

# Sex Talk

Promoting Sexual Health for Youth

## Editor's note

In 1997 there were a total of 5,594 females aged 15-19 in Grey and Bruce counties. Approximately 185 of these young women became pregnant, most of them unintentionally. The teen pregnancy rate in Grey and Bruce (33.07/1000) is lower than the Ontario rate (42.06/1000). However, the local and provincial rates are still alarming. Pregnancy rates include teens that have become pregnant, had stillborn deliveries, miscarriages and abortions.

It is important to recognize the issues associated with teen pregnancy such as parenting, adoption, abortion and teen fathers. However, this issue will focus on teens that have become pregnant and have chosen to parent their babies.

This issue will look at why teens become pregnant and the impact it has on them. It will also take a look at strategies to prevent teen pregnancy and discuss support that is available for teens and professionals in Grey and Bruce counties.



## TEEN PREGNANCY

"I thought I couldn't get pregnant during the middle of my cycle", "He told me that if he pulled out I wouldn't get pregnant", "I didn't think I could be pregnant because we've done it lots of times without birth control and I've never gotten pregnant." Statements like these are often heard in sexual health clinics across Grey and Bruce counties.

Most people will agree that becoming pregnant during adolescence is not ideal. Studies tell us that a pregnant teen is at higher risk of delivering prematurely and for having a baby with a lower than average birth weight. These two factors can have an impact that lasts a lifetime on a child and parent - causing congenital defects, prolonged hospital stays, learning difficulties and challenges with behaviour.

The reality is about half of all teens are having (or have had) intercourse by the time they graduate from high school. Since there is no birth control that is 100% effective (besides abstinence) teen pregnancy will always be an issue. But the unreliability of birth control isn't the main reason why teens are getting pregnant. It's a much more complex issue. Every teen is different and will have their own reason why they are pregnant just as every one of them will deal with it differently. Debby Minielly, a Public Health Nurse in the Sexual Health Program with the Grey Bruce Health Unit says, "It's important that we don't paint all pregnant teens or teen parents with the same brush. We need to realize the complexity of the issue and do a better job dealing with our attitudes toward teen parents." Studies indicate that teens are more likely to become pregnant if they start having intercourse at an early age, have a history of sexual abuse and grow up in a low income household. Also, some studies show that teens who become pregnant have lower self-esteem and do not do well academically at school. Although some teens have the maturity and support to handle a pregnancy, many do struggle. It's how teens deal with it that makes teen pregnancy an issue for communities and society at large. Will they finish school? How will they afford a baby? Are they emotionally ready to deal with a child on their own? Will they be good parents? When a teen realizes she is pregnant, adequate support is crucial. "We help the teen look at all the options available to her regarding her pregnancy," says Minielly. Making a decision based on her values, beliefs and life situation will help the teen focus towards the best choice for her.

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## Teen Pregnancy continued from page one...

Pregnant teens who plan on keeping their baby need their education. "It's really important for school communities to support teen parents. That's the key. If a mom is able to achieve an education then it will mean all the difference for her and her baby," says Minielly. "If a teen mom is able to continue her education then she and the baby are less likely to rely on social assistance, be more financially secure and more likely to have an improved quality of life."

The birth rate among 15-19 year olds has decreased over the last 25 years; however the pregnancy and abortion rate for this age group is higher than in many other developed countries. Prevention strategies such as sex education and sexual health clinics are working, but the sexual health message that young people are receiving may not be consistent across the province. The quality and quantity of programming offered is also dependent on how comfortable the educator is with the material and with delivering it.

"It also takes some maturity on the part of young persons to access the services available to them," finds Minielly. There are concerns that younger teens have not yet reached the level of emotional development needed to deal with sexual relationships and activities. They are less likely to plan for sex and utilize birth control. This makes teens who choose to have intercourse at an early age at higher risk of having an unwanted pregnancy and less likely to have a partner who will support them.

