

# **A qualitative analysis of youth attitudes about Teenage Pregnancy, School and Governmental intervention approaches, and the Teens and Toddlers programme**

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This paper comprises a qualitative analysis of the attitudes and perceptions of graduates from Teens and Toddlers programmes about school and governmental approaches to sex education and pregnancy prevention; teenager attitudes about teenage pregnancy; and, the suitability of the Teens and Toddlers programme and its methods. Depth focus groups were used to consult past and recent graduates of Teens and Toddlers programmes. Results suggest that participants regard the Teens and Toddlers programme very positively and report the perceived shortcomings of traditional school based and governmental approaches. Additionally specific feedback about the Teens and Toddlers programme is provided, and insight to young people's attitudes about teenage pregnancy is offered. It is concluded that the Teens and Toddlers programme has significant appeal to young people over traditional approaches to teenage pregnancy prevention because it offers a real life experience, practical knowledge and the opportunity to dialogue about the key issues.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Teens and Toddlers programme is a practical teenage pregnancy prevention programme that is an initiative of the charity Children Our Ultimate Investment UK (COUI UK). Teens and Toddlers programmes consist of a 12-week intensive course where teenagers spend two afternoons per week in intensive interaction with toddlers in nurseries and undertake lessons related to the impact of teenage pregnancy.

The Teens and Toddlers programme has been delivered as a pilot project in the London (UK) Boroughs of Southwark, Greenwich, Tower Hamlets and Islington. Participants for Teens and Toddlers programmes are selected by schools according to the following criteria which are considered risk factors for teenage pregnancy: Poverty/social exclusion, Experience of being in care, Mother was a teenage mother, Educational and behavioural problems, Experience of sexual abuse, Mental health problems, and Experience of crime. The aim is to enrol young people who are most "at risk" of teenage pregnancy, however teenagers are not forced to undertake the programme, once targeted they are offered the choice to be involved or not.

Teens and Toddlers claims to be different to other approaches to addressing the issue of teenage pregnancy in that it provides a confluent education approach, involving experiential learning and personal development through a direct experience of

the implications of having a child. The three key learning elements of the Teens and Toddlers approach are: (1) regular one to one contact between each teen and a toddler with whom they establish a relationship during the course; (2) group development sessions covering a broad curriculum including child development, effective parenting skills, anger management, sexuality and relationships; and, (3) one-to-one life coaching by trained staff for participants identified as being 'most at risk'.

The objectives of the research were to gain insight about the attitudes and opinions of graduates of Teens and Toddlers programmes toward the following topics: (1) school and governmental approaches to sex education and pregnancy prevention; (2) teenager attitudes about teenage pregnancy; and, (3) the suitability of the Teens and Toddlers programme and its methods.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Participants for the study were sourced through an invitation that was distributed with a previous quantitative survey. This comprised an information sheet that outlined the aims and objectives of the qualitative study and a response form upon which respondents could elect to agree to participate in a focus group. Sixteen participants from projects that were

conducted in the Borough of Greenwich between 2001-2003 were selected for inclusion in the qualitative sample. Twelve female participants, with ages ranging between 15 and 19 years attended the groups. Participants were broadly representative of the cultural and age groups that attend Teens and Toddlers programmes, and included participants from the four different Teens and Toddlers programmes that had been conducted in Greenwich. Unfortunately no male participants were attended the focus groups. The time that had passed since participants had taken a Teens and Toddlers project ranged between one and three years.

### Procedure

Qualitative investigations were held in a local community centre to provide a relaxed and informal environment to explore ideas and issues in depth. All data were collected in accordance with the Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) Core Principles and COU's internal research policy. The investigators met with the whole group and gave a brief overview of the aims of the research. It was explained that the investigators were interested in being informed by those present about their opinions about the Teens and Toddlers programme, their general attitudes about teenage pregnancy, and how they felt about the way sex education is currently taught in schools and portrayed by the government.

It was explained to participants that there were no right or wrong answers and that the purpose of the discussion was not to produce consensus answers. Rather, the group was encouraged to present a variety of opinions. Following the group introduction, three separate depth focus groups were conducted concurrently, each containing 4 participants and one researcher. Participants from different Greenwich programmes were mixed between depth focus groups. Each researcher followed the same discussion guide to lead a collaborative inquiry with participants into the themes of the qualitative research. An emphasis on participants' own experiences was characteristic of discussions. Each depth focus group was conducted for a two hour time period.

