



**Australian
Human Rights
Commission**

everyone, everywhere, everyday

The rights and needs of young parents and their children.

A summary of key findings from the
Children's Rights Report 2017



1 The rights and needs of young parents and their children

Other than the crippling self doubt I experienced as a young mum, the judgement from other people including strangers was soul destroying. Stereotyping needs to stop, and we need to start celebrating young women who go on to be great parents, whether they finish a uni degree and buy a house, or have ten kids who they love and provide for with everything they have. Young women are strong and each one is capable. All it takes is a few people to believe in you. (Young mother, who had her baby at 15 years)

In 2017 the National Children’s Commissioner conducted a project investigating the rights and needs of young parents and their children. The aim of the project was to identify the gaps in knowledge about the experiences and trajectories of young parents, and analyse good practice in early intervention and support services that lead to better outcomes for young parents and their children. This includes identifying the education and employment pathways most likely to lead to long term stability and security.

This document is a summary of the project findings and recommendations, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of the *Children’s Rights Report 2017*. It includes:

- human rights issues related to young parenthood
- data and research about young parents and their children
- views of experts on young parenthood from submissions and roundtables
- what young parents said about their needs and rights
- recommendations.

We recommended a range of monitoring and data collection mechanisms, and reviews of government policies and practices, to ensure that young parents have their specific needs met. Many of these recommendations have been situated within national initiatives, councils or frameworks. The realisation of young parents’ and their children’s rights requires an integrated approach across a range of government initiatives, and should be informed by the views of young parents themselves.

1.1 *Human rights issues related to young parenthood*

The vulnerability of young parents and their children in Australia

Young parents and their children are particularly vulnerable to breaches of their rights to health, education and care, and are at risk of long term disadvantage and welfare dependency.

Higher rates of teenage pregnancy are associated with family histories of teenage pregnancy, unstable housing arrangements, socio-economic disadvantage and sexual abuse in childhood.¹ The challenging personal circumstances of many young parents are further compounded by the social, financial, medical, education and employment difficulties of raising a child. Young parents frequently face negative consequences such as poverty and long term welfare dependency,² poor emotional health and wellbeing,³ and inability to complete study or gain secure employment.⁴

Children of young parents are also at greater risk of experiencing poorer life outcomes. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), children born to teenage mothers are ‘at greater risk of low birthweight and increased

morbidity during their first year of life, tend to develop more behaviour problems than children of older mothers and are more likely to be born into, and continue to live in, social and economic disadvantage'.⁵ Children of vulnerable young parents are often at risk of being removed into the care and protection system, and are also more likely to become young parents themselves.⁶

Particular groups within the youth population that are more likely to become young parents include young people who have been in care,⁷ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, young people living in rural and remote areas, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸

Despite the many barriers that young parents face, overwhelmingly the young people we spoke to during this project were motivated to be great parents, to provide the best care for their children, to get an education and do well in life.

Human rights of young parents and their children

International human rights treaties set out the human rights of all children and young people, including those who are parents or are pregnant, and the children of young parents. These treaties include the:

- *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*
- *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*
- *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*
- *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).*

Under the CRC, the best interests of all children, including young parents and their children, and pregnant girls, must be a primary consideration in all matters concerning them.⁹

The primacy of the family unit is an important consideration in the implementation of the CRC. The family unit is considered to be:

the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and particularly children, [and as such,] should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, a body set up to monitor the implementation of the CRC, has emphasised the need to support young parents and their children in light of their particular vulnerability:

Articles 24 and 27 of the Convention require that adolescent parents and caregivers be provided with basic knowledge of child health, nutrition and breastfeeding, and appropriate support to assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities towards the children they are responsible for and, when needed, material assistance with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing. Adolescent caregivers need extra support in order to enjoy their rights to education, play and participation.

In particular, States should introduce social protection interventions at key stages of the life cycle and respond to the specific requirements of adolescent caregivers.¹⁰

Under the CRC and other human rights treaties, young parents and their children have the right to:

- accessible education
- enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health
- an adequate standard of living
- assistance in the performance of child-rearing responsibilities.¹¹

As a party to these treaties, the Australian Government must uphold the rights of all young parents and their children, as well as pregnant girls, within Australia, without discrimination of any kind,¹² and take appropriate measures to ensure that children are protected against all forms of discrimination on the basis of the child's status or that of the child's parents.¹³

1.2 Data and research about young parents and their children

In this project we reviewed available data and research on young parenthood in Australia. We paid particular attention to the experiences of vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young parents, young parents with experiences in out-of-home care and child protection systems, and young parents involved with the youth justice system.

