

**Youth Support - Professional Training**

**Reprints - Series One No 2**

"Teenage sexuality and the Media."

International Symposium on Adolescent  
Health Sydney 1987 - "New Universals"  
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TEENAGE SEXUALITY AND THE BRITISH MEDIA

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## Teenage sexuality and the British Media



During 1984 10,500 girls in England and Wales became pregnant while still at school and approximately three thousand gave birth.

In December 1984 a private action (Gillick v. Department of health) was successful in obtaining a court ruling forbidding Doctors to provide contraceptives, or indeed to give contraceptive advice to young people under the age of sixteen without parental permission.

A longitudinal study of 150 pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers conducted in Camberwell, a deprived area of inner London, saw a fourfold increase in schoolgirl pregnancy during the twelve months following this ruling and the plight of pregnant schoolgirls became a media issue when 15 year old Michelle, a character in a top rating television soap opera, was seduced by the local publican.

The DHSS (Department of Health and Social Security) appeal in the house of Lords coincided with our production of a BBC television documentary "Schoolgirl Mum" in which pregnant under sixteens, their boyfriends and families were able to tell in their own words of the difficulties which they had experienced.

It was evident from the comments in "Schoolgirl Mum" and the results of the Camberwell study, that teenagers were not receiving adequate sex education. Moreover, the little they did receive was not appreciated as being relevant to their situation. The BBC Schools Television film "Too young to have a baby?" attempted to break through this barrier by using teenage actress Susan Bully, seen regularly on TV as Michelle, as the link person in a sex education production in which young people advised their schoolage viewers. An example of television 'peer counselling'.

## Teenage sexuality and the British Media

"I couldn't believe it. I didn't think it would happen to me. And I sort of sat there and thought, God, me mam's gonna kill me. And I could feel, you know, I was gonna cry" (Maxine 15, Schoolgirl Mum)

"No, I didn't think I'd ever get pregnant. Didn't think it would happen to me. I thought I was one of the lucky ones, but I was wrong". (Alison 16).

In 1984 in England and Wales 10,500 schoolgirls found they were not one of the lucky ones.

Statistics on teenage pregnancies can be as controversial as the pregnancies themselves (Bury 1984). Fertility rates and statistical data on 'schoolgirls' or under 16s must be differentiated from information on 'teenagers' (15-19) since figures on this younger group of high risk girls are often masked by analysing data on teenagers as a whole (Stanley and Straton 1981). Pitfalls can be avoided by looking at trends over long periods of time, rates rather than numbers and precisely defining age groups.

Figures have been 'manipulated' to give false impressions, for example, that sex education has failed by quoting an increase in illegitimate births, without reference to falling 'shotgun weddings' and increased numbers of joint registrations. Similarly offering contraceptive services to the young has been cited as a cause of promiscuity backed up by rising numbers of teenage births, while 'rates' were actually falling. Such arguments were used to justify withdrawal of confidential contraceptive services for teenagers in England during 1984/5.

Nationally, the general fertility rate has fallen. Taking the three decades 1951 to 1981 numbers of births per thousand women (15-44) rose by 19% in '51 to '61 while births per thousand girls aged 15-19 rose alarmingly by 76%. During the next ten years, rates slowed showing a fall of 6.7% in the general fertility rate with a smaller rise of 38% in the 15-19s; this trend continued in the period 1971-1981 with a fall of -26% for all women and a fall of -45% in teenagers (OPCS 1981). 1981 had the lowest birth rate among teenagers for 20 years (Bury 1984).

The media would have us believe that there has been a "tragic rise in schoolgirl pregnancies". Is this truly the case? The actual number of pregnancies to schoolgirls has remained fairly static at around 10,000 pregnancies per year. There are however proportionately more births in the younger age ranges. In 1973 under 14s accounted for 4% of schoolgirl pregnancies, rising to 6% in 1983 (OPCS 1983). This represents a 50% increase in pregnancies in this age group.

The dramatic fall in teenage fertility has been attributed to better contraceptive services. However, while older teenagers (over 16) have to an increasing extent been protected from unwanted pregnancy by better availability and use of contraception, this has not been the case for the under sixteen age group.

The conception rate for under 16s peaked in the early seventies, rates then fell until 1979 but from then on abortion rates have increased and the birth rate has also showed an upward trend since 1982. (Hansard 1983). These girls have been treated rather ambivalently by society in that they are sometimes encouraged to come forward for contraceptive advice, while at other times they are discouraged and are given conflicting messages by doctors and society in general.

In 1981 Mrs Victoria Gillick, herself a mother of ten children, began to campaign against the availability of contraceptive advice for under sixteens. In July 1983 she took the department of health and social security (DHSS) to court on the grounds that a doctor prescribing contraceptives to girls under the age of sixteen would be committing a criminal offence as an accessory to unlawful sexual intercourse and that in so doing a doctor undermined the legitimate right of parents. Her case was initially unsuccessful but later succeeded on appeal in December 1984.

