

# Young Mothers Not in Learning: A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes

Sally Dench, Anne Bellis, Siobhan Tuohy  
PART OF THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF CARE TO LEARN



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REPORT 439

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**YOUNG MOTHERS NOT IN LEARNING:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF  
BARRIERS AND ATTITUDES**

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# **Young Mothers Not in Learning**

## **A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes**

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## Executive Summary

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This study was conducted as part of the national evaluation of the Care to Learn initiative. It looks at the situation, experiences, views and aspirations of young mothers who are not engaged at all, or who are only very tangentially engaged, in learning or employment. This group is key if the longer-term targets of Care to Learn, and the broader target of having 60 per cent of teenage parents in employment or training by 2010, are to be reached. Furthermore, if the long-term cycle of disadvantage that many young mothers find themselves in is really to be broken, it is the needs and situation of the more disengaged that have to be addressed.

Interviews were conducted with 51 young women, including a few who were still pregnant, and two young fathers (partners of two of the young mothers). Most were not involved in any learning or employment, although a few had recently enrolled on a course or found a job. Their ages ranged from 16 to early 20s. In addition, 15 professionals working with young mothers were interviewed. Fieldwork took place during the late summer/autumn of 2006.

The report focuses on the experiences of teenage mothers. Young fathers are eligible to access Care to Learn funding as long as they have the main caring responsibility for their child. In practice, this means that young fathers rarely apply. In 2004/05, five young fathers received this funding, in 2005/06, 12 fathers received it and in 2006/07, 20. There are many issues for young fathers and in some areas there are projects or particular professionals who work with them. However, most of the concern about long-term social and economic exclusion is around teenage mothers. They nearly always have the main caring responsibility for their child, and in many cases the father is no longer, or only tangentially, involved.

### Structures and initiatives for supporting young mothers

Support for young mothers is generally co-ordinated by teenage pregnancy co-ordinators. High-level groups/boards are involved in directing the approach, such as Children's Trusts and Teenage Parent Support Groups. Support is delivered across

multiple agencies in all case-study areas. In some areas, the high-level groups were central to maintaining contacts across all these agencies to ensure joined-up, co-ordinated delivery of support, and to set up referral pathways, whereas in other areas personal networks were prominent.

A very wide range of agencies is involved in supporting young mothers. The list differs between areas, but is likely to include Connexions, Sure Start, reintegration officers, health visitors and midwives, social services, housing organisations, voluntary and youth organisations.

The extent of integration between agencies working with young mothers has increased in recent years. The inclusion of health services, in particular midwives and health visitors, has been important in providing integrated support and for identifying who the teenage mothers are in an area. There is less demarcation between different roles and more sharing of information. The involvement of health visitors and midwives in drop-in and other provision for young mothers has been a key part of the success of such initiatives.

Some gaps do still exist, with not all agencies being effectively integrated into support networks. This applies, in particular, to community and voluntary groups.

Identifying and tracking teenage mothers is essential if they are to be provided with adequate support and encouragement. The initial point of contact varies between areas, depending on the key agencies involved. What was important was that there was a referral path and clear contact points.

Support is provided to young mothers in a range of ways and at many different locations. The forms of support include:

- printed material, such as booklets and leaflets
- counselling services
- drop-in groups
- advice on housing and benefits
- parenting courses
- one-to-one support.

This might be provided through home visits, in community and youth centres, and at Connexions offices.

Particular initiatives aimed at the 'harder-to-reach' young mothers include:

- learning and taster sessions
- very informal drop-ins

- flexible and responsive learning
- outreach and awareness raising.

A number of lessons have been learnt:

- rapport needs to be built up between the support worker and the young mother
- home visits are often key
- free, short practical courses based on the young mothers' everyday needs and concerns work well
- young mothers often want to stay with their child, particularly when it is very young, and are often reluctant to access formal childcare
- there needs to be a variety of different opportunities and in various locations to address a range of needs.

## Personal circumstances of these young mothers

Just under half of the young mothers interviewed lived with their parents, and a similar proportion lived with, in addition to their child, just their partner or on their own. These were mostly in private rented accommodation, although a few lived in council housing. A few were in some form of supported or temporary housing.

A range of issues was raised in relation to housing. A number of the young mothers had, in the past, been either homeless or in temporary accommodation. This was unsettling and often not appropriate for a young child. The cost of private rented accommodation was reported as extremely high, and young mothers found it difficult to find something both appropriate and affordable. There was a lack of social housing, and an additional problem was that young mothers were often given a rating that did not put them high enough on the list to access what was available.

The vast majority of young mothers' income comes from a mix of benefits and tax credits. Sorting out and obtaining benefits had been an issue for a number of young mothers. While some had managed to sort issues out themselves, others were less confident in doing this and needed a lot of support. It often took some perseverance to get benefit issues sorted – they were constantly passed on to different agencies/ individuals, and were given phone numbers on which they could never get to speak to anyone.

Perceptions of income and how it related to expenditure differed. However, out of the young mothers who expressed views about their income, the majority felt it was not substantial enough to meet their expenses, or found manoeuvring around the benefit and tax credit system very confusing. This was particularly acute among those living in supported, council or private rented accommodation, rather than among those living with their parents.

A majority of young mothers were in contact with the child's father, albeit in some cases on a rather tentative basis. Approximately one half of those who mentioned their relationship with the father stated that it was going well or was okay, and that the father was involved in looking after the child and/or providing for him/her financially. However, the rest of the young mothers were experiencing difficulties with their child's father, and in many cases the couple were no longer together. They were having to deal with issues around allowing access to the child, finances and generally difficult family relationships.

Becoming pregnant and having a baby had impacted substantially on the lives of these young women. It had disrupted their social lives and relationships, had forced them to 'grow up' quickly, and had focused their attention on housing and income. Nevertheless, the vast majority found motherhood a rewarding and positive experience.

## Daily lives and longer-term aspirations

The young women were in a variety of situations on finding they were pregnant. A few had been doing well, or relatively well, and were on a qualification and career track, but the majority had been less strongly engaged. Some of the young mothers had tried a number of different college courses and were dipping in and out of work, study and inactivity. Others had been looking for work or deciding what to do. The majority of those working were in relatively low-skilled, low-paid jobs. These usually showed little sign of involving any training or the possibility of longer-term prospects.

There were a number of examples of young women giving up a college course or job when they became pregnant. This was sometimes of their own volition, or because their health had made it difficult to continue. However, some had been asked to leave their course, or had lost their job because of their pregnancy.

The majority of young women were spending most of their time with their child. They talked about 'chilling out and enjoying being with my daughter', and about the stresses, strains and demands of being a parent. Some were focusing on sorting out problems with housing, their finances and relationships.

A few had recently started, or were about to start, a course. Others had tried combining study and being a parent but had found it too much. In some cases, this was because they had too many issues to deal with in the rest of their lives; others had been too ambitious; a few had chosen the wrong course. Another group was looking for work, but often finding this difficult because of their caring responsibilities, or employers' perceptions of a young mother's ability to cope with a combination of caring and work.

A theme that did emerge was of relative isolation and loneliness. Young mothers welcomed being able to attend a drop-in group, for example, as they could meet other young mothers through this.

The young mothers interviewed varied considerably in the extent to which they were able to think and talk about their future in any concrete terms. A number of themes emerged from these young women's plans for the future. Many wanted to wait until their baby was older before really thinking about what they might do. A number had non-work related aspirations – they wanted to be in a good relationship (possibly married), have a nice home, and their benefits sorted out. There was quite a strong desire to have returned to learning within the next five years, and to be on some sort of career/training track. However, these young women varied in the extent to which they had clear ideas about what course or job they wanted to aim for, or the route through which this could be achieved. They did, however, want to provide a better life for their child.

## Attitudes to learning

A minority were positive about their full-time education; however, most had not enjoyed school and their attendance had been poor. They referred to not getting on with their teachers, or to feeling that teachers were not interested in their progress. Some had disliked certain subjects, or just generally found school boring. A number reported being bullied at school. Others had had their education disrupted for family or personal reasons.

Pregnancy and becoming a mother had further disrupted their education. Those at college had often decided, or been persuaded, not to continue or return.

A number of factors were identified that present barriers to participation in further education or training for young mothers. These include: cultural influences and a general lack of aspirations; the desire to be a good mother; previous educational experiences; a lack of clear goals for the future; lack of access to appropriate advice about learning opportunities; financial constraints; social isolation; learner support issues.

The study also identified a number of factors that can encourage engagement in further learning. These include: the provision of a range of flexible learning opportunities and the motivation to provide a better life for their child.

## Using childcare

The majority of young mothers interviewed had no experience of using formal childcare. A few had never left their child with anyone, not even close family members.

A few of the young mothers had some experience of working or studying since giving birth. Some of these had used a nursery or childminder. Nearly all had been unsure about leaving their child at first, but most had soon become relaxed about this. They valued the time away from their child, and recognised that the child enjoyed and benefited from attending the childcare. A few had given up using childcare – they missed their child too much, and in one or two cases the childcare had not worked out for various reasons.

There was a strong feeling against leaving their child with a stranger, even a recognised childcare provider. They were concerned about how their child would react, that they would miss their mother too much, that something would happen to them at the childcare provider. It was sometimes felt that using childcare reflected badly on them as a mother, suggesting that they could not cope. Some were concerned that their parenting skills would be found lacking.

There were also, in some communities, strong cultural pressures against using childcare. If a young woman becomes pregnant she is expected to stay at home and look after her child. Furthermore, the alternatives are limited – most jobs held by people they know are relatively low-paid and unsatisfactory in a number of ways.

Some young mothers come from a background of abuse and domestic violence. Leaving their child is not something they are able to contemplate. They want to protect them from any possible dangers.

Many young mothers reported that they would be prepared to consider using childcare when their child reached the age of three, although some said they would only start work or studying once the child was at school.

Views were mixed on the desirability of using childminders or a nursery. While some liked the idea of the one-to-one attention given by a childminder, others preferred to think of their child in a nursery, mixing with other children and being cared for by a range of different people.

## Support and advice

Many young mothers have a number of complex support and advice needs. These include: social and emotional; financial; practical issues, such as housing and parenting.

A number of different professionals and service providers were being used as sources of advice and support, including: health visitors and midwives, Connexions PAs, Sure Start advisers, Jobcentre staff, local councils, social workers, other young mothers, project workers in community-based provision. Although the young mothers sometimes looked to the specialists for advice relating to their area of expertise, often the young mothers would turn to someone they knew and had built rapport with for help on a wide range of issues.

Barriers to accessing support and advice included a lack of awareness amongst young mothers of the services available, and a lack of co-ordination between such services.

## Discussion and conclusions

The last chapter discusses a number of themes emerging from this study:

- Being not in education, employment or training (NEET) is not a permanent state; young mothers dip in and out of various activities and statuses. However, for young mothers in particular there is the danger that the general demands and stresses of their lives take over, and they cannot find a way forward in relation to re-engaging in work or learning.
- A history of chaotic lives and family problems are a major barrier to a proportion of young mothers moving out of a circle of disadvantage.
- The right to spend time being a full-time mother is important to many young mothers. They do not want to leave their child, particularly while he/she is very young. However, a number did report that becoming a parent had made them change their ideas about the importance of a good, well-paid job – and that the route to this was through learning.
- Many have a history of disengagement from school. They have negative experiences of education that can put them off returning to further learning. Associated with this disengagement is a low level of, or no, qualifications, which can mean they are not strongly placed to access further education or employment.
- Young mothers have wide-ranging support needs, requiring help with a range of personal and practical issues before even contemplating returning to learning. This support often needs to be intensive and on-going (also continuing once they do return to learning).





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# 1 Introduction

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This study was conducted as part of the national evaluation of Care to Learn. It looks at the situation, experiences, views and aspirations of young mothers who are not engaged at all, or who are only very tangentially engaged, in learning or employment. This group is key if the longer-term targets of Care to Learn, and the broader target of having 60 per cent of teenage parents in employment or training by 2010, are to be reached. Furthermore, if the long-term cycle of disadvantage that many young mothers, and their children, find themselves in is really to be broken, it is the needs and situation of the more disengaged that have to be addressed.

Interviews were conducted with 51 young women, including a few who were still pregnant, and two young fathers (partners of two of the young mothers). Most were not involved in any learning or employment, although a few had recently enrolled on a course or found a job. It should be stressed that the sample included some who had never been very involved in the labour market and had few aspirations; others had dipped in and out. Fieldwork was conducted during late summer/autumn 2006.

The young mothers were contacted in a number of ways. Some were handed letters by professionals working with them, inviting them to return a form if they were prepared to be interviewed. Others were approached through an interviewer visiting drop-in groups or informal learning provision. The young mothers varied in age from 16 years to those in their early 20s.

Some of the mothers (those over the age of 20) were too old to be eligible for Care to Learn. However, they were included in the study because their experiences were very relevant when exploring the learning aspirations of teenage mothers. All of the young women interviewed had been teenagers when they gave birth, and the sample included a few who had not yet given birth. A few had been very young (around 14) when they gave birth, although the majority had been between 16 and 18 when they became a mother.

This report focuses on the experiences of teenage mothers. Young fathers are eligible to access Care to Learn funding as long as they have the main caring responsibility for

their child. In practice, this means that young fathers rarely apply – in 2004/05, five young fathers received this funding, in 2005/06, 12 fathers received it and in 2006/07, 20. There are many issues for young fathers, and in some areas there are projects or particular professionals who work with them. However, most of the concern about long-term social and economic exclusion is around teenage mothers. They nearly always have the main caring responsibility for their child, and in many cases the father is no longer, or only tangentially, involved.

In addition, 15 professionals working with young mothers were interviewed. These included Connexions PAs, youth workers, midwives, teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, reintegration officers and other members of teenage pregnancy teams.

The interviews were conducted in seven different parts of the country. These were spread across regions and included a range of types of location – including an inner city, deprived suburban/outer estates, small towns and remoter locations. All had relatively high rates of teenage pregnancy.

The rest of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 looks at the structures and initiatives in these areas for supporting teenage parents.
- Chapter 3 discusses the personal circumstances of the young mothers interviewed.
- Chapter 4 looks at what the young mothers were doing when they became pregnant, how they spend their time and their longer-term aspirations.
- Chapter 5 explores previous learning experiences, attitudes to learning and factors that either hinder or facilitate access to learning.
- Chapter 6 discusses attitudes to, and use of, childcare.
- Chapter 7 reports the advice and support accessed by these young mothers.
- Finally, Chapter 8 draws some conclusions.

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## 2 Structures and Initiatives for Supporting Young Mothers

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### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses firstly on the structures of support for young mothers in the areas visited. It highlights how the support is structured, what the support incorporates and any difficulties that exist in meeting young mothers' support needs. Lastly, it explores particular initiatives aimed at supporting harder-to-reach young mothers who wish to remain in, or return to, learning.

### 2.2 Structures for supporting young mothers

Each area differed slightly in the structures in place for supporting young mothers. They also varied in the types of support provided, although similar themes tended to arise, such as education programmes and drop-in groups. Support workers highlighted some difficulties that prevent them from meeting all the support needs of all young mothers.

#### 2.2.1 How is support structured?

Support for young mothers is generally co-ordinated by teenage pregnancy co-ordinators. High-level groups/boards, such as Children's Trusts and Teenage Parent Support Groups, are involved in directing the approach. Support is delivered across multiple agencies in all case-study areas. In some areas, the high-level groups were central to maintaining contacts across all these agencies to ensure joined-up, co-ordinated delivery of support, and to set up referral pathways, whereas in other areas personal networks were prominent.

Support for young mothers often generally links into other policies in the areas, for example those relating to the NEET (not in education, employment or training) group, offenders etc. One support worker stated:

*'Teenage pregnancy in this area is linked into everything, it is in everybody's plans.'*

#### Which agencies are involved?

Our interviews clearly illustrate the wide range of agencies involved in delivering support for young mothers. The exact list in each area differs in relation to the organisation of support in that area. However, these agencies include:

- YWCA and other youth organisations
- health visitors
- midwives – including those working specifically with teenage parents
- social services
- Connexions
- reintegration officers
- Sure Start
- voluntary organisations
- pupil referral units
- housing organisations
- teenage pregnancy co-ordinators
- youth offending teams
- local authorities.

