Because adolescence has only recently been identified as a separate phase between childhood and adulthood, childbearing accounts from teenage mothers have hitherto been inseparable from the narratives of other disadvantaged mothers. These accounts generally make for poignant reading, describing the cruel treatment of nonconformist mothers who, despite circumstances beyond their control, were shunned by society. Any discussion of contemporary teenage pregnancy is necessarily defined by reference to its antecedents and hence the need to summarise key historical events and arguments which have shaped current discourses.

Conceptualising ‘family’: trends and current practices

The concept of mothering and family life is acknowledged as a ‘complex historical, social and cultural phenomenon’ (Christensen, 2004: 380) and this is nowhere more fluently described than in The World We Have Lost – a historical account of family life and household structures by the social historian Peter Laslett ([1965] 2000). Laslett challenges long-held assumptions about family groupings and age at marriage, including the widely held belief that marriage rules during earlier periods condoned unions between teenagers – although, that said, it was relatively common practice for young people to be espoused, sometimes from childhood. He also debunks the notion of the nuclear family as a modern invention, suggesting that our ancestors mostly lived within small family groupings.

Research examining changing notions of family and kinship in contemporary society (Silva and Smart, 1999; Smart et al., 2001) suggests that attempts to portray family units as predetermined or representative is untenable. With a shift in focus from studies of ‘the family’ as
a social institution under a capitalist/patriarchal organising system, to closer scrutiny of the interiority of family life and the personal relationships of individual family members, the diversity of family structures and their individually constructed arrangements for self-management have emerged. For example, when single motherhood is examined from a life-course perspective, it emerges ‘less as a distinct family form and more as an experience coloured by the lone mother’s place in a network of relationships, as well as her place in her broader personal, social and historical context’ (May, 2004: 401). Hence, post-modern understandings of ‘family’ view these social arrangements as fluid and flexible sites for constructing ‘webs of relationships’ (ibid.) between ever more diverse groupings of (unrelated) adults and children. As the macro elements of family structures have changed, so have the micro-structures, with intergenerational research revealing a greater emphasis on children’s emotional well-being in contrast to a previous focus on their physical and material needs (Wade, 2005). Changing perceptions of safety and risk also mean that contemporary children and young people are subjected to an ever more intensive parental ‘gaze’ intended to protect them from ‘stranger danger’ (Valentine, 1997: 42) and other possible threats, but which nonetheless inevitably restricts their autonomy and freedom.

So while the contours and contexts of Western family life have undergone considerable change in recent decades, this is not to imply that diversity in kinship relations is a recent phenomenon nor that, until recently, it described normative patterns of family life. That said, although there appears to be general agreement that family relationships, patterns and practices have changed substantially, the rate and extent of change have been contested. Indeed, some would argue (Silva and Smart, 1999) that any such alterations are all too often framed in alarmist terms and frequently (and negatively) exaggerated for political expediency. In her moving ethnography of the ‘violence’ embedded in discourses of mothering in Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) usefully reminds us, however, that any demographic change inevitably affects social arrangements and sentiments, including the intimate bonds between mothers and their children.

The percolation of feminist ideas, a more sexually permissive climate and a more liberal understanding of ‘family’ have contributed to an undermining of the conjugal ‘rights’ previously claimed by men (and which contributed to unwanted pregnancies in women). While marriage was once perceived as protective against a disreputable sexual reputation, by the late 1960s women were employing alternative reproductive and