

The other young mothers

By GAIL ROSENBLUM, Star Tribune

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Dominique Hines has been following media coverage of 17-year-old Bristol Palin's pregnancy with great interest. Dominique, 16, is the single mother of a 3-month-old son, Da'Marion. She's also a high school student with big dreams.

But similarities between the two teenagers pretty much end there. Many professionals who work with pregnant girls and teen mothers are happy to see this issue placed center stage. But they worry that the Palin story glosses over an essential truth: Most teenagers, like Dominique, don't have nearly the resources and support that vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's daughter has.

"It isn't a question of love, ability or hard work," said Mary Pat Sigurdson, program coordinator for Broadway High School, a Minneapolis alternative school for pregnant teens and mothers ages 12 to 21. The school offers on-site child care and Hennepin County social worker services.

"These girls have the same aspirations. It's a question of resources. This is an important discussion to have, but not if you leave that part out. What do other young moms need to have the same advantages as Sarah Palin's daughter?"

Although pregnancy and birth rates among girls ages 15 to 19 have declined nationwide 34 percent since 1991, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), birth rates increased for

the first time in 2006. Abortion rates have held steady, although a slight increase was noted among 18- to 19-year-olds from 2006 to 2007. It is unclear whether these are trends or one-time fluctuations, researchers said.

And it is the rare pregnant teen who marries. In 2006, according to Census figures, just 2.1 percent of males ages 18 to 19 were married; for girls of the same ages, it was 4.8 percent. This could be good news. Nearly half of marriages in which the bride is 18 or younger end in separation or divorce within 10 years, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

A sea change: few adoptions

But Bristol Palin's decision to keep her baby is right in line with cultural norms. Today, fewer than 1 percent of babies born to never-married U.S. women, including teens, are placed for adoption, according to the CDC. That's a sea change from the 1950s to early 1970s, when most pregnant girls mysteriously disappeared to give birth at homes for unwed mothers, their babies adopted out in closed adoptions.

Girls who were allowed to keep their babies were typically forced to marry. Today open adoption, in which the adoptive parents are known, is the norm, and the stigma surrounding teen pregnancy has diminished greatly. A 2007 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reported that nearly one-third of teens view teen pregnancy and parenthood as "no big deal." In fact, 6 percent of teens believe that being a teen parent would *help* young people reach their goals; 10 percent say a pregnancy would not stop them from reaching their goals.

That belief is perpetuated, some say, by high-profile teens such as

Britney Spears' little sister, Jamie Lynn, 16, who sold her pregnancy story to OK! magazine for a reported \$1 million.

In fact, most pregnant teens live in poverty. They often don't finish high school and few go on to college. Their lifetime earnings are significantly lower and they are more likely to go on welfare. Their babies more often suffer from low birth weight and are later more likely to be referred to child protective services.

These pregnancies are not a script for failure, said Brigid Riley, executive director of the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting, "but the odds are so much more challenging."

Planned Parenthood president Sarah Stoesz concurs. "The Palins are putting forth a very idealized picture of an American family, one with income, some level of education and access to many different choices to provide support for their teenaged daughter. That is not the road for most teens in this situation."

Wake-up call

Dominique's day begins at 5 a.m., when she nurses her tiny son, then tries to get a few more hours of sleep. Her sister holds the baby if Dominique wants to grab a shower. She takes six classes as a Broadway High School junior, including college-level course work, and sometimes arrives at school in her jammies, "which is OK, as long as Da'Marion looks presentable." Once a self-described troublemaker and poor student, she now pulls all As and hopes to become a forensic scientist.

She leaves school early to get to Rainbow Foods, where she works the 4 to 8:30 p.m. shift most days and weekends. Dominique, who lives with her mother and stepfather in Robbinsdale, gets no financial

help from the baby's father, using Minnesota Family Investment Program funds to care for her son. Becoming a mother, she said, "was a wake-up call for me."

Fellow student Lania Caldwell, 16, wakes up at 6:30 a.m. and catches three buses -- with 1-year-old daughter Kaylynn -- to get to school. "It really sucks when your kid gets sick because you miss school days," she said. Lania, who lives with a friend in St. Paul, also helps out with her three younger siblings, who live with their mom. Kaylynn's father is in jail. Lania plans to graduate a year early and attend Minneapolis Community and Technical College or Metro State University to major in early childhood education.

"You're not a teenager anymore," Lania said, reflecting on her life now. "You have to set up all the appointments, get your education, go to work, find baby-sitters. Friends? Hardly."

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