Looking across the evaluation, it is clear that the extent of integration between agencies that have some contact with young mothers has increased in recent years. A greater range of agencies is now consulted and kept informed. In particular, the inclusion of health services (midwives and health visitors) more fully in teenage pregnancy strategies has been important in providing integrated support, and for identifying who the teenage mothers are in an area. There is less demarcation between different roles. For example, health visitors and midwives, although obviously providing a service round health, are now more likely to provide information to young mothers about education and learning, and the broader opportunities open to them. The active involvement of health visitors in particular, but also midwives, has been important to the success of some drop-in and other informal groups aimed at the more disengaged young mothers. For example, providing something labelled as

training or learning would not be attractive to most young mothers, while offering a drop-in focused on their own needs, and those of their babies, is more likely to draw them in.

In some areas, there were concerns that not all agencies, in particular community/voluntary groups, were integrated into the support networks. This may result in such groups being unable to signpost young mothers on to other agencies when required. To address this issue, one support worker involved in co-ordinating a local teenage pregnancy strategy reported that they were aiming to:

*'set up a file system where everyone on the support group and all services and agencies would bring together what they were doing ... to have a centralised file so we're aware of everything that's happening.'*

Another issue highlighted was the gap that remained when one of the agencies stopped delivering support, often due to funding ceasing or being withdrawn but sometimes for other reasons. For example, in one area, the teenage pregnancy midwife post was lost as the person in this role was needed in the hospital full-time due to staff shortages. In another, a young mother reported that a popular informal group used to be run by a voluntary organisation. This had been taken over by social services and the young mothers attending felt that they were being watched and criticised all the time, which made them withdraw from the group. These gaps were a problem as all agencies incorporated in delivering support for young mothers in an area are important to the overall structure and in making sure that as many young mothers as possible are reached.

### Identification and tracking of young mothers

The initial point of contact with, or identification of, young mothers differed between the areas. In some areas, the Reintegration Officer acted as the initial point of contact, and signposted young mothers on to other agencies. In other areas, midwives and health workers, particularly those whose role was specifically to work with teenage mothers, identified them. These data were then shared with Connexions so that they could continue to track the young mother, and provide support as necessary. In one area, attempts were being made to identify those most likely to become young mothers before they became pregnant; preventative work was being focused on these groups. It has been established that non-attendance at school, and lack of educational attainment are good indicators of teenage pregnancy; therefore preventative work was being focused on non-attendees and the poorest achievers.

This issue of the identification of young mothers was often mentioned as a problem in the provision of support for this group. Where there was no identification and tracking, support workers were concerned that young mothers were 'slipping through the net' – that they were invisible to the agencies. Where there were monitoring procedures in place to identify and track young mothers, gaps were still identified.

For example, those who move into an area after having the baby elsewhere, are probably not known about unless they present themselves to one of the agencies. Furthermore, in one area, the teenage pregnancy midwife was only responsible for those under 18 years (due to time and funding constraints), and other young mothers were therefore only identified when they sought out one of the agencies. Often, if a young mother had not accessed a midwife in the local area, they would not have been identified.

### 2.2.2 The support available

The support for young mothers is spread across a number of venues in each of the areas visited. In general it is focused in specific areas of the towns/cities known for having high rates of teenage pregnancies. The specific venues included: community centres, youth centres, Connexions, and outreach through midwives etc. Support for young mothers is also provided in the form of information leaflets and booklets. The exact nature of the support provided varies widely, and includes:

- education programmes
- information booklets/leaflets/events
- counselling
- crèche services
- drop-in groups, eg mother and toddler groups
- housing and benefit advice
- creative courses
- parenting courses
- baby-massage courses
- advice
- one-to-one support – as one support worker commented: *‘They need a lot of hand holding. Not all of them, but a lot of them need a lot of hand holding.’*
- home visits – these were reported to be particularly important in engaging young mothers in any activity, however informal. For example, two young mothers had set up a drop-in group in a community centre; they were visiting local young mothers they heard about to tell them about the group and encourage them to attend.
- life-skills course, such as cooking, healthy eating, and managing on a tight budget.

It is particularly important that a varied range of support is available if the harder-to-reach young mothers are to be engaged in any way.

Although there was a wide range of varied support on offer, suggestions were made about other provision that may be useful. For example, a few support workers stated that it would be useful if they could offer more support for those aged 20 and over with children, especially in terms of childcare. It was suggested that the maximum age for accessing Care to Learn should rise to at least 23 years:

*'I would say at least 23 as a minimum. If you look at 18-year-old mums at 23, their babies are school age, so if they haven't had another one [baby], of course, that is the ideal age when they are going to be wanting to go back [to learning].'*

Another suggestion made by support workers was that funding should be provided for an outreach worker for young mothers moving from supported housing into private accommodation. They thought this would be useful, as young mothers in this situation can often be very lonely: *'when they do move on to their own accommodation, they're very isolated.'* It was also suggested that offering courses for young mothers to enable them to talk to their children about sexual health from an early age would be useful, instead of just directing these courses at parents of teenagers.

One area where teenage parents can often struggle is that of relationships, especially with partners (whether the father of their baby or not). Some support workers suggested that this is an issue on which there needs to be more structured support. Some informal (and more formal) groups did aim to cover this. It was reported that there is specific counselling to mediate between young mothers and their parents, but rarely is there any to help them with partnership issues, especially around emotions and dealing with difficult situations.

### 2.2.3 Difficulties in meeting the support needs of all young mothers

A range of difficulties was mentioned that prevent support workers meeting the needs of all young mothers. Some of these issues have already been touched on, such as difficulties in identifying all young mothers, and gaps that sometimes exist due to the fragmentation of support structures. It was also reported that not all young mothers want to access support when it is provided, for example:

*'When I started with the teenagers I put on drop-ins and went into youth centres so that it was a user-friendly site and it wasn't accessed at all. I tried it for six months, it wasn't accessed. They [young people who are pregnant] do not perceive a need.'*

It was generally felt that most of the support needs of young mothers, which are very diverse, are being provided for. However, some of the groups encountered are very reliant on external funding to keep them going, underlining how precarious the support for young mothers can be. It was also mentioned that the process of funding



being filtered down through a number of organisations perhaps limits accessibility to resources that could be used to ensure that all support needs are met.

## 2.3 Particular initiatives aimed at ‘harder-to-reach’ young mothers

A number of initiatives were mentioned that directly supported ‘harder-to-reach’ young mothers in accessing and returning to learning, provided them with information about learning opportunities, or drew them into discussions about returning to education or training. These initiatives have been grouped under: childcare, learning tasters (for example, drop-in classes/groups), flexible learning/training, and outreach strategies. Support workers also highlighted some lessons that had been learnt as a result of these initiatives, or from working with young mothers. These included ideas for extra forms of support.

### 2.3.1 Examples of initiatives

#### Childcare

- Sure Start – an important source of childcare support, it provides learning courses and a free crèche.
- Children’s Centres – an important source of childcare in the future, provides some informal learning activities in a less formal setting than, for example, a college with childcare on-site (although there is some overlap between this and Sure Start provision, some of the latter might not be in Children’s Centres).
- Taking young mothers to visit childcare providers so they feel more at ease using them, and bringing providers into the various informal drop-ins, etc. to talk about what they have to offer. One group met at a location where there was a childcare worker who would look after any children who attended, as and when necessary. This helped them overcome some of their fears about using childcare.
- A programme for childminders to enable them to work more effectively with teenage parents. This programme seeks to enable childminders to understand the issues young people have, which can be different from those of older mothers.

#### Learning tasters, eg drop-in groups/classes

- Weekly drop-in groups, such as mother and toddler groups, that provide sessions on contraception, accessing learning, parenting, baby massage, making time for yourself as a mother, etc. Health visitors and midwives were often key in these

groups. What was important was that they weren't perceived to be 'forcing' young mothers back into learning, but rather, providing a range of services and advice that were relevant to their immediate situation. Information on learning and employment might be made available, or provided sometimes. Building rapport and maintaining contact with these young mothers was seen as particularly important – and needed to be done sensitively as well as on a regular basis.

- Fathers' group targeted at young fathers.
- Connexions – offering the opportunity to drop in to the centre and access advice, use computers etc.
- As part of the condition of tenancy in one supported house, the young mothers had to access sessions about work and career, health and safety, and cooking etc.

### Flexible/responsive learning

- An E2E course in one area was flexible in terms of when a young mother accessed it. They could attend the 16 hours of learning in the morning or afternoon, depending on what suited the individual.
- One area had implemented a virtual school, which can be accessed over the internet, and had computer terminals located across town, eg in youth clubs and community centres.
- Procedures in place, involving Connexions, to help young mothers return to school after they have had their children.

### Outreach/awareness raising

- As part of NEET strategies, Connexions PAs are door knocking and gathering information about those who may want to return to education or employment, and providing advice to enable them to do so. They are also following up people who say they are not interested now but will be in the future. Texting was another means of trying to maintain contact with young mothers.
- Focus groups with young parents (including young mothers) in specific estates/areas of high teenage pregnancy to find out what they want.
- Sending out information booklets to engage fathers.
- Care to Learn promotional events to inform and engage support workers and young mothers.

### 2.3.2 Lessons learnt

A number of lessons can be drawn from the range of initiatives introduced, and from the experience of support workers working closely with young mothers. Suggestions as to some further initiatives that may encourage 'harder-to-reach' young people into learning were also made.

These suggestions included:

- The need to develop rapport with these young mothers, and be seen to be available to provide support as needed and on a range of issues, in particular those of most immediate concern. Even if they don't have the necessary information readily to hand, those working with the harder-to-reach young mothers would know where to find out, or whom to ask. Disjuncture between agencies, for example in relation to the age of young mothers they are able to deal with, could present problems. Several young mothers said that they had found Connexions had helped them to address a range of issues, not just those related to education and employment, and they were worried about whom they would turn to when they reached the maximum age for that service.
- Home visits and, where present, engagement with the broader family, are often necessary to start developing rapport with young mothers, and in suggesting to them that there are alternatives to staying at home.
- It is difficult to reach really disengaged individuals. This is demonstrated by some mother and toddler groups not generally being that well attended, with the mothers who do attend tending to be the most motivated. Involving the more disengaged involves intensive and on-going contact.
- It might be better to wait until young mothers are older, as they often do not want to go into learning straight after they've had a baby. However, childcare becomes an issue if they are no longer eligible for Care to Learn.
- Running free, short, practical courses, which relate to the everyday needs and concerns of the mothers and their babies, can help engage young mothers, improve their confidence and encourage them to have aspirations.
- Young fathers can be more difficult to engage. For example, the experience of running one fathers' group led to the comment: *'all they were interested in was playing snooker and having a fry up, and they were not interested beyond that.'* As a result, this initiative 'fizzled out'. While some of the young fathers are as young as the mothers, for those who are older – in their early/mid20s – the issues are rather different. More work is being conducted with young fathers than in the past, but this remains an area deserving further attention.
- Quite often, the lives of young mothers revolve around their babies. Therefore, providing activities that focus on this (eg baby massage) may be a good way to encourage young mothers into learning. One Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator

mentioned that they might try such an approach – if they can secure the funding. In other areas, this is already working quite successfully.

- Some provision is quite dispersed, with many different agencies involved in providing courses. Centralising this provision, and providing a minibus to get young mothers there and back, was therefore suggested. However, in other areas, provision in the local community is seen as essential.
- There is a need for opportunities for progression for the most disengaged. While the first step might be to get them to attend an informal drop-in session, which gradually introduces a range of activities, there is then often a gap between this and being able to attend more formal learning. In one area, a new initiative was being introduced to bring learning out of further education colleges into community settings, building on existing informal sessions.
- Another reported need was for ways of keeping young mothers engaged once they had made some contact. For example, attendance at some informal provision is limited to a certain number of weeks. Support workers and young mothers themselves commented on how deciding to go to college the following September when it was only February could be a problem, unless there was something in place to keep this motivation going.
- Travel between the place of learning and childcare can be an issue, so trying to have both on the same site was suggested as one way of encouraging and supporting young mothers to access and stay in learning.
- Other barriers such as housing difficulties need to be sorted out prior to the young mother being able to access, or even consider accessing, learning.

## 2.4 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the support structures that exist for young mothers. This highlights the range of agencies involved and the need for multi-agency working. Some gaps do exist, particularly in identifying young mothers. As well as there being a variety of agencies involved in delivering this support, there is also wide variation in the content of this support, ranging from very informal drop-in sessions, to parenting courses and basic skills education.

Outreach is a very important aspect of engaging harder-to-reach young mothers. This needs to be personal, on-going and intensive.

This chapter has also reported on initiatives that seek to support young mothers in accessing learning, or that seek to try and engage young mothers in discussions surrounding learning. Important lessons are emerging as a result of some of these initiatives, which can help feed into the development of successful future programmes aimed at reaching the more disengaged young mothers.

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## 3 Personal Circumstances of Young Mothers

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This chapter explores the personal circumstances of the young mothers interviewed, in terms of: housing, income, relationship with child's father, and the impact that having a child (or being pregnant) has had on their lives.

### 3.1 Housing

Just under half of young mothers interviewed lived with their parent(s). This was especially the case among those who were pregnant. A similar proportion of young mothers lived with (in addition to their child(ren)) their partner, or on their own. In general, this tended to be private rented accommodation, although there were a few young mothers living in council housing.

There were also a small number of young mothers living in some form of supported housing, or in temporary housing whilst waiting to be housed by the council. One example of supported housing encountered was specifically for young mothers or those who were pregnant and who were homeless. While in this, they were given support in finding more permanent, generally private rented, accommodation in the local area. Others were in temporary accommodation that was occupied by a range of different people. This was often not suitable for young families, and the young mothers involved were having to seek out support to improve their situation.

Some of those who had settled housing at the time of the interviews (either with parents, partners, or on their own) had, in the past, been homeless and/or in temporary accommodation. A handful of young mothers currently living at home were on the housing register, waiting for council housing.

Several issues were raised as causing particular problems. The cost of private rented accommodation in many of the areas was extremely high, and young mothers found it difficult to find something appropriate that they could afford. Another issue was the

lack of availability of social housing and the changing ways in which this is allocated. For example, many young mothers found themselves ranked in a category that gave them relatively low priority over other groups. A few were deemed to have made themselves deliberately homeless, which gave them a low priority. By voluntarily leaving an over-crowded, often chaotic, family home, a young mother was often considered as having made herself homeless. In one case, a young mother had returned to the family home; in another her parents had written a letter to say that they could no longer have her at home. One young mother with a baby and a toddler had split up with her boyfriend. This also seemed to be deemed as making herself deliberately homeless. She was given a low priority on the council rating, and had been in inappropriate temporary accommodation for some months.

Those young mothers currently in 'limbo' housing-wise, were perhaps unsurprisingly the most dissatisfied with their current housing situation. For example, one young woman living in temporary accommodation was concerned about the lack of space and undesirable neighbours; others found having to wait frustrating. Ultimately, housing was a high priority for young mothers, and it was often an area of concern.

## 3.2 Income

The vast majority of the income of these young mothers came from a mix of benefits and tax credits. The exact mix differed according to their circumstances, such as: whether they were pregnant, where they were living, and whether they or their partner were working. Many young mothers were in receipt of Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Income Support and, if they were not living at with their parent(s), Housing Benefit. The income generated by these sources tended to amount to just over £100 a week. For a small minority of the young mothers with children, part of their income was generated from a wage (their own, or in most cases, their partner's), or a mixture of wages and Working Families' Tax Credit.

Sorting out and obtaining benefits had been an issue for a number of young mothers. While some had managed to sort this out themselves, others were less confident in doing so and needed a lot of support. It often took some perseverance to get benefit issues sorted. They were constantly passed on to different agencies/individuals, or were given phone numbers on which they could never get to speak to anyone. One young mother had lost all her benefits when she split up with her partner, and it had taken some weeks for this to be sorted out. The arrears had not been paid. Several were in debt because of a break in the payment of their benefits, or because of benefits not coming through quickly enough.