In some instances we identified gaps in information and data on young parents, and requested additional information from a range of sources. We recommended further research in some areas.

Snapshot of data and research on young parents and their children

- The Australian teenage birth rate is at an historic low — in 2015 at a rate of **11.9 births per 1000 women for 15–19 year olds** or 2.8 per cent of overall births in Australia.¹⁴ This converts to 8,574 births to mothers aged 19 years and under, out of a total of 305,377 births during 2015.¹⁵
- Teenage pregnancy is experienced more frequently by people in lower socio-economic circumstances, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples, and people in remote or rural locations.¹⁶
 - Teenagers in rural and remote Australia experience young parenthood at a rate of **57 births per 1000**.¹⁷
 - In 2015, births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young mothers aged 15–19 was at a rate of **59.3 births per 1000**.¹⁸ That is, 2,203 out of 8,574 total births to all Australian mothers aged 15–19 years (**25.7% of total births for this age group**).¹⁹
- Young parents and their children face distinct socio-economic challenges:
 - Young mothers tend to be the most socio-economically disadvantaged of all mothers.²⁰ This is associated with poor educational qualifications, pre-existing socio-economic

circumstances, and the impact of raising children as young mothers.²¹

- Young mothers have a higher likelihood of welfare dependence throughout their lifetime.²² Teenage mothers make up approximately one per cent of all single mothers in Australia but are overrepresented (at 3%) among recipients of Australia's Parenting Payment.²³
- The partners of teenage mothers are more likely to be unemployed and poorly educated than partners of older mothers.²⁴
- Young mothers have lower levels of educational attainment than other mothers and childless women, resulting in lower levels of labour market participation and employment outcomes.²⁵
- Homelessness or having poor living conditions is common for young mothers — either prior to or during pregnancy or with a young child.²⁶
- Teenage pregnancy is also associated with poorer health outcomes for both the young mother and child:
 - Maternal health risk factors for young mothers include anaemia, hypertension and smoking during pregnancy.²⁷
 - Post-natal depression is common among adolescent mothers with over half of the cohort in one study reporting having experienced depressive symptoms within the first three months of motherhood.²⁸
 - Babies born to young mothers (under 20) are more likely to be born pre-term (11%) compared to babies born to mothers aged between 20 and 39 (8%).²⁹ They are also more likely to have low birth weight (13%) compared to babies born to mothers aged between 20 and 39 (9%).³⁰
 - In 2014, children of young mothers had the highest perinatal death rate of all maternal age groups, at 14.5 per 1000 babies, compared to 8.31 for children of older mothers (aged 30 to 34).³¹
 - In 2015, children of teenage parents had a significantly higher rate of Sudden and Unexpected Death of Infants (SUDI) (2.6 per 1000 babies) than children of older parents.³²
- There are a range of factors that are considered to contribute to rates of teenage pregnancy, including:
 - limited access to family planning, sexual and general health services in rural areas³³
 - concerns about confidentiality, challenges in being able to discuss sensitive health issues, and cost, which present barriers to using and purchasing contraception³⁴

- sexual assault and intimate partner violence.³⁵
- The pathways leading to motherhood are diverse and not all teenage parenthood is accidental, unintended or unwanted.³⁶ Further, for many young people, parenthood can have a transformative impact, particularly in changing unhealthy behaviours and relationships.³⁷
- Data on the number of young parents in the juvenile justice system nationally is not readily available in any jurisdiction. The impact of parental (in particular, maternal) incarceration on children is well documented.³⁸
- There is no systematic collection of data on the attendance patterns and inclusion of young parents or pregnant teenagers in schooling systems across Australia.³⁹
- Overall, there is a general lack of data on young parents and their children to guide policy development and ensure that young parents can be best supported.

1.3 Views of experts on young parenthood from submissions and roundtables

We sought submissions from a range of experts across Australia on issues facing young parents, in particular on how to:

- decrease the risk profile of young parents and their children
- influence decisions to delay the birth of a second child
- improve the capacity of young parents for safe and effective parenting
- increase their likelihood of becoming economically secure.

We also asked state, territory and Commonwealth governments about programs and policies in relation to young parents and their children, including details of education, health and welfare policies, programs and services relating to young parents and their children, and any evaluations of these.

We received 69 written submissions. The submissions can be viewed online at <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/projects/childrens-rights-reports>.

We also held expert roundtables in Brisbane, Perth, Sydney and Melbourne, with 61 participants overall.

