

When Teen-agers

PLAN



To Have BABIES

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Mary Richards
teen-age mother

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April
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Tim Vuagniaux
psychologist

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Mary Richards rolled her eyes, smiled and said, "I love you, too, Brian," as her 2-year-old son peeked around the bedroom door, yelled that he loved her then zealously slammed it.

His muffled giggles leaked through the door as he turned the knob in preparation for another round of this game.

"Sometimes I think if I hadn't had Brian, what would I be doing now? And I think if I had it to do all over again, I would've waited until I was older," the 19-year-old Richards said from her home at 129 East Saline.

"But then I think if I'd waited, would I have had *this* baby?"

"But I don't even think about that now because I want Brian," she said.

And she got him — just as she'd planned. Contrary to the more common trend in teen-age pregnancy, Brian was not an accident, Richards said.

That makes her part of a small, yet significant, percentage of teen-age women in the United States who choose to have children out of wedlock.

Experts have suggested that although the reasons for teens purposely getting pregnant are as varied as the individuals, it's hard to ignore one apparent pattern: poor self-esteem.

"It's not that these mothers have made bad choices, but serious choices that for some reason they feel they have to make prematurely, which I feel like cuts them off from the pleasures of adolescence," said local family and child psychologist Dr. Tim Vuagniaux.

The young mothers might be looking for something to hold, to love, to call their own and to need them. And all of those reasons point to low self-esteem, he said.

No statistics are kept on the number of intended teen-age pregnancies. But the Center for Population Options in Washington, D.C., concludes that because 80 percent of the more than one million teen-age pregnancies in this country every year are not intended, the remaining 20 percent are.

Based on those estimates, 10 of the 49 babies born to teen mothers in Pettis County last year may have been planned.

"The way I look at it is, they've got to have a low self-esteem to want to have a baby so young," said local psychologist Dr. Margaret L. Harlan, who has counseled a number of sexually active youths and teen mothers.

In most cases, teen mothers don't agree with this theory, said Marjorie Griffin, a Smith-Cotton teacher who founded a support group for these young women at the school.

"None of the girls I've worked with have ever said they didn't like themselves, but low self-esteem and low self-expectations can come from all walks of life," Griffin said. "Many of them don't know how to stand up for themselves in a positive, assertive way."

Teens who knowingly get pregnant often have abusive relationships with their boyfriends, are seeking acceptance or attention and might have high academic abilities but fail to use them — all of which are signs of low self-esteem, Griffin said.

Listening to Richards and other Sedalia teens' stories, the adults could be right.

At the same time, however, securing jobs and receiving no more than food stamps or Medicaid for their children, the girls have been fairly successful in beating their own odds. That could indicate having babies improved their sense of self-worth, said Smith-Cotton guidance counselor Kathy Kempton-Loveland, who co-advises the young mothers group.

Richards said she was inspired to have a baby after her older sister, Kathy, had a child at the age of 18 and was getting a lot of family attention.

Despite her initial childish attitude, however, Richards said having her baby "completed her," transformed her into an adult and motivated her to "straighten up." Once at-risk of dropping out of high school, Richards was the first in her family of six to graduate.

"If it hadn't been for (Brian), I probably wouldn't have finished school," Richards said. "Things changed. I used to whine and pout, but when I had my baby, I grew up quick. I feel I've accomplished something."

Another recent Smith-Cotton graduate, Robin Quick, 17, of 1202½ South Lamine, has a 1-year-old daughter named Brittany, who was going to be raised in a two-parent household.

But her plans to marry the baby's father fell through — twice. Quick said she doesn't regret having Brittany and deciding to raise her on her own, but she wouldn't want her daughter to follow in her footsteps.

Raising a baby alone as a teen is hard, Quick said. Affordable child care and good-paying jobs are scarce, and many sacrifices have to be made.



Robin Quick and her 1-year-old daughter, Brittany, share giggles at home, top. Mary Richards and her 2-year-old son, Brian, spend part of an afternoon at the park, above.

"If I had it to do all over again, I would have waited until the relationship with the father was more stable. I wouldn't want her to go through that," Quick said of Brittany.

Richards and Quick said they didn't think low self-esteem was a factor in their decisions. But a third young mother, 16-year-old April (not her real name), said a poor sense of self-worth was a big factor in her decision to have a baby.

April said she had a turbulent childhood with a father who wasn't around and a mother who spent her time and money on other men. The duty of caring for her younger brothers and sisters fell to April.

"I think once I stopped taking care of my brother and sister and I had no one to be dependent on me, that might have contributed to my sense of low self-esteem, and I went through severe depression," she said.

"Having had a baby has made me see more of whatever the problem is and fix it. I can't sit around feeling sorry for myself because I have a daughter now who's depending on me," she said. "She's someone who will always love me and I will always love and will always be there for (her) — not back and forth" like her own mother.

April said she thinks many teen girls who plan to have children might have low self-esteem.

"Whenever girls start to have low self-esteem, they put themselves in situations where it gets lower and lower and lower until they have none," she said. "And if you don't respect yourself, no one else will, either."

Reversing the tide of low self-esteem in America's young women will be a monumental task, said Harlan. Its roots run deep in a society that is accustomed to limiting girls' aspirations.

"They have not been brought up to stand up to adversity except in martyrdom or denial," the psychologist said. "The only thing that leads to is being a mother and being somebody's good wife."

The solution, she said, is for girls to be born into healthy families, to be valued and encouraged in their interests and ambitions. Until that happens, many young girls might continue to have children when they are themselves children, she said.