

**Engaging, Ensuring and Elevating:
Essential Strategies for Mentoring Pregnant and Parenting Teens**

**By
Jeannine Amber**

Sandra* smiles when she recalls how Josh used to make her feel so special. The two met at their Detroit church where Josh, then 19, played the organ. He was talented, well mannered and handsome. Most important, he made Sandra feel adored, something she desperately lacked at home. “He talked to me like I was the prettiest girl in the world,” she recalls. “He really boosted my self esteem.” Outgoing and full of charm, Sandra’s sunny disposition belies her difficult past. When she was young, Sandra’s mother would routinely abandon her five children, leaving them to fend for themselves for days at a time. They were placed in foster care when Sandra was eight. “My mother choose men over her children,” she explains matter-of-factly. “She wasn’t a drug addict, but she acted like it. She was just really messed up.”

After they began dating, things between Sandra and Josh got physical fast. Three months into their relationship, Sandra found out she was pregnant. “I was totally shocked,” she says. She hadn’t been using birth control, but Josh had promised her he’d be careful.

Sandra hoped Josh would prove himself a good partner and parent, but she was constantly disappointed. “I guess in the back of my head there was a little shot of hope that he would do good,” she says with a sigh. “But it never happened.” A few months after their daughter, Dakota, was born, the couple split up for good. These days Sandra is raising their seventh-month old baby on her own. She’s 16 years old.

The United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the industrialized world, with more than 300,000 babies born to girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in 2012.

And while the rate of teen pregnancy among African-American girls has been dropping steadily since the 1990s, Black girls — who disproportionately live in segregated, under-resourced communities with a dearth of positive activities for young people — have a pregnancy rates almost twice as high as their White counterparts.

Girls like Sandra, who lack basic family support and a stable home, are the most at risk of an unintended pregnancy (girls in foster care are twice as likely as other girls to become pregnant before 19). For high-risk teens whose parents may be incarcerated, drug addicted or mentally ill, support services are vital to ensure their and their children's wellbeing. However, many teenage parents report that when they do reach out for help — from service providers, school officials or doctors — they often receive admonishments instead of assistance, judgment instead of care. Pregnant or parenting teens need support, guidance and stability. Most of all, they need to know that someone cares.

“No one is trying to hear what we have to say,” says Elijah, who had his son when he was just 16. “Why? Because they think they already know who we are: deadbeats and failures. When my son was born, my father, who didn't even raise me, was the first person to come to the hospital. He was also the first one to have everything bad to say. On what should have been the happiest day of my life, he actually made me cry. I knew he wasn't going to be the one to show me how to be a father. Basically, I was going to have to figure it out myself.” For young girls, who are often left with the majority of child-caring responsibilities, the challenges can feel even greater.

For many teenagers the path from pregnancy to successful parenting is riddled with what feels like insurmountable obstacles. They must quickly learn to provide and care for their children, figure out how to continue their education, secure employment, and possibly housing, all while negotiating their journey through adolescence. Supporting young parents over this rocky terrain is one of the greatest gifts mentors can give.

As mentors we have the power to talk back to the negative messages teen parents hear all around them and replace them with messages of hope. You can reignite deferred dreams, show teens the greatness that is possible and provide the life-changing affirmation, guidance and encouragement needed to empower young people to believe they can surmount the hurdles that lay ahead.

Our work with teen parents is critical. But before we begin, we must get to know those who are entrusting us to guide them. Who are the thousands of teenagers parenting while they are still children themselves? What are their challenges and fears? Most important, how can we support their journey toward adulthood and enable them to better nurture themselves and the children in their care?

To answer these questions, we convened focus groups of teen parents in Detroit and New York. We asked the participants to share their deepest concerns, greatest triumphs and describe what they wish for in their mentors. Then we followed up with one-on-one interviews to dig deeper. We also spoke with scores of service providers who work with pregnant and parenting teens across the country, in Oakland, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Miami, and New York City. Everyone contacted — from educators and social workers to health officials and researchers — generously shared their insight, wisdom and best practices. Each of those we spoke to is a warrior in the fight to secure for our youngest parents the promising futures they are entitled to. Following you will find important lessons and guiding principals gleaned from experts and young parents alike. We hope you will see this as a beginning, the first step in giving our pregnant and parenting teens the support and love they need to soar.

