

Britain’s youngest parents may be in love but other adolescent mums and dads tell Christina Patterson of a harsher reality

It is love. You can see from the photograph that it is love. You cannot see from the eyes, because you cannot see the eyes, and you cannot see from the smiles, because the faces in the picture widely published last week have been pixelated. But you can see from the hand resting lightly on his lover’s hair that Britain’s youngest father and Britain’s youngest mother are in love. They met in a park when she was 10. She “doodled his name”, a friend told The Sun, “all over a folder”. They want to get married, and now they have a baby: a sweet, pink, bouncing, 7lb baby. The father is 13. The mother is 12. At 12 years and three months, the mother, who cannot be named for legal reasons, is five months younger than Tressa Middleton, who was the nation’s previous youngest mother. The new parents have the lowest combined age of any the country has known. The girl’s mother, who was herself a teenage mother, is 27. Her father is 29. He does not live with his daughter but he is, he said last week, “so proud of her that shame doesn’t even come into it”.

In this respect he appears to be alone. The commentators have not thought that getting pregnant at primary school is something to make most parents proud. Both sets of parents, said one, had been “staggeringly negligent in allowing their vulnerable youngsters to have a sexual relationship”. You had to ask, she said, “is there not a crime here?”, and if so, “where is the punishment?”

Actually, for the punishment, you have only to look at the statistics. Teenage mothers have a much greater chance than older mothers of suffering from post-natal depression. Their babies are much more likely to grow up in poverty and there is a much higher risk of infant death.

Although having a baby when you are underage is still quite rare, Britain has the highest level of teenage pregnancy in western Europe. We have five times as many as in the Netherlands, and more than twice as many as in Germany and France. Even Britain’s most famous new grandfather would have to say it does not sound good. What is it really like to have a child before you are an adult?

“I WAS in shock,” says Yvonne Omini, who found out she was pregnant when she was 17 and got pregnant again when her daughter was seven months old. “I felt like I’d disappointed myself, because I came from a single parent family, and I didn’t want to be one of those girls pushing buggies, not going anywhere – a Vicky Pollard.”

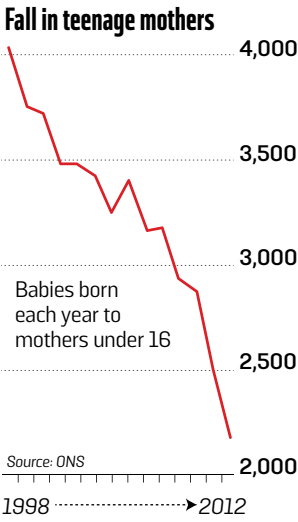
We are sitting in a bright room with blue chairs and blue carpet in Edmonton children’s centre, north London, on the third floor of a shopping centre. To get here, you have to walk past the pawnbrokers, the betting shops, the money transfer shops and the pound shops that seem to have taken over in areas where people are struggling to make ends meet. But the receptionist, in a hallway rammed with buggies, is cheerful, and so, it turns out, is Yvonne.

“A lot of young mums are playing the victim card,” she says, jabbing the air to make her point. “They need to understand that a child doesn’t hold you back.” It would be nice if this were true, but it does not seem to be for most of those I meet. Ashley (not her real name) was doing her GCSEs when she became pregnant. Her daughter – tapping away at my iPad like a tiny, plump Sheryl Sandberg – is four, but Ashley cannot get a job.

She has done her levels 1 and 2 in hairdressing and been working in salons, but only with the help of a scheme called Care to Learn. It pays £175 a week in London towards childcare but this will



The 13-year-old father and 12-year-old mother with their baby. Inset, Lemar, who had a child at 15, now helps others in a similar situation



Alison Hadley, former head of the government’s teenage pregnancy strategy unit, there has been a decrease of 41% in conception rates among under-18s since 1998.

The biggest risk factors for whether a teenager is likely to end up pregnant are “free school meals eligibility, persistent absence from school and poorer than expected academic progress between 11 and 14”, she says.

In other words – poverty and lack of opportunity. As Kai Wooder of Brook, the young people’s sexual health charity, says, “aspiration is the best contraception”.

