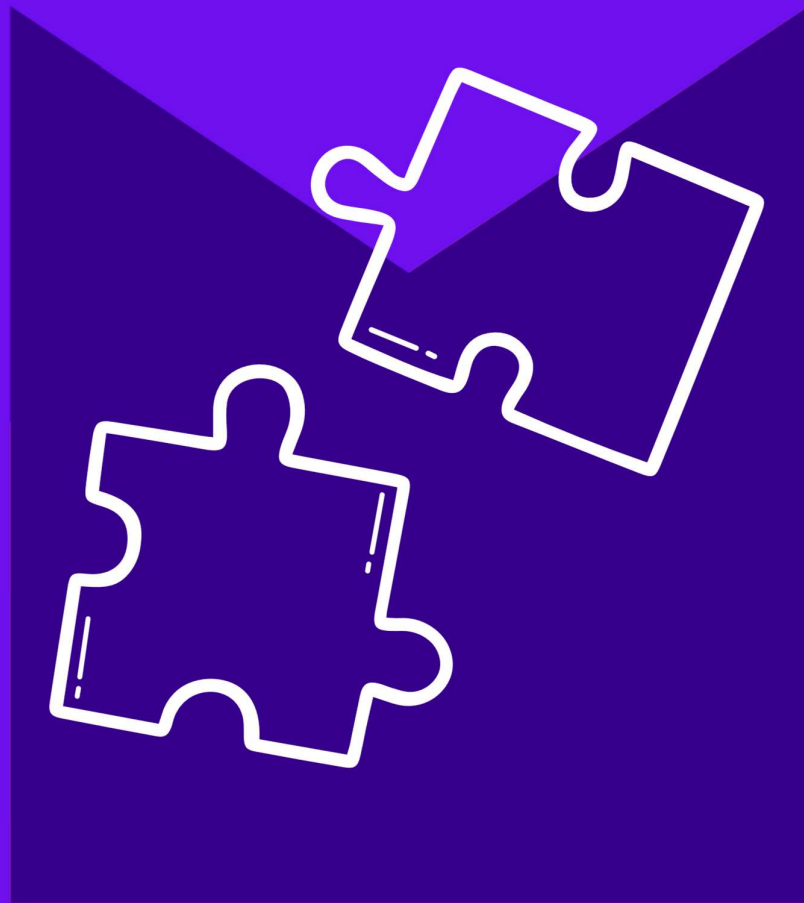


# YOUNG PARENTS CONNECT OVERVIEW





At my lowest I thought, right, this is it. I can't face another day... if I hadn't found these mums, I wouldn't be here today."

– Young Parent - YPC evaluation 2024



This document is designed for Commissioners and Service Leads who are interested in learning more about the programme, underlying principles and evidence of the effectiveness of Young Parents Connect (YPC) groups.

This should be read in conjunction with the “Young Parents Connect – Theory behind the development” which goes into more detail about the underlying evidence supporting the approach that Mental Health Foundation (MHF) has adopted.

## What is Young Parents Connect (YPC)

YPC is an evidence-informed preventative weekly peer support group for young parents (aged 25 and under) and their children that runs for between 12-16 weeks.

The groups are predominantly for mothers, although, as a result of feedback from the groups themselves, fathers are also warmly welcomed.

Parents can attend with their children, during pregnancy or on their own if, for instance, children are attending nursery or school.

The YPC programme aims to support young parents by strengthening their mental health, building social connections, and fostering confidence and resilience through peer support groups. We know that this can then improve outcomes for their children.



“It's really nice to give the voice to the mums because it's more about them. ‘What do you want to share? How do you feel about yourself?’. Developing the young mums rather than just the children.”

– Early Help Facilitator, YPC Evaluation 2024

Targeted outcomes for young parents include:

- Increased understanding of parental mental health and provision of coping strategies post group intervention
- Enhanced parental confidence and skills in promoting healthy parent-infant attachment
- Increased social connection and resilience

- Increased likelihood of help-seeking where additional support may be needed
- Increased confidence and self-esteem leading to increase in future aspirations.

These can all support better mental health.

“I can look after my daughter perfectly, I am at ease within myself, I am calmer, I don't feel suicidal anymore, I can manage my own challenging behaviours better. I have come leaps and bounds from where I was before. I wouldn't be here from where I was before. I am able to speak up for support now, which I wasn't able to do then. I will ask for support if I need it”

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

- Enhanced life changes by increasing aspirations for the future e.g., enabling greater access to employment and improving educational opportunities, including access to financial help for career development and childcare

YPC utilises a manual with a series of topics, framed around a 3-block structure. Different topics are discussed at each session, and the manual can be used flexibly to adapt to the needs of the group. The sessions use activities and skilled facilitation to create a safe space enabling social connection, trust and discussions, to address key risk factors and common concerns that challenge young parents.

Detailed session guides are included in the Connect Programme Manual.

## Why do we need to support Young Parents specifically

In 2022, 14.5% of births in England and Wales were to young people aged 16-24 (Office for National Statistics, 2022) and statistics clearly show the increased risk of poor mental health for young mothers.

