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1.1

Chapter 7

Risk

Claire Smith, Wendy Stainton Rogers and Stan Tucker

Introduction

This chapter is about risk and young people, focusing on young people whose risk taking and exposure to risk raise concern: about their own safety and wellbeing and that of others. The first section examines risk as a concept, and some of the theoretical frameworks that help us gain insight into the risks associated with being young. There then follow three sections looking at different aspects of risk and the ways in which each of these can be addressed. Section 2 discusses ways of tackling the risks that young people pose, Section 3 explores approaches to diverting young people away from risk, and Section 4 looks at initiatives working with young people to overcome risk.

The chapter will address the following core questions:

- Does the categorisation of young people's lives into various 'at risk' groupings help us to understand better their everyday experience?
- What are the advantages and drawbacks of viewing young people's experience through this lens?
- How can those working with young people be encouraged to see them as a heterogeneous group with diverse needs and aspirations?

1 Putting risk in context

Risk is a much debated and highly contentious concept. It is also a very powerful one, since concerns about risk lead to calls 'to do something about it'. *What* to do depends on your definition of what 'risk' means. For young people in the West, the transition to adulthood was once inextricably linked to the movement from school to work. In the period following the Second World War, manufacturing employment was seen to offer viable, if restricted, opportunities for young people, especially young men. Though monotonous, work was seen as providing the material benefits of regular pay, stability, security and a 'job for life'. The decline in manufacturing jobs

in Western countries has in part been supplemented by an expanding service sector economy and the urban regeneration of old industrial quarters. Although this shift has seen an increase in youth participation in the labour market, it is characterised by more casual forms of labour, marked especially by part time working hours, fixed term contracts, more 'flexible' patterns of employment and pay scales that barely rise above the minimum wage (see Thomson, 2007b, in the companion volume in this series).

At structural and cultural levels, then, the 'pathways' open to young people, as they make the transition to adulthood and the world of work, are rapidly changing yet increasingly individualised. In the post-industrial period, transitions to adulthood continue to be marked by opportunity, risk, uncertainty and labour market insecurity. Late modern theorists suggest that the notion of 'risk' characterises the contemporary period (Beck, 1992; see also the discussion by Thomson, 2007a, in the companion volume). However, rather than leading to the collapse of social class distinctions, it is possible to argue that the risk-infused sensibility of the age appears to *strengthen*, rather than abolish inequality in late modernity. It is within these new times that young men and young women are attempting to rewrite their identities and labour biographies and in so doing are found to be pursuing multiple, fragmented or unaccomplished transitions: the increasingly individualised biographies include complex, fractured and 'insecure transitions' (MacDonald, 1999, p. 171) mediating across school, work and local-global networks.

Most people will agree that risk is about taking a chance where there is a real possibility of something bad happening. Yet 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' is also common wisdom: if you don't take risks then you miss out on opportunities. Whereas other terms – such as 'hazard', 'threat' and 'danger' – always carry a negative meaning, risk taking is much more ambiguous: except, that is, risk taking by the young. Youth plus risk taking always seems to add up to a bad thing! That is, if you are an adult. Young people rarely think about their lives in terms of risk. Rather, risk-taking behaviour among young people may be spoken about as forms of pleasure seeking, having fun, being adventurous. In this chapter we will examine the notion of risk in young people's lives and how it is conceptualised, and look at some of the consequences.

Activity 1 Young people and risk

Allow 30 minutes

Below are three extracts from websites, each one about young people and risk. The first is from AVERT, an international HIV and AIDS charity based in the UK, with the aim of averting HIV and AIDS worldwide; the second is from Youth at Risk, a charity dedicated to young people whose reality has become crime, exclusion from school, unemployment, drug and alcohol

abuse and other self harm; and the third is an edited article from Reuters on a report from the Financial Services Authority (FSA).

Read these extracts and then note two or three ways in which they are saying the same thing and at least one way in which they have something different to say.

When you have done that, make some notes about how and why young people are seen to pose risks to themselves and to others.

Risk A: HIV infection

Young people are often particularly vulnerable to sexually-transmitted HIV, and to HIV infection as a result of drug-use. Young people (15–24 years old) account for half of all new HIV infections worldwide – more than 6,000 become infected with HIV every day (UNAIDS, 2004). More than a third of all people living with HIV or AIDS are under the age of 25, and almost two-thirds of them are women. In many parts of the world, young people in this age-group are at particularly high risk of HIV infection from unprotected sex, sex between men and IV [intravenous] drug-use because of the very high prevalence rates often found amongst people who engage in these behaviours. Young people are also often especially vulnerable to exploitation that may increase their susceptibility to infection. Even if they are not currently engaging in risk behaviours, as they become older, young people may soon be exposed to situations that put them at risk. Indeed, globally, most young people become sexually active in their teens. The fact that they are – or soon will be – at risk of HIV infection makes young people a crucial target for AIDS education.

(AVERT, 2006)

Risk B: Becoming 'beyond hope'

Youth at Risk gets to the very heart of youth disaffection by working with the most difficult and damaged young people – as well as those who may be heading that way – to turn their lives around.

The alarming rise in youth crime, truancy, unemployment and apathy affects us all. Youth at Risk recognises the enormous cost of recurring anti-social behaviour, both to young people as well as to their communities.

Those who vandalise, commit burglaries and muggings, are excluded from school or on benefits often feel alienated.

Their families, the police and their schools find it extremely difficult to deal with them. The young people themselves believe they are 'beyond hope'.

(Youth at Risk, 2006)

Risk C: Money problems

Lack of financial understanding is identified by policymakers as a key reason why people, especially the young, are not saving enough for their old age at a time when citizens are expected to enjoy longer lifespans ... Among its findings, the FSA survey found that 70 percent of respondents had not taken any steps to cope with a drop in income, although 28 percent of respondents had experienced such a drop in the past three years.

[...]

Lack of knowledge is particularly acute among young people, who now face an increasingly complex financial world, potentially heavy student loans as well as the attractions of products like credit cards that did not exist for earlier generations.

[...]

This combination of pressures means that the cost of not having the necessary skills to make sound financial decisions is becoming increasingly significant ... The FSA will target schools and workplaces to boost financial education. While dramatic improvements are unlikely over the next few years, the FSA expects to see a steady rate of progress.

(Reuters, 2006)

Comment

There are a fair number of commonalities between these extracts. Even though they are about very different kinds of risk, all three portray the young as vulnerable, mainly because they are seen to be lacking – in experience, understanding, knowledge, ‘the necessary skills’, and so on. They also identify risky behaviour as harmful to the young people concerned. Do notice, though, that the extracts also, in different ways, raise concerns about the risks young people can pose to others. This can be directly, for example, by the impact of their antisocial behaviour; or it can be more indirect, by becoming a financial burden on others, for instance. Not surprisingly, then, another common theme is that all use ‘risk’ as a justification for intervention. In Extracts A and C this is mainly seen in terms of a need to educate the young; in B a specific programme of action is being promoted, targeted at those young people who ‘believe they are “beyond hope”’.

