



INSIDE THE PHENOMENON

Teen Mom

How it became the most addictive (and important) reality show on TV

BY JENNIFER ARMSTRONG

QUESTIONS FLY AT *Teen Mom* star Maci Bookout from all directions, all the time, about her life, her choices, what she's going to do next. At the moment, they're coming from her mother as the sprightly 19-year-old redhead tries to enjoy a fleeting summer afternoon with her almost-2-year-old son, Bentley, in her parents' Tennessee backyard. Will she move back home to Chattanooga to be closer to the father of her child, Ryan, or will she stay in the apartment she rented for the summer outside of Nashville, near new boyfriend Kyle?

"Kyle mentioned us moving in together," Maci blurts out.

"I just feel like you guys need to be more sure of your relationship before you move in together," her mother, Sharon, warns in her Southern drawl. "We were gonna talk about how you're gonna go to school, where you're gonna get a job.... What is your plan?"

As Maci and Sharon scowl at each other, yet another question comes, this time from the clump of cameras, microphones, and producers recording the entire interaction. Prods one producer, "Can you ask where they're moving in together—is it here or Nashville? It's not clear to the viewers."

Sharon rolls her eyes. "It's not clear to me, either."

They barely get Maci's answer—Nashville...maybe—before Bentley makes a break across the yard, then screams as Maci scoops him up in her arms. Her cherubic little bundle of

energy has won her a brief respite from interrogation for now, but soon her parents, her boyfriend, her ex, and, most of all, TV viewers will be demanding answers once more. Such is the very unglamorous truth behind MTV's unbelievably compelling reality sensation *Teen Mom*. Documenting the lives of four heartland girls, the show is so real that—unlike, say, *The Hills*—its veracity is never up for debate. But everything else is fair game for endless dissection by audiences, who have become so attached to *Teen Mom*'s stars that they feel free to comment on the girls' every parenting decision and relationship debacle, whether in person or on their Facebook fan pages. "This is a show that's just heartbreakingly honest," MTV general manager Stephen Friedman says. "And there is such a hunger for the discussion that's going on around it."

Since premiering last December as a spin-off to the surprise-hit docuseries

16 and Pregnant, *Teen Mom*, now in its second season, has become the most gripping teen drama around—both on screen and off. This scrappy series about real kids grappling with custody battles, waitressing jobs, midnight diaper runs, and extreme family dysfunction is a best-of-both-worlds phenomenon for MTV: Not only is it a buzzy ratings hit, with an average of 3.4 million viewers and a barrage of recent celebrity-magazine covers focused on the teen stars, but it also serves to showcase the network's socially conscious side by leading a national discussion about birth control, abstinence, and adoption. At the heart of it all is a quartet of young women with grown-up problems: Maci, a journalism major who's trying to maintain a decent relationship with her son's dad; 19-year-old Farrah Abraham of Iowa, who saw her troubled home life make headlines in January when her mother was arrested on charges of domestic abuse (she pleaded guilty to



(From left) Farrah Abraham with Sophia, Catelynn Lowell, Maci Bookout with Bentley, and Amber Portwood with Leah

a lesser charge); 20-year-old Amber Portwood of Indiana, who's struggling to get her GED and constantly bickering with on-again, off-again fiancé Gary; and 18-year-old Catelynn Lowell of Michigan, who, with boyfriend Tyler, is still dealing with the aftermath of making an open-adoption plan for their daughter, Carly.

"Teen Mom is a game changer when it comes to teen pregnancy on television," says Amy Kramer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, which works with MTV on educational materials available both online and in schools. "It's not like a 'very special episode' of something. Being able to see this stuff close-up and in this gritty way is really powerful. It's not a happy ending, which is what real life is like." And that's what makes it all the more addictive, says executive producer Morgan J. Freeman: "Our mandate is to go in and get the unvarnished truth. Just getting to know these teens and letting this whole process breathe is extremely powerful television."

Being on television never occurred to Teen Mom's four leading ladies—that is, before they heard two years ago that MTV was looking for teens to feature on a documentary show called *16 and*



Amber and Maci on MTV's Teen Mom reunion



Maci, Bristol Palin, and Farrah at 'The Harsh Truth: Teen Moms Tell All' event in New York City

Pregnant. "At first I was like, 'That would be kind of cool to be on MTV,'" says Maci, whose mom spotted the ad on Craigslist among maternity modeling gigs. "Then I started thinking I didn't know how it would be portrayed—it could be trashy drama, or it could be educational. I decided to take the chance and see how it went." Her mom had a similar instinct to share her popular, smart, athletic daughter's plight with others: "I look at Maci as your all-American kid. Pregnancy is not something that [people think] happens to that kind of kid. I thought if she got her story out there, some of these kids would realize it can happen to them." Catelynn also wanted to share her unique experience when she heard about the show through her adoption

counselor. "We never thought we'd get picked," she says. "But I wanted to show the world what adoption is like."

