

A little-known OUHSC program
deals realistically with teen-age pregnancy
and life after motherhood



When Children Have Children

BY JUDITH WALL
photos by Robert Taylor

Teen-age Mothers

While the rest of the country is trying to decide what to do about teen-age pregnancy, a little-known University of Oklahoma program for pregnant and parenting teens has significantly lowered the expected rate of second pregnancies for its participants.

Housed in two dated house trailers and a small metal building clustered behind a downtown Oklahoma City school, the Emerson Teen Parent Program—a program of the OU Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology—has over the last 11 years provided prenatal and postpartum care for more than 1,000 teen-agers. And because of the program's intense counseling and mentoring efforts, a large majority of those girls have stayed in school and waited to have other children.

Norma Leslie, a former OB-GYN faculty member, provided a great deal of the impetus for the founding of the program and served as director until she accepted an appointment at Penn State earlier this year.

She recalls the early 1980s, when she and other community activists first started talking about teen-age pregnancy. "So often, pregnant teens weren't staying in school," she said.

In addition, many pregnant teens in Oklahoma City were not receiving adequate health care, and special counseling programs for pregnant and parenting teens were almost unheard of.

For many years, pregnant girls in Oklahoma City public schools have attended the Emerson Alternative

They live in poverty.
They live in pain.
At thirteen they are thirty-five.

They want acceptance.
They want love.
They get rejection.
From those above.

They have babies when they're too young.
They want the baby to be the one
To put meaning in their life.

But the circle starts again,
And the poverty begins.
The despair and rejection continues.

The babies grow and turn thirteen.
They want acceptance; they want love,
And the circle starts again.

*By an anonymous Oklahoma City teen-ager
who became a mother at 13.*

Education Center, a school that provides flexible scheduling for students with special needs. At one time, pregnant students were required to transfer to Emerson; now a transfer to the school is offered as an option—one that many girls choose because of the teen parent program.

Before the program was established, pregnant students at Emerson usually received their prenatal care at a young mother's clinic in University Hospital, but transportation was often a problem, and a visit to the clinic frequently meant long waits and missing a day of school. All too often, girls did not keep their appointments.

Teen pregnancies are high risk for both the mother and the baby, Leslie explains. And a pregnant teen-ager usually is facing considerable upheaval in her life. The man or boy who made her pregnant almost never is a continuing presence in her life. She needs to learn how to parent and to postpone future pregnancies. And, Leslie emphasizes, she needs to stay in school. Without a high school diploma, vocational training and coun-

seling, she will not be able to provide for herself and her baby.

Leslie envisioned a comprehensive program for pregnant and parenting teens that included health care and counseling. In 1984 she was instrumental in bringing together a task force of health-care professionals, parents, clergy and concerned citizens to develop an awareness of the problem of teen pregnancy in Oklahoma City.

"At that time, no one was talking about teen pregnancy, even though Oklahoma had one of the highest teen-pregnancy rates in the nation," Leslie says. "In fact we were so squeamish about forming this group that we didn't call ourselves a 'teen pregnancy task force.' We called ourselves the Oklahoma County Adolescent Task Force."

With the task force's blessing, Leslie ran a three-month pilot program at Emerson staffed with OU nurse practitioner students. The project demonstrated that pregnant students would take advantage of a school-based health care program. The girls indicated that having a day care center and Woman Infants Children (WIC) nutritional program at the school would help them to stay in school after their babies were born.

Armed with the results of the pilot project, the task force began scrambling for the money to establish a permanent program at the school. In 1987, the Gannett Foundation provided a \$100,000 Community Priorities Grant, which allowed the OU Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology to hire a staff and open a clinic and WIC program at Emerson in a donated house trailer.

The Oklahoma City Public Schools refurbished a nearby building and opened a day care center. Through a vo-tech-sanctioned program, the young mothers who work at the center can fulfill the requirements to become a licensed day care provider. Mothers

■ Left photo: At the end of the day, Angel and her daughter, Alicia, leave Emerson for home aboard an Oklahoma City school bus, specially equipped with car seats for the smallest passengers.

and babies both can ride a school bus to Emerson from any location in Oklahoma City. With room for 28 infants, the day care center is not large enough to provide for all the Emerson babies, however, and there is always a waiting list.