### Instruments

A structured discussion guide was established to ensure consistency between groups. The discussion guide comprised an interview

schedule that had four broad sections and approximately seven questions per section. Researchers followed this structure, but as is customary in qualitative research, asked additional questions to deepen and clarify issues in group discussions. Table 1 provides a listing of the discussion guide sections and two example questions for each section.

**Table 1: Discussion guide structure and examples of stimulus questions**

(1)	<p>School and governmental approaches to sex education and pregnancy prevention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What do young people think about the kind of messages they see coming from the government about "Teenage Pregnancy"?</li> <li>▪ How do young people feel about the way that the issues of sex and pregnancy are dealt with in School?</li> </ul>
(2)	<p>Teenager attitudes about why teens get pregnant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do you think Teenage pregnancy is a big issue? Why?</li> <li>▪ Why do you think people get pregnant as teenagers?</li> </ul>
(3)	<p>Your Teens and Toddlers experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What were the worst parts about the T&amp;T programme? (depth is very important – if it is "classroom time" – what parts, what aspects, etc.,)</li> <li>▪ If you could change anything about the T&amp;T programme what would it be and how would you change it?</li> </ul>
(4)	<p>If you were in charge of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If you were in charge - What do you think would work best in getting teenagers to think about issues like safe sex and pregnancy?</li> <li>▪ If you were in charge - What information do you think would really help teenagers in this area?</li> </ul>

## RESULTS

### Section 1: School and Government Approaches to Sex Education and Pregnancy

#### Perception of government messages

Overall participants reported a limited recall of print media and health promotion campaigns about sex education and pregnancy. While there were some reports of having seen information about STDs in magazines and brochures, the content was felt to be very distant and difficult to engage with. Participants who were aware of print media about teenage pregnancy and sexual health felt it was a waste of money because they claimed that the messages were unclear, condescending and not relevant to their personal situations. Further, most communication on teenage pregnancy was perceived as simplistic or contradictory by participants. They reported that when they observed advertisements of government services it gave the impression that the government was “almost encouraging” teenage pregnancy.

Participants reported that most young people are aware of the public discourse around the problem of teenage pregnancy, but because they are themselves teenagers, they feel blamed about the situation. The implication reported was that they felt like they were seen to be “part of the problem”. Participants suggested that most young people therefore become disengaged from the issue. Examples of verbatim quotes from participants are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Examples of Participants’ perceptions of Government messages**

- (1) *“The government doesn’t talk about the real issues”*
- (2) *“They just think its our fault”*
- (3) *“It doesn’t feel like they really care what’s happening to us, they just don’t want us to get pregnant”*
- (4) *“I can’t remember seeing anything from the government about getting pregnant that would effect what I do in my life”*

#### General Approaches to Sex Education and Pregnancy, School based approaches

In general, participants reported rebellious attitudes toward school based approaches to teaching about sex and pregnancy. They felt that “sex education” was very basic in that it only focused on the biology of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The general perception among participants was that the aim of sex education was to “scare them” out of having sex. They reported that sex education classes were too large for them to feel comfortable to contribute, lacked the opportunity for discussions and were very “theoretical” in their explanation of sex with no discussion of love and intimacy.

Focus group participants consistently reported that there is an overwhelming emphasis on the negative side of pregnancy in their interactions with teachers. They felt that teachers saw pregnancy (and sex) as a “problem” and sexual behaviour among teenagers as “unacceptable”. They reported that they resented the focus on “teenage” pregnancy and would like to talk about pregnancy as an issue in general. In this sense they would prefer to be invited to discuss both the positive and negative aspects of pregnancy more openly.

One positive aspect of sex education classes that participants remember were activities that were practical and interesting like “putting a condom on a banana” and the idea of a “robotic baby”. However they also reported that they believed sex education comes too late, when they claim that most of them had already had to think about having sex. Examples of participants’ statements during discussion that are representative of these themes are presented in Table 3.

Participants were also asked to describe how their perceptions of governmental and in-school approaches to the issue of teenage pregnancy influenced their feelings about the issue. Central to this aspect of the research was the opportunity for participants to discuss the “general” feelings and perceptions that other young people have in response to in-school and governmental approaches to teenage pregnancy. A summary of the main themes reported in participants’ discourse is provided in Table 4.

