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In a collection of essays, young mothers seek to counter stereotypes

By **Stephanie Dunnewind**
Seattle Times staff reporter

The first response many pregnant teens hear is "Your life is ruined." Not so, say two Seattle-area moms who had children before 20. Yes, it's tough. But neither woman regrets having become a young mother.

They contributed to an anthology, "**You Look Too Young to Be a Mom: Teen Mothers Speak Out on Love, Learning and Success**," with hopes the book will counter negative stereotypes of teen moms, to wit, welfare-loving dropouts who raise dysfunctional kids.

"There are really good reasons for thinking about the timing of children," said Donna Dahlquist of Bainbridge Island, who became a mom at 18. "I don't recommend that teens go out and get pregnant on purpose.

"But the whole point of the book is that people learn this is not a doomsday proposition. I have three really fabulous kids, and I've had a good life. The doom and gloom is unwarranted."

The book's editor, Seattle young-adult novelist Deborah Davis, worked as a doula and was appalled by how hospital staff patronized young mothers. "They were so much more capable than they were being given credit for," she said. She later taught a writing class to young mothers at Seattle's John Marshall Alternative School.

"There's no one type of 'teenage mother,' " Davis said. "Every one has her own story. When people read the complex details of those stories, they better understand who they are."

The book's contributors are unapologetic, and some say young motherhood saved their lives by giving them direction.

That view garnered some controversy, but Davis insists the book doesn't promote teen childbearing.

"It simply offers a compassionate and balanced view of young women, who despite our country's efforts to discourage them from becoming mothers, did," she said.

A call for inspirational stories by young mothers attracted 200 submissions; Davis ended up publishing 35 essays on such topics as finding a

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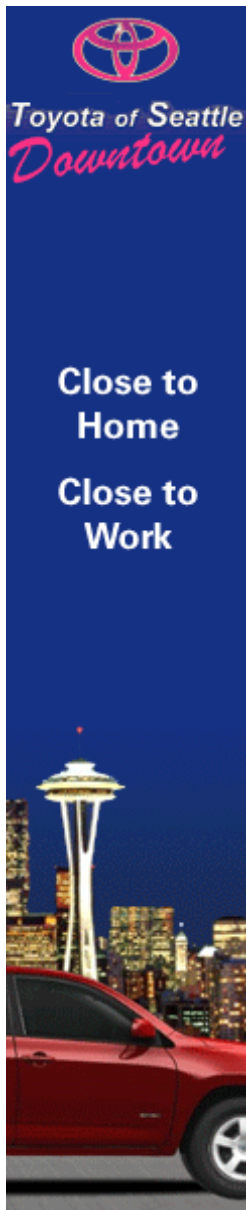
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Book reading

Seattle editor Deborah Davis and Northwest contributors will read stories from "**You Look Too Young to be a Mom: Teen Mothers Speak Out on Love, Learning and Success**" (Perigree Books, \$14.95) at local appearances:

- **2 p.m. Sunday**, Elliott Bay Book Co., 101 S. Main St., Seattle, (206-624-6600 or www.elliottbaybook.com).
- **1 p.m. May 25**, Delridge branch of the Seattle Public Library, 5423 Delridge Way S.W., Seattle (206-733-9125).
- **2 p.m. June 12**, University Book Store, 990 102nd Ave N.E.,

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career, completing a college degree, overcoming addictions and fighting for rights.

Bellevue (425 462-4500).

Most of the writers are in their 20s or early 30s; the oldest is in her late 50s. The book includes eight Northwest contributors, with three from Seattle.

The anthology comes as the birthrate for 15- to 19-year-olds in Washington continues to plummet, with a 40-percent drop from 1991 to 2002, according to the National Vital Statistics Report.

Still, an estimated 15,630 Washington teens became pregnant in 2000, with 8,127 births, reports The Alan Guttmacher Institute, a New York-based nonprofit focused on sexual and reproductive health.

Teenage moms also seem younger as more women wait until their 30s or even 40s to have children. In 2002, a woman had her first child at an average 25 years old, up from 21 in 1970.

Davis supports teen pregnancy-prevention efforts but thinks the finger-shaking should halt once women decide to keep their babies. "These young mothers need to rise to the occasion, and society needs to meet them at their level," she said.

Former teen moms say they'd like to see more support for young parents, but if that's too optimistic, they wish people would at least stop treating them like "sexual criminals," as one writer notes.

Trina Willard, 28, a Seattle mom of Juliana, 7½, and Isaac, 3, was pregnant at 19 but looked 16.

She wore a wedding ring even though she didn't actually marry until her daughter was a year old. Living in Missouri at the time, she felt that was at least some protection from people's glares.

"People are rude if they think you're a bad person," said Willard, a singer-songwriter.

Her essay describes her efforts to be the most prepared mom — training as a La Leche League leader, studying to be a doula, learning to check car sets for proper installation.

A woman's offhand comment during a plane trip made her realize she was trying too hard to counter others' perceptions.

Heading back to the Midwest, Isaac, then 1, screamed for a half-hour before falling asleep. Then she heard an older woman behind them say, "It's just so selfish. It's especially hard when they're teenagers."

"I had thought my armor against criticism was complete, that if I seemed perfect no one would have anything to criticize and I wouldn't have to face how terrified I am, even now, that I won't have what it takes to be a 'good mother,' " she writes.

Willard later discovered the woman wasn't even talking about her. But she learned to stop worrying about what other people thought.

"If you decide to have a baby, then believe in yourself," she said. "Know that your heart really can show you the way."

With a supportive husband, Willard didn't struggle financially as many young moms do. The cost was early divorce: "The things we had in common at 18 did not last into our 20s," she said. Her ex-husband is still active in the children's lives and works a few blocks from Willard's home.

As much as she loved the early years with her kids, it wasn't easy to go from no responsibilities to suddenly managing a household. "It's like someone who can't juggle at all trying to pick up five balls," she said.

Dahlquist's "Welcome to Motherhood" essay recounts a 1981 visit to Planned Parenthood, where she had to promise "not to freak out" at the results.

"When my turn came, I was humiliated to have tears drip down my inflamed cheeks as she told me the test was positive," she writes.

The only response people should offer pregnant women, regardless of their age, is "congratulations," said Dahlquist, now a 40-year-old social worker with three children, ages 22, 18 and 13. "All new parents can use a lot of support, whether they're young or older."

Still, she doesn't believe her grown children are ready to be parents. When her oldest son pulled an April Fool's Day prank and e-mailed that his girlfriend was pregnant, "it was very telling — I was in complete shock," she said. "But he would rise up. It's what you do, what I did."

But she'll have her revenge: "Next year I'll really get him. I'll tell him *I'm* pregnant."

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