

# Valuing young families

## Child protection and family support strategies with adolescent mothers

Karen Healy and *Young Mothers for Young Women*

*This article is based on a study about young mothers' experiences of parenting and their suggestions for child protection and family support strategies. This paper disputes the notion that young mothers are deficient parents, and instead highlights the social stressors faced by many young families. It is argued that, rather than focussing on the individual family or young mother, family work could be better oriented toward resourcing and supporting adolescent families to care for their members.*

This paper concerns a study into young mothers' experiences of parenting and their suggestions for child protection and family support approaches with young families. The study was conducted by *Young Mothers for Young Women*, a peer support and advocacy group involving young mothers in peer support, and community and professional education about young women's experiences. Altogether the study involved 29 mothers, some of whom had lost children subsequent to child protection interventions. The research was motivated by the observations of community workers and young mothers that despite the rhetoric of protecting children, approaches to intervention frequently fail to address the basic family and social support needs of young families. This paper will outline some of the sources of support as well as significant stressors in the lives of the young parents involved in the study. The discussion will highlight some inadequacies of current child protection approaches particularly with vulnerable young families. Finally, some positive features of professional intervention will be outlined with the aim of highlighting some new directions for child protection and family support strategies with young families.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite claims about the 'high rates of abuse and neglect by teenage mothers, and their generally deficient parenting skills' (Gilbert 1987, p. 9) there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate a link between youth of the parent and child

abuse and neglect (Buchholz and Korn-Bursztyn 1993, p. 376; Connelly & Strauss 1992, p. 709). Connelly and Strauss (1992, p. 714) have found some association between a mother's age and abuse, measured according to the mother's age at the time of the birth rather than at the time of the abuse. Haskett et al (1994) also point to poorer emotional health amongst extremely young parents, 16 years and under. However, these researchers concur with the view that the social circumstances that frequently accompany adolescent parenthood, particularly isolation, are significantly implicated in the increased vulnerability of these families to stress (Bolton & Laner 1986, p. 183; Connelly & Strauss 1992, p. 717; Haskett, Johnson & Miller 1994, p. 472). As Buchholz and Korn-Bursztyn (1993, p. 376) argue:

The degree of risk for maltreatment of children of adolescent parents, rather than being directly related to parental chronological age, is embedded within the additional factors of economic status, stress, isolation, knowledge of child development, as well as the woman's experience of motherhood.

Much of the research concerning adolescent parenting and child abuse risk emanates from the USA. However, the changing Australian demographic profile of adolescent parents suggests a similar social vulnerability of this group in this country. Unlike the American context, the incidence of adolescent parenting in Australia has significantly declined in the past two decades (Condon, 1992, p. 19). Increasingly, however, young parents are

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likely to have backgrounds characterised by emotional or material deprivation (Montague 1981; Clarke 1985; Condon 1992). Certainly, upon becoming parents, many of these young women are likely to experience social stressors associated with child abuse and neglect. Our own research has pointed to the extreme vulnerability of young mothers to violence, particularly of a relationship-based character (Healy 1995; Healy et al 1995; *Young Mothers for Young Women* 1995). Other recent literature has confirmed that in Australia, like the American context, adolescent mothers are likely to experience poverty, housing difficulties, social isolation and limited education and employment opportunities (Clarke 1985; Tilbury et al 1990; Zubrzycki et al 1991; Condon 1992).

If one acknowledges the social context of adolescent parenting, a quite different picture emerges to that of the irresponsible or inadequate parent that is often presented in our mass media and, unfortunately, in some of the 'academic' literature about this group. Indeed, it would seem that many young families are coping with extraordinary pressures such as poverty, isolation and violence. The predominance of a casework approach to child protection intervention with young families would suggest that the family or, indeed, the young mother, is seen to be the ultimate cause of the difficulties facing many young families (Weatherley 1987). In this paper we are not suggesting that professional support is without merit, but rather that workers in this field must address the social dimensions of the vulnerability experienced by many young parents (Bolton & Laner 1986, p. 194). By looking at young mothers' suggestions for child protection and family support, we aim to initiate some discussion about changing the framework in which child protection and family support are understood. We would like to shift in focus from that of preventing child abuse and neglect to the broader question, 'How can young families be resourced and supported to care for their members?'

