Teenage Mothers: Adolescent Pregnancy in the Southern United States

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TEENAGE MOTHERS: ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

by

Julie Kish Byrd-Jenkins

2009

A Capstone Experience/Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
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Approved by:

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James Kenney

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Craig Cobane
ABSTRACT

In the United States, teenage pregnancy rates have taken the first upswing since 1991. It has more teenage pregnancies per capita than any other country in the western industrialized world. Television shows, music and culture permeate teenagers’ lives, influencing sexual behaviors and attitudes. Those whose relatives have children in their teens are at an even higher risk. There are programs throughout the region desperately working to bring awareness to teenagers about the risks and consequences of having sex too early, but teens still get pregnant. Teen mothers face the unique challenge of balancing parenting, school and still being young. In this project, the influences on teen pregnancy, the assistance and awareness programs, and the lives of teen mothers are explored and documented through photographs and interviews to give life to the myriad of reports and statistics. Teen pregnancy has continued to escalate, and it is important to be able to see it in order to understand it.
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JULIE KISH BYRD-JENKINS

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Honors College
Western Kentucky University
May 2009
DEDICATION

This photo essay is humbly dedicated to all of the teenage mothers that I met and spent time with during the past year and a half of this project. I am moved by their stories and hope that others will be as well.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so thankful to the teen mothers who allowed me to experience a part of their lives to understand who they are and what they experience as young parents. I would like to thank Renee White of the Kentucky Teen Pregnancy Coalition who was a huge help in contacting most of the Kentucky organizations and teen mothers, as well as Linda Wright of Early Head Start, Pat Bohannon and Peggy Snow of John Hardin High School and Karen Swiney of Bowling Green High School who spent time to talk to me about the teens they help in their school programs. Also, to Chrissy Storms of Warren East High School, consumer sciences teacher.

In Tennessee – Lillian Maddox-Whitehead of the Metro Nashville Public Health Department, Kayce Matthews of Planned Parenthood and director of the PG-13 Players, Ginny Winter, coordinator for the FYI group of Knoxville Planned Parenthood, Jonna Laidlaw and Judy Freudenthal of the Oasis Center in Nashville, and Mark Lancaster, youth pastor at Northeast Church in Hendersonville – all of these people who talked to me about teen pregnancy and helped me to find teenagers who had a story to tell. A huge thank you as well to all the other teens who I interviewed about preventative programs, sex education, abstinence and teenage life.

I would like to acknowledge the director of my thesis, James Kenney, director of the photojournalism program, who helped me to keep my head straight and stay focused on the story I was trying to tell. The past year and a half has been a huge journey, and he gave me incredible input on the direction of my project. Jeanie Adams, professor of photojournalism, contributed especially to the final completion of this essay with her help in final edits, organization and design.

Finally, I have to thank my dad, my husband and all of my friends and family who have suffered through my anxieties and constant discussion of this project since I began working on it. And to Dr. Craig Cobane, director of the Honors College, for believing in me enough to make me stick with the Honors Program and finish this thesis, of which I am very proud.
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INTRODUCTION

Teen pregnancy has been a topic that has intrigued me since I first did a photo story on a teen mother in my picture stories class. I followed the teen around for a few weeks and I was surprised by the adult things she had to deal with while still displaying the teenage tendencies she still had. It has been a subject that has stuck in my mind because of the complexity of the issue, from the girls’ lives themselves to why it even happens in a place like the United States.

As a photojournalist, I am deeply interested in people and their trials and triumphs. Something that really fascinated me about teen pregnancy was that there are so many layers to it. I have just barely skinned the surface of the issue of teen pregnancy in this essay. Teen girls with babies have to grow up fast and experience a world of different emotions and responsibilities, and they have to make different choices than other girls their age. They still want to be teenagers, but they have to make sacrifices to take care of their children.

PROCESS

To produce this project, I started by researching findings and news articles related to teen pregnancy, including cultural factors that have an influence on teens and their choices and overall statistics about teen pregnancy rates. I was able to find many organizations related to either preventing teen pregnancy, promoting awareness of the risks of sexual behavior, or were there to assist teen mothers after they become pregnant. Through these organizations, I was able to contact and
interview 11 teen mothers, most of whom I photographed for a period of time. I photographed their lives with their families, friends, boyfriends and schools, telling their stories through pictures.

In addition to the teenage mothers themselves, I explored the greater issue of teen pregnancy, including cultural influences on behavior. I looked at programs such as Planned Parenthood and the Oasis Center who try to keep teens informed and involved. I also photographed a couple of the programs at high schools that take care of the babies while the mothers are in class.

With my research, interviews and photographs I produced a photo essay and feature news story, laid out in a magazine format.

FINDINGS

By doing this project, I found that there is no right or wrong answer for how to decrease teen pregnancy. All of the people I talked to, adults or teens, agreed that this was something that shouldn’t happen – that teens are not emotionally or financially ready and are not able to handle the responsibility of having a baby. So many things are either risked or sacrificed, including each teen’s social life, ability to succeed, self-esteem and relationship with their parents and family.

There are many valiant efforts being made, but none are going to solve the problem by themselves. Some even argue that programs like abstinence-only education in schools actually increases the problem rather than helping it. But small steps are being taken to make change happen a little at a time. The greatest struggle
is that as teens grow up earlier because of the culture or region they live in, teen pregnancy isn’t as scary or as much of a thing to avoid as it used to be. So many of the girls I met just dealt with it as if it was just “something that happens,” rather than an isolated incident.

Teens are sexually active younger and more often, which puts them at a greater risk. Teen pregnancy has almost become an accepted phenomenon, and the solution has been to put more emphasis on how to help the girls that have babies in high school more than how to prevent them from having children in the first place. While the odds are against them, there are still some who are able to succeed. Some still graduate from high school, go to college and accomplish things in their lives. Now it is important to find out how to make that happen for more teen mothers than it does now.
Bethany Perkins, 17, waits for the bell to ring to leave her family and consumer sciences class. It was her last day at John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky., before she went home to await the birth of her son, Johnathan.

Fifteen and Pregnant

They didn’t think it would happen. That’s what most of the girls said when they were asked how they became pregnant. Somewhere inside them was the naivety that made them feel immune. But when the pregnancy test stick revealed a pink plus sign, the realization was a total shock.

School programs and community organizations tried their best to step in. They formed after-school activities, awareness groups and curriculums to educate teens on the risks of early pregnancy. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reported that four out of ten young women would become pregnant at least once before age 20, and the programs wanted to change that. But teens continue to make poor decisions that result in the birth of a child,
something they aren’t ready to deal with when they were still 14 or 15 years old.

Peggy Snow and Pat Bohannon work with the teen mothers at John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky. Each year they have new teens with babies who came into their program, ExCEL – Experience Children’s Early Learning – to learn more about parenting and have somewhere safe for their children to stay while they finish high school. This year they had more freshmen and sophomores entering their program that already had babies. Being pregnant is especially traumatizing for girls who were that young, Snow said.

The teens who need help the most are usually the ones whose babies were the least of their troubles. They are also the hardest ones to reach. They struggle with truancy, poor grades in classes, drugs and alcohol and difficult home lives. A few will eventually have another child while in the program as they shift their search for acceptance from one boy to another.

Teenage mothers and fathers who try to stay together usually don’t work out. “With those that try to stay together, either the relationship wasn’t stable or the boys run away because they aren’t ready for it,” Bohannon said. When the babies are born, the teen mothers and their families usually try to force the father to file for paternity. Only about half of them actually get support from the father.

The one thing they all have in common is a jolt to their reality. It is no more hanging out with friends on a whim, or going off without planning what they would need or when they would get back. They now have responsibilities. The lives of their babies depend on them.

***

Amber’s Story

Rushing through the door after school, Amber Phillips quickly kisses her 8-month-old daughter, Zymeria, and passes her over to her mother. Amber has just a few minutes to change
and grab her things to get to her tanning appointment. Prom is in just two weeks, and her tan needed to be perfect. It’s her senior year, after all.

Amber Phillips, 17, spends part of the sunny afternoon outside with friends from her neighborhood. She is waiting until she turns 18 to move out of her mother’s home to go to college. She and her 8-month-old daughter, Zymeria, live there in Knoxville until Amber graduates from high school. She plans to go to University of Tennessee to Study law. She likes being a mother, but it isn’t what she expected. “She definitely makes some things harder,” she said. She has to juggle her time between Zymeria, her friends and school.

Amber, 17, has goals. She wants to get out of her mother’s home and knows she could make something of her life. Her small two-bedroom home in Knoxville, Tenn., that she shares with her mom sits in the shadow of the University of Tennessee. She will be walking the line to receive her high school diploma at the end of the month, and she already has her sights set on an apartment closer to the college campus.
Amber is going to law school.

Her arguing talent is evident, standing bold in her care for her daughter and asking the tough questions in FYI – For Your Information – a peer education program through Planned Parenthood about sex and pregnancy.

Amber has to be back in time for her FYI meeting. Her friends, Brittny and Vanessa – also teen moms – will pick her up to go in less than an hour. She heads toward the front door to her friend who is waiting to drive her, but stops for a moment before leaving.

“Hey Zy-Zy! Aw, I love you!” Amber says as she picks up Zymeria from her mom. She gives her a big squeeze and hands her back. “I'll be back soon.”

With teenage pregnancy comes a high rate of fatherless babies, but Amber and her boyfriend, Demetrius Hall, 19, have stayed together. She isn’t sure if they will get married.

Amber’s mother, Maurelia, is a huge help with Zymeria’s care, watching her when Amber had school events, a meeting with FYI, or just wants to go out with her friends. “I wanted Amber to graduate, so I take care of her most of the time,” she said.

That evening after FYI, Amber gets a phone call from a friend she hasn’t seen in a while.
What starts as a cheerful conversation quickly turns serious. Shantaye is afraid she is pregnant. Should she get an abortion? “Just think about it before you try to get an abortion,” she tells her.

Maurelia overheard the conversation and said she cried when she found out Amber was pregnant. “I was only 18 when I had my first. I didn’t want her to be like that,” she said. “They don’t realize the way it steals their youth.”