Perceptions of income and how it related to expenditure differed. However, out of the young mothers who expressed views about their income, the majority reported that it was not sufficient to meet their expenses, or found manoeuvring around the benefit

and tax credit system very confusing. This was particularly acute among those living in supported, council or private rented accommodation instead of with their parents.

*'I get something like £120 to £130 a week. Now, you'd think that would last you a week. It never lasts.'* (young mother living in supported housing)

*'My partner's working part time and I'm getting a bit of housing benefit, child tax credit and child benefit .... It's not enough .... You have to be tight with money.'* (young mother living in private rented accommodation)

However, many of these young mothers did get to grips quickly with careful budgeting. They were keen to make sure that their children did not miss out and were bought new clothes, etc. One commented on how she hardly ever spent on herself and looked a mess, but her son was properly dressed (admittedly she did have help from her mother with this).

Nonetheless, only a very small minority of young mothers thought they were financially okay. This was especially the case among young women who were pregnant, and those living with their parents (where parents contributed by buying nappies etc.).

*'It [my income] seems like enough.'* (young mother living with parents)

This difference between those living at home (and/or pregnant) and those living away from their family, in terms of income, may be due to the extra expenses involved, such as paying bills (which were perhaps subsidised at home by their parents), and also perhaps difficulty in budgeting for outgoings.

### 3.3 Relationship with the child's father

A majority of young mothers were in contact with the child's father, albeit in some cases rather tentatively. Approximately half of the young mothers who mentioned their relationship with their child's father, stated that it was going well or it was okay. Where it was going well the father tended to be involved in looking after and/or providing for the child financially:

*'I'm renting a place with my partner ... he really helps. If I need to go somewhere and I can't take [their child] with me then he keeps him, and he helps me with money if I need money.'*

In a handful of cases, having a baby seems to have strengthened the relationship between mother and father:

*'[Having a baby] has brought us together.'*

*'[Having a baby] has made us stronger in the long term.'*

However, the other half of young mothers were experiencing difficulties with their child's father, which in some cases had resulted in the couple splitting up. The specific reasons for these difficulties were often not volunteered. However, where they were offered, reasons included: the introduction of the child to the relationship led to arguments concerning the division of childcare, arguments about the mother going out, or having a child had changed the mother's opinion of the father:

*'I'm still with my partner, but we're having complications.'*

*'I get stressed with [the father] as I've always got [child's name]. I never get a break, I just want a break; and we argue all the time.'*

*'I'm trying to stay well away from him ... [having a baby] has opened my eyes.'*

*'The other day I said: "have the baby so I can go out with my friends and have a good night out" and he was like: "no you're not going out". He didn't like the fact that I wanted to go out when I have a baby. I want to go out because I hadn't been out for ages and I wanted to have a good time.'*

Some support workers described the very difficult family relationships they were helping young mothers with, including abuse and domestic violence. Such issues were rarely raised by the young mothers interviewed. However, one young mother did say that she wanted to stop her son seeing his father as he had been drunk while looking after the boy. An added difficulty was that the father's sister was still seeing the child and would let him visit his father. Another young woman wanted to move away from the immediate area she was living in to get away from her ex-partner's family – she was not prepared to discuss the problems she was experiencing, but the situation was obviously very difficult.

Problems with housing and money (usually the lack of it) could cause tensions in a relationship. For example, one young woman who was pregnant and living with her partner reported that they were having to move, and that it was difficult to find somewhere they could afford to rent. This was causing arguments and it seemed that they had split up – at least temporarily.

A young woman participating in one focus group had bought a property with her partner; they were assuming that everything would continue to work between them. However, after the birth of their child their relationship fell apart; this left her in financial difficulty, but also disillusioned. A support worker who had been working with her commented that the couple seemed to have a rosy, unrealistic vision of how life would work out, which made it extra difficult when the relationship ended so quickly. Although not explicitly explored in these interviews, it would appear that becoming pregnant and having the baby often creates a long-term link with a man many young mothers would probably have not stayed with for long if circumstances had been different. While some young people meet the person they will eventually marry at a young age, for many, the teenage years are a time of experimentation and change.



The extent of the father's involvement in the child's life was not always specified. It seems, from interviews with support workers, that often the young father's involvement was minimal, for example:

*'A lot of them [young mothers] haven't got partners. The ones that have are a bit transient. They come and they go.'*

*'I don't think there are any young men ... who are probably with the young women involved. The ones we tend to come across aren't the ones living happily as couples, they are single.'*

### 3.4 Impact of having a baby

Being pregnant and having a baby impacts substantially on the lives of young parents, particularly mothers. The following comment was not atypical of the feelings of the young mothers interviewed:

*'[becoming a parent has been] life changing basically.'*

In particular, it impacted on the social life and friendship groups of the majority of young women interviewed. Nonetheless, their attitudes to being a parent (although to a lesser extent being pregnant) were extremely positive.

#### 3.4.1 Social life and friendships

For some young mothers, having a baby moved them away from their old friends. In around half of these cases this distancing from past friends was initiated by the young mother. They reported that their old friends were a bad influence and/or less responsible. These young mothers often felt that having a baby had calmed them down and forced them to grow up, and as a result they no longer wanted to associate with past friends who may have been involved with drugs, alcohol etc. Examples of this are:

*'My old friends were idiots. I hang around with new people now.'*

*'I don't speak to anyone from school anymore ... some of them just haven't grown up.'*

*'I have changed to be a better person. I am more responsible ... have calmed down. I changed my friends. They were doing things I didn't approve of with a baby around. [Prompted to say what] ... drugs, drinking ... I've given up cigarettes and hardly ever drink now, only on birthdays.'*

For others, the loss of past friends was the result of a lack of time (and money) to go out and socialise, and a general drifting apart. Many young mothers said that they had learnt who their real friends were as a result of having a baby, and only maintained contact with a few old friends:

*'I've got about three friends I can count on as being there.'*

*'I don't like having many friends. I don't trust many people these days.'*

*'When you're pregnant your mates leave you because you can't do anything.'*

Others no longer had the time to see their friends:

*'I can't do as much as I used to. I can't go out with friends so much; they all have jobs and money.'*

*'You can't really do much because you need a babysitter.'*

Nonetheless, although a lack of time and opportunity to socialise was an impact echoed by the vast majority of young mothers, some did continue to see their old friends, albeit less often:

*'I see them [friends]; I'm going to see them tonight ... but it isn't the same.'*

Having a baby (or being pregnant) could result in a young woman becoming very isolated. There were a number of reasons for this, including: the young mother being shunned by their family and/or community for having a baby, or because the young mother's old friends and acquaintances moved away (eg went to university) or were still at college/school all day:

*'My parents wanted me to have an abortion but I didn't agree; that's why I had to move away from home ... I don't keep in contact with anybody.'*

*'[Friends] just kind of disappeared because they're busy with their lives and they don't have that much time.'*

There was some evidence of moving quite large distances between towns/areas. These young women were unable to rely on previous social networks and would often know no one at all in the new area. Others felt pressured by their partner to stay at home.

### 3.4.2 Attitudes to being a parent/pregnant

Becoming a parent or being pregnant had often forced young mothers to 'grow up' quickly, as illustrated by the following comments:

*'You have to grow up so quickly. I love her to bits; it's just a bit hard.'*

*'You can't be so selfish or do what you want when you want.'*

*'[Before getting pregnant] I took every penny I had into the pub and I was fighting all the time and being mouthy [but] as soon as I fell pregnant I just grew up.'*

Young mothers (with children) also face other hardships, such as sorting out benefits, housing, and the responsibility and effort involved in looking after a young child.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of young mothers said that being a parent was a rewarding and positive experience, which they ultimately enjoyed, regardless of the obstacles. Some examples of this are:

*'I do love being a mum most of the time, say 90 per cent of the time; ten per cent of the time I just want to strangle her. She's getting to that age now where you start to use that excuse for everything whenever she's naughty: "she's at that age now" – she's always been at that age.'*

*'[being a parent is] hard work and rewarding.'*

They were quick to say that they wouldn't change anything or be without their child now they had him or her.

All young mothers reported that they really enjoyed being parents and were extremely positive about it. Moreover, a handful of them felt that having a baby had given them a purpose in life:

*'I love watching her grow up.'*

*'Her being here, it's the best thing that's happened to me. The only thing that's gone right for me is my daughter.'*

*'When she [her baby] wakes up she is always smiling.'*

*'I enjoy everything about her.'*

Amongst those who were pregnant, the overwhelming opinion was that it was dull and boring, although they were excited at the prospect of being a parent:

*'[being pregnant is] overwhelming, exciting but a bit boring.'*

### 3.4.3 Differences between pregnant young people and young mothers

Those who were pregnant (and had not yet given birth) appeared to differ from those with children in terms of attitudes, especially in relation to socialising and friends. Those interviewed who were pregnant at that time (which was a very small minority) tended to be less mature in their outlook on life and more involved with their original (ie pre-pregnancy) friends and social networks. This is likely to be because the impact of having a baby in 'making you grow up', which was mentioned by a number of young mothers, had not yet happened. Furthermore, they had more time to be involved with friends, as they did not yet have a baby to care for.

A few had experienced health problems while pregnant; others found especially once they began to 'show' that socialising could be difficult. They also often did not have the energy.

### 3.4.4 Chaotic family backgrounds

The problems the young women had encountered in their family backgrounds emerged more fully from the interviews with support workers, although some of the young women interviewed did refer to these issues (either explicitly or implicitly). For example, in one focus group, a young mother said that she had been in care and that this had disrupted her education. She was now back living with her mother, but it seems that the only reason she was not thrown out was because she had a baby. After the focus group, one of the support workers reported that most of the young women had had some contact with the care system at some point in their lives and that this had shaped their reactions. The members of this group were generally particularly disengaged, although a couple had made, or were making, arrangements to study at college. One young woman, who did seem particularly sorted out and organised, although she was not engaging with education or employment, came from a background of an alcoholic mother and absent father. In addition to her toddler, she had custody of her much younger brother.

Support workers talked about dealing with very disengaged young mothers who came from families where abuse and domestic violence occurred. These were often determined to provide good care for their child and not entrust them to childcare; education and employment were much longer-term aims. Some of these young mothers had no real aspirations. They came from a community where joblessness was high, and women, in particular, were not expected to engage in the labour market. Others wanted to rise above this background, being determined to train and obtain a good job. It was trust issues over leaving their child that was a major barrier to them entering learning.

## 3.5 Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the diversity among young mothers in terms of their personal circumstances. They are a varied group with differing needs. One example of this is the varying impact having a baby has had. It seems that some young mothers have a good network of support, which has helped minimise the impact of having a baby (eg in terms of their ability to socialise), whilst for others, having a baby has resulted in them becoming isolated. Nonetheless, although their specific situations may differ, key priorities for young mothers are around housing and finances.

A unifying feature of this group is their positive attitudes towards being a parent and the fact that they found it a rewarding experience. Having a child had instilled a greater sense of maturity and responsibility in the majority of the young women. In general, they enjoy being parents and want to do it properly.

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## 4 Daily Lives and Longer-Term Aspirations

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### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores what the young mothers interviewed were doing when they found they were pregnant, how they spend their time and their future aspirations.

### 4.2 Situation when they found they were pregnant

The young women interviewed were doing various things before and when they found out that they were pregnant. While a few were on a career track of some sort, the majority were not. It should be remembered that the aim of this part of the evaluation was to collect information from the more disengaged young mothers, rather than those accessing Care to Learn. By definition, it therefore seemed likely that we would be largely interviewing those who were less engaged with learning before or when they became pregnant.

The Connexions service is very engaged with accessing young people who are NEET. In many areas, it is known that there is considerable overlap between the NEET group and young mothers. In some of the interviews with support workers, the needs of these groups, and the overlap between them, were discussed. A number of issues emerge (and also from the broader literature<sup>1</sup>).

Being NEET is not always a static situation. A young person (whether a young mother or not) can move between employment, education and training – sometimes being in a position that seems to be leading somewhere and at other times not. This was the case amongst the sample of young women interviewed. Before becoming pregnant

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Anderson A, Brooke B, Doyle A, Finn D, Moley S (2006) *Understanding Young People in Jobs without Training*, Research Report RR726, Department for Education and Skills; Kellard K, Johal S (2007, forthcoming) *NEET Qualitative Research Project Phase 2*, Norwich: Connexions Norfolk.

some of them showed clear signs of being firmly in the NEET group, others were moving in and out, and a third group had been on some sort of career or training track. The latter were in the minority.

It is difficult to tell exactly what impact pregnancy has on these young women and their relationship to the NEET group. How they were spending their time and their longer-term aspirations are explored later in this chapter. There can be no doubt that for all these young women, becoming a mother had a major impact on their lives. They tended to come from less supportive family backgrounds and to have not done so well at school. For some, becoming a parent had not really changed their attitude to learning and employment – they had not been that interested before and they were still not. For others, becoming responsible for a baby had made them reassess their lives. They wanted something better for their child and were keen to end up with a ‘good’ job, which often meant obtaining some qualifications and training. While a few interviewed had recently returned, or were about to return, to learning, the majority had no immediate plans. They wanted to stay with their baby, or had practical issues to deal with before being able to think about learning.

A few were still at school, studying at college or on a training course when they found out they were pregnant. Some of those still at school had remained and taken their GCSEs, although often gaining few, if any, at grade C or above. Others had left. There was little evidence in these interviews of schools not accepting young girls because they were pregnant. However, a number had already been in trouble at school and had more or less dropped out; pregnancy might have exacerbated this. A few had been in a pupil referral unit of some sort, mostly because of general truancy and non-attendance rather than pregnancy. While some of these had obtained qualifications through such units, others had continued to drop-out. For example, one young woman had left before taking GCSEs because of being bullied, having already been bullied in ‘mainstream’ school.

Those who were at college or on a training course had various experiences once they found out they were pregnant. Since a number showed evidence of changing course, or starting and not completing a course before pregnancy, it is likely that not all drop-out was completely attributable to their being pregnant – it is impossible to say. However, some drop-out was due to pregnancy – as a result of the attitudes of the learning provider or maybe from a decision arrived at by the young women themselves. For example, one young woman had been training with a childcare provider, but had health problems, and her GP suggested she stop working with children where she would be open to more germs and infections. The mother of another young woman had had a miscarriage due to pre-eclampsia. She had high blood pressure herself and had given up her training. There was also evidence of various learning providers not being very flexible. For example, several young mothers reported that they had not been able to start or continue with their course because they would not be able to finish (and this would not look good for the provider). However, in the part of the evaluation looking at various learning

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opportunities for young mothers<sup>1</sup>, an example was given of a tutor helping a young woman to get through her assessments more quickly than usual so that she could complete before giving birth. Another young woman had had to give up her course because of health and safety concerns. One young woman interviewed, who was still pregnant, reported that she was training as a hairdresser, but would have finished by the time her baby was due.

Another group of young women interviewed had been in work when they found they were pregnant. Very few of these were in what might be regarded as 'jobs with prospects'. One had been working as a receptionist and was keen to train further once her baby was old enough – so that she could get a similar, but more responsible and better-paid job.

The majority of those working were in relatively low-skilled, low-paid jobs when they became pregnant. These usually showed little sign of involving any training or the possibility of longer-term prospects. Those interviewed reported working in shops, bars, restaurants or working as cleaners in various organisations. Many of these jobs had been taken because the young women concerned had not wanted to continue in education and had no clear idea what they wanted to do. They took any job to earn some money, and often heard about them through friends, having worked there while at school or just by knowing of the place. Some jobs were part time or temporary. Again, those who had been in a job when pregnant split into those who stuck it out until shortly before giving birth and those who left. Those who had left did so for various reasons. There was some evidence of them being laid off due to pregnancy – for example, one had lost her job for no clear reason and felt that it was so that the employer did not have to pay her maternity leave. Others had left because the job was too much or for health reasons. For example, one young woman working in a retail outlet reported having to work from 9am until 6pm and always standing or walking around; this was just too much for her when she was pregnant. A few were ill with their pregnancy and could no longer cope with working. Health and safety risks could also be a reason for leaving a job – for example, one young woman working as a cleaner left due to risks from the chemicals she used in the job.

