

Teen-age pregnancies

Students, counselors speak out on sexuality in high school

A 16-year-old mom tells all

By SUZIE ROLLINS

At 14, Marie's life was in shambles. She was single, pregnant and scared. An abortion seemed the only solution. "I was going through some bad times. I was smoking a lot of pot and didn't know what to do. There was no way I could tell my parents," recalled the Troy teen-ager two years later.

Two weeks before her appointment for the abortion, Marie spilled her heart out to her brother in California through a letter. His advice arrived a week later but was intercepted by her parents.

"I was so relieved it wasn't on my shoulders anymore. My parents wanted to know the whole story. When they found out I was having an abortion, they said it was out of the question," she said, while playing with her seven-month-old daughter.

Marie's family helped her through her predicament. Together, they decided that Marie should keep her child and stay at home where her parents could help out.

The thought of putting her child for adoption was out of the question for Marie.

"She (the baby) was mine. I could feel her growing. She was a part of me, and I didn't want to give her to someone else. I'd always be wondering what happened to her."

But being a teen-ager and a parent hasn't been easy.

MARIE LOOKS like most teen-agers, clad in blue jeans and sneakers. But at 16, she has to deal with the pressures and responsibilities of parenthood. She can't just spend her time in extracurricular activities and hanging around with friends.

Her social life is stifled and she said she feels isolated — particularly now that her best friend turned against her.

"When my best friend found out I was pregnant, she couldn't handle it. It was so weird because everybody had sex — but when you got pregnant, they treated you like a terrible person," she said.

Determined not to let her friend's prejudices get the best of her, Marie dropped out of school during her fourth month of pregnancy and taught herself at home.

After her baby was born, she returned to school a changed person.

"I was much more responsible. I was a better student than I was before and got along with others well. I wasn't always high and getting in trouble and skipping school anymore," she said.

Instead of leading a relatively care-free life, Marie finds herself giving up a lot of activities to be with her daughter.

"I REALLY MISS my freedom. I

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— 16-year-old mother

used to go out all the time, and now I can just go out on Saturday nights. Sometimes it gets to me just how much I've given up," she said.

"I always thought I would be giving up things, but I didn't realize this would be a full-time job."

If her parents hadn't been so supportive, she would not have been able to keep her daughter, she added. Her mother babysits while Marie is at school. And she is planning to continue her education so that she can become a special education teacher.

Even though her social life is less active, Marie does date. And she has gotten over the fright of telling people she's a mother.

She's not looking for a father for her daughter, just friends. "At first guys don't believe me that I've had a baby. But then they accept it."

Asked about her child's father, Marie's eyes fill with tears and her upper

lip stiffens. He's never seen his daughter — and she likes it that way, she said.

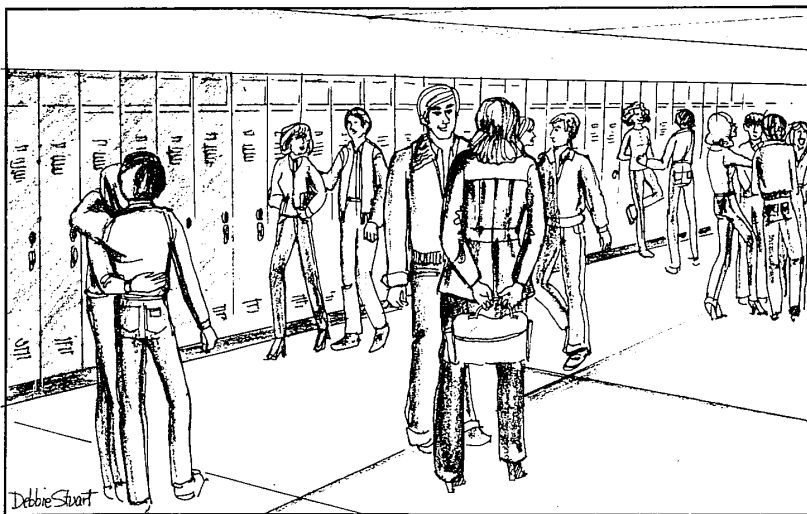
She had known him only a short while before becoming pregnant. Marriage was out of the question, she said. She was too young and had her whole life ahead of her.

GIRLS WHO ARE engaging in sex without using birth control get a few words of advice from the teen-ager who knows the consequences. Her pregnancy forced Marie to come to grips with her own naivete. Although she knew she should use birth control, Marie said she kept postponing finding a contraceptive.

"I was 13 then, and the clinics were far away and the guys didn't have cars. Birth control seems so planned. I guess you don't realize that you might get pregnant."

