



MARIE STOPES
INTERNATIONAL

ABORTION & young women

issues of
confidentiality



Marie Stopes International

Marie Stopes International (MSI) is the UK's leading provider of abortion services outside the NHS, seeing one third of all cases in England and Wales each year.

The organisation currently has nine centres in Bristol, Essex, Leeds London, Maidstone, Manchester and Reading and has been a pioneering force in improving women's access to, and choices in, abortion treatment and care over the past three decades.

As a registered charity and not for profit organisation, surplus funds from MSI's UK operations are devoted either to improving services in the UK or in support of a Global Partnership working through 47 programmes in 39 countries across the world, providing sexual and reproductive healthcare services to approximately 4.3 million people every year.

MSI is the organisation behind www.likeitis.org, a web site aimed at 11 to 15 year olds, providing information on all aspects of sexual development and health and relationships. MSI has also teamed up with the youth magazine 'Sugar' to provide sex and relationship advice for teenage girls.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the following:

The young women who took the time to complete the questionnaire; the teams at the MSI Centres who spent time distributing the questionnaire; the team at Education for Choice; Roger Ingham, Centre for Sexual Health Research, University of Southampton and Samantha Guy, MSI, for their input into the report.

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introduction

In 2004, a total of 185,415 abortions were carried out for residents of England and Wales. Of these, two percent (3,756) were among women aged 15 and under.¹

The recent and highly publicised case of a 14 year old who had a termination without her mother's knowledge has highlighted the issue of teenage abortion and that of parental notification and consent for termination of pregnancy.

Current guidance^{2,3,4} for health professionals protects the confidentiality of young women seeking abortion. Evidence suggests that concerns about confidentiality are barriers to young people accessing sexual health services.⁵

For a female under the age of 16, clinicians judge whether or not they deem her competent to consent to treatment using the Fraser Guidelines (see Box A, page 2) set down following the 1985 judgement 'Gillick vs West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority'. Whilst the Guidelines centre on contraception, they also extend to the issue of abortion. If a young woman is considered 'Gillick competent' to consent for a termination, she can legally proceed without the knowledge of her parents. Under current guidance, health professionals also have an obligation to encourage a young person to talk to a parent or carer, but they should not override her wishes.

Recent media interest has produced a number of newspaper

articles focusing on "secret abortions for under-16s"⁶ and the rights of parents to know about their daughters' actions.⁷ Judicial review proceedings have commenced which challenge current guidelines regarding access to confidential services for women under the age of 16. Yet previous research into parental involvement with teenagers undergoing abortion in Britain suggests that generally, young women do inform their parents of their decision.⁸

Anecdotal evidence from team members at the Marie Stopes International (MSI) network of centres across England suggests that the vast majority of young women do tell an adult and are supported in the abortion process. MSI therefore decided to undertake this research to gain a better understanding of who young women have told when they present for an abortion.

This publication presents the findings of research among young women aged between 13 and 15 years attending MSI Centres across England for termination of pregnancy (see Box B, page 2). The study seeks to contribute to the limited knowledge base about parental involvement among young women seeking abortion, by asking respondents about issues of both parental notification and consent.

The vast majority of young women do tell an adult and are supported in the abortion process.

1. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, 2005. *Abortion Statistics, England and Wales 2004*. Department of Health.

2. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, 2004. *Best practice guidance for doctors and other health professionals on the provision of advice and treatment to young people under 16 on contraception, sexual and reproductive health*. Department of Health.

Fraser Guidelines

A young person is competent to consent to treatment if:

- the young person understands the health professional's advice
- the health professional cannot persuade the young person to inform his or her parent(s) or allow the doctor to inform the parent(s) that he or she is seeking contraceptive advice
- the young person is very likely to begin or continue having intercourse with or without contraceptive treatment
- the young person's physical or mental health or both are likely to suffer unless he or she receives contraceptive advice or treatment
- the young person's best interests require the health professional to give contraceptive advice, treatment or both without parental consent.

Extract from Department of Health guidance for health professionals on the provision of contraceptive services to under 16s.

What is Marie Stopes International's policy on treating under 16s?

MSI supports the rights of all young people under 16 to confidential advice and treatment from health professionals about sexual health, contraception and relationships. MSI adheres to the Department of Health's best practice guidelines for health professionals on the provision of advice and treatment to young people under 16.

In addition to these guidelines:

- all clients under the age of 16 years who contact MSI must initially be booked to see a counsellor
- clients should be encouraged to be accompanied by a parent or guardian if possible. If a client chooses not to involve a parent or guardian treatment can still continue
- appropriate training is given to all team members who come into contact with clients under the age of 16
- a named nurse is allocated to the client for the duration of her admission and treatment.