The four eventual Teen Moms (along with two other girls in the six-episode first season of *16 and Pregnant*) opened their lives to MTV producers through the final months of their pregnancies, the births, and the first few weeks of motherhood. They figured that was the end of their TV careers—but then *Pregnant* became a word-of-mouth hit last summer, prompting a riveting reunion special with Dr. Drew Pinsky and, in turn, the spin-off featuring all four as they continued facing the challenges of being a kid and a mom. "We were getting so much response [from *16 and Pregnant*], I figured it was something that had to be done," Amber says. "It's one of those shows that

really shows something that's been kind of hush-hush for a while." Adds Farrah: "It turned into something way bigger than I ever thought it would."

But now that the show has made real stars of the girls and their babies—with magazines chronicling Amber's 65-pound post-baby weight loss and Farrah's and Maci's family drama—its success raises a host of serious questions. For starters: What will the babies think when they're old enough to see their early lives, and their young parents' every mistake, on tape? "I don't want Bentley to watch it and think Ryan's a terrible father, because he's not," Maci says of her ex, whose cold shoulder to parenting duties during the first season led to their breakup. "So I have to wait until he's old enough where he can understand. Hopefully we can just laugh at it, like, wow, we were morons." Catelynn sees an upside for the daughter she gave up: "I think she'll enjoy it, seeing me and Tyler talking about her and missing her."

Critics have also wondered whether the show contributes to an overall "glamorization" of teen pregnancy. "If you think it's glamorizing teen pregnancy, I don't know what's wrong with you," huffs Amber. "It shows these girls who want to have babies really young how hard it really is." Adds Maci: "I'm not doing it to be famous, and I'm not doing it to get paid, because [money's] not exactly rolling in. I'm just doing it for educational purposes." (Neither the girls nor MTV would comment on how much they're compensated, but the moms' financial issues are a constant theme on the show.)

Then there's the question of the basic well-being of the Teen Moms' offspring. Cameras were rolling as Farrah's daughter, Sophia, was left alone in the kitchen sink and turned a hot-water faucet on herself during a bath, as well as when she fell off the bed while Farrah was distracted by an urgent call from her bank. Producers say the crew would certainly step in if they witnessed a seriously risky situation, though it's a concern they're constantly balancing with their mission to document the "challenges of parenting at this age," Freeman explains. "If we were privy to something that was passing a level of danger, it's no

longer TV," he adds. "That's an internal-compass thing. It's not a network-policy thing, that's just a human thing."

Farrah's attempts to reconcile with her mother, Debra, and her grief over losing Sophia's dad in a car accident will continue to play out this season, which runs through Oct. 12. Viewers will also see Catelynn and Tyler's first visitation with Carly, Amber's pursuit of a GED while her relationship with Gary hovers on the brink of destruction, and Maci's custody battle with Ryan. Though the show has yet to get an official season 3 pickup, crews have already started shoot-

ing footage, including Maci's backyard talk with her mom about her moving plans. It would be a shame to stop now, just when the girls are truly mastering the art of turning moments in their lives into impromptu public-service announcements. A few hours after Maci's poolside chat with Mom, she's enjoying a casual—but, of course, filmed—dinner with girlfriend Keelie when she wonders aloud, "God, why is my life so hard?"

Responds Keelie, "Because you had unprotected sex." And therein lies the *Teen Mom* message: Kids, don't try this at home. ■

My Life as a TV Mom



Maci, 19

HOMETOWN Chattanooga, Tenn.

BACKSTORY Had son Bentley with then boyfriend Ryan, but the couple broke up last season over Ryan's lack of interest in parenting.

IN HER OWN WORDS "The very first time that they came to film for *16 and Pregnant*, I was like, 'Do I look at the camera? Now it's just normal to have 10 people around you listening to everything you say. You can't even go to the bathroom—they can hear you pee. Bentley knows them, and what they're doing.'"



Amber, 20

HOMETOWN Anderson, Ind.

BACKSTORY Had daughter Leah with on-again, off-again fiancé Gary.

IN HER OWN WORDS "I can't go anywhere without people stopping me. I knew from the beginning what I was getting myself into. We can't go out to eat. I have people coming up to the doorstep. I stay professional with it and understand that it comes with the territory. It's a job also. I get death threats; people say stuff about me. It's really not glamorous."

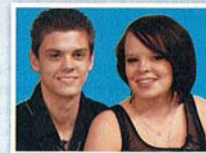


Farrah, 19

HOMETOWN Council Bluffs, Iowa

BACKSTORY Had daughter Sophia with an ex-boyfriend who died in a car accident during the pregnancy, when the two weren't speaking.

IN HER OWN WORDS "I decided to open up and be honest with the viewers [about Sophia's father]. People who have lost people they've cared about, I think it's helped them, and it's helped me. I'll call them fans; I don't want to call them viewers, like I'm a huge celebrity. But viewers are so happy I came forward with who I am."



Catelynn, 18

HOMETOWN Algonac, Mich.

BACKSTORY She and her now fiancé, Tyler, set up an open-adoption plan for daughter Carly.

IN HER OWN WORDS "I've had a lot of people tell me they never knew about adoption. They were thinking you put your kid up and never see them again. It's showing people that adoption is not this huge scary thing."

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