

Being a teen mom not so glamorous

BY LISA QUEEN
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The fact York Region's teen pregnancy rate is half the Ontario average is little comfort to Joanne Culley.

While she can't get her hands on any statistics, the producer of educational videos believes adolescents in rural areas like Georgina are far more likely to have babies than teenagers in more urban towns.

"I would say in the northern part (of the region) it's more of a problem than in the south. But I can't back that up because statistics aren't kept," Culley said.

"I've lived in Sutton for 10 years. I just saw it. I saw a lot of girls on the street pushing strollers and carrying their (school) books. I thought, 'Has the feminist movement bypassed this area?'"

While some teen girls get pregnant without meaning to, many others are choosing early parenthood.

"I think in rural areas, especially in those like Keswick and Sutton, there seems to be a problem with not as many options available for girls. They choose early parenthood instead of a career because they see their lives as being dead ends," Culley said.

Through hearsay, I've heard some girls say they want a baby to escape an unhappy home life and to find love.

Anne Eecloo, spokesperson for the Kinette Club of Sutton, said many teenaged girls believe a baby will give them the unconditional love they crave.

"They're looking for someone to love or they feel it's going to create a relationship.

But that starry-eyed view of early parenthood is dispelled in a new video produced by Culley with the help of the Kinette Club.

Be My Baby details the troubles faced by teen moms, who are often abandoned by their boyfriends when they get pregnant. A couple of teen dads committed to remaining in their babies' lives are also featured.

According to Cathy White, nursing manager of the York public health department's sexual health programs, the region's teen pregnancy rate is half the Ontario average.

It's a lot harder taking care of a baby than you think. It's the biggest responsibility of your life and the longest commitment you'll ever make.

In 1995, the last year statistics are available, 23.9 of every 1,000 teens in York aged 15 to 19 became pregnant.

That compares with the Ontario average of 47.4.

"As you can see, York Region comes out fairly well. We have consistently over several years had one of the lowest teen pregnancy rates in Ontario," White said.

Lots of research has shown generally that it is attributed to fairly decent sex ed in area schools as well as the presence of public health birth control clinics, which make contraceptives available to adolescents.

But of the 30 teen moms Culley interviewed, 75 per cent weren't using birth control.

Of those who were using contraceptives, many falsely believed they are 100 per cent effective.

Endorsed by the York Region District School Board, *Be My Baby* will be used as a tool to warn young teenagers about the implications of bringing a baby into the world unprepared.

But rather than giving kids an adult sermon, the video features teens telling their own stories.

While the young parents in *Be My Baby* obviously love their babies and want the best for them, they all agree they are not emotionally or financially prepared to care for children at the tender ages of 15, 16 or 17.

"We don't have enough money to get to the end of the month because my daughter's formula and diapers are so expensive," one girl complained.

"People tend to look down on you when they know you're a teen parent," added another.

Picking her whining toddler off the ground, Kristen explains that she got pregnant at 17 after going out with her boyfriend for two years. He left her because he couldn't handle the responsibility of a child.

On social assistance, Kristen claims she spends 95 per cent of her income on rent.

Despite the hardships, the teen mom is trying to finish high school to give her daughter a bright future.

"The hardest thing about having a child at this age is going to school and achieving what I should be able to achieve."

Shannon was having unprotected sex with her boyfriend for six months before she got pregnant with her daughter. The couple broke up before the baby's birth.

Although she lives at home and has help from her parents, Shannon isn't sure whether she should attempt to go to college or just get a job to support her baby.

"My options have been limited. I don't know if I can or will be able to go to college," she said.

"Girls tell me I'm lucky. You live with her (the baby) for two days. She's not even that bad of a kid. It's just they don't have one. They don't understand."

Although Amanda was on the pill, she got pregnant after going out with her boyfriend for 18 months.

"I did think about abortion, definitely not adoption," said Amanda.

For information, call Eecloo at 722-3424. The videos sell for \$5, with proceeds going toward life-like dolls teens take home to discover what it's like to care for a baby.



STAFF PHOTO ROB ALARY
Sutton Kinettes Anne Eecloo (front) and Irene McNeil view newly produced video *Be My Baby*.



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