3. GENERAL MEDICAL COUNCIL, 2004. *Confidentiality: protecting and providing information*. General Medical Council.

4. ROYAL COLLEGE OF OBSTETRICIANS and GYNAECOLOGISTS (RCOG), 2004. *The care of women requesting induced abortion: evidence based clinical guideline number 7*. RCOG.

objectives

The objectives of the research were:

- to determine who young women tell about their planned abortion
- to assess parents' reactions to the news of the pregnancy and planned abortion
- to explore the reasons why some young women do not tell their parents about their planned abortion
- to find out what young women think about compulsory parental notification for abortion among under 16s.

methodology

Young women aged under 16 attending MSI Centres for termination of pregnancy were provided with written information on the study and were asked to give their informed consent to take part. Young women in the care of the local authority and wards of court were excluded from the study.

Paper questionnaires were completed by the young women who agreed to take part during their time at the centre. The following centres took part in the research:

- Essex
- Leeds
- Central London
- South London
- West London
- Maidstone
- Manchester
- Reading.

The questionnaire consisted of a combination of tick boxes and open-ended questions. The young women

5. STONE, N. and INGHAM, R.,2003. When and why do young people in the United Kingdom first use sexual health services? *Perspectives on sexual and reproductive health*,35 (3) May/June 2003.

6. DAILY MAIL, 2004.*Secret abortions for under-16s. Daily Mail*, 30 July 2004.

taking part were asked whom they had told about their planned abortion and to describe parents' reactions to their situation. Where relevant, they were also asked to give their reasons for not informing their parent(s). All respondents were asked to give their opinion as to whether they agree that parental consent should be obtained before proceeding with an abortion for anyone under 16 years.

The young women were not asked to specify the ages of those individuals they lived with, those they told, and those that accompanied them to the centre on the day they completed the survey.

The research was carried out between 18 April and 17 July 2005.

key findings

Who do young women confide in?

- 71% of under 16s taking part in the study had told their mother and/or father
- an additional eight percent had told another parental figure such as boyfriend's mother, aunt etc, bringing the total who had informed a parental figure to 79%
- a further 21% told a friend or sister. Although their ages were not given, some of these people may have been adults, indicating that the actual proportion of young women who confide in an adult is likely to be higher than the 79% stated
- only five percent of respondents who did not live with their father had told him of the planned abortion

7. DAILY MAIL, 2004. *A mother's right*. *Daily Mail*, 13 May 2004.

8. LEE, E., 2004. Young women, pregnancy and abortion law in Britain: a discussion of law 'in practice'. *International Journal of Law, Policy and Family*, 18, 283-304.

- 94% of respondents were accompanied to the centre on the day that they completed the questionnaire.

How do parents react?

- the most frequently reported reaction from mothers to the news of the pregnancy (51%) was 'supportive'
- 83% of mothers were supportive of the decision to terminate.

Why do young women not confide in parents?

- the majority of those respondents who did not tell their mother, did not want to disappoint her or to worry her
- common reasons young women gave for not telling their fathers included: being afraid that he would become angry; that they did not live with him, and that they did not want to disappoint him.

What would young women do if they had to obtain parental consent?

- for the majority of respondents, this simply was not an issue, as they had informed their parents of the situation
- of those who had not, many said they would have to tell their parent(s) and others said they would tell another adult. One said she would run away.

Do young women support a change in the law to require parental consent for abortion?

- almost seven out of 10 respondents (68%) do not support a change in the law; 21% would support a change; and 11% did not know if they would or would not support a legal change.

results

One hundred and fourteen young adults were informed about the study and invited to take part. A total of 108 completed questionnaires were included for analysis.

Table 1: Profile of respondents (n=108)

NB: Due to rounding, percentages in tables throughout may not total 100%

Age	%
13	4
14	32
15	64
Total	100

Gestation*	%
≤ nine weeks	62
10 to 12 weeks	13
13 to 18 weeks	16
19 to 23 weeks	4
Not recorded	6
Total	101

Lives with	%
Mother and father	42
Mother only	40
Father only	2
Mother and stepfather**	10
Father and stepmother**	2
Other	4
Total	100

National Health Service (NHS) or private client*	%
NHS	83
Private	12
Not recorded	5
Total	100

Ethnic origin	%
White	78
Black (Caribbean)	5
Black (African)	5
Black (Other)	2
Chinese	1
South Asian	0
Other ethnic group	7
Not recorded	3
Total	101

* Data provided by team members in MSI Centres.

** The options in the questionnaire were stepfather/mother's partner and stepmother/father's partner.

Who do young women live with?

