Teenage Mothers and Social Isolation: The Role of Friendship as Protection against Relational Exclusion

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This article explores links made between teenage mothers and isolation: in particular, the notion of 'relational exclusion' (Kidger, 2004). Political conceptualisations of social exclusion often ignore this aspect and instead focus on the economic dynamics of exclusion. As a consequence, policies aimed at addressing the exclusion of teenage parents often focus on education and employment as solutions. This article argues that friendships are overlooked as a source of potential support. It therefore builds on work that has observed teenage mothers' isolation and loneliness to examine how a teenage pregnancy affects a young woman's friendship networks. It then goes on to expand understanding of how new friendships are formed and the types of support they provide. The article concludes by proposing that social policy has a role in facilitating friendship support through investment, integrating group support with one-to-one methods and tackling stigma.

Keywords: Teenage motherhood, teenage pregnancy, friendship, social support, social exclusion.

Introduction

This article discusses informal forms of social support for young[1] mothers. It is specifically concerned with relational exclusion and the potential role of friendship as a protection against this. Relational exclusion is a term borrowed from Kidger (2004) referring to a lack of social support and relationships. Kidger argues that the dominant political view which links inclusion primarily through involvement in education or employment is inadequate. Rather, an approach that takes into account the relational elements of social exclusion experienced by young mothers is needed. This article fleshes out work that identifies young mothers as experiencing alienation, loneliness or isolation (Phoenix, 1991; Speak *et al.*, 1995; de Jonge, 2001; Kidger, 2004; Arai, 2007; YWT, 2017). It draws on a qualitative study with a small group of young mothers in South East England to examine the relationship between these experiences and friendships. In doing so, this article discusses why friendships may change or fracture in order to add new understanding to these experiences of isolation.

This work also builds on a piece of research conducted by the first author (Ellis-Sloan, 2015) that discussed support groups for young mothers. The women in that study reported that friendships built on shared experiences of teenage motherhood engendered a sense of belonging and normality. It was argued that friendships that are formed within young

parents' groups can act as an antidote to isolation and loneliness and provide informal social support. This article develops this finding to consider the potential for friendship as a mode of social support for young mothers. As Barnes (2012: 85) notes, 'it is important to understand the significance of friendship in order to develop social policies which can support a variety of caring relationships'. We therefore conclude by discussing the potential role of social policy in facilitating friendship as a form of support and, in doing so, join a body of literature examining potential social policy approaches to supporting young parents and their families (see for example Kidger, 2004; Hosie, 2007; Dodds, 2009; Rudoe, 2014).

Teenage motherhood, social support and friendship

As a number of academics have argued, teenage pregnancy is not inevitably problematic. Robust challenges have been made to popular and political claims of a causal relationship between teenage pregnancy and social problems such as educational failure, welfare dependency and poverty (see for example Cater and Coleman, 2006; Arai, 2009; Duncan *et al.*, 2010). Nonetheless, we cannot overlook that young parents do face some challenges and that teenage pregnancy can have a compounding effect on previously experienced disadvantages (Hawkes *et al.*, 2004). Of particular concern here is the potential that young parents may lack sufficient social support.

There is, according to Oakley (1992), something of a conceptual crossover between social support and friendship. Social support can be defined as well-intentioned actions, given willingly to someone with whom there is a personal relationship, producing a positive response (Hupcey, 1998). Defining 'friendship' itself is acknowledged as problematic (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) but the relationship is broadly considered to differ from those with kin in that it is self-chosen and voluntary (Allan, 2005). As with Pederson and Lewis (2012), we take friendship to signify informal ties between people who support each other in various ways. Friends may offer material support such as help with money, meals or housework or 'comparison support' from another mother (Logsdon *et al.*, 2005). They may also provide emotional support including intimacy and attachment, reassurance (Oakley, 1992). Friends can therefore provide social support, but they can also be a social support in and of themselves. This might be as soul-mates, fun friends or companions (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). They can play a distinctive role such as being a confidante or as someone to socialise with (Allan, 1996) and so may complement familial relationships (Willmott, 1987).

