

Jamie Lynn's pregnancy has folks talking

It's an opportunity for parents: Don't panic, just talk to your kids

By Sharon Jayson
USA TODAY

Here's one of those so-called teachable moments: Nickelodeon star Jamie Lynn Spears is 16 and pregnant. Discuss.

Adolescent psychologists and parenting experts say the pregnancy of the TV star is an opportunity to communicate. They advise against overreacting and forbidding kids to watch Spears' popular TV show, *Zoey 101*. And they say definitely don't sit them down for "a talk."

"Parents shouldn't panic at this kind of news, but they should seize the opportunity," says psychologist David Walsh of Minneapolis, founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family.

Behavior "Lecturing is not communication. Communication means talking, listening, asking questions and not lecturing. So (ask), 'What do you think about this? What do your friends think about this?'" he says.

Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, says the "old-fashioned notion" of the big sex talk doesn't work in today's society, when young people have been bombarded with sexualized images since childhood. "It's not a one-time conversation," he says. "It is an 18-year conversation."

Spears, the younger sister of the infamous Britney, who has had her own share of public travails, is just the latest in a string of pop culture icons exhibiting questionable behavior. Her fan base, much like her big sister's in her earlier days, is largely made of tweens, the not-quite-teens ages 10 to 14.

"This is an age group that is tremendously impressionable," says Thomas Cottle, a psychologist and sociologist at Boston University. "Pop culture figures have an inordinate amount of power in some people's minds. It's very clear she has no significance in the shaping of life for a lot of young women and men, and in others, she probably does."

Psychologist Michael Bradley of suburban Philadelphia is a teen expert and says these tweens are in the process of defining their identity, which involves values, codes of behavior and philosophies of life.

"That's why parents have to engage the culture," he says. "There's an amazing number of kids today who do not know what the values and beliefs of their parents are."

Bradley says the influence of the media is also stronger with this age group. "These are very impressionable minds, and the culture comes after kids today in ways it never did before."

Walsh says Spears' pregnancy is another reminder that parents should pay attention to the media that kids consume. "When a high-profile, popular role model gets pregnant like that, what it does for kids is it starts to normalize it."



By Lisa Rose, Nickelodeon, via AP

Expert advice: Don't forbid your tweens to watch *Zoey 101* with Jamie Lynn Spears and Sean Flynn.

Victoria Gobeli of Plano, Texas, doesn't allow her 13-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son to watch MTV or VH1. They do watch Spears' show, and she watches with them, as parenting experts advise.

Although she says both her kids were shocked when they heard about Spears before school on Wednesday, Gobeli says she's previously talked with her daughter about the behavior of these young stars, so she's not worried now.

"I know she doesn't look up to her as a role model. I think my daughter understands from talking about Britney and Lindsay (Lohan) that they got caught up in a whirlwind of celebrity, and it just got out of control," Gobeli says.

Denise Restauri, founder of AllyKatz.com, a website for tween girls, says comments about the pregnancy started appearing after school Wednesday.

"Their messages are mixed," she says. "They're protective of Jamie. They know someone who was pregnant at a young age, and they're saying 'Don't be mean.' They're saying, 'Here's another celebrity gone bad.'"

"And they said that Mommy Spears needs some parenting lessons."