## Section 2: Attitudes about why Teenagers get pregnant

Participants tended to classify the reasons for why teenagers become pregnant as either accidental pregnancies or planned pregnancies. Accidental pregnancies are considered to occur when teenagers lack knowledge about intercourse and contraception; or from when they have sex when under the influence of drugs or alcohol. It was generally thought that “accidents” occurred when girls did not take full responsibility for their actions. They reported that they felt many teenagers have very relaxed views about the chances of becoming pregnant and use the “morning after pill” as their main form of contraception.

Further, the view was consistently expressed that some young people believe that it is alright to become pregnant because they can have an abortion. However, it was also reported that when girls discover they are pregnant many become too frightened to have an abortion or leave it until too late to do anything about it. In general participants expressed primarily negative views about teenagers who became pregnant by “accident”. A selection of verbatim quotes about this topic are presented in Table 5.

In contrast participants’ attitudes towards young people who became pregnant purposefully were less condemning. Despite the fact that it was not necessarily considered to be the best decision, they generally understood why some people chose pregnancy as an option. In this sense participants expressed a compassionate understanding of young people who felt the only option open to them was to become pregnant.

However it should be noted their sense of compassion did not extend to “approval”. The information reported under this section did not reflect participants’ personal opinions about teenage pregnancy, rather, they were reporting their belief about what “most young people think” about the issue. Five main reasons for “planned pregnancy” were consistently reported by participants. These are provided in Table 6 with examples of verbatim quotes.

**Table 3: Examples of Participants’ perceptions of School approaches to Sex Education and Pregnancy**

- (1) *“They think shocking you will make you do what they want ... they show us picture after picture of diseases and all the bad things that can happen to you, so much that you just switch off”*
- (2) *“People are too scared to get personal – the groups are too big and you can’t say too much about yourself”*
- (3) *“Its too easy to not listen and be silly because its so boring”*
- (4) *“When I see all those bad things that can happen I want to try it and prove that its not that bad”*
- (5) *“They only tell you about the bad side of sex ... it makes you want to do the opposite”*
- (6) *“They should lower the age of sex education, I needed it when I was 13”*

**Table 4: Perceived implications of in-school and governmental approaches on Teenagers feelings about the Teenage Pregnancy**

- (1) Young people feel that they are seen as “the problem”
- (2) Young people feel like “numbers to be reduced”
- (3) Young people feel blamed and resent the focus being on them
- (4) Young people feel “told what they should do”
- (5) Young people feel “un-consulted”
- (6) Young people feel “rebellious”

**Table 5: Examples of Participants' perceptions of why Teenagers get pregnant**

- (1) *"They don't know about the consequences, they do it by accident because they don't know what they are doing"*
- (2) *"Its mainly from having sex when you are drunk or on drugs"*
- (3) *"They don't know what's going on, don't know they are pregnant, and then leave it too long to have an abortion"*
- (4) *"They think its not a big deal if they get pregnant because they can have an abortion - and then when they realise that they are pregnant – they don't want to get rid of the baby"*
- (5) *"They want to do whatever the guy wants so he will love them more, even if it means having sex before they want to or when there isn't a condom"*

### Section 3: Feedback about the Teens and Toddlers programme

Feedback about the programme is presented in the following sections: toddler time (the time spent in nurseries with children), classroom time (the time spent on the Teens and Toddlers curriculum), facilitators, training materials, main learnings and recommendations.

#### Toddler time

Participant provided very positive feedback about the "toddler time". The primary feedback concentrated on strength of toddler/teenage relationship. Participants reported many positive memories about toddlers with whom they had been paired and an emphasis on the times when they had been engaged in "play" with toddlers. A main theme was the emphasis on watching how their toddler developed through the process (e.g., came out of themselves, became less shy, more able to play, etc.) and a sense of pride that they had somehow contributed to that development. Participants all reported that the toddler time gave them hands on experience in understanding the implications of 'having a child'.