The differences are much more subtle. These depictions consider risk in young people’s lives at different levels. Extract A takes a global perspective, Extract C a national perspective and Extract B a more localised viewpoint. This determines the level at which intervention is being justified: global, national or local. There is also a difference in standpoint: universal (where intervention is directed to all young people) or targeted (just at those who ...).

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So what does this tell us about the way in which adults typically construe the riskiness of the young? Certainly they are identified as a particularly vulnerable group, more prone to taking risks than adults. In popular imagination, risk taking is almost a defining characteristic of youth. Youth is seen as a time of being feckless and careless – a danger to yourself and to others. The young are defined by their lack: their lack of care in what they do, lack of concern for others and lack of self control and self discipline. It is hardly surprising, then, that the adult world finds their risk taking disturbing – even threatening – and hence seeks to prevent, reduce or curtail it.

1.1 The problematisation of young people's riskiness

This leads us into consideration of the concept of '**problematisation**' – an ugly but useful word that refers to the way in which young people's behaviour is presented as inevitably and inherently problematic. In other words, the dominant representation of young people means that whatever they do, they are positioned, in the eyes of the adult world, as 'being a problem'.

This concept can be seen at work in media coverage of young people. Kirk Astroth (1993) suggests that this has a historical trajectory, citing the cover of a 1954 issue of the US magazine, *Newsweek*, which was headlined: 'Let's face it: our teenagers are out of control'. The article within the magazine lamented, he notes, a 'national teenage problem – a problem that is apparently getting worse' (cited in Astroth, 1993). The same problematising agenda is evident today in the way in which young people are represented. The following extract provides an example.

The trials of living with the feral youths of Salford

Gang-related violence in British cities has made people wary ... of the young.

[...]

Derek, 64 [says] ...

'I was never as bad as these kids. I see them driving up and down the street at night. You can't see their faces. They're coming out with shooters and knives and they're terrorising people. They can't hold their ale or they're high as kites. They've no respect for you if you're over 25. That's why people my age are scared to go out.'

[...]

'Breaking the law means nothing to these kids. Even prisons aren't a deterrent, and don't get me started on the police. A man can be kicked to death in the street and the thugs can't be identified because they're too young? ...'

(Butt, 2005, p. 8)

The newspaper report articulates a range of dominant discourses which present the young as 'troubled', 'feral', 'disaffected' and 'delinquent'. Particular groups of young people seem to be identified as 'in need of intervention' and this approach has become the rationale of policy making and service provision. Judgements are made about the actions of those working with young people in terms of the contribution that is made to fostering and sustaining interventions that address young people's 'difficult', 'unruly' and 'disruptive' behaviour.

The problematising approach of such reports can be used to declare groups of young people to be 'at risk' and 'out of control'. Thus, specific forms of risk-taking behaviour are constructed through problematising discourses. These in turn justify adopting a range of regulatory strategies to control the apparent risks. An example is the way in which groups of young people congregating in public places make others feel uncomfortable and wary of what they may be up to. This 'threat' then becomes the justification for calling on the police or security guards to 'move them on'. A similar, more everyday example is the notice put up in shops that limits the number of under-16s who can enter at the same time.



Media images and stories frequently portray young people as 'problems'

Writing about plans to introduce juvenile curfews in the late 1990s, Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith argued that such measures were 'discriminatory and fundamentally wrong' because they 'criminalise perfectly legal and acceptable behaviour' on the grounds of age:

Walking the street, standing in public places talking to friends, moving quietly and peaceably from one place to another, going to a late night movie are all harmless activities which should never be criminalised – whatever the time of day. To select young people and criminalise them for doing what the rest of the population can freely do is doubly discriminatory. Youth curfews

identify young people as an enemy within, a dangerous other, therefore curfews must be seen as morally repugnant and divisive.

(Jeffs and Smith, 1996, p. 12)

Not only is the problematising of young people unfair, but it may also hinder the impact of strategies that seek to support communities and promote social inclusion. So, for example, Dawn Stephen and Peter Squires, critiquing recent UK government approaches to 'risky' youth, argue that an approach based on an institutionalised mistrust of youth 'serves to further marginalise young people, and their families, most in need of inclusion and support' (Stephen and Squires, 2004, p. 366).

To claim that the young are *positioned* as 'problematic' through the operation of problematising discourses is not to deny that some young people sometimes behave badly and can seriously intimidate others, including other young people. What *is* being claimed, though, is that in many subtle ways the *same* behaviour is often judged very differently if enacted by a young person as opposed to an adult. It is not that young people are (or ever were) 'little angels'. Rather, it is a question of why we *expect* the young to be a problem. Why are all sorts of exclusions and controls set up to manage their behaviour that are not applied to adults behaving equally badly?

Activity 2 Looking for examples of problematisation

Allow 60 minutes

Over the next week or so, try to identify occasions when young people are not only treated or seen differently from adults, but are treated as 'problems' by definition.

Comment

One area that you might have identified is leisure and sport, where facilities are provided for adults for their own benefit: to enjoy themselves or keep fit. Similar facilities for young people are intended more to 'keep them off the streets'. Many facilities explicitly exclude those aged under 21, even though they are legally adults.

1.2 Governmentality and risk taking

As we have already noted, the apparent 'riskiness' of young people's behaviour makes them targets for control. The French theorist Michel Foucault proposed that governments seek to regulate any behaviour of their citizens considered disruptive: according to him, they 'supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies, and to continue when this change has been achieved' (Foucault, 1977, p. 18).

Foucault was particularly interested in exploring forms of **governmentality** (strategies used to regulate and control). Some he identifies are 'the prohibition of entering certain areas', imposing 'obligatory medical treatment' and interventions designed to make 'behaviour changes'. You may recall the discussion in Chapter 6, 'Institutions', of Foucault's ideas in relation to young people in institutions.

Crucially, Foucault draws attention to the fact that, in any society, certain groups have the power to define what actions mean and what they signify, and the responses they promote or prohibit. In our context, this is about defining which actions constitute risky behaviour and which do not. A good example here is the way in which some substances (such as ecstasy and marijuana) are determined to be 'risky' and hence classified as illegal drugs, while others (alcohol, aspirin and tobacco) are 'risky' enough to be controlled (with age limits for purchase) but not enough to be made illegal. Those who have the power to define meanings, Foucault warned, gain considerable power over people's lives – and, in some circumstances, their deaths.

