



The media and teen pregnancy

A new generation of baby boomers

By [Carla Iacovetti](#) 08/27/2009

There is nothing like experiencing a pregnancy. The joy of feeling life grow within you is one of those unsurpassed moments in a woman's life. In 1979, African novelist Buchi Emecheta wrote the book *The Joys of Motherhood*, which tells the story of a young mother's struggles during the 1950s. The book is laced with political and cultural comments on polygamy, patriarchy and the changing roles surrounding motherhood in urban Nigeria. The idealistic belief that a woman's destiny is met by her ability to conceive is radically confronted as the protagonist, Nnu Ego, faces illusions about motherhood and shattered expectations.

While patriarchal notions have changed, and the belief that every woman's role in life is centered around conceiving, giving birth and mothering a child borders on the archaic, new concerns are rising with the current baby boom among young teens in America today.

We live on an evolutionary planet filled with ideals that have been handed down through the ages. Plain and simple: Times have changed. We are not all still governed by thoughts like "A woman's place is in the home" or living under the impertinent mindset that a woman should be "barefoot and pregnant." Happily, we have progressed.

In the last two decades, the media has been a part of the evolution that has taken place. Since the invention of television, we have subliminally become the networks' subjects. They feed us their take, and we buy it — lock, stock and barrel.

It is a known fact that the media is in the business of affecting how and what people think. For years, we have heard this kind of information input referred to as "subliminal." While many may rationally understand that most of the programs viewed on television are fictional, society is still highly

influenced by this medium. Part of the interesting dichotomy between reality and subliminal thinking is that the process is still the same. Whether something is accepted as real or as fictional, it is nonetheless accepted. In order for an audience to accept subliminal thoughts, a certain degree of relationship to the characters (actors, newscasters, etc.) must exist, even if what they are relaying is somewhat fabricated. While these so-called messages may be meant for an older group, they are reaching the wrong crowd.



Too young to be a mom

Mary Ann Ambroselli, the executive director of the Ventura County Crisis Pregnancy Center (VCCPC), says girls are getting pregnant younger and younger. What used to be considered out of the ordinary, or completely taboo, is becoming increasingly accepted. VCCPC has seen a rise in the number of girls 25 and younger becoming pregnant. Even more concerning is the number of girls in their teens who want to get pregnant. “You would be amazed at the number of girls under 17 that we have to counsel when their pregnancy tests come back negative, because they want to have a

child,” Ambroselli says.

Isolating the reasons for the pregnancy increase among single young girls is not always easy, but it is certain that we live in a more sexualized culture, and single motherhood is much more accepted today.

Paul Sutton, a demographer with the National Center for Health Statistics, says, “We’re seeing increases in both the number of teens having births and also the rate at which they are having births. Both of them are going up.” This boost is not just in California.

Ambroselli believes the media has played an active part in the increase of teens getting pregnant, and adds, “What was once considered unthinkable is now acceptable. Many young starlets out there are getting pregnant and conveying the message that it’s OK to get pregnant and keep your baby,” Ambroselli says.

The number of single celebrity high-profile types who have given birth in the last few years has affected the statistics. Even within the political arena, we have seen teen pregnancy somewhat revered. Let us not forget Sarah Palin’s teenage daughter, Bristol, being pregnant during the presidential election season. Recently, Bristol (a single mother) appeared on the Today show, campaigning against teenage pregnancy, claiming that having a baby is hard work, and encouraging other girls to “learn from her example.”

Naturally, celebrity status is not the norm. In fact, there is an unrealistic depiction of pregnancy in the media. Young girls often look to the famous like Jamie Lynn Spears as role models. They compromise

the welfare of their babies because they are simply not prepared to meet the emotional and financial needs that accompany having a child. “Research shows that most teen mothers often raise their children in poverty, because they themselves are undereducated with below-normal job skills,” Ambroselli says.

Sara Rector, a marriage and family therapist from Thousand Oaks, was astounded to find out from her 13-year-old daughter that one of the most popular songs today is entitled “Birthday Sex,” by Jeremih. The song’s lyrics are nothing short of appalling.

“First, I’m gonna take a dive into the water/ Deep until I know I pleased that body (body) / Or girl, without a broom I might just sweep you off your feet / And make you wanna tell somebody (body) how I do / Or maybe we can float on top my waterbed (bed) / You close your eyes as I improv between your legs / We work our way from kitchens, stoves and tables / Girl, you know I’m only able to please, yeah / Say you wanted flowers on the bed (on the bed) / But you got me and now it’s on again.”

Sex appeal is a popular tool in advertising, and it is human nature to be curious about sex. Let’s face it: a sexy blonde straddling a Harley is going to catch a man’s attention much more quickly than a businessman in a suit and tie. Whether in television commercials or magazines, on billboards or the Web, sexual content in advertising is a powerful draw that produces results.

Rector says that today’s kids are in a “rush to grow up,” and while the media is responsible for some of the desensitizing to sex, she believes a huge moral responsibility rests on parents. They need to be “supportive and take an active role, staying aware of the shows our children watch, the music they listen to, and the video games they play,” Rector says. “It is a parent’s job to guide a child above and beyond the media.”

“The girls that come into VCCPC do not have normal family environments,” Ambroselli says. “The majority of girls’ fathers are absent from their lives, and most of these girls are looking for a man to fill the void, and sadly, once pregnant, many of their boyfriends or spouses are in jail and, like their fathers, also not present.”