The majority were, however, not doing much when they found out they were pregnant. This again fits with them falling into the NEET category, and being more disengaged from anything before they became a parent. While most of these had few, if any, qualifications, it is important not to over generalise. The sample of young women interviewed did include some with up to ten GCSEs. For example, one had started college but found it boring and left before she became pregnant. Some had recently left education and were still deciding what they wanted to do when they found that they were pregnant. A number of these were, usually rather half-heartedly,

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<sup>1</sup> Dench S, Bellis A, (2007) *Learning for Young Mothers . A qualitative study of flexible provision*, IES Report 441

looking for work. For example, one young woman who was due to give birth in a few months' time was on Jobseeker's Allowance and was having to attend some sort of job-search course (this might have been a job club – she was rather vague). She was looking round for jobs but found that employers were uninterested in taking on a young woman who was obviously pregnant. From her descriptions, she was obviously not looking very hard – there was not much point – and when asked what she wanted to do responded: *'earn cash in hand'*.

Others reported that they were: *'chilling out'*. They had no clear idea what they wanted to do and were not that bothered. Whilst becoming pregnant was not necessarily a deliberate action, it did give them something in life – and possibly an excuse not to have to look for work or think about doing some training or learning of some sort.

### 4.3 How they spend their time

As this study was aiming to explore the views and perspectives of young mothers not in learning, it would be expected that most of the sample were at home and looking after their child, or children, at the time of the interviews. A number of factors, apart from simply wanting to be a mother and provide the best care for their child, contributed to them wanting to do nothing else. For example, they were in temporary accommodation, had family and partnership issues to resolve, and their finances to sort out.

These young women talked about *'chilling out and enjoying being with my daughter'*, the stresses, strains and demands of being a parent. They talked about *'getting on with their lives'*, shopping and housework. Those with toddlers commented on having to keep their child occupied and coping with them. For example, one with a very lively toddler said she spent a lot of time *'running after him'*.

A few had recently started, or were about to start, a course of some sort. Others had tried combining study and being a parent and found it too much. In some cases, this was because something had fallen apart in the rest of their lives (eg housing), and the support workers interviewed were able to report a number of similar cases among the young women they worked with. Others had been too ambitious. There were several examples of a young mother starting a full-time course when her child was fairly young, and then finding it too much to continue with all her responsibilities. In some cases, a support worker commented how they had tried to encourage some of these young women to do a part-time or less demanding course without success. The young mother wanted to show she could do it all and was often rather demoralised when things didn't work out.

Some others were looking for work or training. For example, one young woman was keen on finding an apprenticeship in retail. She was, however, having difficulty finding an employer prepared to take her on. As soon as they heard she had a child,



they expressed concern about how she would cope with childcare. She commented that this was none of their business and she would get it sorted, but this was creating a major barrier to her becoming active. Some of the interviews were conducted in the period leading up to Christmas. A few reported that they were looking for a temporary job over this period, to earn some money. At one drop-in group through which young mothers were accessed for this study, attendance had dropped slightly due to some regulars obtaining a Christmas job. For those on benefits (ie not living with a partner who worked) a temporary job could cause complications with their benefits – in terms of getting the benefits back afterwards and in that they would lose the reductions or discounts (eg on council tax) that those on benefits are entitled to.

Those who were not in work or learning spent their time in various ways. By definition there was the childcare and homecare to do. Some were accessed for this study because they were attending various drop-in or other groups. At these, they might engage in some form of very informal learning activities – often around parenting skills or relating to looking after their own well-being. In others, they could meet with a health visitor or just generally meet, talk to and share experiences with other young mothers. These groups usually met once a week and were an important part of their lives. Young women living in a hostel had to participate in certain programmes, for example, cooking and budgeting, as a condition of living there.

A few reported attending mother and toddler groups but these were not generally very popular. Some support workers interviewed also commented on this. Young mothers can find it difficult to mix with other mothers in such groups, who lead very different lives and have very different life experiences. They also fear they are going to be looked down upon for being a young mother, or that their parenting skills will be criticised.

These young mothers varied in how much time they spent out of their home. Some were in temporary accommodation or crowded family homes. They liked to get out as much as possible. Others were quite content to stay at home for much of the time. Another reason for going out was because their child was easier to deal with, or more content, when they were out. 'Going out' might involve going to some form of informal drop-in or community centre, or simply 'going up the town'. Others reported that it was easier to stay home and entertain their child.

A theme that often emerged was that of relative isolation and loneliness. Although in one area a support worker interviewed commented:

*'They're young girls and their life revolves around that. They spend quite a lot of time getting up and getting ready, feeding the baby, then they're quite happy going off into town, meeting friends. There is a big circle of these girls – you need to walk through town to see how many there are. They've got a big social gathering and they see that as their life .... A lot of them, it's what they wanted and they like that way of life – socialising with all their friends.'*

This tends to be the stereotypical view of young mothers. However, as reported in Section 3.4.1, not all young mothers maintain their previous networks of friends. It is not always easy to meet and make new friends. When discussing these issues, some young women commented on how quite a few of their friends had babies, but this did not always mean they socialised with them.

Some of those living with their partner seemed to be possibly more isolated than those living alone, although this was not always the case. Those living alone may feel that they have to go out to meet others, and feel freer to do so. Those living with a partner can be more constrained, in that the expectation is that they stay home and look after their family. This was not always explicit in what the young women said (although it was more so in interviews with support workers), but rather implied by various other comments and facial expressions. For example, one young mother commented how her partner had been working on the fishing boats, but once she had the baby, he got a job on shore. Although he was there to support her more, it did seem that he also imposed more restrictions on her life.

## 4.4 Future plans

The young mothers interviewed varied considerably in the extent to which they felt they could think about the future in any concrete terms. It was originally planned to ask about the next five years, but in a few cases this was reduced to three years to help them think about answering. They also varied considerably in the extent to which they had clear aspirations, or indeed any aspirations, and in the extent to which any aspirations they did have had been thought through. For example, some were able to say something along the lines of: *'I need to do this to get ...'*, while others were saying: *'might be doing this'* or: *'maybe I will do that'*.

It might be expected that those who did well, or reasonably well, at school, obtained some qualifications and had some sort of aspirations before they got pregnant, would have clearer views about what they expected or wanted to do in the future. However, it is difficult to generalise. A few who had done reasonably well at school seemed to have lost their direction; sometimes this was related to becoming pregnant, but not always. For others, becoming a mother had really turned their lives around. For example, one young woman who was in her early 20s at the time of the interview reported how, on becoming a mother, she had disassociated herself from previous friends who were into drugs and drink, and other activities she saw as incompatible with having young children. Having floundered around through a variety of courses, she had settled on a career with training and was on track to complete this.

It is difficult to identify what makes a difference between those who had clear future trajectories and those who did not. As reported above, there was not a clear relationship with previous educational experiences and achievement. Factors can be presented that predispose young mothers to have different aspirations for the future,

but then a number of exceptions can be found. There was some discussion with support workers around the extent to which young women choose to have a baby or not. The whole issue of deliberateness in becoming pregnant is complex. One respondent commented how it was not so much that the young woman deliberately got pregnant, but rather, that, on becoming pregnant, it was normal in their community to continue with the pregnancy and become a full-time mother. Pressures may be placed on them, by family, partners, the general community, to stay at home, at least until the child reaches school age. However, examples were also given of young women who had countered these expectations and, for example, were attending college despite family opposition. To do this, they had to be emotionally strong, and usually have good external support.

A number of themes emerged from these young women's plans for the future. Each is outlined below.

### Waiting until the baby is older

This is a theme that appears at a number of points in this report. Some of these young women wanted to wait until their baby was older – a year, three years old or old enough to go to school, were most commonly mentioned – before deciding what they were going to do. Others explicitly talked about wanting to return to college or find a job when their child reached this stage.

They didn't want to miss out on spending time with their baby, watching him/her develop and the various stages they go through, such as beginning to walk, their first words. Some were asserting their right to be a mother and not be pressured into doing anything else until they were ready. Others had no real aspirations before becoming pregnant and this had not really changed. For some, staying at home was justified because they didn't trust strangers to care for their child (this is discussed further in Chapter 6). There was a mix of emotions and aspirations at work here.

A few interviewees were still pregnant. They could often not see beyond giving birth. Indeed, a number of those who had recently given birth reported that when pregnant they hadn't been able to focus on anything else particularly, but they felt freer to do so since the birth.

### Non-work aspirations

A number of future aspirations were not related to work or learning. These young women talked about wanting to be in a nice home or at least being in their own home; being in a good relationship, possibly married; having their benefits sorted out. These were sometimes associated with labour-market aspirations, but by no means always.

To some extent these non-work aspirations related to their current concerns. For example, a number were in temporary housing or housing that was unsatisfactory in

some way; these often referred to wanting to have their housing sorted out. Others were experiencing relationship problems with their current partner: a relationship had broken down or they were alone. Partnership and marriage aspirations were often at, or near, the top of their agenda.

Very few said they wanted to be pregnant again soon. One young woman explicitly said she wanted four children at a young age. For some others, it just seemed to be considered inevitable that they would have further children soon.

### Returning to a course

Among this group of young mothers, there was quite a strong desire to have returned to learning within the next five years, and to be on some sort of training/career track. This was sometimes associated with wanting a good job (which is discussed below). In other cases, there was more of an interest in learning for the sake of learning, although obtaining a good and interesting job was the ultimate aim.

A few had already planned, or were about to start, learning. For example, one young woman was about to start a one-year access course, followed by midwifery and nursing. She wanted to become a midwife and help other young mothers. Another planned to use learndirect to improve her qualifications, as this could be fitted around caring for her baby and when relatives were available to baby-sit:

*'You can go there when you wanna go there ... it's a little bit more ideal than going to college.'*

Others were less clear about what they wanted to do or, if they did have an idea, how they would achieve this. They *'hoped to be learning'* in three or five years' time. However, when asked if they had looked into it, either they hadn't or they had done so only vaguely, and did not know how they would go about doing this. It is difficult to make a judgement on how likely some of these plans were to come to fruition. For those dealing with being a new young mother and associated practical issues, learning was a distant aim. As other issues were resolved they could well take firm action. On the other hand, since most realised this research study was about learning, they could have been saying this to impress the questioner, as it was in their minds and sounded good.

To achieve their aims, a number of these young women needed more advice and support. This is discussed further in the section below relating to work aspirations. For example, one reported wanting to train as a chartered accountant. She discussed how for this she would need training, and might do an apprenticeship. However, she was unsure how to find out about this. She was too old to access Connexions, and in the Jobcentre she was just pointed towards information on a computer.

## Working

The long-term ambition of the majority of this sample of young women was to find a job and not remain reliant on benefits. This was sometimes expressed in terms of concrete job aspirations and plans, but more often in vaguer terms. For example, a number of interviewees talked about needing to train for a job, or having to go to college if they wanted a well-paid job, but with no specific jobs or courses in mind. Others had some idea, but this was often qualified with a 'maybe'. One, on the basis of working in a pub, wanted to be a landlady and own property or a pub. She thought there was a vocational course she could do to prepare her for this, but she wasn't sure.

A few did have more concrete plans. For example, one young woman had previously worked as a receptionist. She wanted to become better qualified so that she could work in a well-paid job, wanting to earn at least £20,000. She planned to do an NVQ in PA and Administration so that she could get a better receptionist job:

*'I wanna be in a well paid job ... how am I going to get there? By going to college in the next five years.'*

Another talked about completing further childcare qualifications so that she could work in a nursery.

A few had career/job aims that were based on previous training or job experience, or earlier aspirations. However, it was quite notable that a number had changed their minds. In many ways this is not surprising, as many young people do leave compulsory education with little idea of what they want to do, or of the opportunities available to them. Indeed, in some of the focus groups, the interview generated a discussion about job/career choice. The young women commented on how difficult it could be to decide what they were really interested in doing. They didn't have enough information on the courses available to them and what jobs some courses would lead to. For example, one young mother talked about not being sure how to get the job she wanted:

*'I don't wanna go into the wrong course.'*

Several talked about wanting to try lots of jobs/courses, so that they could find what they were interested in:

*'Best to try them, you don't know what they're like till you do them.'*

Another motivation for this was so that they had a range of experiences to draw on and something to fall back on if necessary. A few who had completed courses in hairdressing, and health and beauty subsequently decided that they didn't want to do this as a career, but commented that these were useful skills to have to use at home and with friends.

A number of interviewees had developed career aspirations relating to their experiences as young mothers and contact with various support workers. For

example, they expressed interest in becoming midwives, nurses or health visitors, sometimes working specifically with teenage mothers; one of the older young women interviewed wanted to be a youth worker (she had been involved in setting up a drop-in group for young mothers). Others wanted to train in childcare or another caring occupation – for example, as a children’s counsellor or a social worker.

Others had changed their minds about what they wanted to do in the longer term for a variety of reasons. For example, one young mother had previously done a performing arts and drama course, but didn’t plan to return to this:

*‘My confidence has gone since I had [child’s name]. Before, it had gone up, now it’s gone down. I think it’s because you’re bigger after you’ve had a baby. All wobbling.’*

Related to working, two general aspirations were evident. One was to be independent:

*‘[I want to be] independent ... not relying on anyone else’.*

Part of this involved earning, but also a number of young women reported wanting to learn to drive.

The second was around being well paid. They wanted to provide for their child(ren), especially the more expensive items as they got older, such as holidays, so that the children did not miss out on the things so many take for granted.

## 4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has explored what this sample of young mothers were doing when they found they were pregnant, how they spend their time and their longer-term aspirations.

These young women were doing various things before and when they found they were pregnant. A few were on a career track of some sort, but the majority were not. There is a considerable degree of overlap between the NEET group and young mothers. However, being NEET is not a static situation. Young mothers, like young people generally, move between different statuses. Some young mothers had not been particularly interested in learning or employment before becoming pregnant, and being a parent had not really changed their attitudes. Others had reassessed their lives and wanted something better for their child.

Many who were studying or in employment on becoming pregnant had subsequently left their course or job. This was sometimes due to their health being poor, or a decision to give up. However, there were also examples of young women losing their job or being asked to leave their course because they were pregnant.

A number of themes emerged from the plans these young women had for the future. Many expressed the view that they wanted to wait until their baby was older before

considering activities outside the home. Problems with housing, finance and relationships often intervened and these needed to be addressed before longer-term plans could be thought about. However, there was quite a strong desire to return to learning if various barriers could be overcome, and the long-term ambition of the majority was to find a job and to provide a better future for their child.

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## 5 Attitudes to Learning

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### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores young mothers' previous experiences of education and training and the impact this has had on their lives; whether they have tried to return to learning since becoming pregnant or having a child, and their experiences of this; their general attitudes towards learning and the extent to which these have changed since becoming a parent. It goes on to explore their longer-term plans for engaging in further learning in the future, and the factors that might deter or facilitate engagement in future learning.

### 5.2 Experiences of, and attitudes towards, full-time education

#### 5.2.1 Age of leaving full-time education

- Just over half the young mothers in the sample left school at 16 years after taking their GCSEs.
- About one-third of the respondents had stayed on in full-time education to take further qualifications, either 'A' levels or NVQs. All but two of these failed to complete their courses at this level, in most cases because of becoming pregnant (see Section 5.4 on the impact of pregnancy on education/employment).
- Eight young mothers reported leaving school early before taking any exams.



## 5.2.2 Qualifications

A range of different qualifications had been obtained across the sample:

- The majority had achieved qualifications at GCSE level – however, many had only achieved a few or none at grade C or higher. Others could not remember what they had obtained or had not bothered to find out. A couple had achieved around ten GCSEs at or above grade C.
- Two had qualifications at ‘A’ level.
- Some had obtained NVQ level qualifications, for example in Childcare, Performing Arts and Hairdressing.
- One respondent was studying at HE level and was in the second year of a degree in Advanced Nursing.
- Other qualifications mentioned included a GNVQ in computing, Youth Training certificate, Youth Achievement Award, and a few had certificates in subjects such as first aid, health and safety, and food hygiene.
- Seven young mothers had no qualifications at all. While this is low in relation to the general profile of young mothers, it should be remembered that there were others reporting having GCSEs, but none at grade C or above; these would generally be counted as unqualified.

