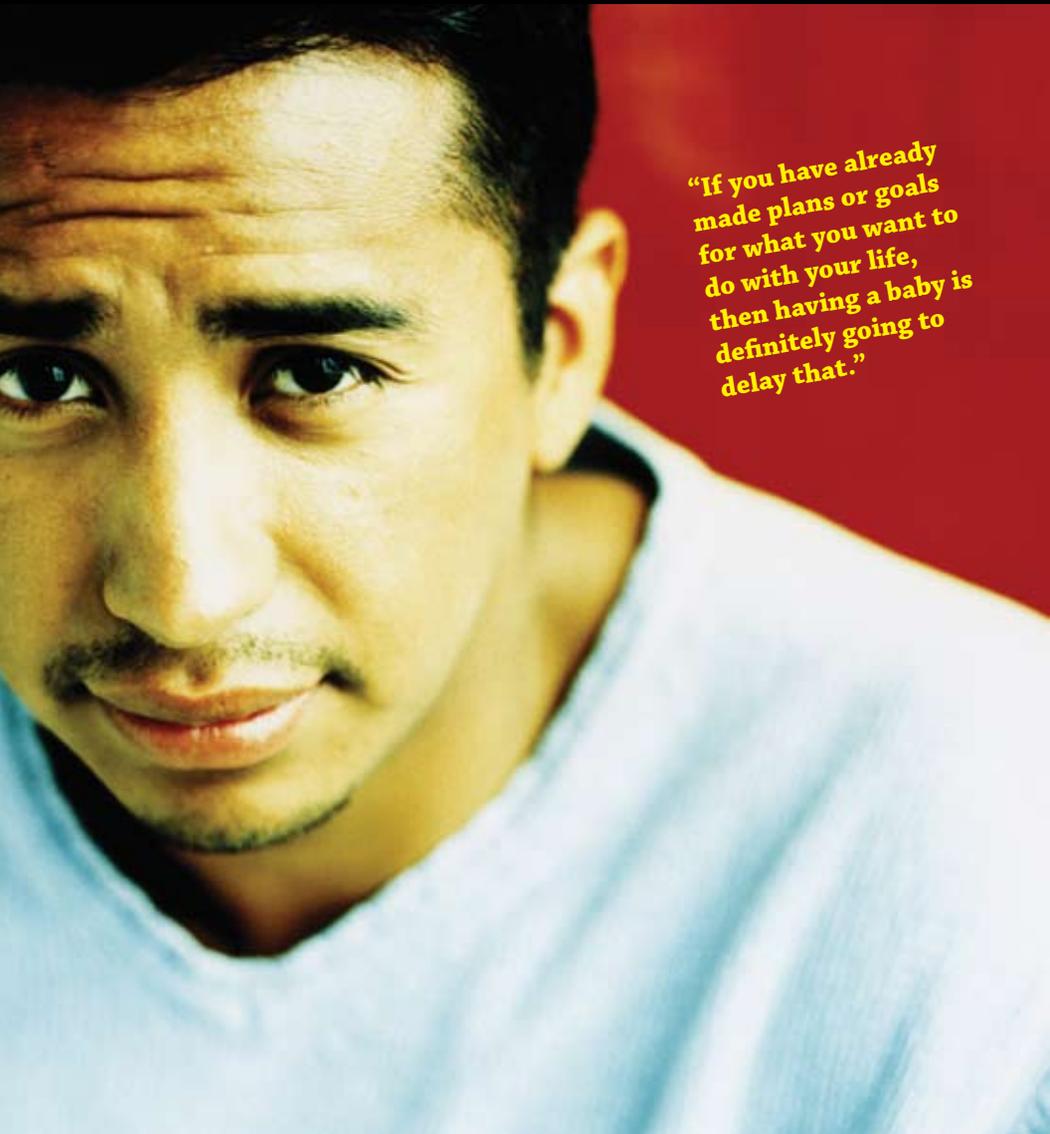


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Our STORY WORDS

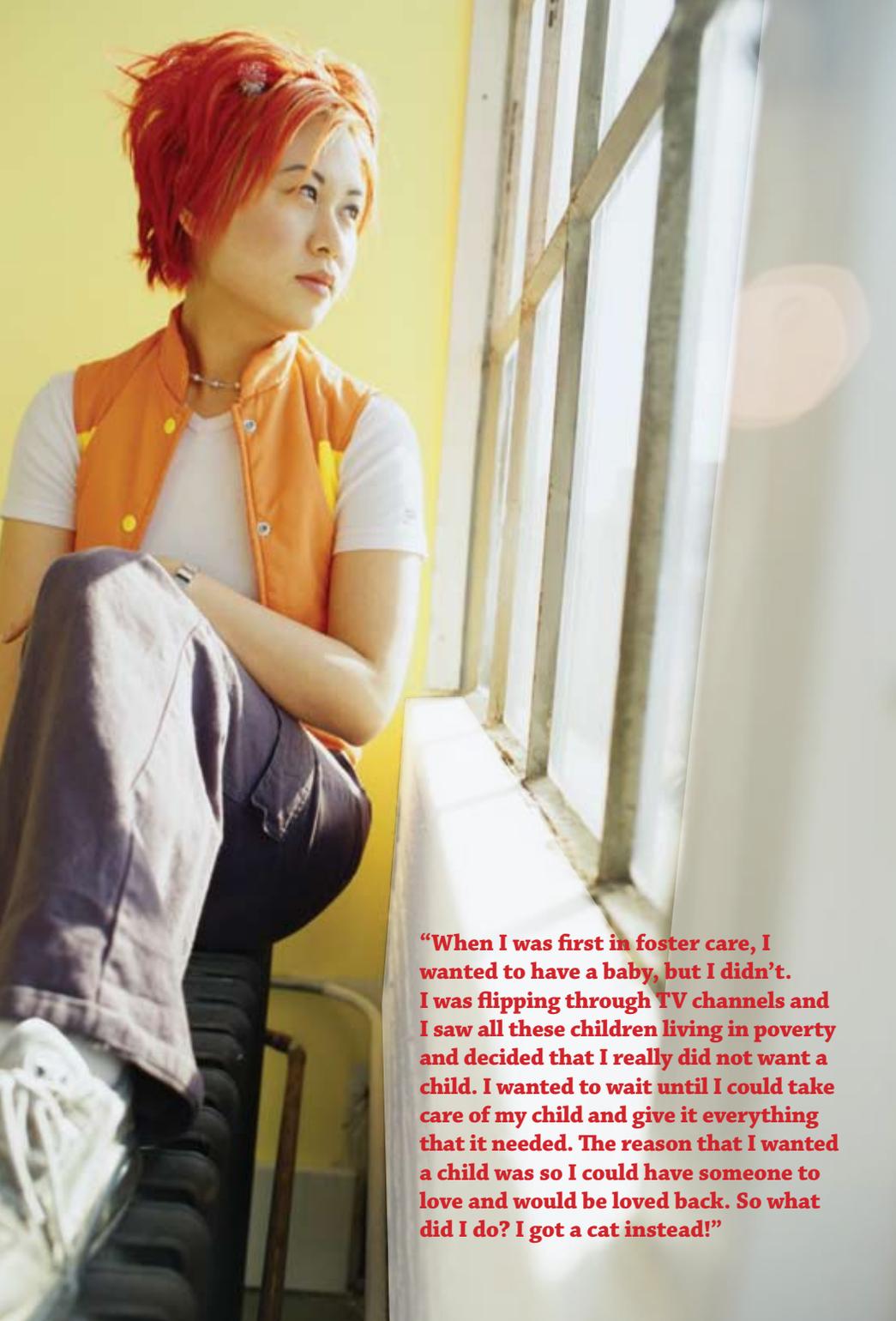
Youth Speak Out
on Sex, Love, and
Teen Pregnancy



“If you have already made plans or goals for what you want to do with your life, then having a baby is definitely going to delay that.”



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“When I was first in foster care, I wanted to have a baby, but I didn’t. I was flipping through TV channels and I saw all these children living in poverty and decided that I really did not want a child. I wanted to wait until I could take care of my child and give it everything that it needed. The reason that I wanted a child was so I could have someone to love and would be loved back. So what did I do? I got a cat instead!”

» **“Think about yourself, instead of making somebody else happy. Think about taking care of yourself. Do it when you are ready, when you are comfortable.”**



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Our STORY WORDS

Youth Speak Out on Sex, Love, and Teen Pregnancy



Teens get lots of advice from adults, but they usually aren't asked to offer their own. That's why we asked teens growing up in foster care what they wanted to know about teen pregnancy prevention and what advice they would give to their peers. Here, in their own words, is what they had to say, as well as some things that just may surprise you.

Some Things to Think About...

The following advice is from youth around the country on how to avoid becoming pregnant as a teen. We hope you find these ideas useful and perhaps see your own views and opinions reflected in them.

“My word of advice would be to wait.”

1 Thinking “it won't happen to me” is stupid—if you're not careful, it probably will. Sex is serious. Make a plan. Either don't have sex at all or use contraception *every single time*.

2 Just because you think everybody is doing it, doesn't mean they are. Some are, some aren't—and some are lying. Seven in ten high school students think their peers are having sex, but less than half really are.

