



Working with children
for children



Young Parents Matter

Exploring the views and experiences of Young Parents living in Northern Ireland (NI).



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Acknowledgments

NCB would like to thank all the young people who took part in this project; for sharing their stories, views and opinions on what it is like for young parents living in Northern Ireland.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of the practitioners working with these young people who also shared their views about current service provision. Particular thanks to those who helped to organise focus groups across Northern Ireland

Terminology:

This report uses the term 'young parent' to denote any person aged between 13- 25 years old who is expecting a baby or has a child.



Introduction

NCB have been working with a group of young people from our 'Engage N You'¹ Big Lottery Northern Ireland (NI) funded project. The majority of the group have experienced issues that arise from being a young parent as they are all either young mums or dads (some for the second time) or are about to become young parents. They had expressed concerns about various issues in terms of difficulties they (and their peers) are facing when becoming a young parent. The group had discussed the perceived lack of information available to young people about their rights, entitlements and access to services that are available to support them.

The group decided they wanted to find out what other young parents were experiencing and discover more about what can be done to help other young people in their situation, including information on their rights and responsibilities when becoming young parents.

Teenage pregnancy in Northern Ireland

The UK has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe.² In recent years, with the help of targeted government strategies aimed at reducing teenage birth rates, there has been a decrease in the teenage birth rate in Northern Ireland (under 20 years of age) from 15.4 to 11.3 births per 1,000 females between 2009 and 2013.

It is important to note, however, that although the overall rate of teenage pregnancies in Northern Ireland fell (under 17 years of age) during this period the teenage birth rate in the 20% most deprived areas of Northern Ireland (4.6 births per 1,000 females) was almost 7 times the rate in the 20% least deprived areas (0.7 births per 1,000 females).³

Table 1: Teenage births- Under 17s by Deprivation Quintile (2012)

Deprivation Quintile					
Most Deprived	2	3	4	Least Deprived	NI
5.1	2.2	0.8	2.3	1.2	2.3

Research has also shown a variation on teenage birth rates in urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland, with urban areas (3.1 births per 1,000 females) almost three and a half times that within rural areas (0.9 births per 1,000 females).

¹ <http://www.ncb.org.uk/who-we-are/northern-ireland/engage/advisory-groups/engage-n-you-young-peoples-advisory-group>

² <http://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/northern-ireland-teenage-pregnancy.pdf>

³ <https://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/hscims-mlb-2015.pdf>

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Young Parents Matter project

In April 2015 the group received a grant from Awards for All Big lottery Fund NI⁴ and began to plan, design and help deliver the 'Young Parents Matter' project.

The project aimed to:

- Record the views and experiences of other young parents living in NI;
- Identify what support is available to young parents who live in NI and identify if there is anything missing from services to help young parents;
- Look at how young parents can be better informed of support available to them in their area.

In total we gathered the views and experiences of 95 young parents from different localities across Northern Ireland and spoke to practitioners delivering support services to these young people.

Due to the small scale nature of this exploratory activity we can't assume that those engaged with this project are representative of the broader demographic but this piece of work has provided a valuable 'snapshot' and insight into young people's attitudes and opinions about services being delivered to young parents from across Northern Ireland and their experiences of parenthood at a young age.

⁴ <https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/northern-ireland/awards-for-all-northern-ireland>

Methodology

Online survey

During the planning of the Young Parents Matter project the young people decided that the best way to collect the views of other young parents would be via an online survey. They thought that it would be an easy way to share the information request via their social media platforms. The group met in May 2015 to plan the questions and were very clear the questionnaire should be short and easy to complete. (See Appendix 1)

The survey was promoted via NCB networks, specifically targeting key organisations working to support young parents. It was also advertised on NCB social media platforms and remained open for 4 months. For anyone unable to access the online version a paper version of the survey was sent out to them. The young people involved in developing the project also promoted it to their peer groups.

The online survey generated **42 responses**. These comprised of 37 young mothers and 5 young fathers from across different areas of Northern Ireland. The age group of respondents was between 16-25 years.

Focus Groups

In addition to the online survey, a number of focus groups were organised to support face-to-face discussions with young parents and gain depth of understanding. NCB helped the project group to develop a topic guide to be used in the focus groups with young parents (See Appendix 2).

