

Five ways to support a pregnant or parenting girl to thrive in school



This Practice Brief focuses on the ways in which girls who are pregnant or parenting can be supported, so that they can thrive in education. This group of girls is often overlooked and under-researched. However, with the right support they can still make significant educational progress.

This Practice Brief is intended for implementers and policymakers who want to make a difference to the educational opportunities open to pregnant and parenting girls.

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The paper presents recommendations for organisations who support these girls to consider. These include:

- Ensuring that girls are listened to and are central to decisions made that impact them.
- Reducing financial barriers that can hinder their engagement in education.
- Strengthening the systems and supporting the stakeholders that directly support pregnant and parenting girls with their education.
- Ensuring that policies and practices do more than simply allow for pregnant and parenting girls to re-enter education, but actively encourage it.

1. Listen to what she says

This is the starting point for supporting any young mother to thrive in school: and the recommendation that counts more than any other. As practitioners, we necessarily bring our own ideas, values and assumptions to any scenario. Adults tend to have particularly strong ideas about what a good childhood looks like, what acceptable sexuality looks like and the right circumstances into which a baby should be born. Education workers might have equally strong ideas about the importance of studying and playing in a child's life, and the need for social cohesion and uniformity in a school.

Some of these ideas can unconsciously lead us towards conclusions about the best way to support a young mother in school. We might conclude that she is a victim who needs counselling.¹ We might decide it is impossible for her to care for the baby and to study: she needs to move away. We might think that her experience means it is important that she commits to pre-marital abstinence. These conclusions are often founded upon compassion, kindness and wanting the best for the girl and her baby. But if they are not based upon what girls themselves say, then they are not reliable. Implementing activities based on our assumptions alone will not lead to a situation in which a girl is truly thriving: securing the freedoms and opportunities that she herself values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Listening to a girl who is pregnant or parenting is the single most important thing we can do. The following four ways to support girls to thrive in school are based upon in-depth and extensive interviews with GEC parenting girls, but this list is not universal or finite. The only way to really be sure that the support is appropriate is to ask the girl herself. For this reason, an individualised approach is important, where conversations with girls can take place in private, safe places, with an appropriate facilitator.² These conversations will help with our understanding of her school, family and baby's situation from a financial, social and psychological perspective, and allow us to straightforwardly ask her for ideas and solutions to help her thrive. Sufficiently frequent conversations are also important – going back to her every few months at a minimum to ask how she is getting on at school and with what she is struggling.

2. Reduce financial and childcare barriers

Lack of money is a huge concern for young mothers. Girls struggle to cover costs relating to their babies, and even if childcare were more readily available, they would struggle to pay for it. The very act of attending school represents another financial problem because it leaves the girls no time to find ways of generating income. Financial worries are also linked with blame: families blame girls for increasing their economic worries and girls internalise these negative feelings.

Girls who have children need more money than girls who do not. They have to cover the cost of healthcare, nappies, clothes and blankets, and food or milk if not breastfeeding or when the baby is older. They may be less able to secure money from their parents than other girls. This could be because parents are angry with them for becoming pregnant and reluctant to help financially. Or, their parents might have less time for income generation because of covering childcare during the school day. Sometimes education is free, but it is rare for there to be no school-related costs at all, such as uniform, school lunches or textbooks. All of these costs mount up, and further compound a girl's financial worries. Against this backdrop, and the other constraints of childcare and an unsupportive school, the pressure to drop out of school is immense. Girls say that solving these financial problems would be the single most important thing that anyone could do for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provision of childcare or childcare costs can also be incredibly helpful for the girl. Girls need to be sure that their babies are safe, healthy and looked after: a low-quality childcare service will make her anxious and unable to fully concentrate at school. In urban areas, one option might be to cover the cost of a place at a nursery or early learning centre. In rural settings implementers can support hyperlocal solutions, such as adults taking turns running a community creche, or helping families come up with childcare rotas. However, it is important not to pass the inequality up a generation by assuming – or even compelling – a girl's mother to look after the baby during school hours. Implementers should be cautious and aware of how this also contributes to gender inequality and strive towards more equitable sharing of caring responsibilities in the household.