Key issues raised in submissions and roundtables

Risk factors of young parenthood

Pre-pregnancy and birth risk factors for young parenthood identified included:

- low socio-economic disadvantage or poverty⁴⁰
- sexual exploitation of vulnerable young women⁴¹
- intergenerational cycle of teenage motherhood⁴²
- family and domestic violence⁴³
- trauma from refugee experience⁴⁴
- parental drug and alcohol abuse.⁴⁵

Services need to understand the ‘multidimensional’ nature of young parents’ lives in order to improve outcomes for this vulnerable group.⁴⁶

Stigma, prejudice and discrimination

Stigma and prejudice represent a substantial impediment to young parents accessing services.⁴⁷ Experiences of social stigma and feelings of shame were identified in interactions with schools, family members, friends, community members, agencies, the rental market and health care professionals.⁴⁸

Young mothers with an out-of-home care experience are particularly vulnerable as they frequently bear a double burden of stigmatisation, both as young mothers and as a young person in care.⁴⁹

It was recommended in submissions and roundtables that services and organisations work to develop and foster young person-centred and judgement-free support environments.⁵⁰ This needs to take place in education and employment settings as well as primary points of contact for young parents, such as general practitioners, schools, hospitals and clinics, early childhood services, Centrelink and housing services.⁵¹

Child protection and family and domestic violence

A number of submissions and participants at roundtables reported that many young parents fear child protection authorities.

Young mothers with a history of childhood abuse or trauma can develop distrust of services, resulting in a reluctance to leave their children with strangers.⁵² This can be exacerbated by mental health issues that may have been brought on or amplified by the birth of their child and can also lead to greater social isolation and increased depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.⁵³

Multicultural Youth South Australia (MYSA) suggested that some adolescent pregnancies in young parents from refugee backgrounds occur in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV).⁵⁴ Refugee teenagers who experience IPV fear they will lose their children to child protection authorities due to the existence of domestic violence within the family,⁵⁵ and are often unwilling to access health care services or seek support.⁵⁶

By disengaging from services, problems faced by young parents may escalate, which could ironically result in child protection involvement.⁵⁷

This self-perpetuating cycle of fear is more frequent among young parents from disadvantaged communities.⁵⁸

To reduce the risk of child protection intervention and increase engagement with young mothers (with or without an out-of-home care experience), parenting programs and programs with embedded health care support and the ability to develop trusting relationships with teenage mothers should be provided to young parents.⁵⁹

MYSA recommended that a multi-dimensional approach is needed to provide support for young mothers experiencing IPV or domestic violence.⁶⁰ MYSA also pointed out that the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2010–2022) does not consider minors as clients — only as children of those mothers experiencing domestic violence, a gap which places young women and their children at risk.⁶¹

Access to early childhood education and care

Limited or poor access to affordable and quality early childhood education and care services is a significant impediment to sustained educational and employment participation by young parents.⁶²

The high cost of early childhood education and care creates a distinct deterrent to remaining in employment or returning to work.⁶³ Submissions and roundtable participants pointed out that young mothers can only receive early childhood education and care benefits for two years yet some basic university courses are four years.⁶⁴ Further, under the new child care policy (to be introduced in 2018), many young parents are likely to be worse off.⁶⁵

Some submissions and roundtable participants recommended the provision of affordable early childhood education and care services located on the site of educational or training institutions, so that young mothers can have close contact with their child and early childhood education and care providers.⁶⁶ Others called for 'integrated child care'— a wrap-around model that allows young people to be close to their children by learning, volunteering, working or engaging in other activities in the same premises.⁶⁷ For example, the CCCares @ Canberra College Program.⁶⁸

Health, sexual health and contraception education

In-school and outreach programs that combine sexual health education and access to contraception are most effective at reducing adolescent pregnancy,⁶⁹ and can reduce risky sexual behaviour in young people.⁷⁰

The need for young people to know more about, and have access to, contraception was a consistent theme in roundtable discussions and in submissions.⁷¹ We heard that sexual health education programs should offer information relating to contraception, pap smears, pregnancy testing, antenatal and post-natal care.⁷² They should also emphasise teaching young people about personal responsibility and developing self-esteem and self-confidence.⁷³ Education on conflict resolution and negotiating consensual relationships is also needed to address young women's concerns about feeling pressured to have sex.⁷⁴ For young people in out-of-home care, peer pressure was considered a significant factor in earlier engagement in sexual activity.⁷⁵