The focus groups were led by NCB Senior Participation Officer, Gill Hassard. A total of 7 focus groups took place, **involving 53 young parents** from different areas of Northern Ireland. 49 young mothers and 4 young fathers participated.

Table 2: Young Parents Matter Focus Groups

Focus Groups	Location	Number of participants	Ages	Male	Female
Extern- Moving Forward Moving on Project	Shankill, Belfast	5	17-21	0	5
Family Nurse Partnership - Belfast	North Belfast	7	16-21	2	5
SureStart Shantallow	Derry	6	17-24	0	6
EA School Age Mothers programme- Southern	Craigavon	7	14-21	0	7
EA School Age Mothers programme- Belfast	West Belfast	6	14-17	0	6
EA School Age Mothers programme- West	Londonderry	4	16-18	0	4
Sure Start Tullycarnet	Dundonald	12	16-25	0	12
Young NCB young parents group	Belfast	6	18-23	2	4
Total		53	14-24	4	49

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Practitioner Interviews

NCB also interviewed staff from a number of agencies identified by the project group as having a direct role in supporting young parents. These included staff from: The School Age Mothers (SAMS) Project; Family Nurse Partnership; Extern; Sure Start, and Parenting NI. We asked them to share their views on:

- what support services were available in their area for young parents;
- whether or not they thought there was anything missing from these services;
- what they believed could help young parents more; and
- how best they thought information about support services could be delivered to young parents.



Practitioner Perspectives

What's on offer for young parents?

Lottery postcode

Practitioners reported a variation in services on offer to young parents dependant on where young people lived and what was offered varied greatly from place to place.

"There are some very useful support for school age mums however these appear to be slightly different depending on the area that you live."

Others commented on Sure Start⁵ services in particular due to their services only being available to parents living in certain areas.

The Good, the bad and indifferent

Practitioners have a sense of what has worked well and what has not worked well for young parents but in some cases there is a mismatch with funding. For example, one practitioner described the funded Parentcraft classes offered by the Health and Social Care Trusts as 'not working' whereas other bespoke programmes for fathers 'worked' but is no longer funded.

'Made to fit' or 'Squeezed in'

Practitioners acknowledge the difference between generic services that young parents can or should be able to access and targeted services that are designed for and responsive to the particular needs of young people.

"Services are limited and they are often expected to fit into services tailored for older people"

Services which go to young parents, e.g. in school, or which meet a specified need, e.g. benefit support, are reportedly well attended.

Building Bridges

Even where services exist, practitioners see a job of work in connecting young parents to those services. Practical support, like availability of transport, is needed but young parents also need encouragement to get through bureaucracy, embarrassment and feelings of being judged or patronised.

"They're reluctant to access mainstream groups as they feel like they're 'Too young and everyone would be looking at you', it's the overall embarrassment factor"

One practitioner described the need for young people to be supported to join group situations: *"they need to feel comfortable before being able to contribute in a group setting so 1:1 is often useful initially"*.

⁵ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/sure-start-services>

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What's missing for young parents?

What's on?

Many of the practitioners we spoke to thought that there were “a number of good support programmes” available to young parents but that the information about these services didn't always filter down to the young people. They identified a need to raise awareness about what's on offer.

“In my experience I believe young parents in this area are not aware of many of the supports available to them as this information is not readily available to them”

This lack of awareness included issues such as contraceptive advice: “There is a lack of clarity about what's available in various settings and how to access this”.

In addition to not knowing what's available to them, Practitioners reported the timing of these programme aren't always suitable to the young parents.

“Many of the young woman I work with are extremely keen to stay on at school and many are completing A-levels, BTEC courses and are reluctant to take time away from school to attend such programmes and are somewhat disadvantaged as they aren't able to avail of some of the programmes that run during the day”.

When we asked practitioners how best they thought information should be given to young parents they said “in a variety of ways”. These suggestions include both ‘online’ e.g. websites, apps, social networking sites and ‘word of mouth’ methods e.g. through midwifery services, Family Nurse Partnerships, Sure Starts, youth services and other support groups that come face to face with the young people.

Education

Practitioners identified a lack of sex and relationship education for young people. Specific reference was made to “domestic violence within young couples” and one practitioner felt that this was due to a lack of understanding about what a healthy relationship is.

“There's a need for more education about social and emotional intelligence.”

