



Teen pregnancy, the unvarnished story

Those who think ‘16 and Pregnant’ and its ilk glamorize the issue are way off base

By Susan Reimer

Those who remember the Academy Award-winning documentary “Scared Straight,” which showed a group of lifers from New Jersey’s Rahway State Prison terrifying a bunch of cocky juvenile delinquent boys with tales of jailhouse horror, will understand when I say that MTV’s “16 and Pregnant” is the chick version.

The show follows teen girls who find themselves pregnant — from the pregnancy test all the way to the delivery room and home again with baby — and it includes graphic scenes of pain, both physical and emotional.

There are angry parents and there are no-good, cheating, lazy boyfriend fathers, and everybody yells at everybody while the teen mothers cry. There is joblessness, and sleeplessness, and unfinished high school dreams and living in somebody’s basement.

The babies are sweet, but their price is clear.

“What about this, exactly, is glamorous?” asks Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Reacting to criticism that programs such as “16 and Pregnant” and its spinoff “Teen Mom” make young, unwed motherhood look somehow attractive, the campaign commissioned a poll of teenagers who have watched “16 and Pregnant” and asked if their attitudes about teen pregnancy changed as a result.

More than 80 percent said the show helped them understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and how to prevent it. And more than 90 percent said that they learned that teen parenthood is harder than they had imagined.

After watching a reunion episode that recapped the stories of a dozen young mothers, I can’t believe the campaign even had to ask the kids if the show had an impact.

More telling than the heartbreaking stories of the young mothers — including one who was pressured by her own mother to give her child up for adoption — are the hands-to-the-mouth reactions of the rapt teen audience on hand for the filming of “Life After Labor,” the “16 and Pregnant” reunion show.

“These stories are among the most gritty and powerful that you are likely to see on almost any topic at any time,” said Mr. Albert.

“I have seen a whole bunch of crap produced to get the attention of teens. They try to appeal to everyone and offend no one.

“But this,” he said, “is better than printing another pamphlet.”

“16 and Pregnant” was not intended to be a season-long public service announcement. That’s not how MTV rolls. It is supposed to be entertainment, another reality show that appeals to baser human instincts. We can’t seem to look away from a train wreck.

And the subjects don’t represent any kind of cross-section of American teens. They are a self-selecting group with one common characteristic: They are willing to put themselves through this trauma while America watches and judges.

So there is still some possibility that some parents and teens will watch this show and say, “Not me. Not my daughter.”

Even though teen pregnancy has declined by 37 percent, and is down in all 50 states and across all racial and ethnic groups, it is also true that 3 in 10 girls in the U.S. will get pregnant before they are 20.

Even though teen pregnancy is higher in poor communities and higher in communities of color, it is also true that most teen mothers come from two-parent households with a gross income 200 percent above the federal poverty line.

And it isn’t what’s in your neighborhood that matters, it is what is in your teenager’s head. Sit down and watch it with your young teen when a new season of “16 and Pregnant” begins Oct. 26 at 10 p.m. Or go online to MTV.com and watch “Life After Labor,” with its added punch of audience reaction.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has produced a discussion guide for the show that you can download at stayteen.org. The campaign encourages parents to talk with their children about pregnancy — how it happens and how to prevent it.

But if you and your teen are speechless after watching this show, you will still be on the right track.