



Many adults face unplanned pregnancies

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Rachel Quinn always wanted to have children and was overjoyed as she and her husband planned her pregnancy with their daughter four years ago.

But the 28-year-old Davenport woman had no intention of getting pregnant the second time.

The couple's relationship and finances were in turmoil. They could not afford birth control at the time, she said, because they did not have health insurance.

To add to the distress, their son, now 10 months old, was born dangerously premature, at 25 weeks of gestation. He spent months in the hospital and almost died.

Despite all of the struggles, she cannot imagine life without her children.

Now, though, she and her husband are in the midst of a divorce.

"The stress of everything, the stress of it all was too much," she said. "It's devastating."

Not all unintended pregnancies end this way, of course. But they often create economic and emotional ripple effects on individuals and their families, as well as the communities where they live, women's issues experts say.

Although many worry about the prevalence of teen pregnancy, few realize that the United States has such a high rate of unplanned pregnancy among adult women like Quinn who are in their 20s and 30s.

In Iowa alone, more than half of the 40,835 live births during 2007 were reported as unintended pregnancies, according to statistics from the state Department of Public Health and the Iowa Initiative, a program geared to reducing the number of such pregnancies among women in the state who are 18 to 30 years old.

The same goes for Illinois, where 42 percent of the more than 180,000 live births in 2006 were reported as unintended pregnancies, according to the most recent statistics available from the state's Department of Public Health.

The focus has been on preventing teen parenthood, but plenty of adults — many of them unmarried and in their 20s, according to research — face the same challenges resulting from unplanned pregnancies, said Sarah Brown, chief executive officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"There are many young adults who will tell you, flat-out, that they've never talked about or considered planning for this very expensive and important thing of pregnancy, childbearing, and having kids and raising a family," she said.

"You can understand how that could happen to a 15-year-old, but to people in their 20s? It's hard to believe that young adults are saying, 'Gee, I didn't think about it. I didn't think it could happen to me.'"

The National Campaign and the Iowa Initiative — led by former Iowa first lady Christie Vilsack — support a combination of responsible values and behavior in young people, as well as responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

Vilsack said there are "tens of thousands of women in Iowa who don't have access to birth control," calling that something which needs to change.

"If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve, there will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions and a stronger nation," Brown said.

Economic factors

The tough economy could make family planning even more important for many people, Brown said.

With new parents needing an extra \$7,000 to \$8,000 per year to raise a child, according to Vilsack, family planning is "definitely cheaper than birth control, pregnancy and parenting," Brown added.

“The issue of ‘Can I afford to have and raise a child now?’ is really critically important,” she said.

The lowest fertility rate in U.S. history was during the Great Depression of the 1930s, she added.

“The poverty and concern about money was so extreme there were families living in the backseats of cars, barely making it at a level that’s almost hard for us to understand today.”

Research also shows that many women who seek abortions say they are choosing that route because of the financial burden that having a baby would create, she said.

Many young adults, especially those in their early 20s, are insured because they are just leaving their parents’ coverage plans, entering the work force in entry-level positions. Low-cost medical care is available, but finding it is sometimes challenging in some parts of the country, she said.

“If you have no insurance and use public-aid systems, there are often long waiting lists, and it’s not always as easily accessible as the private market,” Brown said. “A lot of the best contraceptive methods are costly.”

Changes in society

For previous generations, it was common to get married right out of high school. Now, many young adults are staying in college, moving around and living together without getting married right away — if ever.

“It’s the odyssey period of time,” Vilsack said. “People are bouncing around. They’re in school, have two jobs, not settling down. They’re moving from place to place.”

And those young adults are sexually active, but “not very good at contraceptive use,” Brown said.

Single parenting in cases of unplanned pregnancy often interrupts education and leads to poverty, a tenuous attachment to the work force and “all the things that we worry about with teens,” she added, even among couples who live together.

Unplanned pregnancies also tend to “set off emotional turmoil and great stress,” she said.

“Any woman who thinks, ‘Maybe if I accidentally get pregnant, that will lead to a wedding ring and a picket fence,’ the facts are the exact opposite,” she said. “These have a lot of the same consequences as teen parenthood.”

A culture shift of attitudes about sexual behavior might be necessary to change part of this pattern, she said.

In parts of Europe, she said, it is “considered a mark of being an adult to take responsibility for your behavior.” Birth-control options are very accessible in those areas, she added.

“In this country, people would rather talk about their grocery list than talk about these very basic things, even though the consequences are so great,” she said. “If everybody giggles and leaves the room, we’re going to remain with high levels of unplanned pregnancies but also high levels of abortion.”

Not all doom and gloom

Still, lots of unplanned pregnancies have happy endings.

Vilsack said this point is extremely important to remember: “There is a difference between unplanned and unwanted.”

Ask Loreen Williams. The 42-year-old Clinton, Iowa, native was 22 years old and unmarried when she gave birth to her son, Joshua. He is now 20 years old.

She did not plan her pregnancy with him or her second son, who is 17. But by the time the second one arrived, she was married, Williams said.

“We had talked (about kids), but we were just new into the marriage, so it wasn’t planned, but we welcomed him,” she said. “The only one who was planned was the 13-year-old. We were trying for a girl.”

They got another boy, who is named Jalen, instead.

Williams is no longer married. She has been a single mother for the past eight years “and enjoying it,” she said. All three children live with her in Davenport. She works as Web-order coordinator at the Palmer College of Chiropractic bookstore.

Out of everything she has done in life, motherhood has been her biggest challenge. Williams said she has good kids, but raising them has not been easy — and she doubts it is for anyone.

“No matter how you raise your kids, you don’t know how they’re going to turn out,” she said.

But unplanned pregnancies and all, she wouldn’t change a thing.

“I still want the same kids I have,” she said, “even though you go through your ups and downs.”

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