Tailored breastfeeding advice for young parents was also highlighted. One practitioner identified the need for “specific breastfeeding support targeted at young parents highlighting key benefits for parents to encourage them to try it e.g. helps parent lose weight!”

Education and support for dads was identified by many as lacking in Northern Ireland. Most organisations' focus is on support for the young mums and this was an area practitioners felt needed to be addressed.

“Recently during a home visit with a young woman and her partner it was highlighted to me that there was little support for school age dads within the South Eastern area”

The lack of data available about young fathers was also raised, particularly in relation to school age dads.

Practitioners felt that to help young people access organisations providing these courses and to help them to access further and higher education there needed to be ‘flexible crèche provision’ and ‘help with transport’, particularly for those in rural areas.

“Good quality affordable childcare is essential especially when trying to encourage young people back into education or work. This should be easily accessible.”

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Mind your head

Coping with mental health issues was raised by many who work with young parents. Practitioners identified a lack of mental health provision available to young parents, issues with long waiting times and difficulties in getting the young person engaged with the service after the initial crisis.

One practitioner said *“Often we see a ‘denial in pregnancy’- young people not acknowledging what is happening/ happened and therefore risk of pre/postnatal depression”*.

Practitioners shared their thoughts on ways in which parents can be supported. Mentoring, advocacy and befrienders were seen as good ways of providing additional support to young parents. As well as the need for young parents to have ‘social spaces that they fit in’.

“They need space for them to grieve for the loss of their own childhood”.

A practitioner working with school age mums also cautioned about the need for something which doesn't stigmatise young parents: *“careful of the title of the group ‘young mums’; the venue should be in a neutral space, cross community and open in the evenings for a drop in”*.

Advice please

When asked what practitioners thought young parents could have more help with they all pointed to better advice for young parents in coping with the issues parenthood brings. Specifically mentioned was advice on breast-feeding, contraception, diet and nutrition, both for themselves and their offspring. More help with weaning babies onto solid food *“in user friendly ways such as videos on websites”*.

Practitioners also talked about young parents needing legal advice on various matters such as knowing their rights, gaining access to their child and advice on the birth certificate: *“They need legal advice, putting the fathers name on the birth certificate has implications”*.

The need for financial advice and help understanding and accessing benefit entitlement was brought up by many as an issue that young parents need help with.

“Information on benefits is vital for some of the young women and their families as financial worries can often be the biggest concern”.

Building capacity

Parenting skills was something professionals thought was an area for development. Learning practical skills about how to care for their children, *“with a greater focus on attachment and bonding and developing a secure relationship with your baby.”*

It was suggested *“offering young parents an OCR in Parenting Skills”*.

In addition, it was thought that learning more about children's disabilities should also be considered: *“ADHD and Autism, they need to be clued in and helped to understand these conditions”*.

Young Parents' Experiences

The experiences of the young parents we spoke to were generally positive, with many commenting on being a parent as 'fun' and 'enjoyable': *"Being a young mum is so hard as you have to give up your free time but being a mum is the best feeling in the world!"*

There was only one 15 year old participant in a focus group who claimed she *'hated being a mum'*.

Many did acknowledge how difficult being a parent can be: *"even though it's hard and stressful it's the best achievement of my life and I wouldn't change it for the world"*. The young parents recognised that it isn't easy for many young parents who don't have good support networks around them: *"People have helped me but I know people who didn't have anyone to go to"*.

Reactions to pregnancy

When the young parents spoke about finding out about being pregnant for the first time they expressed feeling 'worried' and 'shocked'. There were many who admitted to denying it to themselves: *"I told myself I'm not, I'm not"*. Others spoke about not being aware they were expecting a baby until quite late in their pregnancies: *"I was pregnant at 15, I didn't tell anyone until I was 32 weeks"*.

As we found by talking to the young parents, practitioners have also witnessed a 'denial in pregnancy' with young people not acknowledging what is happening or has happened to them. This denial of pregnancy is worrying for young mothers. Young mothers who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing postpartum depression, stress and feelings of isolation.⁶ One practitioner working with school age mums referred to young parents pregnancies as a 'loss of childhood', she said *'(they) need time to grieve their childhood'*.