Listen with Compassion

In a small classroom at Pathways Academy, located on the east side of Detroit, seven pregnant or parenting teenage girls have gathered to share their experiences. They

come to this newly opened charter school from all over the city, attracted by Pathways' promise of free childcare and an opportunity to graduate. Some of these girls have been out of school for more than a year, forced to drop out of their old high schools to care of their children. Pathways represents a chance at a new beginning, and the girls speak shyly about their plans. One 18-year-old girl wants to be a veterinarian, another, 16, hopes to be a pediatrician. Two girls, both 16, want to go into cosmetology. Another girl announces proudly that she wants to be both a veterinarian and a part-time cosmetologist.

Even as they hold their babies in their laps, it's clear these mothers are still very young girls, given to animated discussions about who said what to whom in the school corridors that week. Like most adolescent girls, they are acutely attuned to what people around them think. Each girl admits she was terrified to reveal her pregnancy. "I still haven't told my uncle," says Jennifer, 18, whose son is almost two years old. Kendra, 16, shares that before she told her mother she was pregnant, she investigated homeless shelters certain her mother was going to kick her out of the house.

Coping with rejection and ridicule are some of the most difficult emotional challenges pregnant girls across the country face. They are labeled fast and loose even if they were coerced or forced into sex; even if they got pregnant the first time they had intercourse; even if they are only 13 or 14 years old. . Once they become pregnant, some girls feel they are responsible for any ill treatment they receive. "I can't tell you how many times I've heard girls say, 'I spread my legs, so I deserve this,'" says Kris Ahmed, program director of Teen Success Inc., a non-profit organization serving teen mothers in Northern California.

Ahmed, like many experts, points out that teen mothers are often crippled by feelings of shame: shame that they had sex; shame that they got pregnant; shame that the father of their baby has abandoned them. This toxic emotion prevents some girls from asking for the help they need and deserve, whether it be in the form of

public assistance, health care, or child support. “They don’t think they are entitled to any help,” says Ahmed. “Instead, they see their babies as a punishment.”

Our girls are in pain; sometimes that pain is turned inward. Ahmed notes a recent survey of more than 600 girls in the Teen Success program, almost half reported feelings of depression. Shockingly, 12 percent said they had attempted suicide after learning they were pregnant or becoming a mother. Mentors need to give young mothers and fathers a safe place to vent their fears, frustration and anger. At the same time, it’s critical that mentors, facilitators and leads be aware of any warning signs, such as sudden changes in mood or behavior, that their mentees may need additional support. [For more information on warning signs of depression see <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/depression-signs-and-symptoms.htm>]

Sometimes, the first step in healing your mentees' distress begins with the most simple displays of encouragement, affirmation and love. Keshana Enoex, a caseworker with Detroit’s Children’s Aid Society, teaches parenting classes at Pathways and mentors other teen parents across the city. She showers her girls with affection. “I give plenty of hugs,” she says. “Some of these girls get so little tenderness, especially from a woman. You can feel them exhale when you wrap your arms around them.”

Speak with Purpose

Ask young men and woman what they’d like in their mentors and they’ll eagerly share their laundry list of “must haves:” someone who can answer parenting questions, won’t judge them, and can help them feel less alone. But some of these girls have been let down so often, they’ve become self-protective and guarded, especially around adults who appear to be interrogating them without disclosing anything in return.

“I had a mentor once who wouldn’t tell me anything about herself,” complains Tanisha, 17, mother to a chubby-cheeked 1-year-old baby girl “When you’re secretive how am I suppose to trust you?”

Striking the right balance between disclosure and over-sharing can feel like a tight-wire act. It’s important to offer enough information to let your mentee know you can relate — for instance, by sharing a quick anecdote about your own fears surrounding parenthood — but you don’t want to monopolize the conversation. A quick rule of thumb: Answer questions directly, share your experiences when they illustrate a point, but never be the most vocal participant in the circle.

