

Citation:

Green, Liz (2007) *Imaging families: a research project, September 2006-February 2007*.  
Report of project with Coram Family Parents' Centre, funded by Children's Workforce  
Development Council (CWDC)

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# Coram Family

## IMAGING FAMILIES A Research Project

September 2006 - February 2007

### **Background and Aims:**

The image of young parents in the UK is generally negative, and it has been shown through Sure Start that young parents are very difficult to engage in projects and services. Research has demonstrated that the home situation can have a negative effect on a baby's development and on family cohesion, physical and mental health.

This research, funded by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), aims to explore how the work at Coram Family Parents' Centre, Young Parents' Project has engaged young people, using their own visual representations. The project is essentially a photographic project enabling young parents at the Coram to give their impressions of services provided using camera and sound. The pictures and commentary aim to provide insight into how to work with difficult to engage young parents. This would include what they value in a worker and how practice can be improved to take this into account. Additionally, it aims to uncover how practice can be improved to assist young parents to provide positive outcomes for themselves and their children.

It was hoped that the pictures and commentary would provide insight into how to work with difficult to engage young parents. This would include what they value in a worker and how practice can be improved to take this into account. Additionally, how practice can be improved to assist young parents to provide positive outcomes for themselves and their children.

The questions the young parents were to be asked included:

1. How do you feel society views you as a young parent?
2. How would you describe your relationship with the workers at Coram Young Parents Project?
3. How has Coram Family provided you with support?
4. How do you feel such photographic and text work can help others to understand your experiences?

## **Participants:**

### ***Those involved in bidding and coordination of the project included:***

#### **Lucy Draper, Head of Service, Coram Parents' Centre:**

Lucy has been involved in early childhood and parents' education for many years. She has been involved in a number of different research projects – most recently on outcomes in fostering, on attachment in adoption and on the development of music therapy in a community-based setting. In Coram Parents' Centre, and in partnership with Charities Evaluation Service, she has recently been involved in completing a project evaluating outcomes from Coram's parenting groups and drop-in services.

#### **Paul Halliday, Coordinator of MA Photography and Urban Cultures, Goldsmiths College:**

Paul has been a research fellow in the Centre for Urban and Community Research for 7 years. His work has included work for Channel 4 TV, media consultancy for LB Greenwich Social Services Department including audience research and the production of training and information films. He was also based at the British Refugee Council as a Media Advisor working with refugee organisations. He is the Co-ordinator of the MA in Photography and Urban Cultures at Goldsmiths.

#### **Liz Green, Coordinator of MA in Social Work, Goldsmiths College:**

Liz was a social worker and manager for 16 years, has been a lecturer in social work for 15 years. She is presently involved with research with service users and the production of video materials for use on the MA and BA in Social Work at Goldsmiths as well as a pan Europe parenting project funded by the EEC.

#### **Fiona Peters, PhD student, Goldsmiths College:**

Fiona, a trained researcher and producer, was formally based at the BBC. The title of her thesis is 'The experiences of multiple heritage care leavers using visual images'.

### ***Those involved in running of the project included:***

#### **Matthew Stinson, Education Coordinator, Coram Young Parents' Project:**

Matthew has a background in secondary education having taught both in the US and the UK, as well as working in a family support capacity before joining Coram two years ago.

#### **Trina Lynskey, MA student, Goldsmiths College:**

Trina has a background in Audio Visual Media and has spent the last 3 years in Tokyo working in the English education sector first as a teacher and then a curriculum planning coordinator. Trina is currently studying for an MA in Culture, Globalisation and the City.

**Maria Kelly, MA student, Goldsmiths College:**

Maria has a background in Fine Art, specializing in photography. For the past four years she has worked as an arts workshop leader and teaching assistant, working with children with special educational needs. Maria is currently studying for an MA in Photography and Urban Cultures.

**Ami Yesufu, Coordinator, Project Subway, Headliners:**

Ami is a trained and experienced journalist having worked in a number of settings in TV, radio and print including BBC2, Radio 1 and Radio 4. Ami has been coordinating the Introduction to Journalism course for Project Subway since 2006, and she is the tutor for the course at Coram.

***The seven young mothers involved in the Imaging Families Project included:***

**Helen Bekele  
Kirsty Williams  
Emma Hannington  
Jade Willis-Sawh  
Alechha Begum  
Sherelle Jones  
Ashley Francis**

**The logistics of the project:**

The research was undertaken at Coram with a group of 7 young women who were enrolled in an Introduction to Journalism course with the Young Parent's Project. The project took place over a five week period for two to three hours each week starting in November 2006. The limited time available meant that the each session had to be tightly structured and goal driven. It was important that the project was successful both in terms of producing research material and in providing a meaningful and productive experience for the participants.

The workshops followed a linear progression, beginning with an introduction to some photographic techniques and concepts, and concluding with a peer critique of the completed projects.

The initial meeting with the young people included workers from Coram and Goldsmiths and was followed by a workshop on camera techniques and practical experience in the field. This workshop was conducted mostly by Paul Halliday and focussed on the camera and ways of formulating and framing a photograph before it is taken. The participants spent some time familiarising themselves with their new digital cameras. At this stage there was then a focus group to learn about the young people's attitudes to services. The introduction of some basic concepts of photography, for example the use of composition to produce a particular emphasis, and some of the vocabulary of photography and visual criticism, such as 'editing', 'narrative' or 'audience', enabled the participants to produce work and discuss

the concepts behind their individual projects as we moved through the different stages of the project.

