Sex

I Don't Regret Having My Baby: Teen Pregnancy in NZ

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This article is supported by Durex's Sexual Health Education Month. In this series, we explore Kiwi sexual behaviour.

Katie*, currently in her final year of high school in Dunedin, was 16 when she found out she was pregnant. She'd been dating her boyfriend for five years and at the time thought she was ready to have sex. Although, she admits she was swayed by what was considered socially acceptable in her friend group.

Teen pregnancy numbers have halved since 2008, but the rate of teen pregnancy in New Zealand is still considered to be high by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development standards. Recent figures show approximately 88 percent of these are unplanned pregnancies. It comes down to roadblocks relating to education and contraception.

"I learned about sex through social media and friends sharing their stories," Katie tells VICE. "They were a massive influence. Your friend tells a story and if you don't have a story that matches up, you're kind of looked down upon."

While teenagers talk a lot about sex, it's not balanced by a dialogue around safe sex or sexual health. In school, Katie learned about sex from a teacher who used scare tactics.

"The message was that abstinence was the best form of protection."

This lack of education during school may be a leading factor contributing to New Zealand's high teen pregnancy rates. Family Planning chief executive Jackie Edmond tells VICE, "Although the Ministry of Education are doing their best, meaningful education is really patchy around the country and we think we could be doing much better."

One of the issues here is inconsistency: sexuality education, which is a compulsory part of the curriculum from Years 1 to 10, is not taught in the same way at every school. Every two years schools are required to consult their school community on how it's taught. And like every other part of the curriculum, schools have the scope, flexibility, and authority on how they teach it.

The Ministry of Education's guidance situates sexuality education within the context of relationships with others. It focuses on things required to foster healthy relationships like self- knowledge, assertiveness, and empathy.

As part of its review process, the Education Review Office (ERO) focuses on how schools are delivering the curriculum, including sex education. The ERO is in the process of evaluating sex education and they expect findings to be released next year.

Considering the stigma around teen pregnancy, Katie's parents were thankfully supportive of her decision to raise a child at such a young age. "I'm from a really open family. Growing up I could ask my mum anything," she says. "I was scared to tell her I was pregnant, but she took it fine, other than having a panic attack at my first midwife appointment. It just took a while to sink in."

Being a soon-to-be-parent puts a strain on any relationship, especially when you're navigating school and adolescence. At 30 weeks pregnant, the relationship with her boyfriend broke down. With her focus shifting to her family and her son, Katie is convinced her future will be bright. "I don't regret having my baby. I regret the timing of having him, sure, and it's been really tough in a money sense and a stress sense, but I'll make it work."

She's one of many young women dealing with the long term consequences of a sexual health program that underserves high school students. It's a flawed program that Libby Zandbergen, who started Birds & Bees, an external provider that aims to revamp sex and wellness education in schools, wants to completely overhaul.

"It's crazy that in 2017, New Zealand's sex education curriculum is still hugely influenced by outdated religious notions that sex is a private matter. This argument is tied up in so much shame and stigma and is not reflective of our current societal values around sex."

"Teaching sex in this way has meant an increase in risky behaviour because teens don't have the tools for creating healthy, functional, and safe sex lives," she says.

Engaging teachers who are specialists in the area and teaching content that reflects what's actually happening in the lives of teenagers will help to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy.

"By empowering and enabling teens to have conversations in relation to, and during, sex we are instilling a sense of agency in the matter."

For those who don't have a support network, or who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, their situation is much more of a challenge.

At 24, Zoë James has almost finished a double major in arts at the University of Auckland, and works as an early childhood educator in Auckland. Her own childhood was marred by abuse at the hands of her step father. In response to the traumatic experience at home, she dropped out of school and started drinking at 13 before falling pregnant at 17.

"I was not ready for sex. But after my sexual abuse I just kind of went, 'Well, this is normal, this is what you do, this isn't so special, it feels good (sometimes)' and I thought I was in control of who I slept with."

Being a teen mum was terrible at first. "I was already in a vulnerable position before I fell pregnant and having a child made things even harder. I had a tonne of pressure to be a perfect mum or I would lose my child to the welfare system," she says. "It was hard and scary to speak up for help, because it could be seen as a sign that I wasn't coping or doing a good job."

Neither of her parents were comfortable talking about sex, so she got most of her learning from friends. But, like with Katie, this peer-to-peer education was problematic. She received a Depo-Provera injection, but was wrongly told it lasted six months, not three. School was the only other source of information.

"At school, we put a condom on a stick, and kids made rude jokes about trans people. It felt awkward and taboo, and I remember the teaching being so brief. The things I learned about my sexuality and sexual health at school never helped me in the real world."

Genevieve Smith completed a masters in applied social work at Massey University in 2014, looking into education for teen mums. "We're dealing with a truly marginalised group in society. The people I spoke to painted such a dark picture of these teenagers who have lives of immense struggle—they drop out of school, they often need welfare assistance, they're often exposed to domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and these babies are born into a life of poverty."

She says teen pregnancy numbers are still high because girls are not taught the basics around their biology and how to access services, and the current status quo fails to speak to culturally diverse, and often disenfranchised communities.

Pregnancy Counselling Services spokesperson Sandy Simpson agrees that this overarching cultural ethos where conversations aren't open, or don't take into account New Zealand's multicultural spread or varying socioeconomic backgrounds, are one of the main causes.

"I see a lot of teenagers who feel they have to be secretive and they're more likely to take risks. I've encountered a lot of girls who have little understanding of their biology, or their cycle," she says.

Many of the girls she works with say in a social context they're expected to look and behave in a sexual manner, and yet the responsibility of ensuring they're using protection unfairly rests on their shoulders.

"We should be teaching men that if they're not ready to have children, they should be equally responsible to ensure they're using protection."

While family planning services are free for people under 22, there are no outlets in remote, and often poorer, areas such as The Hawke's Bay region, the Lakes District, and the Mid Central District. Statistics NZ figures suggest some of these areas are most in need of access, with the number of teen pregnancies in Gisborne being the highest in the country at 10.1 percent, followed by the Hawke's Bay region at 7 percent, and Northland at 6.5 percent.

Alternatively, outside of family planning services, people could be paying up to $100 for an implant, for example, if they were to go to their local GP. "Access is a big problem for people living in lower socioeconomic areas," Sandy says.

For the meantime, while education continues to focus around PE teachers promoting abstinence, it means people, particularly those who fall through the cracks or who are disenfranchised, will continue falling pregnant at a young age.

****Name changed on request***

If you relate to any of the issues raised in this article, know that help is out there. If you're in New Zealand and want to talk to someone about teen pregnancy you can call Healthline on 0800 611 116 or Youthline on 0800 376 633. If you want to talk to someone about sexual assault, you can call HELP on 09 623 1700 or visit here for a list of sexual assault services across New Zealand.

This article is supported by Durex's Sexual Health Education Month. You can find out more info about it here.

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