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A baby changes everything: The true cost of teen pregnancy's uptick

Teen couple faces tall odds in a town where life is already a struggle



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Nate Howell has approximately 76 days to adjust to his new reality. That is when he is due to become a parent with his girlfriend, Samantha Keith, who just turned 17.

"It scares the living hell out of me," says Nate, 19, who is working at a pork-packing plant in his hometown, Elkhart, Ind. "I thought I'd be in college right now playing football."

Nate is one of five members of the class of 2009 whom msnbc.com has been following as part of The Elkhart Project. After high school, Nate had hoped to go to college and play football but didn't get a financial scholarship.

Now, facing parenthood, he and Samantha are in a tough spot — one that tends to come with a high price. Research shows that people who have children in their teens are less likely to get a high school diploma or go on to college. They tend to earn less in the working world, and children born to these teens struggle to keep up with their peers. For many, beating back poverty becomes the overriding concern.

"The data is overwhelming that teen pregnancy has a negative impact on education and employment," says James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. "While that is a problem during any economic cycle, it becomes even more of a negative during a recession."

After declining for 15 years, the teen pregnancy rate is now on the rise in the United States, which has by far the highest rate in the industrialized world. The number of pregnancies among girls age 15 to 19 increased 3 percent between 2005 and 2006, showed a study of the most recent data collected by the federal government and the Guttmacher Institute, the non-profit research group in New York that released the report last month.

Reasons behind the rise are debated, but some blame increasing poverty and an emphasis on abstinence-only sex education. The Guttmacher Institute notes that declining teen pregnancy rates first started to stall out about a decade ago when programs promoting abstinence, without offering education about birth control, became more widespread.

Samantha says that at school, she sees another reason. "Some girls as young as eighth grade who are so in love with their boyfriends and just think they'll be together forever, they just say 'Let's have a baby.'"

In her and Nate's case, she says, birth control failed. "I was very scared and shocked," she says about the moment she found out she was pregnant. "I'm still a little scared and

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nervous."

Struggles passed on to next generation

Not surprisingly, teens who have a baby are less likely to finish high school than their peers. Only 40 percent of teen moms who give birth at age 17 or earlier finish high school, according to research compiled by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. About 23 percent of the younger moms go on to earn a GED. The gap is even bigger when it comes to higher education.

That interrupted education often means teen parents will earn less money throughout the rest of their lives. Girls who have a baby at age 17 or younger can expect to earn \$28,000 less in the subsequent 15 years after the birth than if they had delayed until 20 or 21, according to the National Campaign report. Fathers of children born to teen mothers who were 17 and under earn some \$27,000 less over the subsequent 18 years than those who have children with women who were 20 or 21.

Those struggles are often passed on to the next generation. Daughters of teen mothers are three times more likely to become teen parents themselves than girls born to older moms, says the National Campaign, while sons born to young teens are significantly more likely to be incarcerated. And the research shows that children born to teen parents tend to struggle socially and academically to keep up with their peers.

Samantha says she hopes their daughter, who they've already named Alana, won't repeat the cycle of teen parenthood. "I don't want her to make the same mistakes as I did," she says.

One of her first goals is to graduate from high school, says Samantha, who is now a junior. "One of my biggest concerns is staying in school and getting up in the night [with the baby] and then staying up all day," she says.

She's taking parenting classes at school now and trying to prepare to be the best mother she can. "It's a little baby and it'll be my responsibility," she says. "I just don't want to do anything wrong."

'I'm going to own up to it'

Despite the obstacles, Nate says there's no question of walking away.

"It's my responsibility now and I'm going to own up to it," says Nate, who is saving for a promise ring for Samantha, and says he intends to marry her. He's been going with Samantha to doctor visits, and helping her with her homework in his spare time.

Nate is used to working hard. He's had jobs since he was 15, helping to support his three siblings and his mother when she was diagnosed with cancer. Now he's working full time, sometimes more, at a local meatpacking plant as well as filling in at a pizza joint.

But he's doing the math, and it's daunting.

Out of the \$1,100-\$1,200 he brings home every month, he pays \$200 in rent for an apartment he shares with a buddy, \$100 for his cell phone, about \$300 a month for groceries and \$200 a month for the fallout from a car accident that also cost him his driver's license. He also gives gas money to the guy who drives him to work.

Each week, he buys what baby gear he can afford for Samantha and the baby. Even now, he's just scraping by.

"It's scary ... not having enough money, having no car, to where I feel like I won't be able to provide for both," says Nate. He spent his childhood watching his own mother — single

and always struggling to make ends meet for her family — and he doesn't want history to repeat itself. "I'm going to be a better father than I ever had ... I didn't know mine," says Nate.

"I'm working for my baby's future now," he says. "I don't care if I have to work in a factory the rest of my life, as long as my baby will have everything it needs. I'm fine with a second-rate life."

If he sticks to his word, Nate will be an exception to the rule.

"What he's doing is exceedingly rare," says Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "The notion that teen fathers are sticking around supporting their child, and supporting the mother simply doesn't happen as much as we would like ... I want to applaud this young man, but I wonder where the couple will be in two years."