Yet power over the risk agenda is not as closed as it might at first appear. Foucault also pointed out that individuals and groups have the ability to resist dominant discourses in order to assert their own visions and ideas. Challenges to dominant discourses can arise out of 'innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations' (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). From this perspective it is possible to see just why some groups of young people raise the hackles of politicians and those whose job it is to care for and educate young people – given that the young have a whole armoury of strategies for resistance. Indeed, it can be argued that the young are problematised *because* they are so good at rebelling against adult power.

1.3 The moralisation of risk

A number of theorists have argued that one of the features of **neo-liberalism**, a political philosophy that rejects direct government intervention in the economy and which appears to be achieving global dominance, is an emphasis on new and more indirect forms of regulation and control over the lives of individuals. One way in which this is manifested, they claim, is through greater regulation of risk taking. Radical economists, for example, claim that our society is becoming one where 'the active management of responsible choice in risk-taking is the core of neo-liberal governance' (Ericson *et al.*, 2000, p. 553) and in which 'the ideal liberal citizen' is one who 'possesses remarkable qualities of self-discipline' (Ruhl, 1999, p. 109; see also the discussion by Robb, 2007b, in the companion volume in this series).

According to this analysis, one of the ways in which neo-liberalism promotes itself is by a *moralisation* of risk taking: making the taking of risks blameworthy. A good example is in relation to the risks people are seen to take with their health:

Risk [is] ... a tool for blaming those who fail in the face of choice ...

[...]

... people are blamed if they become ill and cannot demonstrate that, not only did they avoid risky behaviours and situations, but they also did everything in their power to be healthy so as to overcome the risks intrinsic to a lack of action.

(Galvin, 2002, p. 120)

Blaming someone is very powerful. Not only is it a means of attributing responsibility to the risk taker: the blameworthy person becomes *responsible* for the harm that befalls them. According to Stephen and Squires: “‘Dangerous’ young people and families, through the moralistic rhetoric of ‘responsibilisation’ ... become firmly subject to that great ‘epistemological fallacy’ (Furlong & Cartmel 1997) of late modernity in that they are encouraged to formulate individual solutions for problems that remain, largely, of a structural nature’ (Stephen and Squires, 2004, p. 352). Blaming also warrants highly invasive forms of intervention, on the argument that risk takers cannot be trusted and must be managed ‘for their own good’ as well as to protect the law-abiding and responsible others.

1.4 Risky circumstances

Blaming people for the harms that befall them has other consequences. Not only does it warrant intervening in their lives, it also deflects attention away from alternative explanations for the harm. As theorists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) point out, some young people face an ‘abundance of risks’ that arise not from their own actions but from their circumstances. Young people born and raised on disadvantaged estates face a variety of increased risks compared with those growing up in the leafy suburbs: much greater risks of violent attack and of being unemployed, for instance. And, although it goes on in the most elite public schools, not only are the risks of getting drawn into drug taking and drug dealing greater, but, more crucially, so are the risks of getting caught and then of being convicted and imprisoned.

Young people who have grown up in the care of a local authority are far more at risk of being homeless than those who have grown up within a family. Young people who are disabled or who have debilitating conditions such as ME (Myalgic Encephalopathy) can easily become cut off from their

friendship networks and wider communities (Tucker and Tatum, 2000), putting them at risk of social isolation and the concomitant problems that can bring. Young mothers supporting themselves and their child(ren) on a very low income face risks to their health (including their mental health), to their education and to their life opportunities (Osler and Vincent, 2003).

In risk terms, the stakes are heavily loaded against some young people and can have an additive effect where one set of risks, such as mental health problems, makes them more vulnerable to others, such as social isolation, which in turn can lead to yet others, such as homelessness. We will explore some of these risks further in the remainder of this chapter.

Key points

- 'Risk' characterises the late modern period. It is a highly contested concept that provides a justification for taking action. How risk is defined determines what action is possible and what is not.
- Young people's behaviour tends to be understood through a problematising discourse which portrays them as particularly vulnerable to risk, to be harmed by it and therefore 'in need' of being controlled.
- It is argued that current policy towards young people is informed by neo-liberalism which views 'riskiness' as an individual quality.
- Some young people face an 'abundance of risk'. They will require extra support and services if they are to achieve a good quality of life.

2 Tackling the risks posed by young people

This section examines how current government policy seeks to deal with the way in which young people's behaviour exposes others to risk.

Activity 3 Young people as 'the enemy'

Allow 20 minutes

Read the extract below and consider the issues raised – both for young people and for the communities in which they live – by the curfew that has been imposed on local young people. What questions do you have after reading it?

The young people in and around Hillhouse were confused about why adults made complaints to the police about them when they were simply hanging about with friends. Fear of young people is such that contact between the generations appears to be declining. Rather than talk to young people who hang about the street, today adults often assume that young people would attack

them verbally or physically. Rather than taking some responsibility for the behaviour of these young people, by assuming the worst many adults are handing this responsibility to the police. In the minds of these adults, it is likely that the curfew will have confirmed their worst fears about these young people, who will remain strangers to them.

(Waiton, 2001, p. 149)

Comment

This is a powerful piece of writing in that it depicts a disintegrating community where there is little in the way of dialogue between young people and adults, and even less in the way of personal and collective responsibility being taken for what is going on. The young people are clearly puzzled and a 'fear of young people' helps to create a gap between generations. There is no sense of community cohesion or conversation between the young people and the adults.

One response might be that the curfew may have accomplished its aim – removing young people from the streets – but at what cost? Is this a price worth paying? Is the risk posed by the young being appropriately addressed? Isn't there a better alternative that builds on a community's strengths rather than exposes its weaknesses and makes them worse?

2.1 How real is the threat?

The threat posed by some young people's behaviour has preoccupied government in recent times. Images of youthful disorderly behaviour and unrest grab the headlines and create a sense of political and public unease (see the discussion in Robb, 2007a, in the companion volume in this series). Dangerous streets and playgrounds, 'no-go' housing estates and disorderly town centres are seen as places that require greater levels of surveillance, control and regulation. Antisocial and disorderly behaviour within such locations is viewed as a public risk in that environments are created where other members of the public feel threatened and intimidated. For many, 'fear of crime' has increased to the point where it imprisons them in their homes, and the young are seen to be ever more 'out of control'.

This section will argue, however, that policy responses to threats of this kind are complex in the way in which they link together matters of social concern, parental responsibility and the need to control the behaviour of the young by restricting their activities. At the same time, as John Springhall (1998, p. 8) argues, the media have also been highly influential in shaping the public perception of risk via 'exaggerated reports about the "effects" on their children's behaviour of "sensational" and violent amusements'. A number of theorists (such as Waiton, 2001; Hendrick, 2003) argue that

there has not been any real increase in such behaviour but simply greater media coverage of it, coupled with changed perceptions of what constitutes misbehaviour.