### THE STUDY

The study was designed and implemented by a community researcher and young mothers from *Young Mothers for Young Women*. The study, conducted between July and November 1995, was

aimed at identifying appropriate informal and formal responses to young families' support needs. The study involved two groups of adolescent mothers. The first group were young mothers who had experienced limited or no statutory intervention with their children, while the second group had children removed temporarily or permanently due to child protection concerns. Altogether 29 young women contributed to the study.

For the young women who had experienced limited or no statutory intervention a questionnaire was developed. The first part of the questionnaire considered basic demographic data, such as housing and relationship status. The second part looked at young mothers' experiences of parenting stress, current ways in which this stress was addressed and what further responses to parenting stress and child protection these young women would recommend. This questionnaire was administered by the young mothers to young women in three young parent support groups. Twenty-six young women completed the questionnaire.

In addition, a focus group of three young women was facilitated by two community workers. These three women had lost parenting rights either temporarily or permanently subsequent to the intervention of statutory services. Two of these women had a child permanently placed elsewhere, one with a relative, whilst the other is a ward of the state. The third woman had three children temporarily removed due to neglect. This group was important because, unlike most of the other young women who had apparently coped despite the stressors of parenting with few resources, these young women had been identified for long-term intervention by statutory services. Through discussion with these young women we hoped to gain some insight into some of the special needs of particularly vulnerable young families.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

All participants had become parents whilst teenagers and all were associated with a support service or network at the time of the study. The majority of the respondents to the study were between eighteen and twenty-two years. Twenty-two of the twenty-six respondents in the first part of the study had one child,

though two respondents had three or more children. By contrast, the three participants in the focus group were between twenty-two and twenty-four years of age. In the second group, each had given birth to three children, and one participant was pregnant with a fourth child.

The majority of participants were single parents. Eight of the respondents were in de facto relationships and one was married. Although some of the single parents lived with family and friends, the basic data indicates that the majority of respondents assumed primary parenting responsibility for their child. Moreover, as the greatest proportion lived alone with their child or children, it was unlikely that many received in-home support in the daily tasks of parenting.

Almost all the respondents were reliant on Department of Social Security payments, hence most lived in financially difficult circumstances. Data collected from the first group indicates some accommodation transience. Just over a quarter of respondents had lived in one residence over the past year, with a significant proportion of participants (13) living at two or three residences over the past year. Three respondents indicated that they had lived in four or more places of accommodation over the previous year. For the first group then, a picture emerges of a moderate level of accommodation impermanence, though few would be identified as transient. Even these moderate levels of impermanence, however, may significantly impact on the young families' capacity to develop and maintain social networks.

### STRESSORS AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT

The young women in the first group were asked to identify major sources of stress in their parenting role. Most commonly, pressure associated with the daily routines of family life, such as the child's crying and dinner times, was identified. These stresses were further exacerbated, it would seem, by the difficulty of coping with the tasks often alone and with few resources. For many of the women, including some of those in relationships, informal support did not extend to opportunities for time away from the child. The absence of formal or informal child care opportunities meant that, for

some women, such things as shopping, visiting the doctor or planning small breaks from parenting, presented major difficulties. Only two respondents indicated that the absence of money was a significant stress. This is surprising in that, as other recent research confirms, single and welfare dependent families are highly likely to live in poverty (Thornwaite, Kingston & Walsh 1995). It seems that the young women were more likely to identify the absence of support services, particularly child care services, rather than the lack of money to purchase these services as a key problem.

For a small number (3), stress associated with lack of parenting knowledge was noted. Many of the young women in their response to the questionnaire indicated a fear of judgement by the community and professionals and this may impede their willingness to seek advice about parenting issues. Like many other single parents (Kissman 1991), for some respondents (3) difficulties associated with the breakdown of a relationship were identified as current stressors. Memories of past abuse were also mentioned by one participant. Indeed, the significance of past abuse on current parenting may be a far more major issue than indicated here as other research has demonstrated the pervasiveness of violence in many young mothers' lives (Healy 1995; *Young Mothers for Young Women* 1995).

