



Photo: Bev Pearl

Forsaken Children

Jo Billung-Meyer

L'auteure s'inquiète de l'augmentation du nombre de grossesses chez les adolescentes car 80 pour cent de ces jeunes mères ne finissent jamais leurs études et vivent au dépens de l'Etat. Les tentatives de suicide sont sept fois plus fréquentes que chez les adolescentes sans enfants. Leur descendance fait bien souvent les mêmes erreurs. Pour ces raisons l'auteure questionne la politique publique et propose des alternatives.

Four years ago, Debbie, a sixteen-year-old, came reluctantly into my pre-natal classes, pressured into attending by her mother. Being the

only unmarried pregnant woman in a class of couples, she was embarrassed and frightened. Although I did my utmost to put her at ease, she broke into tears during several classes. Finally she confided to me that her seventeen-year-old boyfriend was far more interested in his car than in his baby. He had pleaded with her to have an abortion but, but by the time Debbie had summoned enough courage to tell her mother, it was too late. A popular and good student, Debbie had wanted to place her baby for adoption, finish high school, become a secretary, and travel. But

her mother had said, "You made your bed, you're going to lie in it. If you give your baby up for adoption, I'll disown you!" Debbie said she loved children and wanted to keep her baby but was afraid of what that would do to her future. She also wanted her baby to have two parents, security, and all the material things she knew she could not provide. I encouraged her to do what she thought was right for herself and for her child.

Afraid of being disowned, she decided to keep her infant. Because of constant friction between Debbie and her mother over the care of baby Daphne, the teenage mother and infant were out on their own, supported by welfare, within a year. Today Debbie is frustrated, unhappy, and calls herself "a loser." She feels she has been "shafted" by her mother, her boyfriend, and by society. She never finished high school, feels trapped and desperately poor on welfare, has never had a permanent job, and has had one disappointing relationship after another with men who take advantage of her loneliness. Although Debbie enjoyed her role as mother for the first year, she now resents the complete sacrifice required of her own adolescent needs.

Although the reaction of Debbie's mother may have been unusual, the fate of Debbie and Daphne is typical for the majority of single teenage mothers who keep their children. Only the rare few who receive tremendous financial and emotional support from their parents for many years or who possess exceptional inner strength and ideals become responsible parents and live fulfilling lives.

During five years of teaching childbirth preparation to couples in Victoria, B.C. (1973-78), it became

apparent to me that the many prenatal classes offered in the city were not meeting the needs of the single mother. Since single pregnant women, and particularly teenagers, had little factual knowledge and far greater fear of giving birth and needed classes more than couples, I decided in 1978 to start a program designed for them. As the issue of teenage and single mothers had not been confronted publicly by the media at the time, I was unable to find support for my pilot project and started in single-handedly on a volunteer basis.

Although there is a dropping birth rate in adult women in Canada today, there is an alarming increase in the number of teenage pregnancies. A study in Toronto shows that close to ten in every 100 girls aged fifteen to nineteen became pregnant in 1980, with a 51 per cent increase in a five-year period of pregnancies to sixteen-year-olds and a 33 per cent rise in pregnancies to those fifteen and under. A 1980 survey conducted in Vancouver, B.C., pointed out that 93 per cent of unwed teenage pregnancies were unintended and that 77 per cent of adolescent single mothers were dependent on welfare.

Almost all the single pregnant women in my program (266 to date) knew about contraception but chose not to use any. They strongly believed that "it couldn't happen to me," felt the use of birth control was "unnatural" or that it made them feel double guilty to have pre-

pared for sex. Some used contraception half of the time and many were misinformed or misused the information.

Teenagers usually react with shock and denial to unwed pregnancy, are scared to death of telling their parents or of going to the doctor (lest he inform their parents) and consequently receive no prenatal care until late in their pregnancy. Since adolescent women have the poorest eating habits of any age group, the added load of pregnancy on a still-growing teenager (combined with her rejection of pre-natal care) can increase health risks to both mother and baby. Further, teen mothers face a greater danger of obstetrical complications than do mature women.

Eighty per cent of adolescent mothers never complete their education, become welfare dependent, and endure lives of desperate poverty and futility. Unless a young mother receives unstinting support from her parents or tax-supported social systems, her frustrations are taken out on herself, her child, or society. The combination of unstable family life, repeat pregnancies, welfare dependency, and negative social attitudes cause nine per cent of teen mothers to attempt suicide, a seven-times higher percentage than that for teenagers without children.

