



Megan Mitchell  
National Children's Commissioner  
Australian Human rights Commission  
GPO Box 5218  
SYDNEY, NSW 2001

30 May 2017

Dear Commissioner Mitchell,

**RE: Request from the National Children's Commissioner for CREATE's participation in a roundtable and a call for a written submission.**

Thank you for your letter inviting CREATE to participate in the roundtable events being held in Brisbane, Sydney, Perth, and Melbourne, and also to provide a written submission on the early intervention needs for young mothers and teenage motherhood.

With regard to a written submission, CREATE notes that there is little research with regard to teenage motherhood in the population of young women still in, or who recently have left out-of-home care. With this in mind, CREATE has prepared a response outlining an overview of some of the current and available research in this specific area.

As noted above, there is little research into the issues surrounding teenage pregnancy or young women in care. CREATE has spoken to young women across Australia about their experience of teen pregnancy while in care and as they prepared to transition from care. Parts of these experiences have been included here. CREATE wishes to express its support for this inquiry, and calls for national research into the impact of teenage parenthood on young people in care and who are transitioning from care in Australia.

Research into teen motherhood, especially for young women leaving care, tends to be limited to smaller, qualitative studies (Mendes, 2009) and there are gaps in the literature (Radely, Schelbe, McWey, Holtrop & Canto, (2016). Nevertheless studies consistently reveal that young people leaving care are over-represented in terms of teenage pregnancies. For example, Radely, Schelbe, McWey, Holtrop & Canto (2016), note that data indicate that the rate of pregnancy and child birth among current and former foster children is two to three times higher than for their peers who are not in care, and this is reflected elsewhere. A 1996 Australian study (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996), revealed that one in three young women were pregnant or had given birth soon after transiting from care. A follow up study of the same group, found that by the time they were aged 23-24 years, 57% had become parents (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007). Another study of 60 care leavers in Victoria, found that 17% had become parents while in care or shortly after transitioning from care (Raman, Inder & Forbes, 2005).

This trend is reflected in overseas data where, on average, between one third and one half of female care leavers are pregnant within 18 – 24 months of leaving care (Biehal, Claydon, Stein & Wade, 1995). Numerous other international studies show that teenage care leavers are more likely to be pregnant or become pregnant prior to, or soon after leaving care (Barth, 1990; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Tweedle, 2007). CREATE's 2009 Report Card (McDowall, 2009), also noted this issue, whereby young people transitioning from care experienced disadvantage in a number of areas, including the observation that 28% of the 471 young people sampled were already parents themselves.


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One key element to this disadvantage, is the issue of stigma as experienced by young people with a care history. While many younger mothers share hopes and aspirations for their future and for the futures of their children, they also experience high levels of social stigma, which often only serves to exacerbate the more common motherhood experiences of tiredness, and being overwhelmed (McArthur & Barry, 2013). The issue of stigma is one that doubly effects young women with a care experience, and this is reflected in CREATE's recent work exploring stigma experienced by children and young people in care (CREATE, 2017). The stigma they experience is often reinforced by the level of child protection intervention experienced by young people who have transitioned from care. This is not the same experience as for young people without a care experience, and evidence points to a potential 'surveillance bias' for young people who are in care or who have transitioned from care and who are parents or pregnant (Widom, Czaja, & DuMont, 2015).

Indeed, the stigma experienced by younger mothers in general makes it difficult for them to feel that they can engage with support services, noting that they often feel judged and "stereotyped as being irresponsible and immature, languishing on welfare payments and being ignorant and incompetent at raising children" (McArthur & Barry, 2013, p. 3). This stigma is part of the lived experience for young parents who have been in care or who have transitioned from care, in particular young women. One young woman shared her story of being a young mother with a care experience with CREATE, and in particular noted the judgement expressed by a child protection officer during a meeting about her case plan;

*On the way in, (the Child Protection Worker) said to me it's such a shame seeing kids who grew up in care having kids so young.... Let's hope he doesn't end up in care too. (Young woman, 26 years old)*

However, when added to the additional stigma of being placed into care, this potentially increases the likelihood of further social isolation for these young parents resulting in a reluctance to engage in statutory service provision (McArthur & Barry, 2013).

*I'm always very cautious about everything I do with my kids because I'm afraid (the department) will try and remove my kids from me by using my past against me. (Young woman, 24 years old)*


*I found (dealing with the department) was mostly judgement – with everything.... The department are quick to jump on you and judge you. (Young woman, 26 years old)*

With regard to solutions for this issue, CREATE considers that, based on the available evidence, early intervention with this cohort is a first step forward. Alleviating the stigma and fear many young people face when they are pregnant is vital for providing the much-needed support.

*Young mums in care need specifically tailored units (homes), which support and encourage their relationship with their baby. (Young woman, 24 years old)*

This support should commence early on and, where possible, prior to pregnancy with open discussions about the importance of education in relation to young people's health and healthy relationships, and include what services and assistance are available for them. In addition, promoting a culture of support, rather than a culture of blame throughout a pregnancy and beyond for young people in care or exiting care, will also assist them to feel confident to approach services for support.

One young woman (aged 25 years) has told CREATE that she had a very positive relationship with her caseworker. This caseworker supported her decisions, advocated for her, ensured education could continue for as long as possible, attended housing meetings and medical appointments with her and advised her of her rights and entitlements. This suggests that these relationships can be a powerful influence in a young person's life, and this is supported by current research (Mendes, 2009)



Young people in care often have multiple placements, and other challenges in the care system, therefore they often miss out on the parental mentoring and learning that comes from direct and positive care. Many young women have noted that this is a significant issue for them as young parents and one that requires specific support (Manning, 2017).

In CREATE's discussions with young people, they noted that support with parenting skills and non-judgemental assistance would be of great benefit to them. This is in line with research indicating that support must include reducing stigma, improved access to health services, and relationship assistance (McArthur & Barry, 2013), along with a focus on stability and after care support (Mendes, 2009).

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to provide information, and we look forward to attending the roundtable discussions in various locations in the near future. In addition, we look forward to attending the round table in Perth scheduled for 20th June 2017, and engaging in further discussion. CREATE sought to attend another session in Brisbane, but was advised that only one would be possible per organisation and therefore will be represented at the Perth roundtable by a CREATE team member and a young parent with a care experience.

Should you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me on (07) 3062 4860 or at [noelle.hudson@create.org.au](mailto:noelle.hudson@create.org.au).

Yours faithfully



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