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“You don’t know half the story”: deepening the dialogue with young mothers in Australia [Review]

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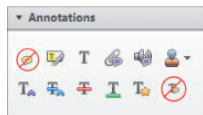
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Review: “You don’t know half the story”: deepening the dialogue with young mothers in Australia

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Young people, including teenage mothers, are often regarded as vulnerable, and reporting in this way by the general and academic media reinforces prevailing attitudes towards younger parents. The study reported aimed to give young women a voice – enable them to be heard. In doing so, it opens the discourse arising from young women themselves based on their experiences, their understandings and their sense making. The importance of this contribution is that it provides a counterbalance to pre-existing discourses informed by media and thus provides an opportunity to assess how far dominant attitudes can hold up to real-world experiences.

The qualitative literature highlighted by the authors indicates evidence of the transformative opportunity that young mothering can offer, opening chances for a positive step change in a life course. However, this may not be realised when young mothers are living within societies where policies direct attention towards deficits and individual responsibility. In these circumstances ‘risky behaviours’ are criticised, and those who display actions outside of mainstream acceptability are soon stigmatised. The consequence for teenage mothers is that their personal assets are denied and their generative potential is curtailed. These experiences are compounded when young mothers encounter professionals who misunderstand their real needs and who display approaches that reinforce social stigma and stereotyping. Through such actions health professionals risk contributing to experiences of inequity faced by teenage mothers and their children.

The study findings support the presence of societal stigma as a concerning feature of young mothers’ lives; though the narrative approach also revealed how some mothers demonstrate resilience when they perceived others to be critical and judgemental. A dimension not discussed by the authors, but that is likely to be implicated in understandings of real and perceived stigmatisation, concerns the developmental stage of the teenage mother. Neuroscience now provides evidence for why communication between young people and adults can easily be mismatched and fail. This is due to the fact that a

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young person's brain is still undergoing important development, and will not likely be 'fully wired' to accurately interpret emotional expression of others until they have reached their early to mid-twenties. For those who have also experienced fractured lives, this incompleteness of brain maturity adds another layer of challenge. As a consequence, the teenage mother could be encountering interactions with professionals at a time when their emotional 'tool box' is not yet fully stocked, and perceptions of stigma which damage self-confidence may result in self-fulfilling behaviours, such as defensiveness which provokes unhelpful responses from others, including professionals. Remedying this could rest with broadening all health professionals' knowledge of adolescent brain development as well as the simple act of learning to 'listening closely' – though the simplicity of the latter may be its problem, as this vital skill is often poorly appreciated. Experienced practitioners can miss the mark, as listening takes time and also involves 'hearing' – these both being difficult to negotiate and honour when providing care as part of increasingly busy services. This said, the imperative for professionals to better gauge young mothers' needs and consider their own approaches to communication remains high if services are to be more relevant and helpful to this important group of parents.

Karen Whittaker leads elements of the PGDip and BSc SCPHN programme provided at the University of Central Lancashire. Her doctorate and post-doctorate research has involved study of parenting support and health visiting/ public health nursing practice. She is chair of the UK Standing Conference on Specialist Community Public Health Nurse Education and is working with UNICEF Central and Eastern Europe International Technical Advisory Group on Home Visiting.