**Table 6: Examples of Participants' perceptions of why Teenagers get pregnant**

- (1) It is believed by young women that becoming pregnant can ensure stability in a relationship;  
e.g., *"They think if they have the guy's baby he will stay with them"*
- (2) It is believed that having a baby will make them feel loved/needed and bring meaning into their lives;  
e.g., *"They want some one to love and who will love them back – someone who needs them"*
- (3) It is believed that having a baby is prestigious or a status symbol;  
e.g., *"They think that you become a real woman when you have a child, and that people will look at them differently as responsible and important"*
- (4) It is believed that having a baby is the next step to take in growing up and gives a social role;  
e.g., *"They think that it's the thing you do when you leave school, that it was good enough for their mums so its good enough for them"*
- (5) It is believed that having a baby will open the door to social benefits and provide a way out of home;  
e.g., *"They think they will get their own flat and money for not working"*

Further, being "looked up to" by the toddlers and being considered part of the "teaching group" or "adult group" in the nurseries was highly valued. The only negative feedback expressed about toddler time was from some participants who felt that they would have liked to personally choose the toddler they were to be paired with, rather than having had them allocated. However, other participants countered this perspective, explaining that it was hard to choose, and they would have preferred an allocation process.

### Classroom time

While participants were generally less positive about classroom time than they were about toddler time, they understood the value of this aspect of the programme, and most were generally accepting of its place in the Teens and Toddlers approach. Participants reported that the most important aspect of classroom time were the discussions. Group discussions and learning that there can be many perspectives on one issue was considered to be valuable and engaging way of learning. Participants reported feeling very positive about their opinion being valued by facilitators.

They also emphasised that having something practical like the toddler time to talk about and refer back to in discussions made the classroom time much more practical and “real-life” in feeling. Participants appreciated the small group sizes (6-8) during classroom time and claimed that it creates safety, time and space to express opinions on subjects. A minority of participants reported that they found classroom time to be a “little boring at times”. Some participants stated they would have liked more opportunities for discussions in classroom time; while others explained that they found sharing their experience in the group very challenging (e.g., check-ins, role plays). Additionally some participants reported that they would have liked to receive more ‘hard-facts’ on sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy.

### Facilitators

Teens and Toddlers facilitators were generally well received by participants. They felt that “friendliness” was the strongest quality in facilitators and assistants. They reported that they felt the facilitators cared about them as people, and gave the impression that they respected their opinions. Participants appreciated the efforts made to listen to them during the programme and seek their opinion about the course content. However, it was reported by a minority of participants that some facilitators would improve by “less talking and more listening”. A high degree of support was expressed for the inclusion of younger staff on the programmes as participants explained that they find it easier to talk to people closer to their own age.

### Training materials

While participants were generally appreciative of the aims and methods of the Teens and Toddlers curriculum, they were generally

critical of the training material that was handed out during the programme. The training manual was considered to be too large and cumbersome to engage with. Participants felt that such a “big book” was hard to relate to and “felt like school”. They suggested page numbers, sections and a more “friendly feel” would be an improvement. Some participants expressed their opinion that the range of different material in the manual was good, and that they appreciated the use of examples and pictures.

### Main Learnings

Participants were asked to identify the main things that they felt they had learned from undertaking the Teens and Toddlers programme. Table 7 lists a summary of the main themes that participants reported. As another measure of participants’ learnings, participants were also asked to explain what they would hope the toddler that they had worked with would learn if that toddler would also participate in the Teens and Toddlers programme in ten years time. A summary of verbatim responses is included in Table 8.

**Table 7: Participants’ Main Learnings from Teens and Toddlers**

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| (1) | Self expression - <i>learning to discuss and express opinions, understanding issues from more than one point of view</i>        |
| (2) | Making choices - <i>thinking about when to have a baby and what you want for yourself</i>                                       |
| (3) | Planning for the future - <i>thinking about security, having a job before having a child</i>                                    |
| (4) | Responsibility - <i>understanding the responsibility associated with becoming a parent</i>                                      |
| (5) | Anger management – <i>learning positive ways to deal with difficult situations and feelings</i>                                 |
| (6) | Self esteem - <i>becoming more aware of personal ways of dealing with things and feeling good about yourself - ‘braving up’</i> |

**Table 8: Participants' learning hopes for toddlers who participate in Teens and Toddlers in 10 years time**

- (1) *"That their opinion counts, and not to be afraid of what other people say or think of them, to do what they know is right"*
- (2) *"That little children have minds of their own and that they understand what older people are thinking"*
- (3) *"To learn about sex and drugs and how to be safe"*
- (4) *"To help them understand that they are not on their own, and that someone will always be there to help them out"*