Another contributing factor to the single-parent syndrome is the sense of belonging and connection that should accompany a family unit but is fractured by divorce. “Procreation seems like the answer for their disconnection, but they have no clue about the responsibilities that accompany having a child,” Rector says. “It’s an age-old syndrome — wanting a baby that will love them unconditionally.” The long-term picture is not even considered, only the excitement and joy of having something they can love, and who will love them in return.

VCCPC averages between 70 and 80 clients per month, and there has been a consistent increase in single pregnancies. Ambroselli did not have the statistics for 2009, but in 2008, out of 921 clients, 647 were single mothers and 123 of them were younger than 18. This year alone, more than 730,000 teenage girls became pregnant in the United States. Ambroselli further revealed, “There is a huge increase of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like herpes, chlamydia and gonorrhea. These young girls do not realize that STDs can alter your life forever, and even kill you.”

The glamour of teen pregnancy quickly goes out the window when these young teens realize that they

do not have the wealth that celebrities like Britney Spears or Angelina Jolie have to hire full-time, live-in nannies to be nursemaids to their little ones so they can enjoy the lives they should be enjoying as teens. A familiar commentary on today's society: Children having children.

The Oscar-winning movie *Juno*, released in 2007, is a perfect example of relaying a message that teenage pregnancy is not really a big deal. As a matter of fact, the film makes teen pregnancy seem quite ordinary. While a healthy adult will view a film like this with a mature understanding of the risks and complications that can undoubtedly arise with a teenage pregnancy, many teenagers could receive an entirely different message. What happens when children grow up with these kinds of messages? Is it any wonder when they hit puberty that they then desire to engage in adult activities?

The vanishing line between right and wrong

Another real and present issue surrounds the lack of absolutes in today's society. With the minimizing of traditional values, things that were once viewed as "right" and "wrong" are simply accepted. "There is a clear, unrealistic representation of fertility in the United States today, and it's not just about teens," Rector says. "Look at all of the celebrities who decide to have a child at 45, using fertility drugs or in vitro fertilization, projecting a message to the world that you can have a baby at any age, single or not!"

"While things in our society have changed, the way one gets pregnant or contracts STDs has not," Ambroselli says. "Why would anyone, young or old, put themselves in a position to risk their health and/or the health of a child just for an orgasm?"

VCCPC teaches teens that they do have a choice. Even though the message of abstinence might seem archaic, Ambroselli has found that teens really do want to hear it. "I am always amazed at how many girls and guys want to hear that there is another way," she said. "They need to hear that it's OK to say 'no.' You don't have to do something just because everybody else does. The abstinence-only message is a rough concept to convey to kids who are learning about sex in elementary school, but because it is being glorified in the media, it makes it even harder." Ambroselli added, "The greatest contributing factor to the 'hurried child' is, what their parents and teachers model to their children then becomes their life experience or style. Guaranteed, what these kids are hearing from parents, teachers and peers all play into the element."

Ironically, a book like *The Joys of Motherhood*, written more than 30 years ago, still confronts the illusions and shattered expectations of motherhood. Because while motherhood should be a memorable, joy-filled experience, those who encounter it before they are old enough to responsibly care for a child might well join the ranks of Bristol Palin, who says, "A baby is not just an accessory



on your hip, but they are hard work.”

Perhaps, through education, greater awareness and parents setting important boundaries and guidelines, teenage pregnancy rates will come down. “Sex education in and of itself is a good thing,” Rector says. “Being forewarned is being forearmed.” Whether the media will take note and begin to reverse the trend of sexual exploitation in advertising, television, films and videos remains in doubt.

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Comments

Excellent article.

posted by **sardith** on 8/31/09 @ 06:39 a.m.

The idea that mega stars having babies at young ages, like Brittany Spears, or worse her younger sister Jamie Lynn, with young girls not having the complete picture in the media of all the support staff that it takes to care for their babies, behind the scenes, gives such a wrong impression to these young girls, who romanticize love anyway and have an ideal in their mind about having babies, is being partly formed through this media-driven picture. So sad, that the truth is NOT found in a Juno screenplay, and I am thankful for places like the Ventura Crisis Pregnancy Center and people like Mary Ann Ambroselli, who are there to gather up the shattered pieces of the broken lives of young girls, who just realized that their dreams have intersected reality.

Susan Ardith Lee

posted by **sardith** on 9/02/09 @ 11:19 p.m.

Amazing and well written story!! teens need more education about the reality that faces them everyday.

-Dex

posted by **dex** on 9/03/09 @ 05:00 p.m.

Thanks so much for your comments Susan! I couldn't agree with you more about the misconceptions that these young starlets are projecting to the youth about "motherhood," etc.

The Crisis Pregnancy Clinic is a wonderful organization.

posted by **WriterAtTheSea** on 9/05/09 @ 11:07 a.m.

Thanks Dex! Yes, teens need more education and awareness about so many things today.

:)

posted by **WriterAtTheSea** on 9/05/09 @ 11:08 a.m.

For the most part, I have to disagree with your point of view on teen pregnancy. You make it seem like all teen mothers are irresponsible parents, which is clearly not the case. Many young mothers continue on to be very successful women. Your stance on this matter is very stereotypical and biased. Whether young or old, a mother is a mother.

posted by **patterns** on 9/09/09 @ 09:52 p.m.

I appreciate your comment Patterns. I can fully understand your feelings, however I was merely trying to show the relationship between the media and the message that they are portraying to young adults. Of course there are those who are responsible mothers, and they should be commended. This article is not meant to criticize those who are successfully embracing motherhood as a teen.

Thank you for your reply.
Carla

posted by **WriterAtTheSea** on 9/11/09 @ 11:29 p.m.

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