3 Many teens in foster care say they feel lonely or unloved and that having sex or having a baby at an early age is the answer. A baby is a lifelong responsibility. Think about what you would want from your parents. Then ask yourself—are you ready to provide that for a child right now? Seriously think about waiting to have a baby at least until after you finish high school and hopefully college; have a good job; are in a healthy, long-term relationship; and can support your family.

4 Here are three good reasons to say “no, not yet.” Protect your feelings, protect your health, and protect your future.

5 Just because someone is older, doesn't mean they get to call the shots. Don't let anyone take advantage of you or pressure you into having sex.

6 You can always say “no”—even if you've said “yes” before. You get to decide every single time whether to have sex or not. Remember: you're in control!

7 You're not alone. If you have questions about sex, don't be shy about talking with a doctor or nurse, foster parent, caseworker, or another trusted adult.

The only way to really avoid pregnancy is to not have sex; otherwise, you just might get pregnant.

8 If you think birth control “ruins the mood,” consider what a pregnancy test will do to it. Both guys and girls are responsible for using protection. If you're having sex, remember: carrying a condom is just being smart—it doesn't mean you're pushy or easy. It also doesn't mean you're expected to have sex.

“How are you going to spoil your baby? How are you going to buy diapers? How are you going to buy all this stuff the baby needs if you don’t have any money coming in? Who are you going to depend on if nobody else is gonna take care of the child? Nobody has been willing to take care of you, and now it’s up to you to take care of you and your child.”

If you’re drunk or high you can’t make good decisions about sex. Don’t do something you might not remember or might really regret.

Girls: Sex won’t make him yours, and a baby won’t make him stay.

Guys: Got an extra \$10,000? Because that’s how much it costs to raise a baby the first year. The total bill for 18 years of raising a child = \$250,530.

If you have been sexually abused, it is not your fault. Sexual abuse is not the same as consensual sex. If you have been abused, talk to a trusted adult, caseworker, or therapist to get the help and support you need, in addition to advice on developing safe, healthy relationships.

Having a baby is not a “way out.” In fact, having a baby at an early age often means even more time in the “system”. Think hard about what’s best for you and your future, and what’s best for a baby.

“Be strong, hold your ground, because if he loves you he would wait.”

Did you know that...

- ★ Three out of ten girls become pregnant at least once by age 20.
- ★ Two-thirds of teen mothers never finish high school.
- ★ You can get pregnant or get a sexually transmitted disease (STD) the *first time* you have sex.
- ★ Nearly 80 percent of teen mothers do not marry their baby’s father. On average, these absent fathers pay only \$800 a year in child support.
- ★ Children of teen parents are more likely to do poorly in school, drop out of school, and are less likely to attend college. They’re also more likely to end up in foster care.
- ★ A child born to a teen mother who has not finished high school and is not married is nine times more likely to be poor than a child born to an adult who has finished high school and is married.
- ★ 10,000 teens are infected by STDs per day, or one teen every eight seconds. One out of every four sexually active teens has an STD.
- ★ Some STDs can be treated with medication, but for many there is no cure.
- ★ Half of all new HIV infections occur in people under age 25.
- ★ 25 percent of people living with HIV in the United States do not even know they are infected.
- ★ 41% of foster youth think the reason teen pregnancy is higher among foster youth is because they want to feel loved.

» **“It’s hard with the money they (the child welfare system) give us. We’re not living back in the old days where stuff was less expensive. Now everything is more expensive than it used to be. They expect us to do too much with that little check.”**



These are the stories of teens who grew up in the foster care system, in their own words. Only the names have been changed.

Alicia, 23

When I was seven, my younger sister Kayla and I were sent to live with a friend of the family. Our mother was a drug addict and she couldn't take care of us anymore. On the outside, Kayla and I looked healthy and happy. But behind closed doors, my foster mother, Mary, would physically, mentally, and verbally abuse us. Because I felt like no one loved me or wanted me, I became extremely attached to the first boy who showed me any attention. I would have done anything to keep him, which is why I lost my virginity to him when I was only 14. I didn't want to have sex (actually I found it disgusting) but I figured he expected me to, so I just did it. I had a prescription for the birth control pill, but I hardly ever took them. Girls like me didn't get pregnant. I was one of the top students in my high school. Having a baby wasn't in my plan, until I found out that I was pregnant. I was only 15.

I was in denial throughout most of my pregnancy. Even though I went to the doctor for regular check-ups, I refused to acknowledge that I was going to have a child. I was on my way to a hair appointment when I went into labor, and I was more concerned with missing my appointment than with going to the hospital. It wasn't until I held my son, Kevin, in my arms for the first time, that I realized that I was a mom. I did manage to finish high school, but trying to take college classes, work full-time, and take care of a child is really hard. Kevin is seven now, and though his father and I aren't together anymore, he does have a relationship with him.

