

Case Study 17: Young Mothers Initiative

Fife Council

This case study describes the Fife initiative that encourages teenage mothers to stay in education and fulfil their academic potential.

More teenagers become pregnant in the UK than in any other country in Western Europe. Many of the young women leave school rather than continue with their studies and as a result lose out on their education at a key stage in their development. The Fife Young Mothers' Initiative began in 1993. Funding was initially for a two-year project to consider ways of supporting young mothers in their own mainstream schools although the success of the project saw it pass into mainstream funding. Fife has 19 secondary schools and on average the initiative relates to some 30 young women between the ages of 13 and 18 each year. The service provided by the initiative is uniform throughout the area and is available regardless of age, place of residence or school history.

Regardless of their circumstances young mothers should be encouraged to stay on at school. We must also remember that most teachers want to support young people who are trying to cope with difficult situations. It doesn't matter if it is a couple of Standard Grades or five Highers – it is about achieving the best results according to your ability.

Marriann Raymond

The service has been managed since establishment by a coordinator, Marriann Raymond, who is an experienced secondary teacher. The coordinator is based centrally and travels throughout the area. Her wide-ranging role includes:

- actively encouraging all schoolgirl mothers to access the wealth of opportunities within mainstream schools
- providing practical support and enabling young mothers to attain their highest level
- providing information on a wide range of issues enabling young mothers to make informed choices about the future
- providing opportunities that enable young mothers to develop their confidence both as learners and as parents.

A multi-agency advisory group oversees the project with input from education, health and social work staff.

I suppose that an important thing for me has been the realisation of how short a period it is before the young mother's child actually enters the education system at 3 years old. It is vital that the young mum has a positive view of the education system and its support for her if the child is not to receive negative messages about education.

Marriann Raymond

The initiative targets school-age girls who are already pregnant and are continuing with the pregnancy or who already have children. The project receives referrals across the school year and so programmes and support packages have to be constantly revisited and amended. In terms of numbers the high point in the year is the summer term by which time most girls have been referred for that school session. This is also exam time when demands for support can be considerable. Referrals usually come from schools (75 per cent) with the balance coming from health and social work agencies but also from parents and voluntary organisations. There are no formal referral procedures and each case is treated according to the needs of that situation. The fact that most referrals come through the guidance system in schools is important as it indicates not only how closely guidance departments and the coordinator work but also that the school guidance system is alert to the need to maintain the girl in her education.

The attitude of most teachers is very positive. They are pleased that there is a system to pick up the girls and for the most part they feel that they have invested a lot of effort in the pupils and that it would be wasteful to see them vanish from the education system. The level of support from individual teachers and school management is very considerable.

I want you to know that this school will take care of your daughter. We will support her in any way we can and we will ensure that she completes her secondary school education.

Gordon Mackenzie, Rector, Balwearie HS, Kirkcaldy (response to a parent)

The school was great. It just went on as normal and nobody made a big thing of it. Of course I felt different – I didn't like my shape but there was no special treatment – I still had to hand things in on time.

Mairiead

Most girls are in the 15-year-old range and in the last statutory year of schooling but it can vary and three 13-year-olds have made use of the project's services over the past eight years. The thrust of the work is to consider the future and to explore the ways to make it possible for them to stay on in school. Sometimes the young people have had pressure to engage in an abortion and as a result of their decisions have lost family support.

The range of situations with which I and my colleagues across the services have to deal is very wide and often quite challenging. The other week I had a situation of a concealed pregnancy and the immediate need to ensure that the 18-year-old girl concerned could sit her Highers. It was like a business meeting where we planned out immediate steps and actions. On the other hand the same week saw me dealing with a young girl bordering on special needs with only very limited understanding of her situation. However, whatever their background and history our principle is that they deserve the opportunity to stay on in school and reach the highest standard possible for them. This may mean facilitating a couple of hours tuition a week for one girl because that is all she can cope with to helping to get

another young woman through her five Highers.

