

Family

At the supermarket or outside at a park, Nancy and Selena are constant companions.



mama drama

NANCY SANTIAGO WAS A FUN-LOVING TEENAGER. THEN SHE HAD A BABY. SUDDENLY, LIFE CHANGED—AND GOT MUCH HARDER—IN A HURRY.

By Alexandra Rockey Fleming



At age 13,

Nancy Santiago was like a lot of other teens. She was outgoing and liked to have fun. She was carefree, and wasn't one to get caught up in the long-term consequences of her actions. She was stubborn and defiant of her mother's rule forbidding her to date.

As a result, Nancy started seeing a 19-year-old man. Within months, the couple was sexually active. They did not use birth control. Why? "Because I was stupid," says Nancy, who lives in White Plains, New York. "I knew I could get pregnant, but at that age, the possibility of that happening just didn't faze me."

It should have. Nancy became pregnant and nine months later, she gave birth to a baby girl. Nancy was only 14. Three years have passed and Nancy's baby, Selena, is now an adorable and active young child. Nancy, now a high school senior, loves Selena, but admits that life as a teen parent is tough. "She's wonderful, but it's so much work raising her," Nancy told *Choices*.

Experts agree. "Teen parenthood is never a good choice," says Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "It's hard growing up and becoming a parent too soon makes it even harder."

TOUGH LIFE

Here's a typical school day for Nancy and Selena. Nancy wakes up at 6 a.m., exhausted because Selena frequently resists going to bed at night. The teen showers, dresses quickly, and tries to wake

up her daughter, who kicks and screams because she doesn't want to get up.

After dressing Selena, Nancy takes her to a day-care center where the toddler will spend the day. The drop-off is hard because Selena is at an age when she doesn't like to be separated from her mother. "Once we get to the day-care driveway, she starts screaming and throwing a tantrum," Nancy says. "To drag her to her day-care room and get her to stay in the room is another fiasco. Once she settles down, I start my day."

After attending school all day, Nancy takes a bus to the day-care center to pick up Selena. "On a good day, we get home at around 3:30. Then it's 'do I want to take her to the playground after a long day or do I put on a movie for her so I can relax?'" Nancy says.

Whichever option she chooses, the downtime is brief. Small children demand constant attention, which means that Nancy can't even do her homework at night. "So I try to get my work done during my lunch hour so I don't have to take it home," she says.

DR. MOM

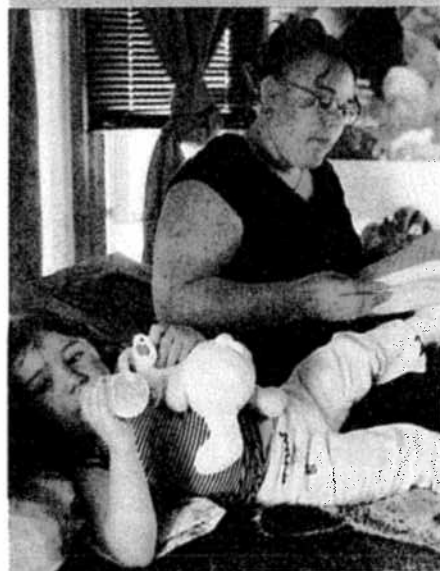
And what happens if Selena gets sick? Nancy must take care of her, but if the



Whether she's looking at flowers, getting changed, or playing, Selena keeps her mother busy.



“I’ll take care of Selena when she’s sick, sleep for an hour, then get dressed and still go to school.”



teen missed too much school, she risks falling behind in her classes or even failing them. So Nancy tries to do both. “I’ll take care of Selena at night when she’s sick, sleep for an hour, and then get dressed and still go to school,” she says. If Selena can’t go to day-care and Nancy can’t stay home, the teen has to find someone to watch her child for the day. “It’s very stressful when you know that your kid is sick and you can’t do much about it because you still have to go through the day,” Nancy says.

Being a parent has severely curtailed Nancy’s social life, too. She really only sees her friends in school. When Nancy is able to go bowling or shoot pool, she usually has to bring Selena with her. Nancy’s mother, who shares a one-bedroom apartment with her daughter and granddaughter, will occasionally baby-sit. “But that doesn’t happen often because she’s busy with her own life,” Nancy says.

Nancy spends most weekend nights with Selena at home. “I watch everyone else have fun,” the teen

says. “My friends might be going to a club while I watch *Dora the Explorer* over and over.”

And while she’s watching that children’s TV show, Nancy can think of her favorite activity that she never gets to do anymore—shopping. “I’m lucky if I can get a pair of pants or socks,” Nancy says. “It’s never about me and it’s hard to pass up something that you want.”

INVOLVED DAD

Nancy’s life is clearly hard, but in one respect she’s fortunate. Her baby’s father hasn’t abandoned her or their child. He lives nearby and comes over nearly every day after work to take Selena to the playground or out for a snack. Nancy cooks dinner each night, and the three of them usually eat together.

Selena’s father also gives Nancy money to help support their child. “As far as clothes and stuff like that, he buys them for her on an as-needed basis,” Nancy says. “It’s never been a problem.”

The bond between Nancy and her baby's father is unusual. "The reality is that most fathers almost always move on and are not involved," Brown says. "Who wants to stay home on a Saturday night? Who wants to spend money on diapers?"

Things aren't always good between Nancy and her boyfriend. "It's hard," she says. "We've had ups and downs. But we put up with each other, and it seems to work."

SUPPORT GROUP

Nancy also gets help from a teen-parenting group called School-Based Adolescent Parenting Program. The group offers weekly

counseling and Nancy gets together every Tuesday afternoon with other young mothers for support.

She is thinking about her future, and after graduating from high school, she plans to attend cosmetology school and perhaps become a hairdresser. Ironically, it is Selena, the little girl whose birth created so many challenges for Nancy, who has inspired the teen to try to be successful in life.

"You get over the hardships of having a child, you have to," says Nancy about being a teen mom. "And maybe without her, I never would have pushed myself to get where I want to go, to finish school."

did you know?



generation next

Having a baby is tough on a teen. At the same time, being raised by a teen parent is rough on a child. Below are four hardships for a teen parent. On a separate sheet of paper, write down how each of those challenges can adversely affect children when they are infants, toddler, young kids, and teens. We did the first one for you. Answers are in the Teacher's Edition.

HURDLE FOR PARENT

1. Raising a child prevents a parent from finishing high school or going on to college.
2. Lack of money, because most jobs available to teens are low-paying.
3. Lack of time and money prevents a parent from eating enough nutritious meals.
4. Stress of being a teen and a parent increases the chances that teen parents will lose their temper or get out of control.

EFFECT ON CHILD

1. Lack of a high school diploma makes it harder for the parent to get a well-paying job, which hurts the child's chances to attend college later in life.

34% of young women in the U.S. become pregnant at least once before the age of 20. That is about 820,000 teens a year.

Only **1/3** of teen moms complete high school.

Boys born to teen moms are **13% more likely** to end up in prison than the sons of older women.

Girls born to teen moms are **22% more likely** to become teen moms themselves than the daughters of older mothers.

About **1/4** of teen mothers have a second child within two years of giving birth to the first one.

2/3 of teens younger than 18 who have sex wish they had waited longer.

Source: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy