

# An Inappropriate Transition to Adulthood?

## *Teenage Pregnancy and the Discourses of Childhood in the UK*

*Teenage pregnancy has long been viewed as a social problem, and over the past three decades those who become pregnant during their teens have been subject to varying degrees of scrutiny. However, it is possible to argue that those young women experiencing teenage pregnancy and motherhood in the UK at present are being scrutinised more than ever before. Coupled with discourses that surround lone motherhood, discourses around childhood are informing discourses on teenage pregnancy and young motherhood. The focus by the present government on ensuring that every child makes a “successful transition to adulthood” alongside other policies introduced by the current UK Government have impacted on how pregnant teenagers and young mothers are viewed by society in general. This paper will highlight how current discourses of childhood reflect historical ideas and reaffirm negative stereotypes of pregnant teenagers and young motherhood.*

This paper will focus on the historical development of discourses of childhood and explore how these discourses inform the primarily negative understandings of teenage pregnancy and young motherhood. In Great Britain, teenage pregnancy has long been viewed as a social problem and over the past three decades those young women experiencing pregnancy in their teens have been subject to varying degrees of scrutiny. However, it is possible to argue that young women experiencing teenage pregnancy and motherhood in England and Wales are being scrutinised more than ever before. Negative discourses dominate debates on teenage pregnancy and the overwhelming focus of policy is prevention. Many discourses inform debates on teenage pregnancy, lone motherhood, childhood, family discourses and constantly reaffirm the negative stereotypes of teenage mothers and their children.

The current Government, and the Prime Minister himself, have made no

secret of how they perceive teenage pregnancy as “a cause and consequence of social exclusion” (Blair, 1999). The introduction of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, with a specific remit to halve teenage pregnancy rates in England and Wales by 2010, further reaffirms the status of teenage pregnancy as a social problem. The constantly quoted statistics, not only by the Government but also by many academics, health professionals, the media and social commentators, that the UK has the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe, justifies government intervention. Research in the area frequently focuses on the prevention of teenage pregnancy and very rarely questions why it appears imperative to reduce teenage pregnancy rates (Monahan, 2002; Collins, Lane and West Stevens, 2003; Eaton, 1998). More importantly in regards to this paper much of the existing work on teenage pregnancy makes connections with the social construction of lone motherhood but does not explore the connections between the social construction of childhood and discourses of teenage pregnancy.

### **Childhood: Under construction**

In regards to the negative discourses of teenage pregnancy and young motherhood it is important to explore the beginnings of the construction of childhood as something distinct and separate from adulthood.

The construction of childhood and how we understand this concept at the beginning of twenty-first century Britain has its roots in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Today, a dominant and enduring Western representation of childhood is one where children are thought to inhabit a space that has been called a “walled garden” (Holt, 1975: 22). This “walled garden” protects children from the harsh realities of the outside world and children, it is argued, need protecting because they are essentially “innocent.” This protection is provided by the adult who is responsible for the child’s welfare. Adulthood is defined as in opposition to childhood. Children “grow up.” Growing up is a process in which something—a child—turns into its opposite—an adult (Lee, 2001). As Nick Lee suggests we have become used to thinking that adults and children are in some way fundamentally different. The notion that adults are complete and children are some way incomplete gives adults the power and authority to decide how far a child has to go before counting as a person in their own right, deserving of rights, responsibilities and recognition.

Adulthood, with its associated notions of completeness, has operated as a kind of standard model by which we can measure a child’s incompleteness (Lee, 2001). This notion of the incompleteness of the child acts as a justification for the distribution of power and authority, and the rights of adults, whether they are policy makers, teachers, parents, health professionals, carers etc., to make decisions about children, and sometimes make decisions on behalf of children or in the child’s “best interests.” Adults sometimes even make decisions about whether children are capable of making decisions for themselves.

## The historical legacy

It is possible to chart the emergence of this specific construction in the UK to the early nineteenth century. The disappearance of children as active citizens was initiated by the restriction of child employment under the *Factories Act* of 1833. Prior to this time, Philippe Aries (1962) suggests, the ideology of childhood did not exist as once the child moved from the biological dependency of “infancy” they belonged to adult society. Their behaviour, dress and interaction were the same as adults. Children were actively engaged in paid employment and contributed to the domestic and national economy, and to some extent actively participated in social life. It is possible to argue that the restriction of child working conditions in nineteenth-century Britain was the result of a growing concern about the working conditions under which many children were employed and what was regarded as exploitation of child labour. But as Helmut Wintersberger (1994) argues, the disappearance of the child’s contribution to both the national and domestic economy resulted in the disappearance of children as both subjects and actors. So while it is possible to interpret the *Factories Act* as a humane Act that reflected a genuine concern for child welfare and, in particular, the horrendous conditions under which many children were employed, the Act also served to marginalize many children and consign, in particular working class children, to a life of poverty. The numbers of children seeking work far outnumbered the opportunities available to them. This resulted in the abandonment of many working-class children, swelling the poor population, with petty offending as the only means of survival. Harry Hendrick (1994) argues this led to the replacing of the “factory child” with the “delinquent child.” What developed in this period is a shift in focus from the exploitation of children, to the scrutinisation of the very “essence” of childhood.