Teenage parents often feel that whatever they are going through is only happening to them. The goal of personal disclosure is, ultimately, to affirm your mentees’ experiences, validate their emotions and create a safe place in which they can speak. Showing them they are not alone in feeling fear, confusion or frustration can be very helpful. It’s also critical that mentors help remind mentees of the gift and joys of parenthood. For teenagers such a Sandra, motherhood can be a positive catalyst for growth and maturation.

“Before I got pregnant I was all over the place,” she recalls. “I was reckless. But when I got pregnant I realized I had to get it together. I didn’t want my daughter to end up in the same position I was in, growing up in foster care because her mother didn’t take care of her. My daughter gave me discipline and self-control. She made me think about things *before* I do them. Like, I used to be such a hothead. But now, anytime I think about fighting someone, I realize I could go to jail. I don’t want my baby to go into the system so I do my best not to put myself in situations where I have to be aggressive in the first place.”

Keep Them Safe

There is perhaps no group as maligned as pregnant and parenting teens. In many cities, billboards featuring tearful infants warn young people of the dire outcomes of teen pregnancy. The message is clear: if you parent while still a teenager you've failed not only yourself, but also your child. This shaming can leave young parents feeling reluctant to share the most difficult details of their lives. But it's critical that you learn the living arrangements of your mentees in order to offer them the most appropriate guidance and ensure that they are connected with best services and service providers to keep them and their children safe.

Where does your mentee live, and with whom? Is there enough food? Warm clothes? A safe place for the baby to sleep? Some teen parents are fortunate and well provided for. But for many, especially those living in chronically underserved communities, housing and food instability is a reality with which they live with every day. In situations of extreme poverty, girls may be living in homes with no running water, heat or electricity.

Homelessness is a constant threat for some teenage parents. They may be kicked out of their family home, or leave voluntarily after tensions flare in the wake of their pregnancy. They end up in shelters, or moving from place to place, staying at a cousin's one week and a girlfriend's the next. Program leads, facilitator and also mentors must be aware of these circumstances and able to direct teens to resources for family counseling and emergency housing, which school officials can often provide, or have access to. Our role is to make sure that young parents, dealing with a host of pressures, get connected.

Sometimes the greatest risk to a teen mother and her child is posed by her relationship her baby's father. Some young mothers move in with their boyfriends, lured by the promise of love and support, even though their boyfriends may be engaged in criminal activity and the homes may contain weapons or drugs. Other

girls find themselves locked in constant battle with the fathers of their children, engaging in non-stop verbal, and even physical, altercations, and subjecting their infants to harmful amounts of environmental stress and putting themselves and their babies at risk.

Even when the living arrangements are stable, sometimes the emotional chaos of adding a pregnancy to an adolescent relationship is can take an enormous toll. Teen parents may struggle with feelings of jealousy and despair, anger and loneliness. This is why mentoring is so critical. Wellness Mentoring Circles surrounding these precious young people— who have fragile lives in their hands — so that they can grow to know and love themselves. With support, even the most at-risk teen parents can discover his or her power and resilience and get on a path to high achievement and stability.

For young parents, particularly young mothers who are living in emotionally unhealthy environments, mentors can do the important work of guiding them to the awareness that they, and their children, deserve so much more. “I remind my girls that this may be what you are used to, but it’s not healthy,” says Enoex.

This is why the wisdom embedded in A New Way Forward is so pivotal. We are surrounding our precious young who are living fragile lives with the principals of loving themselves and learning how to make life-affirming and enhancing choices, which come alive in the Wellness Mentoring Circles.

Engage, for example, your Wellness Mentoring Circle in conversations about the qualities of a healthy, loving relationship. Show your mentees they are worthy of respect and empower them to safely ease away from toxic relationships, without placing themselves and their children in harm’s way. Engage mentees in exercises to promote self-care, love and acceptance. The more your mentees can depend on themselves for positive affirmation the less likely they are to seek attention from those who do them harm.

Mentors should also be aware of the risks posed by large age difference between teen mothers and the fathers of their children; it's not uncommon for girls to be preyed upon and impregnated by men in their 20s and older even. This power imbalance heightens a girl's risk for emotional and physical abuse. Be particularly mindful of indications that a mentee gives that she feels she has little or no control over her life, her body, her access to birth control and pre and post natal care. Ask your mentee, who makes the rules in the house? Who takes you to the doctor? Who makes decisions about the baby's care? What happens when you and your boyfriend argue?

