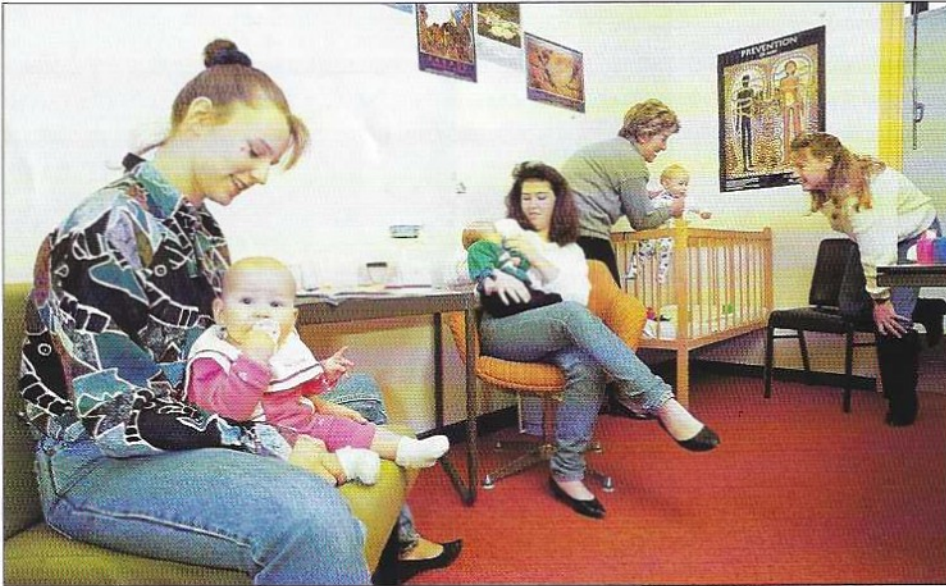


Baby talk

— HAWKER COLLEGE, ACT



The Mothers' Room: a place to spend some quiet time with baby.

A cot, a change mat, a nappy bin, a wash basin, tea and coffee making facilities and soft toys — certainly not an average room in a typical high school. It's called the "Mothers' Room", a rare but highly successful initiative coordinated by Information Management teacher Siska Reichel and Art teacher Fran Lammas.

In the past, pregnant teenagers were often forced out, or opted out of schooling. Hawker College is trying to change this situation and give these girls the support they need.

A supportive environment

"Our policy is that all students be provided with the opportunity to succeed. If students become pregnant while at college, and choose to keep their children, I see it as our responsibility to support them in that decision in terms of continuing their education," states Principal Sandra Lambert. "If someone becomes pregnant, we deal with that. And one of the ways we do that is by encouraging them to continue their education."

"The Mothers' Room is a place where mothers can spend some quiet time with their child, a place to breastfeed in privacy in an inviting and comfortable atmosphere," says Siska. "But more importantly it has shown girls that it's possible to finish their education if they become pregnant."

Siska is well aware of the differing opinions on the subject, but says it's time to be open about the problem. "Teenage pregnancy is not advertised.

There is very little discussion about how to deal with it in schools. I can only say that Hawker College has approached the issue in a very practical way."

School — the best option

"It's been very hard, but it's not impossible. You just have to keep pushing yourself," says Anne, a student at Hawker and mother of a three month old son. "After I had the baby I thought this is the end, I can't go back to school, I'll be staying home changing nappies for the rest of my life. Deciding to come back was the best thing I've done, my self confidence and self esteem are so much stronger."

Anne's story is typical of many teenage mothers. She still lives at home with her mother, and as no childcare facility was available and her mother works, staying at home seemed the only solution. But unlike others, Anne has been given a choice. As a part time student, Anne, with the help of students and teachers, has been bringing her baby to college since he was three weeks old. Anne has recently found permanent day care and is pleased that she will be able to take on more subjects and complete the Year 12 Certificate this year.

"Information Management is an employment-oriented course in computer application skills and other administrative tasks," explains Siska. "To gain acceptable levels of speed and accuracy students need to attend regularly. I suggested to the mothers that they could bring their babies to college if there was a genuine need."

One of the unused sick rooms was then converted into the Mothers' Room. The cot and change mat were donated by a staff member and other items were purchased at minimal cost.

Another mother, Kellie, is also very grateful for the use of the Mothers' Room. Although Kellie has access to child minding and doesn't need to bring her baby to school on a regular basis, there are times when this is necessary. If the baby has had a restless night or is suffering from a slight illness, rather than missing school, Kellie can bring her baby to school. "The support network is there if Kellie needs it, and that's the important thing," says Siska.

Reversing the cycle

Siska firmly rejects any suggestions that the school's policy glorifies teenage pregnancy. "The other students admire Anne, but they're also fully aware of how hard it is being a student with a baby."

School counsellor, Mike Owner, is also familiar with the difficulties

"Coming back to school was the best thing I've done."

experienced by young women as they face the choice of continuing their education after childbirth. "Girls were dropping out of school following the births of their babies because they felt they had no choice. We decided that college needed to be made more accessible for these young women."

A support network

The girls have formed their own support group to discuss things such as housing, job opportunities and childcare. "This support network will ensure that the girls won't be isolated when they leave school," says Siska. "But best of all, the girls know that the college will support them in a positive and constructive way so that they too can finish their education."

Hawker College believes that it has a responsibility to the community as well as their students. "It's not appropriate to send young people into the world with no skills, or ask students to leave because they have become pregnant. People have to learn and grow," states Ms Lambert. "To us, these teenage mothers are students who developed a particular need while enrolled at college. It's just part of our philosophy to cater for them."