

Dependency System Needs to Help Teens Parenting Children

Focus Column
Juvenile Law

By Miriam Aroni Krinsky

At 3, Linda came under the jurisdiction of Dependency Court to protect her from an abusive parent. Her childhood was a revolving door of foster homes, group homes and school disruptions.

As she approached adolescence, Linda dreamed of having a baby of her own - someone to love her and whom she would love and care for in return.

While a teen in foster care, Linda became pregnant and found herself with no family structure within which to raise her child.

Unfortunately, this scenario is far from unusual. Children who have been placed in foster care because of the abuse and neglect they suffered at the hands of their own parents commonly become parents themselves at a young age. One recent study found that 32 percent of young women in foster care who were 17 and older were pregnant or parenting.

Almost 12 percent of all births in California are to adolescent mothers, and our state's rate of teen pregnancy is 21 percent higher than the national average. In Los Angeles, the numbers are equally disheartening: 6,000 teen births in the year 2000 and 4,000 repeat births to teen mothers.

Foster youths, taken from their family and all that is familiar to them, are raised within a system that is ill-equipped to teach them how to parent and that rarely provides positive parenting models for them to emulate. Many teens in foster care view having a child of their own as a chance to start fresh and to provide for their baby as they were not provided for.

Yet many foster youths, while well-intentioned, have no idea how to accomplish this end, and the system itself is of little help. These young parents lack the support, education and assistance needed to become self-sufficient and safe parents. In short, they have no one to lean on.

Most foster youth who become parents live in group homes and are expected to abide by rigid rules. Adults who interact with them frequently have no faith in their ability to parent. A young mother's every move is scrutinized; a failure to promptly change a dirty diaper may precipitate an allegation of neglect. In time, many of these teen mothers become discouraged by the constant reminder that they cannot become good parents and overcome the child welfare cycle that their parents, and often their grandparents, were part of. Sadly, in many cases these young parents feel defeated by the system designed to help them and simply give up. Their own child is taken into foster care, and the cycle begins anew.

It is time to break this cycle. Our dependency system must make this crisis a priority and take positive action on behalf of the ever-growing population of children parenting children.

As a community, we need to strengthen our commitment and dedicate needed resources to address the needs of these at-risk children. We have an obligation to educate and empower foster youth who have babies and help them to create strong and lasting families.

These ends can be achieved not only by preserving the parent-child relationship but also by assisting teen mothers in foster care to become self-sufficient and thereby be able to provide a permanent, nurturing and safe home for their children. Pregnancy and parenting exacerbate the overwhelming challenges that youth in foster care face, as evidenced by one report noting that 23 percent of parenting teens drop out of school - a dropout rate twice that of other girls.

Several barriers must be overcome before we can begin to understand the breadth of the problem, let alone work toward improved results. One of the largest problems is no way to collect accurate data regarding pregnant and parenting teens and their children under the jurisdiction of the dependency court. Similarly, neither the Department of Children and Family Services nor any other part of the system does anything to track this population adequately. Without accurate data on the number of parenting teens in care or current placement resources, it is impossible to measure outcomes, evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs, determine best practices or plan for resource needs.

Similarly, child advocates, the Department of Children and Family Services and experts on adolescent parenting need to assess resources and develop innovative approaches to meeting the need for placements and services for pregnant and parenting teens in foster care. Programs such as whole-family foster care, crisis nurseries, nontraditional emancipation homes, and mechanisms for more effective post-emancipation services should be established. In addition, we need to encourage cooperation among foster caregivers, schools and service providers to ensure that parenting teens are connected to community resources and support systems outside of the foster care system.

We need to initiate reforms within the foster care system, as well, including the establishment of flexible funding mechanisms to support self-sufficiency, family well-being and stabilization of these new families, in order to prevent yet another generation of children from entering the dependency system. Focused staff training in this area and special handling of teen parent cases are necessary. Social workers must have caseloads that allow them adequate time to provide quality services and case management to these most challenging cases. Contracting procedures and performance mechanisms for caregivers should include an assessment of foster care providers' willingness and ability to create a supportive and nurturing environment for pregnant and parenting teens.

Finally, we must develop strategies to link youth in foster care, who all too often try to parent with no safety net, to parenting classes, appropriate transitional housing and other essential support systems. Best-practice models should be incorporated into the operations of all the agencies working with minor parents and their children. Additional resources, facilities for foster teens with children, expansion of high-quality pregnancy prevention and parenting classes, and increases in child-care slots for this population, are all long-range cost-effective approaches.

A first-ever summit sponsored by Westside Children's Center and Children's Law Center, "Fostering the Bond: Dependent Teens and Their Babies," will put a long overdue spotlight on this issue on May 7. This conference, part of a broader Los Angeles Foster Care Awareness Campaign during the month of May, will bring together nationally renowned experts, leaders, judges, former foster youth and stakeholders who work with this population to identify existing barriers and collaborate on creating systems change. This gathering will be a critical first step, but much more remains to be done.

If teen mothers like Linda could live in a nurturing environment with effective caregivers modeling positive parenting roles ... if Linda could finish her education and ultimately support herself and her child ... if Linda had a support system she could rely on when she felt overwhelmed ... if all this could be in place, then Linda and all the other "Lindas" in our community would have a real chance to break the cycle of abuse and neglect and begin to forge new, strong family bonds.

The children being born to children today are our future. We cannot, and should not, keep our heads in the sand on this critically important issue.

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