



COMMENTARY

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Kids should hear truths of teen pregnancy

Oops! . . . another Spears did it again. Seems it was only yesterday that Jamie Lynn Spears was playing mama with doll babies. Now, the teen idol — and lil' sis of pop star Britney, whose hit "Oops! . . . I Did It Again" has become her standing mea culpa — is poised at Sweet 16 to become a Hollywood baby mama.

I'm not one to pile on. Suffice it to say that premarital sex and a bouncing baby future tabloid star don't add up to the best life choice or career move for the star of Nickelodeon's popular TV series *Zoey 101*.

Now, her fertility has put in limbo the future of the sitcom, in which Spears plays one of the first girls to attend a formerly all-boys boarding school. Nickelodeon hasn't declared whether it will roll out the already-filmed fourth and final season in February as planned.

Jamie Lynn being in the family way has outraged many parents. TV critic David Hinckley of the *New York Daily News* suggested Nickelodeon ax *Zoey* and send a message by nixing "this sordid moment."

Should her private persona bear on a TV alter ego that largely appeals to 9- to 14-year-olds? Absolutely. Dropping the show might teach a lesson.

But let me suggest another.

The typical teen absorbs some 15,000 sexual references, allusions and jokes on TV each year, with only a small fraction regarding abstinence, sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy, a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics found. Nickelodeon should seize this moment to explore in its tween and teen fare the fallout from the nonstop promotion of promiscuity.

Hope Kramer sees teenage moms confront it every day. She pilots the BETA Center, which annually helps some 260 teens in greater Orlando become good mothers and not bad statistics through its Pregnant and Parenting Teen Program. She isn't stunned at Jamie Lynn's bombshell.

"Sad to say, this is not something new to us at BETA. We see that age group get pregnant now more than we used to."

This month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced an uptick in teen pregnancies — ending a 14-year stretch that saw the rate tumble.

The CDC reports a steady dip in pregnancies for girls ages 10 to 14 — Zoey's audience — but BETA has watched the number of clients younger than 16 explode from just a couple a decade ago to 65 middle-schoolers they currently are serving. Moms as young as 11 have padded into BETA, though typically teen motherhood plagues 14- to 16-year-olds.

Unlike Jamie Lynn, these girls often travel a less-gilded road. Many become dropouts, plunge into poverty, bear frail babies, never wed, and neglect and abuse their kids.

And we all pay for it. Florida taxpayers shelled out \$96 million for public health care, \$89 million for child welfare, \$105 million for incarceration, and lost millions more in support of teen moms' kids in 2004, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Perhaps complacency crept in as teen births fell 34 percent since 1991. Teeny-bopper turned teeny-mama Jamie Lynn reminds us the rampant problem hasn't gone the way of polio.

Linda Ellerbee may do a *Nick News* special on the issue. But for Nickelodeon, which enjoyed early success with its animated *Rugrats* series, confronting teen pregnancy in its sitcoms not only would be perfect symmetry, but likely also would reach more kids. Sure, the plot lines might limit the high jinks on its frothy tween sitcoms. But then, as Jamie Lynn is learning, there's little funny about a teenager's big oops.

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