

## When Children Have Children

Babies born in the U.S. to teenage mothers are at risk for long-term problems in many major areas of life, including school failure, poverty, and physical or mental illness. The teenage mothers themselves are also at risk for these problems. Teenage pregnancy is usually a crisis for the pregnant girl and her family. Common reactions include anger, guilt, and denial. If the father is young and involved, similar reactions can occur in his family. Pregnant teenagers require special understanding, medical care, and education, particularly about nutrition, infections, substance abuse, and complications of pregnancy. They also need to learn that using tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs can damage the developing fetus. All pregnant teenagers should have medical care beginning early in their pregnancy; however, they may not seek proper medical care at all leading to an increased risk for medical complications.

Pregnant teens can have many different emotional reactions: • some may not want their babies • some may want them for idealized and unrealistic reasons • others may view the creation of a child as an achievement and not recognize the serious responsibilities • some may keep a child to please another family member • some may want a baby to have someone to love, but not recognize the amount of care a baby needs • some become overwhelmed by guilt, anxiety, and fears about the future. Depression is also common among pregnant teens. Many do not anticipate that their adorable baby can also be demanding and sometimes irritating.

There may be times when the pregnant teenager's emotional reactions and mental state will require referral to a qualified mental health professional. Babies born to teenagers are at risk for neglect and abuse because their young mothers are uncertain about their roles and may be frustrated by the constant demands of caretaking. Adult parents can help prevent teenage pregnancy through open communication and by providing guidance to their children about sexuality, contraception, and the risks and responsibilities of intimate relationships and pregnancy. Some teenage girls drop out of school to have their babies and don't return. In this way, pregnant teens lose the opportunity to learn skills necessary for employment and self-survival as adults. School classes in family life and sexual education, as well as, clinics providing reproductive information and birth control to young people can also help to prevent an unwanted pregnancy.

If pregnancy occurs, teenagers and their families deserve honest and sensitive counseling about options available to them, from abortion to adoption. Special support systems, including consultation with a child and adolescent psychiatrist when needed, should be available to help the teenager throughout the pregnancy, birth, and decision about whether to keep the infant or "make a plan for adoption" so that adopted individuals don't feel they were just given up but that their mother and/or father actually cared enough about them to make a plan for their wellbeing.

