

“Yes I am a mother
and I am still a teenager”
*Teen Moms Use Digital Photography
to Share their Views*

Leanne Levy and Sandra Weber

Introduction

If we took the time to listen attentively and carefully to pregnant teenagers and teen mothers what would we hear? If we invited them to articulate their messages to the adults who interact with them, speak to those who judge them, and give advice to their peers, what would they say? This photo-essay addresses these related questions by presenting some of the findings of an arts-based activist research project called TEEN M.O.M. (Mirrors of Motherhood). One of the goals of the project was to examine how a media production program, implemented within the context of an existing community organization, can empower teenage girls in difficult circumstances to share their views. In a series of workshops, the participants were invited, offered guidance, and equipped to produce their own images—digital photographs, drawings, and collage work—so as to make visible their views on the personal and social issues that affect them directly. (In this photo-essay we concentrate on their photographs and offer comments taken from their writing and from video-taped interviews.) For two hours each week for thirteen weeks, the project gave these young mothers time away from their daily responsibilities and provided them with a safe space in which to focus single-mindedly on creating their images. The project culminated in an exhibition in which their work was shown to members of the community, policy makers, family and friends.

The research was conducted at Isabelle House, a Montreal community organization dedicated to meeting the needs of teenagers who are new mothers or who are pregnant. Of the eight young women who volunteered as participants, six had already had their babies and the other two gave birth just as the workshops ended. The group was very diverse



in its reflection of the racial, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural mix of a cosmopolitan Canadian city. The ages of the participants ranged from fourteen to twenty-three, but the majority of them were aged sixteen years or younger. With the help of volunteers and the staff of Isabelle House, baby-sitting services were made available on-site to enable the mothers to participate without having to worry about their children's well-being.

The research methodology elaborated for the process, and the curriculum of Project TEEN M.O.M. drew heavily on established visual methods developed for photovoice (Wang 1999), self-study (Weber and Mitchell 2004), curated photo albums (Mitchell et al. 2009), and activist collaborative documentary filmmaking (Levy 2008, 2007). Of particular relevance to Project TEEN M.O.M. was the individual's use of art, photography and video to re-frame and re-present some meaningful issues in her life. Equally important was the continual critical feedback from, and collective participation of, the members of the group. During the workshops, the young women took photographs of each other, shared materials and traded stories. They gave each other ideas, criticism and encouragement. In relation to this, it is noteworthy that the staff of Isabelle House reported in their responses to the questionnaire that formed part of the evaluation of the project a marked increase in collaboration and creative self-expression among their clients.

The body of this photo-essay consists of examples of the messages the participants shared—messages that deal with an array of issues and that speak to multiple audiences including themselves, other teenage girls and adults, their own mothers, and their children. The material and images we draw on below are mainly from the curated photo albums¹ and the written texts² the participants prepared for the exhibition. Since, as photographers and artists in the context of the website and public exhibits, these women use their real names under the images they produced (see the project website: <http://www.teenmom.ca>), they wanted us to use them here, too.

Managing depression

At least three of the participants had suffered from depression. Most of Melissa's photography centered on her battle with depression, which she appeared to be winning.

... A part of being me going through parenthood is like I am in somebody else's body, and I don't want to be, I just woke up like that one day, and it's scary because I am not the way that I used to be. I used to be so giving, patient, and understanding, and all of those things went away. The doctor said I was overwhelmed and I was going through post partum depression but it ended up being bigger, about me not liking myself. Art is a way for me to relax—taking pictures with the camera relaxes me. Some of the pictures that I took are about my depression to show others that they are not alone if they get depressed. (Melissa)

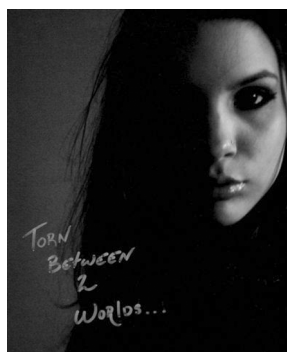


This says it all, "Anxious, confused, depressed, hopeless, hurt, trapped." I feel like I am smacking my head against a brick wall. (Melissa)

Living between two worlds: Negotiating and performing identities

When one of the participants commented that being a teen mom was to be caught between two worlds—between adolescence and adulthood—she struck a chord that resonated with the others. The challenge of being a teen and a single mom at the same time involves the performance of different identities and, at times, considerable negotiation between and among them.

I don't know what my likes are and what my dislikes are, I am still growing, I am a baby with a baby.... Being in this program gives us some time to reflect on ourselves while we have our children taken care of. I get to express how I feel about everything that has happened to me. (Annika)



Torn between two worlds, who am I behind motherhood? Having a child so young shook up who I am and I don't know myself anymore.... (Annika)

Challenging stereotypes about teen moms

As a way of coping with being judged by others and found wanting almost every day, the participants challenged some of the western cultural stereotypes attached to teenage motherhood and parenting. Their hope is that by providing a glimpse into their lives they will help people to see them and their circumstances differently and learn to treat other teenage mothers with compassion, understanding, encouragement and respect.

