

A Teen Pregnancy in the Family

She's pregnant. You're shocked.

Here are some guidelines to help you through this unexpected time of confusion and heartache.

"I'm pregnant."

When your daughter first breaks the news to you, you may feel shock, disappointment, despair, embarrassment. You may think, "Her life is shattered. Our lives are ruined. All of her (and our!) hopes, dreams and plans are threatened."

It's not good news. It's also not the end of the world. Remember to:

- Stay calm.
- Avoid assigning blame or condemning.
- Focus on the positive. (She could have chosen abortion.)
- Show grace and mercy as Jesus would (even when it's toughest!)

Step into her shoes

- Understand her fears. She is probably overwhelmed:
- Feeling like she has lost your love and confidence.
- Feeling alone and needing a support group.
- Wondering what her options are.
- Facing a future she hadn't planned.

Step up

- Be an asset to your daughter by:
- Reassuring her of your unconditional love and concern.
- Affirming your confidence in her.
- Trusting God whole-heartedly.

Simply say it

She can't read your mind. You need to speak the words:

- "I still love you. No matter what."
- "I'm here for you and will help you in whatever way I can."
- "You do have options." (marriage, adoption, single-parenting, evening college courses, etc.)
- "Some people will look down on you. Many more will extend their compassion."
- "You are ultimately accountable to God, not other people."
- "You have a whole lifetime ahead of you. This one mistake doesn't need to destroy your bright future."

A comfortable environment

Create a non-threatening atmosphere by:

- Being willing to listen as she talks about her feelings.

- Giving advice only when asked.
- Enabling her to make rational, thoughtful decisions.
- Respecting her privacy. (Allow her to ponder secret thoughts.)
- Respecting her feelings about the baby's father (whether the relationship continues or is terminated).
- Guiding the baby's father into responsible participation.

Family matters

Lighten your daughter's burden by offering to tell close family members about her pregnancy.

They need to know because:

- It gives family an opportunity to express their genuine concern.
- Siblings, because they are closer in age, may offer her unique sympathy.
- They may have suggestions you haven't thought of.
- You can unite as a family to be a support for her.

After sharing the news, remember:

- To respect one another's opinions.
- You are not obligated to act on every suggestion made by others.
- Family members may strongly disagree on some decisions.
- Ultimately, it's your daughter and the life inside of her who are affected by the decisions made by your family.

Don't deny it

You need support, too! You can best help your daughter when you are strengthened and healthy.

Check out the people and places ready to help:

- Pregnancy resource centers (They have a wealth of information and can refer you to other parents who have "been there.")
- Church (pastors, Sunday school and Bible study groups)
- Youth leaders (They are in-tune with what teens are dealing with.)
- Other parents who have gone through similar experiences
- An existing parent support group (or be willing to start your own!)
- Other agencies in your area working with unmarried pregnant women

Higher ground

The spiritual lives of both you and your daughter have been catapulted into unknown territory.

Regardless of spiritual maturity or how well you think you're handling things, don't ignore this critical part of each other's well-being. Take action by:

- Requesting that your pastor or other mature Christians help you and your daughter grow through this situation.
- Remembering that God is big enough to handle your doubts and questions.
- Resting in the fact that God's love is everlasting and unconditional.
- Realizing that sometimes God doesn't make sense, but pain can be necessary to pave the way for healthy growth.
- Receiving the help that others offer.

When Your Son is the Father

If your son has had a sexual relationship from which a pregnancy has resulted, remember that he will probably be experiencing many of the same emotions as his girlfriend, including fear, guilt and ambivalence. In addition, he will feel considerable conflict and confusion over the role he should play.

What's His Level of Commitment?

Usually the relationship with the mother-to-be has not, until this point, involved any long-range plans. Now he must make a decision about the level of commitment he intends to assume, and the issues are significant. What does he owe this young woman? Can he walk away from this situation? Should he make a lifelong commitment to her because of this unplanned pregnancy? He does not bear the biological consequences, of course, and the mother of the baby has the legal right to have an abortion or carry the pregnancy to term with or without his input.

This may leave him with the impression that he has no control over the unplanned pregnancy and therefore no responsibility for it. As his parents, you are one step further removed from the situation and may have similar questions about the role you should play.

Encourage Appropriate Responsibility

Above all, your son will need encouragement and guidance to assume the appropriate level of responsibility for his role in the pregnancy. He should not be allowed to abandon his girlfriend with a cavalier, hit-and-run attitude. "It's her problem now," "She should have protected herself" or even "She should just get an abortion" are shallow and disrespectful responses to a serious situation.

Pushing for a quick marriage may seem honorable, but is probably unwise. Teenage matrimony carries with it very short odds of long-term success, and the combination of immaturity, lack of resources, and the intense demands of a newborn baby will usually strain an adolescent relationship to the breaking point.

Family Issues

In a best-case scenario, the families of both participants will cooperate to find a productive balance among several tasks: facing the consequences of the sexual relationship, accountability of adolescents to the adults in both families, short-and long-term planning, and mature decision-making.

Your son will need encouragement to acknowledge his responsibility to the girl's family and to accept with humility their response, whether it is measured or angry. All of you may have to face the possibility that the other family will choose to deal with the pregnancy on their own, even if you are willing to participate in the process.

And if that decision includes forbidding your son to have further contact with someone about whom he cares very deeply, he will have to find the strength to abide by the other family's wishes. If he is allowed to continue their relationship and support her when the going gets tough, clear ground rules (including abstaining from sexual contact) will need to be established and respected.

Having a pregnant girlfriend is tough and painful. But it also can be an opportunity for your son to mature—to find out what he is made of. In the long run, the pregnant adolescent girl isn't the only one who has to make important choices.

Excerpted from *Let's Talk About Sex*, published by Focus on the Family. Copyright © 1998
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