



I'm all right, Jack

Young men are wholly irresponsible when it comes to unintended teenage pregnancy, right? Quite the opposite, argue **Áine Aventin** and **Maria Lohan** from Queen's University Belfast, but they have suffered from a void of educational support materials on how to deal with unintended pregnancy. Here they describe a new resource to fill it.

Although teenage pregnancy rates in the UK have been gradually declining over the past decade, they remain the highest in Western Europe. Approximately 40,000 women under the age of 18 become pregnant in the UK every year and around half of these pregnancies end in legal abortion¹. While teenage parents do not experience universally negative life course outcomes, *unintended* teenage pregnancy is associated with social exclusion and disadvantage and can generate significant social, emotional, health and economic costs for adolescents, their infants and

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society. Unintended adolescent pregnancy is therefore considered a public health concern requiring urgent action on the part of health and education practitioners.

While there is ample population level data regarding teenage mothers, information on adolescent fathers is largely absent from national statistics. Although this is in part due to the fact that the demographic details of teenage fathers are not always included on birth registrations, it also echoes historical assumptions that responsibility for pregnancy and childbirth lies with the woman. Increasingly, however, research with adolescents shows that the majority of young fathers are keen to connect with and stay connected to their children. This is demonstrated in the high number of joint birth registrations for children born to teenage mothers in the UK (78% of all adolescent births)² and the fact that the majority of young men report their willingness to take responsibility for avoiding and dealing with the consequences of an unintended pregnancy.³

Unintended teenage pregnancy is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of interconnected social and individual issues. These include: economic factors; the availability of sexual health education and support services; the personal values and beliefs of individuals; and cultural norms regarding the acceptability of teenage parenting. While unintended adolescent pregnancy is unlikely to be prevented through educational interventions alone, it is widely recognised that high quality relationship and sexuality education (RSE) in classroom settings is an important element of the process of reducing unintended pregnancy rates.

RSE provides young people with which information to help students make healthy and responsible decisions about relationships and sexuality and is an essential part of ensuring the sexual and emotional wellbeing of adolescents. This is reflected in the government policies of Northern Ireland, England and Scotland which have all emphasised the importance of reducing teenage pregnancy rates using the implementation of RSE in schools as a key objective in their current sexual health policies.⁴

Teenage men: problem or solution?

In developing educational interventions that aim to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies, it is increasingly recognised that targeting teenage men is an important yet neglected focus. Teenage men are currently much less likely than girls to receive education about pregnancy and pregnancy prevention in schools in the UK. When teenage men do receive RSE relating to pregnancy the lessons usually focus on females ignoring the fact that boys have a different take on gender norms and values that will influence their responses to pregnancy. Equally, parents are much less likely to talk to their sons about teenage pregnancy than to their daughters reflecting traditional attitudes towards pregnancy.

Additionally, there is a general assumption that young men cannot be trusted to take responsibility for avoiding teenage pregnancy and have little interest in dealing with the consequences of an unintended pregnancy. Such negative perceptions are reinforced by the media’s increasing fondness of the paternity test.

Yet, there is also recognition that teenage men’s understanding of an unintended pregnancy is important. Research suggests that the way that women define and cope with an unintended pregnancy is strongly influenced by male partners and that the support of a male partner can ease the emotional burden of an unintended pregnancy. In addition, addressing teenage men’s RSE is an important mechanism for promoting positive development and improving the lives of all young adults, especially those suffering the effects of various types of disadvantage. Men’s adolescent years are a critical opportunity to promote positive relationships and to help young men resist peer pressure to have sex. This is likely to have a sustained impact throughout their adult years and would also benefit their sexual partners.

