

# **Listening to the research – launch of Teenage Parenting: what's the problem?**

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## **Introduction**

- **My task today is to discuss what the research evidence tells us about teenage parenting and how this relates – or more accurately does NOT relate - to the construction of ‘the teenage parent’ in media and policy discourse. For this, I will be drawing on the research that forms the substance of our new edited collection to try and provide an overview of some key themes that emerge from this research. I want to outline three important areas of contribution to our understanding of teenage parenting.**

### **Theme 1: challenging the teenage parent of policy.**

- **The first theme that all the authors in the book address in important and critical ways is the construction of ‘the teenage parent’ (most usually ‘the teenage mother’) as they/she appears in popular and policy discourse. One of the key points that the research makes is that the image of the teenage parent is very two dimensional. In this the voices, lives and experiences of teenage parents themselves are troublingly absent. Much of the research in the collection, and more broadly in the academy, has aimed to redress this balance by ‘giving voice’ to teenage parents. Unsurprisingly, much of this research has chosen a qualitative approach, focusing on in-depth and small scale studies. However, there is also important and powerful critical quantitative and discourse-related work which takes on the policymakers on their own terms.**

- For example, in her chapter in the book entitled ‘Just what difference does teenage motherhood make?’, Denise Hawkes draws on data from the Millennium Cohort study to argue three central points contesting the argument that young motherhood in itself is always and necessarily a problem, both for the mothers and their children. Firstly, the data illustrates that the disadvantage experienced by teenage mothers predates the experience of childbirth – i.e. she reverses the causal relationship assumed between teenage motherhood and social disadvantage. Secondly, Hawkes argues that there is evidence of social disadvantage experienced by young mothers and her children but that this can largely be explained by prior conditions of disadvantage. Thirdly, she argues that the children of teenage mothers do not display significant cognitive or behavioural disadvantages in relation to other children. She notes ‘Being a young mother does not in itself lead to poorer outcomes for the children of teenage mothers, or for the mothers themselves’.
- A number of the chapters also critically engage the construction of ‘the teenage mother’ in policy and explores some of the policy consequences of this construction for young mothers. Jan MacVarish and Jenny Billings’ chapter challenges the construction of the teenage mother as ‘irrational, amoral and anti-social’. They explore the ‘deficit’ model of teenage parenting which forms the basis for increased levels of state intervention, and note New Labour’s disingenuous expansion of the ‘teenage parenting’ category upwards (to include u18s) and the idea of ‘risk’ in the inflation of this ‘social problem’. They, along with others in the book, strongly critique the individualisation and privatisation of social exclusion and disadvantage – what the editors have argued as the ‘culturing’ of the teenage parenting issue – and the idea of the teenage mother as necessarily a ‘lone’ and isolated one, again something that our own research in Bradford has also challenged. Their own qualitative research suggests, in contrast, that young mothers are both embedded in complex supportive social and familial networks and that they are fully engaged as rational and moral agents in the choice to become and be parents.

- **Pam Alldred and Miriam David's chapter on 'young mother's values and policy presumptions' explores how policy gets put into practice in their research based on research based in a Local Education Authority. Tackling the policy initiatives around sex education in school designed to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies, the chapter (and the bigger study on which it is based), explores the fraught encounter between policy practitioners (teachers, nurses and mentors) who seek to implement the government's teenage pregnancy strategy and the young mothers on the receiving end. The chapter criticises the value laden and moralising assumptions of the policy, which implicitly targets young women's sexuality as 'risky behaviour' and which positions young parenthood as in dangerous and irresponsible opposition to the 'independence' of the neo-liberal and implicitly responsible adult subject. They and our own chapter on 'work life balance' criticises the devaluing of 'women's work' and domestic or familial labour in the construction of the moral(ising) economy of New Labour policy rhetoric. On the other hand, the young mothers that Alldred and David interviewed held a contrasting account of value and morality – of 'what's important at the end of the day'.**

## **Theme 2: Teenage Parents: an alternative voice.**

- **The question 'what's important at the end of the day' points to my second theme, which is that of the alternative view of teenage parenting that comes from young parents themselves and which provides the overarching theme across most of the chapters in our new collection. Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards have both written earlier about the importance of alternative 'moral rationalities' which point to the existence of different worldviews and values attached to parenting which challenge the middle-class individualistic materialism and self-determination of both New Labour and the earlier neo-Conservative anti-welfarism on which it builds. In these alternative world views, parenthood – particularly motherhood – is a valued role signalling responsibility, maturity and the entering into society, not as a failure of these. In each of the qualitative chapters in our collection, the voices of young mothers (and some young fathers) express their commitment to parenthood as a source of self-**

esteem, as promoting self-reliance and as highly valued within familial and local community contexts. In many cases, young parents are from communities where young parenting is the norm not the exception. MacVarish and Billings note that the young mothers they interviewed were fully engaged in their decision to have sex and to continue with their pregnancies. They were also part of close and supportive family relationships which were of crucial importance financially and emotionally. Our own study of teenage parents in Bradford reflected this – that the young mothers and fathers had extended familial and friendship networks that they were able to draw upon, and this was something that cut across different generations, communities and ethnic groups. The chapter by Jenny Owen and others on minority ethnic young mothers in London, Bradford and Sheffield noted the centrality of relationships between young mothers and their own mothers or mothers-in-law as a source of knowledge and as a practical and financial resource, and this finding is also echoed by Eleanor Formby, Julia Hirst and Jenny Owen’s chapter which explores parenting as a ‘pathway to adulthood’ across generations in South Yorkshire.

