

# The Washington Times

## MTV's '16 and Pregnant' sobering for many teens, poll says

by Cheryl Wetzstein

The dialogue doesn't get more real: A pregnant teenage girl pushes her boyfriend in a parking lot, screaming, "I hate you, I hate you!"

Another boy, sitting in a living room with his pregnant girlfriend, says coldly, "So you realize if we weren't having a baby, I wouldn't be here, right?" "No, I did not realize that," she replies in a small voice.

These are the voices of "16 and Pregnant," a hugely popular reality-TV program that follows several young mothers through their pregnancies and deliveries.

Their stories are so heart-rending that "one could make the argument that these are the best teen-pregnancy-prevention public service announcements ever made," said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

But "16 and Pregnant" — which starts its third season Oct. 26 — is not a documentary series on some sober news station. It is the brainchild of MTV, the cable network that is also home to sexually charged music videos, sex-laden reality shows and all-but-explicit "Spring Break" coverage.

The show also inspired a spinoff, "Teen Mom," which follows some of the pregnant girls into the early years of caring for their babies.

Mr. Albert's view of the show was backed up last week by a survey to find out what teens really thought of "16 and Pregnant."

The poll, which the National Campaign commissioned, found that out of more than 1,000 teens, six in 10 had seen the show. Of those teens, 82 percent thought the show helped teens understand the challenges of childbearing much better, while only 15 percent thought it glamorized having a baby in high school.

The phone survey of 1,008 people aged 12 to 19, taken Aug. 12 to Sept. 12, also found that youths overwhelmingly said watching TV shows made them think harder about how to avoid teen pregnancy themselves, though there was a major gap between the sexes.

Among girls, 46 percent "agree strongly" and 34 percent "agree somewhat" that seeing TV shows and characters they like dealing with teen pregnancy makes them consider themselves how to avoid it. Among boys, the numbers were 27 percent "agree strongly" and 40 percent "agree somewhat."

But the juxtaposition of virtual celebration of casual sex on some MTV channels and cautionary tales about teen pregnancy on other MTV channels elicits eye-rolls from groups like the Parents Television Council (PTC).

"It's hard for me to believe that they are really sincere [about fighting teen pregnancy] when they produce and distribute so many programs that really glamorize irresponsible behavior," said Melissa Henson, director of communications for the nonprofit media-watchdog organization.

MTV has only gotten coarser over the years, she said. When the "Real World" reality show debuted, it seemed to be more focused on "young people getting started with their new lives, getting internships, embarking on their careers," she said.

"These days, it's almost entirely focused on kids going out, getting drunk, hooking up with strangers they meet at the bar and fighting with their housemates when they get home."

As for sexually charged programming aimed at youth, MTV is close to the top, if not the top network, Ms. Henson said.

In 2004, PTC examined a week of MTV's "Spring Break" programming. They found 3,056 depictions of sex or various forms of nudity, plus 2,881 verbal sexual references, which broke down to about 18 instances an hour. In comparison, prime-time "adult hour" network programming has fewer than six instances of sexual content an hour, the group said.

In a statement to The Washington Times, MTV said it "has always reflected and been a source for our audience on the issues that affect them most — our job is to air a balance of what is culturally relevant to our audience and produce shows that reflect issues and interests that are important to our viewers."

For more than a decade, it added, MTV has worked with the Kaiser Family Foundation on a public-information partner-