

TEEN PREGNANCY GROWING UP TOO FAST

Hundreds of thousands of high school girls are getting pregnant—and living with the consequences. Six share their stories

While most Americans gasped at news that 16-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears is pregnant, some 750,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 had a different response: me too. “What Jamie Lynn, in part, has helped people understand: This problem happens to everybody, including the ‘good girl,’” says Bill Albert, deputy director of the non-profit National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. In fact, after a 14-year decline (from a historic high in 1991), the teen birth rate was up 3 percent in 2006. Experts differ as to why, speculating on everything from a sexually permissive culture to a federal government push for abstinence-only sex education, which last year got \$176 million in funding; states that receive funds are banned

from discussing the potential benefits of contraception. Albert, however, says, “There is no strong evidence that abstinence-only programs affect teen sexual behavior.”

Everyone, however, agrees on this: A teenager is no match for the rigors of parenthood. Just like Jamie Lynn, more than half of pregnant teens today choose to become parents (roughly one-third terminate their pregnancies; 2 percent make an adoption plan and about 14 percent miscarry). And as every parent knows, the challenges really begin once the baby is born. Only one-third of teen moms ever finish high school.

What is it like to be a real-life pregnant teen in 2008? Here, six stories about the all-too-grown-up realities of an unplanned pregnancy.



"I couldn't act like a kid anymore," says Ambria Branch (at home in St. Louis with Amber).

DANGEROUS COMPLICATIONS

AMBRIA BRANCH, 19

Two months into eighth grade, Ambria Branch learned she was pregnant—and soon became a social outcast at her St. Louis school. Except for her teachers and two friends, “everyone turned their backs on me.” Yet Ambria never wavered. “I wanted,” she says, “to keep the baby.”

It only got tougher from there. By the seventh month, Ambria faced complications: Diagnosed with preeclampsia—a potentially life-threatening condition in which the blood pressure spikes—she spent a month in the hospital. Oddly, that’s when her life began to even out. James Smith, then a ninth grader and

the baby’s father, visited regularly. Teachers arranged for homework to be delivered. A month before Ambria’s due date, doctors induced labor; she gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Two months later, she returned to middle school to graduate with her class.

Today, Ambria juggles college courses with a night job at Amber’s childcare center. Ambria and her mom, with whom she lives, divide Amber’s care. James, no longer her boyfriend, takes Amber, now 4, some weekends. “I settled down—I had a child,” says James, now 20 and a retail clerk. And Ambria? She can’t imagine life without Amber: “I love everything about her.”



"He makes me laugh," Ada (at home in Washington, D.C.) says of son Bryan.

DENIAL, THEN A PLAN

ADA ZELAYA, 18

It had been two months—and two missed periods—since Ada Zelaya had “spur-of-the-moment” unprotected sex with her longtime boyfriend, 27-year-old William Montiel. The Washington, D.C., high school senior “didn’t want to accept” that she was pregnant, she says, but a test at a nearby clinic confirmed her fears. “The first words out of my mouth were, ‘I’m only 17, what am I going to do?’” says Ada. “I just started crying.”

She decided to keep the baby—but faced harsh consequences. “I knew my mom would get really mad at me, and she did,” Ada says. The teen moved in with her aunt, kept up her studies and even continued getting A’s and B’s.

On Sept. 9, three months after she graduated, Ada, with William by her side, gave birth to son Bryan Omar. Planning to start college this summer, she’s working in a bakery to earn cash and living with William’s sister, declining for now his offer to move in with him. “Bryan,” she says, “is my main priority.”

By Molly Lopez, Jill Smolowe and Michelle Tauber. With Nina Burleigh, Darla Atlas, Anne Lang, Wendy Grossman, Steve Helling, Ruth Laney and Alyssa Shelasky

Anne Lang

From: Anne Lang [news@annelang.net]
Sent: Thursday, January 10, 2008 8:21 PM
To: Anne Lang
Subject: Fwd: Thank you!

----- Forwarded message -----
From: Joyner, Val <Val.Joyner@ppslr.org>
Date: Jan 10, 2008 4:57 PM
Subject: Thank you!
To: Anne Lang <news@annelang.net>

Hi Anne:

I got my copy of *People* Magazine over the weekend. Thank you for including Ambria's story. She was so excited and has turned into a local celebrity (well at least at church, in her community and at school). Your coverage will surely help me to get additional media on Ambria and the issues of teen pregnancy and comprehensive sex education. Never hesitate to call me if you need anything.

Best!

Val Joyner, MA

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"Courage does not always ROAR; sometimes it is the QUIET voice at the end of a day saying: I will try again Tomorrow"