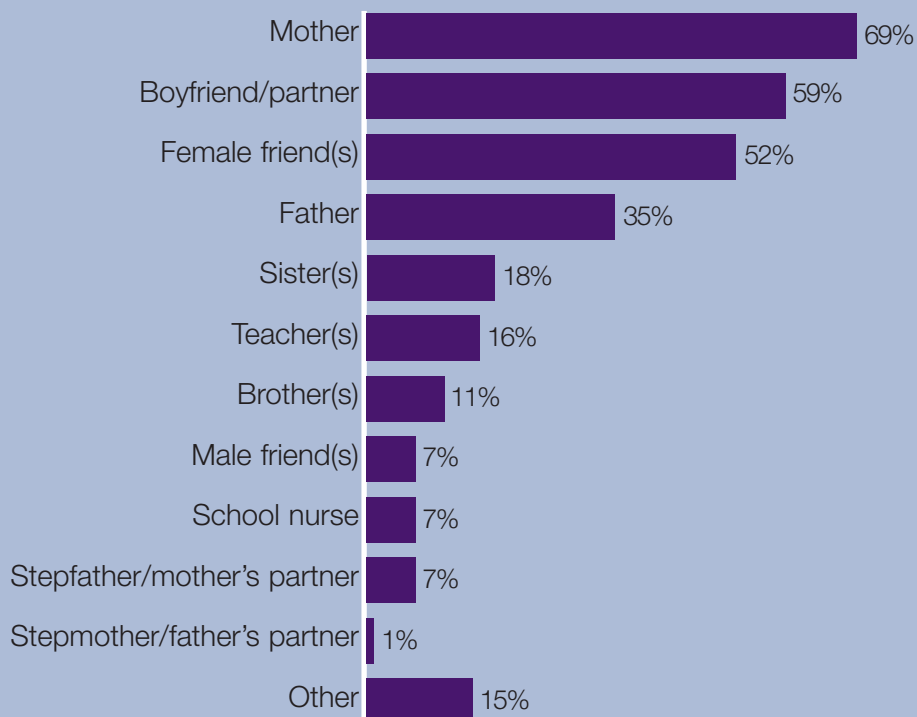
Young women were asked to tick boxes of all those they lived with, in order to build a picture of their household situation. The findings are shown in Table 1. Five individuals (four percent) reported living with someone other than a parent or step parent.

Who do young women tell?

Respondents were asked to mark tick boxes of those, other than healthcare professionals, they had told about their planned termination. Multiple responses were possible. Figure 1 illustrates the responses to this question.

Figure 1: Those who young women told about their planned abortion

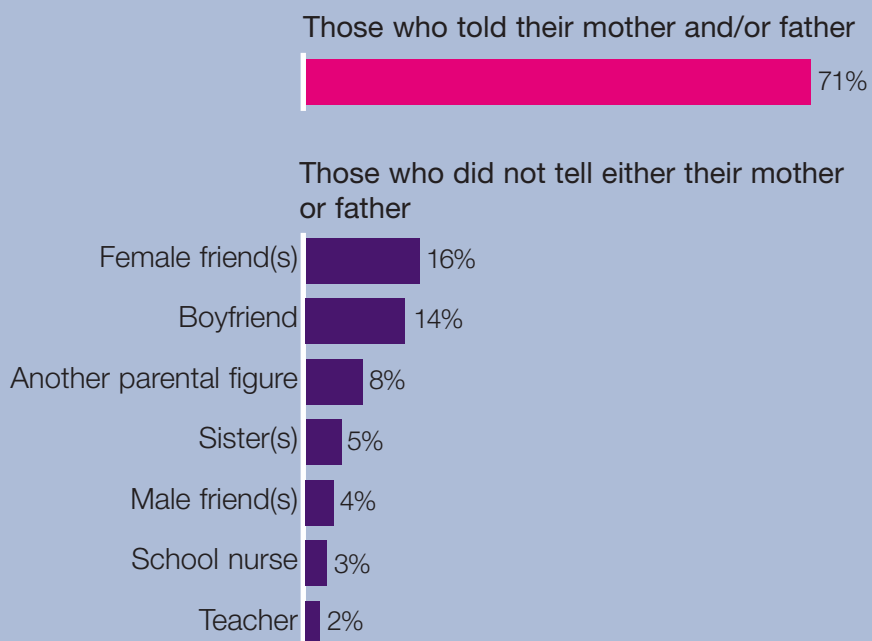
(Categories are not mutually exclusive)



Overall, the vast majority, 99%, of respondents had told someone about their situation. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who reported telling a parental figure and also shows who respondents reported they had told if they did not report telling a parent.

Figure 2: Those who young women told about their planned abortion: parental notification or other

(Categories are not mutually exclusive)



Only two percent of respondents had told their father, but not their mother, giving a total of 71% of respondents who had told either their mother, father or both. Those respondents who reported that they lived with their father were more likely to report that they told him than those who did not live with him (Chi-squared test $p < 0.01$). Half of the respondents who reported that they told their sister(s) did not report whether or not they lived with their sister(s).