Furthermore, the ‘reality’ of the avoidant young father often portrayed in the

media does not, in fact, provide a true representation of the attitudes and perceptions of many adolescent men who find themselves experiencing an unintended pregnancy. In 2009 we conducted research in Ireland exploring adolescent men's attitudes to a



hypothetical unintended pregnancy, asking them to consider how they would feel and react if they found themselves in such a situation.⁵ The majority of young men said they would be shocked and/or frightened (49.7% and 36.7%, respectively) if a partner became unintentionally pregnant, however, most said that they would accept shared responsibility for their part in the pregnancy, as well as any decision about what action to take. Almost half (46.7%) of the young men said they would choose to keep the baby, 18.9% said they would opt for abortion, 16.1% for adoption and 18.3% said they would leave it up to their partner to decide. When asked who they would blame for the pregnancy, over half said they would blame themselves, with only a very small minority (2.7%) indicating they would blame their partner. This

research highlights young men's willingness to take responsibility for avoiding teenage pregnancy. It makes sense, then, that they should therefore be offered the same education as young women in relation to avoiding unintended teenage pregnancy and dealing with its potential consequences. While there are few who would deny that young men are part of the problem of teenage pregnancy, there remains an urgent need for resources to help them to become part of the solution.

Evidence-based resource

Research has identified the characteristics of effective RSE programmes which help reduce sexual risk-taking behaviours. These include:

- the use of interventions that can influence the sexual and psychosocial factors that influence behaviour such as knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, intentions, perceptions of risk, and perceptions of how their peers behave;
- the use of culturally-sensitive and gender-specific interventions;
- the use of interactive resources that help young people identify and engage with the educational issues being raised;
- the use of skills-building components;
- the involvement of parents in the RSE process; and
- facilitating links with support services.

The *If I Were Jack* intervention incorporates all of these different elements so that it can help young people with the skills and understanding they need to enjoy healthy relationships and avoid an unintended teenage pregnancy in their lives.

Working in close consultation with key stakeholders and end-users including teachers, young people and parents, researchers at Queen's University Belfast and *If I Were Jack* is the copyright of Queen's University Belfast, the Medical Research Council Social and Public

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Health Sciences Unit developed an evidence-based, theory-informed educational resource targeted specifically at young men. The resource aims to help young people avoid teenage pregnancy and them to communicate their feelings and intentions about pregnancy (see www.qub.ac.uk/IfIWereJack). The *If I Were Jack* educational resource includes an interactive video drama (IVD) which tells the story of an unexpected pregnancy from a teenage man's perspective. It also contains classroom materials for teachers containing four detailed lesson plans with specific classroom-based and homework activities which include group discussions, role-plays, worksheets, and a parent-pupil exercise (the parent survey); a 60-minute training session for teachers wishing to implement the intervention; a 60-minute information and discussion session for parents/guardians delivered by RSE teachers; and detailed

information brochures and factsheets about the intervention and unintended teenage pregnancy in general for schools, teachers, teacher trainers, young people and parents.

If I were Jack takes a new approach to resources about unintended pregnancy by combining the following elements:

- an interactive video drama to immerse young people in a case scenario of an unintended pregnancy in their lives. The video develops the scenario of an unintended pregnancy from a teenage man's point of view;
- targeting the development of awareness and behavioural skills in boys as well as girls to avoid a teenage pregnancy; and
- incorporating communication about teenage pregnancy within the classroom as well with parents/guardians.

As well as helping young people avoid an unintended pregnancy during their teenage years, the resource particularly aims to help young men become aware of their own responsibilities. It invites both male and female users to put themselves in Jack's shoes encouraging them to reflect on the consequences of such a situation in their own lives. The key educational aims of the resource are to provide young men and women with:

- Increased awareness of the potential negative consequences of unintended pregnancy and available support services;
- Increased awareness of personal attitudes, values and beliefs in relation to unintended pregnancy;
- Improved self-efficacy in communicating about unintended pregnancy; and
- Increased awareness of gender norms associated with unintended pregnancy.

The resource aims to help students explore the issues rather than direct them to particular conclusions and is designed to be taught within the framework of a school's ethos and RSE policy. While the resource tells the story of a young unmarried couple and encourages discussion of the options that may be open to a young person if they experience an unintended pregnancy (i.e. keeping the baby, adoption and abortion) there is no suggestion that any of these options should be preferred over the other. Rather, the resource directs the pupil to consider all of the options and their consequences, thereby encouraging reflection on how their decision might be affected by their existing relationships and individual values.

