

The experiences of pregnant teenagers

Often the person who requests an abortion is an adolescent. On the one hand, the adolescent is confronted by the development crisis of adolescence and, on the other hand, by the circumstantial crisis of an unwanted pregnancy (Geldenhuis & De Lange, 2001:92). Research has found that many teenagers who are sexually active are unaware of the risk of an unwanted pregnancy or are inclined to ignore the consequences of their behaviour. They display an apologetic attitude and deny the risks, because they do not realise the long-term consequences of their behaviour. The consequences of their decisions are not taken into account and they easily become involved in unsafe sex with the expectation that they will not fall pregnant (Evangelisti, 2000:3; Henwick, 2001:18; Mogano, 1999:9). Beside the fact that the adolescent is at greater risk of an unwanted pregnancy than the adult woman, she is also physically and socially not ready to start a family yet.

A pregnant teenager must be understood within the context of the specific world she lives in, namely the family and broader social environment. The socio-economic environment determines the context of the adolescent's psycho-social development, namely values and beliefs as well as attitude with regard to pregnancy, abortion, adoption and motherhood (Evangelisti, 2000:21). Teenagers are inclined to request an abortion in spite of the possibility that abortion is rejected in the specific culture which creates confusion and anxiety. The teenager's experience of teenage pregnancy is three-dimensional, namely physical, psychological and spiritual (Britz, 1997:51). The adolescent who requests an abortion finds herself in a unique educational and life situation. She is caught up in irrational beliefs and has to make a difficult decision in a time in which she herself is dependent on the guidance of adults (Britz, 1997:10, 51). The adolescent must have sound decision-making skills before she can decide on how to deal with the unwanted pregnancy.

The adolescent's reasons for an abortion

Although the reasons for an abortion are the same for adult women and teenagers, a few unique reasons are linked to the pregnant teenager.

- Adolescents fear their parents' reaction to an unwanted pregnancy – an unwanted pregnancy is an embarrassment because the teenager has deviated from the values of her parents and because of the community's rejection of pre-marital sex. It is untimely and encroaches upon the teenager's objectives, and an abortion is then the only way out, in her opinion. Teenagers do not share this with their parents out of fear of disappointment, anger and rejection, and then take everything on themselves in an attempt to spare their parents the heartache. Many teenagers have preconceived notions that parents will not understand or support them. The mere idea of informing them about the unwanted pregnancy is to them more stressful than the actual act of communicating the information. They deny themselves the phase of support and concern of their parents and lose sight of the possibility that the news can strengthen the relationship between the parents and the children, and then rather request an abortion (Kaufman, 1997:46; McCulloch, 1996:37; Reproductive Health Alliance Barometer, 1997:17; Taylor, 1990:43).
- The peer group does not easily influence the pregnant teenager during the decision-making process. However, if she knows someone who has undergone an abortion, it is relatively easy for her to make her decision (Evangelisti, 2000:25).
- Age and emotionally not ready – often adolescents mention concrete reasons for terminating a pregnancy. The fear of social rejection is linked to this (Evangelisti, 2000:25).

- School career and studies – completing her school career and/or studies as well as fulfilling her plans for the future are her concrete arguments for terminating her pregnancy (Evangelisti, 2000:25).
- Silence and secrecy – Geldenhuys and De Lange (2001:96) emphasise silence and secrecy as concrete reasons why adolescents consider terminating the pregnancy.

CONCLUSION

Every individual is exposed to life crises. A pregnancy is a life crisis to a pregnant woman who does not see her way clear to going through with a pregnancy or to educating the child. The feelings and behavioural patterns of the pregnant woman who requests an abortion correspond with those of an individual in any crisis. The woman with an unwanted pregnancy must not be ignored and social work aid should be available when and if she needs it.

Although pre-abortion counselling for the pregnant woman who requests abortion is not compulsory, legislation makes provision for this. In order to do effective pre-abortion counselling and to focus on rendering a social work service of high quality, it is essential to obtain knowledge about the environment that the pregnant woman who requests abortion lives in. A literature study and an empirical investigation succeeded in compiling a profile of such a woman, investigating her behavioural patterns and feelings, and determining what reasons are given for the termination of pregnancy. Adolescence and teenage pregnancy were addressed in this article too, but differentiated from one another, seeing that the adolescent development phase in itself is a crisis period.

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