Some young mums described how they didn't really comprehend what was happening to them: *"I was too young I didn't understand"*. Another girl explained that she didn't know she was pregnant because: *"I didn't have a bump so I didn't really know what was happening until I was 8 months pregnant"*.

The reaction to telling people they were pregnant was varied. The young parents said that people were mainly supportive, particularly family members, however this experience was not shared by all. One young mum said her dad hasn't spoken to her since she told him and that he'd asked her to get an abortion. Interestingly the young parents said people's reactions to the news was usually to ask *'what they were going to do about it?'* They felt this wasn't right and wouldn't be the reaction that older women would get. One girl reported that her GP reacted by expressing sympathy: *"(she said) I'm sorry to hear your bad news. She wouldn't have said that to an older woman"*.

The young women also spoke about how people automatically *'assumed they wouldn't be with the daddy'*: *"they expect you to be a single parent living on benefits, not going to school and a complete tramp!"*. They reported that peoples first questions to them by adults such as teachers and health professionals was usually about *'if the daddy was still around?'* which they thought was rude and not something that older women would be asked.

⁶<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/young-mums-together-report#sthash.Ky9SH4eO.dpuf>

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A Sense of Achievement

Young parents reported many positive feelings and experiences of parenthood. They commented on being a parent as 'fun', 'enjoyable' and 'rewarding': *"Being a young mum is so hard as you have to give up your free time but being a mum is the best feeling in the world!"* Critically, there was a level of self-awareness and positive self-talk among participants who reported a sense of 'achievement' in their efforts and spoke of themselves as 'doing a good job': *"even though it's hard and stressful it's the best achievement of my life and I wouldn't change it for the world"*. The challenges and difficulties they experienced were positively impacted on by the support of others and the reverse also proved true as young parents reporting loneliness, stress or depression spoke of not always having or getting the support they felt they needed. There was only one 15 year old participant in a focus group who claimed she *'hated being a mum'*.

Social isolation

The young mothers who were pregnant in their teenage years all referred to the social isolation that came with being a young parent: *"you lose a lot of friends over it. No-one asks you to go out anymore"* with one girl commenting: *"even if they know the answer will be no it's still nice to be asked!"* The support from friends of teenage parents seemed to vary. Often the girls are left with fewer friends and social networks. The school aged mums described how upon finding out they were pregnant *"you get a load of people asking to be your friend on Facebook just to be nosey"* however these people weren't your friends and offered no support.

This social isolation didn't seem as much of an issue with the older age group (17+) who although describing finding it hard at times seemed to be less affected by it than the teenage parents. One group explained that

'you get different opinions from people' and others didn't view themselves as young parents.

Attitude to Professionals

There was high praise given to services that are currently supporting them, in particular the Sure Start family support workers, Family Nurse Partnership nurses and School Age Mums Project co-ordinators. It was obvious that where relationships had been developed and trust was built the young parents felt they could ask questions and get advice: *"(she) knows me and what's happening in my life"*.

The participants commented about the importance of having a dedicated worker to support them to *'be helpful and give me lots of advice'*. One participant commented that she particularly liked the *'continuity of care throughout pregnancy'* that went on until her infant was 2 years old.

Young parents' attitudes towards professional health workers varied. Whilst many viewed their experiences with midwives and health visitors as 'positive', 'lovely' and 'helpful' it would seem that some viewed the health professionals approach as 'disrespectful' and 'cheeky':

"Midwives really discriminated, directed questions at my mum instead of me as if I was a child".

Some young mums expressed a feeling of being judged by professionals: *"they looked down on me because I was young and pregnant"*. One young woman, who had been brought up in care, reported a difficult relationship with Social Services, both antenatal and for the first 2 years of her child's life. Rather than feeling supported, she was angry that her unborn child had been registered at potential risk and she understood this to be as a result of her own childhood experiences of neglect:

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"Social services made my life a lot more harder than it had to be...No one should be able to judge what kind of a mother you'll be before your child's even born".

In one very disappointing example a young woman who had just lost her baby was told "Don't be so upset you're still young"; the young women felt the health professional needed to be more sensitive to her loss.

Some young mums commented about 'needing more support and advice on mental health issues' and how to manage after your baby arrives. There were a few women that made reference to their postnatal depression and the negative effect that this has had on their experience of parenthood. Some felt that doctors were too quick to hand out antidepressants and not offer other ways to cope: "Doctors just hand things out to you and tell you to go to counselling". This was reiterated by a practitioner who said that she felt there was a distinct lack of mental health provision for young parents despite pre and postnatal depression affecting teenage parents more compared with mainstream.