Beth Karrow, a Public Health Nurse in the Healthy Babies/Healthy Children program, visits teenagers during the prenatal and postpartum period. She identifies transportation and lack of money to be the major barriers for teen parents. She finds that, "teen parents who get emotional and practical support from their families are able to cope much better than those without family support. Family support seems to be particularly helpful if the new grandparents are good role models." Karrow also believes "Supportive families provide good advice and allow the teen some much needed breaks from the baby."

Providing each teenager with practical and accurate information will help to lower the teenage pregnancy rate. They need to know what the risks are if they choose to have sex, have the self-esteem and knowledge to prevent these risks and access the resources available to them.

## Did you know?

- In 1996, 51% of females and 43% of males aged 15 to 19 reported having had intercourse <sup>2</sup>
- $\frac{3}{4}$  of teens use some method of contraception (usually a condom) the first time they have sex<sup>3</sup>
- A sexually active teen who does not use contraceptives has a 90% chance of becoming pregnant within one year <sup>1</sup>
- Pregnant teens are least likely of all pregnant women to get early and regular prenatal care <sup>4</sup>
- A pregnant teen is at greater risk for pregnancy complications such as premature labour, anemia and high blood pressure <sup>4</sup>
- Teen moms are more likely to drop out of high school, lack job skills, require public assistance and end up living in poverty <sup>4</sup>
- $\frac{1}{4}$  of teen moms go on to have a second baby within two years after the birth of their first baby <sup>4</sup>

## Tough Decisions

There are 3 options a pregnant teen may consider:

- Does she choose to keep the baby and raise the child?
- Does she choose to have someone adopt her baby?
- Does she choose to terminate the pregnancy?

Some Considerations:

- Which is the easiest choice to live with?
- Which choice would be most difficult to live with?
- What would each choice mean to the people closest to her?
- What plans does she have for the future?
- Will her decision have an impact on her spiritual and moral beliefs?
- Does she have support for her decision?

The teen needs to talk with someone who will not judge her for the choice she makes and will listen to her as she weighs the consequences of her decision.

## A Blessing in Disguise

A personal story by a Grey Bruce Teen Parent

At eighteen years old my life was complete - then I got pregnant. After I had the ultrasound I realized that this was not someone else's child, this was my child. I had always said that if I ever got pregnant I would never have an abortion but when it happened I didn't want to even think about any other choices. I just wanted the baby to disappear and my life to be back to normal.

The day I met with the nurse seemed to be the most "unfair" day of my life. It was too late for me to have an abortion and we ended up discussing how I was going to tell my parents. I felt like I really was letting them down and decided I was not going to tell them. I thought of running away, praying to get into a car accident, having a miscarriage, or planning not to show any signs of being pregnant then giving the baby up for adoption.

Eventually, I did tell my mom. She cried but then said, "When people have babies they are not considered to be a curse. Babies are suppose to be blessings, new life, happiness and hope." Suddenly my outlook changed. When I told my dad he said we would just have to deal with it and make the best of it. I still didn't want anyone else to know that I was pregnant in case I decided not to keep my baby.

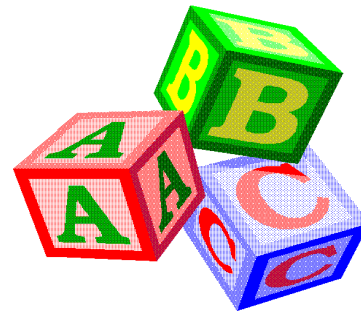
I had a lot of support from my family. Eventually my friends found out. Even though they were really interested I did not want to be near them because I felt like they were better than I was.

A month later my boyfriend and I decided that we wanted to live together and raise the baby. Once I set up the baby things my feelings changed. I was very excited and couldn't wait for the baby to arrive.

My boyfriend got a good paying job and moved in with me. When Ethan was born I had many different feelings. In the hospital I wondered what I was doing having a baby, but on the other hand, I could not imagine a nurse taking my baby away to give to another family. The first month I was really tired because Ethan was up a lot at night. I stayed at home for a week with Ethan and then I went to school to finish my OAC's so I could go to university next year. My relationship with my boyfriend seemed like it was going to quickly come to an end because there was less time for us and we were both tired.