Indeed, it has been argued that contemporary 'moral panics' about youthful delinquency, increased fear about public safety and, in particular, the failure of parents to control their children adequately, can be traced back to the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two boys in 1993 (Hendrick, 2003). Harry Hendrick argues that following this tragedy a discourse focused on promoting children's welfare was replaced by one based on a concern for 'justice' and a desire for retribution and punishment. This shift, Hendrick claims, led to a call for increased levels of state intervention in the lives of young people and families seen to pose a threat to social order. He maintains that 'under the influence of such a "moral panic" Labour first inherited a climate of opinion that demonised "troublesome" young people, and then it set about consolidating this age prejudice' (Hendrick, 2003, p. 225). Since then, media reports of gang violence, unsocial activity and disorderly behaviour have helped to reinforce and sustain the retributive justice discourse.

From the perspective of government policy making, what has happened in the public domain can be directly linked to a range of family, cultural and social factors. It is claimed that contributory influences to antisocial activity include underachievement at school, family dysfunction, mental health problems and drug and alcohol abuse. Other factors extend to the unemployment of parents, growing up in poverty, social exclusion and inadequate community facilities. By citing such influences a conceptual link between vulnerability, risk and antisocial behaviour is forged. However, this form of analysis has a long history, in the sense that delinquent activity has frequently been linked to deprived families and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, from this perspective elements of any 'solution' also need to address personality 'deficiencies' as well as 'inadequate parental discipline' (Griffin, 1993, p. 104).

2.2 Intervention based on the retributive justice model

One of the most significant policy innovations to have been shaped by ideas of risk has been the establishment of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Parenting Orders and the 'sweeping' of shopping malls for truanting children (normally involving the police and social services). A clear connection is being made between what young people do on the streets and their family and community networks. For example, ASBOs were first introduced under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act in England and Wales and later adopted in Scotland and Northern Ireland. As civil orders requested by local authorities, the police or landlords, and made in court, ASBOs are statutory measures that can be employed to protect the

public and they prohibit the offender from committing specified antisocial acts or from entering a particular area. They are effective for a minimum of two years.

Since their inception ASBOs have generated a great deal of argument both for and against their use with young people. On the positive side, they do seem to 'work'. Residents in areas affected by what is viewed as 'yobbish' and antisocial behaviour have reported improvements in their neighbourhood when ASBOs have been issued to young people, and it is this perception that has tended to dominate media coverage of their use. Arguments against them include concerns that young people's rights to anonymity are undermined if they are 'named and shamed' (Monahan, 2005), that they demonise young people, unnecessarily bringing more teenagers into the criminal justice system (Bradley, undated), and that they stigmatise families (Monahan, 2005). It is also argued that ASBOs could be counterproductive, acting more like a 'badge of honour' among teenagers.

In addition to ASBOs, the government has also introduced curfews for young people (see again Activity 3), which aim to stop those under the age of 16 years being out after 9 pm unless accompanied by an adult. Again, these have generated much discussion, usually centring on young people's rights and the appropriateness of excluding particular groups of young people from certain public spaces. On the other hand, it could be argued that the use of curfews can effectively reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in crime. As Waiton (2001, p. 31) noted with regard to a curfew introduced in Hamilton, this aimed 'to prevent crime happening by monitoring the behaviour of the young people who hung about the streets. It also aimed to protect children and young people from the "many dangers that they face when out at night"', thus juxtaposing crime with personal safety issues.

Dispersal Orders and Fixed Penalty Notices have been introduced as part of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003 in England and Wales, 2004 in Scotland and Northern Ireland). Under this legislation police can disperse groups of two or more young people who are perceived to be a threat or intimidating, and any within the group who are aged 16 or under can be escorted home. Again, these policy developments have generated much debate surrounding their impact. The National Youth Agency (undated) has argued that Dispersal Orders generate even more negative perceptions towards young people, classing them as troublemakers and worsening relations between young people and authority figures. Fixed Penalty Notices were introduced as a rapid response for dealing with low level disorder (for example, being drunk and disorderly through binge drinking; throwing fireworks) outside of the courtroom. Penalties depend on the type of offence and the age of the person involved; for example, Fixed Penalty Notices can now be given to 16- and 17-years-olds causing disorderly behaviour through alcohol misuse. A number of theorists in this field are

public and they prohibit the offender from committing specified antisocial acts or from entering a particular area. They are effective for a minimum of two years.

Since their inception ASBOs have generated a great deal of argument both for and against their use with young people. On the positive side, they do seem to 'work'. Residents in areas affected by what is viewed as 'yobbish' and antisocial behaviour have reported improvements in their neighbourhood when ASBOs have been issued to young people, and it is this perception that has tended to dominate media coverage of their use. Arguments against them include concerns that young people's rights to anonymity are undermined if they are 'named and shamed' (Monahan, 2005), that they demonise young people, unnecessarily bringing more teenagers into the criminal justice system (Bradley, undated), and that they stigmatise families (Monahan, 2005). It is also argued that ASBOs could be counterproductive, acting more like a 'badge of honour' among teenagers.

In addition to ASBOs, the government has also introduced curfews for young people (see again Activity 3), which aim to stop those under the age of 16 years being out after 9 pm unless accompanied by an adult. Again, these have generated much discussion, usually centring on young people's rights and the appropriateness of excluding particular groups of young people from certain public spaces. On the other hand, it could be argued that the use of curfews can effectively reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in crime. As Waiton (2001, p. 31) noted with regard to a curfew introduced in Hamilton, this aimed 'to prevent crime happening by monitoring the behaviour of the young people who hung about the streets. It also aimed to protect children and young people from the "many dangers that they face when out at night"', thus juxtaposing crime with personal safety issues.

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highly critical of intervention of this kind. For instance, Bob Coles *et al.* (2000, p. 25) argue that 'keeping children and young people in the home or continually moving them on is not a reasonable policy response to their needs'.

Curfews put maintaining public order above the harm that they do to young people's social lives and friendship networks, especially for those living on impoverished housing estates or in other deprived areas. These young people are unlikely to have any space at home in which to 'hang out', or parents who will ferry them about if they want to go out, as many middle class youngsters do. Reporting research that examined a range of disadvantaged housing estates, Coles *et al.* (2000, p. 25) comment that 'although some activities were often available within walking distance or on main bus routes, many young people did not have the financial resources required to take them off the estate'. Stephen and Squires (2004, p. 366) criticise a range of recent Community Safety initiatives undertaken by the UK government on the grounds that they represent a 'civilianisation' of crime prevention that can absolve the authorities from their responsibilities to uphold the rights of young people and their families, such as the right to a fair trial. They report the sense of injustice felt by many young people on the receiving end of measures such as Community Safety Orders:

The main frustration expressed related directly to the notion of 'anti-social behaviour' itself and the sense that the young people had been 'picked on' for behaviour rooted in mental health or special educational needs problems; behaviour they perceived as minor when compared with the types and extent of crime in their neighbourhoods, which the research participants did not see being tackled anywhere near so forcefully.