Disrupted school attendance for some young people meant that such educational programs could be missed.⁷⁶ Without a family support system around them, adolescents in out-of-home care in particular can continue to lack knowledge about these issues.⁷⁷ Limited knowledge about contraception was highlighted as a particular issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.⁷⁸

Roundtable participants highlighted access to abortion services as a challenge for some young parents.⁷⁹ It was noted that many young people did not feel comfortable accessing mainstream services for abortion advice and services, as these services were not youth friendly and perceived as judgemental.⁸⁰

Transport and driver's licences

Transport is fundamental to young parents' access to services and support. Without a reliable form of transport, young parents face practical difficulties in getting to work, attending school or other education settings, and accessing health and care services.⁸¹

Transport challenges for young parents include:

- difficulties gaining a driver's licence
- completing the number of required supervised driving hours
- access to a car or someone to supervise
- expensive bus fares
- poor treatment by bus drivers
- narrow and poorly maintained footpaths preventing pram access
- the cost of petrol.

Programs should support young parents to gain their driver's licence or provide alternative transport to enable access to services, early childhood education and care services or employment.⁸²

Education, employment and economic security

Education is critical for breaking the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency and increasing the chances of new young parents becoming economically secure.⁸³ In particular, education is a pathway to improved employment opportunities and outcomes.

There are complex issues surrounding young parents' engagement with education. For example, young mothers are likely to leave school early. At the same time, early school leavers have a greater likelihood of becoming young parents.⁸⁴

Young parents, especially young mothers, face barriers to remaining in mainstream schooling.⁸⁵ Even when schools implement an education policy to support pregnancy and parenting, it may be unrealistic to get parenting students back into the mainstream classroom.⁸⁶ In the roundtable discussions, it was noted that young parents have many 'competing drivers' (including, but not limited, to parenting, education, housing and employment) that make it hard for them to fit into the mainstream education environment.⁸⁷

Most state and territory education laws specify that providing access to education for all children is a principle or objective of the law. The education laws in certain

jurisdictions also recognise that some children require special assistance or adjustments to ensure their access to education.⁸⁸ However, in general, state and territory education laws do not **require** schools to make necessary adjustments or provide necessary support to ensure access to education for all children, including those who are pregnant or are parents.

Some submissions pointed to the desirability for inbuilt flexibility within schools and educational institutions to accommodate the needs of pregnant and parenting young people.⁸⁹ For example, programs such as Young Families Connect (YFC)⁹⁰ and Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring (STEMM)⁹¹ support young parents through both academic and parenting education.

Housing

Stable and secure housing is a core need for young parents and their children.⁹² Access to suitable properties and security of tenure is central to addressing other issues and challenges that young parents face.⁹³

Homeless young parents tend to experience multiple social disadvantages such as: financial instability; lower educational attainment; poor training and employment opportunities and outcomes; poor physical and mental health; social isolation; and lack of independent living skills.⁹⁴ It appears that there are few programs for homeless young couples and there is insufficient emergency and ongoing housing support for young parents.

Some participants at the roundtables advised us that there is often nowhere for young mothers in out-of-home care and their babies to go while they are still officially in care, as it is difficult to find foster carers who will take both the young parent and their child.⁹⁵

Consequently, access to safe, secure and affordable housing is a critical factor in providing effective services to young parents with vulnerable children.⁹⁶ Some roundtable participants suggested refocusing a proportion of homeless refuges to house young parents only, arguing that this would yield positive results.⁹⁷

Due to the various disadvantages often faced by young homeless parents, it is important for support services to have the ability to address multiple issues at once.⁹⁸

Cultural safety

Culturally safe programs and services for young parents and their children are more likely to succeed in promoting their health, wellbeing and socio-economic independence.⁹⁹

In its submission, the Healing Foundation argued that there needs to be consideration of the culturally appropriate nature of education.¹⁰⁰ They also advised that in rural and remote areas, discussions about young parenting still do not take into account or prioritise the cultural contexts of how people parent.¹⁰¹ Similarly, some roundtable discussions affirmed the importance of addressing the issue of cultural safety in services for young people from refugee backgrounds, noting that divergent cultural values can be at odds with mainstream parenting beliefs and practices.¹⁰²

Professor Kerry Arabena, from the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, suggested that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men should be supported by members of a therapeutic cultural workforce. This would include the help of a multidisciplinary team of trusted professionals from pre-conception to the first two thousand days of a newborn's life. This support should intensify at key transition points and focus on different types of support as needed, including supporting the health of mum and baby, addressing family violence, and building the skills and capacities of parents.¹⁰³