Little is heard about the teenage father — he is the "forgotten man." Unless he married the mother, he has no say in what will happen to his child. Studies show that the majority of teenage fathers come from homes with poor relationships between parents or between parent and child. One-half come from homes where fathers are absent or deceased. The majority tend to be immature and lack a sense of responsibility. About one-third have previously fathered a child out-of-wedlock. The father, regardless of age, is financially liable for the support of his child up to age eighteen or until his child is adopted. Some teen fathers are interested in the girl's welfare and want to marry her; but for those who marry, it means an interruption of school or training which would have equipped them for a better job.

... 80 per cent of adolescent mothers never complete their education, become welfare dependent, and endure lives of desperate poverty and futility...

Marriage is not a panacea for teenage pregnancy, as married teens are apt to have subsequent children in rapid succession and two-thirds of teen marriages end in divorce within five years.

Judging from the adolescents who attended my program, the majority who decided to keep their infants came from deprived or foster homes, were immature girls with unrealistic expectations, possessing very little potential of becoming responsible parents. Those who came from more stable backgrounds, had good relationships with their parents, and were more emotionally and intellectually mature were able to weigh the pros and cons of adoption. The teenagers who could not arrange sufficient bus-fare to attend classes regularly had no doubt about their ability to raise a child.

The reasons given for keeping the baby were always based on the teenager's own needs and never those of the child. Many decided to keep their infants because they believed the baby would give them the love they felt was lacking in their lives. Some believed that their boyfriends would not leave them or might even marry them if they kept the baby. Others wanted to prove their independence to their parents by attempting to raise their child by themselves. A few used motherhood as a means of escaping an unhappy situation.

A short ten to fifteen years ago, the social stigma of raising an illegitimate child was so great that the majority were placed for adoption. In B.C. over 80 per cent of single adolescents keep their infants initially. Many are placed into foster care or given up for adoption at a later date when the mother is disenchanted with parenthood and the child has been neglected or abused. No matter how loving the adoptive or foster parents, these children never fully recover from the psychological scars inflicted upon them in their crucial first years of life. Many of these children grow up to repeat the disastrous cycle themselves in their teen years.

What is being done about this problem? In B.C. public policy dictates that support service be pro-

... Children of adolescent mothers suffer greater health problems, score below average in I.Q. tests, have more behaviour problems. ...

vided to mother, regardless of age or parenting potential, to enable her to keep her infant. When

an adolescent only earns baby-sitting money, \$500 a month of income assistance seems like a fortune, but soon reality hits and many find the severe financial restrictions lead to social isolation and frustration.

Because of their immaturity, instability, and lack of life experience, most young mothers need far more than income assistance and subsidized daycare and accommodation to fulfill their roles as responsible parents and self-sufficient individuals. Although various teen-mother programs have been started in a number of Canadian cities, these are, on the whole, poorly attended. Those who need the greatest help feel too threatened to seek or accept it. The child's persistent demands on their time, financial restrictions, and the lack of reliable daycare prevent the majority of teenage mothers from completing their education or job-training and breaking away from welfare dependency, a situation which frequently destroys their ambition and self-esteem. Should the mother prove neglectful or abusive, her child may be taken into care, as ward of the Crown or Children's Aid, and placed in a foster home. However, the demand for foster homes far exceeds the supply. Some foster parents are primarily interested in remuneration, dare not become emotionally involved with their temporary wards, and set poor parenting examples.

The fact that there are at present in B.C. 1400 screened and approved

couples waiting years for every adoptable newborn presents a paradox in our public policy. These

couples have been screened for their parenting potential, their emotional and financial stability, and their degree of commitment. Under the guidance of the B.C. Ministry of Human Resources, the mother herself may select the adoptive couple possessing criteria which she considers ideal for her child. Studies have shown that children of adolescent mothers suffer greater health problems, score below average in I.Q. tests, have more behaviour problems and higher rates of failure in school. Would it not be better for an infant to be raised as a much-wanted child by two dedicated and mature parents than to be brought up by an unwed teenage mother and run the risk of physical, emotional, and intellectual deprivation?

The alarming increase in the numbers of single adolescent mothers attempting to raise their infants creates serious social, economic, and health problems. These young women and their children can require, for many years, financial, medical, and social-service support which increases the burden on the taxpayer at a time of economic hardship. Society sees only two choices — our present public policy of providing support services to enable every unwed mother regardless of age or parenting potential to keep her child or of promoting adoption as an admirable alternative. There is, of course, a third choice, one supported by the Feminist Movement. We could, beginning at an early age, provide teens not only with information on the workings of their own bodies but also with an environment (in the schools, the media, and the workplace) which would support their development as whole, independent, realistic persons with good self-images and ability to relate to others not out of weakness but out of strength.