

CHAPTER FIVE

MARRYING YOUR BABY'S FATHER

Keith and I had talked about marriage in the past, so this wasn't a totally new idea. It would just happen a lot sooner than we had planned. I had to quit school. Keith got a job in our hometown, as we wanted to be near our parents. We felt that bringing our baby into a family was a priority.

Our parents were being really supportive, but my dad still had some questions to ask me:

- Did I love Keith above any other, *forever*?
- Was I willing to live with him and his faults and not try to change them?
- Did I know the difference between love and lust?

I answered "yes" to all these questions. I poured out my heart to my parents about my feelings for Keith and our plans for the future. They both looked quite choked up. Keith was ecstatic when I told him what had happened! Things were much lighter from then on. We all joked and made plans.

Keith and I were nineteen when we married. Keith was able to get a job, and we had our parents' help and support. I know that's not the way it is for everyone. Some couples really love each other and want to take responsibility for this new life together, but it isn't as easy as just saying, "OK, we'll get married."

AGAINST THE ODDS

Dee and her boyfriend were young when they faced this decision:

My boyfriend and I were both sixteen when we found out I was pregnant. He was happy about it, but when we told my parents they blew up. His family wasn't as angry, but they all made it clear we were on our own.

We decided to have the baby and take care of everything together. We both had part-time jobs and lived at home, so we had that going for us. We bought baby clothes and furniture from the Salvation Army.

It hurt that my parents just ignored us; it was as if they were just waiting for us to fail. They thought the stress would drive us apart. Instead the shared decisions and chores brought us closer together.

Then we found out that I was having twins! I suffered from morning sickness and depression throughout the whole pregnancy, but somehow I got through it all to start the next year of school. I had my babies, a boy and a girl. My boyfriend's sister threw us a baby shower and helped take care of the babies so we could finish our senior year.

We were married as soon as we graduated. My husband got a job with a landscape company, and we rented a small one-bedroom apartment. We

qualified for food stamps and stayed on state aid until the twins were old enough for me to get a job.

My babies are eighteen months old and perfectly healthy. I'm so glad we didn't give in and "get rid of the problem," as a lot of people suggested.

Wow! Sixteen is young. And twins: That must have been a real challenge. But Dee and the babies' father have made it this far. My prayer is that they will be able to face the other challenges ahead and stick it out together. Not easy, especially at that age, but it can be done!

Mandy also was young:

When I first found out I was pregnant, I was only sixteen and so scared I thought abortion was my only option. My boyfriend and I agreed to get it over with and not tell our parents.

When we got to the clinic, I saw a pamphlet with several pictures of aborted babies. I knew then that if we went through with it, I would resent my boyfriend and hate myself for the rest of my life.

We had to tell our parents. After a few weeks they accepted the fact that we were going to have a baby, and everyone helped me out as much as they could. Money was a problem, so I went to a couple of local agencies that provided free baby clothes, diapers, a bassinet and a car seat. A federal program called WIC—Women, Infant and Children services—helped us with food and

prenatal care. I stayed in school, maintained my grades and even played softball.

When my baby boy was born, I took him to the school day-care center for free. With the extra help I graduated early. My son's father and I were married six months later. I was very young, and I know the odds were against us, but we managed to make a life together, and I can honestly say we are a very happy family.

Keith and I married before our baby was born. Dee and Mandy were quite a bit younger, so they waited until after they had their babies and had graduated from high school. Only you can decide what's right for you.

Theya and Tom cared about each other and the baby they were going to have, but they decided they were too young for marriage. Tom helped with the baby as much as he could, but five dollars an hour at a part-time job didn't go very far. They both lived at home, with Theya and her mom mostly raising the baby.

When the baby turned three, Theya and Tom were a little more independent. They had both graduated and had jobs. They started dating again, and a few months later they decided they really loved each other and wanted to get married. They've been married for several years now and have added two other children to the family.

ARE YOU READY?

I have to be honest: Marriage isn't always easy. It takes a lot of dedication and commitment to share life with someone, even someone you love, and adding a baby to the mix makes it even more complicated.

Then too, the younger you are, the more change you have ahead of you. At fifteen and sixteen you and your boyfriend may like the same music, hang out with the same crowd and have the same value system, but what happens when you are in your twenties and discover your values and emotions have changed?

He still wants to hang out and play poker with the guys, but you want him to stay home and pay attention to you. You think you are entitled to a night off, but he would rather watch TV than watch the baby. Or he turns out to be a neat freak and is constantly on your case about the dirty house, which you loudly remind him would not be a problem if he would help out a little more. Then he reminds you, even more forcefully, that he already has a job that drives him crazy.

And you just know in your heart, without bothering to ask him, that you drive him crazy too, and if he didn't have you and your child, all his problems would be solved. As for you, it would be easier to live without him, you feel all alone in this anyway, so why not do it alone for real and have a lot more peace in the process?

There are a million scenarios like this, and unless you can learn to communicate and adjust to the changes with a lot of unselfish give-and-take, divorce is a real possibility. My dad knew that. That's why he asked me those pointed questions when I told him I wanted to marry Keith.

You might want to think about those questions and ask your boyfriend to answer them too:

- Do you love him or her above any other *forever*?

- Are you willing to live with his or her faults and not try to change them?
- Do you know the difference between love and lust?

There is a big difference, you know. Sex is great, but it lasts only for the moment. Love is patient, kind and unselfish. Love looks to what's best for the other person and chooses to give up its own way to benefit the other person.

Love is for always. In a universal marriage ceremony each person promises to love the other "for better or for worse, until death do us part." From your teens to death could be a very long time.

Stella's story gives an example of a marriage that did not work, as well as one that did!

When I was sixteen I got pregnant. Some people told me to have an abortion, but I just couldn't do it. I dropped out of school, and my parents insisted we get married. I felt that I had no other choice, so I married the boy.

To make a very long story short, things were terrible, and he abused me. We were both too young to be married. After I left him, my baby and I saw him only twice.

When I was seventeen, and holding that little baby in my arms, I thought my life was over. I didn't realize my adventure was just beginning.

There were times when I thought that I could not go on. But my girl gave me the strength to take care of myself. My beautiful baby made me realize

that I was worth something to someone, and she needed me. I really feel that God gave her to me to save my life.

I finally met the man I was meant to be with. My past did not matter to him, and after we married he adopted my daughter.

Everything I went through has made me the woman I am today. I finally like myself and have a family who loves me. My daughter is ten years old and absolutely beautiful. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to believe it's true.

I know that having two parents is what's best for a baby. But getting married just because you're pregnant may not be the best choice. It might be better to wait awhile and see what happens between you and the baby's father. If you are really committed to each other and willing to sacrifice to make your marriage work, it could be the best decision you've ever made. It sure was for Keith and me.

KEY QUESTIONS :

What is your present relationship with your baby's father?

How would that have to change if you were to marry him?

What are his strengths and weaknesses?

How do his ideas about marriage and family compare to yours?

Are you ready to commit the rest of your lives to each other and your baby?