

TEEN PREGNANCY . . . ANOTHER APPROACH?

By Steven M. Kirsh

Recently, I met a fifteen year old girl who had just given birth to a baby without having had any prenatal care. In fact, she stated that she did not even know she was pregnant until she arrived at the hospital complaining of stomach pains.

Her parents were with her at the hospital when I arrived. They seemed very supportive of their daughter and tried to say the right things, particularly, that this was her decision, that they did not want to try to influence her decision, and that she needed to do what she believed was best for the baby.

I first met the birth mother and her family late in the afternoon on the same day the baby was born. I explained adoption to them and gave them information about prospective adoptive parents. I said I wanted them all to sleep on the decision and that I return the following day.

We also discussed the birth father. Because the birth mother had "denied" the pregnancy, the birth father was also unaware. The birth mother's family asked me to call him, which I did that evening.

Shortly after I arrived at the hospital the next morning, the birth father and his mother arrived. Their initial thought was that the birth mother should parent the baby. After all, the birth father's mother gave birth to a child when she was seventeen years of age and married the father. There was no reason why this girl could not do the same.

After speaking with the birth father and his mother for awhile, the birth mother began to have second thoughts about adoption. At that point, I could tell that her parents were clearly distressed. They knew that their daughter was making a bad decision. She was a good student and destined to go onto college, but for the pregnancy.

The birth mother ultimately decided to parent the baby.

I have given a lot of thought to this situation, not only from the perspective of an adoption attorney, but also as the father of teenage sons. What would I do if it were my son or daughter?

Initially, I probably would have taken the "politically correct" position and confirmed that it was my child's decision to make and would stand by whatever decision they made. However, upon further contemplation, I realized that would probably be bad advice which would not only potentially cause irreparable harm to the baby, but also to my own child, particularly if I were the father of the birth mother.

The national statistics support this conclusion. Twenty-five percent of teen mothers conceive more than one child as teenagers. Sixty percent of women living on welfare conceived their first child as a teenager. Most frightening of all, eighty-five percent of children living in poverty were born to teen mothers.

As parents, we all make decisions for our children which we believe are best for them. Often times, those decisions are contrary to our children's wishes. We make decisions which we believe are best based upon our responsibility as parents, our having had more life experiences, and ultimately because we love our children.

If a fifteen year old daughter wanted to quit school, as a parent, I would not let her do so. If she wanted to use drugs or engage in other dangerous behavior, I would also intervene.

Why is it different for the father of a fifteen year old girl to insist that she make an adoption plan for the baby? Of course, it is her baby, but does that answer the question? Some would argue that by making such a decision for the daughter, the parent risks alienating the child forever. In the short run, that is probably true. However, is it not also possible that if the parent forced the child to proceed with an adoption and the child completed her education, and settled

into a rewarding career, the child might be grateful for the parents intervention? Likewise, if the parent did not insist upon adoption and the birth mother quit school to care for the child, is it not also possible that the child would resent the parent for not "preventing" her from making such a tragic mistake?

My feeling is that, either way, the child could contrive a reason to resent her parents. Making parental decisions should not be based upon the child's view of those decisions, but rather what is best for the child. Does not the father of the fifteen year old birth mother have an obligation to do what he believes is best for his daughter and also best for the newborn baby?

With the rates of teen pregnancy continuing to rise and given the historical data which demonstrates the disastrous effects it has on both the teen mother and the child, perhaps we should rethink our feelings about being "politically correct" in these circumstances?