The questionnaire asked the young women to identify key sources of support. In twenty of the twenty-six responses to this question, participants stated informal support networks, particularly family of origin and partners, as primary sources of support. Eight respondents also identified young parent support services, including particularly the provision of respite child care services. Four young women also identified financial support, especially through the Supporting Parent Benefit and from partners, as fundamental to maintaining their parenting role.

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their relationship status and participants were also asked to explain this rating. The reason for this question was to investigate the contribution partners made to the well-being of the family. Indeed, in this research we wished to raise some questions about the popular image of the

TABLE 1. Young parents' satisfaction with relationship status.

	very low	low	moderate	high	very high
single	3	3	7	2	2
de facto	1		2	1	4
married		1			

young father as 'uninvolved and exploitative' (Buchholz & Korn-Bursztyn 1993, p. 364), as this portrait did not fit with the anecdotal experience of some group members. Moreover, the question about relationship status was also intended to investigate the ways in which the lack of a partner impacted upon young single parents' perceptions of satisfaction.

As Table 1 indicates, although there was a spread of responses, there was a generally higher perception of satisfaction amongst those in de facto relationships than amongst the single respondents. In the young women's explanations of their ratings, a link between perceptions of support and degree of satisfaction was evident. For those indicating very low and low levels of satisfaction, isolation, dependence of the child and a pretence about coping were noted. For example, one single woman wrote, 'People look through the window and think I'm coping, they don't see the cracks'. Another young married woman explained her low level of satisfaction in this way, 'Professional people assume that my husband supports me and "takes care" of me and my kids. It is assumed that he makes life easier when in fact he makes things more difficult.' This young woman's statement suggests some caution is advisable in evaluating the role partners play in young families. Indeed, whilst for some of the women in this study partners provided invaluable support, it was clear that for others partners compounded the stressors in their lives.

The greatest proportion of single respondents (7) identified a moderate level of satisfaction. For these women there was often a sense of some stress and loneliness associated with parenting which, however, was balanced against greater independence, including freedom from destructive relationships. As one single young mother put it, '(It) can be

stressful on my own but I have supportive family and friends. Better than when I was in my last relationship'. The two respondents in de facto relationships, who indicated moderate levels of satisfaction, also appeared to see their situation as something of a balancing act. One young woman described her situation as 'sometimes stressful, sometimes supportive'.

Proportionally, the highest levels of satisfaction were indicated amongst those in de facto relationships, with five of the eight respondents indicating high to very high levels of satisfaction. The young women's comments about their relationship contradict the image of unsupportive or irresponsible young father. As one young woman commented, 'My boyfriend is so supportive and I'd be lost without him'. At the same time four of seventeen single respondents indicated high to very high levels of satisfaction. Again for these young women, it was a perception of support that contributed to their satisfaction; as one young woman wrote, 'It's amazing how much everyone else comes out to help and support you when they think that you're doing it on your own'.

Overall, it was clear that the mundane tasks of parenting were the major source of stress for many of the young mothers. It is perhaps unsurprising then that those who felt supported in the daily tasks of parenting indicated greatest satisfaction. Whilst the highest proportion of respondents indicating satisfaction in their relationship status were in de facto relationships, it would seem that it is the perception of informal support rather than its specific source that contributed to contentment. It is important to note, nonetheless, that for a significant number of these women, a male partner featured as a support. Hence, it is critical that young parent services are alert and responsive to the possibility that the young father may play a supportive role.

Whilst many respondents received considerable assistance from community based support services, the problems of isolation and absence of reprieve from the parenting role remained. Indeed, it would seem that these two problems are linked. Previous research on feminist practice with single parents (Kissman 1991) has highlighted the importance of facilitating opportunities for socialising and relaxation. Thus, it would seem that the provision of child care services can assist in addressing the issues of isolation and family stress (Yandell & Hewitt 1995). Indeed, the need for respite is part of 'normal' family life (Yandell & Hewitt, 1995, p. 6). It is the visibility of these needs amongst adolescent parents, due to the absence of home-based support and the lack of financial resources, rather than the presence of them that is problematic. Workers and policy makers must maintain an awareness of the social dimensions of the young parents if these typical support needs are not to be pathologised as evidence of the 'deficiency' of adolescent parents.