Some pregnant or parenting girls became involved in sexual relationships because of the financial benefits (boys or men providing them with money to buy essential or desired items). These relationships may be the only way that girls can provide for their children in the future unless more is done to give them the social protection (via cash transfers) that they need. Ignoring the financial problems of a parenting girl makes it more likely that she will engage in transactional sex in the future. In the context of constrained access to contraception and power imbalances within sexual relationships this makes a second pregnancy more likely. Returning to school after a second pregnancy is substantially more difficult and so prevention of a second unwanted pregnancy via provision of cash alongside access to sexual and reproductive health services is critical.³

¹ While girls who have survived sexual abuse should be offered high quality, survivor-centred counselling, some countries support counselling as the primary intervention offered to young mothers, assuming that this is what they all want or need. The value given to them by girls should not be discounted: all girls mentioned counselling and applauded the one or two teachers who gave them encouragement. But this was not their dominant demand, in the way that their financial concerns were. Additionally, teachers are often tasked with counselling on top of their other workload, without any additional pay, and with limited training – making it difficult for them to deliver quality sessions. If a girl fails to respond to the rigours of the school regime in spite of these efforts, then this can be attributed to her inability to make the most of this 'second chance'. Counselling can therefore be a problematic response to young mothers if this is the only support provided.

² Recommended to be a woman under 30 who already holds a close relationship with the girl.

³ Many girls said they would have liked to get access to long-acting contraceptives after having their first baby but were not sure where or how they could do this. In addition to this lack of knowledge, they were also susceptible to what they heard from their peers – such as a myth that usage of contraception would prevent them from having more children in the future. Implementers could introduce stronger pro-contraception elements into their work, whether at the systems-level (lobbying for more adolescent-friendly services) or through existing engagement with adolescents (such as in girls' clubs). Political and cultural constraints can make this difficult, but often there are more opportunities for a girl who is a mother to access these than a girl who is not a mother in reality, even when this opportunity doesn't exist on paper.

3. Take a whole-school approach to becoming ‘adolescent parent-friendly’

Many GEC girls demonstrate incredible resilience both when pregnant and when parenting. Girls often stay in school for as long as possible, overcoming discomfort and long days. While some schools take actions such as allowing girls to miss lessons if they want to and re-enrol girls once they come back after the baby is born, this is not uniformly the case even when the law mandates these actions. And even when schools do take these actions, it is often framed as ‘allowing’ girls to have these flexible hours, or ‘permitting’ her to re-enrol, even though it is her right. These actions also often represent the full extent of the school’s support.

But girls need much more than this from their schools. Girls felt that teachers should be doing more to stop other pupils from talking about them. Girls have no option but to summon their own will and strength to ignore the negative words of others at school rather than being able to turn to a teacher for support and action.

Additionally, most girls do not receive any help from their schools with catching up on missed lessons. Girls who are mothers – just like many other girls who do not have children – want to complete their full primary and secondary cycles, and get good grades. For them, enrolment and completion is not enough: they want to do well. It will be difficult for these girls to do this without extra academic help. This help is needed both when she is out of school (in the first few months after birth for example) as well as when back in school. Schools need support in thinking about how they can provide this, without putting further time constraints on the girl, and how they can check whether it is helping her.

Finally, schools are rarely able or willing to help girls overcome the practical and logistical constraints to access. Some Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) schools do offer on-site childcare and this model could be further explored and integrated into more schools. Other GEC schools have created spaces for breastfeeding or expressing. But in general, girls are told to look to their own parents for support with these caring needs, rather than thinking about small tweaks that the school could make to become more accommodating.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Much can be learned from others using a whole-school approach to transform schools into safer, inclusive places. GEC projects unanimously agreed on the critical role of the headteacher within this process and how they had secured her/his buy-in through one-on-one conversations that gave space for values and concerns to be aired and allayed. Many GEC projects related extraordinary transformations that had taken place after this engagement, with schools that had previously rejected young mothers taking them in, and headteachers striving to help girls catch up and to accommodate a flexible timetable. But engagement with headteachers alone is not enough if other pupils or teachers continue to bully, or if government officials prioritise performance over inclusion. Efforts that simultaneously engage children, teachers, the headteacher, parents, those involved in school governance and local government officials to collectively plan and deliver on actions that will make pregnant and parenting girls more welcome are likely to be more successful than those which exclude any of these groups.

