



Teenage Pregnancy

January 2011

The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe. FPA wishes to see this rate reduced because evidence shows that teenage parents and their children are more likely to experience a range of long-term negative educational, social, health and economic outcomes. FPA believes that young people need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to negotiate the sexual relationships that they want at the time that is right for them and their partner, including the ability to resist the pressure to have sex until they are ready.

1. FPA believes that all children and young people should learn how to prevent pregnancy as part of sex and relationships education (SRE) beginning before puberty and based on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and positive attitudes about sexuality.
2. FPA believes that SRE should be a statutory part of the National Curriculum from primary school onwards, and should be taught by professionals with specialist training in this area.
3. FPA believes that all young people should have accurate information about all methods of contraception, including emergency contraception, and how to access it quickly and easily.
4. FPA believes that good SRE presents abortion as a valid option and that young women must have access to information about abortion and supportive counselling and abortion services.
5. FPA believes that all sexual health services, including general practice, contraception and genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinics, youth advice clinics and telephone helplines, must ensure that they are accessible, appropriate and welcoming to young people.
6. FPA believes that much of the moral outrage focused on teenage mothers involves unease about teenage sexuality and this should not be allowed to cloud what should be a young person-centred issue.
7. FPA believes that there should not be any stigmatisation of pregnant teenagers and that teenage mothers and fathers should be fully supported.
8. FPA believes that the range of cultural and socio-economic factors which underlie teenage pregnancy rates must be addressed for rates to be reduced.
9. FPA believes that the law must protect young people from abuse, but it should not be an obstacle to their sexual development or their ability to get help and advice when they need it.

Every young person should have the freedom and capacity to choose whether to be sexually active, use contraception or become pregnant and, if pregnant, whether to continue with the pregnancy. Currently, many young people in the UK lack the knowledge and skills to make these decisions and do not have access to services that will adequately support them. Many young people are influenced by peer pressure to become sexually active before they are ready, and subsequently may experience feelings of regret about early sexual experiences. It is important that all young people are empowered to make decisions about sex and relationships which are right for them.

FPA welcomed the launch of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy in England, which set out a ten-year programme to 2010 with targets for reducing conceptions among under-16s and under-18s and for increasing the participation of teenage parents in education and work to reduce the risk of social exclusion. We endorse this prioritisation of teenage pregnancy as an issue and welcome the signs that the Strategy has had a positive impact. Figures show that there was a 13.2 per cent reduction in the under-18 conception rate between 1998 and 2008¹. We also endorse the objectives to reduce teenage pregnancy rates in the *Sexual Health and Wellbeing Action Plan for Wales 2010–2015*, the *Respect and Responsibility* framework in Scotland, and the *Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan 2008-2013* in Northern Ireland.

However, FPA believes that more must be done to ensure that mainstream SRE is integrated with best practice from strategies specifically designed to reduce teenage pregnancy, to ensure that this downward trend continues. Young people consistently comment that school-based SRE is too little, too late and too biological. Teachers may have little formal training, and boys often feel excluded. The Sex Education Forum states “*Sex and relationships education is learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships, sexual health and ourselves*”². FPA believes that age-appropriate SRE should be compulsory within the National Curriculum from primary school onwards and should place the needs of the child firmly at its centre. We believe that SRE should be part of core Initial Teacher Training programmes, and there should also be an increased focus on improving the quality of specialist SRE training and increasing the numbers of teachers and school nurses who receive this training. Support should also be available for parents to enable them to talk with their children about sex and relationships.

All young people must have access to services that will provide information about sexual health and a range of contraceptive choices, including telephone helplines. They must be acceptable to young people, open at appropriate times, offer and publicise confidentiality and the staff must be trained to understand the needs of young women and young men, including under-16s. Carers, professionals and providers should ensure that young people know how to access these services.

Clear information and access to emergency contraception (EC) should be more easily available to young people. EC should be free of charge and available from a choice of provider in or near to places where young people spend most of their time, including schools. Staff who provide EC must be trained to work with young people and should combine provision of EC with contraceptive and sexual health information and advice.

The decision to have an abortion rests with the woman herself whatever her age, and abortion access and treatment should be based on this principle. However, young people in the UK grow up in a culture that is biased and ill informed about abortion. SRE and health services should present abortion as a valid option and provide accurate information about it to young people. Young women who have an unintended pregnancy should have access to free, non-directive, timely pregnancy counselling and supportive services.

Sexually explicit media images may give an impression of UK society as being at ease with sexuality, but this is not always the case. Teenage sexuality, in particular, is often viewed in a negative light and young people's sexual activity seen as sexual deviance or promiscuity. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 has further stigmatised young people by explicitly criminalising all sexual activity for under-16s in England and Wales and this is mirrored in the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 and the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009. FPA believes that these pieces of legislation send wholly the wrong message to children and young people about normal adolescent sexual development, and give young people confusing and contradictory messages which go against best practice in SRE.

Programmes to address teenage pregnancy should seek to achieve a balance between enabling young people to avoid unintended pregnancy while supporting young women who become pregnant and young people who become parents. The wellbeing of the young women, their partners and children should always be the primary concern, and teenage parents must be supported to ensure that they are able to take advantage of both education and employment opportunities after their child is born.

FPA is primarily concerned with the sexual health aspects of teenage pregnancy but we recognise that where young people have ambition and high expectations of life, rates of teenage pregnancy are low. Many young women in the UK live in communities where teenage pregnancy is the norm and to have a child early is seen as a way of achieving something positive in life. Social inequalities must be addressed to secure real freedom of choice for all young people.

Further information

FPA policies on *Young People and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE)* (2011)

FPA factsheet on *Teenage Pregnancy* (2010)

Social Exclusion Unit, *Report on Teenage Pregnancy* (London: SEU, 1999)

¹ Department for Education, *Teenage Conception Statistics for England 1998-2008* (London: Department for Education, 2010)

² Sex Education Forum, *Forum Factsheet 30: Sex and Relationships Education Framework* (London: SEF, 2005)