In addition to the 71% who had told their mother and/or father, a further eight percent had told another parental figure, such as their boyfriend's mother, an aunt or a friend's mother. Nineteen percent of respondents did not report telling an adult. Only one respondent, aged 15 years, reported telling only healthcare professionals.

Among all respondents, 16% reported they had told a teacher and seven percent reported they had told a school nurse.

Twenty one percent of respondents had only told one person. Those who had told a parent were more likely to have told only one person than those who did not (Chi-squared test $p < 0.01$). The mean and median number of people told was three.

Fifty nine percent of respondents reported that they had told their boyfriend, of whom only five percent ($n=three$) reported that they had told only their boyfriend.

Accompaniment during visit

Ninety four percent of respondents reported that someone had come with them to the centre on the day they completed the questionnaire. Two respondents did not answer and four percent ($n=four$), all aged 15 years, reported that they were not accompanied. Of the four respondents who were unaccompanied only one had told her mother, two had told only their boyfriend and one had told only a teacher.

Parents' reactions to the pregnancy and planned abortion

Respondents were asked to tick boxes regarding the reaction of their mothers and fathers to the news of the pregnancy and to the planned abortion. Multiple responses were allowed. The most frequently reported reaction, of mothers who were told, to the news of the pregnancy was "supportive" (51%).

Mothers who were told about the planned abortion displayed a wider range of reactions to the pregnancy than to the termination. As can be seen in Figure 4, the proportion of mothers who were reported to be supportive regarding the planned abortion rose to 83%.

As previously mentioned, the vast majority of fathers who were informed lived with the young woman and her mother. The reported reactions of parents when both were told were very similar, so reactions of fathers are not shown.

Figure 3: Reactions of mothers who were told, to the news of the pregnancy (n=67)

(NB: multiple responses were allowed)

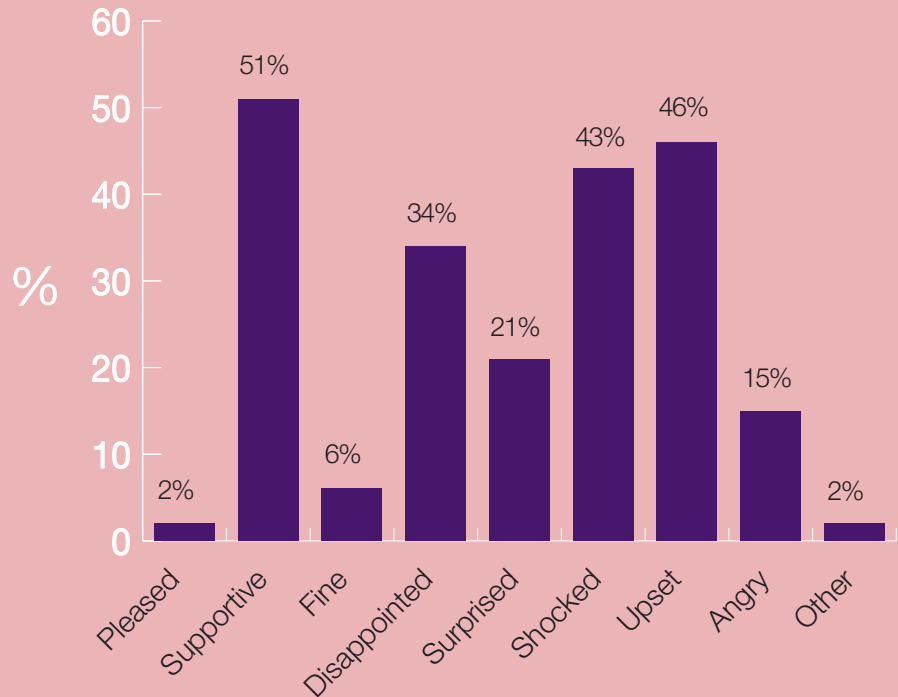
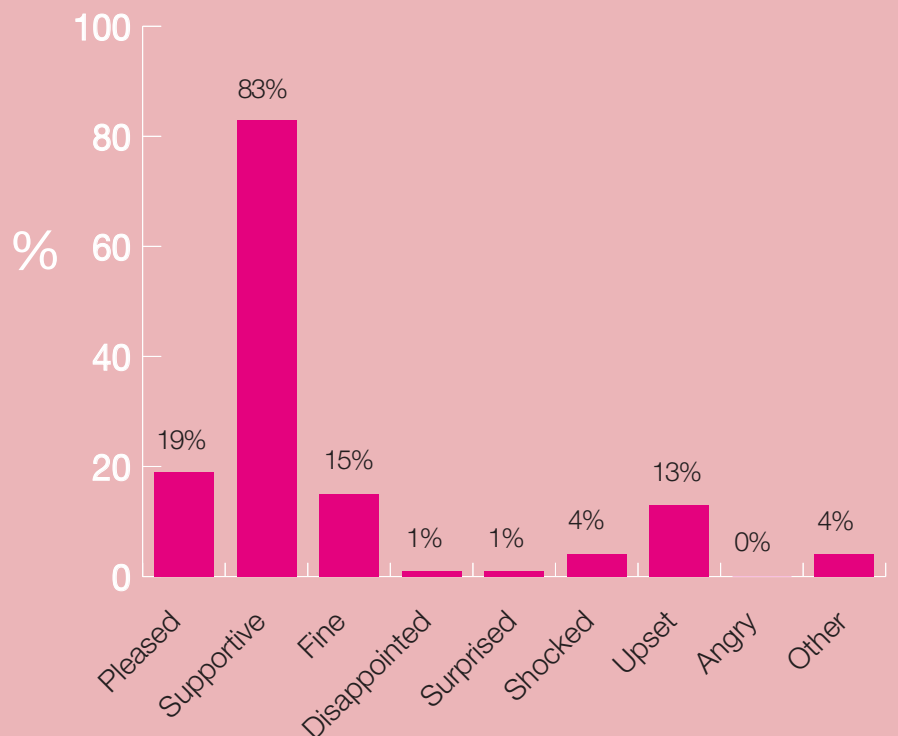