The day care center has been an incredible plus for the girls fortunate enough to have their babies accepted, says Louise Foster, a nurse practitioner who serves as on-site director for the Emerson Teen Parent Program. "The day care center solves lots of problems and provides the girls with a marketable trade," she points out. "Unfortunately, there's no funding for expanding the center."



While Shavon gains child-care skills by working in the Emerson day care center, she also can spend time with her daughter, Shacarri.

When the initial grant ended, the Gannett Foundation provided an additional \$87,000. Currently, the program has a grant from the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, and the state Legislature provides supplemental funding through the Department of Health. Other money and assistance comes from a variety of sources.

"This whole program from the very beginning has been manna from heaven," Leslie says. "The Independent Order of Foresters, for example, gives us money every year. Organizations have fund raisers and give us the proceeds."

Because of community and state support, the Emerson Teen Parent Program has been able to grow and expand in scope over the past 11 years. The staff now includes nurse practitioners, nurses and counselors who work with the girls and their babies on a daily basis year-round. The nurse practitioners provide

them and give them a great deal of motherly advice."

The staff conducts classes on parenting, decision-making and conflict resolutions and offers career and relationship counseling and individual and group mentoring programs. They visit the girls in their homes and meet their families. They have birthday parties for them and cook lunch for them in the summertime when the school lunchroom is closed. Going the extra mile is a routine occurrence.

The average patient load at Emerson averages between 150 to 175, including prenatal and postpartum adolescents, their babies and general adolescent care. In addition, the nurses will administer health care free of charge to anyone who comes to the trailer door, including other Emerson students—male or female—and family members of the girls. They are especially interested in helping the younger sisters of their pregnant and parenting girls avoid a teen-age pregnancy.

"Even with all they see and hear about sex, these young girls don't understand

their own bodies or acknowledge their own sexuality," Leslie points out. "Often they haven't a clue about their own anatomy or that of the boys. If they did, they probably wouldn't be having premature intercourse."

What is being done to prevent that first pregnancy?

"Nationwide, the big push now is on abstinence," Leslie says.

When asked if she believes such a policy will work, she shrugs. "Well, that's a politically fired question right

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prenatal and postpartum care. The lone man on the nine-person staff conducts a mentoring program for male students at Emerson School.

The staff has three primary goals—healthy mothers and babies, convincing the girls to postpone future pregnancies and keeping young people in school.

"Our girls range in age from 11 to 18," Foster says. "Most come from dysfunctional families, and many of their own mothers were teen-age moms. We spend a lot of time with



Infants like Tatiana, here with Emerson daycare director Glenda Crabtree, receive plenty of affection and rocking-chair time.



At the end of the day, toddlers Alicia, left, and Lashrona are bundled into their coats by Emerson day-care worker Myrtle Mosley while Timothy, at far right, patiently awaits his mother's arrival.

now, but I do think most of us who work with adolescents agree they shouldn't be having sex because of the many emotional and physical consequences. What we don't agree on is how to deliver the message.

"We have to teach little girls about attachments and relationships," she adds emphatically. "More teen preg-

nancies are the result of incest than anyone is willing to admit, and a great deal of the sex is involuntary."

Even much of the so-called consensual sex frequently happens simply because the girl does not know how to avoid it and also is yearning for a "love attachment."

Leslie says a teen-age girl's expla-

nation of how she became pregnant usually sounds something like this: *Well, I was just out with these friends, and we were drinking, and I kind of got caught in a corner. I didn't know how to get myself out of the corner and got pregnant.*

"Somehow, we need to help girls stay out of those corners," Leslie says.

As for the girls who enter willingly into a sexual situation, they seldom do so with a full awareness of what having sex at an early age can mean. Leslie recalls one girl saying, "You just do it. We all lie down without knowing the consequences."

However, educating youngsters about sex also is a politically charged issue, she admits. Public schools succumb to pressure from groups who believe that teaching about sex encourages promiscuity. Little is being done in public schools to teach children about sex and relationships.

The Emerson program focuses instead on building self-esteem and helping girls formulate career and life goals. "We try to show them there's something else out there besides poverty and hopelessness," Foster says. "If we can make them feel better about themselves, it's half the battle. The rest of the battle is getting them to take the necessary steps to prevent a second pregnancy."

Foster brags about graduates of the program who are holding jobs and supporting themselves and their babies. And she is quite proud of the ones who have gone on to college.