Spencer and Pahl (2006) argue that the distinction between friend and familial relationships are beginning to blur in a process they call 'suffusion'. This chimes with the arguments of Weeks *et al.* (2001) who argue that non-familial ties are becoming more prominent. As daily contact with relatives has reduced, intimate relationships are less stable and roles become less certain, friends are argued to 'provide an important normative reference point' (Budgeon, 2006: 1.8). For some, they have become a 'family of choice' and a key provider of care and support in everyday life (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). The prominence of 'families of choice' amongst gay men and lesbians has been linked to the rejection, problematisation and marginalisation they often experience from their biological families. Friendships are then particularly important for stigmatised groups. This article argues that one such group is teenage mothers.

Table 1   Characteristics of sample at time of first birth

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Class	Relationship status	Church member	Living arrangements
Anna	18	White	MC	Partnered	No	With family
Chrissy	16	White	WC	Single	No	Hostel
Sharon	19	White	WC	Partnered	No	Hostel
Charlotte	16	White	MC	Single	Yes	With family
Kelly	19	White	WC	Partnered	Yes	House-share
Mel	17	BAME	WC	Married	Yes	With family

Young parents are aware of their problematic, even pathological, depiction in the popular imagination (Jewell *et al.*, 2000; Kirkman *et al.*, 2001). They report experiences of 'dirty looks' and derogatory comments in public spaces that can make them feel isolated and alone (Alldred and David, 2010; Formby *et al.*, 2010; Ellis-Sloan, 2014). Whitehead (2001) argues stigma goes beyond 'looks', leading to a process of 'social death'. This is where stigma perpetuates teenage mothers' isolation and social exclusion, negatively affecting mental and physical health (SmithBattle, 2013). The isolating effect of stigma can result in young parents avoiding leaving the house and refraining from accessing formal support services (de Jonge, 2001; McDermott *et al.*, 2004; Craig and Stanley, 2006; SmithBattle, 2013).

The stigma attached to youthful parenting also impacts on young women's friendships. Young mothers report former friends gossiping about them and using sexually degrading names (Alldred and David, 2010; Formby *et al.*, 2010). Informal social support from friends is therefore not guaranteed. Alienation may be exacerbated if youthful parenting is unusual amongst a friendship group or neighbourhood (Arai, 2007) or if a young mother is housed away from existing social networks (Speak *et al.*, 1995; Kidger, 2004). Mothering responsibilities have also been found to lead to isolation (YWT, 2017). A lack of social support among pregnant or parenting adolescents has been associated with distress, depression and feelings of helplessness (Stapleton, 2010). Yet friendship can have a powerful role in improving self-worth and challenging stereotypes (Alexander *et al.*, 2010). Appropriate support can aid successful transitions into adulthood and motherhood (Formby *et al.*, 2010), increase self-esteem and help young mothers to create positive identities for themselves (Graham and McDermott, 2005). Friends are therefore a potential source of emotional support (Bunting and McAuley, 2004). Before going on to consider how a teenage pregnancy may affect friendship (and thus social support), the following section provides some detail of the sample.

Sample and method

This article draws on qualitative interviews with six mothers in their early twenties who had their first child as a teenager.

The women were interviewed about the impact that becoming a teenage mother had on their friendships, how new friendships developed and what support they provided. Other relationships were not expressly discussed but were mentioned at various points by the women. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by Table 1, by virtue of their class position,

living arrangements or relationship status, some of the women had additional sources of support. Furthermore, the role of religion was also significant for three women. Although condemnation from some church members was evident, the community of the church was also a valuable source of friendship and having a faith provided personal reassurance. As these sources of support are not always available to young mothers, these specific experiences need to be borne in mind.

Data was analysed thematically following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved searching for concepts and themes within individual interviews, before finding patterns (and differences) between interviews. These were coded and synthesised to create an overall narrative of the trajectory of friendships. We now turn to that data with a discussion of three overarching key themes: the effects of a teenage pregnancy on friendship; how new friendship were formed; and the role of friends as providers of social support.