## 5.2.3 Attitudes towards full-time education

The majority of young mothers interviewed reported having had a negative experience of school. A minority were more positive about their full-time education. Generally speaking, those who had enjoyed attending school were more likely to have continued their full-time education post-16, even if they did not complete their course.

There were a number of reasons given for disliking school. Some referred to not getting on well with teachers, feeling teaching staff were not interested in their progress, or that their education had suffered because of staff shortages:

*‘I think in my year we didn’t have much opportunity; at one time we had four days at school. Our teachers, we were really short on teachers. We didn’t get that much of an opportunity I don’t think ... I don’t think they cared. The amount of times I walked out. We had four days at school and we were meant to get through our maths exams; half the stuff we didn’t know because we weren’t taught it. I didn’t know what the stuff was.’*

Some said that they had a dislike of certain subjects or just found school boring generally:

*‘Sometimes I just got bored and walked out; it just bored me. I got bored easily ... all my lessons, if they bored me, I just got up and walked out and said: “you’re boring me” ....’*

One young mother said she preferred to be at work:

*'I went to college and I was taking those at 'A' Levels but I ended up dropping out because I was working part time and they kept getting me in for more hours and I just preferred working to being at college. I hated college. I hated school. I'd rather be working and getting paid for it.'*

Other reasons for not liking school included: the discipline (or in one case the lack of this); the compulsory nature of school attendance: *'having to be there'*; having to get up early to go; not fitting in; learning difficulties such as dyslexia; and experiences of bullying. Several young mothers reporting being dyslexic and that this wasn't picked up at school, so they didn't do well and had been classed as not very bright. Another had not been given any additional support to help her cope. Bullying, although not reported by that many, was a major cause of disengagement from school, and this has been more widely found amongst the NEET group.<sup>1</sup> Many young mothers reported that their attendance at school had been poor, particularly in later years:

*'My attendance was bad at school.'*

*'Well, I had issues like being off school and then when it came to the exams and they messed me about a bit.'*

Some young mothers had their education disrupted because of personal or family problems. For example, one 21-year-old in a community-based project had been bullied at school but did not feel supported by staff when she reported it. She also had to deal with the emotional trauma of two violent deaths in her family, and left school early as the bullying continued:

*'I used to go to the teachers and say I was bullied ... they're calling me names and it is upsetting. And they turned round and said: "well grow up and get over it". And I said: "you're supposed to be here to help us, not tell us to grow up and get over it".'*

Another respondent had experienced problems with her parents and had been in care for a year. She had then moved to a different part of the country at the age of 14, and continued to move around to different schools in the new locality. Not surprisingly, she did not do well at school, eventually taking her GCSE exams in a special unit.

A young woman who had left school in Year 8 had experienced bullying because she was overweight. She was tutored at home for a while, then went to a special unit for non-attenders. However, she left before taking her GCSE exams because of further bullying.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Kellard K, Johal S (2007, forthcoming) *NEET Qualitative Research Project Phase 2*, Norwich: Connexions Norfolk.

Some respondents talked about their behaviour problems in school. In some cases, these had led to suspension or expulsion and taking their exams in a special unit for excluded students:

*'I was kicked out of every school I've been in .... They let me back, the last school I was in for nine months; I got kicked out but they let me do my GCSEs; they just didn't want me ... I just can't stand being told what to do. I never have, that's why I was never allowed in school.'*

A few felt that because of the area they lived in they were classed as likely to be a problem and not particularly worth bothering with from early on in their school career. Most had lived up to these expectations.

Another young mother (now aged 22 years) was training to be a nurse and undertaking a work placement with the midwifery service. She had also had a very disrupted education: she had been bullied at school and did not feel that she fitted in; she was a poor attender, was always getting into trouble and had been excluded from school twice. Despite all these negative factors, she had gone on to pass 11 GCSEs at grade C and above.

Those who had not attended or bothered much at school now frequently regretted this. If they could turn back the clock and do better at school they would. For example, they wanted to get a good job and found that a lack of, or very low-level, qualifications worked against them. Several commented on how not attending, or not doing much at school, meant they had nothing to put on a CV – and this did not impress employers.

### 5.3 Engagement in learning beyond full-time education

A number of respondents reported that they had participated in some form of further learning after leaving full-time education. For example, one young mother had just completed an NVQ Childcare course at the time of interview. She had left school following her GCSEs and had returned to learning when her baby was six months old. She had accessed Care to Learn funding to pay for a place in a local nursery.

Another respondent had attempted to go to college every year from the age of 16 to 19 years, but always left after a few weeks as it was too much like school. She eventually took her 'A' levels as a mature student, attending evening classes, which suited her better. Although pregnant at the time, she passed her exams and went on to university to study nursing. She did not know about Care to Learn funding, which she would have been eligible for in the past; she now has an NHS bursary that covers childcare costs.

Some young mothers had taken courses that focused on developing their employability skills. For example, one respondent attended an 'after school' employability skills course which led into bar work, and this seemed to be a positive experience:

*'I went to ... skills. It's this thing where you do health and safety, and things like that – an after school thing .... It's the careers centre that gave it to me. To get a bit of money, do the forms and that ... then I went to work in a pub and I loved that. I'd like to run my own pub, I would.'*

Another young mother was taking a ten-week evening class in Computerised Accountancy which she hoped would help her towards her goal of becoming a chartered accountant:

*'You get a certificate, but that's about it because it's an attendance-based course. It isn't exam based. But it'll look good on my CV.'*

At one location (where there were particularly high levels of teenage pregnancy), some young mothers were attending parenting skills courses. These were organised by a community-based project and targeted specifically at young mothers and pregnant girls, to encourage them back into learning. The courses offered accreditation equivalent to NVQ Level 1 and included: health and safety, money management, child development and communication with your baby. There were visiting speakers, health and other professionals who offered advice and information on a variety of topics. Free childcare was provided through an on-site crèche. It was interesting to note that some of the young mothers, who had reported previously negative experiences of schooling, seemed to feel much more positive about learning in a more informal environment (this is an issue explored further in the evaluation report on learning provision for teenage mothers<sup>1</sup>):

*'Oh it's nothing like school. They don't talk down to you. They talk to you like you're an adult. The teachers are like friends as well; more relaxed atmosphere. It's not like you've got to get this piece of work done by the end of the day. You can sit with them and have a chat with them and relax. You can work at your own pace.'*

Other types of courses mentioned included work-based learning and basic skills.

## 5.4 Impact of pregnancy/parenthood on education and employment

Over half of the sample reported that their education or employment had been disrupted to some extent by becoming pregnant or having a baby.

One young mother was going to stay on at school to take her 'A' levels, but left when she became pregnant:

*'I finished in June and I was meant to go back in September but I didn't because I was pregnant with him.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Dench S, Bellis A, (2007) *Learning for Young Mothers . A qualitative study of flexible provision*, IES Report 441.

The impact of pregnancy and parenthood on the life of this young mother had extended beyond her education. She had also become estranged from her family and friends, and had moved to a different area of the country where, to begin with, she had been socially isolated.

Another respondent was finishing her 'A' levels when she found out she was pregnant. She had applied to university to study law, but was unable to continue further with her studies at that stage. She was still hoping to study at HE level, but had put these plans on hold until her child was older. Another consequence of her experience of becoming a mother was that she was now more interested in midwifery than law.

Four respondents had left their NVQ college courses during pregnancy – two of them for health and safety reasons. One young mother was attending a work-based learning childcare course when she became pregnant and was advised not to continue by her GP because of her susceptibility to infections. Another respondent claimed that she had been required to leave her course because of health complications due to her pregnancy:

*'I got kicked out of college because I was pregnant ... I had low iron levels, I kept on feeling dizzy, collapsing and they said it's a health risk to others and a health risk to yourself because my classroom was upstairs. And I went and asked to use the disabled lift and they said it was for disabled people.'*

One young mother (19 years of age with a one-year-old baby) had attempted to study on a full-time IT course but had found that she was unable to cope with the pressures of childcare responsibilities and full-time study, so left the course to stay at home.

By contrast, one pregnant young woman was planning to complete her NVQ in Hairdressing, even though she was due to give birth before the course finished. The main issue of concern for her was accessing childcare support later on, as her college did not have a crèche.

Some young mothers talked about the effect that pregnancy or having a child had had on their employment. In some cases, because they had chosen not to continue; in others, because circumstances made it difficult for them to continue.

One respondent had worked in telesales after leaving school, and returned to her job after having her son. Her baby was looked after in a nursery but, as her wages were very low, she found it difficult to manage financially, saying that she: *'only made about £20 a week more'* than when she was not working. She also had transport difficulties, relying on buses to get her from home to the nursery and to work every day. Because of these difficulties, she decided to give up work and stay at home with her son.

Another respondent claimed that she had been sacked from her sales job so her employer would not have to pay her maternity leave:

*'I'd been there over a year, that's why they sacked me – so they didn't have to pay me maternity leave. That's what I reckon – so they didn't have to pay maternity leave.'*

## 5.5 Future plans for learning or employment

The majority of young mothers interviewed expressed an intention of returning to education or training at some time in the future, whether in the shorter or longer term. When asked about their plans for the future, most young mothers in the sample indicated that they would need to obtain further training or qualifications to meet their vocational goals.

Plans for further learning included courses in: childcare, midwifery, social work and youth worker training; counselling; working with disabled people; accountancy; leisure and tourism; business and administration; catering; interior design and training to be a fitness instructor.

Some of those who had been negative about their school experience, were more positive in their attitude towards engaging in further learning. One young mother who had disliked school and was a poor attender said she would now like to attend college:

*'... when I was at school I didn't want to go to college because I thought it would be like school, but I want to go to college now.'*

Some felt more motivated to return to learning because they wanted to get well-paid jobs. For example, a respondent who had worked as a receptionist before she was pregnant wanted to get qualifications in PA and Administration so she could get a better-paid job. A few wanted to complete unfinished training, or qualifications started before they became pregnant.

It is interesting to note that the choice of future vocational aspirations appears in some cases to have been influenced by their experiences of pregnancy and parenthood. For example, two young mothers were keen to take HE level courses in midwifery; two others said they wanted to change direction from their previous subject area to pursue a career in childcare. They wanted to work either with children or with young people in a similar situation to themselves.

## 5.6 Barriers to further engagement in learning and/or employment

A number of factors that emerged from the interviews were likely to present barriers to participation in further education or training for young mothers.

### 5.6.1 Cultural influences and a general lack of aspirations

A number of the young women interviewed came from chaotic family backgrounds and/or lived in areas where there were very few job opportunities or expectations that women in particular would have a career and work rather than stay at home with young children. Support workers were able to provide many more examples of young mothers in similar situations amongst those they worked with.

A Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator, reflecting on the reasons why so many young mothers in the area seemed to become pregnant after leaving school at 16 years, concluded that, for many of them, becoming a parent was a more attractive prospect, in an economically depressed area, than the alternative of being stuck in a low-paid job:

*'... they've finished school and then something happens around 17, 18 and they say: "right, okay", you know they are having babies and that's our big group which to me suggests something happens around that time. The only thing I can see that would happen around that time from my own personal experience is that there is nothing here for them. "I can go and work in some crappy job in a factory and earn £20 a week more than I will get on Income Support. What's all that about?"'*

These interviews did not explore the reasons for becoming pregnant, although they did pick up various pieces of anecdotal evidence, for example: contraception failing, not being careful enough, *'it just happened'*. Among those asked, no one admitted to wanting to start a family as young as they had done.

The extent to which young women deliberately get pregnant was discussed with some support workers.<sup>1</sup> One respondent commented that it was not so much a matter of deliberately getting pregnant, but that if a young woman did become pregnant it was expected that she would have the baby and care for it. There was often a history of high unemployment, many single parents and low levels of aspirations in such areas. One support worker talked about a young woman she was working with who had decided to have an abortion and as a result had been ostracised by her family.

Having become a mother, young women in these communities are often under pressure from friends and family to be a full-time mother, and not consider wider career or labour-market opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been the subject of a recent report: Cater S, Coleman L (2006) *'Planned' teenage pregnancy: Views and experiences of young people from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Policy Press.

### 5.6.2 The desire to be a good mother

An element came through from some interviews, of young mothers feeling far too pressured to remain in or return to learning before they were ready. If you are a 'normal' mother (ie having children in 20s/30s, and within a secure relationship) it is seen as alright to stay at home to be a full-time mother. A number of those working with young mothers felt it unfair that this group should be treated differently and have different expectations placed on them.

There was a strong desire amongst many of the young mothers interviewed to care for their child full time, especially during the first few years. Although perhaps prepared to attend some sort of informal provision – and indeed, in most areas, once young mothers started attending something of this sort, they really valued and enjoyed it – they did not want to engage any further.

Attending formal learning is a step too far for a number of young mothers, and this can set them up for failure if other aspects of their lives are not sorted out. Housing, relationship issues and finances are all more immediate priorities than longer-term labour-market participation.

### 5.6.3 Previous educational experiences

The majority of these young women had not enjoyed school, and while some had attended and achieved qualifications, others had effectively dropped out before they reached statutory school-leaving age.

Many of the reasons for disliking school created a barrier to them moving on to further learning. Further, those with few or no qualifications did not always have the levels needed to progress without retaking (or taking for the first time) some GCSEs. Some needed to improve their basic skills.

Failure, or relative lack of success at school, perhaps alongside being bullied or not fitting in, had undermined the confidence of a number of young mothers interviewed. While in some cases this was expressed as a straightforward lack of interest in learning, in other cases their having a child they couldn't leave (or were not prepared to leave) in childcare was given as the reason.

An adviser talked about working with young mothers who had been bullied at school. They were not prepared to put themselves in a position in which this could happen again. This put them off attending any learning provision. Furthermore, some were concerned that they might meet up again with those who bullied them at school, and that the bullying would start again. Fear was an underlying emotion putting them off learning.



#### 5.6.4 Lack of clear goals for the future/lack of access to appropriate advice and support about education and training

Although the majority of young mothers indicated that they would like to return to learning in the future, there were varying levels of awareness about the steps needed to achieve their future goals. Some appeared to be confused or uncertain about their future course of action:

*'First I wanted to work in hotels. Then I wanted to work with animals ... I've done loads of stuff, done cleaning – I enjoyed that actually – and I've worked in a pub and I loved that. Totally different things. I haven't got a clue to be honest.'*

Others were clearer about the direction they wanted to take, but were unsure where to go for appropriate advice and guidance about the options open to them, and what kinds of support were available, eg for childcare:

*'I haven't got a clue. I don't really know what options I've got because I was wanting to do an apprenticeship. I don't know what options I've got for childcare at the moment ... I don't know what I'm entitled to.'*

This was also an issue for a young pregnant woman who would be continuing her course in hairdressing after her baby was born, but had experienced difficulty getting advice about childcare support:

*'I don't know where to get the information about what you can and can't get ... I went to my college student services, and asked about childcare for the last month I'm going to be there, and they said they can't help me – no one can help me – I have to sort it out myself.'*

#### 5.6.5 Eligibility for funding and financial constraints

Many young mothers indicated that they wanted to delay going back into education until their babies were older, perhaps old enough to go to nursery or play group:

*'I wouldn't mind doing it ... it's just, when she's older, she's only ten months ... or when she goes to play group or nursery, and then start it off. But she's too young now, she's just too attached to me.'*

A support worker, who helped young mothers back into education, training and employment, confirmed that many of her clients made a conscious choice to stay at home with their children until they were old enough for nursery school:

*'A lot of the girls say: "I want to enjoy Johnny while he's a baby. I want to stay at home for the first three years of his life until he goes to nursery". I think it's a conscious decision ... they are choosing to stay at home and be mums, which is fine.'*

This was an issue that many support workers were constantly coming up against as a barrier to learning, and they had to work with this. Pushing a very reluctant young mother constantly or too forcibly into learning was unlikely to be successful. Indeed,

this could often have the opposite effect. Those working with young mothers were having to make sure that these young women continued to remain aware of the options open to them, and what funding was available to support them.