Not surprisingly, where good support was in place we found that young people coped better with being a young parent. Support from family and friends was acknowledged by many as the people they turn to for their main support. Midwives also scored highly on the online survey with 55% of respondents saying they had helped them.

Judgement

The issue of feeling judged by people was reported by the majority of young parents: "You feel very judged by a lot of people because you're so young and you're not able to cope apparently because you're still a child yourself."

One young mum described how she felt people stared at her when her child cried: "you get judged a lot; when your baby cries, all babies cry not just mine because I'm young".

Some young mums also expressed an embarrassment about attending ante-natal appointments in their school uniform: "when you go in with your uniform on and your green folder and everyone's looking at you- I hate that situation".

In other examples the young mums felt that boys in particular judged girls who became pregnant, with examples of cyber bullying being an issue particularly on Facebook: "(boys) will write stuff about girls who go to such and such a school; you have to be pregnant to go there' or 'babies are accessories in Lurgan, everyone gets pregnant'".

Some said they even felt judged by other young parents: "it's all a competition to have the best pram".

The issue of socialising when you've become a young parent seemed to be common to young mums in particular and carried its own set of peer opinions or judgements: "See when you're at school all week and then you want a night to yourself at the weekend, that's when everyone thinks you don't look after your child because you want to go out". They ask you "Where's your son?".

However the young parents we spoke to viewed themselves and their peers as good parents: "most of the young people I know who have had children young are doing a fantastic job". There was a consensus amongst the groups that age shouldn't make a difference to the success of parenthood: "people can do just as good a job no matter whether you're 14 or 30, it doesn't make a difference".

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Young Dads

Unfortunately this project did not engage with many young fathers. Efforts were made through local partners to ensure they would be able to participate in the focus groups and survey activity but response rates were low. This could be reflective of the need to support dads further to participate in service provision as current findings suggest that young fathers are not as well engaged in services.

The young fathers we did speak to reported feeling unsupported and uninvolved with a lack of targeted support. In responses to being asked if there was anything that could help young parents more one young dad reported a need for *“more male focussed approaches in terms of fatherhood and parenting”*.

In a focus group with young dads, the issue of **access to their children** was an issue. Unfortunately for some young fathers, they have had limited, and sometimes no contact, with their offspring. This can be for various reasons but the young dads we spoke to felt they had ‘no rights’ or ‘didn’t know their rights’ as a parent. One of the young dads in this project expressed his dismay about not having met his daughter until after she was one year old because of the length of time it had taken him to gain access through the courts. He also explained that he often *“didn’t really understand what was happening”* in this legal process and that his solicitor hadn’t explained things properly to him.

Another young dad in a focus group expressed the importance of services organising and paying for activities. He said about the Family Nurse Partnership group meeting at a soft play area: *“it’s good to get out of the house, get your head showered a bit”*.

Support Services

It became apparent from talking to the young people and practitioners that the information about the services and programmes on offer doesn’t always reach the young parents.

“Young parents are not aware of many of the supports that are available to them as this information is not readily available to them”. (SAMS Co-ordinator)

The young people agreed. They often reported not being aware of what support they could access: *“I wasn’t offered or told about any”* and reported that there was not enough services out there for young people: *“I don’t think young parents are aware of the support services available to them”*. When asked what they liked or disliked about support services on offer to young parents a young dad said: *“not one of them were useful for a young father”*. This perceived lack of support for young dads was raised by each of the young men who took part in this project.

When asked about the services on offer to support young parents the majority of practitioners discussed a ‘services postcode lottery’. They said young people benefit from different support and programmes depending on the area they live in.

An example was given by a practitioner about two young parents who lived on opposite sides of the same street and due to their postcodes one woman was able to access Sure Start⁷ services and the other wasn’t. The same was true with some specialised services which are not universal i.e. Family Nurse Partnership⁸ which isn’t available to all young parents but only those in certain areas of Northern Ireland. This ‘postcode lottery’ also applied to accessing money. Some projects supporting uptake of benefit entitlements are only available in rural areas not urban. e.g. MARA⁹ benefits assessments.