Better sex and relationship education and better access to contraception have done a lot to push the figures down. State-funded projects such as the Family Nurse Partnership, which offers structured home visits to young first-time mothers, can improve the prospects of a teenage parent’s child once it is born.

What seems to make the biggest difference, however, is the parents of the parent.

Lemar Johnson became a father when he was 15. “My mum cried because her baby was having a baby.” But he adds with a sweet smile that she has been “the most supportive mum I could ever think of”.

His baby was only three weeks old when he was sent to Oakhill secure training centre, a secure unit for people thought too vulnerable for a young offenders’ institution. He did not see his son again for a year.

Now a dapper 19-year-old with a pierced chin, he runs “fatherhood” classes at Oakhill and does some work for the Young Dads Council, an information service for young fathers. He has also recently been named Brook young person of the year.

Lemar is not with the mother of his son, but sees him almost every day. He wants to become a midwife. “The day I’ve met my goal will be the day I’m in hospital with my tunic and my clock,” he says.

Lemar is not alone in struggling to succeed against the odds. “Sophie” (who does not want to give her real name for professional reasons) was 14 when she found out she was pregnant.

“When you’re 14 you can’t really comprehend what it’s going to be like,” she says. She was 15 when she had her daughter, Emily, but her family and school were so supportive she missed only two weeks of school.

While she was pregnant she learnt how to take care of children by helping “a lady who lived locally who fostered newborns”. She went on to get nine GCSEs, three A-levels, a degree and a teaching qualification. She is now doing a part-time master’s degree while teaching key stage 2 (children aged 7-10).

“Having Emily has made me quite determined about what I want,” she says. “I believe she has made me a better person.” But she hopes her daughter will know what it is like to be carefree at 15: “I never had that freedom.”

When the father of Britain’s youngest mother heard the news about his daughter’s pregnancy he did not immediately say that he was “proud”. Instead he broke down and cried. In an interview with LBC radio, he said it was “heartbreaking” to hear news like this of any child, but “once the mistake’s made, you can only support them”.

And he is right. Of course you should do everything you can to make sure children do not have babies. Of course you should show them that they will have a better future if they do not.

But sometimes children will have sex with other children, and sometimes they will hide the result until it is too late. You can punish them if you want to. You can hurl abuse. But if you want the children’s children to have any chance at all, you had better roll up your sleeves and get on with the job.

Additional reporting: Clio Williams

WHEN A CHILD HAS A BABY

JAMES DAVIES



soon stop. She will not be able to work in a salon, she says, because as a junior she would earn only £20 a day.

“I’ve applied for hundreds of jobs, but I can’t seem to get anywhere. I’ve even applied to McDonald’s, but they haven’t got back to me.” Her dream, she says, is to be a nurse. Chatting to her, I think she would make a lovely nurse. Does she think she will manage it? “It would be really difficult,” she says after a long pause.

Ashley’s friend Abbie Stevens did not have dreams as a child. Her mother died when she was seven and her father “had bipolar”, so she and her four brothers and sisters went to live in Essex with an uncle and aunt. Two of her sisters got pregnant at 15. Abbie was 17 and living with her father when she found out she was pregnant. He threw her out.

She has done one year of hairdressing but does not know when she will pick it up again. “I love being a mum”, she says, cuddling her big, blond son, Riley, “but it is hard.”

If a 16-year old asked her whether it was a good idea to have a baby, what would she say? Abbie giggles and looks even younger. “I’d say no,” she says. “Go and live your life!”

“More and more, it’s learnt behaviour,” says Suzanne Bailey, team leader of a teenage parents’ project at a hostel for young mothers in Wakefield, West Yorkshire.

“You meet the parents when they come in and you see where the attitudes come from: not wanting to better themselves, just continuing to have child after child.”

Connie Gomersall, who has

been living in the hostel since she had her baby, certainly seems to fit that mould. When she found out at 16 that she was pregnant, she thought it was “funny”. None of her sisters, nor her mother, nor her grandmother, works. So what does she hope for? Connie looks surprised.