Key findings

How a teenage pregnancy affects friendships

Participants reported that their pregnancy prompted mixed reactions from friends. Chrissy recalled that some friends said she was 'stupid' for keeping the baby and Charlotte reported that some declared: '. . . you've ruined your life'. For others, their decision to continue the pregnancy led to them feeling rejected by friends:

> A couple of my college friends just thought I had made a really bad decision keeping the baby and seemed to not be interested in spending time with me anymore because I was kind of like damaged goods (Charlotte)

> I think a lot of people pulled back away from me . . . you know it's just like, everyone's just like 'ahhh I want to run fast away from you in case I catch the pregnancy' (Mel)

These accounts and the language used reflect common conceptions of teenage parenting as inevitably disastrous. Interestingly, the reactions reported by Mel were from church members. It could then be assumed that faith plays a role in the exclusion of young mothers. Nevertheless, Mel rejects this idea by highlighting the support of older church members and linking the reactions of younger church members to a divergence of life paths:

> They were coming to their life where things were being cool, they'd just started part-time jobs or finishing school, that sort of stuff . . . but mine was about to become different . . .

As has been found elsewhere, being unable to participate in the same activities as peers can cause friendships to fracture (Formby *et al.*, 2010; Speak *et al.*, 1995) and young parents often segregate themselves from non-parenting teenagers due to diverging lifestyles (Kaplan, 1997). This was also the case here:

> I had to stop that sort of lifestyle and they didn't want to . . . I didn't feel like I could hang around them when I was pregnant (Sharon)

> I stopped hanging out with them pretty much instantly because I was obviously quite vulnerable being pregnant and I couldn't join in with what they were doing (Charlotte)

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Some friendships did remain intact however:

> She used to meet up with me once a week and just go through stuff and just say 'would you like me to help out' (Mel)

> Some of them would come to the house and fold baby clothes and coo at stuff with me and they genuinely wanted to know what was going on [and] how I felt ... they were all really interested in the changes and the scan pictures (Charlotte)

When teenage parenting is publicly stigmatised, it is difficult for young parents to enjoy pregnancy and look forward to impending motherhood; even more so when families may react negatively or take time to 'come round', as was the case for all but Kelly here. For Chrissy and Sharon, the (albeit temporary) rejection they experienced from members of their families would have been additionally distressing. Here we can see that having supportive and non-judgmental friends meant being able to adopt a more positive frame of mind. As Charlotte found, this helped her to 'enjoy it a bit more instead of focusing on "oh crap, I'm 16 and pregnant"'.

Kelly was the only participant whose friendships stayed constant throughout the pregnancy and into motherhood. Kelly's group of friends had been close for some time and had already weathered other changes such as a period when she lived elsewhere in the country. Furthermore, their relative maturity (19) may have meant they were more ready to adapt to Kelly's changed situation. The group made a conscious effort to meet up once a week and while Kelly could not drink or go clubbing during her pregnancy, the group would get together and watch films instead. This type of effort and accommodation of the expectant mothers' needs and limitations appears to be key to the continuation of friendship. Where friends accommodated the young mothers parenting responsibilities, it seems more likely that friendships survived; when they did not, pre-pregnancy friendships waned:

> Rather than going out and doing whatever they wanted to do, they'd come and see me. It was very nice, I kind of needed it (Chrissy)

> I haven't got a babysitter and you need to plan these things in advance ... which is why I think the friendship group from school kind of slipped away a bit, I think they eventually stopped asking because when I said no twice, they just kind of assumed that I wasn't going to be going out at all anymore (Anna)

For some, the arrival of the baby and the attendant challenges of dealing with a newborn (including a divergence in lifestyle from non-parenting friends) led to isolation and sometimes withdrawal of much needed friend support:

> People would come and visit because they thought it was exciting at first, but then the novelty wears off and there's a screaming baby that needs feeding and nappies still need changing every day, they're not so interested anymore (Anna)

> When [daughter] was younger ... I didn't really know anyone, so if my mum was at work and my friends were at work I didn't really have anyone to do anything with (Sharon)

