

Teach Your Children Well

A young family friend completing her general practitioner training at a South Auckland medical centre recently told me of a difficult task: she'd had to break the news to a 15 year-old schoolgirl that her pregnancy test was positive. To the young doctor's great surprise, the girl, on hearing the result, punched the air with her fist and shouted elatedly "Yes!"

How could she be so pleased? Perhaps a welcome escape from an education that was going nowhere? A chance to be 'independent'? Something to love? Or a way of meeting a requirement to pull her weight in a benefit-dependent household? Who knows.

What we do know is that she'll be one of around 4,500 teens who'll give birth in New Zealand this year, maintaining our position as the second highest developed country after the United States for teenage births.

What else do we know about teen parents in New Zealand? We know that early child-bearing is often part of a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and welfare dependence. Longitudinal studies in New Zealand tell us that many teen mothers come from deprived, dysfunctional, violent or abusive backgrounds, and a high proportion have already been under the care of Child, Youth and Family. Many have a parental history of criminal offending and substance abuse. Many have a fatalistic attitude to pregnancy and start engaging in unsafe sex at an early age. Around half of teen mothers are Maori. Many have left school early with no qualifications. Three quarters will go on to welfare.

Compared with mothers who delay childbearing, teen parents are much more likely to have mental health and substance dependence problems. At least a third of current Domestic Purposes Benefit recipients became parents as teenagers, and those who go on to a benefit as a teenager remain there for long periods of time. Around 40 percent have another newborn while on a benefit. Many teen fathers come from similarly

disadvantaged backgrounds, with many themselves having been born to a teenage mother.

And how do the children fare? Studies have shown a high rate of depression and stress in teen mothers, factors that can predispose a parent to neglect or abuse their child, and smoking and poor nutrition during pregnancy can disadvantage a child even before birth. After birth, factors such as transient lifestyles, hardship, and harsh and erratic parenting are strongly associated with negative outcomes for children. A poignant reminder of how ill-equipped many young people are for parenthood is the trend reported recently in Britain and Australia of babies being weaned on pureed junk food.

That is not to say that many young parents do not overcome their disadvantages and go on to become loving, capable parents. Tragically, however, others do not fare well. Many are among the 220,000 New Zealand children growing up in benefit-dependent households. KidsCan, the country's largest charitable school programme which feeds around 4,400 children in decile 1 schools each day, estimates that about 15,400 children come to school every day without breakfast. For some, a donated school breakfast is all they eat all day. Some schools report they have children who haven't eaten for 24 hours.

New Zealand's child health facts make grim reading. Of 30 OECD countries, New Zealand ranks 29th for child health and safety, 21st for infant mortality and 26th for injury deaths among one to four-year olds, along with shameful rates of child health problems such as pneumonia, whooping cough, rheumatic fever and measles immunisation coverage.

As they move into adulthood, children from impoverished backgrounds run further risks. Young adult offspring of teen parents, compared with the rest of the population, are at much greater risk of leaving school without qualifications, poor economic circumstances, violent offending, unemployment, high rates of smoking, drug and alcohol use, and benefit dependence, and they are more than twice as likely to become teen parents themselves.

How do we break this seemingly intractable cycle? The government's Welfare Working Group devoted considerable attention to teen parents. It proposes a number of interventions and supports for at-risk teen mothers and their children. It states that the welfare system needs to reaffirm the responsibilities parents have to their children and that it "must not allow teenagers to conclude that welfare dependence is more attractive than education, training or paid work". The WWG proposes that in return for a benefit teen parents under the age of 18 be required to:

- complete their education or training (necessitating an expansion beyond the current 20 teen parent units attached to schools),
- live with a responsible adult (a measure used to good effect in the US welfare reforms)
- undertake parenting and budgeting programmes
- have their welfare payments paid to a responsible adult until they have demonstrated they can manage their budget and support their children
- ensure their children participate in approved early childhood education from age three and attend school when legally required to, and
- complete the 12 Wellchild/Tamariki health checks, including completing the immunisation schedule.

Failure to meet these expectations would result in the recipient's income being managed by a third party. Coupled with these is support for strengthened obligations to protect children and report child abuse or neglect.

The WWG proposes a number of measures designed to encourage teenagers to defer parenting until they have completed their education, have a steady job, and are in an enduring relationship. Along with emphasising the need for an education system more responsive to students' needs, the group proposes strong signals about the realities and responsibilities of teen parenting and the significant obligations of welfare recipients. Finally, and importantly, it proposes better access to effective, cheap, long-acting reversible contraception. This latter proposal was instantly attacked by the child poverty action lobby.

These recommendations are quite deeply buried in the WWG's report. But they are sensible, practical proposals which, taken together, could do much to break the cycle of disadvantage and welfare dependence that blights so many young lives.

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