



By Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press

In Marine City, Mich.: *Teen Mom*'s Catelynn Lowell and Tyler Baltierra, both 18 now, play with dog Caddy. They gave up their daughter, Carly, for adoption.

16, pregnant — and famous

MTV series, and their stars' celeb status, run risk of glamorizing teen motherhood

By Arieenne Thompson
USA TODAY

Maci Bookout, 19, wants to set the record straight.

She's still dating her boyfriend, Kyle King, 22. She's not house hunting in Hollywood, and she's not best friends with Taylor Swift. In fact, she has never spoken to her.

So who's Maci Bookout?

She's a teen mother and star of MTV reality show and ratings home run *Teen Mom*, which scored nearly 1.5 million more viewers this summer in its second-season premiere than the season finale of Emmy darling *Mad Men* last month.

Saturday Night Live has spoofed it. *Today* co-hosts Hoda Kotb and Kathie Lee Gifford have debated it. The Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, has written about MTV's pregnant programming.

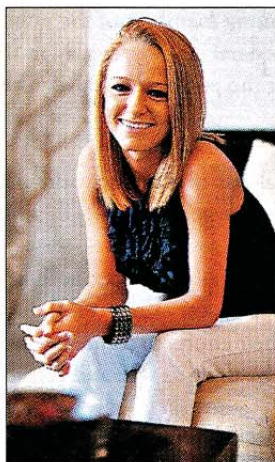
The stories and personalities behind the pop-culture phenomenon are a casting director's dream.

Bookout, a sophomore at Chattanooga State Community College in Tennessee, gave birth to Bentley, now 2, when she was 17. She has a drama-filled relationship with Bentley's father, ex-boyfriend Ryan Edwards, 22. Marine City, Mich., native Catelynn Lowell, 18, gave birth to Carly, now 18 months, when she was 17 and decided with her fiancé, Tyler Baltierra, 18, to put the baby up for an open adoption. Their adoption counselor helped the couple try out for *16 and Pregnant*.

Council Bluffs, Iowa, mom Farrah Abraham, 19, dreams of going to culinary school but for now is caring for Sophia, 21 months, whose 18-year-old father, Derek Underwood, died in a car accident months before she was born. Amber Portwood, 20, has made news in her hometown of Anderson, Ind., where on Thursday police charged her with two counts of felony domestic battery after they said she struck former fiancé Gary Shirley, 24, on camera in front of their daughter, Leah, 2.

All four women are mainstays on USA TODAY's Celebrity Heat Index, which measures media exposure; Portwood topped the list for October, beating

Cover story



MTV

A different kind of life: Maci Bookout, who has a son, Bentley, says that now, "everyone ... knows something about me and is watching me and judging me."

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Shows' educational goals clash with tabloids

Continued from 1D

out Angelina Jolie and Prince William. The moms are regularly on the covers of *People* and *Us Weekly* and have Facebook fan pages dedicated to them.

All of the attention prompts the question of whether the young women's rise to pop prominence glamorizes teen pregnancy and motherhood, says child psychologist Laurie Zelinger.

"While a teenage parent may be doing the best they can, they don't have all the information to weigh their options. The emotional part of them says, 'Wow, this is exciting getting my 15 minutes of fame,' but they're not always thinking of the effect on the child," she says. "I think it does increase the likelihood that for some people, they will say, 'I can do it, too.'"

It's been on the radar

Bookout, who applied to be on the show via Craigslist, concedes that the exposure has made her an unlikely star.

"Before (the show), I just had my friends and family in Chattanooga, and that was really the only thing I knew," she says of her newfound notoriety, fueled by tabloid rumors about her love life, place of residence and A-list connections. "Now, it's like everyone in the world knows me or knows something about me and is watching me and judging me."

So what's the allure of watching a series about teen moms struggling to make ends meet?

"For a while, there was a lot of reality TV that felt very scripted, and for us and our readers, there's this appeal. (Readers) just really feel like they're getting a glimpse into these people's lives," says *Us Weekly* entertainment director Dina Sansing. "There's not really much more compelling television than teens trying to raise children."

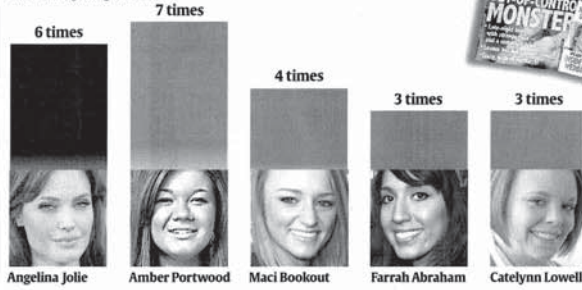
The ratings for *Teen Mom*, which is a spinoff of MTV's *16 and Pregnant*, prove how "must-see" the programming is. Its December 2009 premiere pulled in more than 2 million viewers, and that number nearly doubled for July's premiere. In February, the viewership for *16 and Pregnant* hit 3.4 million, while the Oct. 26 Season 2 extension premiere (the show airs Tuesdays at 10 p.m.) grabbed 2.8 million viewers.

The shows "really resonate with (MTV's) audience," says media analyst Brad Adgate. "There was the movie *Juno*, and then there's been high-profile teen pregnancies — people like Bristol Palin or Jamie Lynn Spears. It's been on the radar. If you're going after young women, it's really putting on a show they can identify with."

And it's not just resonating with teens.

Celebrity factor of the 'Teen Mom' cast

Regulars on the MTV reality series first captured the attention of celebrity tabloids and news sites late this summer, according to USA TODAY's Celebrity Heat Index, which measures media exposure. This chart shows how many times they made the weekly index compared with Hollywood A-lister Angelina Jolie, a popular media subject, since the beginning of October.



