

In 2003, when Aggie Ferguson told her boyfriend that she was pregnant, he vowed to stand by her. He wanted to stay together and have a family, he said. But his enthusiasm for fatherhood quickly faded after he learned Aggie was expecting a girl.

"He brought me flowers at the ultrasound," Aggie, now 18, tells *Choices*. "But when he found out I was having a girl, he lost interest. He wanted a son. He just tossed the flowers at me and told me he'd meet me outside."

Like Aggie, most of the 820,000 teenagers who get pregnant each year in the United States face motherhood frightened and alone.

"There are many young mothers working hard, struggling, and trying to do right by their children," says Bill Albert, spokesperson for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "But the deck is dramatically stacked against them. Most 16-year-olds are simply not ready for the challenges of being a parent, emotionally or financially."

## Tough Questions

Aggie, who's from Quincy, Massachusetts, wasn't ready. When she learned she was pregnant, her mind raced with questions she didn't have the answers to. "I was devastated," Aggie says. "I was thinking, 'What am I going to do? How am I going to support the baby? How am I going to finish my education?'"

At first, Aggie and her boyfriend tried to make their relationship work. She moved in with him for a month. But after she discovered he was unfaithful, she packed her bags and returned home to live with her mother.

When her daughter, Mia, was born in 2004, Aggie's boyfriend didn't bother to show up at the hospital. Now 20 months old, Mia has only seen her father a handful of times—mostly in court, where Aggie has had to go to force him to pay child support.

Absentee fathers are hardly uncommon. In fact, nearly 80 percent of fathers of children born to teen mothers do not marry the mothers. Often poor themselves, they pay, on average, less than \$800 a year in child support.





# teen daddy

**Aggie's boyfriend clearly dropped the ball when he bailed on Aggie and their daughter. Sadly, his behavior is typical of most teenage fathers. Below is a list of reasons why teen dads fail to act responsibly toward their children and the mothers of those kids. Teen moms face the same issues, yet many don't abandon their children. On a piece of paper, write responses that counter these arguments and show why teen dads should support their children. Answers are in the Teacher's Edition.**

- ARE SCARED OF BEING A PARENT**
- DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY OR ANY MONEY TO SUPPORT A FAMILY**
- DON'T LOVE THE BABY'S MOTHER**
- ARE BUSY WITH SCHOOL, ACTIVITIES, OR A PART-TIME JOB**

## Where's Dad?

"The notion that a teen mom has that the father is going to be there for her and the baby is simply not the reality," Albert says. "A lot of young women think that having a baby will make him stay. The fact of the matter is that most teen dads don't stick around."

Teen moms like Aggie are often forced to take on the role of both mother and father. For Aggie, that means waking up at 7:00 a.m., feeding and dressing Mia, catching the bus at 8:30 a.m., dropping off Mia at day care, and going to school from 9:00 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. When she can, Aggie crams in her homework at school.

"I try to do all my homework at school because I don't really have any time to do it at home because Mia's up until 8:30 or 9:00 p.m.," she says. "At nighttime, I'm tired or I have to work."

Three days a week, Aggie works an eight-hour shift as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home. She punches out at 11:00 p.m., weary and exhausted. But Aggie has no choice. She needs the money.

"If I didn't have a child, I would be working to get stuff I want," Aggie says. "Now, I'm working to get stuff I need: diapers, clothes, wipes, shoes. Babies don't stop growing. It's very expensive having a child."

## Zero Time

While Aggie has little money for herself, she has even less time to herself. "It's nonstop," she says. "Even when Mia's asleep, I have to do the things I can't do when she's awake, like cleaning, laundry, and cooking."

Aggie misses the freedom she once had to ride horses, play basketball, and go to parties with friends. Now, she's lucky to go out once a week. Even though Aggie has family to help her, she's reluctant to ask. "It's not my mom's responsibility to take care of my child," Aggie says. "It's mine."

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Aggie insists she doesn't regret having Mia. She just wishes she could have had her later in life, when she was more prepared for the responsibilities and stress of raising a child.

For Mia's sake, Aggie has turned her life around. She no longer drinks or smokes. Once an average student, she now brings home A's and B's. But Aggie admits she didn't always act responsibly, especially the night she got pregnant with Mia.

"I didn't practice safe sex," says Aggie, who got pregnant the very first time she had sex with her boyfriend. "I was under the influence of alcohol, so I didn't check to see if he had any protection."

Many young people who have unprotected sex mistakenly think they won't get pregnant or they won't get their partner pregnant. "It can happen the first time or the 20th time," Albert says.

## Abstinence Works

Of course, it doesn't have to happen at all. Not having sex is the one foolproof method to prevent pregnancy. Of those teens who choose to have sex, the ones who don't use contraception have a 90 percent chance of getting pregnant within one year.

The good news is that these days, more teens are unwilling to tempt fate. In recent years, the teen pregnancy rate has dropped by nearly one third as more teens are delaying having sex for the first time, and others are using contraception more carefully.

Teen mothers like Aggie are far less likely to graduate from high school than their peers. Their limited education, in turn, costs them well-paying jobs. As a result, they are more likely to end up on public assistance.

Aggie is determined to defy the odds; she refuses to go on welfare. Instead, she will continue to work long hours in order to support her child. And this spring, she will graduate from high school.

"I want to get a diploma," she says. "I want to finish high school, go to college, and become a nurse or work in law enforcement. I want to set the right example for my daughter. I want to show Mia that you have to do your best in order to get where you need to go in life. You can't settle for less than your best."



## money pit

**Did you know that the cost of raising a child to the age of 18 is between \$125,000 and \$250,000? (And that's not including college tuition.) In your baby's first year alone, you can easily pay between \$9,000 and \$11,000 for items like diapers, formula, clothes, etc. Here are the average prices of some baby items:**

CAR SEAT: \$35 to \$280  
CRIB WITH MATTRESS: \$160 to \$270  
STROLLER: \$30 to \$300  
CLOTHES: \$500 to \$1,200 (for first year)  
HIGH CHAIR: \$45 to \$240  
BOTTLES: \$10 to \$20 (for a three-pack)  
FORMULA: \$1,000 to \$2,300

**And that's just a few items. Among other things, a baby needs a changing table and pad, crib blankets, a playpen, a monitor, a diaper bag, first aid supplies, a bath tub or seat, and a mobile.**

Source: [www.surebaby.com](http://www.surebaby.com)