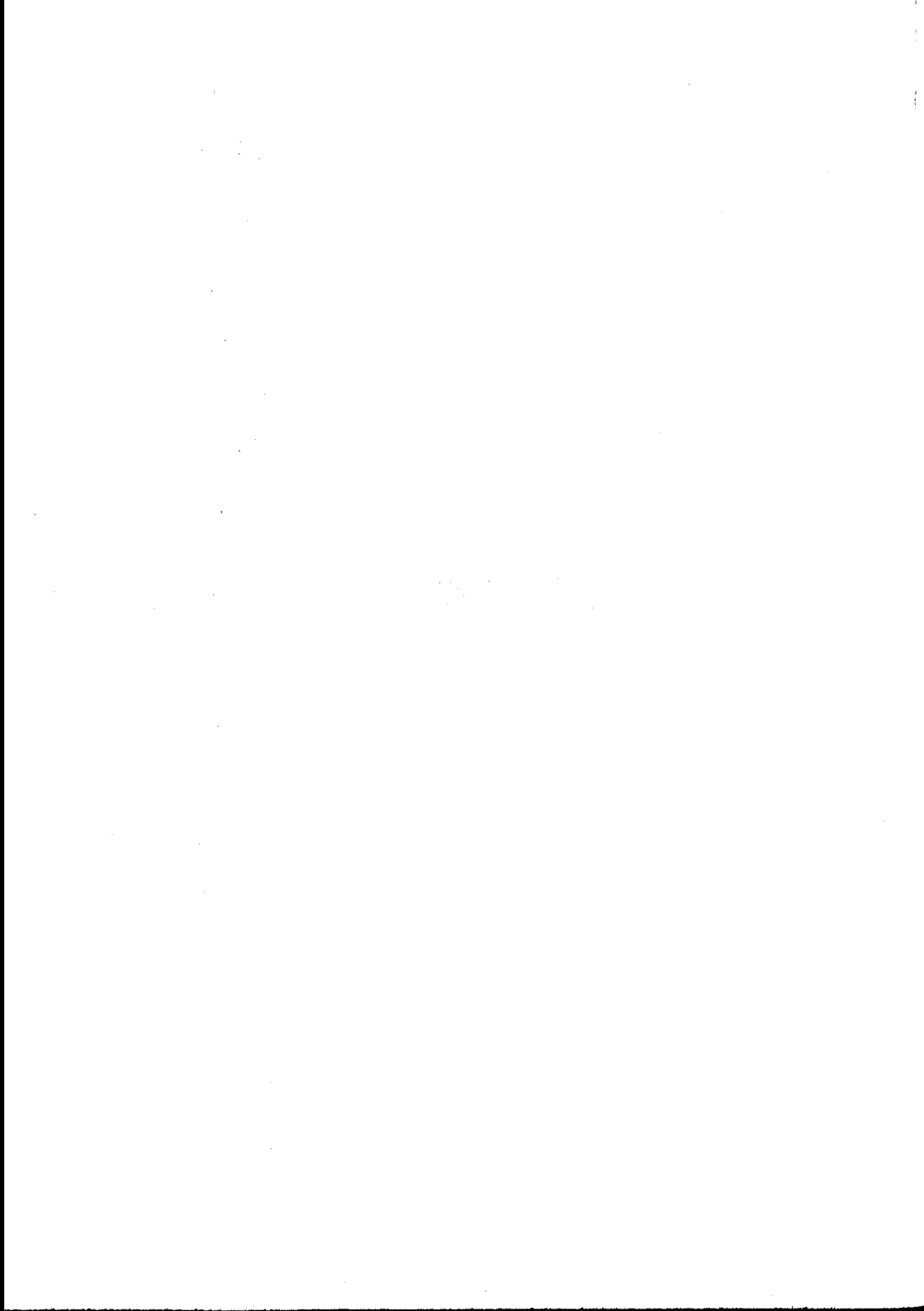
There followed a very difficult year during which young people could not obtain contraceptive advice without their parents permission. Ultimately the DHSS won on appeal to the house of Lords, but in the meantime a great deal of harm had been done.

The message put across by the media in Britain during the 'Gillick' controversy, in headlines such as "Mother of ten fights sex for under sixteens" was largely that, if sexual intercourse is illegal under the age of sixteen, this being the 'age of consent', then is it not a paradox to provide contraception for these girls? Secondly teenagers were made to fear that if they did seek help, the doctor would not respect their confidence and would inform their parents.

The 'misconceptions' here were that all teenagers had approachable, caring parents who would talk to them about the facts of life and that young girls who did not have parental permission to use contraceptives would simply stop having sex. An American article "Does your mother know?" (Aida Torres 1977) had explored this problem in some depth and concluded that if girls knew that their parents would be told about clinic attendances, they would not stop having sex, but would rather continue to have unprotected intercourse and not attend contraceptive clinics.

