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Perception clashes with reality for Edmonton's teen moms



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Karen Mottershead, executive director of Terra Centre, can sum up societal stereotypes of teen moms with a single anecdote: Earlier this month, two of the 600 mothers the centre helps were riding a bus to school, when, Mottershead says, the driver saw their fresh faces and baby strollers and accused them of using stolen bus passes.

What he didn't know is the school was setup by Terra with childcare services for girls like them.

"His perception is, 'You're a teen mom, you can't possibly be going to school and you can't possibly afford a bus pass,'" explains Mottershead, who's 40-year-old organization offers teen parents outreach programs.

She says there's an inspiring side to their stories that society rarely sees, that often their babies are the single best things to happen in their lives.

"There are many teen parents who've had a lot of life challenges, and having an early pregnancy is often the impetus for them to take a look at their lives and say, 'OK, now is the time to do something different.'"

This weekend, teashops will be overcrowded, florists will be overwhelmed and headlines will rush you to the mall with "Last minute Mother's Day gifts." We'll make a special toast to single moms, "mompreneurs" and military moms, but will anyone raise a Shirley Temple for teen moms?

It might seem laughable to call an end to the stereotypes the same week that the world's most famous teen mom, 16 & Pregnant "star" Farrah Abraham, was revealed to have made \$1.5 million off porn.

But the common picture of teen mothers as wholly inadequate really is cartoonish. Many just need extra support to finish school, find full-time work, go to college, amend relationships with their parents and become better parents themselves.

Before the sexual revolution, the stigma of teen pregnancy had less to do with the baby and more to do with being unwed. The overwhelming majority of those mothers gave their babies up for adoption, which is the inverse of today's reality. However, the new stigma is less sexual shame than it is stupidity — both for getting pregnant and keeping the baby.

These were highlighted in recent New York bus stop ads featuring toddlers pointing out their future parents' inadequacies with such comic sans-font messages as: I'm twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen.

"When the community sees them as incapable, that continues to erode at their self-esteem and their confidence," says Mottershead.

When it comes to stereotypes, she has heard them all: Teen parents can't hold down a job, they party all the time, and (her personal favourite) they get pregnant for the welfare cheques.

These stereotypes aren't harmless. A 1993 Adolescence journal article cited teen moms as no more likely to be abusive to their children than older mothers, yet more likely to be reported for maltreatment that's later deemed false.

It's assumptions like these that do the most damage, says Mottershead.

"The community doesn't understand that these young parents want something no different than what we want for our kids and they're highly motivated to do that."



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