For the teen-ager who finds herself pregnant, Marie advises being realistic in making the decision that will influence the rest of your life. Don't try to keep the child without your parents' support, she said.

"You really need your family's support. And you've got to plan ahead and be realistic about what you're giving up. Probably most important is you have to remember your baby isn't always going to be a baby who is cute and cuddly; she's going to grow up, so you always have some problems to deal with."



A group of Troy teenagers surveyed said they wouldn't be able to handle high school and parenthood. Many of the young women said

they would temporarily drop out of school if they were pregnant because the negative peer pressure would be too great to withstand.

Recent studies show that half of today's teenagers are sexually active by age 18. And that it is common for teenage girls to be sexually active for a year or more before they use any type of contraceptives at all. (Staff photo by John Stano)

Surveys indicate

Sexually active teens put off by contraceptives

By SUZIE ROLLINS

About half of today's teenagers are sexually active by age 18, and about 75 percent by age 21.

Recent studies show that only about 50 percent of sexually active women in high school and college use contraceptives the first time they have intercourse. In fact, it is common for teenage girls to be sexually active for a year or more before they use any type of contraceptive at all.

These findings were compiled by Catherine S. Chulman, a social welfare professor at the University of Wisconsin, and published in Social Work, in November 1979.

Local counselors and nurses agree with Ms. Chulman's study and add that teenage pregnancies are more common today than they were in the '60s. Although young people are quick to admit they are sexually active, many are embarrassed to inquire about birth control methods, said the counselors. Young people also are fighting what they perceive as a stigma against teens who "plan to have sex."

"It's one thing to have sex, and another to plan ahead. I'll hear many times, 'a different type of girl plans ahead,'" said Jeff Hyde, a psychotherapist

at the Consortium for Development in Troy. The consortium provides free, confidential counseling so often-times therapists work with youths who are reluctant to discuss their feelings and concerns with their parents.

"Many of them say they didn't think it (becoming pregnant) would happen to them," said Hyde. "Or they say, 'it was only the first time.'"

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS surveyed in Troy, contend that they don't know about methods of birth control and wish they could learn through the schools.

"I think kids will be sexually active during their young high school years and won't know enough about birth control. They should be educated about contraceptives and about getting pregnant in high school," a 17-year-old male said.

When his 16-year-old girlfriend became pregnant, they opted for abortion, said one teen. "Our mistake was we got lazy with our birth control and never really believed it would happen to us."

An 18-year-old girl said she tried a contraceptive once but discontinued us-

ing it because "it was super messy." She says she's frightened about getting pregnant, but tries not to concern herself with the possibility too much.

"I always worry afterwards (about being pregnant) but I try not to do it (engage in sex) all the time and to watch my periods and try to watch

myself. I don't always worry like I should, sometimes I try not to think about it," she said.

Troy High School nurse Naomi Tomko encourages teenagers to talk to their parents about birth control and to confide in them should they become pregnant.

"They feel frightened, scared and have anxiety. I encourage them to talk to their parents," she said.

SEVERAL YOUNG pregnant women have told counselors they "didn't mind" having a baby.

"Sometimes the baby is the first love they ever had. They usually aren't being realistic about how they will support the child," said Hyde. "Many think they'll go on welfare or ADC and get their own apartments. It's a dream to them."

Most high school students who were surveyed said they didn't like the idea of teenage parenthood — for themselves or the children. Parenthood and high school just don't mix, they said. While some said the babies should be put up for adoption, others said they would opt for abortions. Only a few said they would raise the child themselves.

"It (raising a child) would be very hard. But there are many hardships in life and you have to be strong to cope with the situation," said a 16-year-old male. "That's the problem with people, they give up on their life and don't cope

with their problems."

Although most of the teenage boys surveyed said they would get jobs to support their new families, they admitted they didn't have employable skills. None could say what types of jobs they thought they could secure.

TEENAGERS AND counselors believe that pre-marital sex, and hence out-of-wedlock pregnancies, are a part of our culture. In her study Ms. Chulman said, "By the early 1970s, pre-marital intercourse by age 18 was almost normative for both males and females and the double standard of sexual behavior has almost disappeared."

But even youths recognize that because it is commonly accepted among peers doesn't mean it is best for them. One 17-year-old, who had her first sexual experience at 16, said she would advise younger women to postpone engaging in sexual relations.

"If I had to do it all over again I would not have become sexually active at this time because it causes many worries and problems between you and your parents," she said. "It makes it much more difficult for you to break up the relationship when you're having sex with someone."



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