

# parenting fund **project**



*“A good parent  
is someone who  
provides love,  
warmth and stability”*

**Care-experienced young father**

*“I want to provide,  
not spoil her”*

**Care-experienced young mother**

*“Children who have been  
in care are almost 2.5  
times more likely to  
become teenage parents”*

**SEU, 1999**

*“I understand that the  
children of parents who  
have been in care are 66  
times more likely to be  
looked after themselves”*

**Maria Miller, Shadow Minister for  
Education, February 2006**

## report 2006

This briefing paper sets out the work of the Parenting Fund Project to date. The key findings, as given by care-experienced young parents, are outlined along with the current and future work to be undertaken in response to them. The findings may not be new but this project is unique in that the planning and delivery was undertaken by care leavers. Consequently, we believe the depth of feelings and openness on the part of the young parents who participated was unique, as peer working engenders confidence and trust.



## the project brief

In October 2004, the Parenting Fund (DfES) awarded the Fostering Network Young People's Project a grant to undertake the following:

- *Map current service provision, identify need and disseminate project findings and good practice to all agencies involved with care experienced young parents.*
- *Better equip foster carers/supported lodgings providers with the skills, information and advice they need to support young parents.*
- *Increase the capacity of organisations and carers to support young parents through the provision of training, information and advice.*

## the team

**Benni Jo** – a proud mother of two, Benni Jo spent twelve years in care and since leaving has worked as a participation worker with The Children's Society, A National Voice and now the Fostering Network. She has led the work on this project.

**Sarah** – is a care leaver currently completing a four-year course at university, with plans to do a post graduate social work course. Sarah worked on this project as part of her third year work-experience but remains interested and involved.

**Sarah** – comes from Middlesbrough and was fostered then adopted. She has worked with young people in a range of settings and now works for the Fostering Network on a part-time basis as a participation development worker.

**Tracy** – a former care leaver from Oldham, Tracy has helped with focus groups and presentations in the north west. She has a five-year-old daughter

All the team has experience of being fostered except **Ena**, who is overall project manager for the Fostering Network Young People's Project.

## acknowledgements

This project has greatly benefited from the enthusiasm, interest and support of so many people and organisations, including:

Our partner organisations – NCB Healthy Care programme, especially Helen Chambers for her enthusiasm and networks; TCRU, especially Elaine Chase for her interest and expertise; Clarion Fostering Agency; former Maternity Alliance; our enthusiastic advisory group and individual foster carers who shared their time and experiences with us.

Special thanks to the young parents and staff in Bradford, Greenwich, Hackney, Middlesbrough, Norfolk, Oldham and Rochdale and the 'lads' in Scarborough.

Finally, our thanks go to the **Parenting Fund**, whose generous financial support made it possible to undertake this work.



## the work

**Focus groups:** the team held focus groups for care-experienced parents in seven local authorities and a one-off meeting with care-experienced fathers. In total, 35 young mothers and three young fathers participated, ranging in age from 16 to 22. Their views and experience formed the basis of the subsequent work, which included:

- *Meeting with foster carers who had experience of working with care-experienced young parents.*
- *Drafting a questionnaire for staff in local authorities and independent fostering agencies, which was evaluated by the Thomas Coram Research Unit.*

**Story-telling workshop:** held at the British Library with Jacqueline Wilson, Children's Laureate, as the keynote speaker (see overleaf for more details).

**Support group:** pilot project – six sessions with young parents in Bradford.

**Presentations:** the team delivered workshops at two national events organised by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence and National Leaving Care Advisory Service.

## the messages

The following gives a flavour of the topics covered and the views expressed by young parents, based on variety of experiences.