![Image of Amber and her child](image.jpg)

Amber gives advice to her friend, Shantaye, who just found out that she’s pregnant. “Just think about it before you try to get an abortion,” she told her. Amber’s mother, who overheard the conversation, said she cried when she found out that Amber was pregnant. “I was only 18 when I had my first. I didn’t want her to be like that,” she said.

**Nece’s Story**

On a sunny April afternoon, Breyona “Nece” Holland takes her 7-month-old baby Michelle to Lampkin Park in Bowling Green, Ky. She stops at her grandmother’s house after school, who insists she take advantage of the nice weather.

Nece, 18, is struggling to finish high school. She was failing English, and while she could have done summer school she decided it would be easier to drop out. “I’m going to get my
GED and go to college,” she said of her future plans. Taking care of Michelle is taking too much of her time right now, she said.

Michelle Holland, 7 months, waits for her lunch while her mother, Nece Holland, 18, prepares it in the other room. Holland was shocked when she found out she was pregnant. “I didn’t know what to do,” she said.

The tiny baby in her belly was nearly four months developed when she hurt her knee in a basketball game. It wasn’t until the doctor did some blood tests at the hospital that she even knew she was pregnant.

“I was scared at first because I was so far along,” she said.

She was forced to quit Bowling Green High School’s basketball team. Now, instead of playing, she brings Michelle with her to games to watch her former teammates play.

There is so much to keep up with caring for Michelle – doctor’s visits, making sure she has enough to eat, preparing her bottles, changing diapers and buying clothes. Her family helps her
when they can, usually her grandparents.

Nece is certain she wanted to go to college. She wants her baby to have everything, and college is the obvious first step.

Nece takes Michelle out for an afternoon at the park. Though she lives on her own, she spends most of her time at her grandmother’s home. Her grandmother made her come out with Michelle to enjoy the nice weather.

Nece had to make some difficult decisions as a result of having a child in high school. Initially she had to quit basketball, and she said taking care of Michelle caused her to fail English. She dropped out of high school and plans to get her GED.
Megan’s Story

Megan Mercer always wanted a baby.

Megan is 17 and a little slower than most of her classmates, held back a year in high school. She is only a junior, and hopes to finally get out of high school so she can go to the local technical college and get at least an associates degree in Spanish. Her first choice is Western Kentucky University, if she could be accepted, though her older sister doubts her ability to do so. Megan comes down to Bowling Green on a regular basis from her town of Leitchfield, Ky., to visit friends. Most of the time she lives with her father and her 25-year-old sister, Tiffany, and her sister’s two kids.

While she receives assistance from the school during the day in the Early Head Start program, Megan Mercer, 17, has to spend most of her time at home caring for her 6-month-old daughter, Shakira, and her older sister’s two children, Shahaley, 5, and Cadence, 1. Tiffany, 25, leaves the children to Megan while she spends her time on the phone in the house that they share together. Their parents are divorced, with their mother living out of state and their father mostly on the road. “Most of my day is like this,” Megan said.
Between the two, Megan acts more like the older sister, caring for the three children while Tiffany closes herself up in her room, texting and chatting with friends on her cell phone. While she sits idly on the couch, Megan is stuck wrangling the kids, forcing them to sit down with their Kid Cuisine TV dinners in front of the television.

“They (the other teen moms) could learn from her,” Tiffany said. Megan is good at taking care of all the kids by herself, she said.

Megan doesn’t have many friends in her school, which is one reason she wanted a baby so much. “It gives me something to do,” she said.

On many weekends, Mercer comes to Bowling Green with Shakira to spend time with her boyfriend, Esteban, 20, an immigrant from Mexico. “It’s alright coming here, I guess,” she said. She had only known Esteban for a couple of weeks before coming to spend the weekend with him for the first time. They havea difficult time communicating because of the language barrier.

After school, her new boyfriend, Esteban, 20, picks her up from her home and drives her to his family’s house across the tracks from WKU in Bowling Green. Her ex-boyfriend, Shakira’s
father, lived in the same area of town and hung with the same crowd. Shortly after her birth he was deported back to Mexico. His child support checks didn’t last longer than five months after he left.

It is her first overnight visit to see Esteban after only knowing him a couple of weeks. She nervously eyes the small house as she set her things in his bedroom. They have a nice weekend planned ahead: some lazy hours together, just the three of them, maybe an hour or two at Lampkin Park down the street. She holds onto Shakira tightly as they sit in the living room, chatting with Esteban’s brother and his girlfriend. The girlfriend and Megan quickly realize they both dated the same Hispanic guy before: it was the one right after Shakira’s father, Megan said.

The conversations are in short sentences and a lot of gestures, with the girls not knowing much Spanish and the guys struggling with their own limited English vocabulary.

Megan hopes things will eventually get better.

Jessica’s Story

It really could take just one time. Jessica Rose, 18, of Madison, Tenn., was reeling from a broken relationship, only the second “grown-up” boyfriend she had. She had put all of herself into it. They dated seriously for a year before he broke up with her.

She was devastated. “This was the boy I thought I was going to marry,” she said.

Searching for some comfort in her loneliness, she reconnected with her first boyfriend for one night. He wasn’t the same person he was before. He had never been a good influence and had since turned to drinking and living on the edge.

She was vulnerable. He took advantage.

Weeks passed and she was ashamed of what had happened, sickened by that one weak
moment. How could she have let it come to this? She was the church-going, baby-sitting, responsible girl that no one would expect to lose her virginity that way.

She missed her period. She took a pregnancy test. Then another. And another. She eventually took what she thought amounted to nearly a dozen, and each time the plus sign proved the same result.

She couldn’t believe it. She was pregnant.

She could barely bring herself to tell her parents, whose traditional family values would be shaken. They would be devastated, she thought. But she got up the courage and told them. To her surprise, they were still supportive through their disappointment.

Ever since she had Evelyn Rose, she refused to tell the father. After all, he had nothing to do with her life and he didn’t deserve to know. He eventually found out through a mutual friend that she had a baby, and he called to congratulate her. She still didn’t tell him. He didn’t need to be in Evelyn’s life.

Jessica has done her best to move on, and has a new, steady boyfriend, one that accepts her. She met him at the Walgreens where he worked, and it didn’t take long for her to ask him out. What’s best is he adores Evelyn. Jessica wouldn’t date him if he didn’t.

**Bethany’s Story**

A brand new mother sits in the living room of the trailer she shares with her mom in Radcliff, Ky., carefully holding her two-week-old baby boy across her lap. She stares into his eyes, falling in love with his baby blues.

Bethany Perkins, 17, doesn’t have much else to look forward to, no friends to hang out with or places to go, so little Johnathan is the best thing in her life.
Bethany’s mom, Denise, had her brother when she was 16. So when she found out Bethany was pregnant, she was disappointed at first, but she understood what she was going through.

Bethany’s boyfriend, Bradley, is still around. She was worried at first that he would leave when she told him she was pregnant. “I have a friend who as soon as her baby’s dad found out, he left her and she was by herself. I was scared at first that he was going to, but I knew better.”

Bethany says he will be there whether or not they stay together because of Johnathan. He wants to be there for his son.

Before she and Bradley met at the state fair, she didn’t think she would ever do anything to risk getting pregnant. After talking the entire night and then going out on dates together, she was in love.

While waiting for Johnathan’s arrival, Bradley wouldn’t show how excited he really was, she said. But she knew on the inside he was proud.

As she reached the end of her pregnancy, she knew school was going to get tough when Johnathan arrived. Already held back a year, she was afraid she was going to fail school. “It’s no fun being in high school, trying to graduate and stuff and being pregnant.”

Bethany has it all planned out, though. Her mom will help take care of Johnathan when she needs a break or has homework to do. As long as her mom isn’t working her night shift at the Hampton Inn, she said.

Not long after Johnathan was born, Bradley had barbed wire tattooed around his bicep with his son’s name underneath. The 17-year-old is proud of his son, Bethany said.

Alexia’s Story

Alexia Billingsley comes home from school with little to do but sit with her daughter on the
couch and watch cartoons. Her school day is short, dismissed at 11 a.m. She attends Ombudsman in Nashville, Tenn., a special learning school for students who need more one-on-one attention than they would receive at normal schools. Most of the students there have trouble with truancy or behavioral problems. The rest of her time is spent with her daughter, 5-month-old Mailha.

Alexia Billingsley, 17, gives herself and her daughter, Mailha, a break from the darkness of their living room to enjoy a bit of the sunny weather outside. Her mother, Martha, and a neighbor discuss problems with their apartments in a set of government housing units in Nashville. One was still finding cockroaches behind the refrigerator, while the other was complaining of a yellow substance running down the walls of her kitchen.

Alexia and her two brothers moved with their mom from Chattanooga only a year and a half ago. She got pregnant not long after they moved. They live in the rough area of east Nashville where they and many of their neighbors face the same plight, supported by food stamps and government assistance, many without steady jobs. Alexia’s mother has been out of a job for several months and sits at home with her during the day, reminding her when Mailha needs to
be fed while going through bills and making phone calls to find work.

Most of Alexia’s day is spent on the couch with Mailha. Her only outings are usually to the grocery store, or to meet with her counselor at Ombudsman.

Alexia’s mother, Martha, gives Mailha a kiss on the cheek. She often helps Alexia with caring for Mailha, giving her tips on how to get her to eat and pointing out when Mailha needs a diaper change.

Alexia gives Mailha a spoonful of Gerber baby cereal in their sparsely decorated apartment. She lives with her mother and two brothers, one older and one younger. She doesn’t know her father’s daughter anymore, and isn’t sure where he is. Her mother is currently jobless, though makes phone calls trying to find one, counting on the good will of some of her former temporary employers.
Barbie’s Story

Barbie White spends her afternoons much differently than she did before Mason. She rides a special bus home from John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky., one that is specially designed to carry her and the other teen moms and be able to buckle in the car seats, securing their precious passengers.

Barbie White’s life is completely reversed from the one she lived before having her son, Mason. She got pregnant at 16, during a time when she was addicted to drugs and alcohol. Mason motivated her to clean up her behavior, now that she had someone else to think about who would suffer the consequences of her actions.