⁷ <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sure-start-services>

⁸ <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/health-and-social-wellbeing-improvement/family-nurse-partnership>

⁹ The Maximising Access in Rural Areas (MARA) project is a joint initiative between DARDNI and the Public Health Agency (PHA) and is designed to tackle rural poverty and social isolation.

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Managing Money & Benefits proved complicated and confusing for many young parents and practitioners agreed with them that the systems and support services can be hard to access or navigate. One practitioner said: *“Sure start maternity grants and Healthy Start Vouchers are bureaucratic and takes time for processing”*.

The majority of young parents expressed a need for help with this financial support with most stating that they were *“unsure what I can claim for”*. Our online survey found that this issue was the one they wanted to know more about with 65% of young parents wanting help with benefit entitlement.

When we explored this issue in the focus groups most of the young people said that they *‘need help with money’* and quite a few said that their parents helped them with this as they found it *‘complicated’* and *‘confusing’*. Particular reference was made to help with *‘form filling’*, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) entitlement and *‘help with milk tokens’*. One young mother said *“more support with money would make things a lot easier”*.

The young people said that they found the benefit system confusing, which led to some young parents not getting what they are entitled to. It was noted that some grants were only available to one household at a time, meaning that if more than one young person in the family had a baby they couldn't claim what they were entitled to. One young mum in Derry claimed that the benefit system was putting people off getting married as it penalised you if your partner worked.

Housing advice was also identified by 54% of survey respondents as an area where they would like to see more support. The young people weren't clear what their rights were or what they were entitled to if they required their own homes. Some of the young parents spoke about a need for support in how to live alone: *“I found it a real struggle when I moved out of home”*.

Young parents becoming homeless was highlighted as a concern by a practitioner; *“Young parents being kicked out of home as a result of pregnancies have limited options... Lack of beds in NI and no beds for under 16's”*.

Parenting skills was identified by 46% of survey respondents as an area in which some young parents felt they could do with more support. Specifically support in relation to:

- budgeting,
- cookery,
- advice on diet and nutrition (both in pregnancy and weaning their babies),
- sleep problems,
- Identifying symptoms of sickness,
- first aid; *“what to do if your baby chokes”*,
- Discipline and behaviour management: *“How to treat or handle first child when you have second baby”*.

The young parents said they would like this information in group situations: *“more groups and courses to help parents improve their skills”* for example, parenting classes that were for people of similar age to themselves. The young parents stated their preference in gaining information in groups to *“hear for themselves”* and help them understand more: *“if you don't understand things it's better to hear upfront”*.

The young parents we spoke to said they would often *“google the issue”* or ask friends or family members for help about parenting issues. Whilst this support is vital for young parents it doesn't always mean they are hearing the correct information and following government guidelines. Confusion and/or misinterpretation of information was an issue that reoccurred throughout conversations with young parents. For example, one young mother explained *“they said if you smoke you won't be able to breastfeed”*.

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Breastfeeding support was highlighted by practitioners as needing to be specifically targeted at young parents; highlighting key benefits for parents to encourage them to try it e.g. breastfeeding helps parent lose baby weight! Information and advice still appears to be unclear for young mums around breastfeeding, with some reporting that they don't have enough support to do this. One young mum told us that she had wanted to breastfeed but the hospital had given her baby a bottle and she felt that with more support she would have liked to have tried breastfeeding. Others had said no to trying breastfeeding during their birth plan and then weren't asked again, and perhaps would have liked to have been persuaded but weren't.

However the approach to breastfeeding needs to be sensitive to the individual as some young people we spoke to reported feeling pressured by health professionals to do it: *"I felt they looked down on me sometimes, for example I didn't want to breastfeed and they kept pushing me to do it"*.

Young parents admitted to not always understanding terminology: *"the consultant didn't tell me what it means when your son is breech"* and some reported that there was *'too much information'* given to them. Some of the younger parents reported that they hadn't read the leaflets and books given to them and others said they had read them but sometimes they contained too much jargon.

Befriending and mentoring were highlighted by practitioners as a good method of supporting young parents with this. The idea that people who have been young parents themselves and understand the issues would be able to provide help and guidance and be there to help take young parents to appointments, act as advocates and explain things to them when necessary.

