

Care to Learn Consultation Response

Summary

This report looks at recommendations from recent research reports and results from a survey carried out by 'prymface' with 75 young parents in the UK. It highlights concerns about the proposed options to change eligibility of Care to Learn for young parents and recommends that issues such as support and flexibility of education provision are addressed alongside childcare funding. The evidence strongly suggests that cutting the current eligibility for childcare payments for young parents is short sighted, particularly at a time when child poverty is predicted to increase and public services and EMA are being cut.

Recommendations

The following recommendations should be considered to ensure that young parents are able to progress in education and employment.

1. As well as covering all parents under 19, guaranteed childcare payment should remain for young parents who start a course when they are 19 – particularly for those without a level 3 qualification, looking to improve on their current qualification level or have had their education disrupted due to pregnancy or becoming a parent.
2. Support should be looked at alongside Care to Learn proposals to ensure that information and advice regarding education is accessible to all young parents and those who are pregnant.
3. Education provision should be looked at alongside Care to Learn proposals and findings from this consultation should be taken into account when providing flexible education to meet the individual needs of young parents and those who are pregnant.

Background

There is wealth of research evidencing the poor social and economic outcomes for teenage parents and their children. This is often used to support initiatives aiming to reducing teenage pregnancy, rather than understand the barriers that exist for young parents and work towards removing those barriers. Having a child at a young age is rarely the first 'issue' in a young persons life, but research has shown that many use the experience of becoming a parent to turn their lives around [1], finding that they have a new sense of purpose and motivation.

Unfortunately however, there is currently no clear path back into education for young people who become pregnant in their teens. This leaves most young parents having to work out for themselves which courses are suitable, where childcare is available, what funds or support can be accessed, and when. Consequently many young parents are excluded from further education and become isolated from mainstream education provision.

Care to Learn, by funding childcare while studying, addresses a common barrier that young parents face to enable them to improve their own situation and future for their family. It is one of the few funds that benefits young parents taking steps towards greater independence, rather than a sticking plaster for those in crises.

A recent report from Barnardos 'Not the end of the story' [2] recognises that ignoring the educational needs of young mothers will only marginalize an increasingly isolated and excluded group.

As numbers reduce further and the average age of motherhood generally increases, those who become mothers at a young age and struggle to get back into education can be expected to be among the most isolated and marginalised.

Barnardos note the need for clarity around maternity leave from education and a consideration of research into the effects of different options on babies and mothers.

Barnardo's believes that maternity should not excuse young mothers from participating in education or training, but greater clarity and guidance is needed from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) about how much time young women may take as maternity leave. This should be flexible enough to respond to individual needs and take into account up-to-date research about which options improve long-term outcomes for both babies and their mothers.

The report therefore makes a specific recommendation to extend the Care to Learn eligibility age from the current cut off of 20.

It has also been found that young mothers are rarely ready to continue their education immediately and want to spend time with their babies before re-engaging. By then they may be over 20 years old. Barnardo's recommends that in England, Care to Learn funding be extended past the age of 20 to help more young mothers get back into education or training, recognising that they may want to take time out to care for their baby.

A new report published in September 2011 evaluated supported housing pilots for teenage parents [3]. The report reiterates the warning of pushing young parents into education before they are ready.

Staff and stakeholders cautioned against losing sight of the scale of the challenge that some teenage parents face in (re)engaging in EET. They emphasised that teenage parents should not be pushed into education or training too quickly, but rather be given sufficient time to develop a stable home life, adjust to becoming a parent, and bond with their child.

It is important that young parents are not expected to fit into a mould created for young people who are not parents. It is only by acknowledging their individual needs that appropriate support can be provided, and barriers addressed.

The 'right' time to return to education

A recent survey carried out by 'prymface' in October 2011 with 75 young mothers [4] found that they were most likely to feel that the right time to return to education was within a year of having their first child (38.5%). 23% felt that the right time was when the children were at school and 22% felt that the right time was between 1 and 3 years. 15% felt that it was best to return straight away. None felt that they should wait till children were grown up or that they should never return to education, supporting the need to understand how young parents can be supported back into learning.