The following week the mentors (Goldsmiths MA students) presented some short photography projects of their own to the young people. These presentations were designed to generate discussion about themes and ways of approaching a subject. It was also an ice breaking opportunity, and a chance to show the participants that they were happy to take comments and criticism of their own work.

Participants were then asked to fill in a worksheet containing questions about how and why they use Coram. Using the worksheet questions prompted discussion about possible subjects and themes for photographic projects and ideas were noted down for photographing them. Each participant then photographed a 'mini project' within Coram, using some of the strategies and techniques discussed. At the end of the session, each participant had decided on a theme or subject they were going to explore, and were asked to return the following week with about thirty images to work with in the session.

Over the next three weeks the young people used cameras provided by the research project to take visual images of their lives and their connection to Coram independently. In small groups they met weekly with a mentor (MA Goldsmiths Student) who gave support and advice.

On week three the prints were made of each participant's work up to that point, and they were asked to edit their images by selecting ten that they felt best communicated their ideas or themes. The young people were encouraged to work as artists and photographers often do, by finding a space editing their work by sticking the prints on the wall. They were then able to step back and view their selection, and make changes where necessary. At the end of the session, participants were asked to discuss their editing choices with the group.

Week four took place at Goldsmiths College, and was focussed on learning digital editing techniques. Participants learned some basic editing skills using Adobe Photoshop, such as changing contrast and brightness, and cropping. The young people then chose and edited their photographs for presentation. Each young person chose to create a photo narrative of their experiences which was initially incorporated with sound interviews onto DVD for the presentation to an independent audience.

On the final week participants captioned their photographs using post-it notes, and were interviewed by Liz Green & Fiona Peters about the project. The captioning was guided by a list of questions the participants were asked to consider. The questions were about content and editing decisions, and also about what the participants would like their images to communicate to a viewer. At the end of this session, the participants chose one of these questions to ask one another. The session was finished with a discussion where participants were asked to feed back about the project, and consider areas which they may want to develop at a later date.

## **What were we able to learn from the research about Coram?**

The young people made some clear points about what they valued and appreciated from Coram through the photographs and their recordings.

### **Some quotes from the young parents:**

*Going to Coram just gets me in with people like me and prepares me for college next year. I get on with Matt. He really helps me out. He helped me get a college course. I don't feel intimidated by Matt 'coz I'm a young parent.*

*When I actually come to Coram, it was OK and there were other mothers about my own age*

*They (Coram) got me involved with my housing officer and I was put in a hostel. They helped me with benefits and I started a few courses so was coming every day. On Fridays I come to the drop-in where we can all have something to eat and talk. It's a really relaxing place.*

*I like the fact that they don't make me feel like I can't be a good mother. They don't make me feel inadequate.*

*You get a lot of help and support especially if you ask for it. I love the support I get here. Whatever help I ask for whether it's to do with the courses or outside Coram – they help me here.*

From these quotes, and from the images selected by a number of the young people, we inferred the following points of strength that Coram offers to their service users:

- The parents appreciated the accessible, informal and non-judgemental approach that Coram staff have towards the young people
- An opportunity to mix with other young mothers in a relaxed environment
- Support from Coram staff in accessing other services including education, housing and benefits
- Support in parenting issues including provision of on-site crèches
- The provision of travel expenses for attending classes

## **What was learned from the Independent Audience Review?**

The initial showing to the independent audience was extremely useful since participants were asked to complete a questionnaire giving feedback on several areas:

1. What did you understand from the research?
  - The struggles which the young women had been through, yet a clear level of hope and perseverance
  - The young women's feelings about society
  - How well they felt supported by Coram and how much they value the training opportunities provided
  - The young people's sense of value about the opportunity to learn new things
  - That the project allowed them to show a small part of their lives to others
  - That the young people have ambitions and aspirations
  
2. Do you consider that the presentation achieved the aims of the project?
  - All observers considered that the aims had been met
  - Some would have liked more guidance and more information about the pictures
  - It was considered powerful to hear the parents own voices and not have someone speaking for them
  
3. Do you have any thoughts about the presentation of the work and how it could be improved?
  - The photos should be shown for longer and be bigger
  - That the boards are read first to get an idea of the project
  - Would have liked the themes and issues drawn out more either by text or sound
  - Need to get the right balance between image and text/voice over
  - The preparation for the presentation should be improved

### **Changes to be implemented to future presentations:**

The above feedback was taken on board and the research group decided that since this was a small scale project, then incorporating sound to an acceptable standard for the regional and national presentation was not possible. It was therefore decided that the final presentation would incorporate 3 aspects which are the outputs from the research project.

1. The boards showing the process of the research project
2. The PowerPoint presentation of photo essays which should be running on small screen or lap top
3. 8 enlarged photos which encapsulated the project

We learned that in order for an audience to fully understand the project then the boards need to be viewed first with an audience then viewing the enlarged photos and PowerPoint. The technical problems experienced in the initial presentation with the PowerPoint and sound equipment need to be minimised for future presentation.

### **Further evaluation revealed the following:**

The young women:

- Enjoyed taking part in a group project which encouraged good communication, commitment and dedication.
- Were positive about the digital photography skills learned and practiced on the project. Their knowledge and skills in this field varied but all felt they had progressed and would be able to apply this in the studies and social lives.
- Learned how to edit digital photographs on a computer
- Were positive about being able to take part in the presentation and give feedback to participants

The mentors, Coram and Goldsmiths Staff learned the following:

- How confident the young people are about what they want
- How confident the young women are about their ability to be good parents
- How they value the assistance and guidance they get from Coram
- The benefits of working across organisation and disciplines and the inherent difficulties such as communication and time.