How to really help pregnant teens

By JEANNETTE PAI-ESPINOSA

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It's easy to judge the choices made by others as "good" or "bad" without considering the range — or lack — of options open to them. Intellectually, most of us are aware that choice, opportunity, respect, and success look very different depending where you fall on the poverty line. But putting that into practice is key.

The way forward means taking the time to consider why young women might intentionally get pregnant or choose to raise their child once they give birth.

The truth is, we might be a better and more humane society if we understood that choice, opportunity, respect, and success are relative terms and that these terms can be perceived and achieved in very different ways.

On the outside, especially from a middle-class perspective, pregnancy might appear to be a "bad" decision that ends in a life of poverty, struggle, and underachievement.


The authors talked with more than 150 single mothers living in poor neighborhoods at Philadelphia's urban core. They found that, to these women, being a mother meant unconditional love; eliminating a sense of isolation; the ability to prove they are capable of maturity and high moral stature by being a good parent; and gaining control over their life.

These mothers saw having a baby not as a burden, but as an opportunity.

Despite the many obstacles pregnant and parenting young adults face, experience shows that they can nurture healthy families and become economically self-sufficient if provided adequate support and by utilizing their tremendous strength and resilience. Disappointingly, our country's system for supporting them is frayed and patched. And judging these women doesn't help.

But you can do something about it: Support candidates (and elected officials) who want to break cycles of destructive behavior and attack root causes like poverty, racism, and sexism, rather than those who would only complain about teenage pregnancy after the fact. Volunteer for mentoring programs that work with young people in at-risk situations, especially girls.

Most important, listen to young people and try to communicate with them on their own wavelength and be ready to consider the validity of your own reactions and feelings about hot-button issues like teen pregnancy.

Let's channel our energy into making a positive difference for vulnerable young women and their families — in Gloucester and across the country.

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