(Stephen and Squires, 2004, p. 366)

They report one young person as saying:

I thought it was bullshit 'cause we didn't do half the things that goes on in this estate. Yes, I was worried that we'd be evicted, but it seemed completely over the top for a couple of things when you see what others're doing ... but with me, they'd be straight in on my case. No it ain't fair is it, but that's just the way the world is.

(Quoted in Stephen and Squires, 2004, p. 360)

Less punitive approaches include providing extra services and support to young people with few financial or social resources. And, as we shall see in the next section, preventative forms of intervention are used to divert 'at risk' young people away from becoming embroiled in antisocial and criminal behaviour.

Some further welfare focused interventions have been introduced to sit alongside ASBOs. For example, under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, Individual Support Orders (ISOs) were introduced to ensure that children and young people issued with ASBOs are given professional help; for example, counselling to tackle alcohol abuse, or drug rehabilitation for drug abusers.

Key points

- Although it is a common assumption that young people's misbehaviour is becoming more extreme, theorists argue that this is a 'moral panic': more a matter of increased media coverage and a growing 'law and order' political agenda.
- Policy on how to manage misbehaviour appears to be shifting. Whereas young troublemakers were once mainly seen as 'deprived' and hence in need of welfare measures, now they are seen more as 'depraved' and hence in need of regulation, punishment and retribution. This is evident in a range of new measures, including ASBOs, Dispersal Orders and curfews.
- Critics argue that these prioritise public order to the detriment of young people's friendship and community networks, their opportunities and their quality of life. They are thus likely to increase alienation and exacerbate rather than alleviate many of the factors leading to 'delinquency'.
- Welfare services are still available, but are not given high priority.

3 Diverting young people away from risk

Diversionary intervention works on the principle that it is better to resolve problems when they are minor than to wait until they get really serious: a 'nip it in the bud' approach. It is targeted at young people who are identified as 'risk prone': in Youth at Risk's terminology (see Activity 1), not so much 'the most difficult and damaged' as 'those who may be heading that way' (quite possibly because they are involved with the 'difficult and damaged'). The idea is that intervention can divert the young person away from a life of crime, for example. The risk *potential* is identified by observing behaviour that is seen as:

- already heading towards becoming dangerous, for the young person and/or others
- arising from circumstances, relationships or activities that have the potential to push the young person across the line into illegality and/or unacceptability

- sufficiently concerning at a societal, service or community level to justify some form of early formal or informal intervention.

The next activity is designed to help you reflect on the factors that might lead to young people heading towards such a state of affairs.

Activity 4 What makes people risk prone?

Allow 20 minutes

What kind of personal, social and economic factors do you think may contribute to young people becoming a danger to themselves and others in this way? What leads some young people into antisocial behaviour and criminal activity? List three or four different factors that you think are important and write short notes for each on why you think so. When you have done that, reflect on how some of these factors might combine to increase the likelihood of young people becoming the focus of public attention and early intervention.

Comment

Clearly this is a contentious area. You may agree with those who argue that behaving badly is the outcome of social forces and situations, such as being raised in a 'bad neighbourhood' or 'getting in with the wrong crowd' (for this argument see, for example, Shaw and McKay, 1969). On the other hand, you may consider criminality to have a psychological basis – in personality, for instance. In this case you may see some young people as having an innate and biologically driven propensity to become involved in delinquent activity (see, for instance, Mednick *et al.*, 1987; Caspi *et al.*, 2002).

Probably, though, you identified a range of factors. Research by David Farrington (1996) lists a series of connected categories that focus on 'backgrounds', 'circumstances' and 'attitudes'. Included in these are matters concerned with:

- *personality*: including impulse, 'hyperactivity' and 'restlessness' and an inability to understand the outcomes of offending behaviour
- *intelligence and attainment*: including poor school performance, a failure to comprehend the feelings of potential victims and a low level of intelligence
- *parental supervision, discipline and conflict*: including poor quality and inconsistent parenting, parental disharmony, separation and divorce
- *socio-economic status*: including families living on low incomes and benefits, unemployment and poor quality housing
- *delinquent friends and community influences*: including peer group relationships, impoverished housing estates, a lack of youth facilities and environmental factors.

(Adapted from Farrington, 1996, p. 2)

The important point about this list is not whether you agree or disagree with the content, but the way in which the factors listed might be used to justify intervening in the lives of young people. The young people concerned may not, in fact, have done anything wrong – merely 'hung out' with those who have.

3.1 Approaches based on the 'vulnerability' model

As an example of the discussion above, if the view is taken that a particular housing estate in an inner city area is a 'breeding ground' for young people who 'go wrong' (informed, say, by socio-economic and community factors), then this provides legitimacy for 'doing something about it'. For instance, the police might mount truancy patrols; youth workers could become involved in street level work; and a programme of diversionary activities may be offered by a local or national youth charity. The primary intention of all these approaches would be to prevent young people becoming involved in risky activity that could lead to antisocial behaviour and criminality. Intervention here is justified by the assumption that certain individual and groups of young people are 'vulnerable'. For Simon Bradford, the link to the idea of vulnerability is central to the way in which young people are declared to be 'at risk':

By identifying their 'at risk' status (that is, their vulnerability), early *diversionary* or *preventative* intervention is thought possible. Rather than privileging characteristics which are thought to reside *in* individuals, the concept of 'risk' concentrates attention on abstract factors which constitute an individual as being 'at risk' ... almost anything can be plausibly incorporated.

(Bradford, 2004, p. 250)

Bradford raises an interesting point in terms of the way in which it becomes possible to extend the concept of risk by concentrating on a young person's vulnerability. Emphasis is placed on 'abstract' factors that seem to shift the focus away from the individual through the identification of 'new sites for expert intervention in the social and material worlds' (Bradford, 2004, p. 250). With this form of analysis, nothing is 'off limits', in the sense that a great deal of the things young people do and say have the potential to place them at some level of risk, particularly when viewed through a problematising discourse.

The important point to focus on here is the way in which the concept of 'risk' arises out of processes of social construction that are influential in permitting different forms and levels of intervention. Problematising discourses are, in effect, extended to include those who have the potential to become 'at risk' at some time in the future. In turn, the seriousness of



Young people living on poor estates are often seen as particularly 'at risk'

particular activities can be assessed and managed more effectively. Attention is given to the categorisation and ranking of certain forms of behaviour and activity according to their potential to generate deviance, dysfunction and disruption.