The house is empty and quiet when she walks through the door. Her mother isn’t home, to her relief, and her 4-year-old sister is away, too. “When my mom is home, things fly,” Barbie said. “We don’t get along very well.”

Barbie, 17, moved back in with her mother after living with her grandmother for five years.
Her mother had been addicted to drugs and alcohol, so Barbie’s grandmother took her out of her mom’s care.

Barbie had her own addictions to deal with. She and Robby met when she was 12, and started dating when she was 15. Both were heavy into drugs and pushed their boundaries, partying constantly and shoplifting. Robby was always doing drugs, and Barbie was always on probation or in court for another violation.

Barbie rubs the top of Mason’s head, trying to console him while she talks on the phone to Robby.

Eight months after they got together, Barbie discovered she was pregnant. “I kinda knew – but that was a wake-up call because I was high when I found out. I was like, ‘Oh, man.’”

Her grandmother wouldn’t speak to her after she told her the news. She never came around about the subject and always kept her distance. She kicked Barbie out of the house, leaving Barbie nowhere to go but her mother’s. Her grandmother had her first child at 15. She was ashamed her granddaughter was doing the same.
“I think it’s our wonderful little legacy,” Barbie said.

Now after having Mason, her grandmother only likes to feed him sometimes. She mostly ignores the fact that her 17-year-old granddaughter has a 1-year-old son. “Me and Robby have a theory that she wants me to have as much trouble as she had.”

Her mother’s ex-husband was more of a father to her than her real dad, who had nearly nothing to do with her life. So when she became pregnant, her former stepfather was the one she had to answer to. “He found out I was pregnant and I haven’t talked to him since. He sent me a Mother’s Day card that said ‘Pat, XOXO.’” She used to call him “Dad.”

Barbie was born into a broken family situation. As a result, she feels she practically raised herself, making her own difficult decisions and relying on herself for guidance. When she was still in elementary school, she watched TV shows that depicted explicit scenes. A favorite was the show “Talk Sex” that featured callers asking an expert for help with their sex lives.

At 14, the constant barrage of sexual information and the pressure from other teens was too much. She wanted to get the questioning and wondering behind her. “I decided I wanted to get the virginity thing over with, so I did three guys,” she said.

But now, living with her reformed drug-addict mother without a job, Barbie is just waiting for high school to end so she could move on. Robby, now 21, helps to buy what clothes, food and diapers Barbie can’t get with her WIC and food stamps. She can’t get a job after losing one at Little Caesar’s because she still has shoplifting on her record. She was fired because they said she asked for too many days off once when Mason was seriously ill.

She has cleaned up her behavior. It’s all for Mason, she said. She is no longer failing her classes and she makes the honor roll. Barbie put the drugs and alcohol behind her. She wants Mason to have a good childhood, not one like she had.
Barbie and Maurissa Heady, another teen mom in the ExCEL program at John Hardin High School, swap babies during lunchtime.

Barbie looks forward to the end of school. She doesn’t like high schoolers, finding them too trivial and immature. For now she is just waiting for the end of the school year to rid herself and Mason of John Hardin, her mother’s house, and Radcliff.

Their plans are uncertain but they know where to start: she and Robby will get married, whether or not Barbie’s family finally decides to accept him. They’ll slowly make their way to New York and shake the south off their shoes. First it will be Elizabethtown, then Louisville, then Cincinnati, then on up to the Big Apple. When they can afford it. The only thing they have is each other and their little family.
Brittany’s Story

“Oh, she’s so cute!” Michelle Miller cries, holding onto her sister’s baby, Brooklyn. She bounces the 6-month-old in her lap as Brooklyn’s mom, Brittany Miller, keeps a watchful eye. Michelle, 14, has a friend visiting from across the street who is equally in awe of the cute little baby and her laughing smile, cooing at her and teasing her with a wind-up toy.

Brittany opted to stay in that night, only allowing herself to spend three hours at a time away from Brooklyn. Those are the only times she hung out with her friends.

Brittany loves her daughter, but it isn’t what she envisioned. “Not this soon. I always wanted a baby, but not now.”

She kept the news from her parents for two months, hiding her growing belly. She finally broke the news to her mother and aunt, who helped her gather the courage to tell her dad. At first, he was furious. But by the time his first granddaughter was born, he was a little happier about it. It was hard to look at a newborn and not smile.

Brittany lives with her grandparents because it’s easier. She has more space there, and they are more eager to help. After work each day, her parents come over to see the family.

She isn’t concerned about knowing how to care for Brooklyn. She had experience with children before. “I took care of my little cousin when he was a baby and he’s 5 now. I don’t think it’s as bad as everybody thinks it is,” she said.

On some evenings and on the weekends she works at McDonald’s down the street from her house and at Aeropostale at the mall. She earns the money to pay for most of Brooklyn’s needs, though she doesn’t have to worry about rent or car insurance or paying for her cell phone. Her parents and grandparents provide those things to her.

She is close to graduating, and wants to eventually get an associate’s degree at Draughon’s
Junior College. Brittany hopes to follow in the footsteps of her aunt and mother to enter the medical field as a nurse. She has good intentions, but she isn’t sure when she will finally get around to college.

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‘Babies are the new handbag’

Celebrities and famous faces in the media make it look cool. Jamie Lynn Spears, who was once one of the “good girls” of the Disney channel, had a baby and was forced to quit her show “Zoe 101.” Her devoted young fans still followed her. Even Bristol Palin, the daughter of former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, caused a stir as she showed up at rallies to support her mother, boasting a full 6-month belly and her boyfriend by her side. Some reports say these high-profile pregnancies are making babies appear to be a popular accessory. One article, published by Macleans in Canada, said they were afraid the babies were becoming as fashionable to teenagers as a new purse.

The movie “Juno” is also wildly popular among teens. It portrays the sappy story of a confused teenage girl who accidentally becomes pregnant by a close friend. The circumstances are some that many teens are probably familiar with – they were just curious. Juno decides to give the baby up for adoption, and a few awkward moments and uncomfortable scenes later, she is baby-free and back to her normal teenage life.

Even walking through local malls, sparsely-clothed mannequins bombard teens, staring through shop windows, and flaunting the current fashions. Teens frequent stores like Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister and Victoria’s Secret, picking and choosing through the short shorts, low-cut shirts and pants with slogans across the back pockets.
Sex symbols abound in America’s society, from racy television shows and commercials to nearly-nude models in store fronts at the mall. A group of young girls walk through Rivergate Mall in Goodlettsville, Tenn., where stores like Abercrombie & Fitch frequently use shirtless male models and scantily clad photos of women in their advertising.

Television shows portray tough life situations and adult content. Many shows that are popular among teens, such as “Sex and the City,” “Friends” and “Grey’s Anatomy” deal with adult issues and displayed sexual encounters that are beyond teens’ maturity level.

A study conducted by RAND between 2001 and 2004 found that teens who are frequently exposed to television shows with heavy sexual content are nearly twice as likely to become pregnant – or to make someone else pregnant. Anita Chandra, a behavioral scientist at RAND, told NPR in 2008 that the sexual behaviors on television can give teens the misconception that there is little risk in sexual activity without the use of contraceptives. Most of the shows do not portray any type of safe-sex practices, and virtually none of them show any negative consequences.
Tori Huber, 16, and her boyfriend watch her favorite show, “Sex and the City,” in the den of her family’s home in Hopkinsville, Ky. Huber owns all of the seasons of the provocative show on DVD. Her mother, tired of the language and subject content she was hearing, finally switched off the TV when a sex scene popped up.

Family influences are just as important as the cultural ones. Just like Brittany, who is only 18, who spends much of her time around her 14-year-old sister, Michelle, and often lets her watch Brooklyn. The side of parenting Michelle sees is the fun side, sitting in the floor playing peek-a-boo or picking out her tiny outfits. And when she becomes tired of having to change diapers or hearing Brooklyn cry, she gives her back to Brittany. It isn’t permanent.

Because of her own impressionable age, a research study conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy said Michelle could be more likely to become pregnant. The children of teen parents are even more likely to have babies young.

When a teenager walks out of his or her home and into the world, influences come from the music in the car, blaring pop and rap music, and from storefronts displaying sexy clothing. These expressions of fashion and culture are taken in differently by different teens, which depends
Brittany Miller, 18, keeps a watchful eye as her sister, Melissa, 14, holds her daughter, Michelle. Of all the things that influence adolescents, one of the biggest is family. According to a research study conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a teenage girl is more likely to become pregnant if she has a family member, especially her mother or a sister, who had a child at a young age.

largely on their family involvement and upbringing, as well as their own awareness of what those symbols mean.

When Brittany’s grandmother leaves the room, Michelle jumps up and changes the TV from the news to BET. Immediately, she begins mimicking the suggestive moves of the girls in bikinis on the TV screen, shifting from side to side and shaking her hips.

Even in a place that should be a controlled environment, such as a bowling alley, things are not as supervised as they should be. At the Circus World Family Fun Center in Hendersonville, Tenn., a group of friends hang out in the corner of the empty café, just sitting and talking.

“We come here when we’re bored,” said Kimberly Evans, 16. Though Hendersonville is only 20 miles from Nashville, the teenagers usually spend their time in their hometown. There aren’t many options, so they usually end up at each others’ homes, or the bowling alley. They don’t bowl, but just sit along the edges in the empty booths.
Lauren Higgins, 16, center, and Keith Farmer, 18, are affectionate in public while they hang out with their friends Verena Pennington, 15, left, and Kimberly Evans, 16, at the Circus World Family Fun Center bowling alley in Hendersonville, Tenn. They come to the bowling alley most weekends. “This area doesn’t have a lot of places to hang out,” Evans said.

Parent-child relationships have everything to do with how likely a girl is to become pregnant. Peggy Snow, youth services coordinator for John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky., says girls search for love and care in the form of a boyfriend, oftentimes trying to fill voids in their family life.

“They’re finding a boy that says, ‘I care about you,’” says Pat Bohannon, director of the ExCEL program. “There is a direct correlation in the relationship they have with their father, or don’t have.”