> I was on my own quite a lot and so I felt quite cut off from friends because I couldn't really get out and meet them with a small child that easily (Charlotte)

It is worth noting here that becoming a parent at any age is a challenging experience as women struggle to deal with the needs of a newborn, alongside the physical and emotional after-effects of having given birth. Older mothers also experience a reduction of friendship circles following childbirth (Gottlieb and Pancer, 1988) and report finding little time, energy or financial resources to maintain pre-parenting friendships (Cronin, 2015). Barclay *et al*. (1997: 727) found that '"becoming a mother" for most women caused them to feel isolated, alone and depleted rather than nurtured and supported'. There is then a legitimate concern for all mothers in terms of their mental health and support networks. There is also, however, a specific concern for young mothers who may be more likely to experience additional challenges which can lead to isolation. For example, in this cohort, Chrissy and Anna had been homeless leading to numerous moves and temporary accommodation, Charlotte's relocation to a new town led to isolation exacerbated by financial difficulties. Additionally, both Charlotte and Chrissy experienced single parenthood:

> Being a single parent especially is very, very, very lonely . . . I was 6 days out of 7 at home, on my own (Chrissy)

> . . . you can feel really lonely (Charlotte)

Even when partnered, their partner's employment meant the women were largely coping alone:

> I felt really low . . . I used to look forward to going to the baby weighing clinics, like literally just for that half an hour that I was there just because then I was out and around other people and it's not just me and a screaming baby . . . [partner] worked shift work . . . sometimes he kind of wasn't there at all (Anna)

> [Partner] worked all the time, at weekends and stuff so I was really isolated . . . days were long and boring and dull . . . (Charlotte)[2]

Despite the initial reduction in friendship circles, these women did go on to form new friendships.

Forming new friendships

Most of the women described varied friendship groups much expanded from when they were pregnant or in the early days of motherhood. Friendships were formed in a variety of settings including toddler groups, college, university, church or through their child's school or nursery. As Phoenix (1991) highlights, institutions such as schools facilitate the structure of friendships. Although these women had seen their friendship groups reduce as they left school and college to focus on motherhood, joining other institutions (or having their children join institutions) provided routes to new friendships. However, it was not always the case that the women were socially included in this sense. Chrissy related how becoming a mother at sixteen had impacted on her education and accumulation of work experience impeding her job prospects. Her attempts to return to college were further hindered by childcare issues, temporary housing and poor mental health. Possibly as a result, Chrissy was the only young parent not to report a wide range of new friends.

For those who did report new friendships, it was important that, wherever the friendship was formed, the friend needed to 'get it' (Anna). That is, friends understood and were supportive of mothering responsibilities and its challenges. They did not need to be parents themselves but other mothers were usually preferred and were the most likely source for new friendships. Shared experiences and timetables led to the women spending more time with who were often referred to as 'mum friends' than with other groups of friends. This did not necessarily lead to them being considered 'close' however. Charlotte distinguished between 'deep' and 'surface-level' friends, with the latter referring to those seen regularly but rarely confided in, such as mothers at the school gate. Kelly felt her close group of friends provided as much social interaction as she wanted and described mothers she met at groups as 'just people I see'. As Sharon differentiates, 'some [friends] are just to see and our kids play, whereas some friends are my friends and then we just both have children'. Some 'mum friends' therefore seemed to be more about companionship than friendship.

Interestingly, the shared experience of *teenage* motherhood did not often lead to a friendship; in fact this was the least likely pool for friendships to come from. This is despite Chrissy, Mel and Charlotte having attended groups specifically for young parents and Chrissy having lived in hostels for young mothers. For Chrissy, the way in which the young parent group was promoted did little to encourage her to see it as a positive place for making friends and receiving support:

> I had to go to one for teenage pregnant people. Had to. I was told by the midwife that if I didn't do it I was a bad person pretty much

It may simply be that these women had very little in common with other teenage mothers they met. We have already seen above how a shared experience of motherhood does not necessarily lead to a close friendship. Nonetheless, the language used indicates that it may be something more than this:

