

What influences teenagers' decisions about unplanned pregnancy?

Young women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy are faced with a decision that can affect the rest of their lives, yet little is known about what influences this decision. This qualitative study looks in-depth at this decision-making period. Through interviews with 41 young women who had decided either to continue with their pregnancy or to have an abortion, focus groups within the wider community and interviews with parents, the researchers looked at the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the decision taken. They found:

- f** Decisions about continuing with or ending an unplanned teenage pregnancy were shaped by a range of factors including the prevalence and visibility of teenage motherhood within the local area and community-wide views on the unacceptability of abortion.
- f** Decisions were firmed up during the 7-14 week period after the discovery of the pregnancy. During this period, sources of impartial advice for pregnant teenagers were few.
- f** The range and sort of advice the young woman received and her expectations of family support after the birth were crucial to any decision made.
- f** Among the young mothers, abortion had not generally been considered as an option. Where abortion was considered this was in response to range of factors, including the personal circumstances of the young woman and her knowledge of others who had made a similar decision.
- f** After the decision to continue with a pregnancy, families - and especially young women's own mothers - often proved crucial in integrating the young mother and child into ordinary family life.
- f** Many young mothers found themselves reliant upon their family of origin; there was no evidence that young women deliberately became pregnant to secure economic independence.

Introduction

Over the last decade, teenage pregnancy has been regarded as an increasingly pressing problem for government culminating in recent pledges to halve the rate of teenage conceptions within ten years. This is to be achieved via a series of national and local initiatives that aim first, to prevent teenage conceptions and second, to offer support to young mothers to minimise any disadvantage that early motherhood might bring.

However, these policies do not address the intermediate period during which a young woman decides either to continue with a pregnancy or to have an abortion. This is no doubt due, at least in part, to the considerable political, ethical, cultural and religious sensitivities surrounding these issues. But it also due to a real lack of knowledge about this crucial time of decision-making in young women's lives.

This research focused on this intermediate period of decision-making, examining the complex factors that shape decisions, reflecting social beliefs, attitudes towards parenting, adulthood and sexuality, and formal sources of advice and counselling.

Making the decision

Almost all of the women interviewed had not planned to become pregnant and had been shocked at finding themselves pregnant. For a few, confirming the pregnancy had been a difficult period, taking place in some instances over some months as they went through a series of pregnancy tests from a variety of agencies and sought to understand the changes taking place in their bodies.

Once the pregnancy had been confirmed, young women often had to take the decision about whether or not to continue with the pregnancy very quickly to fit within the time limits on abortion. Time was particularly short for those who had not realised they were pregnant until four or five months had passed, either because of false negative pregnancy tests or an unwillingness to face up to the situation they found themselves in. In making the decision they might or might not have the support of others, such as parents or boyfriends. Perhaps unsurprisingly in light of the time available, their own pre-existing views and the experiences of those surrounding them were a primary influence on the young women. In the area

studied, anti-abortion views were quite prevalent and families had generally not discussed abortion as an option for pregnant young women. In contrast, young motherhood was highly visible and had been discussed within families before it became a particular issue for them.

For those who did choose abortion, an important influence was having known someone who had made this decision or who was willing to offer advice.

"I went to see a woman who lives across road from me stepmum, and she were telling me she were pregnant when she were fifteen and she had an abortion, she said that it hurt her, but it were for best reasons." (Sally)

Some felt that their own circumstances were exceptional enough to make abortion an option despite their more general anti-abortion views.

"'Cos I've never ever really thought of me doing something like this, not at all ... not at all. But I've got myself into the situation where I really needed to really help myself cope with what I've already got." (Diane)

Parents of young women who had chosen to continue with their pregnancies had often been reluctant to give specific advice about which decision to make, preferring to offer general support. However, this offer of support could have an implicit effect on the decision made, with young women feeling reassured that they would not be on their own.

"If my Mum and Dad said they wouldn't support me I think that would have changed my mind, because I wouldn't have been able to afford to look after her." (Leone)

Boyfriends could also be instrumental in shaping the decision if they'd held or had previously expressed strong views on the topic. However, young men were often happy to let their girlfriend take the decision alone or in association with her parents. In some situations, this could make it very hard for the young woman to choose, as she tried to work out the views of others and to make the 'right' decision.