Parents who gave birth when they were 18 or under were more likely to feel the best time is within a year whereas older parents (who gave birth in the years they turned 19–20) felt that the best time is within a few years. Those 16 or under were more likely to feel that the best time was straight away. However many young parents commented that it depended on the individual or support available:

"Depending on circumstances of that parent – both the child and the time needed to give to the education should be considered, there are many courses / environments for learning that fit with parents it needs to be widely accessible."

"It differs with every parent, some don't want to, others like me go right ahead...."

"Depends on support available. Most important thing is to bond with child and feel like a 'proper mum'."

At the time of giving birth 15% stated that they didn't think about education at this time. Those who were working when they had their child were less likely to have thought about education when their child was born. Those at school were more likely to have wanted to remain in education and those at college were more likely to have wanted to return within a year.

Those living with a partner who was working were more likely to have not thought about education, or wanted to wait till children were at school.

Looking back, the majority of young mums felt broadly the same as at the time of birth with regards to the best time to return to education, although those who wanted to return straight away when their child was born were more likely to think that the best time was within a year rather than straight away when looking back. Those that did not think about education when their child was born were more likely to think, when looking back, that the best time was when their children were at school.

Supporting progression

Free childcare was considered the most important thing for young parents in helping them return to education, followed by support and advice, childcare close to school/college and flexible timetables. Groups just for young mums was considered least important.

What is most important in helping young parents return to education?	Average score*
Free childcare	3.8
Support and advice	3.7
Childcare close to education provider	3.7
Flexible time tables	3.6
Part time courses	3.5
Maternity leave from school/college	3.5
Home learning	3.3
Flexible start dates	3.2
Groups just for young mums	3.1

*Average score where 4 is 'very important' and 1 is 'not important at all'

'Other' suggestions included:

- Emergency leave (day) if child is ill etc
- Specific support for young parents. Tutors who understand the need for flexibility, and willing to go the extra mile for young parents.
- Maternity leave from coursework, allowances in assessments
- An income sufficient to live on.

Those who gave birth at 16 or under were more likely to state that maternity leave from school was most important and were more likely than older parents to feel that groups just for young mums are important. Those who were older than 18 were more likely to value part time courses. Those who gave birth in Summer holidays thought maternity leave was the most important thing.

Those living on their own when their child was born were more likely to value young mum groups than other parents, and they rated home learning as the least important. Those living with a working partner or parent still valued free childcare as the most important thing. Those living with a partner rated young mums groups the lowest and were more likely to value part time courses.

All parents with level 1 when they gave birth stated that free childcare was 'very important' and were more likely to state that part time courses were important than other parents. Those with no qualifications were more likely to be 16 or under so were more likely to value young mums groups than other parents and less likely to value part time courses. Those who already had a level 2 qualification when they became a parent rated 'childcare close to education provider' as important as free childcare.

Those who were working when their child was born were more likely to value home learning than other parents. All parents who were NEET stated that support and advice was 'very important', and home learning was rated as least important.

Flexible approach

Of the survey respondents, for those who gave birth during what would have been years 12 and 13, 76% were in education when they found out they were pregnant but only 26% of these wanted to remain in education when their child was born. Looking back, only 16% felt that the right time to return to education would have been straight away. 53% felt that the right time would have been within a year and 26% felt the right time would have been within a few years. This suggests that even for those engaged in education a short period of 'time off' is felt to be needed before they can return to education. Most young parents were not able to gain a level 3 qualification before having their child (36% had less than level 2) therefore many may wish to start a course, or retake a course after some time away from education. Moreover, half of those in this cohort lived with parents where at least one worked so would potentially be ineligible for discretionary funds for childcare through adult learning grants. The support needs of this cohort are similar to the needs overall with free childcare, childcare close to college, and support and advice rated highest.