The influence of this kind of policy and practice agenda can be seen in a range of interventions. For instance, the link between risk and prevention features significantly in debates about the need to safeguard children and young people from abusive situations and relationships. Indeed, Sir William Utting, in reviewing safeguarding structures and processes for 'children looked after', spoke about the need for 'proactive' interventions to keep children and young people safe (Utting, 1997). A useful example of this can be seen in the way in which Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) within schools is now being used as 'an essential part of preparing children and young people to protect themselves from harm and abuse and is especially important for vulnerable children with disabilities' (Joint Chief Inspectors' Report, 2005, p. 20). In essence, the approach is underpinned by the idea that young people, if provided with good quality information (and the opportunity to explore the information in a supportive climate) on issues concerned with sex education, bullying, self harm, personal safety or drug awareness, are more likely to avoid situations that place them at risk (see Chapter 8, 'Safeguarding'). Diversionary programmes have received significant levels of funding from central government. One such programme, The Neighbourhood Support Fund (DfES, 2004), has been effective in meeting the needs of marginalised young people. It is claimed that, through the financial investment (some £60 million over a three-year period) provided, the Fund has allowed community based work to be carried out with over 50,000 young people in the 13–19 age group:

Of those involved, 25% had been excluded from school and 16% long term non-attenders. 55% had low levels of educational attainment and 13% special educational needs. 25% were identified as young offenders or at risk of offending. The programme also engaged young people with drug and alcohol and mental health problems ...

(DfES, 2004, p. 4)

It is important to note that the aims of the programme, and the associated outcomes of the work, reflect wider government ambitions for marginalised and at risk young people. Opportunities were provided to young people to help them re-engage in educational activities, develop 'soft skills' concerned with, for example, anger management, confidence building and personal responsibility, and become involved with training.

Such an initiative, then, has to be painted into a much bigger picture and reflects the demand for government to respond to the needs of a significant number of young people (estimated at over 160,000) who opt out of

education, training and employment once they leave school – these young people are referred to as the ‘NEET’ (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999a). Indeed, a claim is made by the DfES that the Neighbourhood Support Fund enabled 68 per cent of participants to go on to ‘further learning or employment – a significant contribution to the Connexions target of reducing “NEET” numbers by 10%’ (DfES, 2004, p. 4).

What becomes evident in examining the approaches outlined above is the shift in policy strategy that has occurred. The important point to bear in mind is that there has been a move away from offering ‘universal’ services and towards an approach based on targeting services at the vulnerable (see Chapters 1, ‘Practitioners’, and 9, ‘Support’). Increasingly, work with young people is set within boundaries that:

- categorise what are viewed as areas of activity that can increase the likelihood of longer term risk
- determine how significant levels of financial and human resource are to be invested to prevent the escalation of exposure to risk
- define the skills (both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’) and personal attributes that young people need to acquire, or increase, to avoid risk – and it is the promotion of appropriate skills and attributes that is the central function of a programme of intervention.

The management of risk, then, has become an important function for government. In turn this kind of work is used to respond to a wider concern about the way in which some young people in society are seen to be at risk of experiencing social exclusion. Such a form of exclusion might be the product of a variety of factors, including a lack of education, employment and training, economic hardship, inappropriate lifestyles, drug and alcohol abuse or involvement in crime. To understand social exclusion from this perspective is to comprehend how cumulative forms of disadvantage come together to shape individual and collective behaviour and place some young people ‘at risk’. More effective management of the environments that young people experience is seen to be important. In turn, different forms of intervention (sometimes carried out through inter-agency activity) are required to counter personal and collective vulnerability, marginalisation, discrimination and dysfunction. The theme of ‘joined-up’ government policy making and service development has dominated discussion as a way of reducing young people’s exposure to risk (see Chapter 1).

3.2 Alternative approaches

So far the discussion has focused on how risk management has increasingly been used to support early interventions in the lives of young people. Yet at the same time there are important questions to ask about the different

forms of discourse that are currently used to inform work within this area. Does the categorisation of young people's lives into various 'at risk' groupings help us to understand better the nature of their day-to-day experience? Is there a risk of stereotyping the lives of young people through such approaches? Is there a danger that those working with young people will see them as a homogeneous group and fail to respond to their individual needs and aspirations? The fact remains that much of the discourse underpinning the need for early forms of intervention to reduce risk remains preoccupied with a deficit agenda that advocates various forms of 'treatment'. It is important, therefore, that an attempt is made to see the lives of young people who are potentially 'at risk' from different perspectives.

One such perspective shifts from the focus on young people's vulnerability (usually predicated on the 'failure' of their family and/or community) to one which concentrates instead on their resourcefulness and resilience and how their families and communities can promote these qualities (see, for instance, Little and Mount, 1999). An example is a programme called Communities that Care. Gordon Jack, in discussing the ideas that underpinned the programme, outlines how work with young people considered to be at risk can take on a very different focus: 'It involves assisting communities to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, in a systematic and standardised way, and to use existing research evidence to develop effective strategies to reduce risk and enhance the prevention of harm to children' (Jack, 2001, p. 191).

A variety of strategies is employed to work with the young, including education, youth work and family support. Yet what marks this approach out as potentially different is that it is underpinned by a clear focus on the need to pursue *community* development strategies that will empower and potentially change the lives of young people. Young people and their families become important stakeholders when it comes to assessing the nature of risk (based on research evidence) and the strategies that need to be introduced to counter it. When this strategy is followed, the assessment of risk takes on a very different form, in that it is based on the particular threats and troubles facing a specific community.

To move away from problematising perspectives and towards a position where the voices of young people are heard as equal participants in the risk assessment process, it is necessary to create a different kind of working environment:

In order to be considered successful many of the more innovative recent policy interventions *presuppose* an ability to engage with children and to enlist their participation and consent ... We need ... to think about the conditions under which

children's deliberative participation can occur, and about the efforts of translation involved in mediating between children's and adults' frames of meaning.

(Sparks *et al.*, 2000, p. 205)

The participation of young people in assessing risk, then, needs to assume both a practical and a symbolic significance. Indeed, the passing of the Human Rights Act 1998 has helped to foster a situation where the voices of young people assume an increased level of importance. To pursue the kind of interventions that Richard Sparks *et al.* advocate, there is a need to move away from viewing young people as 'lacking' and 'incompetent' to a position where power imbalances between professionals and young people are acknowledged and, as far as possible, countered in order to promote the best interests of the young.

Activity 5 Emphasising the positive

Allow 20 minutes

Reflect for a few minutes on the arguments made in this section. Consider how diversionary work with young people can move away from problematising them and thus emphasising their vulnerabilities. Draw up a list of the key principles that will underpin policies and professional practice that build on the strengths of young people, their families and their communities.

Comment

The list below, adapted from original work undertaken by the Department of Health (DoH, 1999, p. 10), includes a range of principles that might potentially inform risk assessment practice in work with young people. See how they compare with the principles that you produced.