### Sex education

*"If you don't use a condom and a girl gets pregnant, then you have to take responsibility for the baby – no ifs or buts."*

*"You don't get good sex education and the things you learnt at school were basic and it didn't help if you rarely attended. The rest you learnt yourself."*

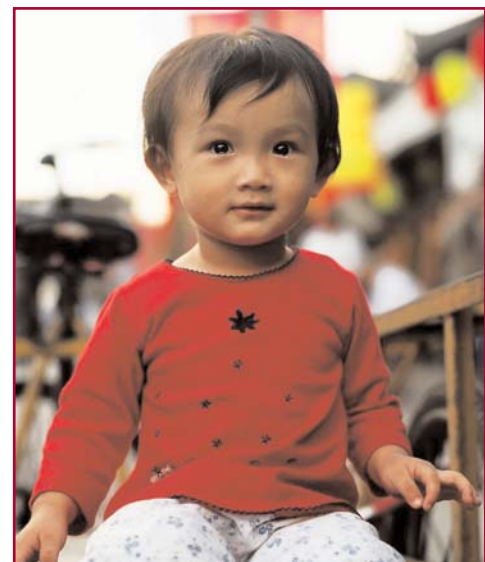
- *Two thirds felt they had not received good sex education, either in school or in residential or foster care, and that there was too much focus on bodily functions and not enough on emotions or the consequences of sex, ie pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs).*
- *Several had missed out on school and sex education lessons.*
- *The majority did not use condoms as they, or their partner, "didn't like to use them" or "they don't always work".*

### Becoming a parent

*"I don't want my child to grow up like I did."*

*"It's a chance to give them what I didn't have."*

- *Most were happy to learn that they were pregnant, even though for the majority it had happened accidentally.*
- *Those who chose to become pregnant did so for a variety of reasons, including feeling under pressure because their friends were doing it or to have someone to love who would love them back.*
- *The young people felt they had made their own decisions to keep their babies but several had felt that social workers, foster carers and other professionals had tried to heavily influence their decision about whether or not to continue with an unplanned pregnancy.*



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## Health

*"Baby depends on me so I can't take drugs."*

- *Many admitted having misused drugs and/or alcohol but most had either stopped or reduced use on becoming pregnant/a parent, both for health reasons and for fear of losing their children.*
- *Smoking is an issue as, although they knew smoking in pregnancy and around a baby was not good, many did smoke and needed help – "not just nagging" – to stop.*
- *Few felt that they had a good relationship with their health visitor or midwife.*

## Relationships and support

Young women's views on their partners:

*"Social services often blame fathers for young women's problems, even if they are not to blame."*

*"It's good for the baby for dad to be there, but he gets on my nerves. I would miss him but he's not the one..."*

- *Most had a good attitude to relationships, recognising the importance of making sure a partner was not with them just for sex. However, many were/had been in difficult relationships.*
- *Several young women were staying in unhappy relationships for the sake of their child, often knowing that the child's father was cheating on them.*
- *Many felt it was wrong to have children by different fathers.*
- *Little was said by the young women about active involvement by their children's fathers.*
- *Some felt that fathers from different cultures posed problems for them, and they often felt they were not supported to express their views in situations where there was pressure from the father and his family.*

## Father's views

*"I went along to a Sure Start mothers-to-be group and was turned away because it was only for women. I argued there should be a fathers-to-be group and guess what? A few weeks later there was a fathers-to-be group!"*

- *The roles of fathers are often neglected.*
- *Everyone asks how the mother is doing but no one asks about if the father is OK: they, too, go through a range of emotions.*



## Family

*"I hadn't spoken to mum for a year. Then I got pregnant. It brought us closer together."*

- *Many had little or no contact with their own parents.*
- *Where becoming a parent had helped in healing old wounds, the young mothers appreciated having their own mother at the birth or just to offer advice and support in caring for a new baby.*

## Professional support

*"Young parents don't get the support that older parents get."*

- *Some felt being looked after did not prepare them for a 'normal life' and they had little idea what a normal family was like.*
- *Most did not feel supported by social services or health services. The exceptions were leaving-care staff, who offered parenting groups/classes and received praise for their support/services.*
- *A few commented that their current or former foster carers were a great help to them.*

## Education, training and employment

*"Baby should be with mum and dad, not in a crèche."*

- *Views varied as to when to resume training or employment, but most felt that it was important to do so as it set a good role model to their children as well as getting on with their own lives.*
- *All wanted their own children to get a good education/job and felt that this would ensure that their child's life was better than their own had been.*
- *Part-time work would be good but it is often not financially beneficial.*
- *A few experienced problems in being funded for child care to enable them to attend college.*