Marriann Raymond

The level of close working with guidance teams in schools is significant. This ensures that the girls get the appropriate support they need it and that they are being enabled to make progress. Plans are reviewed about every six weeks and the review meetings involve guidance staff and the girl's family.

Schools cope with lots of difficulties, make lots of special arrangements; this is not anything we can't cope with.

Mike Gimour, Head, Woodhill HS, Dunfermline

The devolved budget available to the coordinator means that there is additional support that can be provided where particular circumstances warrant it. For example, when a girl has difficulties with her work because of problems at home or where she has been sick, extra tuition can be arranged. The initiative also assists with transport and there is a small childcare budget. Where a family cannot or does not want to support a girl with childcare during school hours, use can be made of a registered childminder or other care mechanisms.

A good childminder is excellent to have. Mine is so flexible when it comes to arrangements if study demands affect my normal routine. When the press did the articles on the initiative there was one that featured me and how I was working with the help of my childminder to get through my exams. It was a positive article but one woman came up to me in the street and commented 'I see you have made yourself famous – a pity it is for all the wrong reasons' I think she missed the point – I was succeeding, not failing.

Yvonne

This means very close working with services such as health and social work, but the collaboration does usually pay off by maintaining the young women in full-time education. The relationship of the girl with the registered childminder often assumes a different level from the norm with the childminder taking a real interest in the young mother as well as her baby. The level of team working and shared responsibility across all those involved with the young women is of the very highest order.

We have to deal with the practical issues of assisting with childcare arrangements and fitting these arrangements around a school timetable. These are organisational matters and by the time they have their baby these young women will have matured a lot. They are willing partners in these arrangements and the will to succeed and prove that they can plan for the future and to have a sense of responsibility is strong.

Marriann Raymond

This initiative provides us with a wonderful way of supporting young parents and helping them to plan for a positive future. As well as

providing practical help and development it also gives the girls opportunities to come together and have some normal, fun experiences as young women of a similar age at a time when many are under significant pressures.

Vivien Boyle, Social Work Manager

Some of the post-16 girls choose to leave home and set up on their own. Sometimes family circumstances force this course of action; at other times the young women feel the need to be more independent. For the minority that chooses this course this is a tough route to follow.

I stay with the girls until they leave school which may be a few years down the line. We have a couple of groups that have joint funding with other agencies working with girls who have left school. This has been a very significant development because the girls know that for some of them the prospect of coping on their own is not as bleak as it may have seemed before.

Marriann Raymond

These groups enhance support for the young women and try to build confidence and self-esteem as well as offer further advice and strategies for coping. This work is vital since there is often the perception that young mums will not be able to cope or do things well. The precursor to the group sessions was a firm agreement with school guidance teams about the day-to-day support needed and only after this was secured were moves made into more structured out-of-school activities. The first of these groups was the link-up 'It's my Future' group led by social work where the focus was on careers and building the skills and confidence for relating to the wider world and the workplace. They have covered things like relaxation strategies, outdoor education, self-defence and arts activities.

We had to learn how to get on better with folk, control stress and anger, and the classes in the groups helped. Some of them were just excellent and you learned how to do new things like pottery. Sometimes the group leaders took a bit of coping with but we did.

Louise

It gives you the chance to meet others in the same boat as yourself and also gives another place for the children to play and meet.

Sarah

The second group is a joint group with Barnardo's that is concerned with parenting skills. The group met weekly for six weeks in the spring of 2001 and was called 'Just Us'. The sessions included girls at school and some who had left and also involved a Barnardo's family worker to help lead the sessions. The girls were enthusiastic about these support meetings, which ended as the group came up for exam time. The sessions provided support discussions and were guided by the priorities identified by the girls and included opportunities to relate to the wider range of professionals and exploration of topics like the importance of play. The professionals also enjoyed it because it gave them a

real chance to engage the group across a reasonable period of time. The logistics in organising these events, which draw girls together from across the Council area, involved transport arrangements and crèches. The sessions will be re-started in the autumn and others are planned for the winter with peer support as a major plank of the group dynamic.