The relevance of child care as part of an intervention strategy in child protection, recently discussed by Yandell and Hewitt (1995), was also highlighted by the respondents. When asked how they would respond to a situation in which they thought abuse or neglect was occurring, the most common response was to offer time away from the child. In addition, some respondents recommended that places of respite for both parent and child were necessary. One possibility suggested was the option of shared care arrangements with a foster family. Child care and emergency respite care were seen as effective strategies to promote the long-term well being of all family members. As one respondent put it:

I feel that if a parent is feeling like harming their children, there should be a service/centre where the children can be dropped off. There should be experienced workers to talk to parents and help them through their anger. I do not feel (that) tearing a family apart is the answer. It does not solve problems. Maybe even a place where both parent and child can stay and receive the care they both need. Parents can be referred to ongoing outside help and the child can be returned home safely after a weekend or however long may be needed to get through the danger

period. Taking children away from their parents and into a strange environment without them can be even more traumatic than the bashing itself.

In summary, for the young women who responded to the questionnaire, two themes were frequently highlighted. Firstly, the primacy of informal support in fostering family well being was repeatedly highlighted. Hence, an appropriate part of family support with young families is the facilitation of informal support opportunities. In our own work, there has been a focus on promoting peer support networks (see also Heffernan, 1994). The chance to meet with others outside the young parents' network is important, but the absence of child care prohibits opportunities for network extension. Secondly, as the major sources of stress in their lives were primarily related to the everyday tasks of parenting often alone and with few resources, the importance of reprieve from the demands of parenting seemed connected to their sense of well being. Respite forms of child care, both as part of an overall family support strategy and as a response to crisis, are likely to provide significant relief for these young families.

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#### YOUNG MOTHERS AND CHILD PROTECTION

The young women who responded to the questionnaire presented support needs that could be responded to within a social support approach. However, for the women who had lost children subsequent to statutory intervention, a quite different approach to family support emerges. During the focus group, these young women presented support needs of a

different and more intense order. Whilst low-key support services, such as the provision of regular child care support, were important, these were not adequate to meet the high support needs expressed by these women. For all three women, family support was either non-existent or destructive. For example, one young woman had been a ward of the state since the age of six. Another indicated that her mother's treatment of her continued to be highly ambivalent, as she stated, 'Sometimes mum is nice to me, sometimes I get treated like a piece of shit'. Whilst all three expressed the wish for more supportive family relationships, they appeared resigned to their poor relationships with their family of origin.

The destructiveness of their own family experience, coupled with continuing social isolation, contributed to significant difficulty in parenting for these young women. For all three women these difficulties contributed to statutory intervention in their lives. The uncertainty and powerlessness that pervaded their experience of parenting was often exacerbated by their contact with statutory services. In this excerpt Jeanne (now 23 years old and pregnant with her fourth child) discusses the loss of her child at 16 years:

I lost my first child because I wasn't mature enough to look after a child. I was in a residential youth service but I couldn't stay once the child was born ... I was in the care of the department and nothing they had done had prepared me for living much less looking after a baby. I was institutionalised. I had never learnt to deal with my anger and I took it out on everyone. Everyone told me that I would not be capable of looking after a child and I wanted to prove them wrong but in the end I had to just cut my losses and give the baby up for adoption. The department was useless. I just went into children's services, (and said) 'You're gonna take him anyway, I'm not even gonna wait'.

Jeanne's story indicates the intensity of her support needs in the role of parent. Jeanne's background as a ward of the state had meant that she did not have a stable network of informal support for herself or her children. This deprivation in her background constrained her parenting capacity. Indeed, Jeanne's comments underscore a lack of confidence about her parenting which

reflects both her institutionalisation and the inadequate support she is likely to experience as a young parent.