One aspect of this increased scrutiny led to growing concern over juvenile delinquency, and this concern was influential in the strengthening of the “child rescue movement” and the development of Reformatories (1854) and Industrial Schools (1857). The Reformatories and Industrial schools were responsible for an institutional regime that concentrated on “saving” children through the imposition of a dominant middle class-based Victorian moral order. However, there was a distinction in the type of child accepted into Reformatories and Industrial schools. Barry Goldson (1997) views the Reformatories and Industrial schools as institutional responses to justice and welfare needs, which separated the “depraved” from the “deprived” or the “deserving” from the “undeserving.” Reformatories took children from the “dangerous classes,” aged 16 years and under, who had been convicted of an offence that was punishable by either imprisonment or penal servitude. The Industrial schools took children who were found begging or receiving alms, wandering and not having a home or any means of subsistence, the “perishing classes.” More importantly, however, as Hendrick (1990) suggests, what was under construction was a carefully defined nature of childhood.

Underpinning the Reformatories and Industrial schools was not only the notion that children had to be “saved” and turned once again into children, but also that society needed “protecting” from these “delinquent” children. There is a clear development of the notion that children are different from adults and the innocence of children is something that should be protected and, perhaps more pertinently, when childhood “innocence” is lost, society itself is under threat.

By 1870, with the introduction of the *Education Act*, the processes of re-socialisation and moral correction initiated by the Reformatories and Industrial schools were consolidated with the state taking responsibility for “educating” all able-bodied children (Goldson, 1997). With the introduction of the state into child rearing practices the conceptualisation of a national childhood begins to emerge. By the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century childhood became an increasingly important focus for the whole of adult society. This is clearly seen in the approach of the current British government, where children occupy a central position in social policy, and as Hendrick argues,

From an historical perspective government investment in children for the greater good of the nation has many antecedents, what is novel, is the way in which New Labour has “put children at the *centre* of a social investment strategy” and of social policy making. (1994: 8)

So, a key goal of policy in twenty-first century Britain is to ensure that children make a “successful” transition to adulthood. However as Allison James and Adrian James (2001) argue many of the policies introduced under the current Government represent an attempt to increase social control of the young as they are viewed as “spiralling out of control” and damaging the social and moral fabric of society. This is clearly illustrated in the current response to teenage pregnancy.

### **Every child matters?**

Over the past nine years, in the UK, two ideas have dominated social policy, combating social exclusion and making work pay (Levitas, 2001). Ruth Levitas argues that these ideas identify two gendered groups that are particularly problematic for “social cohesion and social order”; “they are unemployed, unemployable and actually or potentially criminal young men, and sexually delinquent young women” (451). With particular reference to pregnant teenagers and young mothers, Jean Carabine (2001) furthers this argument by suggesting that it is the “sexually delinquent young woman” who is perceived as particularly threatening to the moral fabric of society. As Gillian Schofield (1994) suggests, motherhood takes place within a prescribed framework and motherhood outside this framework has negative connotations and can be seen as deviant,

The marital status of a mother has become less a source of stigma but the age of a mother is seen as significant, not just in terms of individually deviant behaviour but as a source of social pollution. (xii)

So it appears that teenage mothers are inappropriate mothers because they are having sex outside marriage, children they cannot afford to support, but more importantly they are too young to be having sex let alone having babies (Carabine, 2001). I would suggest that not only are young mothers defined as “inappropriate” mothers but are also condemned as “inappropriate” children. What lies behind many of the concerns regarding teenage pregnancy and young motherhood is the contrast between young mothers and an idealised view of what life holds for other teenage girls (Schofield, 1994). So, young motherhood falls outside the expected gendered and class-based transition to adulthood for young women. The expected trajectory is for a young woman to gain an education, acquire a vocational skill and enjoy their youth before starting a family (Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005). Motherhood is traditionally at the heart of adult female identity; however, early motherhood is often described as an experience of lost opportunities (Erikson, 1980).

The importance of ensuring children become “successful” adults constructed in the early nineteenth-century has arguably reached a new peak at the beginning of the twenty-first century in current social policy in the UK. An example of this is the Connexions Agency, which tracks all 13–19 year olds with the aim of ensuring that all young people make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood and working life (DofEE, 2000). In regards to teenage pregnancy and young motherhood, the Connexions Agency is the agency with which most young pregnant women and young mothers will come into contact. Alongside generic Personal Advisors, specialist Young Parent Advisors working within Connexions are seen as the key point of contact for all young parents. The Connexions Agency’s underpinning ideology of the “successful transition to adulthood” and the explicit linking of successful adulthood with paid work is problematic. This ideology is essentially gendered. Historically, it is men who have been associated with paid work, and entry into paid work has traditionally been the signifier of adulthood in young men (Mac an Ghail, 1994). However, while acknowledging the significant increase in women engaging in paid work and the current Government’s attempts to de-gender paid work through limited policy initiatives, historically the transition to adulthood for women has been motherhood and arguably motherhood is still the most significant identifier of young women’s transition to adulthood.