In order for teachers to be addressing bullying and providing catch-up opportunities, the teachers themselves need much more support from school leadership. At the school level, the support of a headteacher and school governance structure is critical and engagement with any school needs to start with these key individuals (and their attitudes – see no. 4). At a system-level, implementers can critically analyse whether existing policies, structures and budgets would enable these kind of changes, and base their advocacy around these gaps.

4. Challenge ‘blaming and shaming’ attitudes by creating space for discussion and learning at the school and community level

GEC girls describe feeling shocked when they first discovered they were pregnant, and predicted that they would be blamed and held solely responsible for the pregnancy. Often, they were right. Girls even blame themselves when the pregnancy is the result of sexual violence or poverty leading to engagement in transactional sex, and this is because many people in their lives make them feel it is their fault.

GEC young mothers held high aspirations for their futures and were proud of the determination they have shown in their lives. While such determination is inspiring, it is also concerning that some adults felt that girls should be working extra hard in order to show they wanted another chance. This is problematic because it implies that pregnant or parenting girls have done something bad in the first place (which they have not). Young mothers work particularly hard at home and at school, and sometimes this is encouraged by adults, including teachers, as ‘making up for their mistake’⁴ or compensating for what happened, even though what happened was not their ‘fault’ and they have the right to go to school and pursue their goals. Some projects noted that some schools encourage this because they believe that childcare is a kind of ‘punishment’.

In the most extreme manifestation of a belief that these two roles are incompatible, some schools and communities encourage the practice of separating a girl from her baby by sending her to a different school, far away, where she can ‘start again’. Girls and most GEC project staff are vehemently against this because of the severe psychological damage it can cause, and the way it reproduces and endorses ideas of blame and shame.⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

Girls who have children want to parent *and* they want to learn. For them the two identities are compatible.

Schools and implementers should take the same approach and actively embrace her dual identity as parent and learner, working with both the school and family to make it easier for her to do both.

In order for schools and families to embrace the idea of compatibility, fundamental changes in attitude are critical. Conversations need to allow people to be open and honest about their ideas on how girls and boys should behave, the roles they believe they should have in the home and as a parent, and their ideas about girls and sexuality. Skilled facilitators can gently challenge discriminatory ideas and help people to unpack why some beliefs are problematic. This process takes time: repeated engagement with the same people is critical as well as designing projects to have more time to do this.

Discussing gender roles with girls, parents, teachers and community leaders can also be a great opportunity for exploring the role of teenage fathers in the community. While the law might classify sex under 18 as automatically non-consensual, the reality is that older teenagers may well have had sex that they felt to be consensual. In this situation the adolescent father has rights and responsibilities but is often left out of the equation, even though the girl has a huge childcare burden. Discussing these issues may even lead to opportunities to encourage both teenage parents to take more equal responsibility for childcare, if that is appropriate and desired by the girl.

At the same time, work with schools and communities around gendered attitudes should attend to issues of gender and violence. Many girls become pregnant through violence and abuse, and implementers should apply their own high standards of survivor-centred support to navigate the complex feelings they may have about motherhood. When working with girls and their families, implementers should take great care to ensure survivors (girls) are signposted to trusted specialist providers who can offer safe spaces to access psychosocial support, medical care and legal advice should they wish to take that path.

⁴ As one example of this, many GEC projects noted that schools sometimes see the presence of a young mother as a ‘teaching moment’ for those responsible for sexual and reproductive health content within life skills classes. These moments were described as cruel instances of verbal abuse in which young mothers were held up as examples of ‘what not to do’ and why sex should be avoided. Such practices are not only violent in their intention and increase the risk of drop-out, but they also do not serve the needs of the young mother herself.

⁵ Note that this practice also contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child.