**Recommendations for Teens and Toddlers**

During discussion groups participants were invited to make suggestions about how Teens and Toddlers could be improved. Recommendations from participants ranged depending on personal preferences and experiences, but the following themes were consistently identified across groups: (1) invite ex teenage parents visiting programmes and explain their experience being a teenage parent; (2) Expand the programme to include more schools; (3) Create a qualification for doing Teens and Toddlers that can lead to a career structure; (4) Have more discussions in classroom time; (5) Improve folders and handouts; and (6) Include more boys in the programme. The last point is worthy of a short comment. The inclusion of males as participants in the programme was highly valued by female participants. They felt it was good to see males learning about the same issues and hearing their opinions in classroom time; at some level it seemed to give them confidence that some boys cared about these issues. Unfortunately no male participants attended the research groups.

**Description of the Teens and Toddlers programme**

Participants were asked to state how they would explain the Teens and Toddlers experience to other young people. Table 9 provides a summary of some of the verbatim quotes, while Table 10 lists the key words that participants used to describe Teens and Toddlers.

**Section 4: If you were in charge of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy**

In the final section of the focus group discussion participants were invited to share their opinions about appropriate ways for communicating with young people about sex education and teenage pregnancy. Several issues were consistently expressed by participants that reflected the findings of the rest of this research. A primary theme was there desire for material to incorporate a more balanced view of sex and pregnancy, rather than to focus only on the negative side. Further it was consistently claimed that the use of "scare tactics" to effect behaviour was misguided. Participants described the emphasis on the problems or difficulties associated with having a baby, and classes that showed "picture after disgusting picture" of sexually transmitted infections, as examples of scare tactics.

Participants argued that education needed to be more realistic and incorporate the positive side of sex and relationships. They expressed an interest in learning more about emotional intimacy and relationships; and that learning

**Table 9: Examples of how Participants would explain Teens and Toddlers to other young people**

- (1) *"A place to learn about what it would really be like to have a child and how hard it is to look after them"*
- (2) *"A hands-on experience with toddlers"*
- (3) *"It's interesting, it's an interesting thing to do"*
- (4) *"It's a place where you want to be - not told to be, it's a place where you choose to come to - it's better than school"*
- (5) *"It's a place where you learn about yourself"*
- (6) *"You learn that the decision of when to have a baby isn't just about me and my needs - its about what the baby would need and being able to provide that best"*
- (7) *"I used to want to have a baby as soon as I left school but I have decided to wait until I am about 25"*

**Table 10: Main Key Words used by Participants to explain Teens and Toddlers**

- |     |               |
|-----|---------------|
| (1) | Choice        |
| (2) | Understanding |
| (3) | Real-life     |
| (4) | No bullshit   |
| (5) | Discussion    |
| (6) | Training      |
| (7) | Respect       |

about sex without reference to these issues was not meaningful. Typically, participants argued that if they were in charge of how teenagers were taught about sex and pregnancy they would “enable people to understand the good and bad aspects and choose for themselves”. There was a strong theme of empowerment or choice in participant response. It was the opinion of participants that young people would be much more likely to respond to an “invitation to choose” and that “the people in charge need to realize that we rebel against being told what to do”.

Another aspect that participants felt that decision makers should understand is that young people mature at differentially and therefore have different educational needs at different times. They suggested a range of approaches to teaching young people about the issues, and reported that communication material should be presented in visual and youth friendly styles. Participants described this as a “magaziney” feel, the implication being that it could be browsed through and was easy to understand and digest.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this qualitative inquiry was to gain general insight into the issues surrounding teenage pregnancy and determine participants’ feedback about the Teens and Toddlers programme. The discussion will consider the findings of research in relation to participants’ perceptions of traditional school approaches to sexual education; and their perceptions of

governmental attitudes and approaches to the teenage pregnancy issue.

A discussion of the results of this inquiry should be prefaced by a statement that the small sample size involved in the focus groups does not comprise a representative sample and that results should be interpreted conservatively. However, the findings presented above do provide a useful gauge for teenage opinions and attitudes both about the issue of teenage pregnancy and the Teens and Toddlers programme.

