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A helping hand for teenage mothers

Helen Clifton finds out what assistance is available to mums – and how initiatives like Manchester's Be Cot Safe scheme have raised awareness of the dangers of cot death



THERE TO HELP Midwife Donna Roney with Kirsty Park and her ten-week-old daughter Gracie

COT DEATH: THE FACTS

COT death is when a baby dies suddenly and unexpectedly. There is often no obvious reason why this happens, and nobody knows what causes these tragedies.

Mums can, however, reduce the risks by following these guidelines until the baby is over six months old:

- Don't smoke in pregnancy. And don't let anyone smoke in the same room as your baby.
- Always lay your baby face

up, on their back to sleep (and not on the front or side).

- Do not let your baby get too hot, and make sure to keep your baby's head uncovered.

Overheating is a leading risk factor. Dress your baby in as much or little as you would wear.

- Place your baby with their feet to the foot of the cot to prevent them wriggling down under the covers, or use a baby sleep bag.

BECOME a teenage parent and suddenly all those negative tabloid headlines can start to feel quite personal. Social stigma are reinforced in the media, and the column inches given over to the issue suggest teenage pregnancy is at epidemic proportions.

Yet the reality is that, nationally, the number of teenage mums is at its lowest for 20 years.

And in Greater Manchester, there is more support than ever for young parents to reach their full potential. Establishing a programme of full and frank advice about sexual health and contraception, as well as consulting with young parents about care once their babies are born, has been a critical goal in the region.

Among the groups keen to reach teenage mums and dads is NHS Manchester's Vulnerable Baby Service, which was set up in 2004 to bring together local support service Connexions, Sure Start workers, midwives, and health visitors to drive down the high rate of cot deaths in Manchester.

Younger mums can be more likely to have chaotic and unstable lifestyles, increasing the likelihood of cot death. Initiatives like Manchester's Be Cot

Safe scheme have raised awareness of the dangers of cot death and, as manager Ethna Dillon explains, the team's hard work supporting teenage mums is now paying off.

"The overall rates of cot death have reduced significantly in Manchester over the last six years," Ethna says.

"We have not seen a teenage mum suffer the tragedy of sudden unexpected infant death for over two years, although Manchester does still have a higher than national average number of cot deaths."

Being mindful of additional health worries is only one of the extra pressures on teenage mums.

The life of a teenage mother can be tough, says Ethna. "Teenage parents often have financial problems, because they don't have recourse to a lot of benefits," she says. "Very often they live at home, and the home is very crowded. They may have relationship problems with the father of the baby."

"To be a teenage mother can be very stressful. You are not set up to provide a home for a baby

in the same way that an older mum more often is. Teenage parents really do live in poverty a lot of the time, and they rely a lot on goodwill from other people. It is really difficult for them.

"But it doesn't make them poor mothers. Some of them are very, very good mothers. They have to learn to develop themselves and their own independence, while putting the needs of their baby first."

Manchester's maternity hospitals have specialist midwives who work with expectant teenage mums and dads, with fathers an important part of the picture. Ethna's team run weekly drop-ins for teenage mums at Connexions offices across the city.

Staffed by a specialist midwife and pregnancy adviser, Connexions organises sessions that provide a chance to talk about problems at home, discuss career options and benefits, or just let off steam.

Teenage pregnancy midwife Donna Roney runs a drop-in at Wythenshawe Connexions as well as a clinic for teenage parents at Benchill Sure Start.

She says the centres can really benefit young parents: "We teach mums and dads how to recognise different types of crying, how to change nappies, and what a baby's poo should look like – basically, the skills of parenting. It really benefits them."

Mum of ten-week-old Gracie, Kirsty Park, 19, says Connexions gave her and her daughter a great start. "When you are pregnant, everyone tells you that breast feeding is the best start for the baby," she remembers.

"I was adamant that Gracie

THEY HAVE GUIDED ME THROUGH Marisa, who has been helped by the Family Nurse Partnership, with daughter Kiera



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CASE STUDY
MARISA AND
KIERA

MARISA, from south Manchester, is 18. She was 16 when she gave birth to daughter Kiera, who is now two years old.