Figure 4: Reactions of mothers who were told, to the news of the planned abortion (n=69)

(NB: multiple responses were allowed)



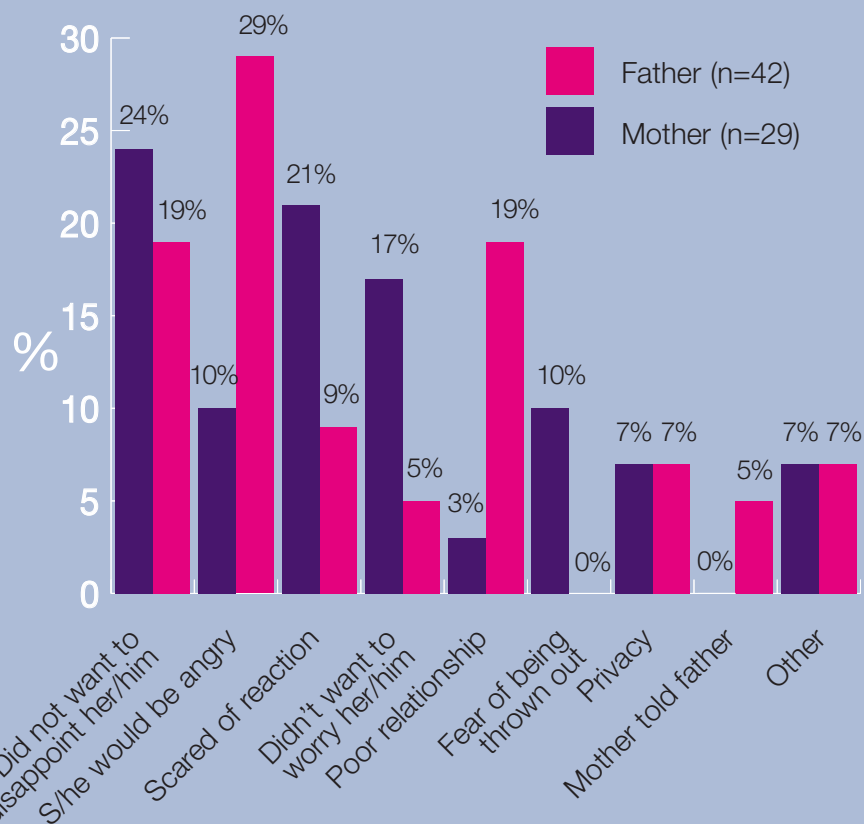
Why do young women choose not to tell their parents about their abortion?

Open ended information gathered from the questionnaires yielded insight into why young women chose not to inform their parents about their intention to have a termination. *The question asked was: If you didn't tell your mother/stepmother or father/stepfather, why was this?*

Twenty nine young women responded with reasons why they had not told their mother and 42 reported why they had not told their father. Responses were retrospectively coded into mutually exclusive categories and are shown in Figure 5.

The most common reason respondents gave for not telling their mother was that they did not want to disappoint her. Almost one fifth of those respondents who did not tell their mother did not do so because they did not want to cause their mother undue worry. The most common reason given for not telling their father was that he would be angry, though as can be seen in Figure 5, almost one fifth of respondents did not want to disappoint him and another fifth did not have a close relationship with him.