For those who became parents in the year after year 13, only 21% had achieved level 3 qualification at the time their child was born. 36% thought that the best time to return to education was within a year although at the time of becoming a parent only 7% said they thought this. 29% felt that the best time was within 1–3 years. At the time of becoming a parent 28% had no interest or were not thinking about education. 57% lived with a working partner or parent suggesting that they may not be eligible for discretionary funding. Support and Advice was considered most important for this cohort, with all parents rating it 'very important', followed by free childcare. It is expected that by raising the participation age to 18 most of these parents would have remained in education until 18, and therefore may be in a better position to go on to higher education, or find suitable work, at a time that will be right for them, without the need for Care to Learn funding. It is important that support is available for those who become pregnant towards the end of a course to be able to complete their studies in a supportive environment.

It is considered important that young parents are able to return to learning flexibly to complete the level of education that would be expected at 16–18. This will not necessarily cost more in Care to Learn funding. If young parents are entitled to a year off as maternity leave (as those working are usually entitled to) then Care to Learn payments will simply be deferred for a year. Alternatively, for young parents who want to continue in education but are not ready to leave their child every day, all FE courses could also be available on a part time basis (e.g. taking 1 or 2 A levels at a time) without the need for exclusion from mainstream education. Young parent only courses tended to be of more value to younger mums or those living on their own. However, it is important that mainstream colleges are flexible and supportive to help young parents to catch up when they need time off and address any bullying or discrimination within education settings. Support and advice was considered crucial for all young parents, whatever their circumstances.

Care to Learn Proposals

A further survey by 'prymface' exploring young parents', and those who work with young parents', concerns around the Care to Learn proposals found that there were a number of issues with discretionary funds or eligibility based on income:

"If that had been in place I wouldn't have even applied for course. Young parents need certainty to be able to plan. Not days of worrying!" Former Young Parent

"It would make it difficult to identify the support available to young parents. There would be more chance of refusal as eventually budgets at individual learning providers would run out. It wouldn't be an effective system. Having a separate governing body to control the payment of care2learn is better because it makes sure that everyone is treated as fairly as possible, and also that the funding is distributed where it is needed." Current Young Parent

"Those living at home with parents/or a working partner might miss out if they don't fit the income/vulnerability criteria, and it would add an uncertainty/risk to starting a course. It allows colleges to make judgement about young parents and potentially exclude them if they chose. Those living in areas where teen pregnancy is high would be most at risk of not getting funding" Former Young Parent

"If it had gone on my parents income I would have got zilch. Just because they earn a good wage does not mean they can pay childcare too. They have a mortgage, bills, household expenses and other children to fund." Former Young Parent

"Childcare is too expensive to be taken out of the family income or young parents income. Childcare costs myself £170 a week, and my parents struggle to pay for their own living, let alone putting aside £170 for someone to take care of my child while I'm in full time education, and while they're in full time work." Current Young Parent

"In reality just because someone in the house works it does not mean that they will pay for (or feel responsible for) childcare costs. In DV relationships this can increase the control the partner holds. Alternatively, it could stop a young family for gaining employment." Former Young Parent

Similarly, reducing the amount paid for childcare was viewed as impractical as most young parents would not be able to afford to top up payments while studying.

"It is not acceptable to call it Care to Learn in that case, and feels very wrong. I believe young parents should have their child care costs fully met so they are on an equal footing with their peers in education." Young Parent Worker

"In our area anything lower would have made it impossible for me to do my course. It barely covered the hours of 3 full days as it was!" Former Young Parent

"This wouldn't be effective at all. The payments are just about enough to cover nursery places as it is. To further reduce that amount would limit the courses that people could choose. It would completely limit the choice of childcare that young parents have and, although it could reach another 1000 young parents it could also cut off many more." Current Young Parent

"Young parents would not go back to education if they had to pay £70 out of their own money. We already struggle as is it, we do NOT have a spare £70 a week to pay towards it." Current Young Parent

While the governments preferred option of reducing the age limit was considered by some to be suitable for the 'younger' young parents there were concerns that the discretionary fund would cause confusion and potentially be unfair for those wishing to start a course at 19.