Many of the girls who end up pregnant come from a single-parent home, most often the mother being the only caregiver. Many have a difficult home life or a lack of involvement from their parents. “Teen pregnancy is a symptom of other things that are going on,” Bohannon said.

Handbooks and web sites such as teenpregnancy.org and resource guides for teaching adolescents about responsible sex habits say the most likely time for a teen to have sex is right
after school when there is the smallest amount of supervision, out of the sight of adults. When they are out with friends, peer pressure is also a major contributor.

**Is knowledge power?**

It is hard to know what it is like from the outside. The constant attention, the crying, waking up all hours of the night for feeding. For that reason, many schools have programs in place to give teens a taste of what it would be like to have to fit a baby into their already hectic teenage lives.

*Alicia Miller, 17, talks with her friends during lunch period at Warren Central High School. She had to carry her virtual baby with her wherever she went to get a true experience of what it was like to be a young mother.*

“I failed the first time, so I’m trying it again,” said Alicia Miller, 17. She sits in the hallway outside her health classroom at Warren Central High School in Bowling Green, Ky., leaning against the blue lockers that line the walls. She feeds a bottle to an electronic baby, listening as it makes the slurping noises of a real baby boy.
The first time she carted the virtual baby home, she slept through the baby’s cries in the middle of the night. It never woke her up. Her dad had to come and get her to let her know it had been crying.

“When you’re a parent you can’t do that – you can’t ignore it like that,” Miller said.

With a real baby, there are no do-overs. There are no pretend dirty diapers and no fake bottles to prepare.

Alicia sits out in the hallway when the baby starts crying. It was time to feed the baby and burp it. “The only thing that doesn’t feel real is that it’s plastic,” she said. She and the other students in her health class were required to take a virtual baby home for at least 24 hours. Because she had failed the first time, she was taking it home for a whole weekend.

Scooter Lightfoot, a basketball player, chose to write a lengthy paper about parenting to avoid taking the fake baby home. With a heavy school schedule and basketball season in full swing, having to take care of a baby would have interfered.

“I just can’t imagine having a baby right now. My career ain’t set,” he said. The 17-year-old thought that other teens with babies have it tough financially, and that they probably don’t have any free time.
The virtual babies and their needs are so realistic that a student even fooled a nurse when she took one with her to the hospital.

Having one in the household just for the required 24-hour period they care for one changes everything. Miller missed out on a party with friends because she had to stay home and pretend to change diapers and pat the back of a plastic doll.

Now she knows what it was like for her mom, she said. Her mother had her at 16. Her younger sister helped with the virtual baby and though she had long wanted a baby, she realizes now isn’t the time. It’s too much work, she said.

“The only thing that doesn’t feel real is that it’s plastic,” Miller said.

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“SEX!”

Conrad Blake’s neon yellow sign screams the word out to evening motorists passing in front of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville. Three of his peers stand in front of him along the side of the highway, and one behind, flashing their bright signs that spell out an important message:

“Everyone Needs More Sex Education.”

They form the inaugural group of students in For Your Information, FYI, in the Knoxville Planned Parenthood organization. The group’s philosophy is to arm the teenagers with knowledge, and when their peers have questions about sex, they know who to ask. Teens are going to go to their friends anyway to search for answers to their tough questions about sex, condoms and how to tell their parents they’re pregnant.

Ginny Winter, FYI’s director, fills the eight teens with the knowledge their peers so desperately need.
Weekly, the group meets with Winter to ask questions that other teens ask them. No topic is off limits: How do you put on a condom? How do you know if you’re pregnant? Should you get an abortion?

Winter gives them the best answers, along with a generous supply of colorful condoms to give to their friends, should they ask for them. Four of the eight teens in the group are already parents.

Conrad Blake, 16, and members of the FYI – For Your Information, a group at the Planned Parenthood in Knoxville, Tenn., hold signs on the side of the road promoting sex education in the local school systems. Right now, the curriculum is abstinence-only, which many feel prevents teens from getting the knowledge they need to keep themselves safe and protected. The eight teens in the group held up signs that read “Everyone Needs More Sex Education” and “Honk for Choice.”

On this day, VOX, a Planned Parenthood group at University of Tennessee, came to talk to FYI about sex education. Is it better? They thought so. Currently, Tennessee’s curriculum calls for abstinence-only education, which some say makes it more likely for teens to get pregnant.
rather than to prevent it, Winter said. When they are taught abstinence-only in the schools, safe sex practices are not covered. Planned Parenthood calls for sex education to enter Tennessee schools.

As they stand on the roadside, drivers honk their horns, some even yelling out their windows in support.

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Emily Tan, 18, center, and Sidney Simmons, 18, act out a skit about decision making with the PG-13 Players at Stratford High School in Nashville, Tenn. The Players, a program organized by Planned Parenthood, perform at Nashville-area high schools, presenting difficult teenage issues including alcohol, relationships and sexual decision making. Their performances help to raise awareness with teens and encourages them to ask the tough questions. “It catches their attention,” Tan said of the skits. “But then they get interested, and then they get into it.”

Emily Tan stands in front of the class, pretending to be drunk and wanting to go to a friend’s house. “What’s the problem? I’m fine! I’m not drunk at all!” she yells to the teen beside her, tottering back and forth.

The students in the Stratford High School consumer sciences classroom watch with mixed
levels of interest as Sidney Simmons tries to convince Tan that she shouldn’t drink under age.

Tan and Simmons, both 18, are acting out a scene in a skit about wise decision-making with the PG-13 Players. It is another group organized by Planned Parenthood, this one in Nashville, Tenn. The small group of teens in the Metro school system spends time writing, rehearsing and acting out skits that address what they think are important issues to students their age. They talk about things like depression, drugs and alcohol, HIV and sex.

They hope that with this program they are able to make a difference. “We’re teenagers, just like them. What’s important is they can relate to it,” Tan said.

**Stepping in**

Fartun Omar, 17, carefully picks a green seven from her two remaining cards.

“Uno!” she cries with an accent, a smile spreading across her face. She is holding a Wild Draw Four card in her hand. Next turn around, her opponents have no chance at keeping her from winning.

Omar and her friend Lote Guye, 16, sit around a table in the lobby with cancer patients living at Hope Harbor, run by the American Cancer Society. The Ethiopian teens participate in community involvement projects a couple of times a week with the Oasis Center in Nashville. Some days they read to seniors, visit colleges to talk about their future or fill food bags at the Second Harvest Food Bank. This week, it’s time for Uno.

Jonna Laidlaw has all refugees and immigrants in her group. There are several groups at the Oasis Center that vary by age and school, but this one is unique because of its diversity. It is a collaboration of young people from different cultures.
The Oasis Center in Nashville, Tenn., believes that keeping teenagers involved in extracurricular activities is a valuable preventative tool against early pregnancy. The center takes at-risk teens and involves them in the community. Fartun Omar, 17, second from left, and Lote Guye, 16, both originally from Ethiopia, play Uno at the American Cancer Society’s Hope Harbor center with patients Mary Judd, far left, Bob Judd, far right and James Bates. The teens are part of a group of teens from high school who have bi-weekly community service. Immigrants and refugees are at a greater risk of becoming pregnant because they are trying to fit in and be accepted by their fellow American students.

Participation in an after-school program is crucial in preventing many inner-city teenagers from becoming involved in risky or dangerous activities. Especially for teens who are new to the country, who are just trying to find a way to fit in. They want to be a part of something.

“They want to be American,” Laidlaw said. “They’re in the midst of adolescence, so they’re rebelling against their family.”

For that reason, too many teens from China, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and other countries find themselves wrapped up in the groups that are fastest to invite them in. Often, these are the teens involved in gang activity, drugs and alcohol, and sex.

“With a lot of my kids, sex isn’t something discussed at home. They don’t learn until marriage,” Laidlaw said. Instead, teens who come to the United States from other countries learn from other American teens.

Part of the funding for the after-school programs comes from grants to help prevent teen
pregnancy. Because of their desire to find a place to belong, teenage immigrants and refugees are at a particularly high risk of getting in trouble, and getting pregnant. The Oasis Center is trying to change that.

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Brianna Hall, 15, carefully studies the drink selections on the Starbucks menu board. There are so many choices: Caramel frappuccino? Café mocha? “I think I’ll just have apple juice,” she tells the cashier as she picks up a juice box from the cooler.

Hanging out with her friends after youth group at Northeast Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., Brianna settles at a table with her church friends in the middle of the café. While they laugh together, teasing one boy about his disheveled hair, her mother laughs too, enjoying a cold mocha frappuccino at the table next to them.

After youth group service at Northeast Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., Brianna Hall, 15, hangs out with friends. Hall made the decision to wear a purity ring to keep herself until marriage, a popular symbol among Christian youth of their dedication to Christ. “We didn’t want to ask her to do it because then it wasn’t from her heart, but we prayed about it,” said her mother, Kay Hall.
Kay Hall is proud of her daughter’s choice to stay pure until marriage. The home schooled daughter of a pastor starting up his own church ministry in their home, she decided to get a purity ring.

“We didn’t want to ask her to do it because then it wasn’t from her heart, but we prayed about it,” Kay said. When Brianna approached her father, the two went out for a nice breakfast together, a date of sorts. Then they went to a local Christian bookstore and selected a ring with a small cross on it, which she wore on her right hand as a constant reminder. They also got a certificate, declaring the promise she had made between her parents, God, herself and her future spouse.

“This ring won’t leave my finger until a wedding ring is put on it,” Brianna said.

Help within the school systems

Her mother had her at 16, her grandmother had her mother at 16, and her great-grandmother was pregnant at 16. They expected her to do the same. It was the way it was in her family.

Though it sounds unique, Peggy Snow has seen a few cases like it. Teens pass through her office door daily, searching for help with a homework assignment, to grab some candy pumpkins off her desk at Halloween, or just to confide in her about a difficult evening at home.

Some students come in because they are pregnant. She hears stories about one’s boyfriend who ran off when he found out, or another’s mom that threatened to kick the pregnant teen out of her home. Many come from dysfunctional families. Which is why so many come to her.

She has stories about all kinds of girls who have traversed John Hardin High School’s hallways. “She was 17 and living in a trailer, just her and the baby - it took some time, but she
got to being a pretty good little mom,” she remembers of a girl who had been through the program a few years before.