Young fathers

Currently, research, policies and programs to support teenage pregnancy mostly exclude young fathers.¹⁰⁴ The inclusion of young fathers is critical for the longer term involvement of young parents with services.¹⁰⁵

Similar to the predictors of teenage pregnancy for young women, the indicators of teen fatherhood include multiple factors such as 'parental separation/divorce in early childhood, exposure to family violence in early childhood, and illicit drug use (ever or in pregnancy)'.¹⁰⁶

At roundtables, we heard that programs supporting young fathers to share their stories and learn to understand their paternal role, while rare, were helpful and supportive.¹⁰⁷ For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young fathers, VACCA recommended that 'direct support' should be provided to young fathers at the individual, family and community level.¹⁰⁸ VACCA additionally advocated that programs should be inclusive of young fathers, as long as the safety of the mother and child is not compromised.¹⁰⁹

Service disconnection

A particular concern raised in the roundtable discussions was the service disconnect when a young parent leaves a service, described by some participants as being 'lost in transition'.¹¹⁰ Discussions highlighted the lack of follow up with young parents after they leave services, complete programs or no longer meet the criteria required to continue to attend the service.¹¹¹

1.4 What did young parents say?

The project included 77 consultations with young parents in workshops and individual interviews in New South Wales, Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. In addition to face-to-face consultations, 89 surveys were completed by young parents and expecting young parents.

Our consultations with young parents were critical to understanding the needs of young parents and their children and what supports are most effective for them.

Of young mothers who completed the survey, almost seven per cent identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and approximately eleven per cent told us they were not born in Australia.

Education

Being a pregnant school student was difficult for most young people we spoke to. In particular, young people said that others judged them, gossiped about them, pried into their affairs or stared at them. Many said that they were bullied. Other difficulties young parents reported were being sick while trying to study, being tired all the time, being unable to concentrate, finding it an effort to get dressed, and difficulties getting around the school and being on public transport. They said:

I was scared school was going to kick me out because I was pregnant.

The school told me to leave when I got pregnant.

I was getting hate from other students.

Of the young mothers who completed the survey, 64% were not regularly attending school when they became pregnant. Of those who were attending school, the majority said that they were supported by their school. They said their school:

- was flexible with schedules, breaks (including for feeding), appointments, homework, and exams
- provided out of school support such as a home visit from a teacher
- had a crèche on site, allowed children in the school, or helped to access external early childhood education and care services
- supplied larger uniforms for when they were pregnant
- provided keys to an accessible lift.

Some of the ways young people said that school could have helped more included:

- giving information about distance education options
- proactively addressing bullying of pregnant students
- being flexible about child minding and breast feeding after giving birth
- helping young people handle the dual pressures of pregnancy and school work
- allowing the option of taking school work home when unwell.

Of the young mothers who completed the survey 58.3% told us that they returned to education after they had their baby, 43% said they returned to full time education (mostly returning to school), and 30.6% said they returned to part time education (mostly attending TAFE or other non-specified education).

Employment

Very few of the young mothers we spoke with in face-to-face consultations had full or part time jobs. However, many of the young fathers had jobs. It was particularly hard for young mothers with preschool-aged children and no private transport to be working, as they were focused on caring for their children, addressing their own physical and mental health issues, and securing stable housing. Young parents told us:

I lost my job when they found out I was pregnant, I was only six weeks. They asked if I was pregnant or just putting on weight. I got a text message saying I'd lost my job after they found out. It's hard to get a job because I don't have formal qualifications or experience.

Health care and information

Many young parents in consultations and the survey said they received limited helpful information or advice at the hospital prior to or after giving birth. The exception to this was when their baby required special care in the hospital for a period of some days. In these circumstances young people reported more consistent and useful guidance about how to care for their baby.

The experience of giving birth and care at the hospital varied. Young parents told us:

I was breastfeeding and the midwife ripped my breast from her mouth and told me I wasn't doing it properly.

The hospital staff were really good, I got lots of materials.

Stigma, prejudice and lack of respect

Being judged and being treated like a young child were common experiences for the young people consulted. These negative experiences were reported as occurring in mothers groups, school, shopping centres, Centrelink, on public transport, in medical contexts, and sometimes within their own family.

I told my parents and they pretty much disowned me.

One of the hardest things was going around in public. I had my kid at 14. The looks I got going down the street. I would never walk out of the house by myself. One of my biggest fears was the public. Now I don't care.