When asked how young parents should be given parenting information the messages were mixed. The young parents want

information about services online, but they want support and advice to be given in group situations, preferably with peers of similar age and with the option of 1:1 support: *"do a bit of everything, online, leaflets and groups"*.

More support to help young parents continue their education was another issue that repeatedly came up. Young parents want support to gain qualifications, to go back to college, to university and need advice on how to do this: *"We need more things to further yourself; when you've got children you're tied down."*

The young people identified their support needs in relation to access to childcare; *"courses with crèches"* and in particular advice on how to do this without it impacting negatively on their entitlements.

Accessing Support

There are many organisations providing fantastic support to young parents living in Northern Ireland. However, despite this, the young people we spoke to have identified gaps in provision. **Peer support** was identified as being of particular importance for young parents with *'more groups specifically for young parents'* being repeatedly requested by the young people in this project. Many of the participants emphasised the need for **social space and time with their peers** rather than only being brought together to be taught or told something.

Practitioners thought that in some instances there would be some reluctance for young parents to access **mainstream support groups**; *"They feel they are too young and everyone will be looking at you"*. They referred to it as an *'embarrassment factor'* for young parents. Young parents reported that more support should be provided in group situations; specifically young parent only groups where they could relate to their peers and the *'embarrassment factor'* would be eliminated.

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They said they would prefer to be with mums of 'their own age' and that some mums and tots groups were 'quite cliquey'. One young mum said she wouldn't go to her local mums and tots groups because its *'full of childminders and grannies... it puts me off'*. One young dad from a focus group reported a similar experience of attending a local father's support group that he had found on the internet. He said that he only attended once as *"he didn't belong there"*. He described the conversations that they were having as *"sob stories for men over 40; talking about marriage issues"* and felt that they all had *"stuff in common"*.

Some young parents felt disadvantaged in not being to avail of some of the programmes which run during the day and felt that practitioners should consider the **timing of programmes**. One school age mum said *"There's a group on a Tuesday for under 25's which is really good but it's on during the day so it's not like everyone can benefit from it because we are at school, its mostly the ones that are a bit older 21,22."*

Transport was identified as an issue which can sometimes prevent young parents accessing services, particularly in rural areas and can be a huge barrier to young parent's participation in services on offer to them. They may not be able to go to a programme or event that is running if they don't drive or have access to transport, particularly if projects can't afford to provide transport. However one practitioner in a rural area commented that despite arranging transport for summer activities the uptake was still less than those in the city.

We asked the young parents how they would like to find out about services on offer and results from our survey showed an overwhelming preference for online information and communication with 68% saying they would like to find out via social networking sites and 53% asking for website use.

Conclusions and Recommendations

NCB champions the meaningful involvement of children and young people in all matters that affect their lives and recognise that they are experts in their own lives. We believe that seeking, listening to and hearing their experiences and ideas not only meets our obligations to them but also improves the quality of the services delivered to them.

This project involved 95 young parents who shared their insights into what being a young parent living in Northern Ireland is like for them and how they feel the support they are receiving could be improved by the practitioners working to support them.

Based on their experiences and on the perspectives of the practitioners who seek to support them, a number of conclusions can be reached. These conclusions and associated recommendations are set out in this final section of the report.

Positive Reinforcement

It was clear that on the whole these young people are enjoying the experience of being parents and with the right support, feel confident about bringing up their children. The young parents we spoke to in this project reported the joy and reward of parenting and spoke positively of themselves and their achievements. However, they commonly experienced stigma, judgement and discrimination, both during pregnancy and as a young parent, from a range of people including trusted professionals. Young mums in particular often feel like they are being looked at in a judgemental way and that's why it's important professionals understand that and make them feel comfortable. There is a need for communication which provides positive reinforcement to young parents' self-concept rather than unintentionally undermining it.

Recommendation 1: Practitioners and young parents should be supported to work together to develop communication guidance to positively reinforce capacity and confidence of young parents.

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Young Fathers Matter

The voices of young fathers are as notably underrepresented in this project as in many others. It was clear from even the small number of young dads we spoke to and those working with them, that they feel there is a distinct lack of support for them which needs to be addressed. Recent research focussing on fathers in Northern Ireland¹⁰ has recommended 'father-proofing' of services (i.e. systematically changing how dads are supported by services). Young fathers should be supported to engage with services and their voices must be included in discussion on service development.

