses and Sure Start Plus workers.
- A dedicated service for young parents includes specialised support for looked after young people, such as enhanced supported lodgings and fostering placements for young mothers and intensive support to enable mothers to keep their babies.
- An antenatal and follow-on post-natal group for young mothers leaving care is run by midwives and participation workers. It links young women to other services such as Sure Start, parenting courses (including one for fathers) as well as providing advice, information and support.

Practice

- A Bumps and Babies group was set up for pregnant young women who were looked after but reluctant to access services. A midwife and two Connexions workers help run the group. The group provides advice, information and social support to young mothers, including helping them access other services such as Sure Start and organising visits to the maternity unit.
- A male worker has been appointed to work on sexual health issues with looked after young men and young fathers.
- Transport is provided to enable young parents to attend parenting support groups and antenatal appointments. This is particularly important in rural areas and is often essential for young parents who find it hard to engage with services and may have few friends or social opportunities.

Participation

- A parenting support group was set up with a group of looked after young mothers who wanted to develop their skills. The work of the group has now been accredited through the Open College Network. The group is a partnership between the young women, social services and Connexions.
- A group of looked after young people developed a sexual health booklet for other looked after young people in the area. It addresses the issues most important to the young people and how to access confidential advice and support and information on local services. It has been widely distributed to young people.
- Arts projects including museums and galleries involve young parents who have been looked after and leads to them exploring their future as parents. As a result several young people have returned to education and training.

National Policy

The National Healthy Care Standard contributes to the achievement of the five outcomes described in *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury 2003):

- being healthy
- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving
- making a positive contribution
- economic well-being.

The National Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (Social Exclusion Unit 1999) aims to halve the under-18 conception rate by 2010 and to increase the participation of teenage mothers in education, training or work in order to reduce the risk of long-term social exclusion.

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (Department of Health 2004) Standard 1 refers to the need for information and services to prevent risk-taking and promote healthy lifestyles including good sexual health for all children and young people. Standard 4 refers to the need for access to age-appropriate services including health promotion that aims to reduce teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and the need for extra support to be given to young care leavers.

Choosing Health: Making healthier choices easier (2004) identifies the need to promote the health and well-being of children and young people. There will be a new government campaign focusing on sexual health and young people that aims to cut rates of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

Youth Matters Green Paper (2005) proposes increased advice, information and guidance for young people on their future options, and identifies the need for some young people to receive targeted support as well as local authorities leading local action on teenage pregnancy.

Useful resources

Sexual Health, Healthy Care Briefing
London: National Children's Bureau (2005)
Available from: www.ncb.org.uk/healthycare

Let's make it happen. Training on sex, relationships, pregnancy and parenthood for those working with looked after children and young people
Mackie S and Patel-Kanwal H (2003), London: Family Planning Association and National Children's Bureau.

Let's talk about sex and relationships. A policy and practice framework for working with children and young people in public care
Patel-Kanwal, H and Frances, G (1998) London: National Children's Bureau.

The Teenage Pregnancy Unit publishes a range of guidance documents, publication and examples of good practice:

Enabling Young People to access contraception and sexual health information and advice: Legal

and Policy Framework for Social Workers, Residential Social Workers, Foster Carers and other social care practitioners (2004)

Good enough to eat – the diet of pregnant teenagers (2003)

Guidance on the education of School Age Parents (2001)

Guidance for Youth Workers on Providing Information and Referring Young People to Contraceptive and Sexual Health Services (2001)

Guidelines for good practice in supported accommodation for young parents (2001)

Good Practice in Supported Housing for Young Mothers (2002)

Teenage Pregnancy and Looked after Children or Care Leavers – Resource for Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinators (2003)

Teenage pregnancy and looked after children/care leavers – examples of innovative practice (2003)

Making a Difference: Connexions and Teenage Pregnancy (2003).

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8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7843 6000

Fax: +44 (0)20 7278 9512

Website: www.ncb.org.uk

Registered Charity No: 258825

Email: enquiries@ncb.org.uk

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