The results strongly suggest a high degree of dissatisfaction with school based and governmental approaches to sex education and pregnancy prevention among the young people that participated in focus groups. The main reasons proposed by participants to account for their negative opinions seem to focus around four main themes. First, the delivery of sexual education in schools is considered to be too theoretical in nature. Young people consider it to be difficult to relate to concepts that are “ideas” with no immediate practical application. Second, participants expressed concern about the way school based sexual education is actually conducted. Young people reported feeling unable to engage with material while in large class sizes that reflect common didactic teaching structures in the normal school environment.

Third, participants also reported that they did not feel that the teaching methods used in schools were particularly empowering. A consistent theme across groups was that they felt that the teaching methods employed by schools left them in a passive role where they were not invited to engage with material and share their own opinions. Fourth, the material itself was considered to be fear based (e.g., showing graphic pictures of sexual infections) lacking in any consideration of emotional and psychological issues, and moralistic in presenting only one side of the teenage pregnancy argument. This final point is of great significance; participants expressed a strong desire for the inclusion of material about relationships, feelings and the emotional variables associated with becoming pregnant.

It was evident from the research that young people are likely to react strongly against programmes that attempt to frighten them into having safe sex or “preach” a moralistic view. Rather, after undertaking Teens and Toddlers, they express a wish to consider various viewpoints associated with the teenage

pregnancy issue and be trusted to make their own decisions about their behaviour. Participants also reported negative perceptions of health promotion based print campaigns for teenage pregnancy reduction, feeling these strategies were judgemental and ineffective. Overall their preference is for experiential approaches that respect their opinions.

An interesting finding was the description of a dialectical relationship between the Government services that are offered to young people who become pregnant; and the general level of blame that young people feel is directed to them because of the high levels of teenage pregnancy. At one end of the dynamic are perceptions of a blaming, moralistic system that attempts to reduce pregnancies through traditional school approaches that are based on the premise that young people can be frightened into safe-sex (e.g., an emphasis on sexually transmitted infections); while at other end of the dynamic is a series of government services for teenage parents that provide opportunities for care, independence and a social role. The dissonance between the two messages can feel confusing and alienating for teenagers, and it could be argued, create a mixed message about the teenage pregnancy issue. For example a number of participants pointed out that the governmental approaches almost highlight the benefits of pregnancy when they advertise the social, health and financial support available to teenage parents.

In summary, the current state of governmental and school based approaches to teenage pregnancy and sexual education is perceived by the study's participants to be in need of major review. It should be noted however that in the current sample of young people have had an experience of a very different approach to the issue of teenage pregnancy through the Teens and Toddlers programme. In this sense it could be argued that the sample's views do not necessarily represent those of their peers. However, during focus groups participants claimed that their views were in fact representative or typical of the viewpoints of other young people.

Research about participants' attitudes about why Teenagers get pregnant also revealed very interesting findings. Perhaps the most significant overall finding is that young people appear to be very aware of the contributing social and psychological factors that effect whether young people become teenage parents. The findings reported in the results

section demonstrate a high degree of emotional literacy and understanding among the young people included in the study. Of course it is possible that the depth and specificity of the views expressed may be at least partly due to the experience of undertaking the Teens and Toddlers programme. Therefore the attitudes expressed may not represent the understanding of other young people; however they do clearly demonstrate a good understanding of the problem among this population.

From the results it can be conceived that a general trend among young people is to see teenage pregnancy as an adaptive mechanism for dealing with the various life stresses associated with being an adolescent. Participants expressed an empathic understanding for young people who see becoming a parent as the only option available to them and therefore plan to have a child at an early age. The various examples offered in Table 6 describe how some teenagers use "becoming a parent" as a way to attempt to bring some sense of stability and meaning to their lives. It is important to note that while understanding this trend and expressing empathy for people in such situations, participants generally did not approve of such behaviour. Further participants expressed strong negative views about young people who became pregnant as a result of either lack of knowledge or associated risk taking behaviours like alcohol or drug use.

