

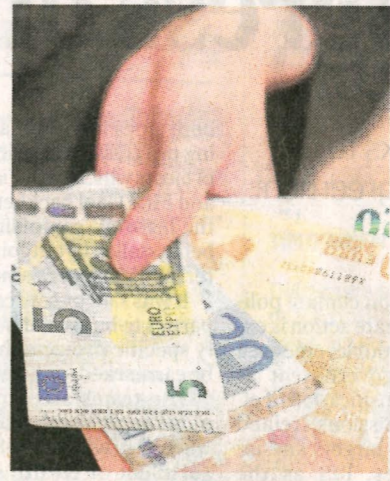
NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF BEING A YOUNG PARENT

Sheila Wayman
Health & Family



Michael Lowry is now openly embraced as the power broker of the incoming government. It's a national indignity

Fintan O'Toole
Opinion & Analysis



YOUR MONEY

A RENT-FREE JANUARY ... AND OTHER NEW YEAR BUDGET BENEFITS

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THE IRISH TIMES
Tuesday, January 7, 2025

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Joanne Ryan of the Teen Parent Support Programme; Jodie Reeves with her two daughters Jayda-Cathann (3) and Rylee (1); Courtney Cronin with her sons Dawson (2) and William (four months); and Aileen Harrold of the Teen Parent Support Programme, at the Southside Child and Family Centre. Photograph: Brian Arthur

Young parents: 'A lot of them would suffer social anxiety and isolation'



Sheila Wayman

The Young Parents Support Programme helps young people through pregnancy, with caring for their babies, and continuing in education or finding suitable housing

She then completed a degree in social care, at what is now Munster Technological University in Cork, helped on the way by funding for childcare costs.

Support from the TPSP allowed her to focus on education and her baby daughter "without having the constant worry of financial burdens at such a young age", she says. It "helped me navigate the complexities of being a young parent and ultimately led me to where I am today" – a professional project worker for that same organisation and advocating for other young parents. Now aged 32, she and her daughter's father have since married and also have a three-year-old son.

The TPSP marked its 25th anniversary at the end of 2024 by launching its new, expanding, identity as the Young Parents Support Programme (YPSP), which reflects a change in needs over time.

When the organisation's first pilot project was established in Limerick at the end of 1999, there were 3,135 births to parents under the age of 20 years in Ireland that year. By 2023, the annual number had dropped dramatically to just 705.

However, the complexity of cases has increased. Nearly three quarters of those referred in 2023 had severe mental health issues, reports the programme's national manager, Samantha Dunne. Many of the young parents are coping with experiences such as having been in care, domestic abuse, homelessness and substance misuse.

In response, many of the TPSP projects, which had grown to 11 in total, began to work with parents in their early 20s and for longer. Backing from the European Social Fund Plus has enabled an ongoing transition to a co-funded, Government and EU programme that supports parents up to 24 years of age and for the first 1,000 days of a child's life, rather than just the first two years.

The beauty of the programme, says Dunne, is that it is voluntary and people can self-refer. She is employed by Treoir, the national information service for unmarried parents, and co-ordinates a YPSP staff of 60 who operate from within family services embedded in the community, such as Barnardos.

The absence of involvement by Tusla, the State's Child and Family Agency, reduces anxiety, she suggests, around availing of the programme. "Young parents can walk in off the street or call the project."

Staff work one to one with them, as well as offering the opportunity to attend group education and peer support. They also advocate for them with other services, assisting in necessary paperwork.

The main focus is on antenatal health, parenthood education, mental health and formal education. Self-development is another vital aspect for the young parents.

"A lot of them would suffer social anxiety and isolation," she says and project workers do home visits as required. Deferring education would traditionally have been a choice made by a lot of young parents. Funding to support them to remain in, or return to, formal education comes from Tusla's school completion programme, Dunne says, and the TPSP has made sure this is targeted at individuals' needs.

For one young mother living in a caravan in rural Co Tipperary with her mother and disabled brother, the programme paid for a taxi to bring her to school.

Others benefit from fees being paid for an access programme, or for grinds, or for a laptop. "The biggest impact of the TPSP, and the YPSP now in its infancy, has been the reduction in the numbers of young parents' children going into the care system,"



Having my own house, I'm able to put them into a routine and no one is complaining about them being loud or anything like that – Courtney Cronin

says Dunne. So far the European funding has enabled three projects to employ extra workers for the expanded criteria and four new sites are being established, which will stretch the programme's reach to 19 counties.