- Of course, it is over-simplistic to argue for completely autonomous alternative rationalities, and a number of the chapters argue too for the intersection of competing accounts of teenage parenting as they structure the lives and views of teenage parents themselves. The impact of policy on practitioners and the implications for the ways in which teenage parents are seen was a common complaint from many of the interviewees across the different studies – the young mothers in Alldred and David’s chapter, for example, spoke of the lack of respect shown by teachers and practitioners, and the BME young mothers in the Owen chapter also spoke of difficulties they encountered with professionals in the health service or housing offices. Another strong finding was the ways in which the neo-liberal discourses around the importance of training and education was central to how young parents, mothers and fathers, saw their roles. This was a rather double edged sword – in the chapter we (Alexander, Duncan & Edwards) wrote on ‘work-life balance’ based on a study in Bradford, we argued both that the insistence on EET in the teenage parenting strategy

led the young parents we spoke to both to formulate and articulate future plans for their own educational and employment development as part of being 'good parents' but also led to insecurity and concern about their role as (particularly) 'good' mothers if they were forced to return to work and leave their children in childcare. We argue that this can often 'set young parents up to fail both as workers and as parents' (something also found in the study by Alldred and David).

### **Theme 3: continuity, change and diversity**

- **The final theme I want to address is that of continuity, change and diversity in teenage parenting. One of the issues about the way in which the problem of 'teenage parenting' is constructed is that it often assumes a homogeneous subject – usually white, working class and female – and the discussion is presented ahistorically, as if this is a permanent problem and has always been framed in this way. To take the latter point first: the collection includes two chapters that explore the usually unresearched dimension of changing understandings of teenage parents from view of different generations of parents.**
- **Thus, Formby and her co-authors in their chapter on 'pathways to adulthood' discuss their research across three generations of parents which points to the continuities and change in the experience of teenage parenting. Of particular interest, I think, is the shifting class composition of young parents – in their oldest generation who were parents in the late 50s to early 70s and the middle generation, who were parents in the 1960s to mid 1990s, the group includes middle class as well as working class parents. Their youngest generation of parents were all working class and several had come from disrupted or problematic households. This signals the changing social expectations of young parents and the ways in which, increasingly, class rather than age can be seen to be the issue at stake (who is reproducing rather than when). The chapter explores the continuities across the generations of the experience of motherhood, in particular (especially the notion of planning pregnancy or not), of the seemingly universal and timeless problems of parenthood and the**

importance of familial support or of societal approbation or condemnation. There are differences too - the older interviewees speak about the taboos around sex and contraception, about social stigma around illegitimacy and about the changing expectations of fatherhood.

- **Ann McNulty's chapter similarly explores cross-generational experiences, this time within families. Her study set in the North-East of England explored families with three or four generations of young mothers – rather than pointing to the underclass/culture of transmitted poverty argument, McNulty argues that her study shows the diversity of experience across the generations, particularly in terms of social expectation around marriage and motherhood, and disrupts the 2-dimensional story of teenage pregnancy. It also points to the broader social and economic context within which young parenting becomes seen as a problem – for example the context of deindustrialisation and long-term male worklessness in the North-East. Again, this suggests that it is socio-economic status not age that is the real issue at stake in government policy. McNulty argues that the ideas of transmitted cultural deficit and of generational cycles of teenage pregnancy are 'largely assumed rather than evidenced'.**

- **It is clearly apparent that much of the discussion of the teenage parent 'problem' is a code for speaking about class. Less obvious, perhaps, is the way in which it is a code for racialised ideas of whiteness and the role that the undeserving 'white working class'/chav plays in the imagination of middle class politicians and policy makers. Teenage parenting is, it seems, a 'white' problem, and certainly most of the chapters in our collection are focused on white teen parents. There has been less work done on BME teen parents, partly because the numbers are smaller (though proportionate in similar mixed boroughs amongst black communities), and partly because, in my view, BME young parents often get lost in the broader construction of pathologised BME families. Two of the chapters in our collection begin, however, to unravel some of the complex intersections between 'race', ethnicity, class and gender amongst teenage mothers. My chapter with Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards, set in**

**Bradford, included interviews with British Pakistani mothers, and this work pointed the way towards both the significance of cultural and community expectations in framing the experience of young motherhood (marriage and family is valued), the diversity within this group and the parallels with the other white young mothers in the study. The chapter by Jenny Owen and others presents three stories from a larger study of BME young mothers, and similarly points to the complex intersection of race, class and age in the experience of these young mothers. They note the presence of racial stereotypes both in Department of Health practice guidelines on BME young parents and the way in which this feeds into the ways in which practitioners treat them. They point too to the role of alternative community expectations which, in very different ways, positions motherhood as a valued social and cultural status.**

- **To conclude, what emerges clearly from the research collected in this edited book are three main points:**
  - 1) The diversity of experiences, positionings and attitudes that go to make up the category of ‘teenage parent’**
  - 2) The resistance of these young parents to their categorisation as a ‘problem’ and the insistence on the normalisation of their experience – that they are ‘just a mum or dad’**
  - 3) The challenges that are posed to the understanding of politicians, media and policymakers – in particular to take teenage parents seriously AS parents, people and citizens and to REALLY listen to what young parents are saying**