Snow and Pat Bohannon see their jobs as crucial in helping to turn the girls toward a brighter future.

Pat Bohannon, director of the ExCEL program at John Hardin High School, feeds strained vegetables to 6-month-old Audrey during lunch time. Bohannon cares for 15 babies and toddlers of teen moms while they are in class.

Their is a unique program. Girls who come through there live in all areas of Hardin County. If they attend a different high school, they still can come to John Hardin. There is a bussing system in place for that – a short school bus that car seats can be secured in. ExCEL is set in place to teach child development and to prevent dropouts among teen mothers.

But they only have room for 15 girls. There are still other teens who don’t get the help they need. At least for the ones in the program, they hope their involvement makes an impact.

“Even if we can’t reach the parents, at least we’ve been able to help the kids,” Bohannon said, who has been working with the girls for eight years.

A couple of counties over, a similar program exists in Grayson County. Linda Wright, the
Even though the young mothers have added responsibilities, they’re still teens. Maurissa multi-tasks, reading a text message from a friend while feeding her daughter, Rahmya, strained carrots mixed with baby formula. “That’s a method I don’t think I’ve ever seen before,” Bohannon said to her, questioning the unusual concoction.

director, and the other caretakers do their best to guide eight teen mothers and teach them how to be better parents. The Early Head Start program, run by the health department, cares for newborns, infants and toddlers.

At the start of the day, student-mothers drop off their babies in a small building just outside a set of double doors at Grayson County High School. Early Head Start functions separate of the school. They don’t want the babies to disrupt the school day, and they don’t want the babies to seem like a prize as they carry them through the school.

While the mothers sit through lectures on civil rights and Spanish verb conjugation, Wright and the other two women coddle their infants and sing lullabies. At nap time, Wright curls up beside one on the floor, rubbing his back to soothe him to sleep. A cabinet in the room, right above the sign-in sheet, holds a library of books and VHS tapes covering an array of parenting topics: breast-feeding, discipline and healthy eating for baby.

At lunchtime the mothers come in and spent the hour with their children, always under
Wright’s watchful eye. Early Head Start provides lunch for the children and their mothers. Today it is fish sticks, corn and mashed potatoes. Wright makes it a point to join in on the conversation with the girls, getting to know what is going on in their lives.

They share stories about who asked them to prom, and what their dresses look like that they each so carefully picked out. One decided to rebel and wear a tuxedo instead of a dress.

The program fills a crucial need in the county, providing care for the babies and toddlers so their mothers can finish high school. Wright devotes herself to these children, giving the younger ones the attention they crave and teaching the older ones manners.

But she has misgivings. “Having a facility like this, it’s are you promoting teen pregnancy or are you just trying to help those that already are [mothers]? That’s the battle,” Wright said.

The teens that participate choose to do it, though sometimes it is court ordered. A waiting list holds the names of many teens eager to enter Early Head Start. The benefit of getting in is clear. “They learn from us as role models, and they get to stay in school and graduate,” Wright said. “But they still have that desire to be teenagers.”

Snow believes that although it might appear that the help is promoting teen pregnancy, it is crucial. “This is something that happens. This is reality. We need to have this,” she said.

The programs are expensive to run and receive state funding that some educators would rather see spent in other places, but Snow and Bohannon believe what they do is worth every penny. “My theory is pay now or pay later,” Snow said. Spending the money now to help them while they’re young can help to prevent them from needing to be on welfare or governmental assistance later. At least now they are enabling the teen mothers to complete their high school diploma and hopefully become successful young adults. “If we don’t help these girls graduate, it diminishes their likeliness to succeed,” Snow said.
Linda Wright is a caretaker at the Early Head Start center located inside Grayson County High School in Leitchfield, Ky. The high school has a high rate of teen pregnancy, so the family resources group decided to bring in the center to have a positive place for teen mothers to keep their children while they’re in school, where the children can be learning, too. “They learn from us as role models,” Wright said of the teens. “The question we face, though, is are we helping them as teen mothers in need or are we promoting it?”

Moving forward

As teenagers with children, the biggest struggle for many of them is continuing on with their lives and becoming successful. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that only 40 percent of teen mothers finish high school, with another 23 percent completing a GED. Between two and three percent receive a college degree by age 30.

Because they are less likely to finish their education, they are also less likely to land a well-paying job. Many of them end up on welfare, if their families were not already supported by it. A study by Child Trends, Inc. found that nearly 52 percent of mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager.

Are the programs working? The results of the preventative programs and the abstinence
education initiatives are mixed. Even having teen mothers enrolled in the few slots available to them within the assistance programs does not guarantee success.

Success depends largely on the independence and determination of each girl. Nece dropped out of high school to work, Megan continued to struggle with completing high school while taking care of her family, and Brittany graduated but worked at McDonald’s and continues to live with her grandparents.

A few do go to college, such as Amber, who went to study law, and Jessica, who is working on getting an associate’s degree at Volunteer State Community College.

Though the odds are against them, there is still hope. There are boundless opportunities ahead of the teen moms because they are still so young. They still have a chance to move on with their lives and be great.
Fifteen and Pregnant

They didn’t think it would happen. That’s what most of the girls said when they were asked how they became pregnant. Somewhere inside them was the naivety that made them feel immune. But when the pregnancy test stick revealed a pink plus sign, the realization was a total shock.

School programs and community organizations tried their best to step in. They formed after-school activities, awareness groups and curriculums to educate teens on the risks of early pregnancy. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reported that four out of ten young women would become pregnant at least once before age 20, and the programs wanted to change that. But teens continue to make poor decisions that result in the birth of a child, something they aren’t ready to deal with when they were still 14 or 15 years old.

Peggy Snow and Pat Bohannon work with the teen mothers at John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky. Each year they have new teens with babies who came into their program, ExCEL – Experience Children’s Early Learning – to learn more about parenting and have somewhere safe for their children to stay while they finish high school. This year they had more freshmen and sophomores entering their program that already had babies. Being pregnant is especially
traumatizing for girls who were that young, Snow said.

The teens who need help the most are usually the ones whose babies were the least of their troubles. They are also the hardest ones to reach. They struggle with truancy, poor grades in classes, drugs and alcohol and difficult home lives. A few will eventually have another child while in the program as they shift their search for acceptance from one boy to another.

Teenage mothers and fathers who try to stay together usually don’t work out. “With those that try to stay together, either the relationship wasn’t stable or the boys run away because they aren’t ready for it,” Bohannon said. When the babies are born, the teen mothers and their families usually try to force the father to file for paternity. Only about half of them actually get support from the father.

The one thing they all have in common is a jolt to their reality. It is no more hanging out with friends on a whim, or going off without planning what they would need or when they would get back. They now have responsibilities. The lives of their babies depend on them.

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**Amber’s Story**

Rushing through the door after school, Amber Phillips quickly kisses her 8-month-old daughter, Zymeria, and passes her over to her mother. Amber has just a few minutes to change and grab her things to get to her tanning appointment. Prom is in just two weeks, and her tan needed to be perfect. It’s her senior year, after all.

Amber, 17, has goals. She wants to get out of her mother’s home and knows she could make something of her life. Her small two-bedroom home in Knoxville, Tenn., that she shares with her mom sits in the shadow of the University of Tennessee. She will be walking the line to receive her high school diploma at the end of the month, and she already has her sights set on an apartment closer to the college campus.

Amber is going to law school.

Her arguing talent is evident, standing bold in her care for her daughter and asking the tough questions in FYI – For Your Information – a peer education program through Planned Parenthood about sex and pregnancy.

Amber has to be back in time for her FYI meeting. Her friends, Brittny and Vanessa – also teen moms – will pick her up to go in less than an hour. She heads toward the front door to her friend who is waiting to drive her, but stops for a moment before leaving.

“Hey Zy-Zy! Aw, I love you!” Amber says as she picks up Zymeria from her mom. She gives her a big squeeze and hands her back. “I’ll be back soon.”

Amber’s mother, Maurelia, is a huge help with Zymeria’s care, watching her when Amber had school events, a meeting with FYI, or just wants to go out with her friends. “I wanted Amber
Amber gives advice to her friend, Shantaye, who just found out that she’s pregnant. “Just think about it before you try to get an abortion,” she told her. Amber’s mother, who overheard the conversation, said she cried when she found out that Amber was pregnant. “I was only 18 when I had my first. I didn’t want her to be like that,” she said.

With teenage pregnancy comes a high rate of fatherless babies, but Amber and her boyfriend, Demetrius Hall, 19, have stayed together. She isn’t sure if they will get married.
to graduate, so I take care of her most of the time,” she said.

That evening after FYI, Amber gets a phone call from a friend she hasn't seen in a while. What starts as a cheerful conversation quickly turns serious. Shantaye is afraid she is pregnant. Should she get an abortion? “Just think about it before you try to get an abortion,” she tells her.

Maurelia overheard the conversation and said she cried when she found out Amber was pregnant. “I was only 18 when I had my first. I didn't want her to be like that,” she said. “They don't realize the way it steals their youth.”

The tiny baby in her belly was nearly four months developed when she hurt her knee in a basketball game. It wasn't until the doctor did some blood tests at the hospital that she even knew she was pregnant.

“I was scared at first because I was so far along,” she said.

She was forced to quit Bowling Green High School's basketball team. Now, instead of playing, she brings Michelle with her to games to watch her former teammates play.

There is so much to keep up with caring for Michelle – doctor's visits, making sure she has enough to eat, preparing her bottles, changing diapers and buying clothes. Her family helps her when they can, usually her grandparents.

Nece is certain she wanted to go to college. She wants her baby to have everything, and college is the obvious first step.

Nece’s Story

On a sunny April afternoon, Breyona “Nece” Holland takes her 7-month-old baby Michelle to Lampkin Park in Bowling Green, Ky. She stops at her grandmother's house after school, who insists she take advantage of the nice weather.

Nece, 18, is struggling to finish high school. She was failing English, and while she could have done summer school she decided it would be easier to drop out. “I'm going to get my GED and go to college,” she said of her future plans. Taking care of Michelle is taking too much of her time right now, she said.