If you suspect your mentee, or her baby, is in danger, immediately alert your program director who will be connected to in-school and external services designed to address immediate threats. Protect and secure the future of particularly our girls and their children by steering them from danger.

Set Goals

One of the unspoken tragedies for many teen parents is the loss of faith that a bright future is theirs to have. Before they became pregnant, many young mothers had been planning for life beyond high school. But with the arrival of a child, their focus turns to fulfilling their most immediate needs — securing diapers, formula and clothes. Meanwhile, the important task of setting goals and creating a long-term plan for success falls by the wayside.

It's a mindset that is often reinforced by the child's peer group, or even family members. "Many of our students are typically dealing with people who are trying to help them get the most from of Medicaid, or welfare to take care of their critical needs," explains Pathways Academy Principal Nathaniel King. "What they get is information about how to exist *right now*. What they really need also is information about their future. The more people we can get to tell them how wonderful they are, and show them the possibilities, the better." Helping young people envision, and

plan for, a productive life for themselves and their children is one of the most transformational acts of mentoring.

“I know a lot of people look at us and think all we have to offer is being loud, fighting and getting pregnant,” says Kara, 17, who is raising her 9-month-old daughter alone. “They are wrong. But a lot of girls don’t have good role models. We need to see different examples of other women who raised their children alone and went on to become successful. I’d love to see a mentor who shows us how to carry ourselves as young Black women; someone who can show us how to do better and be better.”

Ask your mentees to describe what a full and rewarding life looks like. Fuel confidence and sense of agency by reminding them they have the power to create their own destinies. Working together, help them translate their dreams into concrete action by devising plan with manageable weekly tasks. Check in regularly about progress, recognizing efforts and providing plenty of encouragement along the way.

Discuss Consequences

Kara, a bubbly 17-year old Pathways student, has thought about mentoring a lot. Before she became pregnant, she says proudly, she mentored younger students at her old high school, helping freshman acclimate to their new school. She has some advice for would-be mentors planning to work with teen mothers. She describes it as a three-step plan for self esteem. “Exercise one should be to write down all the things you like about yourself,” she says eagerly. “Exercise two is to stop caring about what people say about you, by writing down why you care. Exercise three is to stop comparing yourself to other people. A lot of girls have low self-esteem because they compare themselves to others. That’s why they are constantly fighting. They feel so bad about themselves the only way they can feel better is to point out each others’ flaws.” Kara, who moved in with her brother and his family after her mother moved to another city to be with a boyfriend, plans to graduate high school this

year. She wants to go to beauty school so she can get a job and support her daughter. Her big dream is to one day become a therapist.

Kara says the guidance and support she has received from her mentors has helped her become more aware of the relationship between her behavior and her child's well being. Now she even tries to relay those messages to other teen mothers. "I saw this girl at school who was cussing at her baby," she says. "So I tried to tell her that when you are violent toward your child then the baby becomes more violent. I learned that in my parenting class."

The supportive and nurturing atmosphere of a Wellness Mentoring Circle is specifically designed and uniquely suited to encourage young people to examine the consequences of their behavior. With much love and without judgment, you can help your mentees see how poor choices — from engaging in physical fights to not showing up for school — may negatively impact their children, or further keep them from their goals. Caseworker Keshana Enoex says she routinely talks to her girls about the choices they make. "I ask them to think things through. For instance, if they are getting into fights, I'll say, 'you thought you would just slap the other girl but what if something goes wrong and she falls down and dies, now what? You're in jai and someone else is caring, or possibly not caring, for your child.' The girls appreciate me appreciate being real."

These are not scare tactics; they are reality checks. Prompt your mentees to talk about emotion ("anger") versus action ("throwing a punch"). Discuss the possible outcomes of various choices they might make in situations that trigger high emotion. Teach them to explore other ways of coping when they feel overwhelmed, such as talking, meditating, journaling, praying or problem solving. Most important, encourage your mentees to see themselves as responsible young adults, in control of their behavior and in charge of their lives.

