

MEDIA INFORMATION: EMBARGO 00.01 am FRIDAY 3 MAY

Abolish Teenage Pregnancy Unit says family group

‘Government’s policy based on outdated and limited approach’

The Teenage Pregnancy Unit, set up by the government to halve under-18 conceptions by 2010, should be scrapped, according to a new report from the Family Education Trust. Its approach is described as limited and outdated, it excludes creative thinking and new research, and represents an approach to teenage sexual activity which has been shown to be flawed.

Britain has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Western Europe. This is widely acknowledged to be undesirable, as such pregnancies, occurring in young, unmarried women, have serious consequences for the health and welfare of both mothers and babies. The government therefore set up the Teenage Pregnancy Unit to implement the recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit’s report on Teenage Pregnancy. Every local authority and health authority in England has been required to produce a strategy for its local area, laying out plans to contribute towards the government’s target. A team of researchers from the Family Education Trust has reviewed a sample of twenty-three of these local strategies.

Local strategies are unoriginal and flawed

According to Robert Whelan, Director of the Family Education Trust:

‘The disappointing thing is the complete lack of originality of these local strategies. Taking their cue from the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (TPU), they attribute our high teenage pregnancy

rate to an ignorance of the facts of life, and the inability of young people to obtain contraception, or a lack of awareness of why and how it should be used. Preventing teenage pregnancies is therefore seen as a matter of earlier and more explicit sex education, and the easier availability of contraception, including the use of school clinics to distribute this. If this approach proves to be misguided, there is nothing in these strategies to fall back on.

‘There is little evidence to support this view, and a good deal to contradict it. Unfortunately, the local strategies, once again taking their cue from the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, fail to address key factors like the importance of the intact family in delaying the initiation of teen sexual activity; the role of cultural factors (including government policy) in pressurising young people into becoming sexually active; and the importance of helping young people to understand the real medical, social and economic advantages of deferring the commencement of sexual activity.’

Local authorities facilitate juvenile Lotharios and their Lolitas

Far from trying to discourage teenage sexual activity, however, some of these local strategies seem to see the role of the public authorities in terms of facilitating it. The ‘strategic vision’ of Est Kent is that ‘children and young people’ should ‘be aware of and enjoy their sexuality’, while the Essex strategy ‘is designed to ... provide appropriate advice and support for young people in their physical, emotional and moral development as they begin to explore their own sexuality and become sexually active’. The Swindon strategy promises that ‘community responsibility and positive attitudes towards sex and relationships in young people will be fostered across Swindon’ (see p.9).

Whether it is appropriate for local authorities to facilitate the sexual adventures of juvenile Lotharios and their Lolitas is a matter of opinion, but some of the assurances they are giving to young people verge on the irresponsible. Swindon takes the view that: ‘Young women have the right to freedom from unplanned pregnancy and a fulfilling sex life’, while the Kingston and Richmond strategy believes ‘it is a young person’s right to expect that ... all unwanted teenage conceptions are prevented, as much as possible, by different agencies working together’.

However, all methods of contraception have known failure rates, and the failures increase as you go down the age range. Furthermore, even the most efficient use of contraceptives offers only limited protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which are currently at epidemic levels amongst young people.

Being older and wiser is taboo

What is left out of the strategies is as significant as what is put in. There is very little said about the role of parents in preventing their children from becoming sexually active at young ages. The issues are all of information and services and are between the authorities and the children. The idea that parents and other authority figures might have something to transmit to the younger generation by virtue of their greater experience of life is taboo. In fact, the children are meant to be running the teenage pregnancy strategy themselves!

To be successful, young people must feel that they own the strategy (Southwark)... In ten years' time we will expect the delivery of the Confide Young Peoples' specialist services to be shaped by the young people themselves (Swindon) (p.11).

The government's teenage pregnancy strategy perceives young people to be autonomous individuals entitled to choose from a range of options. All the choices are presumed to be of equal validity, and the community at large is called upon to pick up the cost of the negative consequences following on from these choices. There is no question of expecting young people who are growing to maturity to accept responsibility for their sexual and reproductive capacity. Sexuality is accepted as an activity like eating or sleeping that you grow into as a teenager. Teenage pregnancy is treated as a clinical issue, not a behavioural one, and in some cases young people are scarcely regarded as moral agents: 'We do not believe that young parents are to blame' (Bolton) (pp.10-11).

Close down the TPU and try something better

The Family Education Trust is now calling for the Teenage Pregnancy Unit to be closed down and replaced with a programme to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy which

will be more innovative, and which will not take such a partial view of a complex subject.

According to Robert Whelan:

‘The ideological bent of the TPU is shown by the close links (for example on their website) with the Brook and the Sex Education Forum. Both are controversial organisations which are associated with a particular attitude towards teenage sexual activity which does not encourage abstinence. We need a new approach to teenage pregnancy which acknowledges the importance of intact families and parental influence in preventing young people from becoming involved with relationships which they are too immature to handle successfully.’

Copies of ‘Why the government’s teenage pregnancy strategy is destined to fail’ are available from the Family Education Trust, The Mezzanine, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London SE1 7NQ, tel 020 7401 5480. The report can be downloaded free from the website www.famyouth.org.uk

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