

Prymface Response to the Consultation on the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) regulations

Submitted on 12th April 2012

Background

From summer 2013 all young people will be required to participate in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17, and from summer 2015 onwards until their 18th birthday. Participating in education or training brings benefits for young people, and also for the economy and wider society. The DFE's consultation seeks views on elements of how RPA will work in practice – by consulting on the policies that will form the secondary legislation. It covers aspects such as the definition of residency; the definition of full-time education; any wider ways of working that (when combined with part-time study) could be considered as participating, and the amount and use of any fines.

Prymface is particularly concerned about the lack of consultation with young parents around the 'requirement' for all young parents to remain in full time education (>18 hours a week) until they are 18. Prymface therefore designed a survey to allow young parents to give their views.

Who responded to the survey

Between 17th March and 3rd April 88 young parents responded to survey about education, ranging from young mothers who had their babies this year, to young mothers who had their babies in the seventies. Almost half the young mothers already had a degree or higher and many more were currently studying for degrees. After they had their babies they took a variety of routes; 20% went into part-time employment, 13% started or continued a degree, 14% went into full-time employment, 8% continued with GCSEs, and 12% started or continued with A levels. A further 17% took a variety of different education routes such as vocational qualifications, alternative curriculum, access courses etc.

When young parents should go back to education?

Of the respondents, 64% returned to education, work or training when their child was less than a year old (13% were less than a month old, 29% were less than 3 months old. 17% were between 3

months and 6 months, 17% were between 6 months and a year old). 21% returned when their child was between 1 and 2 years old and 15% when their child was more than 2 years old. If they were in education when they found out they were pregnant, just over 60% took up to a year out before returning to education although only 12% stayed in education without a break. Young parents were asked whether they felt this was right for them and why. Here are a selection of the responses

"So I could have a chance to bond and settle before returning to full-time education, yes it was right for me."

"It took me some time to decide what I wanted to do"

"to give my child the best start in life I stayed at home as a fulltime parent. When she was old enough to be happy being with other people, I went back to work/started study"

"I wanted to go back sooner but financial, child cover and transport created barriers"

"I should have waited till I knew I was ready but I was under pressure from my leaving care PA"

"I wanted to get on with my life and be successful but it wasn't right for me and I dropped out"

"I was in the middle of my A-levels, and it never even occurred to me to stop!"

"I was pushed to do this by my family. On reflection, I should have had the year with the baby, I was exhausted and unprepared"

"I wanted to get back to school as soon as possible. I didn't want too much time to pass before I went back to school. I absolutely feel this was right for me"

"It was enough time for me to recover but not too long for me to fall too far behind. I had a tutor who visited me 2-3 times a week to help with lessons and homework."

"Childcare was too difficult to study full time and course wasn't available part time"

"I went on to have other children, and later joined the OU."

"I wish I could have gone back. But leaving my baby every day felt wrong to me. Aren't mums meant to look after their babies? But I was leaving him with strangers every day."

"I had a home tutor to complete my GCSE's. This worked well between midwife appointments, building a home and morning sickness!"

"I was breast feeding at the time and I needed time to bond with my son."

"My daughter was born in the summer holidays between the first and second year of my A-levels, and it worked well for me."

"I had no support, no money, no guidance, no help, I was very ill and fell through every safety net there was (i.e. I was turned away wherever I turned for help)"

"My college course that I took up was 3 days out of the week so I didn't feel as if I was "giving up" my son. I then eased into an extra two days of work placement which went smoothly."

"I was sent to a special unit for pregnant schoolgirls. We were given 6 weeks off after the birth, then returned to studies. I went on from there to FE and HE – I am now educated to post grad level."

Young mums were asked "If you had to say, how long do you think is the maximum time that young mothers should be allowed out of education if they have a baby under 18? (If there was also an option of going back sooner if they chose to)". 28% of the young mums felt that young mothers under 18 should be allowed more than a year out of education, or that there should be NO time limit. A further 30% felt that young mothers under 18 should be allowed up to one year out of education. None felt that young mothers should have to stay in education without a break, although 8% felt the maximum time off should be a month, a further 9% felt the maximum should be two months, 9% felt it should be three months and 13% felt the maximum should be 6 months off. Many of the comments, however, were about personal choice, while ensuring there is support in schools/colleges for mothers to return.

