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Adoption Decision Difficult for Teen-Agers to Make

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ADDITION DECISION DIFFICULT FOR TEEN-AGERS TO MAKE

DAYTON, Ohio -- Thirty years ago, it was rare for an unwed mother to keep her baby. Today it's uncommon for a pregnant teen-ager to give up her baby for adoption, says Brenda Donnelly, research associate of the University of Dayton's Center for the Study of Family Development.

Donnelly and Patricia Voydanoff, director of the center, conducted a study on factors that influence a pregnant teen's decision about her baby once she has decided to see the pregnancy through. Results appear in the current issue of Family Relations.

"There is less stigma attached to single parenthood now than ever before," says Donnelly, "and very little precedent for releasing for adoption among adolescents."

According to results, a teen-ager who chooses to release her baby for adoption is generally white, not poor, plans to continue her education and thinks she would regret the commitment of keeping her child. A teen-ager who chooses to keep her baby is typically older, thinks parenthood will not limit her socially or personally, is of a lower social class and is dependent on welfare.

"Black teen-agers, especially, are very reluctant to formally release a child for adoption, although an 'informal' adoption, where the child is placed with an aunt, grandmother or cousin to raise, is a more common reaction," says Donnelly.

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Donnelly and Voydanoff interviewed 177 pregnant or postpartum teen-agers who decided to carry their babies to term to find out what factors were most important to them when they decided whether to keep and raise their babies or release them for adoption.

National statistics show that about half of all pregnant teens decide to carry their babies to term and that 4 percent of those teens choose to release their children for adoption. Of the study participants, located through local health clinics, 14 percent opted for adoption and 86 percent chose to raise their child.

"It's generally accepted that the chances for the baby are better with adoption, although the mother faces real pain when she releases her child," says Donnelly. Children adopted through agencies tend to be placed in two-parent households with access to health care, educational opportunities and economic stability, she said, while children raised by teen mothers are more likely to experience physical problems, lower educational attainment and problem behaviors.

"At least for the first few years, we know that mothers who release their children tend to do better in school and have better jobs," says Donnelly. "But they were better off to begin with, so it's hard to know if that's a result of releasing their child for adoption."

Teens who decide not to raise their child are not taking the easy way out, says Donnelly. "Those mothers are more likely to suffer grief and loss and various sorts of depression. Giving a child up for adoption hurts--it's like a death and it's a very difficult thing to do."

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For media interviews, contact Brenda Donnelly at (513) 229-4651.