Most young mothers described a lack of respect from medical professionals, members of the community and friends through intrusive personal questions and comments on their ability to be a good parent. Young people told us that public judgement and disapproval often results in them feeling criticised for not being in a stable relationship, owning their own home or pursuing a career to support their family. One young mother told us, 'I got told, when people found out I was pregnant, that I would ruin my child's life'.

These experiences of stigma and prejudice could contribute to self-doubt and hinder the ability of young mothers to gain confidence in their parenting skills. For this reason young parents liked being in programs with other young parents who they could identify with. Some parenting programs provide safe spaces for parents and offer courses on parenting skills. However, young parent's responses to the surveys and in consultations indicate that some parenting programs and service providers do not make young parents feel comfortable or welcomed.

The survey responses suggest that the stigma young parents face can have a serious impact on their mental health. The data collected in the surveys indicates that young mothers feel overwhelmed and isolated because of stereotypes that are held by friends, family and the public. Young mothers described feeling guilty when choosing to balance their personal time with the time spent with their children. Young parents said they feel isolated and excluded from activities with their friends simply because they are a young parent. As one young father said, 'I think that I don't get invited to as many things as I use to. Like with friends and stuff'.

Messages to government

The punitive and harsh cuts to welfare and support to young parents will only contribute to the same cycle of deprivation I was born into. Policies such as the work for the dole and the basics card show only contempt for future vulnerable children. "a society is judged by how it treats it's most vulnerable"

It's hard to get your licence and gain 100 hours supervised training when you have no money/ no one to help.

Do your job!
Free Childcare for single parents, more Healthcare benefits for children.

Housing needs to be more affordable or attainable for mothers on low income, A stable home is the first step to a child's future.

I should be able to consent as a parent, not just for my child but for myself as well.

Everyone know what services are available. A lot of services that were available for me I didn't find out about till after I really needed them.

Dear Government, I think you should be more aware of the young mums out there who are suffering and struggling. More support is needed financially, support networks, case managers, more needed for housing not just refuges.

Advice to other young parents

You're not silly, ask's all the question are not dumb its okay to asks for help.

Going to school is important
Things will be easier with education.

Be there for your kid,
pull your head in.

Gain as much knowledge as you can.
As hard as somedays may seem try
and find the right support to get
what your entitled to!!! The support
is there. Just seems very hidden.

Run your own race,
take all the advice
with a grain of salt.

Support your kids every single day.
Don't count the days, make the
days count.

This world is so
judgemental. If someone
wants to judge you, it
doesn't matter. They don't
know [what] you've been
through.

1. Patience
2. Enjoy every moment they get older quickly
3. You can't love them enough

Try and attend as much parents
groups as possible. Make sure you
have a circle you belong to.

Affordable early childhood education and care services

A number of services for young parents provided free or subsidised early childhood education and care on site, which was highly valued by the young parents we spoke with. Few of the parents in the consultations used early childhood education and care services outside of those provided on site. Many young parents pointed out the prohibitive cost of available early childhood and care services:

The money for child care is too expensive.

I can afford two days. Just. And then like the problem is that I want to look for a job but then you need money for more day care days, but then you need day care to be able to work.

Accommodation

Finding suitable, stable and affordable accommodation was a significant problem for most young parents. The majority of young parents in consultations and the survey had moved several times since becoming pregnant and many were on waiting lists for public or community housing. Only seven of the young parents who completed the survey (9.7%) were in the same living arrangements as when they first became pregnant. Some 23.6 % indicated that they had been homeless, and of these 35.3% fell pregnant while homeless. Of the young mothers responding to the survey, 12.5% identified that they had an out-of-home care experience, with 44.4% of these young mothers indicating they had fallen pregnant while in care.

Young parents generally considered public housing and refuges unsafe for them and their children, often situated in locations far away from family members and services, with limited transport options.

Comments from young parents in the consultations included:

You can't be in shelters when you're pregnant.

There was so much stress through my whole birth and pregnancy ... I was stressed because it was pretty much on my due date I had to move. They were like — you have to move — and I was like — I don't have anywhere to move.

The difficulty of accessing private rental with a young child and no rental record was consistently raised. Young parents stressed the importance of services which provide temporary accommodation, and which assist them to build up a rental history and/or act as lead tenants. Many young people said there needed to be more housing that is cheap for young families.

Responsiveness of services

Of young mothers who responded to the survey, about 60% indicated that services had helped them, most commonly youth specific parenting programs. For example, we heard that:

The best thing about being in this program is being able to raise your kids ... even though I've made a mistake I can still have my kids with me.

