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The Juno Effect - media, teens and pregnancy

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I had a friend in high school. Let's call her Rachael. She got pregnant with her on-and-off boyfriend. I knew about it. But I was one of the very few.

She dropped from sight, "went away", and came back as though nothing changed. But everything clearly had. If others suspected, they didn't ask.

I think about her when there is a new round of debate about media, teens and sex. Rachael is one bookend - pregnant when that didn't happen to nice girls.

The other is a progression from Juno to MTV's "Sixteen and Pregnant" to "Skins," which took young teen sexuality (not to mention drug use) so far that it has prompted serious discussion about whether MTV violated child pornography laws.

Pregnancy - like teen sex - is no longer a secret. It's ratings. The progression from hidden shame to prime-time programming raises questions.

Do sexualized movie and TV story lines shape teen behavior? Have we gone from ignoring the issue to glorifying it - bypassing the kind of reasonable discussion that can keep teens from jumping into the deep end of sexuality before they really know how to swim?

Rachael's time and predicament were captured poignantly in Ann Fessler's book: "The Girls Who Went Away." It was during that cultural time slip when female sexual independence happened before the easy access to birth control. Women felt liberated, but suffered dearly when ownership of their sex life got them, in the quaint euphemism of the times, "in trouble."

They were a family disgrace to be surgically removed from the community - including high school and college - as quickly as possible. Their life, and usually their child, were taken away from them.

It happened. It was taken care of. It was unspoken.

A big crack in the cultural omerta about teen pregnancy was the movie Juno, where it was the story arc of a comedy, with adorable characters, a loving family and a happy ending. The final scene had the baby off to a good home, the boyfriend back, and the teenage lovers strumming guitars in the sun.

Of course, in real life, sunny endings are harder to come by.

But can we blame the media? As with most things in the hot house of teen (or any other kind of) sexuality, there are no clear answers to why the U.S. teen pregnancy rate is double that of other industrialized nations.

Rand Corp. researchers say that they have documented the first long term link between sexual content on television and teen pregnancy. Teens exposed to the most such content are twice as likely to get pregnant before they're 20 as those exposed to less of it.

Earlier research says it happens in two ways: glamorizing sex and showing inconsistent use of contraceptives.

Other studies, however, see a different effect - particularly in views on teen pregnancy. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and Social Science Research Solutions both found that teens who watch shows like "Sixteen and Pregnant," got a better sense of the consequences. They said that when they see the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood, they think more about how to avoid it.

The whole issue is complicated by those who, unhappy with the rain, want to legislate sunshine. Parents can police the screen at home, but what about the ones in their children's pockets? Censors can demand that networks cut down on sexual content, but the cable and pay channels will keep offering more of it. Breaking news: sex sells.

Toss in a heaping helping of hormones and it's clear that teen sexual content- including teen pregnancy - will not, unlike my friend Rachael, simply go away.

"Just say no" is no more effective in the war on teen sex than it was on the war on drugs. The only answer is reasonable discussion of the consequences of pregnancy - regardless of how it's handled. In that, too little information is far more harmful than too much.