"It is a mother's personal choice."

"A mum shouldn't have to go back until she feels ready but also a year or under so she doesn't get stuck in a rut"

"It should be a personal choice whether you want to return to education or not- it's what's right for you and your child."

"I would say a year, for mothers who would still be under 18 when their child turns 1. An older mother is allowed a year of maternity leave – I believe younger mothers should have the option to spend time bonding with her child, instead of being forced back into education (if that's not what they want)."

"I believe they should have the opportunity to complete their education to the legal level but there should be no unnecessary pressure."

"They need to be able to focus on the new baby, but also too long a break would destroy any study habit. going back must include sensitive and sensible childcare arrangements."

"The first year of life is developmentally important and babies should have the best start in life, however, young mothers should be encouraged to carry on with their own lives too and not "give up" on their own qualifications"

"Because young mothers should be able to decide what is right for them and their families and not have it dictated to them. Whether it be staying in education, returning in one week, one year or never. It should be their choice."

"Education after becoming 18 should be encouraged and incentivised. But not at the expense of your bond with your child."

"I don't think that a decision about how anyone chooses to live their life should be made for them. I am all for completing education but no one has the right to dictate how and when it's done."

"It depends entirely on circumstances...childbirth is hard whatever your age, you should only go back when it is right for you."

"Babies need their mums for the first year at least. You miss out on so much if you leave then. No mum should be forced to go back before the child reaches school age in my opinion."

"Some people don't trust nurserys. Some mothers want time to bond and they need their own time and should only go back into education when they are ready. But if the child has a disability they should be allowed more time off."

"Maternity leave for women in work is a year isn't it? I don't see that education should be different. Ideally it would be sooner, as I'd imagine it's harder to go back to education, but perhaps it could be supported by home schooling of some kind in the meantime?"

"A mother of any age should have the chance to stay at home and mother their new born and bond without the extra pressure of having to return to work or education. Especially if they have had a traumatic birth such as ceasarian delivery"

"If people are allowed this time off work – so should young Mums. They should then be able to make up for the year they missed after."

"It's mandatory in MA, USA for mothers to have a minimum 6 weeks of maternity leave. Doctors may extend this time. It was enough for me but short enough to not fall out of the school schedule."

"It depends entirely on the situation they are in. It needs to be their decision, but the support should be there to make a true choice possible."

"The most important thing is bonding with the child and forming relationships. Education is not a thing that only happens when you're a certain age."

How much time should young parents spend studying?

As well as asking young mums about the right time to return to education we also asked about how much time they spent in education (class time) a week when they did return. For those who returned to education, 18% initially studied for 18 hours a week or more (this is classed as full time education), 27% studied for less than 6 hours a week. 18% studied between 6 and 12 hours a week and 37% studied between 12 and 18 hours a week. Young parents were asked whether this was right for them and why.

"My course was work based but coursework was completed at home or I was given some time during the work day to complete tasks."

"I chose to study 3 Highers (equivalent to A Levels), which took me up to 17 hours per week. It wasn't too much, wasn't too little – I got to spend time with my son, at the same time as building a future. It was a good balance."

"Access course was part time – I was also working so could not study more."

"I tried several times to return to education, but it just isn't geared up to support young parents. There are no allowances made in consideration of your responsibilities outside of the classroom. It is not reasonable to expect a single, still-at-home 18yr old and a single, mum-of-two (for example) to be able to dedicate the same time, effort and energy to coursework. It just isn't possible."

"I wanted to complete the course at a good level and ASAP if I went to college part time my course would have been 6 years so I did 3 years instead."

"My lecturers were very supportive and let me go in for just 2/3 of my lectures, so I only had to do 3 days per week"

"I had to go back full time to finish my A-levels and did two A-levels in just one year. I had to go into college full-time in order to complete the subjects."

"I was very lucky and was offered the opportunity to become a peer adviser. I gained free childcare and learned some great skills and confidence. It was these stepping stones that encouraged and supported me to become a teenage parent support adviser."

"I stuck to my timetable. I went home to breastfeed in between as there were no facilities available. It was right for me at the time."

"It was too much because my boy was young"

"That was the hours of 2 A level classes."

