

*Teen Pregnancy's New Twist*

By Natalie Pompilio

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A mother announces that her 17-year-old unmarried daughter is pregnant, and suddenly the most conservative of thinkers are praising her. Her parents say they're proud she'll be keeping the baby. Others note that the Palins are truly "an American family."

There was a time when girls like Bristol Palin were whisked off in the dark of night, taken to isolated locations to give birth, then reintroduced into society.

Now Bristol is sharing the spotlight as the country decides if her mother, the Republican governor of Alaska Sarah Palin, will be the nation's vice president. Have times changed so much?

Pat Paluzzi, who directs a nonprofit that works with pregnant and parenting teenagers, doesn't think so. The public seems to be treating the Palin situation with a compassion many pregnant teenagers don't experience. "I don't think teen pregnancy is more acceptable to us as a society. I say that because of the continued lack of support for parenting teens," said Paluzzi, of the Baltimore-based Healthy Teen Network.

She said 450,000 teens in the United States give birth annually. "We do vilify other pregnant parenting teens. We don't

want to support them. They're saying, 'We all have teenagers. It could happen to anybody.' But where is that attitude when you think about the 449,999 other babies born to teenage mothers each year?"

Teen pregnancy has been making headlines for the last nine months, starting in December, when Jamie Lynn Spears - Britney's little sister and the alleged "good one" - announced her due date. It was followed by Academy Award accolades for Juno, a movie about a spunky teen who decides to offer her baby up for adoption. Then came news of an alleged "pregnancy pact" at a Massachusetts high school, and the release of new statistics for 2006 showing the teen pregnancy rate had risen nationally for the first time in decades, by about 3 percent.

And now Bristol Palin. But Palin is not the typical pregnant teenager. "To have Bristol Palin be the poster child for teen pregnancy is very inaccurate and sends a wrong and potentially harmful message," said Joe Fay, executive director of the Pennsylvania Committee to Prevent Pregnancy. "People get the impression that it's not a big deal because she has family support and they're proud of her and everything is going to be fine. For most girls, it's a struggle to be a single mom."

The teen birth rate actually peaked in the 1950s, Fay said. The difference was that in about 80 percent of those cases, the teenage parents were already married. Or they would marry later, the husband leaving school to take a job at a local factory, Fay said. "But now those jobs don't exist and it's virtually impossible for a single mother to raise a child on her own."

Today about 80 percent of pregnant teens are not married, and expectations that they will marry the child's father are lower. About 70 percent of pregnant teenagers come from poor and low-income families. A study by Fay's organization determined pregnant teens cost Pennsylvania \$380 million a year, Fay said.

On the other hand, Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said Palin's pregnancy was an eye-opener that could lead to teachable moments between parents and their teenagers.

"A lot of people have labored under the misperception that teen pregnancy is 'those girls' problem or it happens in 'that community,'" Albert said. "If it can happen to the daughter of a vice presidential nominee, I think it suggests to all of us that teen pregnancy happens everywhere."

Andrea O'Reilly, a women's studies professor and the director of the Association for Research on Mothering in Canada, noted that the Republicans' spin made a difference as to how it was perceived.

"She's being presented as someone who made a good choice because she's keeping the baby," O'Reilly said of Bristol Palin. "If Clinton's daughter had been pregnant, it would have been spun differently, like, 'Look what happens to the kids of working moms.'"

And many pundits have projected that a teenage pregnant Obama daughter would have garnered a significantly less enthusiastic response. Paluzzi said race and class play major roles in the acceptance of teen pregnancy, but what matters most to her is what's next.

"Where should the conversation go from here?" she asked. "Is this going to translate into some compassion for pregnant teenagers, some love and support? It would be fabulous."