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Speaking out for teen moms

MMO interviews Deborah Davis,
editor of *You Look Too Young to be a Mom*

You Look Too Young to be a Mom: Teen Mothers Speak Out on Love, Learning and Success is a myth-busting anthology illuminating the real-life struggles and rewards of teen motherhood. Edited by **Deborah Davis**, the collection offers more than 30 frank, first-person essays by women—some now mature adults, others still in their late teens and early 20s—who joined the ranks of new motherhood between the ages of 15 and 19. While these stories never glorify adolescent motherhood or minimize its hardships, the combined effect is positive and uplifting. The core message of *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* is that becoming a teen mom need not be a one-way ticket to a blighted future—it's a book that could be an eye-opener for anyone who pictures teen mothers as social wash-outs or worse. Although each of the anthology's contributors has unique obstacles to overcome on her road to personal success, the stories emphasize that when pregnant and parenting teens have the right kind of support and access to the right opportunities, nothing can hold them back from fulfilling their highest hopes and dreams.

Davis was inspired to compile the essays for *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* after providing labor support to birthing teens and teaching a weekly writing class to teen mothers at a Seattle alternative high school. She is the published author of two novels for young people, (*The Secret of the Seal*, Crown, 1989 and *My Brother Has AIDS*, Atheneum, 1994), an ex-magazine editor, and a writing instructor and consultant. Her articles have appeared in a variety of regional and national publications, including *Maine Times* and *Walking Magazine*, and she has held editorial positions at several magazines.

Davis has worked with teenagers in wilderness challenge and community service programs, and she has many years of experience teaching writing classes and workshops to writers of all ages. She lives with her husband and son in Seattle,

Washington, where she is currently working on a young adult novel.

MMO: You mention in your introduction that—like so many mothers today—you gave birth to your first child in your mid-thirties. Can you share a bit more about your background and the personal experiences that inspired you to put together an anthology about teen motherhood?

DD: I grew up in suburbs of New York and Boston, and I was a teenager in the 1970s. My mother urged my sisters and I to “save yourselves for marriage,” but that guidance didn’t make much sense to me when it seemed that the prevailing morality of the 70s was that sex was cool, that there was nothing wrong with having sex, and so why wait? The pill was becoming popular, John Lennon and Yoko Ono had protested the Vietnam war by making love for weeks on end, and the Boston Women’s Health Collective published the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, so there was information about sex all around me. Yet, because we weren’t having any frank discussions about sexual issues in my home, I had a lot of questions and confusion.

I don’t recall seeing any pregnant students in my large high school of 2,700 students, but there must have been plenty of girls in a school that size who were conceiving. They must have been leaving school, possibly being sent away to homes for unwed mothers. I didn’t get to know a pregnant teen until my early 20s. A 17-year-old girl in a community service program I directed stopped attending, and I heard that she had gotten pregnant. Concerned about her, I went to see her, wanting to offer some sort of help. But when I got there and she said nothing about being pregnant, I felt too embarrassed to bring up the subject myself. Hoping she’d bring it up, I said, “You look like you’ve gained some weight.” She shrugged and stayed silent, and I left feeling ashamed at my insensitive attempt to connect with her.

Fifteen years later—after I’d published two novels for young people, taught many writing classes, married, birthed a child of my own, and gained confidence in talking about difficult topics—I trained to be a childbirth educator and doula (a woman who provides continuous support, information, and advocacy to a birthing woman). Several of my doula clients were teenagers having first babies. I was struck by how different they were from the negative images of them portrayed in the media. My clients were resourceful, eager to learn, strong when giving birth, and fiercely loving of their children. Yet I witnessed them being treated harshly or impatiently or

disrespectfully by doctors, nurses, and hospital intake workers, not to mention strangers on the street. And my clients told me stories about critical teachers and unhelpful guidance counselors.

I realized that I hadn't seen anything written by teen mothers about what they went through. I found books that quoted teen mothers briefly, but much of what I found written for and about young moms was negative. I then spent one school year teaching a writing class once a week to teen moms in an alternative high school. Their powerful stories convinced me that a whole book of teen moms' writing was needed.

MMO: The essays in *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* capture the unique voices of a diverse group of young mothers—from those who were raised in average middle-class families to those who grew up in the projects. How did you manage to collect such a wide range of stories?

DD: I placed my call for submissions on many, many web sites. I also sent it to dozens of schools, agencies, community programs, colleges, and even a prison that had a women's master's degree writing program. I placed several print ads in parenting and writing magazines, and I told everyone I came into contact with about the project. Quite a few women heard about the book by word of mouth.

MMO: The stories in your anthology speak volumes about the power of teen mothers' will to thrive despite the obstacles they encounter. But when I mentioned how uplifting and enlightening I found this positive spin on teen motherhood to a thirty-something friend, she said, "Aren't teen moms who get their lives together and escape the failure cycle just the exception to the rule?" What's the reality? Are teen mothers more likely to flounder than to soar?

DD: There's good news for those who fear that young mothers will flounder. Recent sociological studies are showing that while teen parents often experience some rough years when their children are young, generally they eventually do just fine. So, yes, there will be more floundering initially as the young mothers juggle school and parenting and work—not to mention the critical attitudes aimed their way and some very real discrimination in our public schools. Over time, however, young parents tend to establish stable families and lives.