Diversionsary intervention with young people needs to be:

- young person focused
- rooted in the development of the young person
- ecological in approach in that it takes account of personal, social, cultural, family and community circumstances
- based on partnership
- underpinned by equality of opportunity
- based on strengths as well as difficulties
- informed by multi-agency approaches
- seen as a continuing process, not as a single event
- grounded in evidence based knowledge.

If adopted, these kinds of principles can radically change the nature of work undertaken with young people. They make it possible to move away from a preoccupation with what is 'wrong' with youth and, instead, to look for their strengths and build on them. Often young people are disaffected because they lack control over their lives and feel powerless. Instead of trying to rack up the level of control the adult world imposes, it can be much more effective to share responsibility in ways that enable young people to be active participants in projects, rather than have them imposed on them (see Chapter 3, 'Participation').

Key points

- Diversionary intervention is a 'nip it in the bud' approach, targeted at young people heading for trouble.
- Historically, intervention strategies have worked on a model of vulnerability. They sought to identify risk factors and then find ways to reduce their impact: for instance, through education.
- Such strategies are inherently paternalistic and inevitably stigmatising.
- Alternative strategies are being developed that build on the strengths of young people, their families and communities. Such intervention seeks to engage young people as active participants, both in the analysis of risk and in planning ways to flourish in spite of it.

4 Working with young people to overcome risks

This section looks at ways to reduce the risks to which some young people are exposed: either by circumstances beyond their control, or by their own actions (and often a combination of both). Building on the principles developed in the previous section, the focus here is on:

- directly involving young people in understanding the nature of those risks
- creating conditions where they can be active participants in developing strategies to tackle them.

In essence, this section is about how particular kinds of initiatives can be used to empower the young to be more responsible in the management of their risks, life chances, needs and aspirations. The empowerment and engagement of young people in decision making, it will be argued, is likely to lead to an increased level of personal responsibility and the possibility of more desirable outcomes for some young people whose lives are heavily influenced by the kinds of risks that they take, or are considering taking.

This section will briefly look at the management of risk for two particular groups of young people: those who are homeless and young mothers. These two groups of young people have been chosen not only because the challenges they face are different, but also to show how community based policy initiatives can be used to achieve different kinds of outcomes. The initiatives selected are based on the assumption that young people have the potential to significantly change their own lives if they are given the right kind of support.

4.1 Homelessness

Homelessness can include sleeping rough on the streets, living in bed and breakfast accommodation or hostels, or lodging temporarily with family or friends. According to a report on *Rough Sleeping* produced by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998), a quarter of the street homeless are aged between 18 and 25 (Coles, 2004). Many of these young people are those who have been 'looked after' and care leavers. Approximately 129,000 children run away from home every year and end up on the streets (Schopen, 2005).

Living on the streets exposes young people to many risks, including taking and dealing drugs, sexual and physical abuse, sexual exploitation and prostitution. As Kurt Johnson *et al.* (2005, p. 232) highlight: 'substance use, depression, delinquency, and physical and sexual abuse have all been linked to characteristics of social networks. Runaways who report smaller, more transient networks are more likely to be exposed to or engage in high-risk behaviours'.

A report by Barnardo's (2005) highlights the fact that 'young people in the UK are more at risk of homelessness than in any other part of Europe, one fifth of all young people experience homelessness at some point in their lives and a quarter of these have been in care'. Running away from home can lead to a downward spiral of self destruction for a young person, for as Johnson *et al.* (2005, p. 232) state: 'running away and living on the streets profoundly affects adolescent social development. It weakens ties to supervising adults at home and at school, weakens or severs ties to school and neighbourhood friends, and establishes unconventional ties in the street culture'. Accordingly, various initiatives have sought to identify the reasons why young people feel the need to run away, and thereby attempt to help those concerned overcome these issues, or at least indicate that there are alternatives.

Young people living on the streets need a wide range of support services. These must be accessible (in terms of both local availability and the receptiveness of staff) and operate in ways that are valued by the young



Young people are more at risk of homelessness in the UK than anywhere else in Europe

people who use them. Two examples of schemes that have had a positive impact on young people facing homelessness are the Safe in the City scheme and the Safe Moves project.

Safe in the City

The Peabody Trust and Centre Point established the London based Safe in the City charity in 1998. It aimed to address the causes of youth homelessness in order to find ways to prevent it. The scheme was originally funded for a six-year period via the Single Regeneration Budget, which provides resources to support local regeneration initiatives in England. By the end of the scheme, it was estimated that Safe in the City would have worked with 1,200 young people in reducing their chances of becoming homeless (Havell, 2001).

The work of the scheme was underpinned by a multi-agency approach which attempted to tackle the problems that can lead to a young person becoming homeless before crisis point is reached. Participants were supported through individualised and tailor-made programmes of activity. Effective programme management was based on the principle of responding to each individual young person's own needs and not treating them as a homogeneous group. An evaluation of the scheme focused on the fact that:

key issues affecting a young person's outlook on life – family problems, low self-confidence and self-worth, entrenched world views – were tackled first through one-to-one support and family work if a young person was willing. Once outlooks had shifted, subsequent interventions could then help to facilitate change in other areas, for example education and employment.

(Dickens and Woodfield, 2004, p. 4)

Young people, for their part, reported that the scheme had had a positive impact on their confidence, self esteem, motivation and emotional health. An example of this fact was presented by Cathy Havell in her conference report to the Safe in the City charity in which she stressed that 'what had worked for him [a homeless young person] was not a roof but a plan – and crucially, that it was his own plan, and not one imposed on him by well meaning professionals' (Havell, 2001, p. 12). For Havell, the key to the success of this kind of initiative depends on young people being given the opportunity to directly influence policy and practice (Havell, 2001, p. 12). In addition, the management of a young person's future needs to be left under their individual control whenever possible.

Safe Moves

The second example focuses on an initiative promoted by the Minister for Homelessness, Jeff Rooker, in 2004. Initially established as an 18-month pilot scheme launched collaboratively by the Foyer Federation and Connexions in 2002, Safe Moves aimed to identify young people aged between 13 and 19 who were at risk of becoming homeless and help them to avoid this.

Intervention measures included life skills training, family/inter-generational mediation and support, peer mentoring and help to move into supported accommodation if required (Quilgars *et al.*, 2004). The scheme also assisted young people to access education, training and employment where appropriate. According to the evaluation report: 'In two fifths of cases, Safe Moves was helping to maintain, or had helped maintain, a young person in the parental home. A small number of young people had also returned to the parental home or had been helped to move to a more secure setting' (Quilgars *et al.*, 2004, p. x). Again, a central feature of the initiative was to place young people themselves at the centre of any risk reduction strategy development. The scheme operated at two levels – resolution of the first order of risk (that is, being ejected from home) and then exploring other opportunities for improving the young person's life chances. There also existed an element of peer support and guidance where young people were empowered to work together to understand their collective and personal circumstances.