Megan’s Story

Megan Mercer always wanted a baby. Megan is 17 and a little slower than most of her classmates, held back a year in high school. She is only a junior, and hopes to finally get out of high school so she can go to the local technical college and get at least an associates degree in Spanish. Her first choice is Western Kentucky University, if she could be accepted, though her older sister doubts her ability to do so. Megan comes down to Bowling Green on a regular basis from her town of Leitchfield, Ky. to visit friends. Most of the time she lives with her father and her 25-year-old sister, Tiffany, and her sister's two kids.

Between the two, Megan acts more like the older sister, caring for the three children while Tiffany closes herself up in her room, texting and chatting with friends on her cell phone. While she sits idly on the couch, Megan is stuck wrangling the kids, forcing them to sit down with their Kid Cuisine TV dinners in front of the television.

“They (the other teen moms) could learn from her,” Tiffany said. Megan is good at taking care of all the kids by herself, she said.

Megan doesn't have many friends in her school, which is one reason she wanted a baby so much. “It gives me something to do,” she said.

After school, her new boyfriend, Esteban, 20, picks her up from her home and drives her to his family's house across the tracks from WKU in Bowling Green. Her ex-boyfriend, Shakira's
Nece takes Michelle out for an afternoon at the park. Though she lives on her own, she spends most of her time at her grandmother’s home. Her grandmother made her come out with Michelle to enjoy the nice weather.

Nece had to make some difficult decisions as a result of having a child in high school. Initially she had to quit basketball, and she said taking care of Michelle caused her to fail English. She dropped out of high school and plans to get her GED.
father, lived in the same area of town and hung with the same crowd. Shortly after her birth he was deported back to Mexico. His child support checks didn't last longer than five months after he left.

It is her first overnight visit to see Esteban after only knowing him a couple of weeks. She nervously eyes the small house as she sets her things in his bedroom. They have a nice weekend planned ahead: some lazy hours together, just the three of them, maybe an hour or two at Lampkin Park down the street. She holds onto Shakira tightly as they sit in the living room, chatting with Esteban’s brother and his girlfriend. The girlfriend and Megan quickly realize they both dated the same Hispanic guy before: it was the one right after Shakira’s father, Megan said.

The conversations are in short sentences and a lot of gestures, with the girls not knowing much Spanish and the guys struggling with their own limited English vocabulary.

Megan hopes things will eventually get better.

Jessica’s Story

It really could take just one time. Jessica Rose, 18, of Madison, Tenn., was reeling from a broken relationship, only the second “grown-up” boyfriend she had. She had put all of herself into it. They dated seriously for a year before he broke up with her.

She was devastated. “This was the boy I thought I was going to marry,” she said.

Searching for some comfort in her loneliness, she reconnected with her first boyfriend for one night. He wasn’t the same person he was before. He had never been a good influence and had since turned to drinking and living on the edge.

She was vulnerable. He took advantage.

Weeks passed and she was ashamed of what had happened, sickened by that one weak moment. How could she have let it come to this? She was the church-going, baby-sitting, responsible girl that no one would expect to lose her virginity that way.

She missed her period. She took a pregnancy test. Then another. And another. She eventually took what she thought amounted to nearly a dozen, and each time the plus sign proved the same result.

She couldn’t believe it. She was pregnant.

She could barely bring herself to tell her parents, whose traditional family values would be shaken. They would be devastated, she thought. But she got up the courage and told them. To her surprise, they were still supportive through their disappointment.

Ever since she had Evelyn Rose, she refused to tell the father. After all, he had nothing to do with her life and he didn’t deserve to know. He eventually found out through a mutual friend that she had a baby, and he called to congratulate her. She still didn’t tell him. He didn’t need to be in Evelyn’s life.

Jessica has done her best to move on,
and has a new, steady boyfriend, one that accepts her. She met him at the Walgreens where he worked, and it didn't take long for her to ask him out. What's best is he adores Evelyn. Jessica wouldn't date him if he didn't.

Bethany's Story

A brand new mother sits in the living room of the trailer she shares with her mom in Radcliff, Ky., carefully holding her two-week-old baby boy across her lap. She stares into his eyes, falling in love with his baby blues.

Bethany Perkins, 17, doesn't have much else to look forward to, no friends to hang out with or places to go, so little Johnathan is the best thing in her life.

Bethany's mom, Denise, had her brother when she was 16. So when she found out Bethany was pregnant, she was disappointed at first, but she understood what she was going through.

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Bethany's boyfriend, Bradley, is still around. She was worried at first that he would leave when she told him she was pregnant. “I have a friend who as soon as her baby's dad found out, he left her and she was by herself. I was scared at first that he was going to, but I knew better.”

Bethany says he will be there whether or not they stay together because of Johnathan. He wants to be there for his son.

Before she and Bradley met at the state fair, she didn't think she would ever do anything to risk getting pregnant. After talking the entire night and then going out on dates together, she was in love.

While waiting for Johnathan's arrival, Bradley wouldn't show how excited he really was, she said. But she knew on the inside he was proud.

As she reached the end of her pregnancy, she knew school was going to get tough when Johnathan arrived. Already held back a year, she was afraid she was going to fail school. “It's no fun being in high school, trying to graduate and stuff and being pregnant.”

Bethany has it all planned out, though. Her mom will help take care of Johnathan when she needs a break or has homework to do. As long as her mom isn't working her night shift at the Hampton Inn, she said.

Not long after Johnathan was born, Bradley had barbed wire tattooed around his bicep with his son's name underneath. The 17-year-old is proud of his son, Bethany said.

Alexia's Story

Alexia Billingsley comes home from school with little to do but sit with her daughter on the couch and watch cartoons. Her school day is short, dismissed at 11 a.m. She attends Ombudsman in Nashville, Tenn., a special learning school for students who need more one-on-one attention than they would receive at normal schools. Most of the students there have trouble with truancy or behavioral problems. The rest of her time is spent with her daughter, 5-month-old Mailha.

Alexia and her two brothers moved with their mom from Chattanooga only a year and a half ago. She got pregnant not long after they moved. They live in the rough area of east Nashville where they and many of their neighbors face the same plight, supported by food stamps and government assistance, many without steady jobs. Alexia's mother has been out of a job for several months and sits at home with her during the day, reminding her when Mailha needs to be fed while going through bills and making phone calls to find work.

Most of Alexia's day is spent on the couch with Mailha. Her only outings are usually to the grocery store, or to meet with her counselor at Ombudsman.
“I kinda knew – but that was a wake-up call because I was high when I found out. I was like, ‘Oh, man.’”
– Barbie White, 17, on when she discovered her pregnancy
Barbie’s Story

Barbie White spends her afternoons much differently than she did before Mason. She rides a special bus home from John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky., one that is specially designed to carry her and the other teen moms and be able to buckle in the car seats, securing their precious passengers.

The house is empty and quiet when she walks through the door. Her mother isn’t home, to her relief, and her 4-year-old sister is away, too. “When my mom is home, things fly,” Barbie said. “We don’t get along very well.”

Barbie, 17, moved back in with her mother after living with her grandmother for five years. Her mother had been addicted to drugs and alcohol, so Barbie’s grandmother took her out of her mom’s care.

Barbie had her own addictions to deal with. She and Robby met when she was 12, and started dating when she was 15. Both were heavy into drugs and pushed their boundaries, partying constantly and shoplifting. Robby was always doing drugs, and Barbie was always on probation or in court for another violation.

Eight months after they got together, Barbie discovered she was pregnant. “I kinda knew – but that was a wake-up call because I was high when I found out. I was like, ‘Oh, man.’”

Her grandmother wouldn’t speak to her after she told her the news. She never came around about the subject and always kept her distance. She kicked Barbie out of the house, leaving Barbie nowhere to go but her mother’s. Her grandmother had her first child at 15. She was ashamed her granddaughter was doing the same.

“I think it’s our wonderful little legacy,” Barbie said.

Now after having Mason, her grandmother only likes to feed him sometimes. She mostly ignores the fact that her 17-year-old granddaughter has a 1-year-old son. “Me and Robby have a theory that she wants me to have as much trouble as she had.”

Her mother’s ex-husband was more of a father to her than her real dad, who had nearly nothing to do with her life. So when she became pregnant, her former stepfather was the one she had to answer to. “He found out I was pregnant and I haven’t talked to him since. He sent me a Mother’s Day card that said ‘Pat, XOXO.’” She used to call him “Dad.”

Barbie was born into a broken family situation. As a result, she feels she practically raised herself, making her own difficult decisions and relying on herself for guidance. When she was still in elementary school, she watched TV shows that depicted explicit scenes. A favorite was the show “Talk Sex” that featured callers asking an expert for help with their sex lives.

At 14, the constant barrage of sexual information and the pressure from other teens was too...
Alexia gives Mailha a spoonful of Gerber baby cereal in their sparsely decorated apartment. She lives with her mother and two brothers, one older and one younger. She doesn’t know her father’s daughter anymore, and isn’t sure where he is. Her mother is currently jobless, though makes phone calls trying to find one, counting on the good will of some of her former temporary employers.

Alexia’s mother, Martha, gives Mailha a kiss on the cheek. She often helps Alexia with caring for Mailha, giving her tips on how to get her to eat and pointing out when Mailha needs a diaper change.
much. She wanted to get the questioning and wondering behind her. “I decided I wanted to get the virginity thing over with, so I did three guys,” she said.

But now, living with her reformed drug-addict mother without a job, Barbie is just waiting for high school to end so she could move on. Robby, now 21, helps to buy what clothes, food and diapers Barbie can’t get with her WIC and food stamps. She can’t get a job after losing one at Little Caesar’s because she still has shoplifting on her record. She was fired because they said she asked for too many days off once when Mason was seriously ill.

She has cleaned up her behavior. It’s all for Mason, she said. She is no longer failing her classes and she makes the honor roll. Barbie put the drugs and alcohol behind her. She wants Mason to have a good childhood, not one like she had.

Barbie looks forward to the end of school. She doesn’t like high schoolers, finding them too trivial and immature.