Engage Fathers

In a small meeting room in the Dream Center community space in Harlem, New York, Elijah, who became a father at 16, sits up straight in his chair. He's here with other young men to discuss the challenges and joys of teen fatherhood. Like the girls in Detroit, these young men complain of the harsh judgments and low expectations levied against them. But they also want to give thanks for the invaluable mentoring they've received since becoming fathers; support they say changed their lives.

Every young man in this room belongs to a fatherhood mentoring initiative run by the Harlem-based youth services program, Union Settlement. The program provides wrap-around services including counseling, parenting skills workshops, conflict resolution and job readiness training. But what these young men say they appreciate most is the opportunity to talk.

"Finding out my girl was pregnant was like getting punched in the face," says Akil, 18. "I was scared. I didn't know anything about how to take care of a baby. I had so many questions but I thought people would think, 'Why did you have a baby if you don't know how to do this or that?' So I didn't talk to anyone. Then I got into this group. Here I can talk about things I couldn't ask anyone else. Like how to raise my child the proper way. In the group, everyone has an open mic, and all my burdens are lifted."

Teenage boys who become fathers may feel trapped, anxious or depressed. These emotions are compounded by the belief, shared by many young black men, that asking for guidance is a sign of vulnerability. So instead, they grapple with their feelings alone, causing their frustration to escalate. For many, it feels as though the life they envisioned for themselves has been snatched away. Some blame the girls for their predicament, lashing out in anger. Others simply check out, fed up by what feels like their girlfriends' unreasonable demands and unpredictable moods.

“The kids are often not in stable relationships to begin with,” says Lena Green, clinical social worker and founder and executive director of New York’s Akira Center, a community-based counseling center. “Then suddenly there is a pregnancy. For the boys it can feel like a minefield. They are trying to navigate *her* emotions along with their own. As teenagers, they are not equipped to do all that.”

A pregnancy can also ignite strife within a boy’s family. While young girls are often shamed for getting pregnant, young men are blamed. *How could you be so stupid?* They’re asked, sometimes by members of their own family.

Tragically, many of our young Black men have not been given the tools they need to identify and articulate the strong emotions they may experience. Instead, they’ve been brainwashed into believing that power comes from force, patience is weakness and parenting one’s child is optional. So they stomp down their feelings only to lash out with self-destructive behavior. This is exactly where a mentor can step in, guiding young men toward the emotional maturity they’ll need to parent and partner successfully.

Jaden, another young man in the fatherhood program, says with the help of his mentors he’s learned important lesson about managing the rage that used to overwhelm him. “I’m not going to lie,” he says. “I used to be a real whack job. Like one time I saw my child’s mother and another dude was pushing the stroller. I was so mad I almost blacked out.” Jaden admits he assaulted the other young man, an action he now regrets.

Perhaps the single greatest challenge a young father may face is negotiating the relationship with the mother of his child, especially if either parent begins dating someone new. When Jaden mentions his discomfort at seeing his child’s mother with another man, the other young fathers at the table erupt in groans of recognition. Mentors can be instrumental in helping teen fathers tease apart their

feelings for their child's mother, no matter how negative, from the love and responsibility they feel toward his child.

"I used to have so many anger problems and so much trouble communicating," Jaden adds. "But being in the program I am learning how to let things go so I can do what's best for my child. I learned that it's not about my ego. It's about my son. This program is helping me become a better version of myself."

Everyday thousands of underserved teenagers — like Sanda, Kara, Akil, and Jaden — struggle with the emotional demands of parenting. They are expected to nurture their own children and raise themselves while fielding an onslaught of damaging cultural stereotypes, low expectations and shaming tactics. They need our support. The whole-school assembly topics and small group activities which you will find in the following pages, has been carefully designed to foster the deep and meaningful conversations that will guide teenage parents toward a life of patience, good communication and emotional fortitude. Together we can fuel the confidence of these most valuable teens, validating their experience and empowering them to achieve their greatest goals. This is the transformative power of a Mentoring Circle.

With loving gratitude, thank you for embarking on this important journey.

*** The names of the young parents have been changed**