## Child protection

*"You are made to feel that you can't do it."*

*"I worry about my child being taken away; social services are always watching and assuming the worst."*

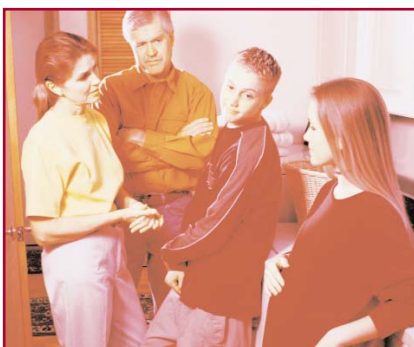
*"I think that Social Services get too involved and carried away, try to take over and enjoy taking babies away."*

*"If my child has a bruise, I have to go into great detail about how they got it."*

- *This was the subject that most felt strongly about.*
- *For the majority, the fear of having their child removed was the greatest fear .*
- *A few had experienced their babies being removed at, or near, birth.*
- *Nearly all those who had challenged removal decisions in the courts were successful in being reunited with their children.*
- *None understood the potential long-term consequences of having a child on the CP Register (eg if they wanted a future career working with children).*

## What role foster carers/supported lodgings providers?

Participants at every focus group were asked their views on how foster care could be used to support them, particularly after they were living independently. Most were quite wary about this as they were concerned about the further involvement of social services in their lives. They felt that the child was their responsibility only and seemed reluctant to allow anyone else to look after it although, in some cases, they did recognise that it would be nice to have some 'time out'.



A few young parents did think this was a good idea and some indeed did have such a service formally or informally from previous carers. The variety of views is highlighted by the following quotes:

*"I want someone to come to my house, not take my baby away."*

*"I like the sound of support care."*

*"I use support care. It's great, flexible and I am in control."*

*"My child – my responsibility."*

*"They looked after me, why can't they look after my child?"*

## facts

**There were 320 mothers aged 12 and over who were looked after at 31 March 2005.**

**The majority of these (97%) were aged 15 to 17.**

**The majority of looked-after young people, like their peers, will one day become parents.**

## next steps

There is much work still to be done, including:

**Advocacy service for care-experienced young parents:** the Fostering Network is delighted that Voice (formerly Voice for the Child in Care) has agreed to consider fundraising for an advocacy worker.

**Regional dissemination events:** it is planned to hold three regional dissemination workshops during the summer of 2006 for all those working with care-experienced young parents.

**Story-telling event:** a second story-telling event is being planned in the NE region.

**Finance fact sheet:** information sheet for carers, workers and young parents (this will be available from summer 2006).

The Fostering Network has applied for round two funding to do a range of further work, building on the findings of the current project. This would include training care-experienced young people to develop and deliver training to peers and professionals on sexual health, pregnancy and being a parent and focusing more on the role of young fathers.

## resources

**Healthy Care** – fact briefing paper, produced by National Children's Bureau in partnership with the Fostering Network (March 2006)

**Setting Up a Fostering Service for Teenage Parents** – fact sheet available from the Fostering Network

**Finance** – fact sheet available from the Fostering Network (available summer 2006)

**The Fostering Network Parenting Fund Project Research report** – produced by Elaine Chase, Thomas Coram Research Unit (full report available summer 2006)

**Fostering Teenage Mums and their Babies** – video/DVD produced by The Clarion Fostering Agency

**Parenting Fund Project bookmark** (see right) - available free from the Fostering Network

More details are available on the Fostering Network website

[www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net)



*Jacqueline Wilson, the Children's Laureate and author of **The Story of Tracy Beaker**, was the main speaker at the story-telling workshop the Parenting Fund Project held at the British Library in April. Attended by foster carers, young people and young parents, this action-packed day proved to be very popular. Everyone listened to Jacqueline then attended an interactive story-telling workshop, a 'communicating with children through reading' workshop and a tour of the fabulous British Library. A big thanks to Jacqueline and staff at the British Library who so generously gave of their time and expertise.*

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading charity for all those involved in fostering

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