

*“I didn’t think it could happen to me.”*

Of the more than 800,000 American teenagers who get pregnant every year, few are prepared to hear the words, “You’re going to have a baby.” Even fewer are the young girls who are realistically prepared for what it means to bear and raise a child.

“I thought I was too young to get pregnant.”

“I thought you couldn’t get pregnant the first time.”

“He said I didn’t have to worry.”

The explanations all amount to the same thing: “I didn’t think it could happen to *me*.”

The fact is, it can and does happen, over and over again, to unmarried teenagers. You, reading these words: If you are a sexually active girl, *it can happen to you*.

The three young women profiled in this book—Johanna, Rasheedah, and Rachel—didn't think it would happen to them, either.

“I didn't worry about getting pregnant,” said Johanna, 22, mother of 4-year-old Kiara. “When you're as young and dumb as we were, you just do what you're going to do without thinking about the consequences. You think you know it all, and that nothing bad can happen to you.”

Rachel, who became pregnant at 14, thought she was too young to become a mother. Her daughter Payten is now 4.

And 20-year-old Rasheedah, whose little girl Iyonna is 5, says, “I didn't let myself think about pregnancy.”

Johanna, Rasheedah, and Rachel have agreed to share their stories in this book, in hopes that other young women can learn something from them. All three have gone through lonely, scary, depressing, and painful times. They have traded their teenage freedom for responsibilities that make them sometimes seem far

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older than their years. All are raising their daughters alone; none is still involved with her baby's father.

In some ways, all of them have exceeded the expectations society has of teen mothers. All three have earned their high school degrees or GEDs. Two are in college. All are devoted parents, doing their best to raise their daughters well.

Still, the odds continue to be against them. And those odds affect not only them, but their children and their communities. The statistics concerning teenage parenthood are grim. Here are a few to consider:

### **For the mothers**

- Teen moms rarely complete their educations. Less than one-third of girls who have a baby before age 18 ever earn a high school degree. Only 1.5% earn a college degree by age 30.
- The majority of teen mothers never move beyond low-paying, entry-level jobs. Most live in poverty. About 80% of teenage mothers eventually go on welfare.

- Teen moms are at high risk for pregnancy-related health problems. They are more likely than older mothers to develop high blood pressure and anemia, to miscarry or go into premature labor, and to contract sexually transmitted diseases.
- Many teen moms do not receive adequate prenatal (meaning “before delivery”) medical care. During the important first three months of pregnancy, many young girls are still in denial about their pregnancy and do not see a doctor. They are less likely to eat a good diet and take prenatal vitamins, and more likely to smoke, drink, and use drugs than older mothers.

### **For the children**

- The babies of teen moms are at risk for premature birth and low birth weight. Both those conditions increase the chance that the baby will die or develop blindness, deafness,

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long-term respiratory problems, mental retardation, and other disabilities. Low birth weight doubles the chance that the child will later develop dyslexia or hyperactivity.

- Children of teen moms often do not receive adequate parenting. Even if they try their best, teen moms (and dads, if they are involved) are typically not ready to provide the kind of stable environment, mental stimulation, and the firm but loving discipline that children need.
- Children of teen moms are at risk for abuse. Reports of abuse or neglect occur twice as often in families headed by a teenage mother than in other families. Children of teen moms are about twice as likely to end up in foster care.
- Children of teen moms rarely excel in school. They are far more likely to repeat grades; they score lower on standardized tests; and they are

much less likely to graduate from high school than other children.

- Boys born to teen mothers are 13% more likely to end up in prison than other boys. Girls born to teen mothers are 22% more likely to become teen moms themselves.

### **For the community**

- Because teen moms often drop out of school and cannot get good jobs, and because their children often require extra social services (public assistance, foster care, subsidized health care, etc.) there is a huge financial cost to the whole society. In the United States, the annual costs related to teen pregnancy are estimated to be about \$7 billion.
- And the cost to society is not only financial. Teenage pregnancies are associated with a number of social problems. Teen parenthood is often part of a cycle—a cycle that can include poverty, lower educational levels,

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alcohol and substance abuse, crime, and homelessness. These are problems that affect everyone.

Statistics like these are useful. They help to make the case that when girls have babies at a young age, the consequences are often bad for the girl, the baby, and everyone else. What these statistics don't do is address this question:

*When it seems clear that an unmarried teenage girl is not the best possible parent, why do so many girls continue getting pregnant?*

Surprisingly, out of all developed nations, the United States has the highest rate of out-of-wedlock pregnancy. This is true even though condoms and spermicidal foams are available at most drug stores. A family doctor or clinic can prescribe more reliable contraceptives, including birth-control pills, injections (such as Depo-Provera), or contraceptive implants (such as Norplant). Abstinence (choosing not to be sexually active) is a 100 percent guarantee

against pregnancy. With all these options available, why do so many young girls become pregnant?

The answers are many, of course. One that is frequently overlooked is that some young girls want to become pregnant, at least on some level. For the most part, these are girls who don't foresee a bright future for themselves. Susan L. Davies is a researcher who has studied teen pregnancy. "Young girls who are headed to college aren't thinking about getting pregnant," she says. "But if you are a sophomore in a lousy high school and getting terrible grades, and the best that you can hope for is a job at the Dairy Queen, then dropping out and having a baby may seem like your best option." The sad irony is that becoming a teen mom pretty well guarantees a dead-end future for such a girl—and her child.