Support for fathers

Involvement of fathers in the TPSP has not changed that much over 25 years. In 2023, "we had 509 young mothers and only 47 dads".

However, she stresses, while the men generally do not like to register, they often engage informally with the mothers in peer support groups and day activities. But if they do not have money, say, for tools to start an apprenticeship, or for driving lessons, they can get support by formally engaging.

The latest UNCRC [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child] report recommends greater engagement, particularly with young fathers, so we at Treoir are trying to respond to that need," adds Dunne. They are currently assessing how best to do that.

The first time Jodie Reeves became pregnant, she was living in an overcrowded house in Limerick and became homeless when her daughter, Jayda-Cathann, was around six months.

"It was a two-bedroom house and there was at least eight or nine of us," she says. "There was no actual room for us to move around or do anything for the child's future. So not enough room to sleep and not enough beds or anything else."

Out of desperation, she went to the Garda station on Henry Street, Limerick and slept overnight with her daughter. The next day, she contacted the TPSP staff with whom she had registered during her pregnancy and they helped her get into temporary accommodation.

Many moves later, including time spent in Rathkeale, 30km from Limerick, and at least three months in the Limerick City Hotel, she got to the house she can call home about two years ago. She was initially paying HAP (Housing Assistance Payment) to a private landlord who recently sold the property to the local authority.

Last August, the 24-year-old had a second daughter, Rylee – named by her brother Lee, a professional boxer and contestant in the 2023 season of the BBC reality series "Survivor UK".

Both children are "flying it", she says



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'I want to do more course work while the kids are in school, or even in the evening,' Jodie Reeves did a beauty course last year and this year she is looking at training in social care

proudly. Their father does not live with them, but the couple are co-parenting.

Thanks to the TPSP, she says, her eldest girl is in pre-school and the youngest in creche at the Southside Child and Family Centre.

The project workers also "make sure that you, yourself, get time to relax". They link in regularly to meet up and have a chat. Early motherhood can be tough and it was great to be able "to sit down and have a little rant" with them, she says with a laugh.

Reeves, who was 15 when her mother Cathy died by suicide in 2015, is optimistic about the future. "I want to do more course work while the kids are in school, or even in the evening." She did a beauty course last year and this year she is looking at training in social care. She worked as a shop assistant for three years before the birth of her first child.

Through the parents' programme in Limerick, Reeves became friendly with fellow participant Courtney Cronin (22), mother to two boys – Dawson (two) and baby William. "It is good because I didn't really have any friends that were mothers," says Cronin. "Me and Jodie are best friends now."

Cronin became homeless and was "couch surfing" during her first pregnancy at age 19. The maternity hospital referred her to the programme and project workers helped her fight for accommodation. "Two weeks before I had the baby, I got a house in Raheen. I wasn't due [to give birth] for another two months."

Cronin then moved into a local authority house in Limerick city last March, before William arrived five months ago. "Having my own house, I'm able to put them into a routine and no one is complaining about them being loud or anything like that."

Although it is a new build, there is mould and dampness, she reports, which is "destroying" their stuff. "I'm not going to complain because I love the house."

However, the project workers are trying to help her get something done about its condition.

Cronin says she was "very surprised" by motherhood first time round. "You know when you're young you always think 'oh I'm gonna be this kind of mother, I'm gonna do this'. But then reality hits. It takes a village to raise a child, it really does."

She was so glad she had the support of the programme team, knowing she could ring them at any time with a query such as "the child is not settling, what do you think I should do?" and they would always have an answer.

Lived experience

As a YPSP project worker in Cork, McCarthy always says her job is the easiest part of her life. "It's something that I don't have to learn." Yes, there is constant training for various aspects, "but when it comes to that lived experience, you can't really compare. I suppose that's kind of what helps me build the connection between the parents that I see on a daily basis."

She knows they are dealing with various services looking for support, but when they meet a project worker such as her, who is able to say "I've been there", it makes all the difference. She is intent on "trying to give them that, extra bit of support to build their confidence".

McCarthy knows her own early start to parenthood is not forgotten by those who knew her then. Her daughter is in the same school now.

"I go back and I'm going in to parent-teacher meetings, and I'm still the one that... 'oh my God, sure, I remember you'... But I'm proud of it all."