“To get my own house”, she says, giggling her daughter, Lexi, on her knee, “and do a course in childcare. They help you to get a house.” Has motherhood been what she expected? Connie looks surprised again.

“Everyone said it was hard”, she replies, “but I think it’s quite easy. All you’ve got to do is play with them, feed them and bath them.” It is “something to do”, she adds.

In the hallway, I bump into a young woman trying to lift a giant buggy up the stairs. She

“WHEN YOU’RE 14 YOU CAN’T REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT IT’S GOING TO BE LIKE

has been asked to move it because it is not being used.

“My dad’s a smack [heroin] addict”, says Sammie, as we move into the communal sitting room, “and my mum died of alcohol poisoning when I was 13. I was in care since I was four months old.”

She was raped when she was 10 and pregnant at 17. Her daughter was removed by social services when she was just a few weeks old. Her son was taken away after she stayed away from her women’s refuge all night. She has fought to keep her children but she knows the battle is lost. “They’re not coming back,” she says. The sadness in her eyes has me fighting off tears.

THESE are not the kind of stories to cheer anyone up, least of all the taxpayer. Basic

support for a teenage parent costs the state at least £96,000 over five years, according to Hilary Pannack, chief executive of the charity Straight Talking. The biggest costs are likely to be housing benefit (more than £50,000), income support (more than £12,000) and child tax credit (more than £11,000).

That is without taking into account the cost of prescriptions, support projects or post-natal care. The charity, which sends former teenage parents to schools to talk about the realities of teenage parenthood, has had a significant effect on numbers of teenage pregnancies. In Barking and Dagenham, east London, for example, there has been a 37% drop since 2002.

Nationally the figures are falling too. According to

Odds stacked against child parents staying together

Towards the end of a cul-de-sac in Caerphilly, south Wales, is a pebble-dash, semi-detached council house with a small garden, writes Francesca Angelini. This is the home of a little boy called Jamie, whose mother and father were Britain’s youngest parents when he was born four years ago.

Jamie lives with his mother, April Webster, 18, and his grandparents. His father, Nathan Fishbourne, 18, lives a couple of miles away. April and Nathan were both 14 when she had Jamie in November 2010. They were in the same year at St Cenydd School. Shortly before Jamie was born, they were said to be having “a cooling-off period”. So where are they now?

“I broke up with Nathan about three years ago, we’re not really in contact,” April said last week. “I don’t really want to be in contact with him. When I first had Jamie I hoped we might stay together. There are no regrets, though.”

April had planned to continue her education but never took her GCSEs. “I’m not in school or working, I’m just looking

after Jamie and everything is going amazingly with him.”

Her family and friends have been supportive. “My mum and sister love having Jamie in the house. He’s fun. He goes to school in the mornings, which gives me time to chill out. I might go to college and take some exams when Jamie is older. I’m not planning on having another baby soon, though.”

If the experiences of these young parents are anything to go by, the couple who became the youngest yet last week will struggle to stay together. Relationship experts agree that the odds are stacked against them.

Even without the stress of having a baby, teenage love rarely endures these days, according to Harry Benson, of the Marriage Foundation. “It’s not just couples who marry young who are at high risk of splitting up, it’s also the case that unmarried young couples are more likely to split up.

“Getting into a relationship with the constraints of living together, having a baby or getting married too quickly puts

a relationship at risk. People haven’t matured by their teens; they’re going to change a lot more.”

If they do make a real effort with the help of friends and family, however, there is a chance they will stay together, according to Susan Quilliam, a relationship expert.

“There is an argument that they are far too young emotionally to be making a relationship choice and coping with the stress of a baby,” she said. “Statistics in general show that, however much you love each other, having a baby rocks the boat, but since they are very young, they will attract an awful lot of support.

“First love is also a bonding love; there is a mystique about it and you can stay bonded to that person. There are examples of very young couples who do make it, but they only make it with extra support. It will be a very, very rough road.

Quilliam added: “They’re not necessarily doomed. On the other hand, if in 10 years they’ve split up, I would also say to them, ‘This is not your fault, you were fighting a losing battle.’”



JAMES DAVIES

April Webster with son Jamie and parents Maria and Jeff after giving birth at 14