The policy responses cited here are centrally concerned with countering the risk of homelessness through a variety of preventative, educational, mediating and empowering strategies. Through increasing a person's positive perception of him- or herself, making them more confident and aware of choices available, young people facing such a risk can be supported in taking greater control of their lives.

4.2 Young mothers

Becoming a mother at the age of 14 was nothing unusual historically and remains commonplace in many parts of the world, though this is changing as young women's educational expectations change. In contemporary Britain it is, however, generally seen as a risk – to the young woman's education and life opportunities and also to a wider society in which early motherhood is seen as one of a range of indicators of bad outcomes for children. Young mothers themselves generally see it as less of a problem, attributing the difficulties they face more to the lack of resources, support and services (such as education) geared to their circumstances than to motherhood in itself (Phoenix, 1991; The Prince's Trust, 2001). These failures do pose risks to young mothers:

Education, employment and training is not going to be an option for young mums until the groundwork for surviving in the world is done prior to dropping them into it. Juggling home/work and family is a major task for most people, just imagine doing it alone, with no support and without the weapons needed for survival!

(Lesley Barnett, teenage pregnancy reintegration officer, Wolverhampton, quoted in YWCA, undated)

According to the Social Exclusion Unit's *Report on Teenage Pregnancy* (1999b), there were 90,000 teenage conceptions in the UK in 1997, which was twice the rate in Germany, three times the rate in France and six times that of Holland. The problem lies in the fact that most young women who become mothers in their teenage years are generally already suffering deprivation. According to Coles (2004, p. 94): 'those who became pregnant were shown to be spatially clustered in areas of social housing, deprivation and poverty and high levels of parental unemployment'. Quite often it can be a case of 'history repeating itself', as teenage mothers are, in many instances, children of teenage parents themselves.

In response to the prevailing situation, the government aims to reduce the number of teenage conceptions by half by 2010 (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999b) and, in support of this, several policy initiatives have been introduced. Crucially, it is also important to note that such initiatives are in a significant sense guided by the need to reduce the 'benefits bills'.



Teenage parenthood is seen as a risk to a young woman's life opportunities

Sure Start Plus

In 1999 the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was launched, and as part of this Sure Start Plus was introduced in England in April 2001 to provide advice, guidance and support on a one-to-one basis to pregnant young women and young mothers. Working in collaboration with other government initiatives such as Connexions, Health Action Zones and Supported Housing, the key

aims were to improve the levels of health experienced by teenage mothers and their children and to decrease the risk of young mothers becoming socially excluded and raising their children in poverty.

Sure Start Plus Pilot Programme

Sure Start Plus advisers give:

- Personal, confidential advice and support to pregnant teenagers
- Specially tailored support to young parents to help with: healthcare during and after pregnancy, parenting skills and support, practical housing and benefit assistance, access to education, training, work and childcare
- Group and one-to-one sessions
- Advice on contraception for teenage mothers and fathers

The various projects running in Sure Start Plus areas offer practical help such as support with breast-feeding, cooking on a budget, managing money, relationship advice, confidence building and help to stop smoking during and after pregnancy.

(Teenage Pregnancy Unit, undated)

The evidence from the national evaluation of Sure Start Plus indicates that the programme is having a positive effect on teenage mothers, improving their physical and emotional wellbeing and personal relationships, and giving them a more positive outlook for the future, which, in turn, will benefit the life chances of their children.

The evaluation concludes that Sure Start Plus projects have 'increased support for emotional issues, improved the young woman's family relationships including reducing the incidence of domestic violence; improved accommodation situations; and increased educational participation for those aged under 16 years' (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, undated). Here, government funding has been specifically used to promote community based work, much of it situated in deprived areas. The young women and their children were helped to access health, social care and educational resources, with the emphasis on self help as well as mutual support and providing opportunities for young women to meet.

Key points

- Good practice in working with young people to overcome risks uses a partnership approach, directly involving the users of services in its planning and delivery.
- Good practice takes a holistic approach, rather than dealing with different risks in isolation, which draws on the support of families and communities.
- Such intervention can be used to tackle a diversity of risky circumstances.

Conclusion

Risk is a complex topic and ideas about what constitutes risk in the lives of young people are influenced by a variety of social, personal, political and economic factors. In a very real sense risk can be viewed as a 'contested concept'; that is, a concept that is seen in different ways by different people and for different reasons. For example, it could be argued that new categories of risk are invented to permit a greater level of surveillance over the lives of young people.

If this is the case, then a rights based agenda for working with young people has the potential to challenge expert views and preoccupations. By involving young people in risk assessment activities, power relations are significantly changed. In providing a legal framework that encourages rights based work, the exploration of their views is formally sanctioned.

Yet as Helen Roberts (2003) argues, we also have to consider both the 'risks and benefits' associated with encouraging the participation of young people in risk assessment processes. In particular, she points to the major risk of developing consultation activities that are eventually seen to be largely 'cosmetic', for such activities 'may well be seen as a disbenefit, drawing on one of the few resources over which children and young people exercise some direct control – namely, their time' (Roberts, 2003, p. 32).

A key point to emerge from the discussion is the way in which risk is assessed. It is reasonable to argue that governments attempt to assert control over the risk agenda when they feel under pressure from the media or public opinion. On such occasions quick, strong and decisive action is viewed as necessary to prevent situations running out of control. In these circumstances the actions of young people are viewed as risky and problematic in that they are seen as a threat to public order. Such debates tend to focus on socio-political concerns about the need to better control the actions and activities of the young. Specifically though, as Jock Young (1999) argues, such a risk agenda has been underpinned by government

concerns to produce 'correct' forms of both behaviour and speech in the public domain. In effect, in these instances the concern is to police 'moral boundaries' that are seen to be under threat.

Yet it is also clear that young people frequently make conscious choices to engage in risk-taking activity because of their personal or collective inclinations and circumstances. In this they are no different from adults, though they may well lack the resources that adults have to carry it off. A 13-year-old may decide to have a child for much the same reasons as a 30-year-old, the difference being that she is much less likely to have the income to make motherhood anything but a struggle, and the resources (such as a network of other mothers to share childcare) to support her.

Thus helping young people to understand better the risks they take is not enough; it has to be accompanied by support systems and resources. The difference is that, when young people are given encouragement to take part in choosing what these are and how they will be delivered, they are far more likely to use them and gain benefit from them. What is being advocated here is a different approach to risk assessment and service delivery that places young people at the centre of the process. Public and political responses to risk that are seen as harsh and punitive are likely to be greeted with hostility and resentment on the part of young people. Risk analysis that 'problematizes' and stereotypes is likely to fail to respond to the real needs of particular individuals and groups. Risk-taking behaviour that leaves young people exposed and isolated is likely to foster a sense of resentment and increase the chances of alienation and exclusion.

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