Recommendation 2: An audit of services to identify who is currently providing young fathers' support and what key messages are being delivered. This audit should also identify to what extent young fathers are actively engaged in service development, delivery and evaluation.

¹⁰ Dads Direct & Sneddon, H. (2015) The Dad Factor in Northern Ireland: How Fathers Improve Child Outcomes. Briefing Paper. Belfast: Dads Direct.

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Spaces and Places

The young people we spoke to all expressed the need for more social spaces, somewhere not to feel different and get support, somewhere to reduce the social isolation they can feel when becoming 'different from their peers'. They need additional support to access these services such as paid transport and good quality childcare that is both accessible and affordable.

Recommendation 3: Services should review their delivery model to ensure they deliver services based on evidence of need of young parents taking into account barriers to engagement such as time of day, transport and childcare.

Seek, Listen and Hear

The young parents we spoke to identify the need for parenting advice and information to be communicated in different ways. They want to receive this information online, in group settings and also be who plans future service development offered 1:1 support when required. Young parents want to access information in safe spaces where they feel confident to ask questions, admit to making mistakes and be supported to understand parenting issues. They prefer this support to be alongside parents of similar age with opportunities to build relationships with key workers. Peer promotion could be a real asset to ensure young people are aware of, and have the confidence to access services.

Recommendation 4: Future service development must explore models of good practice in reaching young parents, diversifying the ways in which their information is provided including the use of social media platforms and online resources.

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Recommendation 5: A working group should be established to take forward the actions outlined in Recommendations 1-4. This group should involve professionals with responsibilities for health, education and welfare and young parents themselves.



Appendix one

Young Parents Matter Survey

Hello, we are from Young NCB and are looking at:

- What support is available to young parents
- If there's anything missing from services to help young parents
- How young parents can be better informed of support available to them in their area

We will be collecting this info and developing a young person friendly online resource

1. Are you male/female? (please circle)
2. How old are you (within the scale of 12-25 years old)?
3. Are you pregnant/have 1 child/2 children/3 or more children? (please circle)
4. How old were you when you had your first child?
5. What town or city do you live in (or closest to) e.g. Belfast, Armagh, Derry/Londonderry?
6. As a young parent who, other than your family, has helped you?
 - Midwives
 - Doctor
 - Health visitors
 - Breast feeding support groups
 - Family Nurse Partnership nurses
 - Sure-start projects
 - Social Services
 - Friends
 - Representatives from youth organisations
 - Other _____
7. What do you think about the support services on offer to young parents? What did you like or dislike about them?

8. Is there anything you think would help young parents more?

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9. Would you like to know more about: (please tick as many as you like)
- Child-minding/day care for your child
 - Contraception advice
 - Coping with mental health issues (e.g. Depression)
 - Healthy eating
 - Help with benefits (money) entitlements
 - How to look after your child (parenting skills)
 - Legal advice (e.g. gaining access to your child)
 - What support is out there for you as a parent
 - Your rights as a parent
 - Other
10. How would you like to find out about which support services are available to you?
- Websites
 - Videos
 - Apps
 - Leaflets/posters
 - Word of mouth
 - Social networking sites
 - Group settings
 - Other

Any other comments about your experience of being a young parent?

Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey

Please return your completed form to Gill Hassard, NCB NI, 73-75 Great Victoria Street, Belfast BT2 7AF or email gassard@ncb.org.uk for more info.

Appendix two

Focus Group Topic Guide for Young Parents Matter Project July 2015

Introduction

Hello, we are from Young NCB and are looking at what support is available to young parents who live in NI, if there's anything missing from services to help young parents and how young parents can be better informed of support available to them in their area. We will be collecting this info and developing a young person friendly online resource.

Don't forget to record:

Date

How many people in focus group

Number of males

females

Location

Age range

Questions

1. What is it like being a young parent in NI?
2. Who offers help or support to young parents? (What did you like or dislike about them? How did you access them?)
3. Is there anything you think would help young parents more? e.g. benefit advice, knowing your rights, parenting skills etc.
4. Is there anything you would you like to know more about e.g. benefit entitlement, day care for your child, your rights as a parent, parenting skills etc.?
5. How best should this info be available to young parents? e.g. leaflets, websites, apps, social networking, groups etc.



Working with children
for children

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April 2016



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