5. Advocate for policies that go beyond ‘re-entry’

An increasing number of countries in which the GEC works have ‘re-entry’ policies: policies that mandate schools to allow girls to come back to school after they have left during pregnancy or once a baby is born. But these policies are often problematic for several reasons. Firstly, closer analysis often reveals that policies still put the power in the hands of the school not the girl. For example, policies often allow headteachers to judge whether the girl is ready rather than letting this decision lie in the hands of the girl. This creates a loophole for schools to reject re-entry even when their reluctance is based on discriminatory attitudes. Secondly, policies may be underpinned by sexist assumptions: such as the assumption that girls/women are solely responsible for childcare, or that girls who have sex are bad.⁶ Thirdly, the existence of policies can sometimes allow duty-bearers to dismiss the need to do better: the ‘we have the re-entry policy already’ narrative. Instead, girls can be blamed for not ‘wanting’ to return to school. Finally, re-entry policies force the girl to leave the school for at least some period of time, removing her right to education and enacting a subtle form of violence. This may be less obvious than the overt violence enacted by expulsion policies, but still a violation of rights.⁷ No GEC country has a more progressive continuation policy (whereby girls are supported to come back to school immediately after delivery) but these do exist within low-income countries such as Cameroon and Madagascar. A final problem is, of course, whether the policy is understood or implemented by schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These issues illustrate the importance of critical analysis of any policy relating to teenage parents and education in advance of deciding on an influencing strategy. Implementers should scan policy documents with a sharp eye for inbuilt sexism and other forms of prejudice, and partner with organisations with experience in feminist advocacy as part of any effort to push for reform.

There should also be a direct line between influencing objectives and the first point in this paper: what girls themselves want and need. Policies, grounded within the gendered ideas of policymakers, might be supportive, for example, of abstinence education and counselling for girls: but what if girls say they need other things more urgently? Could implementers work towards a change to the inclusion criteria of existing social protection schemes so that young mothers can access cash transfers? What about a change to the guidelines on whether adolescents can easily access contraception or not? Would greater resources for children’s departments allow them to respond earlier to cases of abuse and provide survivor-centred support for longer? Sometimes the most obvious policy on teenage mothers might not actually be the most effective one to work on: but starting from the point of view of girls should illuminate this.

SOURCES AND CREDITS

This paper draws from research conducted in 2021 by the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) in Kenya. This included intensive, semi-structured interviews with five girls and young women who generously gave up their time to talk about their experiences as young mothers in school.

- **Judith**, 16, Kilifi county
- **Kuoth**, 21, Turkana county
- **Mercy**, 17, Homa Bay county
- **Natasha**, 20, Homa Bay county
- **Selina**, 16, Garissa county⁸

These girls were all selected because of their age, parental status and school-going status via partnerships with three organisations who implement the GEC in Kenya: Education Development Trust (EDT), Leonard Cheshire, and the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). These

organisations identified a further four women who acted as leaders and role-models in their communities as teachers and counsellors.

Special thanks go to these four women who were then trained to conduct three one-hour long interviews with each girl to hear her experiences and ideas: Joyce Wema Mshanga, Risper Opiyo, Isnina Issack and Beatrice Kamau. Additionally, the research involved holding online focus group discussions with core staff from the organisations listed above, as well as the following additional GEC partners: ActionAid, Avanti, I Choose Life, and Impact-Ed. Particular thanks is also due to Professor Elaine Unterhalter, UCL, for academic review of the research protocols, methodology, and report.

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⁶ For example, Kenya’s National School Health Policy urges schools to ‘make all efforts to treat the teenage mother like all other students and not to keep reminding her of her mistake’ (Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation 2011, p. 23).

⁷ Chilisa put forward this categorisation of pregnancy policies as manifestations of overt or subtle violence in her 2002 exploration of pregnancy policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, critiquing the limits of a ‘re-entry’ policy in favour of continuation policies. Chilisa, B., (2002). ‘National Policies on Pregnancy in Education Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: The case of Botswana’, *Gender and education*, 14(1), pp.21–35.

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The Girls' Education Challenge is a project funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office ("FCDO"), formerly the Department for International Development ("DFID"), and is led and administered by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and Mott MacDonald (trading as Cambridge Education), working with organisations including Nathan Associates London Ltd. and Social Development Direct Ltd. This publication has been prepared for general guidance on matters of interest only and does not constitute professional advice. You should not act upon the information contained in this publication without obtaining specific professional advice. No representation or warranty (express or implied) is given as to the accuracy or completeness of the information contained in this publication, and, to the extent permitted by law, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP and the other entities managing the Girls' Education Challenge (as listed above) do not accept or assume any liability, responsibility or duty of care for any consequences of you or anyone else acting, or refraining to act, in reliance on the information contained in this publication or for any decision based on it.