For now she is just waiting for the end of the school year to rid herself and Mason of John Hardin, her mother’s house, and Radcliff.

Their plans are uncertain but they know where to start: she and Robby will get married, whether or not Barbie’s family finally decides to accept him. They’ll slowly make their way to New York and shake the south off their shoes. First it will be Elizabethtown, then Louisville, then Cincinnati, then on up to the Big Apple. When they can afford it. The only thing they have is each other and their little family.

Brittany’s Story

“Oh, she’s so cute!” Michelle Miller cries, holding onto her sister’s baby, Brooklyn. She bounces the 6-month-old in her lap as Brooklyn’s mom, Brittany Miller, keeps a watchful eye. Michelle, 14, has a friend visiting from across the street who is equally in awe of the cute little baby.
and her laughing smile, cooing at her and teasing her with a wind-up toy.

Brittany opted to stay in that night, only allowing herself to spend three hours at a time away from Brooklyn. Those are the only times she hung out with her friends.

Brittany loves her daughter, but it isn’t what she envisioned. “Not this soon. I always wanted a baby, but not now.”

She kept the news from her parents for two months, hiding her growing belly. She finally broke the news to her mother and aunt, who helped her gather the courage to tell her dad. At first, he was furious. But by the time his first granddaughter was born, he was a little happier about it. It was hard to look at a newborn and not smile.

Brittany lives with her grandparents because it’s easier. She has more space there, and they are more eager to help.

After work each day, her parents come over to see the family. She isn’t concerned about knowing how to care for Brooklyn. She had experience with children before, “I took care of my little cousin when he was a baby and he’s 5 now. I don’t think it’s as bad as everybody thinks it is,” she said.

On some evenings and on the weekends she works at McDonald’s down the street from her house and at Aeropostale at the mall. She earns the money to pay for most of Brooklyn’s needs, though she doesn’t have to worry about rent or car insurance or paying for her cell phone. Her parents and grandparents provide those things to her.

She is close to graduating, and wants to eventually get an associate’s degree at Draughon’s Junior College. Brittany hopes to follow in the footsteps of her aunt and mother to enter the medical field as a nurse. She has good intentions, but she isn’t sure when she will finally get around to college.
Celebrities and famous faces in the media make it look cool. Jamie Lynn Spears, who was once one of the “good girls” of the Disney channel, had a baby and was forced to quit her show “Zoe 101.” Her devoted young fans still followed her. Even Bristol Palin, the daughter of former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, caused a stir as she showed up at rallies to support her mother, boasting a full 6-month belly and her boyfriend by her side. Some reports say these high-profile pregnancies are making babies appear to be a popular accessory. One article, published by Macleans in Canada, said they were afraid the babies were becoming as fashionable to teenagers as a new purse.

The movie “Juno” is also wildly popular among teens. It portrays the sappy story of a confused teenage girl who accidentally becomes pregnant by a close friend. The circumstances are some that many teens are probably familiar with – they were just curious. Juno decides to give the baby up for adoption, and a few awkward moments and uncomfortable scenes later, she is baby-free and back to her normal teenage life.

Even walking through local malls, sparsely-clothed mannequins bombard teens, staring through shop windows, and flaunting the current fashions. Teens frequent stores like Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister and Victoria’s Secret, picking and choosing through the short shorts, low-cut shirts and pants with slogans across the back pockets.

Television shows portray tough life situations and adult content. Many shows that are popular among teens, such as
“They learn from us as role models, and they get to stay in school and graduate. But they still have that desire to be teenagers.”

– Linda Wright, caretaker at Early Head Start, Leitchfield
“Sex and the City,” “Friends” and “Grey’s Anatomy” deal with adult issues and displayed sexual encounters that are beyond teens’ maturity level.

A study conducted by RAND between 2001 and 2004 found that teens who are frequently exposed to television shows with heavy sexual content are nearly twice as likely to become pregnant – or to make someone else pregnant. Anita Chandra, a behavioral scientist at RAND, told NPR in 2008 that the sexual behaviors on television can give teens the misconception that there is little risk in sexual activity without the use of contraceptives. Most of the shows do not portray any type of safe-sex practices, and virtually none of them show any negative consequences.

Family influences are just as important as the cultural ones. Just like Brittany, who is only 18, who spends much of her time around her 14-year-old sister, Michelle, and often lets her watch Brooklyn. The side of parenting Michelle sees is the fun side, sitting in the floor playing peek-a-boo or picking out her tiny outfits. And when she becomes tired of having to change diapers or hearing Brooklyn cry, she gives her back to Brittany. It isn’t permanent.

Because of her own impressionable age, a research study conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy said Michelle could be more likely to become pregnant. The children of teen parents are even more likely to have babies young.

When a teenager walks out of his or her home and into the world, influences come from the music in the car, blaring pop and rap music, and from storefronts displaying sexy clothing. These expressions of fashion and culture are taken in differently by different teens, which depends largely on their family involvement and upbringing, as well as their own awareness of what those symbols mean.

When Brittany’s grandmother leaves the room, Michelle jumps up and changes the TV from the news to BET. Immediately, she begins mimicking the suggestive moves of the girls in bikinis on the TV screen, shifting from side to side and shaking her hips.

Even in a place that should be a controlled environment, such as a bowling alley, things are not as supervised as they should be. At the Circus World Family Fun Center in Hendersonville, Tenn., a group of friends hang out in the corner of the empty café, just sitting and talking.

“We come here when we’re bored,” said Kimberly Evans, 16. Though Hendersonville is only 20 miles from Nashville, the teenagers usually spend their time in their hometown. There aren’t many options, so they usually end up at each other’s homes, or the bowling alley. They don’t bowl, but just sit along the edges in the empty booths.

Parent-child relationships have everything to do with how likely a girl is to become pregnant. Peggy Snow, youth services coordinator for John Hardin High School in Radcliff, Ky., says girls search for love and care in the form of a boyfriend, oftentimes trying to fill voids in their family life.

“They’re finding a boy that says, ‘I
Brittany Miller, 18, keeps a watchful eye as her sister, Melissa, 14, holds her daughter, Michelle. Of all the things that influence adolescents, one of the biggest is family. According to a research study conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a teenage girl is more likely to become pregnant if she has a family member, especially her mother or a sister, who had a child at a young age.

Lauren Higgins, 16, center, and Keith Farmer, 18, are affectionate in public while they hang out with their friends Verena Pennington, 15, left, and Kimberly Evans, 16, at the Circus World Family Fun Center bowling alley in Hendersonville, Tenn. They come to the bowling alley most weekends. “This area doesn’t have a lot of places to hang out,” Evans said.
care about you,” says Pat Bohannon, director of the ExCEL program. “There is a direct correlation in the relationship they have with their father, or don’t have.”

Many of the girls who end up pregnant come from a single-parent home, most often the mother being the only caregiver. Many have a difficult home life or a lack of involvement from their parents. “Teen pregnancy is a symptom of other things that are going on,” Bohannon said.

Handbooks and web sites such as teenpregnancy.org and resource guides for teaching adolescents about responsible sex habits say the most likely time for a teen to have sex is right after school when there is the smallest amount of supervision, out of the sight of adults. When they are out with friends, peer pressure is also a major contributor.

Is knowledge power?

It is hard to know what it is like from the outside. The constant attention, the crying, waking up all hours of the night for feeding. For that reason, many schools have programs in place to give teens a taste of what it would be like to have to fit a baby into their already hectic teenage lives.

“I failed the first time, so I’m trying it again,” said Alicia Miller, 17. She sits in the hallway outside her health classroom at Warren Central High School in Bowling Green, Ky., leaning against the blue lockers that line the walls. She feeds a bottle to an electronic baby, listening as it makes the slurping noises of a real baby boy.

The first time she carted the virtual baby home, she slept through the baby’s cries in the middle of the night. It never woke her up. Her dad had to come and get her to let her know it had been crying.

“When you’re a parent you can’t do that – you can’t ignore it like that,” Miller said.

With a real baby, there are no do-overs. There are no pretend dirty diapers and no fake bottles to prepare.

Scooter Lightfoot, a basketball player, chose to write a lengthy paper about parenting to avoid taking the fake baby home. With a heavy school schedule and basketball season in full swing, having to take care of a baby would have interfered.

“I just can’t imagine having a baby right now. My career ain’t set,” he said. The 17-year-old thought that other teens with babies have it tough financially, and that they probably don’t have any free time.

The virtual babies and their needs are so realistic that a student even fooled a nurse when she took one with her to the hospital.

Having one in the household just for the required 24-hour period they care for one changes everything. Miller missed out on a party with friends because she had to stay home and pretend to change diapers and pat the back of a plastic doll.

Now she knows what it was like for her mom, she said. Her mother had her at 16. Her younger sister helped with the virtual baby and though she had long wanted a baby, she realizes now isn’t the time. It’s too much work, she said.

“The only thing that doesn’t feel real is that it’s plastic,” Miller said.

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“SEX!”

Conrad Blake’s neon yellow sign screams the word out to evening motorists passing in front of the Tennes-
Sex symbols abound in America's society, from racy television shows and commercials to nearly-nude models in storefronts at the mall. A group of young girls walk through Rivergate Mall in Goodlettsville, Tenn., where stores like Abercrombie & Fitch frequently use shirtless male models and scantily clad photos of women in their advertising.
see Valley Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville. Three of his peers stand in front of him along the side of the highway, and one behind, flashing their bright signs that spell out an important message: “Everyone Needs More Sex Education.”

They form the inaugural group of students in For Your Information, FYI, in the Knoxville Planned Parenthood organization. The group’s philosophy is to arm the teenagers with knowledge, and when their peers have questions about sex, they know who to ask. Teens are going to go to their friends anyway to search for answers to their tough questions about sex, condoms and how to tell their parents they’re pregnant.

Ginny Winter, FYI’s director, fills the eight teens with the knowledge their peers so desperately need.

Weekly, the group meets with Winter to ask questions that other teens ask them. No topic is off limits: How do you put on a condom? How do you know if you’re pregnant? Should you get an abortion?

Winter gives them the best answers, along with a generous supply of colorful condoms to give to their friends, should they ask for them. Four of the eight teens in the group are already parents.