> They were like 'I don't know how I got pregnant, one night stand', and I was like . . . I'm totally not in the same world as you. It was horrible! They were just like, 'oh I got drunk one night and it happened', and I was just like, that's nowhere near like me (Mel)

Rather than saying she has nothing (or little) in common with other teenage mothers she met, Mel appears to be saying she is a different kind of person. Her use of the word 'horrible' appears as a value judgment of their situation, or at least their attitude to it. At first glance, Charlotte appears to identify with the women she met at the group. She reports feeling 'safe' there and did make a friend:

> We were all skint, none of us had massive houses with nurseries we were painting, or husbands, or partners that had money or anything. Half of us were single, most of us lived with our parents or had council places so we had loads in common

Nonetheless, she later describes mothers at the young parents group as 'pretty chavvy and still hadn't kind of matured enough to be parents'. This appears to be a way of differentiating herself from them; she, in contrast, is mature enough to be a mother. The specific differentiation being made becomes clearer with Charlotte's use of the word

'chavvy'. As Raisborough and Adams (2008) argue, this is effective (and derogatory) shorthand for the white working class. Charlotte's identification as being similarly 'skint', however, indicates she is not simply talking about the traditional definition of class as being linked to wealth or employment. Perhaps then she is drawing on normative and problematic constructions of 'the' teenage mother. As found by Ellis-Sloan (2014), being a young parent oneself does not prevent the acceptance of such stereotypes. Nor does it preclude their use in 'othering' as a defence against similar judgments being levied against the self. Rather than a class judgement then, these women may simply be guarding themselves against the stigma of 'the' teenage mother.

As a consequence of these experiences, most of the women's 'mum friends' were older than themselves, sometimes considerably. This is a marked change from the women's experience during pregnancy where age was a factor for exclusion as older mothers made Sharon feel 'awkward' and Charlotte 'pushed out'. Once the women were mothers however, the shared experience of motherhood overrode age differences. Furthermore, the age gap was seen as positive in terms of the kinds of support these new friends could provide. The following section will now go on to discuss types of support in more detail.

Friends as providers of social support

As acknowledged above, different friends can meet different needs. Accordingly, Charlotte refers to 'bundles' of friends who 'provide different things in terms of friendship'. For example, older 'mum friends' were appreciated for their maturity, advice and a shared experience of parenting. They were positioned as responsible and knowing:

> They've experienced stuff and have done the 'dud' decisions and the good decisions and they can give me sound advice (Charlotte)

Anna reported that the only friend support she got was from those with children. However, as noted above, some 'mum friends' remained at the level of an acquaintance, someone with whom to share the experience of a toddler group or a park together. Either way, 'mum friends' provided comparison support in the form of empathy as well as a relief from isolation:

> People with children understand . . . if you talk to someone who doesn't have children they don't generally tend to get it, I think they're like 'why are you moaning about your children' whereas other people with children know how stressful it can be (Anna)

> It's just nice to meet up with them and for our kids to play . . . they are important. They make me happy on a weekly basis to see them and have a chat (Sharon)

Younger (and non-parenting friends) also played an important role however:

> It's really nice to have friends who don't have kids otherwise you just talk about kids and babies all the time and it's really important to not just be a mum and be able to just go out and have fun and be "Charlotte" sometimes (Charlotte)

> We had fun and I had someone to talk to and I wasn't just being a mum. I was still being a young person, which I think sometimes I need to feel more (Chrissy)

It was noted that a text or social media could be enough to make them feel supported. However, this was clearly an addition rather than a replacement for face-to-face contact. Friends enabled women to leaving the confines of the house and broke the monotony of caring for small children:

> It's like an opportunity to get out of the house and not do the same thing that I do every single day. It makes me feel a lot better when I go out and see them (Kelly)

These women expressed the importance of retaining an element of fun and a sense of self through friends, but support went much deeper than just this. Chrissy described how she would class her closest friend (a non-mother) 'as family'. Chrissy's account seems to confirm Spencer and Pahl's argument of 'suffusion'; however, support offered by friends and family was generally more distinct. As was found by Allen (1996), practical support was more often sought from family members. The women did not expect practical help from friends, but simply for them to be empathetic and to listen. Emotional support was explicitly stated as a crucial part of friendship and it was clear from the women's accounts just how vital this was:

