



Young mothers at the margin

By George Rede, *The Oregonian*

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Supporting teen parents is the right thing to do

Lately, there has been a good deal of discussion and focus on the topics of abstinence, teen pregnancy prevention, adoption and even the search for middle ground on the issue of abortion. All are subjects worthy of thoughtful discussion, debate and collaborative problem solving, but I find the discussion a bit ironic given that we are facing the first increase in teen pregnancy in 15 years.

Perhaps the teen pregnancy rate is on the rise because we're focusing on the symptoms and not the root causes. Yet there's something else that bothers me about this discussion, something that's left out. We're not talking about how to support teen parents, the ones who have already gotten pregnant and whose babies are here.

A June 23 ABC Primetime special called "Family Secrets" did a good job of presenting the issues and challenges of one segment of the teen parent population. Nearly all the stories told in the special were of young mothers with family support to help them face the trials and to share in the joys. For these young parents, an unintended pregnancy is the result of absent, forgotten or malfunctioning birth control in the life of an otherwise "average" or even "model" young adult. Still, even for these teens, we saw in ABC's special how hard it is for them to make it all work.

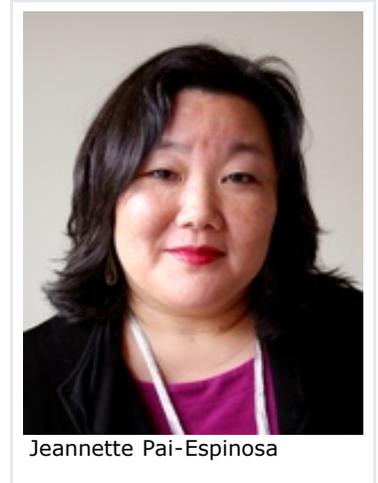
For other young parents, however, a birth control failure is the most recent misfortune in a lifetime of poverty, abuse, neglect, addiction and violence. Traumatic experiences have left these young people searching high and low for safety, belonging, love and support. And sometimes, creating a family seems like the only way to get it.

Moreover, in many cases teen pregnancy is a long family tradition. We refer to these young women as young mothers at the margin, because they live at the edge of the American Dream, working to break the destructive cycles into which they were born. There isn't any meaningful dialogue about addressing the deeply rooted social issues faced by this population. They remain out of sight and largely invisible.

It's not because they are few in number: Each year thousands of young women and men become parents with no support system and no means of providing for their family. In 2006, there were more than 350,000 unmarried teen mothers ages 14 to 18 (let's be honest, it's most often the teen mothers who end up parenting alone) in the United States. This is more than the total number of teens (boys and girls) in foster care and far more than the 90,587 teens that are currently incarcerated, according to research done by Jacob Rosch, Dana Brinson and Bryan Hassel for the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Sadly, a recent study by Chapin Hill, a Chicago-based policy research center, found that "children of mothers who first give birth as teenagers make up more than 60 percent of children entering foster care in Illinois."

Yet, despite these uncomfortable facts, funding for services and programs that support young mothers and their children continue to disappear. According to The (Riverside) Press-Enterprise, California public health officials say proposed budget cuts could hurt or end the state's Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health Program, which provide



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care for high-risk women and teenagers during pregnancy and up to one year after giving birth.

Focusing significant national energy, work and resources on young mothers at the margin is the right thing to do. But if that's not enough to convince you, then focus on the fact that it makes good financial sense for our country. It's only through comprehensive opportunities for young mothers to develop new skills and relationships that they will learn how to be good parents who are personally and financially self-sufficient. If we don't provide them the support, no one will, and we will never be able to reduce the intergenerational poverty and reliance on publicly funded programs.

This won't be easy. It will take a firm national commitment to support young families and to reduce child poverty. A case in point: In 1999, the United Kingdom committed itself to ending child poverty by 2020. This stretch goal focused the attention of the country and established accountability for the development and implementation of the government's strategies.

We know what works: social support, education and good jobs, made possible by high-quality health care, child care, affordable housing and reliable transportation. Young mothers and their children have much to offer this country as part of the work force, volunteers and dedicated parents.

We don't need to look any further than the White House to see how a young mother with the support of her family can change the world. Imagine a country where all young mothers had the same support.

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