I was homeless until a social worker at Centrelink got me a house.

Others found very few services who were helpful, non-judgemental and respectful:

In the early parenting days I needed help with Centrelink and child care options as I didn't understand what was available to me. I would have benefited greatly from access to this information through a social worker.

When asked how services and support could be improved, young mothers in the survey said there was a need for:

- more awareness of and easier access to services so more mothers can easily find and use them
- easier access to education
- an improvement to housing services, their availability and the times it takes to find somewhere, especially in cases involving domestic violence
- more emotional support for young mothers, especially for post-natal depression, and an increase in regular support groups
- driving lessons and support in getting a licence
- more financial support, including help with debts and information on financial topics such as how to budget and open a bank account, or how to set up health insurance
- breastfeeding support
- more flexibility with payment schemes
- more affordable childcare options, especially those with longer or later hours to accommodate for shift workers
- help to get out of abusive relationships and situations
- a review of procedures to give young parents a chance to prove they are capable parents and to provide assistance with support for newborns without the threat of having their child taken away
- more flexibility around appointment times to accommodate transport issues
- training providers to be more respectful and understanding, and to not belittle, patronise or pressure young parents.

Many young people felt unsupported by care and protection services or targeted because of their age:

They're assholes. They won't leave me alone. Someone keeps putting in reports that I'm not looking after my child.

[Agency] workers are more concerned with reporting than helping or educating.

Others told us they had good experiences:

I had my ups and downs seeing someone before I got pregnant. I had anger issues. After I fell pregnant I started seeing a counsellor because [the child protection agency] insisted. I got a case manager and she was ok. My case was closed two or three months after (baby) was born because they didn't see any issues. We're now used as an example for other young parents.

Young parents in contact with the juvenile justice system wanted the courts to be more understanding and take into account their parenting responsibilities.

Delays and frustrations dealing with Centrelink were common experiences:

Low income families need to feel supported, not dehumanised by initiatives such as drug testing welfare recipients and basics card. Centrelink is an exhausting process. [Phone] numbers are often outdated and difficult to access, for example, urgent payment line, housing services.

Many of the young parents pointed out the need for more support for young fathers:

There is not really any support for young men. It can be upsetting to hear that other males aren't supportive. A support group for dads would have been useful, but I don't know how many there are.

Goals and aspirations

For most young people in the consultations, pregnancy was unplanned. However, overwhelmingly they were positive about the experience of being a parent and were aspirational for themselves and their children. Many reported that being a parent had changed them for the better. Some said that they wanted a chance for their children to grow up without the negative experiences they had faced throughout their own childhood. For example:

I want her to grow up better than what I did. Have an amazing future.

I want to be a good mum. My dream is to be able to pass onto my kids my culture.

The surveys also provided the young parents with an opportunity to inform us of their goals and aspirations before their pregnancy. Many young parents indicated that before having a baby they had plans for their futures involving education, jobs, family and travel. Most (68.1%) identified that their goals had changed since having their baby. Others said that their goals had not changed; or that they now had a purpose, and some said that they still had the same goals, but that they had been postponed or would take longer to achieve. For example:

I might have lived with my parents for longer and probably have a part-time job whilst completing university.

I've achieved them all but the hole in my soul has not been worth it at all. I would trade it all to have my daughter with me today.

When asked about new goals since having their baby, almost a third of survey participants told us that they wanted to be good parents, care for their children and provide their children with the best opportunities to succeed in life. Other top priorities were education (15.3%), employment (15.3%), having a licence and car (12.5%), and more affordable and accessible child care (9.7%):

To study beauty therapy in university. Financial help would be fantastic because I won't be able to afford university until my son is older.

My new goals are gaining a good job to provide for my children and also assist my children to become happy, healthy and well-rounded adults one day. I think for both of those goals education is the key.

2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Bureau of Statistics should work with state and territory governments to ensure that national data on fertility rates consistently record age, sex, indigeneity and remoteness.

Recommendation 2: The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare should work with state and territory governments to collect nationally consistent data, over time, on the characteristics and number of young parents in detention.

Recommendation 3: State and territory governments should explore the use of alternative sentencing options, such as home detention, for offenders who are young parents. Where a young parent who is a primary carer is given a custodial sentence, programs which allow them to remain with their children should be made available, when this is in the best interests of the child.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should commission the development of a mobile enabled e-resource for young people to address their education and knowledge gap on sexual health issues such as contraception, pregnancy and parenting.