Figure 5: Reasons young women gave for not telling either their mother or father



"I didn't feel they would understand, I thought they would be disappointed and ashamed."

"He would go mental."

"He would kill me."

"My mum said she would kick me out of the house if I ever got pregnant."

"I was afraid of what she might do or how she would react."

"Because I only wanted my mum to know."

"He doesn't live with me and there would be no point, [we] don't really talk."

"Because I don't live with my father and I'm not close to him."

"I don't want her to worry."

"Because this would cause complications at home, and stress and much arguing."

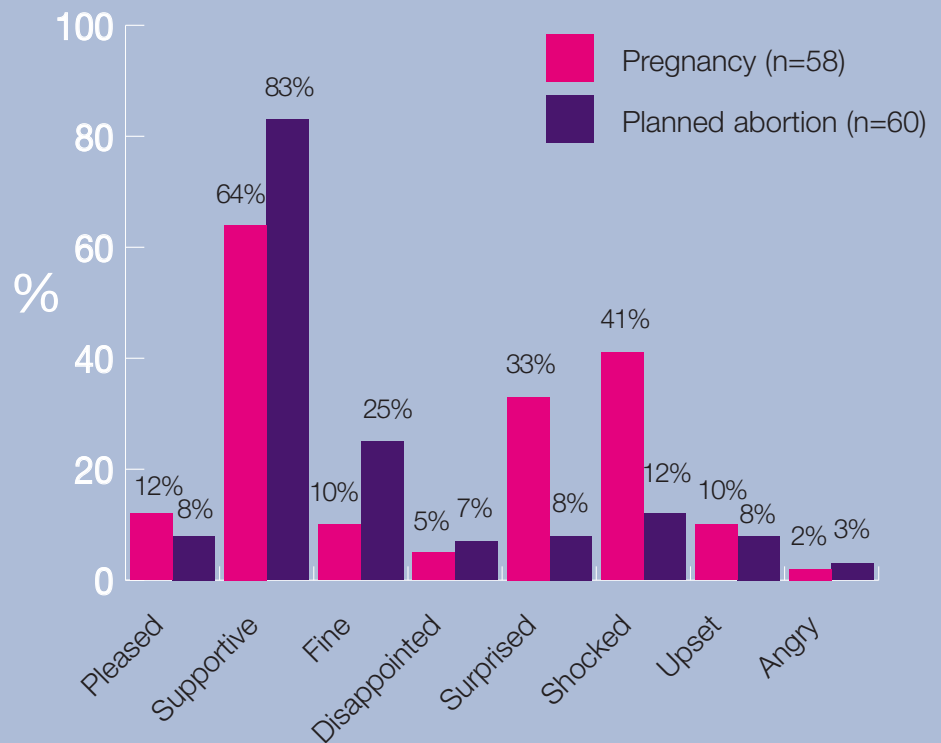
Friends' reactions

Just over half (52%) of all young adults told a female friend(s) and seven percent told a male friend(s) about their planned abortion. As might be expected, friends were supportive on hearing the news of both the pregnancy (64%) and the termination (83%).

Figure 6 Illustrates friends' reported reactions.

Figure 6: Reactions of friends who were told, to the news of the pregnancy and planned abortion

(NB: multiple responses were allowed)



Why do young women choose not to tell their friends?

Thirty two respondents gave reasons for not telling friends. These reasons were largely focussed around privacy with half of respondents giving this as a reason. Young women reported wanting to keep the abortion to themselves and feared their friends might tell others or 'gossip' about them behind their backs. Forty percent of these respondents did not tell their friends as they were afraid that they would tell others. These fears were compounded by worries about what others would think of them.

"They wouldn't keep it a secret and they would tell everyone else."

"Because I was scared of what they would think also I didn't want it to ever get spread around school or anything."

Implications of a legal requirement for parental consent for abortion

The following question was asked to all young women in the study: *if you had not been able to have an abortion unless you had your parents' permission, what would you have done?*

Twenty one respondents did not answer this question, of whom 18 had told their mother and/or father. The responses were retrospectively coded and are shown in Table 2.

Nine percent of respondents reported that they would continue the pregnancy with two of these specifying they would not be able to keep a child and would therefore give it up for adoption. Although a small number reported that they would go to the doctor, these responses were clearly worded that they wanted their doctor's advice and help.

Among those respondents who reported that they had not told a parent, twelve reported that they would tell a parent if required to by law, four reported that they would have told another adult whilst four did not know. One said that she would harm herself or the foetus, but would never tell her mother. One respondent reported that she would wait until she was sixteen to have the procedure.