"His parents lived at the house, he told his parents, and they sat there constantly the whole three to four weeks that I sat there deciding what to do about Ben, they said if you get rid of that child you are murdering my grandchild." (Belinda)

Other young women saw boyfriends as peripheral to both the decision to continue with the pregnancy and to any ongoing support, either because they did not think the relationship was as important as the forthcoming baby or because they already knew they would have support from their parents.

"To me, men have some say but not a lot really, they think they've got a big say in it but, they haven't really, not really ..." (Diane)

The involvement of families

The children of young mothers were very quickly included into the extended family. Parents - and especially, but not exclusively, mothers - were very important in integrating the new baby into broader family life. This was most clear where young women continued to live with their parents, during the pregnancy and after the birth of the child. In some cases, the boyfriend moved into the young woman's family home. But young women who had their own homes and appeared to be outwardly independent could still be very reliant on their family.

"I've got my own house and I live with the father, the baby's dad. I'm still dependent on my Mum. She picks me and my son up in the morning and takes him to Gavin's mum, so that she has him while I'm at work. So I'm still very dependent on her. She takes me shopping and everything." (Fiona)

Young women could be ambivalent about family support. On the one hand, they welcomed support and in many cases the pregnancy may not have proceeded without it. On the other hand, they could find the continued dependence on their family restrictive. For some young people, becoming a parent did not represent a move away from the family but a reintegration within it, at a time when their peers were forming their own identities outside the home.

This suggests that teenage motherhood may not be an automatic route into adulthood, but rather it forms part of an extended transitional process: the young woman gradually learns to take responsibility for her child while her family seeks an appropriate level of support which might eventually lead to her to reduce her reliance on them.

The interviews found no evidence that young women had deliberately become pregnant to gain more economic independence. For those young mothers who had already left home before they had their babies a level of independence was already established. Their pregnancy was more likely to be accepted by others and they were more likely to be treated as adults by their own family.

Young women who elected to have an abortion went through a similar process of decision-making. Parents, especially mothers, offered support and, for some, their advice was important in making the decision.

"She didn't really say anything, she just said, whatever your decision, I'm here for you, I'll stand by you, she said 'I'm not going to say anything, so I don't want you to think I'm forcing you but before you make a decision just think about, you know, like, [paying for] your horses [her hobby], whatever'." (Rose)

However, these young women also had to deal with the views of their wider community. For some young women their decision not to continue with their pregnancy had resulted in isolation from their peers and in some cases open hostility.

"I told this woman I knew who I worked with and she turned round and called me a murderer." (Lucy)

Discussion in the focus groups between young non-pregnant women illustrated the views of the wider community.

"What would happen if everyone knew at school that somebody had had an abortion?"

"You wouldn't be able to go to school."

"You'd get called [names]. You'd probably get hit an' all wouldn't you."

Conclusions

This research suggests that the decision whether or not to continue with a pregnancy is not an isolated one but is influenced by beliefs held before pregnancy and discussions after conception is confirmed.

This suggests that, to enable young women to make an informed choice, more information is needed about abortion and early motherhood before they are in the position of having to make this decision. This information could be part of sex and relationship education within schools.

There is also a possible opportunity for independent counselling/advice and decision-making support during the early period of the pregnancy. Counselling/advice during this period should be particularly attentive to the likely sources of existing influence relating to wider beliefs, the nature of relationships, the circumstances in which the pregnancy originated, and the involvement of the broader family. But it also needs to recognise that the young woman may need support if her decision goes against the expectations of the wider community.

About the study

The fieldwork for the project was undertaken in Doncaster, chosen because of high levels of teenage pregnancy in a context of broad social deprivation. Research was carried out with 41 young women aged who had made the decision either to continue with their pregnancy or to have an abortion whilst aged 18 or under. In order to examine the views on abortion and motherhood in the wider community, focus groups were also held with young women who were not pregnant and young men who were not fathers. In addition, a group of parents were interviewed individually. The research took place between 1997 and 1999.

How to get further information

The full report, **Teenage pregnancy and choice: Abortion or motherhood: influences on the decision** by Sharon Tabberer, Christine Hall, Shirley Prendergast, and Andrew Webster, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 99 7, price £12.95).