This certainly proved to be the case in London. A longitudinal study of schoolgirl pregnancy conducted in Camberwell, a deprived inner city area, highlighted inconsistencies in the 'Gillick' argument. During the period of restricted access to contraceptive advice, the number of under sixteens attending family planning services fell by 75%, while the number of pregnancies increased fourfold.

In Britain, schoolgirl pregnancy is part of a culture of poverty and deprivation. Pregnant schoolgirls live in areas of poor housing, overcrowding and unemployment. The 'typical' pregnant schoolgirl is a member of a large single parent family (McEwan, Owens, Newton 1974; Birch 1986). In South London, 70% of girls do not live with both their natural parents; 16% have no mother and 65% have no father. (Birch 1986). For the majority of pregnant youngsters, the close confiding family pictured by the opponents of teenage counselling simply does not exist.



Schoolage pregnancy is a subject cloaked in denial. Many girls cannot cope with the crisis of realisation of pregnancy and deny it to themselves or they may try to hide their pregnancies fearing discovery by their parents or teachers or to prevent their boyfriends from getting into trouble.

"I kept convincing myself I wasn't - I kept missing periods but I kept putting it off, saying nay, it's just ... I was saying to myself, I've had sex so it's most probably changing my body or something. Just giving myself any old excuse" (Janet 15)

Parents and 'helping' professionals may deny the possibility of pregnancy and thus fail to protect the girl or to provide her with adequate care.

"My mum sent me to the Doctor's when I was about four months, because I hadn't been on the periods. So the doctor said it was just puppy fat. So then she sent me back when I was seven and a half months and he said it was wind.." (Kirsty 14).

Denial of sexuality and sexual risk taking limits young peoples use of contraception. Sexually active, under sixteen year olds continue to have a very low rate of contraceptive use (Zelnik, Kim and Kantner 1979; Miller 1984; Schinke 1984). Contraceptive use prior to pregnancy in an American sample was only 9% for girls aged 12-15 yrs and 25% for older teenagers (Miller 1984).

Knowledge of contraception among pregnant teenagers in Camberwell in 1974 was poor and frequently inappropriate. 17% of under 17 year olds used spermicides or withdrawal only and 49% had never used anything (McEwan, Owens, Newton 1974). Only 7% of a younger (under 16) sample of pregnant Camberwell schoolgirls had ever used any contraception prior to their first pregnancy (Birch 1986). Girls gave varied reasons for non use of contraception the most common being that they did not think that they could get pregnant and they had not expected to have sex.

"My boyfriend was home on leave. And I'd never had sex with him before and I didn't know it was going to happen. It just happened suddenly and before I knew it I got pregnant ... so I didn't have time to use any contraception or anything because I didn't know it was going to happen" (Janet).

Young girls do not want to use contraceptives because this implies that they are planning to have sex which indicates promiscuity. If they use contraceptives they are acknowledging that they are sexually active, something which they are denying to themselves.

"Let's face it - good girls don't - so they don't need the pill; bad girls go out and do it anyway" (Dion 16).

"I suppose she didn't want to admit she was having sex" (Trudi's mother)

A girl like Trudi may not have made the adolescent shift from concrete to abstract reasoning (Blum &



Resnick 1982) she may have no clear sense of a personal future (Babikian & Goldman) and will thus be unable to plan ahead. Such a girl is unable to appreciate the consequences of her actions. To her, having sex is not directly related to having a baby, she is therefore unable to protect herself by using contraception.

Faced with such overwhelming denial of the situation, and its consequences how does one confront the schoolgirl with the idea that, yes, it can happen to you? Often sex education is delivered by middle aged teachers and films of childbirth are shown in schools in which the pregnant woman is identifiable more with the teenager's mother than with herself.

BBC schools television attempted to break through the barrier of denial by encouraging teenage viewers to identify with a popular soap opera character. Young actress Susan Tully is seen in Britain three times a week at peak viewing time, portraying Michelle, a 15 year old girl who became pregnant after being seduced by the local publican. She agreed to present a programme "Too young to have a baby?" in which 'real life Michelles' delivered advice and warnings to their viewing peer group.

" 'I'm pregnant, and you're the father'. They're the words I had to say playing the part of Michelle in Eastenders ..... Playing the part of Michelle and getting involved in this programme .... made me ask the question anyone would ask really : what would it be like if it happened to me? 'I'm pregnant and you're the father' - what would it need for you to be saying, or hearing those words?"

"Schoolgirl mum" has been shown twice, after each showing more than one thousand calls were made by members of the public requesting educational material. "Too young to have a baby?" has been screened on four occasions resulting in the switchboard at the Family Planning Association becoming jammed with calls. A drop in the ocean, but a useful beginning for a new approach.

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