I would tell every foster kid to wait to have sex. Wait until you have your life together and you have everything going for you. Don't do what I did.

Mike, 21

I became a foster kid when I was five years old. My mom had a substance abuse problem. She'd leave me, my two brothers, and sister home alone for days at a time, while she went out looking for drugs. My grandmother took me in and I stayed with her for 7 years.

After moving in with my mom again, all of the order and structure I had at my grandmother's was gone. I started smoking cigarettes, cutting school, and running the streets. I ran away at age 14. To support myself, I dropped out of school and began selling drugs.

When I was 15, I met Tanya. She was everything I wasn't. She had a good family and did well in school. Her family even took me in and gave me a place to stay.

Tanya and I had been dating for two years when she got pregnant. I wasn't educated about birth control at all, and I thought it was cool to have sex. We weren't upset when we found out she was pregnant. I was making enough money selling drugs to support us, and I really thought it would all work out. Then the unthinkable happened: a week after Tanya gave birth to our son, the cops caught me with drugs and arrested me. Before I knew it, I was sentenced to a year in jail.

Now that my son was in the picture, I had a lot more at stake. I kept thinking that here I was, incarcerated, with a little innocent child out there and I couldn't even be there for him. That's when I knew that I would change. I was done dealing drugs. As soon as I got out, I enrolled in an Independent Living Program in Chicago, a program that helps inner city youth get their lives back on track. They found me an apartment and taught me life skills. Now I work for them as a clinical intervention specialist and mentor. I'm planning to go to college and become a social worker. Tanya and my son live with me.

Being a teen parent was the hardest thing ever. Being a father is about more than just buying your kids shoes. You have to be responsible for them. Growing up in foster care is rough. You're in a system that calls the shots for most of your life. But you have to persevere. You have to trust people and let them help you if you want to make it.

Maria, 18

I've been in and out of foster care since I was in third grade. Both of my parents were addicted to alcohol and drugs. My mom would get clean for a little while and I'd move back in with her, but she always ended up using again. At the time I didn't think anything of her behavior. I didn't realize that having parents who used drugs and went to jail was abnormal. It was all I knew.

My dad died in a horrible accident when I was in fifth grade. And every year after that, I lived with a different distant family member or friend. Surprisingly, it wasn't that bad. I became really good at making friends. By the time I was in high school, I had moved back to Virginia to live with my mom, her new husband, and my half brother. Things were good for a couple of years and then my mom began acting strange again. We had a huge fight one night, and the next morning, I walked into her room to apologize. I found her passed out with a crack pipe next to her. That's when I decided that I needed to emancipate myself. For the rest of high school, I stayed with my best friend's family. Today, my mother and I don't speak. I found out recently that she gave birth to another baby, and both she and the baby are HIV positive. I went to see the baby over Thanksgiving. She's in protective services, because my mom abandoned her. Sometimes I want to punch my mother in the face.

Despite my very abnormal upbringing, I'm doing really well. I go to college in Pittsburgh and I plan on staying in the foster care system until I'm 21. I've also been dating the same guy for over a year and we're really happy. I'm very careful though. Foster kids have a lot more freedom than most kids and when that happens, they either go crazy or become super responsible. I'm responsible. I think a lot of times kids are unaware of the consequences of their actions. They know about STDs and pregnancy, but they don't really think about the consequences. But I do. I've learned from other people's examples.

» **“If you feel like you're locked down already, once you have a child you're really going to be locked down. You're not going to be able to go anywhere.”**

Interested in learning more?

Here are some numbers to call and websites to visit for more information:

Questions about sex, protection, contraception (including emergency contraception) and STDs?

- National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy: www.teenpregnancy.org www.myspace.com/nationalcampaign
- Planned Parenthood: 1-800-230-PLAN or www.teenwire.com
- American Social Health Association: 1-800-227-8922 or www.iwannaknow.org
- MTV/It's Your Sex Life 1-888-BE-SAFE-1 (237-2331) or www.mtv.com
- Teen Health: <http://teenhealth.org/teen/>

Questions about where to get tested for HIV?

- National HIV Testing Resources: <http://www.hivtest.org>

Questions about relationships?

- Teen Health: <http://teenhealth.org/teen/>
- Pause: www.fox.com/pause

Questions about foster care, relationships, and more?

- FosterClub: www.fosterclub.com and www.fy13.com

If you've been abused...

- National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-422-4453
- loveisrespect, Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 1-866-331-8453 (TTY) www.loveisrespect.org

If you've run away and need shelter...

- Covenant House: 1-800-999-9999 or <http://www.covenanthouse.org>

“Being a teen parent wasn't easy for me. It's not fun and games...I have this baby that cries for 6 hours a day and I just came home from work and now I gotta take care of my kid.”

RESOURCES

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