Consequently it could be argued that young people do in fact have a good understanding of the issues associated with teenage pregnancies, and that they express responsible and socially acceptable attitudes about a suitable age to become a parent. This outcome should be considered in relation to the perspectives that participants shared about the potentially punitive approaches used in traditional governmental and school based approaches to teenage pregnancy and sexual education. The findings are therefore suggestive of either a positive effect of the Teens and Toddlers programme on the values and attitudes of its graduates; or that young people in general can consider the teenage pregnancy issue in a responsible and sensible manner. The implications of this finding are supportive of participants' calls for the opportunity to be presented with a broad view of the teenage pregnancy issue and being trusted to make their own decisions about their opinions and behaviours.

In terms of the Teens and Toddlers educational programme itself, a key outcome indicating the programmes effectiveness is that participants reported realising that they had the ability to choose when they could have a child. The emphasis on empowering choice appears to be a very important feature of the programme in its appeal to young people. Participants reported a shift in their personal belief systems about the “best” age to have a child as a result of their involvement in the programme. Participants explained that the experience of caring for a young child (toddler) helped them to understand the responsibilities involved and the need to provide security for both the child and their own futures. In understanding the importance of this emphasis on choice it is important to understand that young people often feel rebellious when they feel they are being told what to do by an older generation. The various feelings that participants recorded in Table 4 are evidence for this perspective.

Participants reported that they felt valued, respected and were not under pressure to perform academically during the Teens and Toddlers programmes. The corresponding emotional state reported by participants comprised the ingredients of a strong sense of self esteem. A major contributor to this appears to be the learning that is made possible through the Teenager’s relationship with the Toddler. Participants reported a high degree of value about having the opportunity to simply “play” with the Toddler and learn about how young people develop. It appears that this relationship creates a mechanism for reflexivity and an opportunity to express emotional literacy in allowing participants to talk about their own experiences through talking about their Toddler. For example, learning about the individual characteristics and uniqueness of each toddler was reported to have led to a greater understanding and acceptance of differences among teenagers.

The results identify a number of other specific findings about the Teens and Toddlers programme which are relatively self explanatory and that do not require further elaboration in this discussion. However a few main themes about the educational experience are worth noting. It was interesting to note that participants tended not to describe the Teens and Toddlers programme as a pregnancy prevention programme. Rather they describe it as a learning opportunity that promotes understanding and discussion about important issues that are relevant to pregnancy, child

development and life direction. They describe their experience as learning about working with children, and at the same time learning about choices for the future. The implication of this finding is that young people do not want to be identified as being part of the “Teenage Pregnancy problem”.

It would seem that young prefer a subtle approach to discussing teenage pregnancy. It seems apparent that the Teens and Toddlers programme, with its multiple goals (associated with personal development, child development, etc.,) is appreciated for taking the pressure off young people to talk directly about the teenage pregnancy issue. The general feedback from participants was that the programme does not directly focus too hard on one issue, and that this approach creates space for young people to approach the issue of teenage pregnancy in an indirect way.

Participants expressed that a key positive feature of the programme was that they could understand the learnings during classroom time because they were “fun”, “interesting”, and directly relevant to their recent experiences in “toddler time”. While a number of constructive suggestions were made to improve the “classroom time” (e.g., more discussions, and more user friendly training materials, and age appropriate education strategies), the general trend was that classroom time provided an opportunity to learn about the facts in an experiential and non-judgemental way that gave participants the opportunity to consolidate their learning as evidenced in Table 7.

Above all, young people seem to appreciate the Teens and Toddlers programme because they consider it to be “real life” and “hands on”. They value the fact that that the programme was based on a real life experience of the implications of having a young child to care for, and it was consistently reported that the practical nature of the programme led to participants feeling empowered to make choices about their own behaviours. During the research process this concept was consistently reported by participants and contrasted to school approaches that emphasise “theoretical” concepts about the dangers and negative implications of sexual behaviour and leave participants feeling “preached at”.

## CONCLUSION

Qualitative research suggests that the Teens and Toddlers programme is positively regarded by participants in the programmes; and that this positive regard can extend up to four years after the programme. The key features that are valued by young people are a real life experience, practical knowledge and the opportunity to dialogue about the key issues. In contrast the general feedback about school and governmental approaches was generally negative, described as fear based, theoretical and lacking in features that engage young people. While Teens and Toddlers is a relatively new organisation, and its long term effectiveness is yet to be demonstrated, it promises to be an innovative model for youth participation in a project that appears to empower participants to consider the relevant factors associated with teenage pregnancy and make positive life decisions about their futures.