However, some respondents realised that by the time they were ready to return to learning, they were likely to be too old to be eligible for Care to Learn funding. For example, two young mothers in one focus group said they were planning to go back into learning the following year: one was keen to study PA and Administration, and the other was considering social work training. However, both had concerns about childcare, as by then they would be too old to access Care to Learn:

*'I want to go back to college but I don't know how I'll be able to with a baby.'*

Both respondents thought they would have to rely on family to help out with the childcare.

Some young mothers were already too old to be eligible for Care to Learn funding and had not found out about it until it was too late. One young mother indicated that this type of funding would have been useful to her. She was keen to go back into learning to become qualified as an accountant but was worried about how to pay for childcare:

*'I would probably use it if I'd found out about it ... I would have looked into it, seen what opportunities I could have done, like what sort of courses.'*

Some support workers also raised the issue of the difficulties faced by young mothers, particularly those now over the age of 20, in accessing financial support for returning to study. According to one Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator, there was a pattern of young mothers in her area wanting to get back into learning at an older age (ie early 20s) but there was no specific funding targeted at the needs of this older age group:

*'I couldn't quote any figures on it but we know just from work that we have done around the town that it is the age. What young mums are saying to us and what they are saying to Connexions ... is that they would be more prepared to go back then.'*

Another support worker said that many of the difficulties encountered by young mothers in this age group related particularly to the additional costs of studying, such as childcare, travel and equipment:

*'EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance] is not available to 19 year olds. There's no extra funding with E2E now EMA's taken over .... They may get support with travel expenses but with E2E you have to pay in advance and claim it back. They haven't got the money available in their pocket to do that in the first instance.'*

Some young mothers also raised this issue of financial constraints as a perceived barrier to further learning. For example, in one focus group, general concerns were expressed about all the associated costs of learning, such as childcare, travel, trips, books and other course materials. There was also a lack of knowledge about how the

course fees would be paid and what would happen to their benefits. Recent changes in the regulations regarding course and exam fees were causing problems for some of the older young mothers. For example, a 19-year-old reported that to retake GCSEs would cost her £160 an exam.

Even when financial support for childcare was available, there could be extra costs to cover. One young mother had successfully accessed Care to Learn funding for her course in childcare, but had to find additional money to cover the number of hours her child was in the nursery. If a young mother either chooses to use, or has no choice about using, childcare that costs more than the weekly maximum, they will have to find alternative additional sources of funding.

### 5.6.6 Social isolation

The isolation of a number of young mothers was discussed earlier in this report, and this could impact on their ability to engage in learning. For example, they did not know how to find out about learning opportunities available to them, or did not have aspirations in this direction because of their perception that there were no opportunities open to them. Furthermore, being isolated brings other pressures in that these young mothers were having to deal with all aspects of their lives on their own; attending a course as well was just too much.

One young mother was estranged from her family and friends, and had moved to a different area with her partner and baby. She was fairly isolated at first but was able to get advice and support from a Connexions adviser. She described how difficult it had been to cope with course work and childcare without the support of her family:

*'... because I haven't got my family with me it was hard doing college, course work and things, and finding the time and keeping him as well, so it was hard.'*

The support worker who supported this young mother expressed the view that young mothers without family support were at a particular disadvantage in returning to learning:

*'... it's not easy for girls to access it [Care to Learn] if they're totally on their own. If they've got supportive family around them, it will be a lot easier to be able to attend college and use Care to Learn because parents can help with travel and they can help with the child.'*

Supportive families can make studying much easier for a young mother, for example, through helping financially, taking some of the pressures of looking after a child off the mother (giving the young woman space to complete course work or just have time for herself), and just generally providing emotional and other personal support.

### 5.6.7 Availability of learning opportunities

Another issue was the lack of appropriate training opportunities in a particular location. One young mother was interested in undertaking an apprenticeship in accountancy but did not know of any opportunities available in the area where she lived:

*'Well, I want to get an apprenticeship that gets me fully trained, then hopefully they'll keep me on afterwards. I don't know where, if there are any places around here that offer accountancy apprenticeships because ... there's nowhere round here that offers it.'*

The same issue was raised by a support worker, who felt that the lack of apprenticeships was a more general issue which needed to be addressed at a national level:

*'There seems to be nothing in the way of apprenticeships any more. We've got lots of young people we know want to get on apprenticeships but there aren't enough apprenticeships for them to go on. I don't think the issues are necessarily local issues, I think they are national issues around funding streams and around availability – what is available to young people.'*

This respondent believed that many young mothers considering going back into learning might well be interested in apprenticeships in the field of childcare:

*'Well a lot of them are quite interested in childcare once they've had a baby.'*

Another young mother was keen to train as a youth worker and was also frustrated by the fact that the particular course she wanted to undertake, in youth and community studies, was not available at her local college.

There appeared to be geographical variability in the availability of more informal learning opportunities, of the kind designed to encourage young mothers back into learning, such as those focusing on personal development, childcare and parenting skills. One support worker felt that courses of this kind would be popular with the young mothers in the area where she worked, but she was unaware of any provision of this kind available locally:

*'... some of the mums that are engaged [ie with local support workers], we are trying to work with them now to find out what we could provide, what would be the carrot that would tempt them to go back. I was talking to some mums the other day ... and they said: "baby massage"; they all love the idea of baby massage and they want things to do with their baby; they don't want English literature.'*

### 5.6.8 Learner support issues

One young mother who was keen to return to learning was dyslexic, and felt that this would have implications for the type of learning environment that would be appropriate for her:

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*'I'm not very good with schooling. I'm dyslexic, I get quite put off. I think if I do a modern apprenticeship it would be alright.'*

Some support workers discussed the particular difficulties facing young mothers with basic skills needs, including those speaking English as an additional language. For these young mothers, the opportunity to access more informal learning opportunities offered in community locations appeared to be particularly appropriate as a first step back into the education system.

## 5.7 Perceived facilitators/encouraging factors for engagement in further learning

### 5.7.1 Flexible learning opportunities

One young mother was considering studying through learndirect, which she saw as a more flexible option than college. A respondent in her early 20s at the time of her interview reported how she had struggled until finding that night classes suited her. She could more easily combine this with childcare, and her mother was free to look after her child during the evenings when she was on her course. This young woman was interviewed in a drop-in group, which she was attending as part of her training as a nurse; she was shadowing the midwife who facilitated the group. She had started out as a teenage mother who was disengaged from education. Another young mother attending that day had dropped out of a full-time course, having found it too much to cope with being a parent as well. She saw this as a failure and was very discouraged; the older young woman was able to discuss with her alternatives to full-time attendance at college.

Another example of distance learning was given by a support worker who referred to the 'virtual school' which had been set up in one area. This enabled young mothers to learn from home or from a local community centre.

According to one support worker, some forms of provision offered more flexible learning opportunities by ensuring, for example, that the timing of courses fitted in with childcare arrangements, or by being more sensitive to the complex needs of some young mothers:

*'Most people attending E2E [Entry to Employment] have had some sort of problem or issue and I think that E2E are very good at understanding that and have a more flexible approach.'*

Some support workers pointed out that many young women still in full-time education felt uncomfortable attending school when they were pregnant and that they could be offered alternative ways of completing their education. This could take the

form of attending pupil referral units, or the option of studying at home. The level of flexibility, however, could vary from school to school:

*'Some schools are very good and give the girls support when they are pregnant ... others don't at all and actually almost reprimand them for having got pregnant.'*

Other examples of flexible learning mentioned in interviews included work-based learning and informal, community-based learning.

### 5.7.2 Motivational factors

A few young mothers were motivated to return to learning in order to follow a particular career path, become better qualified or get a better job. For example, one respondent, who wanted to become a chartered accountant, was keen to engage in training for this. Another young mother had a very clear sense of her future career path, ie returning to her previous work as a receptionist but also becoming qualified in order to get a better-paid job. Two young mothers wanted to train to become midwives and had very specific plans for achieving this, via an Access course and then studying at degree level.

In some cases, the motivation to aim for better-qualified and higher-paid employment was linked to a desire to provide for their children:

*'Yes, well, I feel as though I can't give her a proper life ... because I'm completely by myself ... I feel like I have to provide big time for her.'*

## 5.8 Conclusions

This chapter has explored young mothers' previous experiences of, and attitudes towards, education and training, and the impact pregnancy and parenthood have had on these. It has also considered their plans for learning in the future, and the factors that might help or hinder these aspirations.

The majority of young mothers in the sample had stayed in full-time education until they were at least 16 years old. The majority of young mothers reported having had a negative experience of school, including some who had had to cope with difficult family circumstances or bullying. Many young mothers reported that their school attendance had been poor, particularly in later years.

Some respondents had participated in some form of further learning after leaving full-time education, such as taking NVQs at college or attending employability skills courses, evening classes, and community-based courses, including parenting skills.

Over half of the sample reported that their education or employment had been disrupted to some extent by becoming pregnant or having a baby, for example, through choice, for health reasons or because they had difficulty coping with

work/study alongside parenting responsibilities. However, a significant majority, despite negative or difficult earlier experiences, indicated that they would like to undertake further learning in the future, whether in the shorter or longer term. Most of their aspirations were vocational and included training in midwifery, childcare, social work, youth work, counselling, accountancy, leisure and tourism administration and catering. Many young mothers felt motivated by a desire to gain further qualifications and obtain employment.

Barriers to engaging in further learning included:

- cultural factors
- a lack of clear goals for the future
- lack of awareness about where to go for advice or guidance on learning opportunities
- being too old for Care to Learn
- lack of knowledge about the availability of other forms of financial support
- preferring to stay at home with their child; financial constraints
- social isolation and lack of family support; and
- learner support issues.

Factors identified as facilitating further engagement in learning were:

- availability of flexible learning opportunities which were sensitive to the particular needs of young mothers
- the presence of family support
- motivational factors, such as clear career goals
- a desire to provide for their children.

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## 6 Attitudes Towards Using Childcare

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### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores experiences of, and attitudes towards, the use of childcare. The majority of young mothers interviewed had no experience of using childcare, and many had no immediate plans to do so. While a few of these young women had clear ideas of what childcare they would like to use, many had not really thought about this or, in some cases, were clearly against leaving their child.

Others had some experience of using childcare, for example, through having started a course at some point since giving birth, or from attending the activity through which they were accessed for this study. In some of the focus groups, a debate started around childcare, bringing out contrasting views.

### 6.2 Experience of childcare

The majority of young mothers interviewed had no experience of using formal childcare. A few had never really left their child with anyone, not even close family members. This might be because they had fallen out with their immediate family for whatever reason, they lived some distance from family, or simply because they did not trust anyone else with their child. For example, one young woman commented:

*'I leave [child's name] with my mum sometimes. Even though she's fine – she brought up four kids – but you still have that worry: "oh my God, is she alright?" But then to leave her to some stranger ....'*

As has been discussed elsewhere, it was not uncommon for those living alone, or indeed with their partner, to seem fairly isolated. They did not go out a great deal or mix with others much.



In a few interviews, although not made explicit, there was an element of partners not being keen on young mothers doing anything except childcare and domestic work. This was more clearly reported by some of the support workers interviewed. They described working with young families where the child's father was in employment (and often older than the mother, perhaps early/mid 20s). He was the bread winner and expected his partner to stay home, look after the child, him and their home. In some cases, young women were not expected to have a life of their own, separate from the family, and it took a strong personality to stand up to this.

Others did use families and partners, for example, to look after the child while they went out with friends, studied or worked, or simply because they lived with their parents. Some were more than happy to do this; they relished having some time to themselves and being able to go out with friends, and lead some sort of normal teenage life. For example, a few who still lived in the family home talked about competition to help look after the baby between family members. Others were more reluctant. Some simply did not want to be reliant on others: *'I like to be independent.'* It was their child and they wanted to show they could cope without requiring much, sometimes any, help from others.

A few of the young mothers interviewed had some experience of working or studying since giving birth. One young woman was attending an evening class one night a week, and her mother or the baby's father's mother looked after the child. Others had used, or were using, a nursery or childminder. If attending some specific provision for young mothers, there was sometimes a crèche on-site that they could use.

Nearly all had been unsure about leaving their child at first, but most had soon become relaxed about this. Where the childcare was on-site, they had been reassured by being able to drop in to check on their child, especially during the first few days or weeks. Others had been reassured by their child settling in well.

This led to some interesting debates amongst focus group participants. Those with no experience of using childcare, or those who were against using childcare, would express one view. Those with some experience would report how their views had changed, commenting, for example, on how it was good to have some time to themselves rather than being with their baby '24/7'. A few said that their relationship with their child improved when they were not with them all the time – the children were usually toddlers rather than very young babies at this point. They also commented on how the child benefited from, and enjoyed, the childcare, and the benefit both to them as mothers, and to their children, of developing positive relationships with childcare providers.

A few had given up using childcare. They had either found studying/working and being a mother too much, or simply wanted to spend time with their child – *'I missed him/her too much'* was a view expressed by more than one. In one or two cases, the childcare had not worked out for various reasons, and this did not seem to be due to the attitudes of the young mother themselves.

### 6.3 Thoughts on using childcare

The theme of preferring to use close family rather than strangers emerged strongly in discussions both with the young mothers and support workers. Indeed, although figures could not be provided, most support workers interviewed knew that there were a number of young mothers accessing learning and using their own mother, sometimes the mother of the baby's father or another close family member, to provide childcare. There was some feeling that this was especially the case with the youngest mothers. However, these were of statutory school age and it is possible that more was known about these young mothers than those who had reached school-leaving age. It was often commented that 'older' young mothers with family support and using family members to provide childcare would not come to the attention of any agencies. It is the young mothers who are less supported, or experiencing particular problems, who are more likely to be known about and accessing various support services.

The young women interviewed nearly always felt that they would prefer to leave their child with their own mother, sometimes other family members, rather than in any formal care. This was especially the case when a child was very young. The following typified these views:

*'I'd rather leave my child with my mum than at a nursery.'*

*'I don't wanna leave her outside the family.'*

There was some debate about whether it was fair to leave a child with anyone, even family members, when the child was 'very young and dependent'.

There was quite a strong feeling among the young mothers that they did not want to leave their baby with anyone at all, not even family members, until the child was at least three years old, in some cases old enough to start school. Some of these might be persuaded that it would be alright to leave their child; others were adamant that they would not.

In some areas, there is a culture of accepting pregnancy, whether this is amongst teenagers or older women. While not exactly becoming pregnant deliberately, if they do become pregnant it is seen as the right thing to do to stay at home and look after your child. There can be strong pressures from family and the local community to do this. The alternatives are limited. If the woman wants a job, usually the only option is to enter low-paid, relatively unsatisfactory work. There is still little experience of studying to get out of a situation. For example, one support worker discussed having to be careful how she tried to persuade some young mothers to think about learning, especially if family members were present. Asking whether they want to end up working somewhere like a named supermarket, might lead to the young mother's mother saying that this was good enough for her so why not for her daughter. Using childcare is not something that such young mothers really think about or see as a possible option.

Some young mothers were simply not able, or prepared, to think about using childcare. This can be an emotional response. For example, a support worker reported how she was working with a young mother who completely blocked any discussion around accessing childcare. It seems there was possibly some background of abuse involved in this case, with the young woman not being prepared to even remotely allow her child to be put in an external situation where something could happen to him/her.

Others don't contemplate using childcare because it puts them in a potentially vulnerable position. They already feel criticised and looked down on as young mothers. Their perception is that placing their baby in childcare might be interpreted as evidence of their inability to cope, or that they are a bad mother. It might also lead to criticisms of how they are caring for their child.

Trust is a big issue for some young mothers. They may come from a chaotic family background, perhaps having experienced abuse or domestic violence; they may be care leavers. Others feel criticised and looked down on, as reported above. Using childcare can be a big deal for such young women. It raises issues about trusting strangers, or indeed anyone; and it involves contact with 'officials' or 'professionals', who might be judgemental in some way. One young woman could have accessed childcare free through Sure Start provision because she was on benefits, but had decided not to:

*'It's just having that trust.'*

Some young mothers commented on how they couldn't leave their child because of the attitude or emotions of the child, for example,

*'She's too young now, she's just too attached to me.'*

*'He is funny with other people.'*

While this could clearly sometimes be true, in other cases it was an excuse or rationalisation of why it would not be acceptable to use childcare. For example, the young woman who made the second of the two comments above had a young son who was rushing around and mixing with others, showing no sign of being 'funny' with them. Admittedly, she was present, this was a place he was used to coming to and he was with people he was used to meeting, but his behaviour seemed to show that he could adjust to being with others. A few support workers also commented that the child not wanting to be, or not coping with being, left was used as an excuse by some young mothers. Indeed, those who had started using childcare nearly always found that their child quickly adjusted and often enjoyed attending.

