

The Intelligencer.

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When grandparents find themselves parenting again

"Unwed mothers at that time ... were a specific group; they fell somewhere between criminals and patients and, like criminals and patients, they were prescribed an exact and fortifying treatment: They were made to disappear."

Alice McDermott, *That Night*



Nancy Taylor
Guest Columnist

When I was in high school and a girl found herself "in trouble," off she went to the convent, disappearing for an appropriate period of time, only to return childless and remorseful. Or she became a hasty bride. But now, such nunneries are hard to find, as more middle-class teen-age girls bring their unplanned babies home.

The scenarios behind teen-age conceptions and births are varied. The parents-to-be could be boyfriend-girlfriend. They may have dated casually, or maybe they were friends who experimented sexually. Maybe they plan to marry some day. They may hate each other.

Regardless, the aftermath is a little one, unaware of the turmoil that preceded and accompanies his or her existence.

In one instance, a 15-year-old mom-to-be, after much soul-searching and hours of counseling, decided to place her newborn with a wonderful adoptive couple, in an open adoption. Teen-age dad was out of the picture. Everyone was waiting dreamily for the birth.

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The adoptive parents were scared off, afraid of the predictable nightmare of losing their new daughter after years of litigation. The teen-age mom's dilemma was to place her daughter in foster care or with "his" parents. Instead, she decided to bring the child home and make the best of it.

But the decision whether to place for adoption or keep the baby is only the starting point. After surviving phase one - "It shouldn't have happened in the first place, but we will support you whatever your decision" - reality parenting sets in. What was the guest room becomes the nursery. Mom starts her junior year.

Along with the crib and the pediatrician, the new baby introduces a myriad of social, legal, emotional and financial issues into this settled household. Undefined roles are confusing, as families struggle to deal with the new arrival.

The unexplained expansion of the middle-class nest is traumatic for every family member, including siblings, schoolmates and grandparents' friends who have children of the same age. Tough questions about rights surface - the rights of the teen-age parents, both sets of grandparents and, of course, the new baby.

Should the teen-age dad's name appear on the birth certificate?

Can he be ordered to pay support while still in high school?

Is a 15-year-old boy capable of caring for a 2-month-old overnight?

Can grandpop put the baby on his insurance plan, or is medical assistance more comprehensive?

What happens if the boy disputes paternity?

The answers to these and dozens of other questions will vary, depending on the situation and especially on who is asking the questions. The choices are complex and can carry lifelong ramifications.

Families who do well under these circumstances are those who allow the process to follow a natural course, instead of forcing the situation to meet anyone's expectations. When it is done best, each and every family member's concerns are expressed. Outside resources are utilized.

Any form of counseling and parenting classes are most helpful in these and, in fact, most custody matters. Dr. Robert Strochak, director of the Conciliation and Evaluation Service in Bucks County, says, "With unmarried teen-age parents, no foundation exists for the proper development of co-parenting skills. Teen-agers hardly know themselves let alone each other in anything but a superficial way."

Co-parenting is a term that applies to parents who are not living together and between whom no relationship exists, other than the parenting one. The skills needed for successful co-parenting require open communication about the child, trust in the other parent's judgment and sense of responsibility as well as a genuine regard for the importance of each parent's role in the child's life.