Today Ethan is eight months old. I try to be with him every chance I get. He does my homework with me, he eats with me, and he goes almost everywhere I go. He gets up at least two to three times a night, which makes me get less sleep. My boyfriend and I share the basement of my dad's house with Ethan and we have all learned to deal with the good and the bad days. The thing I worry about the most is money. Daycare is very expensive and so are diapers and formula. I do not mind being at home with Ethan when I know my friends are at bars and clubs. I still play soccer, tutor, go to school and try to get out once in a while. I have realized that Ethan and school are the most important things in my life.

When I look at my life now I regret trying to hide Ethan from everyone so I wouldn't ruin my reputation. I have learned so many lessons from this experience and I feel that Ethan has made me a better person. He makes me feel so loved because everything I do for him is right, and anything I say is funny. When I leave the room he cries which makes me feel very loved and I know that he recognizes me as a mother and a playmate. I realize I am only a teenager and I am already a mother. I believe that everything happens for a reason. I thought my life was complete enough, but according to fate, I needed a little extra sunlight in my life.



## Pregnancy Checklist

A pregnant teen can improve her chances of having a healthy baby by:

- Getting early and regular prenatal care from a physician.
- Eating a nutritious and balanced diet, which includes taking additional folic acid.
- Keeping their body in good shape. Stay active and get regular exercise.
- Getting plenty of sleep.
- Avoiding smoking (and second-hand smoke), alcoholic beverages and limiting caffeine.
- Avoiding all drugs, unless recommended by a doctor.
- Accessing community resources: Healthy Babies/Healthy Children Program, Healthy Beginnings, Cradlelink, Prenatal Classes.

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## Resources

### Local Agencies

- **Grey Bruce Health Unit**  
**Durham** 519 369-3318 or 1 800 394-6643  
**Owen Sound** 519 376-9420 or 1 800 263-3456  
**Southampton** 519 797-2010 or 1 800 230-7719  
**Walkerton** 519 881-1920 or 1 800 821-7714

Services available; pregnancy testing, pregnancy counseling, birth control, prenatal information and support, prenatal classes and postpartum home visiting.

- **Cradlelink**  
To register call 371-4773 or 1 800 567-2384

A program for expecting and/or new parents who are in need of extra support. Car seats and safety gates are available as well as food vouchers for pregnant or nursing mothers.

- **Healthy Beginnings**  
To register call 371-4773 or 1 800 567-2384

Each session includes cooking time, nutrition, education, baby care or health discussion. Food and/or vitamin gift certificates are distributed.

### Web Sites

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org>  
<http://www.teenadvice.about.com>  
<http://www.pffc.ca>  
<http://www.noah-health.org/english/pregnancy/teenpreg.html>  
<http://www.etr.org/recapp/>  
<http://www.spiderbytes.ca>



### Books

Englander, Anreece, Dear Diary, I'm Pregnant: Teenagers Talk About Their Pregnancy, (1997), Canada, Firefly Books  
Mathes P., Irby, B., Teen Pregnancy & Parenting Handbook, (1993), Research Press.  
Lindsey, J, Brunelli, J., Your Pregnancy and Newborn Journey: Guide for Pregnant Teens (1998)  
Arthur, Shirley, Surviving Teen Pregnancy: Your Choices, Dreams & Decisions (1996), Morning Glory Press.

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3. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Teen Pregnancy Facts and Stats, August 2001.
4. March of Dimes, Teenage Pregnancy Fact Sheet, 1999-2000.
5. Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in Canada, The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, Vol. 9(1) Spring 2000
6. Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health in Southwestern Ontario, July 2000, Middlesex-London Health Unit, London, Ontario
7. Health Behaviours in the Grey Bruce Huron Perth District: Results of the 1996/1997 Ontario Health Survey, December 2000
8. A Health Profile of Adolescents in Southwestern Ontario, September 2000, Iris Gutmanis, Mary Beth Davies, Mary Anne Simpson, London, Ontario

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To contribute ideas, comments or materials, contact the Sexual Health Program Manager, at  
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Our website is [www.publichealthgreybruce.on.ca](http://www.publichealthgreybruce.on.ca)



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