Graphic by Frank Pompea, USA TODAY; Jolie by AP/Getty Images; Portwood by MTV; Bookout and Abraham by Getty Images; Lowell by Detroit Free Press



Mom and tabloid staple: Amber Portwood, with daughter Leah, 2, has been charged after hitting her ex-fiancé on camera in *Teen Mom*.

"It gives you a 360-degree view of the process of childbearing. As an adult looking at it, I see it in a different way because I'm in the process of trying to figure out if I'm ready to have a child or not," says Atlanta viewer Haweni Keskeska, 29. "Part of it makes me like, 'Well, if very young kids can do it, then I can.'"

The concern for teens, however, is what else they may see in the show. While the *Teen Mom* stars have their share of struggles on the small screen each week, paparazzi shots and tabloid covers manage to rip them out of the context of MTV and place them in the realm of celebrity, says *Teen Mom* executive producer Morgan J. Freeman.

"We stumbled into this current success of *Teen Mom* that is driven by a completely different industry. It's driven by a tabloid industry — the modern cultural-Twitter-online-viral monster that is outside of our control," he says. "(I'm) a little bit speechless that this show has kind of hit that pop phenom. Frankly, it's a challenge to stay focused on the real issues, stay focused on the real challenges in all of our girls' lives with this sort of larger cloud of the tabloids, the media circus, the glamorizing and glorifying aspects of it."

What they're trying to do, Freeman contends, is spread the

message of teen pregnancy prevention and safe sex with the help of the four girls whose up-and-down lives show what he and MTV general manager Stephen Friedman describe as an "unvarnished" look.

"I'm not trying to glamorize teen pregnancy," says Lowell, who adds that she and Baltierra regularly communicate with Carly's adoptive parents. "If anything, I'm trying to stop it or at least try to make (teens) make better decisions like using protection or birth control. I'm doing the show for a good reason — to show teens that these are struggles that you go through when you become a young mom."

Bookout concedes that all of the attention is "weird" for her and Bentley but says that the larger picture is more important.

"I don't think I would ever regret doing *16 and Pregnant* or *Teen Mom* because I did it for educational reasons," she says. "I definitely think it's doing its job, because some of the feedback I get from younger girls is really good as far as, 'I'm going to wait to have sex' or 'I'm going to use safe sex.' That was my goal. I didn't do it for the fame or for the attention."

What about the babies?

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Preg-

nancy applauds MTV's efforts. "I think any effort that puts this issue in front of millions of teenagers week in and week out is a net win," says the National Campaign's chief program officer, Bill Albert. "I might go so far as to say this is the best public service announcement I have seen for preventing teen pregnancy in decades."

Portwood, whose domestic spats and questionable romances have been well-documented on *Teen Mom*, has been a particular target for the tabloids. *Life & Style*'s Oct. 25 cover screamed "Out-of-control Monster!" over a photo of the young mom holding her daughter, while the Nov. 8 issue of *InTouch Weekly* promised to reveal Portwood's "secret past" of "cops, drugs and cutting."

Meanwhile, paparazzi have captured the young women's most pedestrian activities: Bookout hailing a taxi in New York and Abraham frolicking in a pumpkin patch with Sophia.

The extra attention can be damaging, especially for the toddlers involved, Zelinger says.

"If the child gets a lot of recognition from other people, it ends up reinforcing the child's sense of 'I'm important,'" she says. "Then, if the child seems to need this sense of recognition, as he grows up, does he then look for other kinds of opportunities for visibility? If he likes the reception he's getting from the public, then does he seek validation by doing riskier kinds of things?"

In order to participate in the initial filming of *16 and Pregnant*, the underage girls' parents had to sign consent forms, but Zelinger argues that the filming of a reality show, though consensual, can break down the bonds between a mother and a child.

"It's my feeling that a child's distress should never be the premise for entertainment. A toddler needs to be with a parent in order to develop that relationship of trust, and the parent

needs to be able to respond to that child without any other priority.

"If the mother is distracted by the celebrity of the cameras, how responsive is she going to be to that child?"

Stars speaking out

Cameras continue to roll for Bookout, Lowell, Abraham and Portwood, "but nothing's been announced yet about what we'll do with (the footage)," Freeman says. Meanwhile, *Teen Mom 2* will premiere Jan. 11 with a cast culled from the latest installment of *16 and Pregnant*.

High school senior Asiaona Smith, 17, worries about the impact of the show.

"Say I have a little sister who's 7. She's going to think, 'She had sex, she got pregnant; it's OK, because she's famous. She's on the cover of magazines.' No, it's not OK. Why are people celebrating them?"

Bookout and Lowell say that MTV has not paid them to participate on *Teen Mom*, and both Freeman and Friedman refuse to discuss any financial details related to the women. Bookout says she has been able to book some paid speaking engagements, but Lowell says that she and Baltierra have yet to see their notoriety help them financially.

"I would love to go places like high schools and talk about my story, but what I want to do is preach about adoption. I know that we can get opportunities, and me and Tyler have been talking about taking them," she says.

Addiction specialist Drew Pinsky, who has consulted with the *Teen Mom* stars and their families, says MTV should pay the *Teen Mom* cast. "The concern is, are these particular young women in some way being adulterated by this experience? You have to go look at their lives to make that assessment. It doesn't seem to be happening. I actually hope they make some money from this, because they're all quite destitute."

Bookout laughs off her public perception as a money-hungry, aspiring star who's planning a reality show with new friend Palin.

"I'm low-maintenance. I don't care about attention. I'm still in Tennessee. I still go to Walmart!" she insists.

"I still live a normal life. I don't buy expensive things. I guess if I were living in L.A. in some mansion and buying whatever I wanted to, I guess I'd feel more famous and like a celebrity, but I don't. I'm just a normal person who's on TV."