Marisa has been supported by the Family Nurse Partnership since she was three months pregnant. She tells I Love Me how they have helped her adjust to life as a mum.

"The Family Nurse Partnership have helped me so much," says Marisa. "They have guided me through and helped me make Kiera be the best she can."

"They just made me feel like there was somebody that cared. You feel like you are on your own, but they make you feel more confident. Everybody looks down on you because you are young - they make you feel like you are not capable."

"I did breastfeed for the first two weeks. The nurses from the partnership gave me help in getting her latched on, and then with the change to bottle feed, because I was quite worried that Kiera wasn't getting the right amount of milk."

"I have been moved around a lot. I was in a bedsit, then in homeless accommodation. But even though I was really far away, they still came and saw me."

"Not a lot of people come to visit and you don't get a chance to talk, so I was quite down. I am not with the father any more, but we are still friends, and he visits Kiera at the weekend. I set that up with the help of the Family Nurse Partnership, too."

"I have just finished a health and social work course at college. The partnership helped me get Kiera into nursery, and gave me the confidence to go to college."

"When I got pregnant, I thought it was the end of the world, but now I want to make something of my life so that Kiera can have a good life. I'm now starting my GCSEs next term so that I can get onto a teacher training course. I'm definitely sticking with that."

"Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't change Kiera for the world. But I would have waited. It really annoys me when my friends say they want a baby. They don't understand how hard it is. I am really proud I come from this country. I have had so much help. I know I wouldn't be the same person if I hadn't had so much support."

mums support their children, and expert Connexions advisers are on hand to guide teenagers through the maze of options on offer.

"We want to help teenage mums get into the job market and stay on in education and become successful people," Ethna says.

"We see mums who will have babies, then go back into education and wait to have another child. The day after they deliver their baby, they are given contraceptive advice."

Despite a national drop in numbers, though, teenage pregnancy rates remain high in Manchester, Ethna admits.

In response, there is now a

wealth of contraceptive advice available.

In Heywood, Rochdale and Middleton, the successful crisis intervention team provide confidential sexual health information for all under-25s.

'We want to help teenage mums get into the job market and stay on in education'

Non-judgemental and flexible, the team discusses terminations and operates drop-ins and sex education talks in schools and colleges across the borough.

They can even visit teenage mums in their own home.

In addition, the US-inspired Family Nurse Partnership programme offers home-based support for teenage mums. As well as contraception, they advise on stopping smoking, how

to breastfeed - in fact, any parenting-related issue.

Set up three years ago for all first-time mums under the age of 20, the team of ten nurses regularly visit parents for the first two years of a child's life.

They provide clear and simple practical advice, as manager and midwife Vanda Wellock explains: "It could be things like singing nursery songs to the foetus to stimulate its brain, or talking to a mum or dad about why it's important to show a child pictures as they are being read to."

"We teach them why it's im-

A campaign brought to you by the Association of Greater Manchester Primary Care Trusts



portant to sit with their baby, instead of plonking them in front of the TV."

"Hopefully, they won't have another child within two years of completing the programme, and they will stay in education or the job market."

"We talk to them about safe sex."

"They do listen, because

WHERE TO FIND HELP AND ADVICE

Connexions: 084567 13 2 19, connexions-manchester.com
Crisis Intervention Team: 01706 517613, hmr.nhs.uk
Family Nurse Partnership/Be Cot Safe: Vanda Wellock on 0161 227 0600, younghealthy-manchester.nhs.uk
Sure Start: education.gov.uk

teenage mums want the best for their baby. Whereas they may have been risk takers before, a teenage mum now has the incentive - having a baby often calms them down.

"There's so much going on for teenage mums, and it's so important to support and advise them."

"The majority do make absolutely brilliant mums."

and click on early years workforce, or for local information visit manchester.gov.uk and click on Communities then Childcare.
Tommy's Baby Charity: 0870 777 3060, tommys.org (offers a range of advice and free publications for young mums).