The depth of Jeanne's isolation was further exacerbated by her sense of powerlessness before statutory services. As she concluded, '... "You're gonna take him anyway"'. Indeed, this defencelessness was expressed by all three young women who had lost children subsequent to child protection intervention. In addition, over half the respondents to the questionnaire indicated a similar distrust and fear of statutory authorities. Rather than a potential source of support and referral in the task of parenting, statutory child protection services were generally regarded, and experienced, as judgmental and unaccountable. There was a sense that statutory services were 'out to get everyone' (questionnaire respondent). Whilst statutory child protection services are needed, the framework through which child protection occurs seemed often to intensify these young women's feelings of powerlessness.

For the women in the focus group, statutory services did not appear to acknowledge their parenting rights. Whatever anxieties the young women bring to their interactions with child protection services, the lack of clarity about the young women's rights contributed to their powerlessness. For example, as one young woman, Candy, whose children were recently removed due to an incident of serious neglect, stated:

The department never told me my rights until way down the track, I never understood what was going on and I was treated like a criminal.

In this young woman's experience, it appeared that the legal implications of the department's involvement were not explained for some time. Whether this was a failure of the departmental officers to explain her rights, or whether she was unable to hear them, is unclear. This young woman's experience, nonetheless, does point to some difficulty in the attempt of statutory workers to perform the dual roles of support person and adversary in child protection claims.

Whilst the recent attempts to include parents in case-planning and decision-making (see McCallum 1992) are

certainly laudable, the limits to client participation within a statutory context need further attention. For young women with histories of social deprivation, negative experiences of statutory intervention, ongoing isolation and a general uncertainty about their parenting capacity, there was an overwhelming fear of statutory authorities. For these young women, attempts at client participation will remain little more than rhetoric unless the power imbalances concomitant with the statutory role are addressed (Ban 1992, p. 19). As Smith (1992, p. 187) points out:

... irrespective of formal decision making and appeal procedures, the nature of the protective worker/client relationship is such that the latter is not an equal partner in the decision-making process.

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*The establishment of rapport between worker and young woman as well as a willingness to respond spontaneously during times of crisis were identified as key features of good professional support.*

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The degree of intimidation before statutory authorities expressed by these women, which has its roots as much in the lack of clarity that characterises much statutory intervention as it does in the social and personal circumstances of the young women, presents a considerable obstacle to participation.

One way of responding to this power imbalance could involve the employment of independent advocates. The advocate could assist in explaining the intervention process to the young person, whilst also ensuring that the statutory service is accountable to the young family for their action (or inaction) toward them. The advocacy role suggested here is different to the adversarial position sometimes taken by legal advocates. Rather, given the confusion and fear some young mothers experience in their involvement with statutory services, the advocate can

play a vital role in clarifying the process. While the advocate may sometimes be required to promote the clients' interests, the primary purpose of this role would be of ensure that young parents are adequately informed about their rights and responsibilities in child protection matters. This study suggests that the statutory service worker is certainly not well placed to perform the dual roles of statutory officer and advocate. This is particularly the case with highly vulnerable women, such as the young women we interviewed. The vulnerability of the young women, due in part to extensive negative experiences with statutory services and ongoing deprivation, provides a formidable barrier to their participation in decision-making about child protection concerns.

### THE LIMITS OF SUPPORT

Whilst the first part of this study highlighted the important role family networks can play in supporting young parents, for the women in the focus group informal support processes had some limitations. Firstly, the young women expressed some difficulty in developing and maintaining peer support relationships. Also, for the young women in the second group in particular, the involvement of their family had potentially destructive consequences. For Tina, her decision to ask for her mother's help had meant the relinquishment of her parenting rights, as she stated:

I had my first child when I was sixteen and had been in refuges. The department (statutory authority) visited and told me they wanted to take the baby on a holiday for a little while when I was living on the reserve. I didn't let them and left the reserve and went back to Adelaide. I was scared that they would take my child so I left my child with my mother who looked after her. Now I can't get her (the child) back. She (the grandmother) kept making excuses about where I was living and why it wasn't suitable for a baby. Once she told me that the house had too many cockroaches and the baby couldn't live there. But I didn't think at the time that I lived with cockroaches all my childhood and it didn't affect me.