The participants felt that movies about teen parenting should be more representative of the lives of teenage mothers who *keep* their children.

The movie *Juno* doesn't really show how the girl took care of her baby and went through the stresses of life. She was just being irresponsible, got pregnant, and then decided "Ok, I am going to carry this baby and then give it away." That offends me, because I am doing everything I have to do—I take care of my son. I wake up every morning, get him ready and get myself ready... It's really hard. So when people see that movie *Juno* and talk about it, do they realize she didn't have to do anything like that? She just gave up her baby and went along with her life. I am not saying that's wrong, because I would rather somebody put their baby up for adoption than get an abortion, but at the same time, the movie doesn't show other young people and moms-to-be what it's really like, how hard it is. (Shantelle)



'My love, I miss you when you are not with me and I cry when I think about you being a victim of abortion.' (Shantelle)

Frustrated by the lack of respect society shows to teenage mothers, another mom described her daily routine of responsibilities.

Society sees young parents as irresponsible kids that have kids. I don't think people should see us that way, because take me, for example—I am a single mother raising my son alone, I go to school, I live on my own, I pay my rent, I do the groceries, buy clothes, do dishes every night, clean every night—those are all things that you need to be strong for, and I don't think people should put you down for doing those things.... People should show us more respect. (Isabelle)

What about the “babyfather”?

Her relationship (or the lack of it) with the babyfather, and his relationship with the child are issues at the forefront of the lives of these moms. Some of the factors that complicate these relationships with the babyfather include geographical distance, his not wanting (or being ready for) the responsibility of taking care of a child, and violence within the relationship.

The babyfather saw his son just two times and he [the baby] is going to be one soon. He doesn't call, he doesn't even ask for news and he even looks like his son. I don't understand how you can be like that. Even if you didn't want him at first, here's here now, he looks like you, he's your blood.... I am 16 years old, I have a one-year old kid, I am a student, I have a lot of bills to pay, a lot of responsibilities, and not that much help. (Taisha)

At first he was like, “Let's keep him” and then when things got really serious and it hit him in the face that he has responsibilities, he did everything to push me away, so I got fed up and decided to leave him. He started to get involved a year after my son was born. He sees him once a week.... I think it's good to not stop him from seeing his son because of the things that happened between him and I. If my son does not want to be involved with his dad, it will have to come from him. Maybe he's a great dad, it's worth giving him a try. But he wasn't a great boyfriend. (Isabelle)



‘Looking at this picture makes me wonder sometimes who is guiding who through life: the child or the parent? My son is holding on to the hand of a non-existent father.’ (Isabelle)

Sometimes he would say, “If you ever left me I would break your nose.” So the first time he beat me that's what he tried to accomplish. He also said, “If you ever left me I will cut off your nose and your bottom lip to make it look like you have a permanent smile,” and he drew me a picture. At the time, I didn't think anything of it... but that's what he actually tried to do. (Christina)

The realities of parenting

Another message the participants wanted to share with other teenage girls is the reality of parenting, and the responsibilities that go into this teen parenting.

... It's waking up during the night to get bottles, or because the baby had a nightmare, then trying to get the baby ready in the morning and get yourself ready.... As they start crawling you have to have eyes all around you, you can't be sitting there with a straightening iron and not watch your baby. You have to teach them good routines, for example, breakfast is very important.... Trying to get to school on time is my biggest issue.... And then after school when you have finished your day shift you are coming home to a night shift. You have to get supper on the table, clean up after the baby, make sure that the baby is bathed, fed, had enough love, and ultimately have a routine or schedule for bedtime so things aren't disorganized. And then try to find some time for yourself in there on top of having to study and do homework. It's two full time jobs, school and being a parent. That's the hardest part, school and taking care of a child. (Annika)

I never told myself it was going to be easy...that's why I used to cry a lot when I was pregnant, because I knew it was going to be hard, I knew I was young. Even though being a single parent is a good thing, it affects me because I do wish he had a good father, somebody to be able to share being a parent with. From my baby father I feel betrayed and some-



times I feel very sad and hurt, I feel pain. I felt that throughout my life I was forced to grow up fast, I am still a child with a lot of learning to do, I am a child raising a child. (Christina)

I have big dreams, I'm not expecting him to become rich and give me all of his money, I'm not expecting him to be perfect, I am expecting him to be happy with himself and in return be nice to me. (Christina)

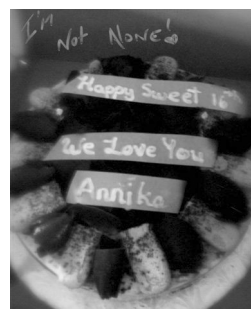


Being a young mother you don't exactly have the means to have a nanny so they are always with us 24/7. It gets tough. (Annika)

Their own mothers' reactions to the pregnancy: abort or not?