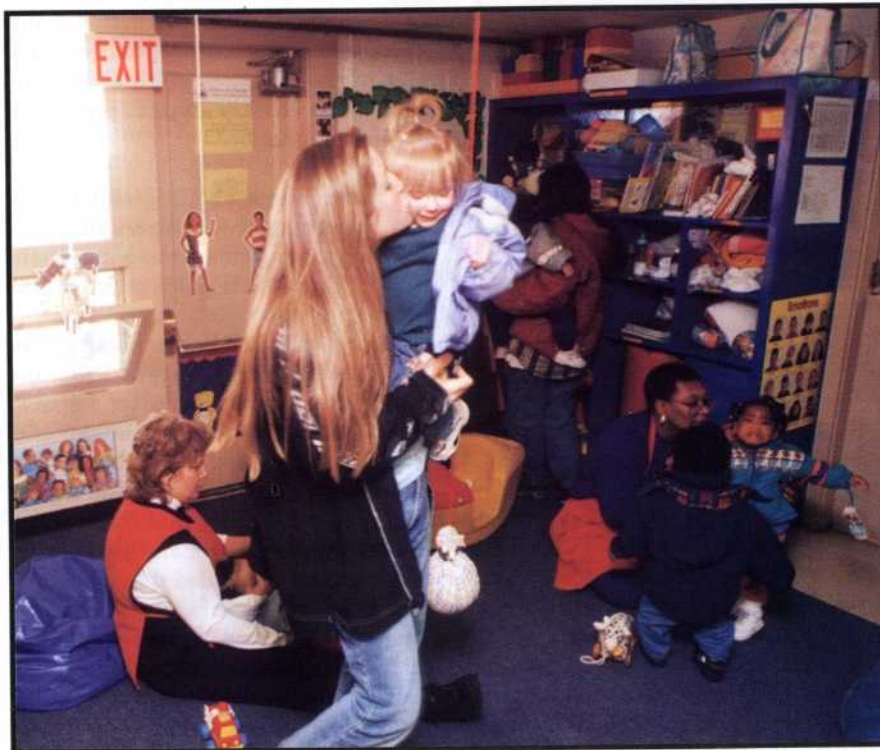
Both Leslie and Foster believe that the Emerson Teen Parent Program could have an even greater impact. But that would take more money.

Leslie points to a vacant lot behind Emerson school that would be a perfect site for a facility that could serve as a community center and house their program, an expanded day care center, WIC program and community outreach programs. But until the manna from heaven turns into an avalanche, they will continue to operate their program in cast-off house trailers and a metal shed.

For a number of years, Leslie has been able to convince a local hotel to



On-site director of the Emerson Teen Parent Program Louise Foster, a nurse practitioner in the OUHSC Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, not only counsels the young mothers on health care issues but also on staying in school and providing for themselves and their babies.



Mom Leslie greets her daughter Michaela with a kiss as they prepare to join Emerson classmates for the bus ride home.

“You won’t believe this place,” she said. **“There’s three bathrooms, telephones in the bathrooms, and there’s food everywhere. They’ve got food for us!”**

sponsor an overnight outing for the young mothers mentoring class. This much-anticipated event is the first hotel stay for most of the girls. Leslie recalls one of the young mothers racing to the phone to call her mother. “You won’t believe this place,” she said. “There’s three bathrooms, telephones in the bathrooms, and there’s food everywhere. They’ve got food for us!”

She remembers the reaction of another girl—Erika, who was 11 and pregnant when she came to Emerson. One of the nurse practitioners took Erika under her wing and provided special mentoring. Leslie says that she will never forget this very young teenage mother looking out the top-floor hotel window and saying, “I just can’t believe this. It’s so wonderful I don’t want to go home.”

Leslie responded to the wonderstruck youngster by saying, “Erika, if you stay in school, when you get older you’ll have the money to do this for yourself.”

Erika did stay in school and avoided a second teen pregnancy. Leslie proudly reports that Erika graduated from high school and has gone on to college.

Thanks to the good care and relentless mothering of the Emerson staff, very few of their young charges have delivered low birth-weight or premature babies, and the rate of second pregnancies among their girls is well below the state and national average. The Emerson Teen Parent Program has an annual budget of only \$325,000, but the resulting savings to society and the benefit to young lives are incalculable.