Again, Tina's story reflects the fear of statutory child protection services expressed by many other young mothers in this study. Tina's fear is, in part,

aroused by the lack of clarity in her dealings with welfare workers. For example, it is hardly surprising that the young woman was 'scared' when statutory authorities offered to take her child on a 'holiday'. Furthermore, this young woman indicated that the hospital staff had notified the statutory authorities, though at no point had the hospital personnel discussed child protection concerns with her. This lack of clarity only served to reinforce the young woman's sense of distrust.

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of Tina's story, however, was the role her family continued to play in the denial of her parenting rights. The involvement of the family in this instance had exacerbated Tina's powerlessness and uncertainty as a parent. It appears that at no stage has Tina's capacity to parent been evaluated, rather through the combination of fear of statutory services and the actions of her family, Tina has lost her parenting rights. Whilst it may be possible for Tina to mount a legal challenge to regain her parenting rights, there are a number of factors that impede her willingness to do so. Firstly, there is clearly an uncertainty about the standard of parenting she could offer, which is illustrated by her willingness to acquiesce to her mother's insistence that the housing was unsuitable. Secondly, Tina now has fears for the consequences for her daughter should the child be returned to her. As she states, 'If I took my daughter back now, it would cause her more pain, to be taken from my mother and dumped with me'. Tina's use of the term 'dumped' to describe the possible return of her child to her suggests that she has accepted some of the negativity about her parenting ability. Tina nonetheless continues to parent two younger children.

Whilst the first part of this study pointed to the importance of family support, the young women have indicated the need for workers to tread carefully in facilitating informal support. Indeed, other research has demonstrated that although young families gain from family support, a cost may be greater insecurity as parents (Zuckerman, et al discussed in Buccholz & Korn-Bursztyn, 1993 p. 364). As Buccholz and Korn-Bursztyn (1993, p. 364) point out, 'The lack of emancipation from the family is threatening to the young mother's sense of self'. Thus, in

promoting informal support, workers should attend also to the protection of the parenting rights and needs of vulnerable young families.

### **Responding to young families with high support needs: some principles for practice**

Whilst for the focus group participants it was clear that family supports cannot be relied on, these young women also expressed a deep ambivalence toward formal support services. Despite this distrust, however, there was also a desire for intense interpersonal support. This level of support was beyond that which could be offered through a mutual peer support relationship. Indeed, what these young mothers seemed to want was the opportunity for dependence whilst moving toward independence. For example, one woman suggested that what was needed was a twenty-four hour service for young parents staffed by people the young women knew and trusted. This type of service was necessary because, as the young woman pointed out, 'a crisis can happen at any time'. Another young woman suggested a sponsor, again this person was to be available at anytime.

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There are a number of welfare services, such as parent-aide units, that operate a twenty-four hour service using volunteer workers. However, this ideal of one-to-one twenty-four hour support may be unattainable as a model of professional family support practice. Nonetheless, during the discussion, a number of important principles in long-term support work with vulnerable young families were highlighted.

Firstly, the issue of worker flexibility and availability was critical. The establishment of rapport between worker and young woman as well as a willingness to respond spontaneously during times of crisis were identified as key features of good professional support. For these young women, with few other supports or sources of care in their own life histories, the support worker can play a fundamental role. As these young women quite rightly identified, finding support for them as young mothers was critical to adequate family support and child protection interventions. As Jeanne remarked, 'There's no such thing as neglect, it's all in the state of mind of the mother'.

Secondly, whilst worker availability was important, it was perhaps even more crucial that the boundaries to what the worker could offer were realistically defined from the outset. As Jeanne commented:

If you got no family and workers say they're there for you, you (the worker) gotta make it clear how much and how ever its gonna be. It's like family. You gotta make clear the limits and the boundaries, otherwise they're (the client) gonna resent you for giving false hope.

For these women, the absence of family and limited peer support networks added an intensity to their relationship with the worker. This need for worker clarity about their boundaries may appear contradictory, in that workers are often motivated by a desire to offer support and care to their clients. However, unless workers can also work out the practical limits of their capacity to offer support, the potential to further disappoint and hurt particularly vulnerable young women is great.