The participants had different views and some expressed ambivalence about the right to terminate a pregnancy: Some were pro-choice, others were adamantly anti-abortion for most of the time and others wavered between these two poles. Although some of the young mothers felt it was their right to choose to either have an abortion or to keep the baby, it wasn't until after giving birth that many realized the tremendous responsibilities this placed on their family members and also began to understand the sacrifices this asked of them.

I already had scheduled an abortion and I had one week to decide...every time the word abortion popped up in my head I started to cry.... I figured there was a life inside of me and I couldn't go through with the abortion.... I gave birth to my son one month after I turned fifteen.... My mom has been my main support. The entire way through, she didn't judge me, she respected my decision, she was even in the delivery room with me and as much as she thought it was too early for me to have a child she respected that this is what I was going ahead with.... To give me a head start in life she's allowed us to stay in her house until I finish college. She knew that if she rejected me I would go nowhere and her grandson would be in a place we don't want our children to be. (Annika)



Mom, You've stuck with me through thick and thin, I know this wasn't what you had planned for me but I promise I won't let you down. I thank you, I love you. (Annika)

Messages to their children

In the hope that their children will one day understand their circumstances as teen moms and their individual struggles to keep and raise them, the participants wrote letters, made art and recorded messages to share with their children in the future.

I will never give up on you and I am sorry that I bringing you up in my own problems. Just remember that you are my little angel and I will never let them take you away from me and if they do I will always come back for you, I promise ... I hope that you grow up to be a respect-

ful person, that you respect people and that people respect you. I hope that you are nice. I hope that you don't ever put your hands on any woman the wrong way. I hope that you have patience and I hope that you become something in life ... and that you never have to think about life in a bad way. I hope ... that you can say, "My mother she took care of me even though she was young. She made it and so can I." (Christina)



I promise to be the best mother I can be. (Christina)



I am raising a daughter in my own body and I love the feeling. It's awesome to know that there is a living human growing inside of me, as I grow up. (Angel)

I want her to be happy, to grow up to do what career she wants, to try and at least go to college, make friends, just have the life that she wants. The only thing I don't want her doing is getting pregnant at 16, "Wait until you're eighteen," that's what my mom told me but as you see it didn't happen that way. I just don't want her to get pregnant at a young age. I want her to stay out of trouble, I don't want her provoking men, I just want her to be a happy person and do what she wants with her life, to follow her dreams. (Angel)

Advice to other teenage girls

The participants also had advice for other teenage girls. The messages ranged from one that said having a baby can encourage you to go further with your life to one that advised teenagers not to do so.

To all moms to be, keep your head up, succeed in life, do what you got to do. Don't let a child stop you because they can encourage you to go further. (Shantelle)

Babies are not dolls that you can put aside when you are tired and then come back to them in a week. They are not cute little children that you can just push around in a stroller and say “Look he’s wearing brand name clothes.” Having a child is a life long commitment, and you are going into the situation without any knowledge of what the reality is going to be and without enough experience under your belt. My advice is: *Don’t* have a child at this age, it’s hard. There are so many things against us. (Annika)



The life I have chosen is...Forever. (Annika)

If you have a baby make sure you have everything you need to make that baby happy. If you didn’t have something in life that you wanted, give it to your child, that’s what I’m doing. Some people use the excuse, “Because of this person I turned out this way” or “because of this situation, I couldn’t make it through.” You have to be strong, you will make it but you can’t be a victim, if you fall you can’t stay down, you have to get back up and you have to keep going. I am still struggling but I am trying to give my son what I didn’t have, I didn’t have a mother so I am giving my son a mother. (Christina)

The importance of going public

The messages expressed by the participants are, of course, their own and are filtered through their circumstances and the culture in which they have been socialized. They do not necessarily represent other teens, although we think their work does reflect common teen issues. Presenting their albums to each other during one of the final workshops, and then displaying their work at an exhibition and on the project website are ways of going public that encouraged the participants to articulate and take ownership of their images and ideas. Not only were they able to see how others react to their work but they were also compelled to step back and look at themselves, at their own lives and decisions.

Conclusion

The photos and accompanying texts reveal courage, determination, intelligence, hope, and sometimes despair. The love and care these moth-

ers give to their children is clearly evident in their work. The messages embedded in their media production and described here are meant to encourage people to treat pregnant teenagers and young mothers with the respect they deserve. We agree with Katherine Schultz (2001) who argues that the understandings articulated by youth should be incorporated into discussions in high school classrooms, included in the preparation of new teachers, as well as in the professional development of experienced teachers and made part of the policy-making conversations of educators, researchers, and legislators.

For more information and to view artwork from Project TEEN M.O.M. visit: www.Teenmom.ca

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Notes

1. The notion of a curated photo album (adapted here from the work of Claudia Mitchell, Sandra Weber, and Kathleen Pithouse) refers to selecting and displaying a

small number of photographs around a selected theme or question. As ‘curator’ of the album, the photographer gives it a title, includes captions, and writes a short statement of intent. Going public with the album in some way is a crucial component. See the project website for examples of curated albums and the protocol we used (<http://Teenmom.ca>).

2. The captions to the figures have been reproduced verbatim.

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