

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY

Joyce Clemons

May 2003

Mother's Day is just around the corner. It is one of the most important days we celebrate. Restaurants will be packed to the hilt because moms everywhere are given a reprieve from the kitchen. Mom will be showered with all kinds of gifts - from aromatic fragrances to zippered handbags, and everything in between. This is the day that all children, young and old, say, "Thank You, Mom," for all that you have done. It is a day to be enjoyed by mothers and those who love her. She is queen for a day.

But for some mothers, Mother's Day will come and go without fanfare or the slightest recognition. Many of the forgotten mothers became mothers as teens, and now some of their teens are mothers. Though the teen pregnancy rate in the District of Columbia has declined down from a high of 233.6 per 1,000 teens 15-19 in 1994 to 81.4 for the same age group in 2000, the rate is still far too high. That means that for some teens, their teen years will be turned into parenting years.

According to research conducted by on behalf of D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, the overwhelming majority of District residents (85 percent) are concerned about teen pregnancy. They rank teen pregnancy among their top concerns, second only to violence.

When those same residents were asked how often they spoke with their adolescent child about "sexual issues," 56 percent of parents said, "frequently" and another 29 percent said, "sometimes." At first glance, the data sounds promising. But when you ask children and teens how often their parents talk with them about these same issues, you get a very different response. Only 32 percent of teens said their parents "frequently" spoke of sexual issues, and 34 percent "sometimes" discussed them with their parents.

Young people in the District want their parents or other trustworthy, dependable adults to pass on their wisdom by giving teens advice, support and encouragement they need to avoid teen pregnancy together. Every teen-ager in the District of Columbia deserves the chance to enjoy his or her teen years. They deserve every opportunity to learn useful skills, to be celebrated for their successes and supported through their failures. Not only mothers, but also fathers can do this well.

Research shows that teen pregnancy is less likely when boys and girls, regardless of income and race, feel strongly connected to their parents and other dependable adults; experience school success from an early age; have a sense of belonging; have safe places to spend time with adult supervision and interesting things to do; get comprehensive, non-friendly health care; and make a clear plan that does not include pregnancy in their teen-age years.

Neither mothers (nor fathers) are born knowing how to make these things happen. A lot of what they know, they learn by doing; parenting is the original on-the-job training. Many people manage to muddle through and make the best of it, while others flounder. Mothers are typically the first line of security, whether homeland or otherwise. Yet, for teen mothers are having a tough time of providing the basic necessities for their children: food, clothing and shelter. Mothering is not just a 9 to 5 job, but one that lasts a lifetime. Teen years should be carefree years, free from the responsibilities of motherhood or fatherhood.

So, as we honor our mothers, as we thank them for the life lessons they have imparted for having the wisdom to teach us and the patience to guide us, we must consider how our mothers (and fathers) got to be so wise. It has something to do with that old expression, "with age comes wisdom." Time and time again, the best parents are those who are ready for parenthood, who have learned from the challenges adult life has to offer and are ready to pass that knowledge on to the next generation.

Let us hope that a year from now on Mother's Day, even fewer teens in the District will be guests of honor. Talk to your teens, both boys and girls, about love, sex and relationships. They want to hear from you.

Happy Mother's Day!

*Joyce Clemons is the communications director for D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.*