Educational literature suggests that young people are more likely to learn when they are encouraged to work things out for themselves in a supportive environment. While the resource has been designed for use within the relationship and sexuality education (RSE) curricula of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, it has potential for use across the UK and both within and outside of classroom settings.

Responses from professionals

As part of the development process the research team has explored the acceptability of the resource to professionals who could use the resource and has received overwhelmingly positive responses from teachers, pupils, and health and education sector professionals.

Adolescent men and also recognized its potential impact on their lives:

- 79% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'If I were Jack made me think about issues I hadn't thought about before';
- 85% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'If I were Jack helped me understand the effect an unplanned pregnancy would have on a guy like me';
- 84% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'If I were Jack made me aware that I could talk to a counselling service if I were in Jack's situation.'

Teachers also endorsed the educational benefits of using the IVD in the classroom commenting:

I think it is addressing a gap, a very definite gap there between knowing how a girl gets pregnant and the actual consequences of somebody saying to you, "I'm pregnant" and all the feelings that would go through them.

We've wonderful videos all about reproduction and the clinical ends of things. Real life scenarios, we're very, very poor on.

Relationship and sexuality educational specialists commended its authenticity, interactive features and the quality of the design:

It's so different from the mainstream stuff, just the tone of it is completely different, the setting is completely different, the language is completely different. [The mainstream stuff] is almost sterile in its content in comparison.

I was struck by the quality of the filming, the likeability of the two young people [playing the part of Jack and his girlfriend Emma]. I think young people will easily identify with them.

Case Study 1: Rural mixed-sex interdenominational post-primary school

The teacher at this school said that the resource engaged the pupils and gave them a much needed platform from which to discuss teenage pregnancy. Although the resource includes plans for four lessons, she actually used it during seven thirty-minute lessons because some of the group discussion activities ran on for longer than anticipated. The first group that the teacher used it with were aged between 15 and 16. She said that there were times when she was surprised at their maturity and other times amazed by their ignorance. She anticipated trying it with different senior cycle year groups before deciding on which age group she felt it worked best with. She felt it was important to use the resource before they 'knew it all' but, at the same time, thought it would be more valuable when the young people were so not so immature that they giggled at any mention of the word 'sex'.

The pupils said that they enjoyed using the resource and had not used anything similar before. In particular they enjoyed the IVD, group discussion and role-play activities. Most pupils said that the parent survey homework activity was 'awkward' but they agreed that it was not as difficult speaking to their parents about pregnancy as they had anticipated. Most said that they had chosen to do the parent survey with their mother rather than their father because they thought it would be less awkward. The girls said that even though the resource was aimed specifically at boys, they enjoyed using it and thought they learned just as much from it as the boys.

Case Study 2: Urban all-boys Catholic post-primary school

The teacher in this school chose to centre four forty-minute lessons around the IVD and group discussion activities, avoiding written activities and role play because he anticipated that the boys would respond better to the former activities. He offered the class the opportunity to do the parent survey homework activity but they 'voted' against it because they thought it would be too 'embarrassing'. The teacher said that the boys responded well to the IVD and that they engaged in lively discussion about the characters. He indicated that it was known that two boys in the school had had an unintended pregnancy with their partners during the previous year, so the issue of unintended teenage pregnancy was very relevant for them.

The boys said that they enjoyed the IVD and were able to identify with Jack and his situation. They said that they particularly enjoyed the controversial statements activity and indicated that they were amazed when they saw what a six-month-old baby's schedule looked like. They said that before using the resource they did not know that boys could avail of crisis pregnancy counselling services. They agreed that the resource had helped them to think about things that they had never considered before, such as how difficult it would be to have to tell your parents that you got a girl pregnant and how hard it would be if you had to leave school and get a job at 17.

The current phase of the *If I Were Jack* project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (RES-189-25-0300), the Irish Health Service Executive's Crisis Pregnancy Programme and the Public Health Agency Northern Ireland. The resources will be piloted in Northern Ireland during the 2013/14 academic year, with a view to future rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness and final roll-out of materials, which will be freely available to the public. Further details on the *If I Were Jack* resource, including excerpts from the IVD, are available from: www.qub.ac.uk/IfIWereJack



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