In many other cases, a girl is trying to deny the fact that she is sexually active—even to herself.

"I think it's the same behavior you sometimes see in someone who has health problems—heart disease or diabetes, for example," says Jhoselyn Martinez.

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Jhoselyn, who was a young unmarried mom, is now a college graduate and a radio producer in Philadelphia. “Once you go to the doctor and ask for help, you’re acknowledging what is happening.



**Jhoselyn Martinez**

When you say those words, ‘I need contraceptives,’ you’re admitting to yourself what you’re doing. Then you have to start thinking of the possible consequences. That’s very scary. A lot of people prefer denial.

“For me, raised as a Catholic, it was a big sin to have sex outside of marriage,” continues Jhoselyn. “I was afraid I was disappointing God, as well as disappointing my parents. I felt so guilty, and talking frankly to a doctor would have just compounded my guilt. For me, and I think for a lot of girls, it’s just easier to pretend that it’s not happening. That way

you can keep it at a mental distance.”

The problem, of course, is that “keeping it at a distance” only works until pregnancy occurs. Then the harsh realities of teen pregnancy become all too real.

One person who has experienced those realities from several angles is Julia Burney of Racine, Wisconsin. Now in her 50s, Julia was born in Mississippi to a 13-year-old mother and her 17-year-old husband. (In those days, among poor people in the rural South, such early marriages were not as



**Julia Burney**

unusual as they are today.) Julia herself became an unmarried teen mother, having three children before she turned 20. Later she became a police officer and then founder of Racine’s Cops ’n Kids Reading Center. In both those roles, she has spent a great deal

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of time with teenage moms. She works with their children at the Reading Center, and she often speaks to groups of teen moms, encouraging them to be the best parents they can be.

Julia's own children have turned out well. All are educated professional people. But she bluntly discourages anyone else from following her example.

"I never should have had children at such a young age," she says emphatically. "Getting pregnant as a teen—it's the worst thing in the world for a girl and her baby. It really is. Being a good mother when you're 30 is hard. It's nearly impossible when you're a teen.

"You're not grown up yourself when you're a teen mom," Julia explains. "I was, in some ways, about as prepared as a person could be. I was the oldest of ten children, and I'd been helping to raise all those younger ones. But that's not the same as being a mother yourself."

According to Julia, teen moms are constantly

faced with a choice they are not prepared to make. “You’re hearing, ‘Stay home and be a mother to that baby.’ But you’re thinking, ‘I’m a kid! I’m only 16.’ Staying home doesn’t feel like the logical choice. What feels right and natural is to act 16—to go with your friends to the mall, to go out partying. It’s hard to sit home with a crying baby and look out the window and see your friends running around. A lot of teen moms—not all of them, but most of them—choose that 16-year-old lifestyle. And it’s the babies who pay the price.”

Julia believes teens often decide to have babies without considering what being a parent truly means. “You know what a lot of teen parents make me think of?” she asks. “That movie, *101 Dalmatians*. When it first came out, everyone had to get a Dalmatian puppy because they looked so cute in the film. And six months later, the pounds were full of Dalmatians because people weren’t prepared to take care of them.”

Like those dog owners, she says, teens too often

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have a baby, then realize they don't want the responsibility. "Even a puppy deserves a responsible owner," says Julia. "So think how much more important and precious a baby is. A baby isn't a novelty. It's not a means to hold a man. Lord knows that doesn't work. That guy who says, 'I love you—I want you to have my shorty'—he's not going to stick around. And when the guy is gone, the baby becomes a pawn, an unwanted pawn. And none of it is that baby's fault."

For girls who already have babies, Julia's advice is direct. "If you don't know how to be a parent, learn how. Go take some classes. Get advice from some grandparents. Find some mentors in mothering. Get involved in your child's school. Do those 'real mom' things, like joining the PTA and packing your child's lunch."

And every minute, Julia says, a teen parent should keep this thought in mind: "It is not that child's fault that his mother is 14, 15, 16. That's a situation the baby never asked for, and it's up to you to try to make that up to him."

How can a teen mom do that? According to Julia, a girl with a baby needs to face this hard fact: she's given up the option to live an ordinary teen life, period. "Make that child your priority," she says. "Get routines in your life, and in the child's. Read your baby bedtime stories; give baths at a regular time; have a regular bedtime for your child; get your son or daughter up in the morning and make them breakfast and make sure they're ready for school—all that real mom stuff. Doing those things isn't easy, but it's right. And it's rewarding to see your child grow up right."

And if a girl is not yet pregnant, Jhoselyn Martinez has some advice for her: "Think more about yourself and your own worth. Is becoming sexually involved with someone a way to gain affection? Is it the result of pressure from your partner? Is it something that is ultimately going to be a positive force in your life? Because as you make those life-altering decisions, the bottom line always ought

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to be your respect for yourself and your body and your future.”

“You’re going to have a baby.” To a woman who is ready to hear those words, they can be the source of enormous joy. To a girl who is not—and to her child—they can bring about years of sadness, disappointment, and lost opportunities. This book, including Johanna’s, Rachel’s, and Rasheedah’s stories, is presented in the hopes that someday, every child will be wanted, welcomed, and well-prepared for.