> Without them I probably would have had some sort of nervous breakdown (Anna)

> [They were] pretty much my sanity! Like, life line, I think I would have probably lost the plot without them (Charlotte)

> I probably actually wouldn't be here if it weren't for her because I was very suicidal back then... she got me through it... if it weren't for her I would have lost my son to Social Services . . . [she helped to] sort out my emotions, stop me from cutting myself (Chrissy)

These expressions as to the importance of friendship as a source of emotional support should not be underestimated. Berrington *et al.* (2005: 21) found that teenage motherhood is associated with a higher occurrence of 'malaise' and others have found that young parents are likely to suffer from poor mental health later in life (Ermisch, 2003; Wiggins *et al.*, 2005; Hawkes, 2010). Whilst friendship support may not mitigate underlying causes of mental health problems, navigating such challenges is likely to be made all the more difficult without the emotional support friends evidently supply. The article will now go on to consider the implications of these findings.

Summary and discussion

Five out of these six young mothers reported a drastically reduced friendship circle as a result of their pregnancies. The withdrawal of friends (or in some cases from friends) was related to stigmatising conceptions of teenage pregnancy or diverging life paths. It is worth considering that some of these friendships may have waned in later teenage years anyway, as friends dispersed to different colleges, universities or workplaces. Changes more in tune with the 'accepted' life course may have then presented opportunities for new friendships. What is of concern, however, was the suddenness of the change. The reduction of friendship groups happened at a time when the women needed more support, not less. As with other young parents, these women faced significant challenges alongside the everyday trials of parenting such as homelessness, single parenthood and financial hardship. Coping without friends for support is likely to increase the strain and test the

coping ability of young mothers. This is especially when support from other sources is not guaranteed. For instance, although all the women in this sample went on to have good relationships with their families, relations were initially fraught for all but Kelly. Furthermore, whilst loneliness and isolation is not an uncommon experience for new mothers at any age, the fracturing of friendships amongst older mothers is unlikely to be a direct rejection of the young woman and her pregnancy. To lose friends in this way added significant hurt to an already difficult situation.

This article moved beyond this moment of fracture to consider new friendships. It is clear from the data that friends were highly valued and a source of companionship, advice and emotional support. These findings chime with research into older mothers' friendships, in that, after an initial depletion, new friendships develop and often with other parents (Pedersen and Lewis, 2012). Cronin (2015: 699) refers to these as 'domestic friendships' and defines them as friendships based on the 'shared challenges and emotions connected with motherhood'. This article therefore supports Cronin's (2015: 10) argument that 'mum friends' have an important role in women's lives in providing, amongst other things, support and pleasure. This is no less the case for young mothers.

By moving beyond a snapshot of the early months of motherhood, we gain a more rounded picture of the lives of young mothers. This work therefore demonstrates that relational exclusion is not an inevitable consequence of teenage pregnancy. Whilst the young women's pregnancy did have an effect on friendship circles, some friendships remained integral, and isolation was not long-lasting. This article has demonstrated that friends can act as an important form of social support. Taken on its own, this might be used to suggest that young parents are therefore well-supported and do not require social policy interventions designed to deal with relational exclusion. Yet, both this and the previous study (Ellis-Sloan, 2015) include a group of women who are 'engaged' and who do have friends. We can then infer from a group of women who, by and large, have social support through friendships, what young mothers who do not may lack. Moreover, it is evident that friendships cannot be formed in a vacuum; new friendships were formed through institutions and where those institutions were not accessed (as was the case with Chrissy) new friendships were less likely to develop. It is an important point therefore that in order to be relationally included, there is a need to be socially included in a wider sense. We therefore conclude by asking, what role does that state have in aiding relational inclusion?