On this day, VOX, a Planned Parenthood group at University of Tennessee, came to talk to FYI about sex education. Is it better? They thought so. Currently, Tennessee’s curriculum calls for abstinence-only education, which some say makes it more likely for teens to get pregnant rather than to prevent it, Winter said. When they are taught abstinence-only in the schools, safe sex practices are not covered. Planned Parenthood calls for sex education to enter Tennessee schools.

As they stand on the roadside, drivers honk their horns, some even yelling out their windows in support.

Emily Tan stands in front of the class, pretending to be drunk and wanting to go to a friend’s house. “What’s the problem? I’m fine! I’m not drunk at all!” she yells to the teen beside her, tottering back and forth.

The students in the Stratford High School consumer sciences classroom watch with mixed levels of interest as Sidney Simmons tries to convince Tan that she shouldn’t drink under age.

Tan and Simmons, both 18, are acting out a scene in a skit about wise decision-making with the PG-13 Players. It is another group organized by Planned Parenthood, this one in Nashville, Tenn. The small group of teens in the Metro school system spends time writing, rehearsing and acting out skits that address what they think are important issues to students their age. They talk about things like depression, drugs and alcohol, HIV and sex.

They hope that with this program they are able to make a difference. “We’re teenagers, just like them. What’s important is they can relate to it,” Tan said.

Stepping in

Fartun Omar, 17, carefully picks a green seven from her two remaining cards.

“So?!” she cries with an accent, a smile spreading across her face. She is holding a Wild Draw Four card in her hand. Next turn around, her opponents have no chance at keeping her from winning.

Omar and her friend Lote Guye, 16, sit around a table in the lobby with cancer patients living at Hope Harbor, run by the American Cancer Society. The Ethiopian teens participate in community involvement projects a couple of times a week with the Oasis Center in Nashville. Some days they read to seniors, visit colleges to talk about their future or fill food bags at the Second Harvest Food Bank. This week, it’s time for Uno.

Jonna Laidlaw has all refugees and immigrants in her group. There are several groups at the Oasis Center that vary by age and school, but this one is unique because of its diversity. It is a collaboration of young people from different cultures.

Participation in an after-school program is crucial in preventing many inner-city teenagers from becoming involved in risky or dangerous activities. Especially for teens who are new to the country, who are just trying to find a way to fit in. They want to be a part of something.

“They want to be American,” Laidlaw said.

“They’re in the midst of adolescence, so they’re rebelling against their family.”

For that reason, too many teens from China, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and other countries find themselves wrapped up in the groups that are fastest to invite them in. Often, these are the teens involved in gang activity, drugs and alcohol, and sex.

“With a lot of my kids, sex isn’t something discussed at home. They don’t learn until marriage,” Laidlaw said. Instead, teens who come to the United States from other countries learn from other American teens.

Part of the funding for the after-school programs comes from grants to help prevent teen pregnancy. Because
of their desire to find a place to belong, teenage immigrants and refugees are at a particularly high risk of getting in trouble, and getting pregnant. The Oasis Center is trying to change that.

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Brianna Hall, 15, carefully studies the drink selections on the Starbucks menu board. There are so many choices: Caramell frappuccino? Café mocha? “I think I’ll just have apple juice,” she tells the cashier as she picks up a juice box from the cooler.

Hanging out with her friends after youth group at Northeast Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., Brianna settles at a table with her church friends in the middle of the café. While they laugh together, teasing one boy about his disheveled hair, her mother laughs too, enjoying a cold mocha frappuccino at the table next to them.

Kay Hall is proud of her daughter’s choice to stay pure until marriage. The home schooled daughter of a pastor starting up his own church ministry in their home, she decided to get a purity ring.

“We didn’t want to ask her to do it because then it wasn’t from her heart, but we prayed about it,” Kay said. When Brianna approached her father, the two went out for a nice breakfast together, a date of sorts. Then they went to a local Christian bookstore and selected a ring with a small cross on it, which she wore on her right hand as a constant reminder. They also got a certificate, declaring the promise she had made between her parents, God, herself and her future spouse.

“This ring won’t leave my finger until a wedding ring is put on it,” Brianna said.

Help within the school systems

Her mother had her at 16, her grandmother had her mother at 16, and her great-grandmother was pregnant at 16. They expected her to do the same. It was the way it was in her family.

Though it sounds unique, Peggy Snow has seen a few cases like it. Teens pass through her office door daily, searching for help with a homework assignment, to grab some candy pumpkins off her desk at Halloween, or just to confide in her about a difficult evening at home.

Some students come in because they are pregnant. She hears stories about one’s boyfriend who ran off when he found out, or another’s mom that threatened to kick the pregnant teen out of her home. Many come from dysfunctional families. Which is why so many come to her.

She has stories about all kinds of girls who have traversed John Hardin High School’s hallways. “She was 17 and living in a trailer, just her and the baby - it took some time, but she got to being a pretty good little mom,” she remembers of a girl who had been through the program a few years before.

Snow and Pat Bohannon see their jobs as crucial in helping to turn the girls toward a brighter future.

Their is a unique program. Girls who
Alicia Miller, 17, talks with her friends during lunch period at Warren Central High School. She had to carry her virtual baby with her wherever she went to get a true experience of what it was like to be a young mother.

Alicia sits out in the hallway when the baby starts crying. It was time to feed the baby and burp it. “The only thing that doesn’t feel real is that it’s plastic,” she said. She and the other students in her health class were required to take a virtual baby home for at least 24 hours. Because she had failed the first time, she was taking it home for a whole weekend.

“I just can’t imagine having a baby right now. My career ain’t set.”
– Scooter Lightfoot, 17, participant in the virtual baby program
come through there live in all areas of Hardin County. If they attend a different high school, they still can come to John Har din. There is a bussing system in place for that – a short school bus that car seats can be secured in. ExCEL is set in place to teach child development and to prevent dropouts among teen mothers.

But they only have room for 15 girls. There are still other teens who don't get the help they need. At least for the ones in the program, they hope their involvement makes an impact.

"Even if we can't reach the parents, at least we've been able to help the kids," Bohannon said, who has been working with the girls for eight years.

A couple of counties over, a similar program exists in Grayson County. Linda Wright, the director, and the other caretakers do their best to guide eight teen mothers and teach them how to be better parents. The Early Head Start program, run by the health department, cares for newborns, infants and toddlers.

At the start of the day, student-mothers drop off their babies in a small building just outside a set of double doors at Grayson County High School. Early Head Start functions separate of the school. They don't want the babies to disrupt the school day, and they don't want the babies to seem like a prize as they carry them through the school.

While the mothers sit through lectures on civil rights and Spanish verb conjugation, Wright and the other two women coddle their infants and sing lullabies. At nap time, Wright curls up beside one on the floor, rubbing his back to soothe him to sleep. A cabinet in the room, right above the sign-in sheet, holds a library of books and VHS tapes covering an array of parenting topics: breast-feeding, discipline and healthy eating for baby.

At lunchtime the mothers come in and spent the hour with their children, always under Wright's watchful eye. Early Head Start provides lunch for the children and their mothers. Today it is fish sticks, corn and mashed potatoes. Wright makes it a point to join in on the conversation with the girls, getting to know what is going on in their lives.

They share stories about who asked them to prom, and what their dresses look like that they each so carefully picked out. One decided to rebel and wear a tuxedo instead of a dress.

The program fills a crucial need in the county, providing care for the babies and toddlers so their mothers can finish high school. Wright devotes herself to these children, giving the younger ones the attention they crave and teaching the older ones manners.

But she has misgivings. "Having a facility like this, it's are you promoting teen pregnancy or are you just trying to help those that already are [mothers]? That's the battle," Wright said.

The teens that participate choose to do it, though sometimes it is court ordered. A waiting list holds the names of many teens eager to enter Early Head Start. The benefit of getting in is clear. "They learn from us as role models, and they get to stay in school and graduate," Wright said. "But they still have that desire to be teenagers."

Emily Tan, 18, center, and Sidney Simmons, 18, act out a skit about decision making with the PG-13 Players at Stratford High School in Nashville, Tenn. The Players, a program organized by Planned Parenthood, perform at Nashville-area high schools, presenting difficult teenage issues including alcohol, relationships and sexual decision making. Their performances help to raise awareness with teens and encourages them to ask the tough questions. "It catches their attention," Tan said of the skits. "But then they get interested, and then they get into it."
“This is something that happens. This is reality. We need to have this.”

– Peggy Snow, youth services coordinator at John Hardin High School
Snow believes that although it might appear that the help is promoting teen pregnancy, it is crucial. “This is something that happens. This is reality. We need to have this,” she said.

The programs are expensive to run and receive state funding that some educators would rather see spent in other places, but Snow and Bohannon believe what they do is worth every penny. “My theory is pay now or pay later,” Snow said. Spending the money now to help them while they’re young can help to prevent them from needing to be on welfare or governmental assistance later. At least now they are enabling the teen mothers to complete their high school diploma and hopefully become successful young adults. “If we don’t help these girls graduate, it diminishes their likeliness to succeed,” Snow said.

Moving forward

As teenagers with children, the biggest struggle for many of them is continuing on with their lives and becoming successful. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that only 40 percent of teen mothers finish high school, with another 23 percent completing a GED. Between two and three percent receive a college degree by age 30.

Because they are less likely to finish their education, they are also less likely to land a well-paying job. Many of them end up on welfare, if their families were not already supported by it. A study by Child Trends, Inc. found that nearly 52 percent of mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager.

Are the programs working? The results of the preventative programs and the abstinence education initiatives are mixed. Even having teen mothers enrolled in the few slots available to them within the assistance programs does not guarantee success. Success depends largely on the independence and determination of each girl. Nece dropped out of high school to work, Megan continued to struggle with completing high school while taking care of her family, and Brittany graduated but worked at McDonald’s and continues to live with her grandparents.

A few do go to college, such as Amber, who went to study law, and Jessica, who is working on getting an associate’s degree at Volunteer State Community College.

Though the odds are against them, there is still hope. There are boundless opportunities ahead of the teen moms because they are still so young. They still have a chance to move on with their lives and be great.