

Baby Mamas Sing the Blues

"American Idol" Fantasia Barrino caused quite a stir with her song "Baby Mama." Metro columnist Donna Britt wrote about the song twice (April 1 and 15), and Brenda Rhodes Miller, executive director of the DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, spoke about it in an interview on National Public Radio on May 24.

Barrino's song is about young, single mothers trying to make it. Her lyrics don't cite any ages, but the singer herself became a parent at 17. Many teenage parents in the District and across the country can relate to Barrino's lyrics because they, too, are trying to eke out an existence for themselves and their children, often while waiting for a support check that is not large enough to pay for day care.

Although the teenage birthrate in the District is dropping, far too many teenagers in the city still are taking on the adult responsibility of parenting. In 2002, the latest year for which data is available from the D.C. Department of Health, 935 babies were born to D.C. teenagers aged 15 to 19, down from the previous year tally of 980 births.

Far too many teenagers in Washington still are taking on the adult responsibility of becoming parents.

One line in Barrino's song says, "Nowadays, it like a badge of honor to be a baby mama."

But should it be? Barrino may have become a teenage parent and still gone on to do well, but she is the exception. Teenage pregnancy is not in the best interest of mother, father or child. Research shows that teenage mothers are less likely to complete high school. The daughters of teenage mothers also are more likely to become teenage parents themselves. Further, children of teenage parents are more likely to suffer higher rates of abuse and neglect, and sons born to teenage mothers are more likely to be incarcerated than the sons of older mothers.

As an "American Idol," privy to the many advantages that go along with that title, Barrino can afford to do

more than give her child the basic necessities. That is not true of most "baby mamas" who have to depend upon government programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. According to "The \$747 Million Dollar Question," a publication of the DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, the District spends that amount in a year to support families started by teenagers.

Believe it or not, teenagers want their parents to talk to them about sensitive issues. A survey of 1,600 D.C. teenagers and adults done by DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy showed that 90 percent of the adults felt that parents should initiate discussions with their children about sex. Most of the adults and adolescents surveyed said that these conversations need to start when the child is young.

The survey asked D.C. residents how often they spoke with their adolescent child about sexual issues. Fifty-six percent of parents said "frequently," and 29 percent said "sometimes." That sounded promising, but the survey uncovered a disconnect. The teenagers gave quite different responses to the same questions. Only 32 percent said their parents "frequently" spoke to them about sexual issues, and only 34 percent said they "sometimes" discussed such issues with their parents.

Parents who are concerned about their teenagers should listen to "Baby Mama" and then ask their children to share their thoughts about its lyrics. By discussing the song, they can turn it into an educational experience for themselves and for their children.

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