Policy implications

Continued investment

Since the end of the last Labour government, the wider social policy context has had a significant effect on the amount and type of support available for young parents. The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) had been a flagship policy under Tony Blair offering support to teenage parents while working to lower the rate of teenage pregnancy. Following the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition however, the TPS was discontinued and the austerity agenda quickly became 'the justifying mantra' (Levitas, 2012: 322) for a raft of economic and social policy decisions. The combination of this meant the withdrawal of ring-fenced funding with many local authorities reducing or abolishing posts and closing support groups (Ellis-Sloan, 2015). Local authorities were

encouraged to formulate their own targets for teenage pregnancy reduction and utilise the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) as a means to support young parents (Teather, 2011). FNP is a one-to-one home visiting service where health professionals aim to improve health during pregnancy, provide parenting knowledge and skills (also with broad health aims) and improve economic self-sufficiency (see FNP, 2015). FNP is time limited, home-based and largely (although not solely) health focused and was not therefore a like-for-like replacement for TPS services. Furthermore, in some areas (including in the locality of this study) FNP has now been decommissioned. Cuts to local authority funding has also meant that remaining services for young parents, as well as those which indirectly provide support such as libraries and children's centres, are now under threat[3]. As a result, support mechanisms available to young parents and their families are vastly diminished.

We find this worrying. We argue that government still has significant role to play in the support of vulnerable young parents. Broadly, this includes ensuring that they have safe housing, access to education and adequate financial support (be that directly from the state or via employment). In their own right, these investments help protect against poverty and social exclusion. Furthermore, and as evidenced above, social and relational inclusion forms a cyclical relationship. Being part of a community – through schools, playgroups, college or university – enabled these women to build new friendships and thus receive much needed social support. However, lack of transport, childcare costs, inadequate benefits, and poor health can render these inaccessible.

We consider relational inclusion to be a gain significant enough in itself to warrant the investment in and protection of services for young parents. Nonetheless, if we are to speak the language of government, it is also worth drawing attention to the likelihood that long term costs may outweigh short term savings. For example, where early intervention support is withdrawn, there is a risk that referrals for social care and mental health services will rise. Furthermore, requiring young parents to meet specific 'hard' targets (such as engagement in education or employment) is not feasible without their wider needs first being met (see McLeod *et al.*, 2006). We argue that these wider needs include the emotional wellbeing of young parents and, as demonstrated above, friendship and the informal social support it provided was vital to this.

Investing in friendship and informal social support

Having found similar experiences of isolation amongst young mothers to those found here, the Young Women's Trust (YWT, 2017) propose the introduction of one-to-one support or mentoring to help young mothers develop relationships outside their families. This is a welcome recognition of the importance of relational inclusion. The women in this study did not lack the ability to form relationships, but their accounts demonstrate there is a need for these connections and for space for them to develop. The women only formed new friendships after they were able to engage in institutions such as college or work. The YWT (2017) recommend that support be put in place specifically for young mothers who are not working, in recognition of this. We therefore argue that there remains a place for group support in order to nurture friendships and provide social support to buffer young mothers especially when they are not yet ready or able to engage in other ways.

Ellis-Sloan (2015) found groups specifically for young parents had the potential to provide a space for friendships and meaningful peer support to develop. Group working

can also complement the kind of one-to-one support the YWT calls for. The group context lends itself as a space for the development of individual support. Ellis-Sloan (2015) reports on official and unofficial mentoring that went on between parents as well as the group being a space for visiting professionals to do one-to-one work. Furthermore, one-to-one support systems like FNP can signpost young parents towards such groups to meet the needs that they cannot. In this study there was more ambiguity about the benefit of young parents groups however. Charlotte described them as 'safe' and Sharon said she would have welcomed the opportunity to go to one but Mel, Chrissy and Charlotte also expressed negativity about their experiences at such groups. As with de Jonge (2001) this was in part linked to stigmatised conceptions of other teenage mothers and a related rejection of them as potential sources of peer support.

