

The Mothers Movement Online

Resources and reporting for mothers and others who think about social change.

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mmo Books

The truth about teen moms

You Look Too Young to be a Mom:

Teen Mothers Speak Out on Love, Learning, and Success

Edited by Deborah Davis

Perigee Books, 2004

Like most healthy, warm-blooded adolescent girls of my era (this was back in the early 70's, when mandatory sex ed classes in public schools provided accurate information about preventing pregnancy and STDs instead of pushing the abstinence-only agenda), my high school years were devoted to certain amount of impulsive risk-taking and romantic foolishness. And while sexual experimentation was high on my "things to do" list, not getting pregnant was Priority One. During that remarkable time of social progress for women, dire warnings about a "fate worse than death" trickled down from my mother's generation to blend with feminist ideals prescribing reliable birth control, higher education and meaningful paid work as the baseline conditions for feminine self-actualization. Compared to the bold new possibilities for women, teen motherhood sounded like a sure-fire shortcut to a lifetime of misery and regret.

As times changed—and they changed quickly—I grew to resent the scornful rhetoric of conservative leaders and religious fundamentalists who singled out unwed teenage mothers as the cause of every imaginable social ill. (It was the late Ronald Reagan who perfected the political art of vilifying teen "welfare" mothers in order to gain popular support for his radical agenda to dismantle the social safety net.) When I finally started to focus on motherhood as a social issue, I recognized that the unique needs of pregnant and parenting teens would have to be included in any legitimate advocacy platform to advance the economic status of mothers. I never condoned punitive attitudes that branded all teen mothers as "bad" girls and "bad" mothers. But I never had a reason to question my assumption that pregnant and parenting teens were destined to be forever trapped in a dispiriting half-life of unrealized potential, and it

certainly never occurred to me that teen motherhood could be the motivating factor for creating a life filled with promise, purpose and meaning.

Until now.

You Look Too Young to be a Mom: Teen Mothers Speak Out on Love, Learning, and Success is a myth-busting anthology of over 30 personal essays by women who joined the ranks of new motherhood between the ages of 15 and 19. While these stories seldom downplay the emotional and practical hardships young mothers face as they deal with challenges of parenting, working and completing their education, the message that rings through is that teen moms— with enough support and the right opportunities— can be devoted parents, model students, and highly successful individuals. Editor **Deborah Davis**, author of two novels for young adults and a childbirth educator and doula, has gathered together a collection of essays reflecting a broad range of personal perspectives and attitudes— these are the stories of “average” middle-class teens and rebellious punk grrls, inner-city gang members and suburban honor students, teenagers who defy expectations and form lasting, loving relationships with their babies’ fathers and others who must find the courage send the guy packing. Some of the contributors are mid-life women recollecting earlier experiences of young motherhood; many are still in their late teens or mid-20s. Despite the different ages and backgrounds of the writers in *You Look Too Young to be a Mom*, the stories repeat a common theme of overcoming the isolation and social stigma of teen motherhood and moving forward with learning, love and life.

Davis groups the essays into eight sections covering everything from finding emotional and practical support in unexpected places, to the physicality of pregnancy and child birth, the challenges of teen parenting with or without a partner, and the ways teen motherhood can prompt young women to take action, both in their own lives and to improve the lives of others. In general, content takes precedent over style in *You Look Too Young to be a Mom*. To a woman, the contributors to are thoughtful, honest and articulate. But not all write professionally and the essays range from well-polished to plain spoken. This is not necessarily a flaw— the authenticity of the writers’ voices and the vivid, first-person accounts of their experiences are far more important to the substance of this book than literary gloss. However, readers searching for a collection of fine creative non-fiction on the topic of teen motherhood may be disappointed by a few of the more prosaic essays. Each section concludes with a selection of short comments from a survey Davis circulated while researching the book. (In answer to the question “What’s the single biggest issue, obstacle or challenge teen parents face

today?,” one succinct respondent replies: “Republicans.”)

When teen moms write about their babies, they write about the same things other mothers write about— from the breath-taking sensation of falling truly, madly and deeply in love with a newborn to the inexplicable mood swings and destructive passions of toddlers. The normal daily pressures of motherhood are dramatically exacerbated when— as all too often happens— teen mothers have been rejected by their friends, families or the baby’s father, have limited options for completing their schooling, experience economic insecurity or are openly shamed by complete strangers for their sexuality and its unplanned outcome. But none of the mothers in *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* is prepared to let her life go down the drain, even when the situation goes from bad to worse (a fair amount of drinking and drugging goes on in these personal histories, and a few moms hook up with abusive partners before they find the right one).

For many of these mothers, the desire to do well springs from a commitment to give their child the best of all possible futures. For others, an oppositional rage against being typecast as a loser is enough to pull them through. Some move beyond helping themselves into helping other teen mothers through social activism, particularly in the area of expanding educational opportunities for pregnant and parenting teens. Whatever it is that fuels the drive of the young mothers in *You Look Too Young to be a Mom*, they are not afraid to sit in the driver’s seat. And these are definitely not the kind of young women any sensible person would relegate to the scrap-heap of society. The teen moms who let us peer into their lives in this remarkable anthology are caring and involved. They accept the consequences of their past actions and strive for self-improvement through a combination of hard work and making their own luck. In other words, they exhibit all the qualities of the type of young person America admires most.

While *You Look Too Young to Be a Mom* celebrates the personal and educational achievements of teen moms, it’s in no way a sales pitch for teen motherhood. Although none of the narratives wallow in remorse for what could have been if that fateful pregnancy test had turned out a “minus” rather than a “plus,” the essays don’t attempt to hide the fact that teen mothers can be emotionally troubled or that their behavior can be troubling. Even so, *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* reminds us that the story of teen motherhood has many possible— and positive— endings.

It’s not necessary to romanticize teen motherhood to acknowledge and respect the value young mothers find in it. Even though teen motherhood shoves a young woman

into the dreary grown-up world of full-time responsibility before her time, it can be a gift — a flashing turn signal in a life heading in the wrong direction or a new reason to make conscious choice and constructive action the bywords of well-lived life. *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* makes it clear that teen motherhood— just like every other kind of motherhood— is rich with opportunities to learn more about the elastic properties of real love and what it means to be human and vulnerable in a complicated and imperfect world.

Judith Stadtman Tucker

June 2004

Also of interest:

The *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* Web site

www.teenmombook.com

MMO interview with Deborah Davis

From *Brain, Child* Magazine:

Going All the Way:

The lies, half-truths, and hidden advantages of teenage motherhood

By Jennifer Niesslein

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editor@mothersmovement.org