Table 2: Action young women anticipated taking if required to obtain parental consent before having an abortion (n=87)

Action	%
Tell parents	42
Tell another adult	10
Continue the pregnancy	9
Go to doctor for help/advice	6
Could not imagine not telling parent(s)	6
Run away	2
Don't know	16
Other	8
Total	99

"I would have kept the baby and given it up for adoption."

"Ask my GP the options I had."

"I would tell my parents and ask for permission as they are very understanding."

"Told my parents because I don't like keeping secrets from them and I'd rather them keep me company."

I'm not sure as my parents would support me whatever therefore I've never really thought about that."

"I would have to tell them but I wouldn't want to."

"Told a close adult friend or an aunt or uncle."

"Found someone else who is over 16."

"[I would] most probably run away from home."

"[I would have] still had an abortion."

"... I would have waited three weeks until I'm 16."

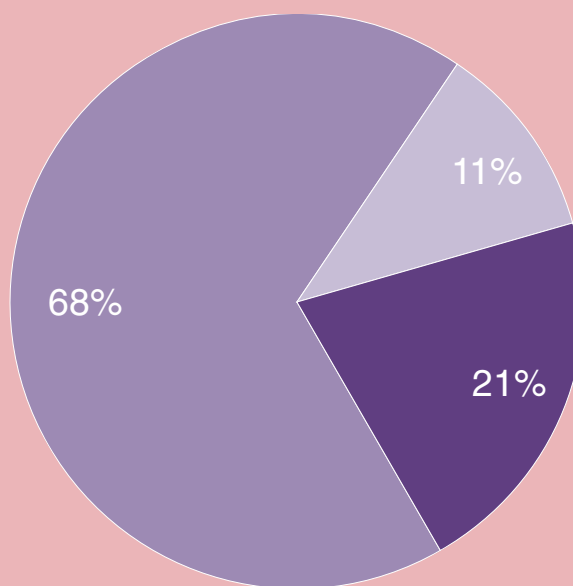
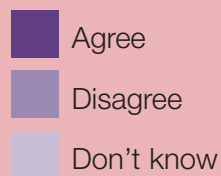
Young women's views on changes to existing legislation

Finally, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a potential change in the law that would make parental consent for abortion compulsory for those under the age of 16 years.

Figure 7 illustrates the response to this question.

Five percent of respondents who reported that they agreed with compulsory parental consent had not told a parent. Ten of the twelve respondents who answered "Don't know" had told their parent(s).

Figure 7: Respondents' reactions to the statement, "Young women under the age of 16 should not be able to have an abortion without their parents' consent."



discussion

The sample differs from the national population⁹ in the following ways:

- in 2004, 66% of families with dependent children (age under 16, 16-18 and in full time education and never married) living in them were married couple families. Fifty four percent of respondents in the present study live with both a male and female parent
- the present study contains a higher proportion of respondents living with a mother or father only (42%) than the national average of lone parent families (25%).

Previous research has suggested that young women seek help and support from their parent(s).⁸ Similarly, the majority of respondents in this study had told a parental figure about their intention to have a termination of pregnancy, namely mother, father or friends' mother. For the vast majority of respondents who told their parent(s), this support was reported to be provided.

A study conducted by Lee et al (2004) found almost one third of young women aged 17 and under did not tell their parent(s) about their pregnancy.¹⁰ This is a slightly higher proportion than that found in this study, which could be explained by the lower age of MSI's respondents.

Of those who chose not to tell their mother about their pregnancy, a large proportion did so because they wanted to protect her. They

believed that they were acting in a responsible way, so as to avoid causing their mother distress.

Whilst a number of respondents reported that they did not tell their father as he would be angry, almost one fifth did not tell him because they "do not live with him" or are not "close to him". Of these, a number went on to say that there would be no point or need to tell him, suggesting that they wanted to spare him unnecessary upset and worry. Again, this suggests that young women are acting in a responsible way when deciding who to involve in the abortion process.

While the reaction of parents to news of the pregnancy varied widely, the most common response was one of support for their daughters.

Previous research, which asked parents of teenagers what they thought their reaction to news of an unexpected pregnancy would be, found that, despite initial shock and disappointment, most believed they would be supportive of their daughters or sons.¹¹ MSI's present research lends support to these findings, with the reactions of parents to the pregnancy, as reported by their daughters, being a combination of support, upset and disappointment, later replaced by broad support for the planned abortion. Other research has indicated that interactions with their parents regarding abortion decision making have proved helpful to young people.⁸ However, it should be noted that it is likely

While the reaction of parents to news of the pregnancy varied widely, the most common response was one of support for their daughters.

9. OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS (ONS), 2005. *Focus on families*. ONS.

14 10. LEE, E., CLEMENTS, S., INGHAM, R. and STONE, N., 2004. *A matter of choice? Explaining variation in teenage abortion and motherhood*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

that when young women believe their parents to be against abortion, they do not tell them of their situation.

For young women who did tell their parent(s), the question which asked respondents what they would do if they were required to tell a parent about their pregnancy proved difficult to answer, as many found it hard to imagine not involving their parent(s). However, of those who did not report telling a parent, the most common response was that had they been required by law to do so, they would have told a parent. This suggests that young people may benefit from better communication with their parents. The Department for Education and Skills recognises the challenge in helping young people to develop the communication skills necessary to discuss such issues.¹²

Organisations such as Education for Choice are supporting Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programmes by working in schools and with parents to enable young people to make informed choices about unplanned pregnancy and abortion.

Teachers and/or school nurses were informed by 23% of respondents, suggesting that they are an important source of support and advice to young women. The Guidelines for sex and relationship education recommend that teachers can give additional information on where to obtain confidential services to pupils, if required. However, little is known about whether teachers are confident and able to do this. Further research is required to assess the support required by teachers and school nurses who are faced with such disclosures.

Forty one percent of respondents did not report telling their “boyfriend/partner” about their planned abortion. This finding may appear exaggerated as some respondents may not have considered the male they became pregnant by to be their “boyfriend/partner”. Despite this possibility, the indication is that young men may not be informed that they are responsible for a pregnancy. Sex and relationship education in schools needs to give greater emphasis to ensuring that young men are aware that when they have unprotected sex, their partner is at risk of pregnancy, regardless of whether they are aware of a previous pregnancy.

What is clear from the research is that young women who do not tell other people about their planned abortion want their privacy to be protected. They do not want people they personally choose not to inform to be made aware of their situation. This finding suggests that abortion is still highly stigmatised.

The findings from this study are not representative due to the small sample size. The data do not tell us the chronology of when different people were informed, nor the extent to which others encouraged respondents to tell their parent(s). More research is needed to explore the experiences of young people finding out about a pregnancy and deciding whether or not to have an abortion, along with the use made of support mechanisms known and available to them, both during the decision making process and beyond.

The questionnaire did not ask the age of friends or siblings, so it is not possible to know whether they were a similar age to the young

It is essential that young women who feel that they cannot tell a parent are protected and receive support from elsewhere. For these few young women, professionals in both the health and education sectors are often well placed to provide necessary support.

11. TABBERER, S., HALL, C., PRENDERGAST, S. and WEBSTER, A., 2000. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. *Teenage pregnancy and choice. Abortion or motherhood: influences on the decision.*

12. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT, 2000. *Sex and relationship education guidance.* Department for Education and Employment.

woman who completed the questionnaire. Friends and siblings have not been included in the categories of parental figure or adult. It is possible that the proportion of respondents who told an adult, such as an older sister, is higher than we have reported.

Also, the research relies on young women's perceptions of the attitudes of parents and friends. Whilst some research does exist on parental response to a young person's decision to terminate a

pregnancy, more could be done to assess the extent to which perceptions of reactions to pregnancy and abortion are true, and might form the basis for educational programmes focusing on enhancing communication around matters of sexual and reproductive health. Improved communication about contraception, pregnancy, abortion, and the rights of young people under the age of 16 to receive and access free and confidential healthcare is vital.

conclusion

In the UK, people under the age of 16 have the same right to confidential health services as all other individuals. The majority of the participants in this study have chosen to involve a parent or other adult. Parents who are told are generally supportive to their daughters over news of the pregnancy and the decision to terminate. However, a minority of those seeking abortion did not tell their parent(s) or other adult(s) close to them, usually because they did not want to worry or disappoint them. It is essential that young women who feel that they cannot tell a parent are protected and receive support from elsewhere. For these few young women, professionals in both the health and education sectors are often well placed to provide necessary support. However, increased efforts need

to focus on ensuring that these professionals are provided with the support and skills to assist young people.

MSI is committed to providing the highest quality of care for all its clients. Our healthcare professionals working with clients under the age of 16 are aware of, and trained to address, the particular issues and needs of young women seeking abortion. These team members are provided with the skills and support required in order to provide these young people with information and support in making an informed decision.

The majority of young women who took part in this study did not support a move towards mandatory parental consent for abortion, despite having told a parent themselves.

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comment

Young people will be reassured to know that they are likely to receive good support from their parents in the event of an unintended pregnancy. Comprehensive sex and relationships education should help to reinforce this message and provide young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to talk to professionals and parents.

Health professionals are eager to support young people to talk to their parents. It will come as no surprise to them that most parents are supportive. Sadly there are exceptions. The law must ensure that there is no obstacle to young people seeking advice and treatment from a professional in confidence especially where parental support will not be available.

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