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The Teens and Toddlers programme: an innovative and practical youth development and teenage pregnancy prevention programme aiming to raise self-esteem, aspiration and educational attainment

The reduction of teenage conception rates has been prioritised by the Government, with the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (established in 1999) leading on this 10-year strategy.

Although recent national statistics show an overall decline, the UK's rate remains the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe and so it is still high on the political agenda. There is marked variation throughout England in teenage pregnancy rates, with 50% of under-18 conceptions occurring in the 20% of census wards with the highest rates.

The Teens and Toddlers Programme

Teens and Toddlers is an innovative and practical youth development and teenage pregnancy prevention programme aiming to raise self-esteem, aspiration and educational attainment.

It is currently working in 13 boroughs in England. It began in London boroughs (e.g. Southwark, Camden and Islington), but is now working much further afield (e.g. Tameside Manchester, North-East Lincolnshire and Walsall).

Teens and Toddlers thinks that the best way to achieve a reduction in teenage pregnancy is to give young people an experience of the enormous privilege, responsibility and hard work involved in

having a child and to help them develop alternative goals, such as satisfying work and relationships.

An environment is created where 'at-risk' teenagers (both male and female) experience a positive view of themselves through supervised work experience and developing a one-to-one relationship with a small child.

Young people are selected to take part in the programme using selection criteria which has been approved and published by the DCFS (formerly DfES).

The main aims of Teens and Toddlers are:

- To support vulnerable young people to develop life skills, aspiration and new positive life goals. This is achieved throughout the project, and is helped by one-to-one life-coaching sessions with a trained professional.

- To develop emotional literacy (self-reflection, self-management, awareness of others and social skills). Most young people gain an accredited National Award in Interpersonal Skills (NCFE).

- To provide SRE knowledge and skills to prevent conception and protect sexual health.

- To educate about the responsibilities of caring for a child to convey the importance and value of postponing pregnancy, through one-to-one mentoring of a small child. By acting as the toddler's role model the young person supports the toddler's

socialisation and learning.

An effective programme

A retrospective analysis of the efficacy of the Teens and Toddlers programme was carried out by Dr Andrew McDowell (2004)¹. A survey was conducted with over 200 graduates of the London programmes. It was found that Teens and Toddlers appeared to differ from some other adolescent pregnancy intervention programmes because it does not advocate an abstinence or "just say no" model. Rather, it engages with young people by providing a hands-on, experiential programme where young people are encouraged to think through the implications of unprotected sex and make their own decisions about the age at which they choose to become a parent.

Award Winner

In November 2007, Teens and Toddlers won the Children and Young People's Services Award for Preventative Services. A panel of 21 adult professionals and 10 young people judged Teens and Toddlers to be the project that has made the most effective early intervention with young people at risk of poor health and dropping out of education.

'The project used research-based methods and had a clear vision for tackling teenage pregnancy' (Young Judge's comment)

Teens and Toddlers were also 'highly commended' for their contribution to young people's health.

Recent research

Annual retrospective study of Teens and Toddlers graduates

Every year, as part of an extensive research strategy, Teens and Toddlers conducts an annual retrospective study where all past graduates are contacted via questionnaire to ascertain their pregnancy status and their opinion of Teens and Toddlers.

The most recent results, (November 2007), showed a pregnancy rate which is well under the national average, with no pregnancies under the age of 16. This is very positive, especially when considering that Teens and Toddlers target the young people most 'at-risk' of teenage pregnancy.

Respondents' attitudes towards key issues were measured with questions designed to fit in to the Every Child Matters 5 Key Outcomes. Here are some of the key findings:

- 87% said the right age to become a parent is over 20, while 30% said over 25
- 88% agreed that Teens and Toddlers (T&T) helped them learn about sexual health issues such as STIs, pregnancy and deciding when to have sex
- 92% said T&T helped them understand the need to have financial security and a stable relationship before having a child
- 90% said T&T is the kind of project young people need to help them make good choices and stay out of trouble
- 79% said T&T made them feel more confident
- 95% said T&T would be beneficial for their peers

Conclusion

The Teens and Toddlers programme seems to be very effective in influencing young people's attitudes and actually preventing teenage pregnancy.

Dr Andrew McDowell, Social Research Director with The Dream Mill, said: "The findings of this study show that Teens and Toddlers is effective in influencing young people's attitudes and preventing teenage pregnancy. The programme should be seen as a youth development programme with a focus on sexual health and behaviour, rather than just a teenage pregnancy prevention programme."

1. McDowell, A. (2004). A retrospective analysis of the efficacy of the Teens and Toddlers programme.

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http://www.thedreammill.com/resources/2%20COUI_article.pdf