Mothers aged 16-24 are much more likely to experience poor mental health compared with older mothers. Teenage mothers are 2 times more likely to experience postnatal depression and have higher rates of poor mental health for up to three years after birth (Swift et al, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

“I know what I was like before I came to the groups and I was on the verge of suicide. Coming here meeting people, making friends, the children have people to play with and they have support. It's not nice when you feel like you're on your own as a parent. It's one of the worst things about being a parent.

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

A high proportion of young mothers have experienced a range of factors in their lives that can impact their mental health, such as poverty, stigma and social isolation<sup>2,3,4</sup>; many are at risk of exploitation, homelessness, substance misuse, domestic abuse and other vulnerabilities, while care-experienced young people are over-represented in teenage pregnancy statistics.

Young people who grew up in the care system are around 2.5 times more likely to become pregnant compared with other teenagers (Barnardos 2022)<sup>5</sup>


*“I feel judgement about being a young parent. Being out and about I always felt judged being a young mum. An appointment with your child, feel they're looking down on you. But when you come to this*

*group, we are all the same age, all going through the same thing. I'm not by myself, I'm not the only one that's judged." – Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

Teenage mothers are at greater risk of poor outcomes including poverty and are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties <sup>6</sup>

Evidence indicates that 35% of participants who reported having an emotional or mental health difficulty did not seek any formal or informal help. Thematic analysis revealed that stigmatising beliefs, difficulty identifying or expressing concerns, a preference for self-reliance, and difficulty accessing help were prominent barrier themes among responders. <sup>7</sup>

Due to feelings of stigma and social isolation traditional services for mothers may not be able to engage young parents. Many young parents require time and a bespoke approach to develop trust with those who can help. As such, young parents are less likely to access local community offers which may be available to older parents.



“Support groups are really important for mums, being with people that are similar age to them and probably been through similar experiences, it just makes them feel more comfortable in valuing who they are as young people as well as being a mum. It just seems to open the door for them.”

– *Early Help Facilitator, YPC Video 2024*

A recent report titled “The Maternal Mental Health Experiences of Young Mothers” published in October 2023 and written by Maternal Mental Health Coalition (MMHA) and Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) calls for “Family Hubs to be established across all local authority areas and should include specific services and information for young parents.”

### **It is not just the young parents that face poorer outcomes, it can also affect their children**

These challenges faced by young mothers can have adverse impacts on their children. For example, they are less likely to gain achievements in higher education and employment. They also face poorer health outcomes and are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties. <sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

### **Poor outcomes for young mothers and their children are not inevitable.**

Research indicates that, rather than the young age of the mother, it may be the variable range of factors they face which can lead to the adverse outcomes for them and their children. Young mums are significantly more likely to experience shame, stigma, and judgement, which can put their mental health at risk and at the same time act as a considerable barrier to accessing support.

Many risk factors that are common to young mothers can be mediated by non-stigmatising support, which offers a viable route for them to seek timely information and support for themselves and their children <sup>12</sup>. MHF’s YPC model is just one of those ways to support young parents.

# What are the underlying elements and principles of YPC

Key elements of the programme are:

- **Creation of a safe and trusted place for open conversations** through careful facilitation, peer support and honest conversations
- **Peer support** opportunities through facilitated activities and group discussions.
- **Psychoeducation** and **information** to improve understanding of mental health and provide tools and techniques to enable parents to support their own mental health
- **Bonding opportunities** through play for mothers and babies/children to enhance parenting skills and confidence and enhance parent-child relationship.
- **Facilitating a Support and information network** for young mothers to engage with opportunities for self-development, including training or employment.

There are 5 underlying therapeutic approaches that underpin the delivery and ethos of the programme:

- Person-centred approach
- Peer support
- Expressive therapies
- Psychoeducation
- Mentalisation – ‘tuning in’ to baby

This document provides a high-level overview of these, but further details can be found in “Theoretical Underpinnings of YPC model”

## Person-centred approaches



“I could talk to the facilitators about anything that was on my mind and they would listen to me. No one judged you there, it was safe.”

– *Young mother, aged 23.*

The person-centred approach is based on the theory and philosophy of Dr Carl Rogers. It is a non-directive approach, trusting in the innate tendency of all human beings to find fulfilment of their personal potentials.

It has the following elements at the core:

- **Curiosity:** genuinely exploring the feelings, thoughts and ideas of each person
- **Empathic:** aiming to gain a deep understanding of their experiences and feelings
- **Genuine:** being “real” and authentic
- **Accepting:** being non-judgemental in all aspects of delivery

“It made me realise that I am important. I am not just a mum, I am not just a partner, I am me”

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

## Peer support

“I have been coming for a couple of weeks. I didn’t attend any groups before coming to this one. My child is 1 and I got referred by Social Services because I didn’t want to go out, they said I need to go to groups like this. This is the only [group] I actually come to. The first time I didn’t want to come, I just came for half an hour and now I just stay. You learn a lot because people are going through the same situation because someone here is going through the same thing and it helps you a lot. Before, I just felt on my own, I would just stay in. I am liking the group so far and I will keep coming.”