It is therefore important to consider the form that groups take. Ellis-Sloan (2015) noted that the groups in her study were run by leaders who took an 'ethic of care' approach. Leaders took a proactive approach to encouraging young women to attend with home visits and by meeting them at the door so they wouldn't enter alone. Group leaders also facilitated friendships between mothers where they felt there were commonalities. The women in this study often formed meaningful friendships with women much older than themselves. Common ground was found through motherhood per se and overrode age differences. It is also therefore worth extending these types of facilitating practices to groups aimed at parents in general. This may also address the reluctance some women may feel at attending a group for 'teenage mothers' (see de Jonge, 2001) and go some way to addressing both the experience and fear of stigma.

Tackling stigma

Lee SmithBattle (2013) notes the prevalence of stigmatising treatment from professionals working with young parents. Consequently, she argues for the embedding of 'recognition practices' in clinical encounters in order to restore young mother's dignity and support their strengths and aspirations. The YWT (2017) echo this with calls for health professionals to be trained in working with young mothers and for young parents to be involved at a strategic level. Yet, for the women in this study, their first experience of stigma and discrimination came from their own peer groups rather than professionals. This was painfully explicit in some friends' reactions to the women's impending motherhood. It was also implicit in the rejection of potential friendships at young parents groups. We therefore reinforce the argument (see Ellis-Sloan, 2014) that de-stigmatising practices need to be targeted at non-parenting teens.

The recent proposal for relationship and sex education to become a requirement in all secondary schools (Department for Education, 2017), provides an ideal opportunity for movement in this direction. We anticipate that such an approach would be resisted given the longstanding commitment to reducing teenage pregnancy rates and the assumption (by some) that stigmatising youthful parenting is an effective deterrent (Palmer, 2009). Policies aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy clearly work from the premise that teenage pregnancy and parenthood are unacceptable. Working to de-stigmatise teenage parenthood at the same time as seeking to prevent its occurrence therefore presents something of a tension for policy makers. Nevertheless, it is an important argument to make that preventing *unwanted* teenage pregnancy and supporting teenage parents need not conflict. Indeed, countries that provide teenagers with adequate knowledge, access

to appropriate services and agency over their bodies and sexuality tend to enjoy lower teenage pregnancy rates (Schalet, 2004). As such, alongside the improved knowledge and agency we hope the introduction of compulsory sex education will bring, there is space for recognition of a more nuanced picture of teenage motherhood to emerge which does not cast young mothers as 'unmotivated, irresponsible, and incompetent' (SmithBattle, 2013: 235). This would then increase the likelihood that young mothers may receive vital friendship and support rather than condemnation from both professionals and peers.

Concluding thoughts

This article has fleshed out previous reports of isolation and loneliness for young mothers by seeking to further understand the effect of having a teenage pregnancy on friendships. It has investigated the formation of new friendships and considered their role as an important source of social support. Given the current scarcity of funds (or political will) for a range of support services, the idea that friends can provide vital informal and individualised social support is likely to be an appealing idea. There is a tension in highlighting the value of friendship as a source of social support, particularly in the context of austerity. It risks informal support networks becoming framed as 'the' solution and being used to support arguments for further dismantling the welfare state. Indeed, the concerns of Chiveralls (2006) are shared here, in that social support (like social capital) has the potential to become a 'weasel word' that enables politicians to avoid responsibility for a range of social issues. We do not then seek to let government 'off the hook', but we do need to be pragmatic and ask: how can we best support young mothers given the limited funds currently available? Consequently, this article has proposed an integrated approach which involves investing in the wider context in which young parents reside, implementing support services which can alleviate relational exclusion (especially in those early months and years of motherhood) and tackling the continuing stigma attached to teenage motherhood at both a grass roots and a professional level.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   The term 'young mother' is generally preferred by teenage mothers. It is also often more accurate for women who have had a teenage pregnancy but are no longer a teenager (as is the case with the women in this study). For reasons of clarity, the term cannot be avoided altogether however.

2   Charlotte met her partner after she had had her daughter. They are now married.

3   For instance, Cambridgeshire County Council is currently consulting on the future of Children's Services in the area. One suggestion is the closure of Romsey Mill Children's Centre, the loss of which would threaten the 'Young Parents Support Contract' held by Romsey Mill Trust (Romsey Mill, 2017).

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