

A teen mom's advice: It's OK if you wait

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

There are, of course, the nights with only four to five hours of sleep - if that.

A baby changes lives. There is no doubt.

When the mother is a teenager, unmarried and without the money to support herself or a child, life virtually implodes.

That, essentially, is the story that Tiera Smith, 18, of Milwaukee tells. A mother at 17 to Kamran, now 6 months old, she is walking testimony to the consequences of pregnancy and motherhood come too soon.

She agreed to talk about her difficulties to give others a glimpse into why this is a circumstance they should - and can - avoid.

When a community talks about teen pregnancy, it is usually in the form of statistics.

As in the lamentable fact that Milwaukee ranks seventh in the nation, according to one credible source, in births to teen mothers.

As in general acknowledgment that this statistic has implications for whether this mother graduates from high school and goes to college; whether her child finishes high school, becomes a teen parent, goes to jail or must rely on public assistance. In other words, implications for whether metro Milwaukee's economy hums or coughs and sputters - or whether poverty recycles endlessly.

Behind the statistics are individuals. A changed life? Ask Smith.

"Well, he wakes up. Sometimes he'll wake up four times out of the night," she said. "He'll wake up because he's hungry ... for his bottle ... if he needs his Pampers changed I'm sleepy, but I can't go to sleep because he wants to play I don't get much sleep."

Nor much time to be a teenager or a young adult. Before pregnancy, there were weekends bowling, going to parties, out to the movies with friends or spending the night at a friend's house.

Those days are gone. "Where I go, he goes," Smith said. Which means, mostly, she doesn't go.

And then there are the financial concerns. She turned 18 in early February. She'll get a full public assistance check in April for \$673. But Kamran, a baby with deep brown pools for eyes and a smile even for strangers, was born about six months ago. She will have been without appreciable income in the interim. Since the birth, Smith has relied on kindnesses. From the grandmother with whom she lives. From her mother, with whom she doesn't live but who gives her what help she is able to give. From members of her church, one of whom gave her a \$50 check to get by.

Here's a baby fact: They are expensive. WIC, the federal Women, Infants and Children program, gives Smith 10 cans of milk a month, she said. It runs out. So do Pampers and everything else. After that, she asks for help. And if that isn't available? "We struggle," she said. "I have to ask people, 'Can you get this for me?'"

Smith was a member of Pearls for Teen Girls, a skills- and esteem-building program that boasts a near perfect rate for its participants not getting pregnant. She is in the other 1 percent. She validated some of the comments given earlier by a group of girls in the program about why girls, generally, get pregnant too early. It's too much the norm in some quarters, she said.

"Sex is the popularity; it's the hobby," Smith said. "They've made it kind of a style. They don't think about the consequences."

Smith, born to a teen mom, puts herself in that last category of not thinking about the consequences. She knows about contraception and said she knows how to get it. But she had unprotected sex.

"I knew if I had unprotected sex, I knew I was going to get pregnant." She did, and she did. "I wouldn't have gotten pregnant if I wasn't so immature about it."

It was a matter of "lust that we thought was love." And now there is Kamran, who she obviously loves much and is proud of.

Smith has plans. First, she wants to graduate from high school in June and is in a program that lets her go to

school four days a week and later in the day to accommodate the child care arrangements she has made. She wants to become a registered nurse, attending perhaps Alverno College or Milwaukee Area Technical College.

She knows obstacles are arrayed against her but also knows that her future is not yet written - except for one part. Kamran will always be part of her life. "I'm going to tell him what I went through with him. It's not easy. You have to struggle and do things on your own," Smith said. Her advice to others is better than any this Editorial Board can give: "It's OK to wait, especially if you don't have the money Just be protected."

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