MMO: What role has the media played in perpetuating cultural anxiety about the

social and personal consequences of teen motherhood? Are you at all concerned that the upbeat, non-punitive message of *You Look Too Young to be a Mom* may be misrepresented by those inclined to depict teen mothers as the scourge of society?

DD: One example of the media's perpetration of negative consequences is in the use of statistics. For example, a statistic that is frequently tossed around and misconstrued concerns the high numbers of teen moms who don't finish high school. Many pregnant teenage dropouts are impoverished economically. If you compare them to similarly impoverished teenage girls who *don't* get pregnant, you'll see that the dropout rates are similar. In other words, pregnant teens who don't finish school aren't dropping out simply because they're pregnant but because of poverty-related issues. The high dropout rate is being reported out of context, without an adequate explanation of the complex factors contributing to it.

As for the book's message being misrepresented, I'm not concerned. First of all, because as I've traveled around the country talking to different groups, I've seen almost none of that happening. And second, because I'm seeing that when people take the time to read the book, they come to understand that the very existence of teen parents offers all of us the opportunity to be kinder, more patient, more compassionate and understanding. Just today I talked with the members of a mother-daughter book club and one of the mothers, who had only begun reading the book, said, "I'm afraid that you're going to glamorize teen motherhood." Her teenage daughter, who was sitting next to her and had read much more of the book, turned to her and said, "No way! These stories aren't glamorous at all. They make it look really hard!"

MMO: In addition to negative stereotyping, what are some of the greatest challenges facing teen mothers in North America? How can the broader mothers' movement respond effectively to the concerns of young moms?

DD: Many of the young mothers I've heard from say that the greatest challenges they face are the negative attitudes and assumptions, nasty stares, and discrimination aimed at them by others. In an interview by the *Christian Science Monitor*, anthology contributor Jackie Lanni said, "Being a teenage mom is like being a woman in corporate America. You have to work twice as hard to get half the credit" (*The Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 2004). Other mothers have said it's the lack of support, lack of information and resources, lack of positive role models, lack of

respect, and lack of access to education. One woman said the biggest challenge is Republicans.

I think the education issue is a huge one. The New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) has been involved in a lawsuit against the New York City Board of Education for discriminating against pregnant students who want to attend the regular high schools. The NYCLU had interns pretend to be pregnant high-school age women and call the 28 high schools to ask about enrolling. Only six of the 22 schools would allow the “students” to enroll. The other schools advised them to apply to the schools for pregnant and parenting students or to simply drop out and get their GED. Such discrimination is against the law under Title IX, and yet it’s happening all over North America. Pregnant and parenting students and their parents need to know that the students have the right to attend regular high schools. This is important because sometimes the GED programs and schools for pregnant students don’t provide adequate preparation for higher education.

MMO: The U.S. is alone in its failure to provide basic supports to working parents, such as extended or paid parental leave, universal access to health coverage and affordable high-quality child care. How does this affect the ability of teen moms to complete their education and secure jobs that offer living wages and good benefits? What other policy issues are front and center for groups aiming to improve the lives of teen mothers?

DD: As I mentioned above, not providing pregnant and parenting students with access to high-quality education is a huge problem. And it’s compounded by the lack child care within or near the schools. New York City alone has 12,000 new teen mothers every year, yet its high schools have space in their child care programs for about 800 to 1,000 children. Teen parents need all the basic supports mentioned—paid leave and health care as well as child care. As a society, we are shooting ourselves in the foot not to support new mothers of all ages, and young mothers in particular.

Other important policy issues for teen mothers include comprehensive sex education programs, starting in elementary schools and continuing up through high school. Studies show that abstinence-only programs are far less effective in preventing pregnancy and STD; financial aid and student housing for pregnant and parenting college students—not just graduate and married students; universal health care; more health clinics, including contraceptive services, in schools; and easier access to

benefits for parenting minors who cannot live with a parent or spouse.

MMO: Where can teen mothers and teen mothers-to-be look for support, online and in their communities?

For contact with a community of savvy, well-informed young mothers I recommend Girl-Mom.com. This web site also has an excellent [list of federal government and educational resources](#) for young parents.

Below is a sampling of resources suggested to me by young mothers. While this list does not cover the entire country (that list would be enormous!) it shows the kinds of organizations and agencies that exist in many cities and towns.

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In any state:

[Planned Parenthood](#)

California:

[Public Housing Authorities in California](#)

[Affordable Housing Online](#)

[California Healthy Families](#)

[California Legal Aid Commission Home Page](#)

[California Courts - Self Help Home Page](#)

[Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency](#)

Oregon:

[Insights Teen Parent Program in Portland](#)

Massachusetts:

Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy www.massteenpregnancy.org or call 617-482-9122. Teens or advocates can call their Teen Benefits Access Line with questions - staff at the Alliance have the most accurate and up-to-date information

about public benefits and services for teen parents in Massachusetts. If they don't know the answer, they will try to find out!

Calling the Alliance is also the easiest way for a pregnant teen to find out about education, childcare, counseling and support, home visiting, and other programs in Massachusetts.

Washington state:

The Mary Sheridan Foundation

Youth and Family Services (many agencies throughout Seattle)

Related reading:

MMO review of *You Look Too Young to be a Mom*

From *Brain, Child Magazine*:

Going All the Way:

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

by Jennifer Niesslein

Teen Mom Book web site, the official site of *You Look Too Young to be a Mom*. Book excerpts, reviews and more.

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