



## *Bristol Palin's Pregnancy, Reactions Raise The Question: Is The Right Message Being Sent?*

*Mixed messages abound in reactions to daughter of John McCain's running mate's pregnancy.*

By Michelle Rabinowitz

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A day after the announcement that Sarah Palin's 17-year-old daughter is five months pregnant, everyone from Lindsay Lohan to evangelicals to residents of the Palin's hometown of Wasilla, Alaska, have been weighing in with opinions. It's the most talked-about teen pregnancy since Jamie Lynn Spears' bombshell of last December.

And while teen pregnancy is on the rise in the U.S. for the first time in 14 years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many are wondering just what kind of message Bristol Palin's news and the reactions to it are sending.

While it's impossible to know what it's like to be 17, pregnant, the daughter of a presumptive vice-presidential candidate and the talk of the nation — Bristol has not spoken publicly about the matter yet — the issue is especially sensitive given Sarah Palin's and many Republicans' endorsement of abstinence-only education and opposition to abortion.

However, in terms of the larger issue, Bristol is hardly alone: According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, approximately 42 out of every 1,000

girls in America between the ages of 15 and 19 becomes pregnant before they turn 20.

"One of the things that is so fascinating about this situation is, everybody is saying they support her — 'We are happy she is having a baby' — but [Bristol] probably came from a family where sex before marriage was not OK," said Dr. Logan Levkoff, a sexuality educator, advice columnist and author of *Third Base Ain't What it Used to Be*. "There is a tremendous disconnect to say babies are wonderful but sex is bad," she continued. "We shouldn't hold this girl up on a pedestal because of the mistake she made and then the decision she made afterwards. Whether or not she keeps the baby, teen pregnancy isn't a good thing."

And while the statement issued by Bristol Palin's parents did focus on "the difficulties of raising a child" and the fact that Bristol will have to "grow up faster than we had ever planned," the emphasis from Sarah Palin and the Republican camps is focused positively on her decision to have the child.

Approximately 17 out of every 1,000 Alaskan teenage girls become pregnant before they turn 20, according to the state's Department of Women's, Children's & Family Health. While that percentage is not high,

according to MTV's Alaskan Street Team reporter Dani Carlson, 23, teen pregnancy is not viewed terribly critically in the state. "Nobody really bats an eyelash," said Carlson, a longtime Palin follower. "In Alaska we have a very live-and-let-live philosophy. People don't go around butting into your business or throwing around moralistic judgments."

Carlson also said Governor Palin's public reaction to her daughter's pregnancy is fairly commonplace. "Her daughter is pregnant and there is nothing she can do about it," said Carlson. "Fortunately she comes from a large, close family that puts a lot of emphasis on children. She's very lucky to have parents who are so supportive."

That aspect of the situation was echoed by Bill Albert, communications director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy. "I suspect most teen mothers don't have the support system she has," he said.

"We all wish Bristol well and we are sure she will get a lot of support, but the truth is most teen mothers don't fare very well. Only 40 percent of women who have a child while they are in high school finish high school. Children of teen moth-

ers are much more likely to grow up in poverty. Also, the daughters of teen mothers are much more likely to become teen mothers themselves."

While many are rallying around Bristol Palin's stated plans to marry the baby's father, 18-year old Levi Johnston, teen marriage can be just as tricky an issue as teen pregnancy. "Getting pregnant and fast-forwarding that component of your life does not mean you will have a stable home life," Levkoff said. "Just because a relationship is right when you are a junior or senior in high school doesn't mean it will be right 10 years later. ...That doesn't mean these two can't be in love, but those feelings evolve."

"Bristol Palin underscores this fact that teen pregnancy is on the rise and it happens to everyone, even the daughters of vice-presidential candidates," Albert said.

But despite the attention and discussion the matter has received in the past year, one wonders whether Bristol Palin or Jamie Lynn Spears should be the issue, instead of teen pregnancy itself.