

Teen Pregnancy, Hollywood Style

Once taboo, pregnant teenagers are popping up more frequently on TV, in movies and on magazine covers. The problem? This latest pop-culture coverage doesn't show what comes before or after.

It could have been Immaculate Conception. In the premiere episode of the new drama "The Secret Life of the American Teenager," 15-year-old Amy comes home from band practice and is shocked--the pregnancy test is positive! That two-second tryst at band camp, as she describes it to her friends, "was definitely not like what you see in the movies." They share the same confusion: how did a good girl end up in this situation? The obvious answer (Amy had unprotected sex) never quite surfaces; it's brushed off in a whirlwind of mystification. By the end of the episode, band-camp guy has taken a backseat to Amy's new love interest. As the plot pushes forward, it never once looks back at whether Amy considered contraceptives or talked to her parents about condoms. Amy is pregnant, and that is where this story starts.

Amy's tale is familiar terrain in the media landscape. Teen pregnancy has become a hot plot device lately, showing up in two new television shows--ABC Family's "Secret Life" and NBC's "Baby Borrowers." The standard plot: teen gets pregnant, teen is horrified and teen tells her family. Audiences saw it in last year's box-office smash "Juno," where an unintended pregnancy becomes a heart-warming adoption. In real life, the same storyline has been running through OK! Magazine's coverage of Jamie Lynn Spears's pregnancy. "I can't say it was something I was planning to do right now," the 16-year-old Nickelodeon star confessed to OK! last December. "But now that it's in my lap and that

it's something I have to deal with, I'm looking forward to being the best mom I can be." Now 17 and with a newborn at home, Spears is already sharing her wisdom on parenting: "Being a mom is the best feeling in the world!"

Many teen moms and the adults who deal with them are glad to see a conversation about teen pregnancy out in the open. But they say that big parts of the story are being glossed over: how that baby bump came to be in the first place, and just how hard it'll be for a teen to raise a child. In "Juno," the word condom is used twice; the Jamie Lynn interviews skirt the issue altogether. Even "The Secret Life" (a show originally pitched with the title "The Sex Life of the American Teenager") only makes a few passing references to condoms, mostly students asking the guidance counselor about the ones kept in his office. In none of these shows are the girls asked whether they used contraception, nor is there mention of STD testing, which would seem a logical step after unprotected sex. "It's the missing three C's: there's little commitment, no mention of contraception and rarely do we see negative consequences," says Jane Brown, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina who runs the Teen Media Project. "What's missing in the media's sexual script is what happens before and after. Why are these kids getting pregnant and what happens afterward?"

To recap, the reality that's not covered: teens are having sex (the average age of first intercourse is 16.9 for boys and

17.4 for girls, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute) and some are getting pregnant (almost 750,000 each year, also from Guttmacher). One third of those women will have an abortion; two thirds will carry their baby to term. Teen moms are less likely to finish high school and more likely to remain a single parent, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Teens are also contracting sexually transmitted diseases in alarmingly high numbers--a quarter of teenage females have at least one.

"Juno" and "Secret Life" and other movies and TV shows like them could open doors to all of those issues. And research suggests that is actually what teens want: three quarters say they would like the media to talk more about the consequences of sex, according to a 2007 study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

But these topics can be risky for Hollywood producers and purveyors of celebrity magazines. Producers and writers may want to avoid the political controversy over abstinence education. There's also the entertainment value at stake--lectures on condoms don't exactly sell blockbuster films. But there's also a more basic reason: talking about high-school students having sex, using condoms or contracting STDs still makes many people a little bit squeamish and embarrassed. Although the vast majority of parents say they talk to their kids about delaying sex and contraceptive use, most are still uncomfortable with the subject.

82 percent of parents and two thirds of teens say that they don't know exactly what to say, how to say it or when to start the conversation, according to the study by the National Campaign.

"It seems like we keep removing taboos related to sex, and this year it was pregnancy," says Nancy Brown, who teaches a course on adolescent health and sexuality at Stanford University and writes a blog on the same subject. "And I hope next year it's sexually transmitted infections. Because that's something we still don't talk about." She gets frustrated when she watches movies pass up perfectly good opportunities to add a line or two about contraceptives or STDs. Like when Juno's dad, after he learns that his daughter is pregnant, tells her, "I thought you were the kind of girl who knew when to say when." Brown suggests, "What would be a lot better there is, 'I wish I had talked to you about birth control when you were 12,' or 'I thought I raised you to use a condom'."

Condoms aren't the only things that teens and adolescent-health experts see missing from the plot. There's that third C that Jane Brown mentioned: consequences. While Juno and Jamie Lynn are celebrated as heroines, the teen moms NEWSWEEK spoke with recount a different reaction from their communities--being stigmatized and ostracized, one to the point where she dropped out of high school. "I guess I was too scared to be pregnant and in high school, it didn't really seem OK," says one teen, who ended up leaving her Atlanta-area private school.

Meghan Mellecker, a 15-year-old from outside Iowa City, had the support of her parents but trouble with her small town of 700. "There were a lot of people who looked down on it," she says. Her mom, Melody Hobert-Mellecker, says she quit a job at the family's church under pressure from congregants. "I had people calling the bishop's office asking how I could be a moral leader when I couldn't even be a good moral mother," she recalls. Ever since Meghan's daughter, Sophie, was born, Hobert-Mellecker says things have improved. But she watches as her daughter struggles with balancing being a parent and being a teen. "One thing that I see this summer, which is her first with Sophie, is how different it is from her friends," says Hobert-Mellecker. "They sleep in, hang out, stay up late. Meghan gets out of bed early every morning and it's hard for her to say to her friends, 'I can't hang out with you'."

Balancing parenting and work is hard enough for moms in their 30s; it's near impossible for 19-year-old Candi Johnson. She wants to go back to school (she dropped out of a GED program two months into her pregnancy) and wants to get a job, but is also responsible for her 18-month-old son, Shymir. Like the majority of teen moms, the father isn't in the picture, so she largely relies on her mother and grandmother for financial support. "Pampers cost \$20, a little bottle of milk is \$7," says Johnson, who lives in Queens, N.Y. "I want to be the best mom that I can, but it's hard, because I

don't have the money or the education to give him everything that he wants." She doesn't see the financial strains or work-parenting balance mentioned at all in OK! Magazine. "She has all that money, she can pay for nannies, she can give her baby whatever she wants. It's so fake," says Johnson. "For me, it's fun but hard. It's the best thing in the world but at the same time it's the worst thing in the world."

Amidst all the teen pregnancy media, researchers do see some encouraging signs. NBC's "Baby Borrowers" (slogan: "It's not TV, it's birth control"), gives real teens a taste of parenting; it attracted nearly 8 million viewers to its debut, about three times the viewership of "Secret Life." And while the storyline on TV may be incomplete, it does give parents a starting point to open their own discussion (47 percent of teens say their parents are the most influential in their decisions about sex, according to the National Campaign Study.) Jane Brown, at the Teen Media Project, remembers striking up a conversation with her 17-year-old daughter as they walked out of "Juno." "She thought, 'Isn't that romantic, she's left with the boyfriend, adoption looks easy,'" Brown says. "We talked about how adoption can be a traumatic event, the fact that there was no contraception and why not, and that it's rare for the guys to actually stay." Brown just hopes she's not the only one talking.