"My daughter was still very young so I studied when she slept. It was extremely tiring but I wouldn't change it"

"It was normal timetable hours, however it was set out for early mornings and late evenings which was difficult as the bus takes 40 minutes to get to the college (and I have to drop my son off to the childminders – 10 mins in the opposite direction), and I didn't drive which made it even harder."

When young parents were asked 'if you had to say, how many hours a week do you think young parents should study (minimum) if they are under 18?', 31% stated that there should be no minimum number of hours. 16% suggested a minimum between 2 and 6 hours, 36% suggested a minimum between 6 and 12 hours. 17% suggested that the minimum should be between 12 and 18 hours (although only 4% actually stated it should be 18 hours). This strongly suggests that young mums do not feel that young parents should be 'required' to be in full time (i.e. more than 18 hours) education and that young parents should be able to choose the hours that are right for them.

"However many they feel is right for them"

"Education is very important but so is being a parent. A balance needs to be found but 10 hours is a good starting point."

"I think 8 hours per week is a good starting point for getting back into education after having a child."

"a couple of hours a day should keep them on track with their peers"

"10 hours a week is 2 hours per working day – this should be manageable together with other responsibilities without creating so much pressure that they are "set up to fail"

"With support, I think an evening class would be a good idea. 3-4 hours of study one night a week would probably be possible, as long as the homework was not too in depth or time consuming."

"I think some young mothers find it difficult and this should be taken into consideration but I also think they should be encouraged to go back full time"

"So they still have time with their child/ren. People need to remember that they are a parent and cant be doing school work all the time, otherwise the child/ren will get neglected."

"Spending time with your newborn, developing an attachment and raising them is most important. Education can be continued anytime but your child won't stop developing while you go to school"

"the mother should be gradually bought back into education. Being a first mother is a very strenuous job so you don't want to bombard them and make them feel overwhelmed and want to give up. Even with studying 8 hours a week they would still need additional support with making sure they were up to date with work. etc."

"Ideally there would be support allowing young parents to return to studying full time when they are ready. However, as this is not always available and as I regard any contact with education as preferable to none, I think it is appropriate to set no minimum on a young parent's study hours; however, this must be matched to an ultimate expectation that they will return to doing enough hours to gain the experience and qualifications they need."

"It needs to be doable, otherwise people will be put off."

"Parents over 18 are not forced to go back to work in any time frame why should young mothers be made to do so."

"Some young parents are not in a position to study, and it is not up to anyone to force extra pressure on them. The support mechanisms should, however, be there to enable them to return to study."

"2 hours a day is enough as well as caring for a child."

"No one should be stressed over studies and exams. Being a new parent is stressful for all mothers whatever their age. However, for some mums study and the companionship it brings may be a relief from parenting stress. Everyone is different."

"At least a 1/2 day each day helps keep up"

"Everyone is different, education may not be right for that young mum, she may be better off giving her child 100% of her time until they are older? It worked for me! By forcing some it may cause more damage than good"

What support is needed?

Young mums were asked how important different types of support were in helping parents return to education. Young mums ordered the support as follows:

1. Free Childcare
2. Childcare close to education provider
3. Part time courses
4. Support and advice
5. Flexible time tables
6. Maternity leave from school/college
- 5 (joint). Home learning and Flexible start dates
6. Groups just for young mums

Other support that young mums suggested would be useful included:

"Someone to help with giving advice about housing/money they can claim/ and about courses they want to do."

"It took me over 3 months to sort out child care funding when I first went back to college, due to a ridiculous amount of forms and phonecalls – which was very daunting and stressful at 19 years old, when I was nervous about starting and didn't quite know what I was doing. There needs to be more support for younger parents when trying to sort out child care. It needs to be done quicker."

"regular goal setting with and monitoring by a supervisor/coach/mentor"

"I believe child development should be taught to both sexes in secondary school, to help children understand how babies brains grow and develop, then society needs to stop expecting parents to hand over their young children to strangers – I believe forcing that seperation to be quite damaging."

"Financial support and training for teaching staff to understand the demands of being a young parents – parents are protected by law in a work environment but not in education"

"Help with driving lessons"

"Support from staff members or maybe youth workers that have been hired specifically to work with young mothers. This is to help them with their work but also support to with things such as parenting. One of the biggest things i appreciated when attending a young mothers group was having a staff member to ask questions about parenting, benefits and receive non judgemental advice."