Others simply wanted to exert their right to be a parent. They wanted to care for their child themselves while very young; leaving them was simply not an option. This sometimes related to the cultural issues discussed earlier in this chapter, but there were also young mothers in other situations who felt this. It was commonly reported,

by young mothers and those working with the child, that it took at least a year before they were prepared to access childcare. By this time, they had become used to being a mother, and the child was beginning to be less fully dependent on the mother. One midwife commented:

*'I do try telling them the positive things about crèches and nurseries – about socialising with babies and that sort of thing – but they don't seem to hear it. ... they are very young and the babies are very young when I see them of course; it is all very new and exciting.'*

Others didn't want to use childcare until their child was older – three, or sometimes old enough to start school. For example, one young mother commented how she thought it would be alright to use a nursery when her daughter was older and could talk:

*'They can tell you if something happens.'*

It was reported earlier in this section that some young mothers were adamant that they would not put their child in childcare, while others could be persuaded to do so, despite initially having similar views. It is difficult to define these two groups in terms of particular characteristics. Some of those strongly against using childcare came from insecure backgrounds, and their personal circumstances meant they would be very unlikely to change their minds. However, others from similar backgrounds were determined to give their child different chances and opportunities in life. Accessing childcare might become part of this by, for example, enabling the mother to study and obtain a good job.

In some cases, attitudes towards childcare had relaxed as the child moved from being a baby to a toddler. Caring for an active toddler can be extremely demanding and the thought of having a break could become attractive.

Some young mothers became more accepting of childcare through having contact with others whose child was accessing some form of care; or through being given help and support in exploring childcare possibilities. This was clearer in the interviews with young mothers who were accessing learning.<sup>1</sup>

In some interviews and focus groups it was possible to explore thoughts on the type of childcare young mothers prefer to access. Generally, their views are as varied as those of any group of parents.

One theme that emerged was the strong influence of the press on their attitudes. Various support workers reported how young mothers were worried by stories in the press about problems in nurseries and with childminders. Comments from the young mothers interviewed show how these sometimes put them off using childcare altogether, and in other cases predisposed them towards or away from particular

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<sup>1</sup> Dench S, Bellis A, (2007) *Learning for Young Mothers . A qualitative study of flexible provision*, IES Report 441.

types of care. For example, one young woman reported that she didn't like the thought of a nursery, or of strangers looking after her daughter:

*'You hear so many horrible stories in the paper and stuff.'*

Others made similar comments:

*'All these things you see on telly – about nannies ... that just puts me right off. I'd rather go somewhere like a nursery.'*

*'I just got put off by that thing on telly about nannies. All those weirdoes out there that do things. That's what really put me off with the childcare thing. When she's talking and can tell me, then I'd feel more comfortable because I will be like: "you can tell me anything".'*

A few had been influenced one way or the other by the experiences of friends or family. One young mother wanted to remain with her child, but had also been put off by a family experience:

*'I want to sit with her, teach her things and then there's more bond then. My ex's sister, her son has been in a nursery since he was just over two and he's just so, I don't know, just weird.'*

Others commented how they had heard from a friend or family friend that a particular nursery or childminder was good. This often contributed to them deciding to use these when they did return to work or study.

Similarly, some were put off because they knew people who worked in some local nurseries and didn't like them. One young woman had started training in a nursery (before she became pregnant) and didn't like the way the children were treated. This had put her off all childcare. Knowing people and having experience of childcare influenced others in a positive way. For example, they knew and liked people who worked in a nursery and thought it would be good to place their child there.

Views about whether a childminder or nursery was more acceptable varied. One support worker commented how teenage parents were keener on nurseries than childminders because more than one person would be caring for the children. This was also reported by some of the young mothers. They felt that a nursery was a safer environment, or that if their child didn't get on with one carer there would be others to look after him or her. Others commented on how using a nursery could help their child with socialising. Concern was also expressed that a child might become more attached to a childminder than to them:

*'I'd rather my child went to a nursery than a childminder. ... Wouldn't want my kid with a childminder full time; that's like someone else is getting too close to your kid.'*

Others preferred the thought of using a childminder. They might know of one, or have heard of someone through word-of-mouth. There might also only be childminders in their local area, and a number of these young women preferred the idea of local care. One young mother commented how she would prefer a nursery,

but if the childminder took the children out on trips and to toddler groups that would be alright. She didn't like the idea of her child being stuck in a house all day, possibly in front of the television. Another thought that childminders were preferable because of the one-to-one attention they can give to the child. She was worried that at a nursery a child would be 'largely ignored':

*'I prefer childminders as they get more one-to-one attention rather than at a nursery ... as most of them[ie nurseries] just leave the kids to it. I wouldn't want that for my son.'*

Views were mixed as to whether it was preferable to access childcare near home or near a place of work/study. As many had not really thought about using childcare as a realistic possibility, most had not really thought about locational preferences. While some preferred the thought of their child staying in their local community, and not having to travel too far with them, others wanted their child to remain close to them while they were studying. However, in reality they were going to be limited by the availability and cost of childcare in different locations – which a few did realise. These issues come out more fully in the interviews with young mothers who were accessing learning.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, varying views were expressed by support workers as to whether young mothers prefer childcare near to their home or place of study/work. One midwife commented:

*'... I also think it would be better if there were nurseries on-site because the girls like it. I think if the nursery wasn't on-site, the girls actually say: "well they haven't got a nursery which would mean I would have to take little Johnny here, and I am here and he is there." ... One place down in [place name] they have a school down there and the bottom of the school is for childcare and then they finish their schooling.'*

## 6.4 Care to Learn

Knowledge of Care to Learn was rather limited amongst these young mothers. Some had not heard of it; others had some vague knowledge about it. Those who had heard about it usually did not see using it as an immediate reality, while a few were very keen and some had recently applied.

Those who knew of Care to Learn were asked how they had heard about it. Being told by a Connexions Personal Adviser was most common. Others had heard through health visitors and a range of support workers they had contact with. Knowing about Care to Learn was helping some to think more constructively about returning to learning. However, to others it was largely irrelevant. They would not contemplate

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<sup>1</sup> Dench S, Bellis A, (2007) *Learning for Young Mothers. A qualitative study of flexible provision*, IES Report 441.

leaving their child at the current time. They had too many other practical issues to sort out before thinking about returning to learning.

Those talking about starting learning when their child was older fell into two groups. If they had their child when they were younger, usually before or around 16 – they would still be eligible for Care to Learn when their child reached the age of three, or when they were prepared to leave them. However, for the majority of young women who have a baby when they are 17 or 18, they can often be too old for Care to Learn by the time they think about returning to learning. The age limit was only recently increased to 20, and this had not always permeated through. More emphasis on this, and that it covers a full course started before a 20th birthday, will encourage a few to return to learning slightly more quickly.

For many who were approaching, or who had already reached, their 20th birthday, paying for childcare was seen as a big barrier to returning to learning. Most did not know that there were any other sources of funding for those aged 20 and over. Indeed, a number of those working with young mothers also did not know that colleges have a discretionary Learner Support Fund, a proportion of which is used to fund childcare. Allocation is nearly always income-assessed and the majority of, if not all, young mothers were below the income threshold, and therefore eligible for such funds. However, these discretionary funds are also administered in additional and varying ways by colleges, for example, on a 'first come, first served' basis, on the basis of evidence of progression, favouring particular types of course. Young women would therefore be 'competing' for childcare funding, and would also often be able to access far less funding than is available through Care to Learn.

## 6.5 Conclusions

This chapter explored experiences of, and attitudes towards, using childcare, and Care to Learn. The majority of young mothers had no experience of using formal childcare. Indeed, a few have never left their child with anyone, not even close family members. They were concerned about leaving their child with a stranger; trust could be a big issue. Families, particularly partners, might also put pressure on young mothers to provide all the childcare themselves.

A few had used formal childcare. Although being concerned about leaving their child at first, most of them had soon relaxed about this. Their relationship with the child could improve when they were not with them '24/7', and they commented on how their child benefited from, and enjoyed, the childcare.

Some young mothers come from a background of abuse and/or domestic violence and this can create a barrier to using childcare. Others perceive that using childcare could be interpreted as evidence of their inability to cope, or that they are a bad mother. It could also lead to criticism of their parenting skills. Many young mothers were simply

exerting their right to be a parent, not wanting to leave their child until he or she was older.

Negative press and television coverage of childcare strongly influenced many against using it. They were also influenced by word-of-mouth – both in favour of and against using particular forms of provision.

Young parents are as varied in their views about what type of childcare they would like to use as are parents in general. Some preferred the one-to-one attention of childminders; others preferred nurseries where their child could interact with many other children and be cared for by a number of different staff.

Knowledge of Care to Learn was rather limited amongst these young mothers. However, those who had heard of it did not usually see accessing this funding as an immediate reality. A few were very keen and some had recently applied.



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## 7 Advice and Support

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### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the general support needs of young mothers, as identified by support workers; the main influences on the lives of young mothers included in the research and the impact of pregnancy/parenthood on these; the sources of advice and support sought since becoming pregnant and/or having a baby and experiences of these; young mothers' experience of how easy or difficult it has been to obtain the advice and support they need, and the types of barriers encountered.

### 7.2 The key support needs of young mothers

According to the support workers interviewed, young mothers have a number of complex needs that require support. These include:

- the social and emotional needs associated with becoming a parent – coping with family and relationship problems etc.
- financial needs, such as advice about benefits, managing finances as a parent, accessing financial support if they are considering returning to education or training.
- practical needs, such as housing advice, acquiring new parenting skills, organising childcare, finding out about their entitlements and where to go for guidance and support.

The most common support needs identified by support workers were advice about housing, benefits and childcare issues. This was also reflected in the interviews with young mothers.

### 7.2.1 Teenage pregnancy and social deprivation

Some support workers discussed the wider implications of teenage pregnancy in areas of social deprivation, and there was some evidence from the interviews of a correlation between high levels of social deprivation and a high incidence of teenage pregnancy. Therefore, in some deprived areas, the support needs of teenage parents were seen to be inter-related with a range of other socio-economic issues, such as unemployment, low levels of educational attainment, poor housing etc. One support worker linked high levels of unemployment to the low educational aspirations among some of the young mothers in the area:

*'I think the biggest barrier is lack of aspiration or a lack of belief in themselves .... In some of our areas, some of our girls actually don't know anyone who's worked. ... aspirations for going back to college to get a job and to do something else are quite foreign to them. It's really getting that across to them that they can really do it.'*

These findings indicate that the needs of young mothers in areas of high social deprivation may be more complex, and require more intensive forms of support.

### 7.2.2 Social and emotional issues

One support worker, working with mothers of 16 to 19 years of age who were seeking education or employment, said that many of the young women in this situation found the first steps back into learning very daunting, especially the idea of leaving their child with a carer outside the family:

*'... the majority of young girls ... it's a big step for them ... if they've left school and had a baby and after 18 months are thinking about doing something educational; it's a big step for them and they find it very difficult to accept that somebody else is going to be looking after their child .... It's such new ground for them, it's daunting.'*

These difficulties could be intensified by lack of life experience and lack of family support:

*'They haven't got life experience and quite a lot of them haven't got family support around them either .... The girls that have got family support ... they're in a better position already.'*

Another support worker pointed out that it would be impossible to generalise about the types of support needed by young mothers because it depended so much on individual circumstances. However, she also commented that those with a 'chaotic lifestyle' and lack of family support were particularly vulnerable and tended to need more intensive support for accessing essentials such as accommodation and benefits. A project worker and community-based course tutor, also referred to the 'life difficulties' faced by many teenage parents and how these can impact on accessing education and other forms of provision. Project workers at an outreach centre in

another area described how the 'at risk' young people they supported had so many issues to deal with, such as leaving home, becoming pregnant, relationship issues, housing problems etc. They usually needed to sort these out before they could even think about returning to education or training.

### 7.2.3 Financial and practical issues

Learning how to cope with finances was identified as a common difficulty for young mothers in many of the interviews with support workers. For example, many of the young mothers they dealt with needed help in finding out which benefits they were entitled to and how to access these.

One support worker highlighted, in particular, the complex issues faced by young mothers who were ready to move back into learning:

*'There are a lot of girls that I'm seeing who want to develop and move on, but financially they're finding it very difficult.'*

Young mothers over 18 years old, face particular difficulties in accessing financial support for returning to study. For example, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is not available to 19 year olds, and there appeared to be a shortage of free course places in the area for this older age group:

*'If you're over 18, there does seem to be a problem with getting free placements ... and if it's a manicure or hairdressing course there's equipment on top of that. There is student support service at the college which helps finance things but it's not guaranteed, they've only got limited funds.'*

Even for those who have successfully accessed Care to Learn funding, there can be further financial complications. For example, nursery placements can be very expensive and Care to Learn funding does not always cover the full cost. If childcare was required across a morning and afternoon session, this could have the effect of doubling the costs:

*'Most of them are choosing nursery placements which are very expensive and Care to Learn doesn't meet the budget because nursery places are charged in a morning and an afternoon session and their training may only be 4-5 hours that day but it may cross from a morning into an afternoon session and the whole day has to be paid for which is averaging out something like £50 to £54 a day. It's normally £25 to £28 a session.'*

Travelling between college and the childcare provider can also be complicated and may incur additional costs. A support worker illustrated this point by citing the case of a young mother enrolled on a part-time ESOL course, who had a nursery placement some distance from the learning provider:

*'... she'd come in on the bus and go to her nursery placement which was quite a way from where she had to be educated and then she couldn't afford the bus fare from A to B so she'd*

*walk the distance, which was probably about a 40 minute walk but for her to get there in time for her course to be starting was very difficult for her ... and she doesn't have the income, she's on Income Support – there's no money in her budget to pay the extra travel.'*

Care to Learn will pay travel costs to/from the childcare provider as long as this is still within the weekly maximum.

Housing was identified by most of the support workers interviewed as a major issue that they have to deal with when offering support to young mothers. According to some support workers, accommodation problems were linked to the acute housing shortages in particular geographical locations:

*'I mean housing in the south east is at a premium so it is very difficult pregnant or otherwise to actually get housing, but obviously if you are pregnant then there is you and the baby to consider ... so that then just ups the ante.'*

In that particular area, young mothers with housing difficulties would be signposted to local housing advisers or settlement officers. There was also a mediation service for young mothers who were experiencing conflict with their families and who were in danger of being made homeless. The aim was to keep them in the home environment.

Another support worker highlighted the difficulties some young mothers experienced in accessing childcare, particularly in the early stages of finding out what was available and making initial contact with the childcare provider:

*'A lot of the girls I see are not even in a position to pick up the phone and phone a childminder. They need a lot of support to be able to make those first steps .... They need a lot of hand holding.'*

### 7.3 Sources of advice and support since becoming pregnant or having a baby

These young mothers were obtaining advice and support from a number of different sources, including family, friends and external agencies.

Many young women said that their own mothers were a key influence on their lives and an important source of advice and support since becoming pregnant or giving birth. This was sometimes the case even when other comments suggested they did not particularly get on with their mother. For example, one young woman said early in the interview that her mother would have thrown her out of the house if it wasn't for her baby (and one of the support workers later reported that this girl had been in care for some of her teenage years). However, when asked who she got most advice and support from, she immediately mentioned her mother. Some young mothers also said that they relied on other family members (eg grandmothers), partners and friends for advice on a day-to-day basis. This point about the importance of family influence was reinforced by various support workers, who discussed how, in many areas, young

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mothers were reluctant to make use of any form of childcare outside the immediate family.