“If discretionary levels of support available will vary by provider it is unfair. Too complicated. Needs to be simple and clear and universal for all young parents nationwide.”
Young Parent Worker

“Would still be helping the “younger” young parents, but may seem unfair for any young parent aged 19 as the learning provider may not cover their childcare costs.” Current Young Parent

“It is important that young parents receive a guaranteed payment that is simply to understand. Many young parents turning 19 will have had to overcome issues such as homelessness, relationship issues, conflict, abuse, etc to be a position to return to education. Paying for childcare should not be a barrier for those wishing to improve their opportunities and future for their children.” Former Young Parent

Other alternative options were explored such as guaranteeing childcare to all young parents age 19 who do not have level 3, are studying to improve their qualification level or had their further education disrupted.

“It would take the pressure off of young parents that become pregnant in year 13. They wouldn’t have to rush back to education to make sure they receive support for childcare.”
Current Young Parent

“DfE should be responsible for supporting teenage parents to reach level 3 so they are in a position to go on to higher education if they choose. However they should look beyond the standard 16–18 education system and understand how young parents want to return to education. (e.g. part time, flexible timetables)” Former Young Parent

“This seems the fairest option if the DfE MUST change C2L, this makes it available to most young parents, and doesn’t impact the young parents family if still living with their parents.” Current Young Parent

It was generally felt that Care to Learn should not change its current criteria for eligibility but if temporary reductions were necessary then it is essential that parents who have not been able to obtain a level 3 qualification were given the opportunity to do so without being rushed back into education before they are ready. Discretionary funding for 19 year olds was felt to be potentially unfair and introduced a level on uncertainty to young parents lives, affecting their ability to plan for their future.

Conclusions

Free childcare, the location of childcare and advice and support are the most important things in helping young parents return to education. Over a third of young parents who responded felt that the best time to return to education was within a year of becoming a young parent, with a further 50% split equally between 1–3 years and when children are at school. Only 15% felt that it was best to return straight away. Many comments suggested that it depended on the individual and the support available, and it should be down to personal choice. Flexible time tables, part time courses and 'maternity leave' from education were also considered important in helping parents to return.

Moving to discretionary funding for childcare for 19 year old parents starting a course ignores the complex lives of young parents. Whilst many young parents may want to stay in college, and support should be available to encourage this, others will not feel ready. Many studies have suggested that forcing young parents to leave their children and return to education before they feel ready should be avoided. It is therefore essential that paths back into education are flexible and supportive, to allow parents time to bond with their baby, get settled and adjust to life as a parent.

Childcare isn't everything – young parents often have complex lives that just don't fit into the structures that the education system expects them to – but playing around with childcare funding for young parents who want to return to education just creates another unknown and another barrier to being able to plan for their future and the future of their children.

End notes

[1] Carter, S. and Coleman, L. (2006) 'Planned' teenage pregnancy. Perspectives of young parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, Bristol, Joseph Rowntree Foundation by The Policy Press

[2] Evans, J. & Slowley, M. (2010) Not the End of the Story: Supporting Teenage Mothers Back into Education, Ilford: Barnardos

[3] Quilgars, D, Johnsen, S. Pleace, N. Beecham, J. and Bonin, E. (2011) Supporting independence? Evaluation of the teenage parent supported housing pilot – Final report, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York

[4] Survey respondents:

75 young parents responded to the survey. Over half had given birth to their first child in the last 4 years. The most common age for giving birth was in the year parents turned 17. 32% were in school when they found out they were pregnant and 32% were working, 23% were in college and 11% were NEET. 39% lived with their parents where at least one worked when they had their first child. 24% lived with a working partner. 13% lived with a partner who was not working and 13% lived with parents who were not working. 18% lived on their own. 41% had a level 2 qualification when their first child was born, 23% had no qualifications, 19% had level 3 and 16% had level 1. Those living on their own when they gave birth were more likely to have no qualifications at this time. For those who gave birth before the year they turned 19 who were living with a partner, the partner was more likely to be unemployed than working. Those who gave birth 16 or under were also most likely not to have any qualifications at that time.

Prymface is about Promoting Respect for Young Mothers and challenging the stereotypical view of 'teenage parents' that seems to encourage judgement and discrimination simply based on age.

<http://prymface.yolasite.com>

The Prymface logo is displayed in white lowercase letters on a black background. The background of the entire page is a dark, grainy, high-contrast image of a city skyline at night.