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

Peer support generally occurs between individuals who have shared experiences or circumstances, and who are therefore more likely to influence each other’s beliefs and values.

It has the following elements:

- **Strengths-based:** Noticing and commenting on parents’ strengths & existing coping skills.
- **Non-directive:** Values the similarities and differences in parent’s views and feelings.
- **Inclusive:** Notices and builds on parents’ shared experiences and challenges
- **Boundaried:** Creates awareness of boundaries within and beyond the group, including confidentiality and safeguarding responsibilities.

Benefits to this approach include those for parents but there are also numerous benefits to services by adopting a peer support approach including:

- Reducing the barriers for young parents to access additional services/support/education
- Lowering the cost per family in providing weekly support/visits
- Gaining local knowledge of issues, including feedback from young mothers
- Building a more connected community of families
- Increasing self-referrals to relevant services

## Expressive therapies

Expressive approaches can be used to enhance young parents’ ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an authentic non-verbal way. However, they can also be used to facilitate or complement discussions, enabling free verbal communication. They are particularly useful in the treatment of mood disorders and also enhance healthy attachment.<sup>13,14</sup>

Expressive therapies are highly action-oriented and participatory. Their primary function is to enable self-understanding through active engagement. Simple forms of expressive approaches can include gluing or painting and Young Parents Connect uses expressive therapies in the following ways:

- **Playful:** Games, ice breakers and activities which promote peer bonding and facilitates parents' comfortability with sharing experiences and discussing ideas.
- **Creativity:** Using varied methods of crafting, games, messy play, art and music to engage the group and enable open discussion.
- **Non-directive activities:** Taking a relaxed approach to activities, allowing families the space to engage in their own way, in their own time.
- **Positivity:** Using encouragement and positive reinforcement to build parents' confidence and increase engagement over time.

The process of self-expression through various creative means can be cathartic, offering an emotional release through an ability to explore and process difficult feelings and experiences. Through this process, parents are more able to foster creativity in their problem-solving and further build on partially developed ideas and solutions.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, creative approaches bring about a relaxation response which mimics self-soothing behaviours from childhood. Expressing ourselves artistically promotes a calmer state within the group which is associated with feelings of wellness.

“...they usually have an activity to do, and they have a talking activity, while we are eating. We sometimes talk about emotional wellbeing, and the different companies we can get help from...Some activities they do plan, but other times it will be a last-minute thing and it will turn into a discussion.”

– *Young Parent – YPC Interim Evaluation 2022*

## Psychoeducation

“I am at ease within myself, I am calmer, I don't feel suicidal anymore, I can manage my own challenging behaviours better. I have come leaps and bounds from where I was before.”

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

Psychoeducation enables the group to explore effective coping skills and gain emotional awareness. This can bring about positive change regarding unhelpful or negative emotional and behavioural patterns.<sup>16</sup>

The approach adopted for Young Parents Connect is:

- **Interactive:** Rather than using an instructive teaching method, discussions are interactive – enabling parents to find their own solutions and share knowledge.
- **Light-touch:** Games, quizzes and activities offer a non-threatening format to explore challenging or new topics. There are also a number of digital packs for young parents on specific topics to support them to explore tools and techniques further
- **Adaptable:** Being flexible in how information is presented, including content, style and format of delivery.
- **Visual:** Using drawings, crafting and other visual methods of representing ideas is a useful aid to discussions and enhances engagement with the topic.
- **Hopeful:** Rounding off discussions with a focus on helpful take-home strategies, coping skills and tools.

## Mentalisation

“It got to the point of like every time she was crying, I thought it was because of me because she’s not doing enough things like that it’s not the case really is it because she’s having a temper tantrum but (laughs) that’s how I used to think.”

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

“It has made me have a better bond with my daughter and I realised that the way I was being with her was because of myself and I was projecting it into her a little bit. I have learnt techniques here to help me manage that better”

– *Young Parent, YPC Evaluation 2024*

Mentalisation is the ability to understand and reflect on the mental states of ourselves and others. Mothers who have experienced trauma, loss or deprivation can often experience difficulties with reflecting on and understanding the feelings that give rise to their baby’s interactions. <sup>17</sup>

The ability to ‘mentalise’ – to tune in to, reflect upon and understand thoughts and feelings – is important within mother-baby relationships. This reflection enhances mothers’ emotional availability and therefore increases baby’s emotional security and their capacity to explore the world around them. <sup>18,19</sup>

Activities and discussions can help parents to ‘tune in’ to their own and their baby’s feelings without feeling pressure or judgement. YPC group enables this approach through:

- **Creating space:** Providing a safe, playful environment that is facilitative of parent-baby play and bonding.
- **Reflective environment:** Role modelling a curious stance, reflecting on babies’ thoughts and feelings.
- **Being Non-judgemental:** Explicitly promoting focus on positive interactions and moments of mum-baby connectedness.
- **Tuning in:** Role modelling attentive and responsive communication with mothers and babies.

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