A number of different professionals and service providers were also referred to as sources of advice and support, including the following:

- teenage pregnancy midwives
- health visitors and other health professionals
- Connexions PAs
- reintegration officers
- Sure Start
- Jobcentres (mainly for advice about benefits)
- local councils (for housing advice, although some young mothers reported that they had not found their local councils helpful)
- social workers
- other young mothers, eg at mother and toddler groups and other social support groups
- project workers in community-based provision, eg education courses, drop-in and support groups.

Access to different forms of advice and support from external agencies appeared to depend to some extent on what was available in the area in which young mothers lived, how they found out about it and their eligibility status.

Many young mothers referred to receiving support from teenage pregnancy midwives and other health professionals, such as health visitors (about 50 per cent of the sample). From these support workers they had obtained advice about a wide range of issues, including benefits, childcare information, young mother support groups and education courses. Teenage pregnancy midwives appeared to offer a valuable source of support for many young mothers (although three young mothers reported having had negative experiences with their midwives and were fairly dismissive of their role).

Some young mothers had received support from a Connexions PA, usually in relation to accessing Care to Learn, and further education or training. One young mother, estranged from family and friends and living in unfamiliar surroundings, had sought support from a Connexions adviser and had relied on her for general day-to-day guidance and advice, as well as support for accessing a training course, Care to Learn funding and childcare arrangements. When asked who she talked to on a day-to-day basis, she said:

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*'[Connexions adviser], she made appointments with me. At that time when I first moved to [...] I didn't actually know everything around here as I was new. I used to have regular appointments with [Connexions adviser] ... [she has] helped me with everything.'*

Other young mothers reported that they had found out about community-based learning opportunities through a Connexions adviser.

Some young mothers were interviewed at community centres and projects which they attended for support of various kinds, such as drop-in and outreach centres and community-based initiatives. These were often cited as useful sources of advice and support, from the project workers, tutors etc. who ran the services, from other professionals (health workers, childcare workers etc.) who were often on-site, and also from other young mothers.

Three young mothers interviewed, who were in hostel accommodation, said that they relied primarily on hostel staff for advice about budgeting, benefits, form filling etc. This was an important source of support for them.

## 7.4 Barriers to accessing advice and support

### 7.4.1 Lack of awareness of support services available

Some young mothers reported that they had not experienced any difficulties accessing the advice and support they had required. However, many described the difficulties they had encountered, in particular their confusion and lack of awareness about where to go for advice and support, and the types of support to which they were entitled. An exchange between two young mothers during a focus group illustrated their confusion about whether they were still eligible for support from the Connexions service:<sup>1</sup>

*'That's the thing, I can't get anything from Connexions. I'm too old for Connexions. I'm 21 next month.'*

*'No it's 24 for Connexions.'*

*'No it's 19.'*

*'I swear it used to be 24.'*

*'It might have been but now it's only 19.'*

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<sup>1</sup> The Connexions service is available to young people aged between 13 and 19; up to 24 if a young person has learning difficulties.

Both these respondents, who were 20 years old and so already too old to be eligible for Care to Learn funding, felt they might have tried to access this form of support, had they known about it earlier.

One young woman, who was pregnant for the first time, spoke about her frustration when she had tried to obtain advice and guidance about the benefits she was entitled to, such as Income Support and maternity grants:

*'With Income Support, I sent off for my Income Support in October ... and I haven't heard from them, and then I was told that my Sure Start maternity grant, they wrote back to me saying I wasn't entitled to it ... so I've got three weeks to have a baby and I've got no money coming in and I sat down somewhere to ring them and you can't get through, you can't get through at all.'*

Another pregnant young woman was unsure where to go to get information about childcare while she was still on her college course. Her college did not have a crèche and was unable to offer her any advice about childcare arrangements:

*'I don't know where you can get the information about what you can and can't get. We went to college [student services] and asked about childcare for the last month that I would be there, and they told me that they can't help me and no one can help me. You've got to do it yourself.'*

There was some evidence from the interviews of young mothers receiving incorrect or misleading advice from some agencies about their eligibility for access to financial support. One young mother at a drop-in centre said that she had gone to the Jobcentre to get advice about returning to college to re-take her GCSEs. Although eligible for Care to Learn, she had been incorrectly informed that she would have to wait until the following academic year as the local college had run out of childcare funding.

A support worker, who worked at a strategic level with a number of different agencies, raised the issue of the need to raise awareness among professionals offering advice to young mothers about the forms of support to which they are eligible, including Care to Learn. This had become apparent at a local promotional event for Care to Learn funding, at which various professionals were brought together with young mothers to discuss their experiences of accessing advice and guidance:

*'The young people actually wrote down their experiences so they all got up and read out their own experiences – what happened when they were pregnant, whether they thought they could continue in education ... and how they were being supported and how they'd gone to Care to Learn, including horror stories of when they were trying to find out what was open to them and some of the responses they got from professionals.'*

The Care to Learn event was considered to have achieved a successful outcome in engaging a range of service providers in direct dialogue with young mothers and thus raising awareness of the needs of this particular target group.

### 7.4.2 Co-ordination of support services

As discussed in Chapter 2, there were a number of different agencies involved in offering support services to young mothers in the areas visited. These included teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, teenage pregnancy midwives and other health professionals, reintegration officers, Connexions, social services, Sure Start, and a range of other statutory and voluntary organisations. One challenge, faced in particular by teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, was to develop a co-ordinated strategy, and to ensure that all agencies involved were communicating effectively with each other. This appeared to be happening to some extent but support workers did report being aware of gaps in services, or instances where co-ordination was not as effective as it could have been. One example given was in the fragmented nature of support offered to pregnant young women in an area:

*'I find that everything is very fragmented – that is one of the biggest things, I have been trying to build this network and draw it all in. There is lots going on in different places for young people, but not necessarily pregnant ones.'*

In another area, the Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator, who had not been in post very long, saw her main task as strengthening the links between agencies and ensuring that support was being delivered in a consistent way across the area:

*'... if there are any gaps, it would just be in that fact of communication between services and agencies, and mainly because there's been no co-ordinator so, in a way, agencies have drifted off and forgotten what they should be doing ... so again, putting those really strong links in with operational groups ... and getting the referral pathway in place so that everybody knows what we should be doing and we're all being consistent in the support that we're giving.'*

Two project workers interviewed were attached to a community-based initiative offering a range of services to young mothers and pregnant young women, such as advice and guidance, counselling, social support, childcare support and education courses. This voluntary organisation worked in close partnership with a number of other agencies in the locality, including the teenage pregnancy co-ordinator, reintegration officers and Connexions. With this level of support available, both respondents agreed that those young mothers who were 'plugged into the networks' had few difficulties with accessing the support they needed. However, they were concerned that, as teenage pregnancy rates in the area were particularly high, there were many more who were failing to access the support services available. Making contact with this 'hard-to-reach' group was an on-going problem.

## 7.5 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the key support needs of young mothers, as identified by support workers who deal with them on a day-to-day basis; the key influences on



young mothers' lives; and the main sources of advice and support they have accessed since becoming pregnant or having a baby. It has considered young mothers' experiences of how easy or difficult it has been to access the forms of support they require and some of the barriers they have encountered.

According to the support workers interviewed in this research, young mothers have a complex range of support needs, relating to: the social and emotional needs associated with pregnancy and parenthood; family and relationship issues; housing and benefits advice; managing finances; parenting skills and childcare arrangements. The most common needs identified were about housing, benefits and childcare. Those young mothers living in areas of high social deprivation, who were socially isolated or who were facing a range of 'life difficulties', tended to be in need of more intensive forms of support. Young mothers wanting to return to education usually require specialised support as well, particularly in relation to financial issues.

Many young mothers in the sample had received advice and support from a number of different sources, including family, friends, partners and external agencies. A significant number of young mothers cited their own mothers as key influences in their lives, and an important source of advice and support since pregnancy and childbirth. A range of other sources of support were mentioned including midwives, health visitors, Connexions advisers, Jobcentres, local councils, community-based projects, mother and toddler groups, and other young mothers.

The main barriers to accessing appropriate advice and support appeared to be:

- lack of awareness of the support services available
- confusion about eligibility status
- receiving incorrect or misleading advice
- lack of awareness among professionals about the entitlements of young mothers
- lack of co-ordination and communication between support services in some areas.

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## 8 Discussion and Conclusions

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This part of the Care to Learn evaluation aimed to explore the lives and aspirations of young mothers who were not engaged in learning or employment. The sample included young mothers experiencing a range of personal circumstances and with varying levels of engagement with the education system and labour market. At one extreme, some were living with their family (either with their own parents or with a partner) in a relatively supportive environment. Others were living alone with their child, sometimes in temporary accommodation, and struggling with issues relating to housing, finances and relationships. Most had not enjoyed school; however, while some had attended and obtained GCSEs (indeed a couple had many GCSEs and good grades), others had effectively dropped out well below the statutory school-leaving age.

A number of themes emerge from the data explored in this report and these are each discussed below.

### 100% NEET?

The majority of young mothers interviewed would be regarded as part of the NEET group. However, what is very evident is that this is not a permanent state (and this has been found in other studies looking at the range of young people who are identified as NEET<sup>1</sup>). The sample included young mothers who had been actively engaged before becoming pregnant and those who had not; those who had done some sort of learning since having their child and those who had not; a few had recently been on, or were about to start, a course.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Anderson A, Brooke B, Doyle A, Finn D, Moley S (2006) *Understanding Young People in Jobs without Training*, Research Report RR726, Department for Education and Skills; Kellard K, Johal S (2006) *NEET Qualitative Research Project Phase 2*, Norwich: Connexions Norfolk.

Young people generally move in and out of different statuses on leaving compulsory education, as they experiment with different options and explore opportunities. For young mothers in particular, however, there is the danger that the general demands and stresses of their lives take over, and they cannot see a way forward in relation to re-engaging in work or learning.

### History of chaotic lives and family problems

Although it is important not to over-generalise, the more disengaged young mothers disproportionately come from chaotic family backgrounds; they live in communities where there are few aspirations in terms of work and learning. They may experience pressure from family and friends to be a full-time mother and they can often see no alternative.

Although some will force their way out and overcome opposition and difficulties, others need a lot of support. Rehousing them out of their immediate community can help, and intensive one-to-one help and advice across a range of issues is also needed. Furthermore, to address intergenerational disadvantage, the whole area of aspirations needs to be addressed much earlier in their lives. There is a lack of positive role models showing them that there are alternatives to being a full-time mother or to a life spent on benefits and/or in poorly paid jobs.

### Being a parent

Many of the young women reported that they wanted to be a full-time mother, at least while their child was very young. Sometimes this was an excuse, either to avoid being put under pressure to do anything, or because of a lack of confidence and a lack of knowledge of alternative opportunities. Often it also reflected a real desire to be fully involved with the development of their child, and to make sure they had a good start in life.

Care to Learn is not about forcing young mothers to return to education, but about giving them the opportunity to do so by addressing some of the major barriers (in particular through paying for childcare and providing advice and support). However, there was an element of feeling that young mothers are treated differently to 'normal' mothers and that it is important to respect their desires to be a full-time mother.

A number of the young women did report that becoming a parent had made them change their ideas about the importance of a good, well-paid job – and that the route to this was through learning. They wanted to provide a good life for their child and be able to afford to give them the material goods, holidays, etc. that other children have.

## Disengagement from school

Previous educational experiences were important in influencing further attitudes to learning. Young mothers talked about not enjoying school, not being treated with respect, and some had experienced bullying (this was often before they became pregnant). Such experiences had put them off learning, although some did perceive that attending college might be different.

A number had taken their GCSEs but, on closer questioning, it emerged that many had grades below C. This does not place them in a good position to access further courses and jobs. A history of failure at school can undermine confidence and self-esteem, especially if linked with bullying and not getting on with their peers.

Others had simply found school boring. They didn't like the more academic subjects and reported that they would have preferred more practical topics; whether this was rationalisation or they really would have done better if offered such subjects is difficult to tell. For many, it was the overall environment of school – being treated as children, told what to do, etc. – that they found really difficult.

Some of the young women interviewed were shy and quiet, not very confident and needed encouragement in relation to this. Others were 'mouthy' (their own words) and outspoken, not prepared to 'toe the line'. Dealing with these in a school must be difficult. However, they often seem to thrive in a less formal, more one-to-one situation (an issue discussed further in the report on flexible learning provision<sup>1</sup>).

## Obtaining information

In the course of the focus groups there were a number of debates on how one decides what to do on leaving school, and how to find out about different careers, courses, etc. Many young women reported that they had left school with little knowledge of the options open to them, and were not sure where to go to obtain this information. This is one issue that the informal provision some of the young mothers were attending was trying to address. For example, during a discussion on this topic among those attending a drop-in session in a community centre, the support worker commented that she would be bringing in someone to talk to the young women about course options.

## Support needs

A key theme that emerges from this study is that although there will always be a number of young mothers who have good support and/or who are able to sort out

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<sup>1</sup> Dench S, Bellis A (2007) *Learning for Young Mothers. A qualitative study of flexible provision*, IES Report 441.

their problems and combine learning with family life, many of the more disengaged do not fall into this category.

The sample included young mothers on a continuum from being recently in, or close to engagement with, learning, and those who had never really had any clear labour-market aspirations. What is clear is that to re-engage these young mothers or keep them engaged, intensive support and varied provision is needed. For those most disengaged, it is almost a matter of 'peeling back the layers'. Initial support needs to focus on immediate personal issues; later support might be around accessing work or learning.

Engaging the most isolated and the most disengaged requires intensive assistance from a range of support workers. Building rapport through home visits, providing informal drop-ins and places to meet is important. Contact needs to be on-going, for example, support workers talked about texting and telephoning young mothers to remind them about a meeting or just to keep in contact. The young women need to know that support is available to them if they want it – this will re-engage some in some form of learning, while with others there will never be much success.

The support needs to address the range of difficulties that young mothers experience. Although education and learning can be included, it is no good focusing on this if a young woman is homeless or in inadequate accommodation, not receiving her benefits or having problems with her partner or wider family. Some of the young women interviewed reported how they had sorted everything out for themselves; others really needed help with these things.

The drop-in groups we attended, used by some of the more disengaged young mothers (or at least disengaged in terms of learning and labour market participation) provided services around health (of the baby and mother), activities relating to the children and activities for the mothers themselves. It was these features that attracted them to such a group, as well as the opportunity to mix with other young mothers. The advice and support provided by those convening the group was also highly valued. Any educational element was of little interest. However, a Connexions PA attending one informal group run by a midwife, commented on how she tried to keep the idea of returning to work or learning in the consciousness of the young mothers through a very short session each week. For example, they had done something on confidence building the previous week. The week we conducted interviews, a woman in her early 20s who had been a teenage mother and was now in learning was asked to talk briefly about her experiences and how she had overcome any barriers.

Integration across services is also crucial to keeping young mothers 'in the system'. One issue in many areas is that no one (or at least none of the key agencies) knows who the young mothers are. The greater involvement of midwives and health visitors in recent years in the general support structures for teenage mothers has been crucial in ensuring that they are put in touch with others who can advise and help them.

A range of different provision is needed to engage teenage mothers, and for there to be some possible element of progression. For example, very informal drop-in sessions in local community centres attract some; 'Young Mums To Be' courses have been very successful in areas where they have been set up; other informal sessions but with a greater learning content than drop-in sessions have also been successful in many areas. These all need to be friendly and accessible. For example, one young mother commented on how, when social services had become involved in some informal provision, this had changed its nature. Those attending had felt judged, criticised and watched, and attendance had fallen.

There does, however, need to be somewhere for young mothers to progress on to. Attending a college course will suit some but not all, or at least not initially. In one area, provision was being developed for young mothers who had been attending an informal session and been motivated towards participation in more structured learning. This involved taking further education out to the community rather than expecting young mothers to attend college.

Another issue, once a young mother has started becoming engaged in learning, is the necessity for this to be maintained. For example, some provision is only available to each individual for a certain number of weeks. A young mother might become motivated to move on, but lose her motivation if there is a delay. For example, an informal learning provision might finish in February, and a college course not start until September. Unless there is something for the young woman to attend in order to maintain her interest during the gap, her interest may well wane.