"Specialist support networks for young parents to help them along their journey, seperate to that offered from the learning provider, and unbiased advice"

"Support such as provided by the PIPS team In Leicester now disbanded; providing emotional support, financial advice, housing advice, advocacy, contraception advice, relationship support, peer support, encouragement, careers advice, child care support....."

"A good network of friends and other parents is the best support. Family is important too. It's important not to be treated differently to other mothers so you can be part of a network."

"Personal advisors for Mothers"

"Tutoring. It was essential throughout my educational success."

"Councillors trained specifically with young parents to help them with any financial or emotional difficult that they may encounter. Maybe an officer per college/school that can "be in charge" of the young parents there – could be integrated in with LSA's or SENCO's somehow."

"You just need people to understand and not be judgemental. When I found out I was pregnant one of my A level tutors asked me how I expected to be able to look after a baby when I couldn't even hand my coursework in on time. Not v. understanding!"

Conclusions

In conclusion, the responses show a range of experiences and views but a common theme is one about respecting individual choice. Young parents clearly are capable of making responsible decisions based on what they feel is right for their family. While full time education may be suitable for some young parents, and there should be appropriate support available to allow, or even encourage, this, for others who may have housing issues, regular appointments with support services (such as Family Nurse Partnership), family issues or simply do not feel comfortable leaving their baby yet, it can be the last thing they need. Indeed, when asked only 4% of young mums felt that the minimum number of hours in education should be 18 (full time).

What now?

At the beginning of 2012 it was announced that DfEs plans to restrict Care to Learn funding to under 19s would be put on hold. This means that there is no reason why education providers can not also be flexible around provision and acknowledge that sometimes it may just take a bit more time for young parents to complete FE. Recognising the importance of settling into being a parent and caring for a child should not be ignored, just because a parent happens to be under 19.

It is really important that young parents voices are included in these reforms. Young parents should be supported to remain in education, which means ensuring that support and high quality childcare provision is available, but they should also be allowed to respond to their role as parent by having a period of 'maternity leave' allowed if needed, and the option to study part time.

This is the offer that research suggests young parents 'require' to get the most out of education:

- 1. When a student becomes pregnant, the education provider should offer support and advice around education issues.**
- 2. The education provider should allow the student to continue in education while pregnant but be flexible around sick leave and appointments, just as an employer should.**
- 3. The education provider should be able to provide accurate information about the range of educational options after the birth.**
- 4. The education provider should be able to offer a maternity leave that is suitable to that young person of up to 12 months if necessary, as employers do, but with clear routes back into education. Young parents who are the main carer for their child should not be forced to return to education too soon.**

5. The education provider should be able to offer part time study or reduced hours to achieve any level of qualification. This may include specialist provision, taking a one year course over two years, taking a reduced number of A Levels, offering support with distance learning to complete courses. Young parents who are the main carer for their child should not be forced to study/work full time.

6. Support should be available throughout a young parent's education with education providers allowing flexibility in attendance and deadlines, for example, when a child is sick, where there are housing issues, childcare problems or appointments with support services such as the Family Nurse Partnerships.

7. Part time students who are parents should still be eligible for the Education Bursary to help with travel and equipment.

8. The provision of childcare should also be considered in terms of its location and quality. Ideally parents would be able to study close to the childcare provision to offer both reassurance and practicality. Support should be offered to find suitable childcare and the education provider should also allow the parent and child time to get used to the childcare provision.

9. Discrimination and bullying towards young parents by education providers, staff and other students should be monitored and understood.

10. Young parents should be involved in any decisions around raising the participation age and consulted with on any changes that affect them.

Young parents should not be punished for having a child. They have not broken the law; the state needs to respect the family life of young parents just as the state is required to respect the family life of older parents. (Human Rights Act, 1998). The DfE consultation around what constitutes as 'full time' should therefore take account of the value of caring for children, just as it is suggesting accounting for 'working not for reward'. If the importance of raising children is rejected then it potentially ignores the priorities of young parents and risks excluding them even further.

Additional support for flexibility for young parents in further education

See below for further evidence:

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

"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." 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

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 logo for Prymface is displayed in white text on a black rectangular background. The word "prymface" is written in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The background of the logo area has a textured, grainy appearance.

prymface