Thirdly, in addition to clarity about the extent of their involvement, workers should make plain the limits to confidentiality. Because of the centrality of issues of trust in support work, it is important that workers are able to deal with concerns in an upfront way. Particularly where child protection notification is necessary it is absolutely paramount that the worker is forthright about their intention to report. Ultimately, these young women saw dishonesty as more harmful than confrontation. The issue of child protection notification is a difficult one for community based



workers, but one such workers cannot afford to ignore. Working with young parents means necessarily acknowledging the parenting rights and responsibilities of young families. The worker cannot simply side with the rights of the young woman, as these must always be balanced with the rights and needs of the child. This creates particular problems as these rights do not always coincide. It seems critical that, in dealing with this issue, principles of respect and clarity remain central to the workers' approach to the young family.

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*Ultimately, these young women saw dishonesty as more harmful than confrontation.*

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It is also important that statutory service workers are clear about the extent to which community based workers can be expected to play a part in the ongoing monitoring of child protection concerns. This is a particular issue for young families who are highly reliant on a support worker. For example, Candy perceived the community worker to be a key support person for her, hence the expectation of child protection authorities that this worker also monitor Candy's progress was seen as unjust. As Candy argued, 'Now, they're (statutory authority) leaving most of the work up to (the community worker) to do. I don't think it's fair. She doesn't have to take on Family Services work'.

Child protection and family support funding agencies need to recognise that the adoption of a monitoring role by a family support worker significantly complicates the support and advocacy role the worker may otherwise play. Whilst it may be possible in some instances for community workers to engage in monitoring work, for women with few supports beyond the community based worker, these dual roles appear untenable.

Finally, whilst acknowledging the high support needs of some young parents, it is also important that workers work towards the young woman's increasing

independence. Indeed, the young women were acutely aware that even with the best of support, there would always be situations in which they were alone. Importantly, for these young women, family support intervention should aim to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to assert their rights. As Jeanne put it:

I've learnt more through youth workers about my rights, how to get along in life, how to look after yourself, how to fight for your rights, you know, than I have in my whole time with Family Services – because they don't take time to get to know you.

For young women with high support needs, the move toward independence is a long and treacherous road. Indeed, for some, the negative effects of serious early deprivation may produce lifelong difficulties. Nonetheless, the promotion of their rights in the context of a supportive relationship with a worker was identified by these young women as increasing their autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

Child protection and family support responses to adolescent families often imply that individual families and, in particular, individual young women are culpable for the significant stress they often face (Weatherley 1987, p. 6). In the Australian context, a casework approach to child protection and family support continues to dominate. While individual support is important in practice with young parents, this approach has also served to occlude the social dimensions of young families' experience (Bolton & Laner 1986, p. 194).

In this study, we have considered some aspects of young mothers' experiences of parenting. From this research we have begun to suggest strategies for interventions that resource rather than simply regulate young families. Whilst two different responses were highlighted, that is for young families with low support needs and those with higher needs, these should be seen as a continuum rather than distinct, interventive repertoires. In summary, our findings suggest that basic child protection and family support approaches with adolescent families must recognise the important role informal support networks may play in maintaining young families. In addition, the major stressors

for many young families emanate from the poor resourcing and isolation of young parents. A resourcing response to young parents, then, may involve reprieve from the daily stress of parenting. We support Yandell and Hewitt's (1995) view that respite child care services can play an important part in child protection and family support responses. For both groups of women, community-based workers can play an important advocacy and support role, should the women come into contact with statutory services. Although emphasising the importance of low-key support, the study did recognise that for some families the need for ongoing one-to-one professional intervention was necessary. A number of principles for offering such support with a resourcing rather than individualising frame were identified.

Importantly, we have noted that young parents are a diverse population and, as such, intervention strategies should reflect these differences. Thus, although our suggestions may raise some possibilities for responding to the social needs of young parents, the ongoing development of child protection and family support approaches should occur in dialogue with young families. ☼

## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

*In this paper, identifying information, such as names and places, have been changed in an attempt to protect the identity of participants.*

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