The Tuesday group is more about coping with being a mum. We talk about expectations of people and ourselves and try to work out answers for any problems we may have. We looked at children's play and did some activities, like using play dough, ourselves to find out about how wee ones learn and develop.

Louise

An important development in the gradual build-up of the confidence has been the desire on the part of a number of the girls to support the work of the initiative and this has led to their participation and leadership of a number of projects.

- Three young mothers put together a support pack for young women in their circumstances. They wanted this to be more than a list of telephone numbers and addresses for help agencies and they sought to personalise the information by relating it to their own experiences. The support pack included leaflets on a variety of topics including breaking the news to family and friends, being a mum, the role of the father, benefits, housing, bare necessities, schools and colleges, legal requirements and support agencies. They considered the layout, length and presentation very carefully and produced a fine publication that can fit in a handbag. The package reflects significant work on the part of the young women involved and the publication identifies well with the target audience. It is testimony to the success of the initiative and also the resilience and ability of the young women involved that a product of such quality emerged. The tone of the publication is excellent and whilst realistically reflecting the problems does identify the good times and the positive side of parenthood.

We knew that there was material to support girls in our position but it was difficult to access because it often just referred you to another agency for answers. Lists of addresses and directories are not enough. We wanted to make something which was a genuine help and gave you many if not all the answers. We started with the intention of writing it in six weeks but it worked out as the best part of a year, often working in each other's flats. We had to debate the issues and edit it to a realistic size with the help of others with specialist knowledge in graphics and layout. We also wanted something of manageable which could have replacement pages put in as laws and circumstances changed. It is very rewarding to see the levels of interest not just in Scotland but also in Ireland and Australia where they are now making their own versions.

Dawn

- The launch of the Young Mothers pack attracted widespread attention both locally and nationally. The levels of interest meant there were press and television interviews that tested their confidence and skills. The work of the initiative drew interest from other groups and invitations to speak about their experiences were received.

The young women now participate in these conference sessions and their contributions lend weight to the importance and innovative character of the initiative.

We have been involved in speaking and running workshops. The first one is always terrible – it is scary – they always seem friendly enough on a one-to-one basis when you meet them but an audience of a few hundred it is threatening. I couldn't have done it if Marriann had not been there to give moral support.

Yvonne

There was one session we did which was a great day and we all felt good about how we had contributed but the press article which followed had a lot of negative stuff about the existence of the initiative possibly encouraging girls to get pregnant. You are going back to school and your friends are seeing you look – well – rubbish! Everybody is going out at weekends, buying clothes and planning the abroad holidays and you are not. There may be some fourth years sitting out there dreaming about escaping from school but they have seen us come back to school by choice they know what it has been like for us. There's no way they would choose this situation.

Mairead

- The Scottish Executive set up an expert witness session as part of a wider health initiative. Marriann Raymond was invited to attend and to be sure that she would reflect an accurate representation of the views of the young mothers she set up an all-day event with eight girls to discuss their lives and experiences.

What they said was so good and powerful. I mostly reported it as said to me. The impact on the listeners was significant and the exhibition I put together of their quotes and observations is a very informative display feature in any events we are running.

Marriann Raymond

Tackling an important social and educational issue in this focused inter-agency way has had very positive results both personally and academically for the young women involved.

If I hadn't had this service I wouldn't have stayed on at school. It has opened doors I didn't know were available to me and has helped me to get involved in the Open University and get me to college. It kept me

focused on education and its importance when I thought I would simply have to leave and get a job. Marriann kept chasing me and as I realised what I might achieve for me and my baby I got more and more interested in making a go of my education. This was very important at a time when there was so very much going on emotionally.

Patsy

In this very successful Young Mothers initiative a number of present features relating to creativity and innovation are:

- a willingness to take risks and tackle a problem area with an investment of time and resource
- extensive and flexible team working across departments and schools with the provision of role models of people and ways of working that reinforce collaborative solutions
- the development of higher-order skills and confidence as a positive strategy
- allowing delegated responsibility to be real and valuing the contributions of all as significant to the success of the work
- progressive building of experience, skills and attitudes as integral to the success of the project.