Eight of 10 teenage fathers do not marry the mothers of their first children, according to a study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies in Washington, D.C. And, these absent fathers pay less than \$800 annually for child support, it says, often because they are quite poor themselves.

Samantha says she's confident Nate is committed to her and their baby and that the couple have grown closer during her pregnancy. "I trust him," she says. "He's my boyfriend and the father of my daughter but he also my best friend and I can talk to him about anything."

Lower expectations

Even before news of the pregnancy, Nate was forced to scale back his expectations. A top athlete in high school, he had hoped to attend Ohio Wesleyan University and play football. But he didn't get the scholarship he needed, and some of his earnings at the grocery store where he worked were going to help his family.

He started saving what he could for a community college program, with hopes of getting his grades up, and then pursuing a spot at Wesleyan.

Nate got his job at Plumrose, the meatpacking plant, earning \$9.50 an hour plus health insurance, a step up from working at the grocery store. For now, Samantha's prenatal care is covered by Indiana's state health program.

Because of Samantha's pregnancy, Nate has put community college on the back burner.

Now his plan is to move in with Samantha at her parents' place for a while after the baby is born, save money so they can rent a place of their own and get a car. He doesn't want her to have to take the baby on the school bus.

Samantha is hoping to finish high school through a combination of summer and night school classes. After she graduates she plans to find a job. Maybe someday down the road she'll join the Navy, her dream before she became pregnant, she says. But she still worries about how the future will unfold.

"While I'm in school I'll have family support," she says. "After I graduate ... I'm still confused about what will happen."

A view from the ground

In Mishawaka, just down the road from Elkhart, a maternity residence for teens called Hannah's House sees the hardship of teen parents up close. The home provides housing for seven pregnant teens at a time — as well as counseling, parenting classes and

transitional assistance after giving birth. Last year, Hannah's had to turn away 37 pregnant teens seeking a spot.

For about half of the girls who stay at Hannah's House, the baby's father initially is involved, says executive director Karen DeLucenay. The staff works with these young men as they can, and she is planning to start a support group for fathers-to-be.

"The risk is that the dads want to be good dads, but they haven't thought through what that really means," DeLucenay says, adding that most are focused on the tangible — like buying diapers, she says. "But how to bond with the baby, and meet the emotional needs of babies? Sometimes dads have no idea how to do that, and no idea how important it is."

At Hannah's House, residents are expected to work and try to save money but since the recession hit, few have found jobs. It's also forced budget cuts in many public services. Among the casualties were child care programs throughout northern Indiana.

"It's very hard for the young mom to stay in school," says DeLucenay, "Which leads to more poverty situations."

750,000 teens get pregnant each year

It remains to be seen if the uptick in the teen pregnancy rate is part of a larger trend, though preliminary data from 2007 and 2008 suggest it is still rising.

"The increase in the rate is one way to look at the issue — but look at the absolute numbers," says Lawrence Finer, research director at the Guttmacher Institute. "We have far too many teen pregnancies to begin with. We have 750,000 teenagers getting pregnant every year."

Like the teen pregnancy rate, the number of abortions is also on the rise after having been on the decline. In 2006, the rate rose 1 percent over the previous year. While 42 out of every 1,000 teen girls gave birth in 2006, 19 out of every 1,000 had abortions, according to the Guttmacher Institute's report.

Nate said abortion wasn't ever something he and Samantha considered. "It's not in my vocabulary," he said. The couple didn't want to put their baby up for adoption, either.

Not only do the teens who then go on to become parents often pay a high price, so does society.

U.S. taxpayers forked over at least \$9.1 billion in 2004 for costs associated with teens having children, according to a report by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies. The report, which the authors say is a conservative estimate, compiled research estimating the cost of health care, housing assistance, food stamps, child welfare services, provided for teens and their children, and the lost revenue due to lower taxes paid by teen mothers.

'Sea-change' in prevention

A major shift in Washington, D.C., will broaden efforts to prevent teen pregnancy. The Obama administration and Congress have allocated more than \$100 million in the 2010 and 2011 fiscal years for a wide array of approaches to preventing teen pregnancy, including instruction on contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections. Most of the money will be allotted to programs that have proven effective, with a smaller portion for others seen as promising.

The new policy eliminates the requirement that government funds go exclusively to programs that teach "abstinence only until marriage."

“It is about as timely and encouraging an investment as I can imagine,” says Albert of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “‘Sea change’ is the term I would use.”

Proponents hope it will not only halt the increase in teen pregnancies, but restore the previous decline.

For Nate, already heading into parenthood, that struggle is distant and academic compared to the one he faces now.

“I never planned on having a kid at the age of 19. I always planned to have one later on down the road when I got my values and everything settled out and got a degree,” says Nate. “Now to find out that the baby’s due in (May) and I’m in the same predicament my mom was in. I’m trying to get myself out of that now. And I don’t care if I have to work six days in a row, if I can find a job that will let me, I will.”

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