

Growing Up Fast

By Joanne Lipper

Review by Richard J Moldawsky, MD

On the subject of teenage pregnancy, we might suppose that the right combination of parental supervision, community support, personal values, and education would effectively neutralize the impulsivity and hormonal surges of adolescence. Written for a general audience, this book examines these opposing forces by presenting indepth stories distilled from conversations between Joanne Lipper and six teenaged mothers. The introductory chapter sets the stage effectively, but the closing chapter does not summarize as well as the reader might hope.

The setting for these stories is Pittsfield, a small city in western Massachusetts in the Berkshire Mountains. This area boasts many cultural offerings—Tanglewood and Jacob's Pillow are among the better-known attractions. Pittsfield has benefited from this environment but even more so from its long relationship with the General Electric Corporation (GE), the area's main employer for decades. This situation changed in 1986, when GE decided to shift many of its operations abroad; this action greatly disrupted the Pittsfield economy and combined with an earlier crisis—toxic waste disposal into the local river—to set the city on a prolonged course of decline.

This decline occurred at a time of plentiful coverage for inpatient treatment for substance abuse, and a local hospital contracted with Medicaid to provide such treatment for New York beneficiaries. Consequently, Pittsfield became a hub for drug dealers and drug abuse. The impact of this phenomenon on a poor community is the powerful theme of this book and illuminates the social, economic, familial, and psychological factors which lead to early sexual activity and pregnancy.

Ms Lipper cites a study¹ coauthored by Vincent Felitti, MD, of SCPMG in San Diego (and Book Review Editor of *The Permanente Journal*) which found that girls younger than 15 years of age are more likely to engage in sexual behavior if they

have been subjected to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; have witnessed domestic violence; live with an adult who has a history of substance abuse, mental illness, or a prison record; or has experienced a combination of these factors, which fill each chapter of the book. Readers must try to imagine how a teenage girl could cope with the deprivations caused by these factors. Most of the girls are themselves children of teenage mothers—mothers so entrapped by their own problems that they cannot provide the basic necessities for their children. These children naturally continue to seek security—no matter how illusory or temporary—wherever possible. The immensity of the problems seems insurmountable.

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But perhaps they are not insurmountable. A community resource such as the Teen Parent Program can become a lifeline for pregnant adolescents in Pittsfield. This program (a day school housed in a church building) offers counseling, daycare, tutoring, and—perhaps most important—caring adults who help these girls through family turmoil, medical needs, and the public welfare system. The program is no panacea but is a beginning.

We would hope for happy resolutions for all the girls described in the book. Instead, however, the book describes heroic victories—a high school graduation and ending the need for public welfare assistance—as well as horrendously bad choices such as returning to a physically abusive boyfriend or selling drugs. The reader is left to worry about the kind of parents the babies will become—and how soon.

Ms Lipper largely allows the stories to speak for themselves but does offer some psychological and sociological insight into these teens. Given how well she has come to know these young mothers, her insights ring true. The final chapter, "Community," attempts to synthesize what Ms Lipper has learned from the girls (and from others) about



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copied with teen pregnancy. Although Ms Lipper identifies and describes some of these approaches, I would be interested to know more about how she envisions the roles of schools, churches, health care agencies, and government. And, of course, what about the families and the girls themselves? Ms Lipper sees all these entities as having a place, but the final chapter would have benefited from more detail in this regard. Nonetheless, those with any interest in adolescence will appreciate this book and will find these stories worth reading.

The book forcefully reminds those who interact with pregnant teenagers that these girls are usually the victims of deeply troubled families. More awareness of the predictors of teenage sexual activity and pregnancy may provide an opportunity for health care professionals to make appropriate referrals, offer counseling, and provide medical information to such children, who must be considered at high risk for a life of extraordinary challenges. ❖

Reference

1. Hillis SD, Anda RF, Felitti VJ, Marchbanks PA. Adverse childhood experiences and sexual risk behaviors in women: a retrospective cohort study. *Fam Plann Perspect* 2001 Sep-Oct;33(5):206-11.

Words

Words are things; and a small drop of ink
Falling like dew upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.

Lord Byron, 1788-1824, poet