

# Rising teenage pregnancy . . .

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happy," Ms Platt says. "Whatever she decides to do, (pregnancy) is a life-changing event."

One practical area of change is in school status. Pregnant teens and young mothers are sometimes reluctant to continue attending traditional high schools.

The Teen Education and Motherhood (TEAM) program, with locations in Milton and Burlington, is one solution for them. Through the Halton Board of Education, TEAM provides independent study courses to gain high school credits. About 50 girls have used this resource in the two years it has been in operation, says co-ordinator Kathy Mills.

Ms Mills says not all of them quit school because they were pregnant. "Often times the girls coming into the program are in need of high school credits but have been out of high school for a few years. Their pregnancy is just one more obstacle to getting back to school."

Most TEAM participants are older — 16 to 18 — and realize they need grade 12 diplomas for better jobs. Ms Mills says the program has "lots of success stories", including one girl who chose the welding program at Sheridan College through its "women in non-traditional careers" option, which can be entered without a high school diploma. She now has her welder's certificate. Another, having completed grade 13, was accepted into the Ontario College of Art.

An advantage of the TEAM program is that babysitting, funded by Ontario's Ministry of Community and Social Services, is provided. Transportation expenses for girls living in other centres are also provided by the ministry. While studying with TEAM, the girls can take a parenting course for credit.

Another component of the TEAM program, as well as in other agencies and services, is birth control education. As Ms Stuart points out, "teenagers, having had one baby, are at a higher risk of getting pregnant again, because of their lifestyles."

Indeed, although there are no pat solutions, educating people to make informed, healthy, sexual choices is surely a step in the right direction.

Susan Amos is co-ordinator of physical and health

education for the Halton Board of Education. She says a human sexuality curriculum component is taught to public school children from kindergarten to grade eight, but that there is only one compulsory physical education/health credit in the high school curriculum.

Ms Amos finds it frustrating that only four hours are devoted to sexuality issues in that course.

"We're up against an incredible challenge," she says, "that of the media. Kids hear in excess of 50,000 messages a year from television that encourage them, or make sexual activity positive, and so few that say 'No. It isn't the right thing to do.' How do we compete against that?"

Issues such as drug abuse, human sexuality, health and the environment, teen suicide and decision-making are presently getting short shrift in the high school health curriculum, simply for lack of time, Ms Amos says.

"We have to look at the traditional curriculum and gear it to the next decade and the next century."

Education resources are available through Halton's family planning/STD clinics, which are backed by an extensive audio-visual and resource library. The other agencies mentioned here also provide resource material, information and speakers.

Individual counselling ranges from the conservative (presenting chastity as a viable alternative) to the highly practical (suggesting the use of condoms for disease prevention, in conjunction with other birth control methods.)

Patricia Coulman stresses the value of education in making healthy sexual decisions. Halton's family planning/STD clinics are "trying to help people realize sexuality is an individual expression that starts at birth and ends at death."

"People who recognize their sexuality find it easier to make wise decisions. People who haven't addressed their sexuality, who feel they're planning something sinful if they do become sexual, are the ones who have trouble making safe decisions for themselves."

One thing parents can do for their children, Ms Coulman says, is to "tell them they are sexual beings and that they do have decisions to make." If they have sound information, based on family values as well as "how-to" techniques, they are most likely to make wiser choices.

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