Recommendation 5: The Australian Government should commission research into the distinct needs and characteristics of young parents that present barriers to employment pathways, and the kinds of targeted interventions that are most likely to assist in overcoming these.

Recommendation 6: The Australian Government should commission research into how to deliver housing and homelessness services that more effectively suit the unique needs of young parents and their children. This research will necessarily involve consulting with young parents and their children themselves.

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government should commission research into the factors that lead to parenthood for young fathers and how young fathers can be meaningfully included in education, health and community services programs for parents.

Recommendation 8: The Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments' Education Council, should work with state and territory governments to develop systemic policies to address the needs of young pregnant and parenting students, including through specific policies and programs.

Recommendation 9: State and territory education departments should systematically collect data on the numbers of young pregnant and parenting young people who are enrolled students.

Recommendation 10: The Australian Government should develop a specific ParentsNext stream for young parents, in particular for those living in rural or remote Australia.

Recommendation 11: The Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments' Health Council, should work with states and territories to review laws, policies and practices, so that all children and young people who are determined to

be Gillick competent have access to prescribed medical forms of contraception and abortion.

Recommendation 12: The Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments' Education Council, should work with states and territories to review their laws, policies and practices to ensure that:

- access to education for all children is guaranteed
- educational authorities and educational institutions – both public and private – are required to make all necessary adjustments and provide all necessary support to facilitate and ensure access to education for children and young people who are pregnant or are parents
- regular publication of information on adjustments made to support children and young people who are pregnant or are parents is required
- suspension, expulsion or denial of education of a child or young person on the ground of their being pregnant or a parent is prohibited.

Recommendation 13: The Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments' Attorneys-General Council, should work with states and territories to review their laws, policies and practices to ensure that discrimination against a child or young person on the ground of their pregnancy, breastfeeding or parental status/responsibilities is prohibited without exceptions.

Recommendation 14: State and territory governments should review their policies and practices to ensure that young parents are not targeted on the basis of their age as an at-risk group for child protection assessment purposes.

Recommendation 15: State and territory governments should review their policies and practices to ensure that young parents receive services designed to support them in their parenting role.

Recommendation 16: As part of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*, Commonwealth, state and territory governments should collect nationally consistent data on children receiving child protection and care services who have teenage parents and on young people receiving child protection and care services who have children as teenagers themselves.

Recommendation 17: All states and territories, led by the Australian Government, should commit to conducting a routine national child maltreatment incidence and prevalence study.

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⁸⁹ SYC Limited, Submission No 31 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 6; Ipswich State High School, Submission No 41 to Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 2; CCCares at Canberra College, Submission No 7 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 2; STEMM (Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring) Submission No 10 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 2.

⁹⁰ Ipswich State High School, Submission No 41 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 1.

⁹¹ Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring (STEMM), Submission No 10 to Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*; *Supporting Teenagers with Education, Mothering and Mentoring* (STEMM). At <http://stemm.com.au/> (viewed 13 September 2017).

⁹² Karinya Young Women's Service (KYWS), Submission No 14 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 3; Philip Mendes and Jade Purtell, Submission No 4 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 6–8; Advocate for Children and Young People NSW, Submission No 35 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 3; Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Submission No 42 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 9.

⁹³ Karinya Young Women's Service (KYWS), Launceston, Tasmania, Submission No 14 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 3.

⁹⁴ Ella Kuskoff, Submission No 1 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 6.

⁹⁵ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

⁹⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Submission No 42 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 9.

⁹⁷ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

⁹⁸ Ella Kuskoff, Submission No 1 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 6 citing Joe Marrone, 'Creating

hope through employment for people who are homeless or in transitional housing' (2005) 8(1) *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation* 13-35.

⁹⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Submission No 42 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

¹⁰¹ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

¹⁰² Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

¹⁰³ Professor Kerry Arabena, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne (October 2017) for *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*.

¹⁰⁴ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017); Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Submission No 42 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 7; Rachel Skinner, Jennifer Marino, Martha Hickey, Deborah Bateson, and Lucy Lewis, Submission No 32 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 4; Ella Kuskoff, Submission No 1 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Association of Women Educators Inc, Submission No 37 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Louisa Tan and Julie Quinlivan, 'Domestic violence, single parenthood, and fathers in the setting of teenage pregnancy' (2006) 38 *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 201, cited in Richard Fletcher and Jennifer StGeorge, Submission No 30 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

¹⁰⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Submission No 42 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Submission No 42 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children*, 7.

¹¹⁰ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).

¹¹¹ Roundtable Discussion, *National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children* (2017).