It is possible to suggest that the dominant discourse for interpreting the experiences of the vast majority of 13–19 year olds has been the transitions discourse. The Connexions Agency’s stated aims are located within this discourse (Fergusson *et al.*, 2000). The transitions discourse suggests that the period from 13–19 years is constituted as a linear transition from school to employment

or further education/higher education and this transition is secured through the assessments, judgments and interventions of teachers and careers staff. So the Connexions Service “assists” young people in making “realistic choices” and “right decisions” (DofEE, 2000). Pregnant teenagers and young mothers by implication are not making the “right decisions” or “realistic choices” and more significantly are making these decisions unaided. They will not follow this linear progression that is seen as imperative to making a “successful” transition to adulthood.

If an adult can decide how far a child has to go before they are deemed a person in their own right, I am suggesting that young pregnant women have taken this decision for themselves by choosing to become pregnant, continuing with a pregnancy, or choosing to become sexually active. Arguably this can be understood as an attempt to gain control and power on the part of the young woman, an attempt to make a transition to adulthood. However, they are deemed “inappropriate adults” as appropriate adults have, for example, financial security, a home, and are married before having a child. Thus, these young women do not achieve adult status. The pregnancy is a signifier of their immaturity, as Schofield suggests, “It is acceptable to be intellectually in advance of chronological age but other behaviours and roles are only acceptable at certain ages” (1994: 13).

This arguably results in their childhood status being prolonged through the intervention of agencies such as the Connexions Agency and justifies coercion to “help” young pregnant women and mothers make the “right decisions.” If, as Anthony Giddens argues, “the prime motto for the new politics is no rights without responsibilities” (1998: 66), then pregnant teenagers and mothers do not meet the “responsibility” criteria. This is the clear message from the Connexions Agency through the identification of “at risk” target groups, pregnant teenagers and young mothers being one of these groups (see Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).

In 2001, the Children and Young People’s Unit published the consultation document *Building a Strategy for Children and Young People* in which the government articulated its vision for the young, arguing the need to ensure that:

Every child and young person deserves the best possible start in life, to be brought up in a safe, happy and secure environment, to be consulted, listened to and heard, to be supported as they develop into adulthood and maturity, and be given every opportunity to achieve their full potential. (2001: 2)

State intervention into teenage pregnancy and young motherhood highlights how achieving full potential in maturity is an uncertain term and ignores the gendered, class, and “race” implications of adulthood.

Young pregnant women and young mothers are perceived as being unable to make a successful transition to adulthood and they are always perceived

as “unsuccessful” children. The recently published Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (2003), I would suggest, further adds weight to the argument I am putting forward regarding the ambiguous status of young pregnant women and mothers. The Green Paper sets out the Government’s proposals to reform and improve children’s care. The document includes several references to teenage pregnancy but again the language reflects prevention discourses:

The policies set out in the Green Paper are designed both to protect children and maximise their potential.... It aims to reduce the numbers of children who experience educational failure, engage in offending or anti-social behaviour, suffer from ill health, or become teenage parents. (DofEE, 2003: 5)

The identification of certain “at risk” groups of children reproduces the tensions between protection and punishment, deserving and undeserving. Teenage mothers are “undeserving” of adult status, “undeserving” of protection (by the very fact that they have engaged in sexual activity) and “deserving” of “punishment” through the prolonging of their childhood status.

Negative discourses of teenage pregnancy are informed by the social construction of childhood. As Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) suggest,

It is difficult for young women to make the “right” reproductive choices; if they become pregnant early, they are easily seen as educational failures and “welfare cheats,” but again, if they postpone motherhood, they are seen as “selfish” and too career-orientated. (105)

So it is possible to argue that all women make their reproductive “choices” against the backdrop of “appropriate” motherhood; however, young women who become pregnant in their teens make their reproductive “choices” not only against a backdrop of “appropriate” motherhood but also constructions of “appropriate” childhood.

## Conclusion

It is important to recognise that the current UK Government have placed children and young people at the centre of public and social policies like no previous government. This has the potential for positive outcomes for all children and young people. However, the Government has approached the issue of children and young people in a way that reflects rather than challenges traditional white middle class constructions of childhood.

In February 2007, the UNICEF annual report on *The State of the World’s Children* placed the UK bottom of a league table for child well being across 21 industrialised countries. In defence of the current UK Government’s record on children and young people, Jim Murphy, the Welfare Reform Minister, asserts: “If you look at the teenage pregnancies issue, for example, we are now

at a 20-year low on teenage pregnancy levels ... so there is an awful lot we have achieved.”

This clearly demonstrates how teenage mothers fall outside the socially constructed notion of a “successful” childhood. Dominant discourses of teenage pregnancy in the UK always construct young motherhood in the negative. I would suggest we need to open up understandings of what a “successful” childhood is and challenge the indicators of a “successful” transition to adulthood. We then have the possibility of providing alternative discourses that counter the prevailing and dominant negative discourses of teenage pregnancy and young motherhood.

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