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Kids Having Kids

The posters were meant to be provocative, and they are.

Mounted on bus shelters and subway walls in New York City, they feature doe-eyed children lamenting the perils of teenage parenthood.

“Honestly Mom ... chances are he won’t stay with you,” reads the text alongside a photo of one tyke. “What happens to me?”

“Got a good job?” asks another. “I cost thousands of dollars each year.”

Still another frets: “I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen.”

They’re part of a campaign by Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Human Resources Administration. The aim is to reduce teen pregnancy by raising awareness of the cost and responsibility involved in raising a child, which sounds like a great idea to us. So we were surprised to learn that reproductive health advocates hate the campaign.

In a strongly worded press release, Planned Parenthood of New York City said the ads “perpetuate gender stereotypes and present stigmatizing, fear-based messages” instead of providing information about health care and birth control.

“Teenage parenthood is simply not the disastrous and life-compromising event these ads portray,” Haydee Morales, the group’s vice president of education and training, says in the release.

Did we hear this right? Teen parenthood is not the big deal Mayor Bloomberg thinks it is, according to Planned Parenthood? Urging teens to delay parenthood until they’re out of school, able to support a family and otherwise grown-up is not helpful; it is “shaming”?

We’ll grant that the messages aren’t subtle. We’ll also grant that Bloomberg has a bad habit of trying to dictate personal choices through governmental overreach. Just last week, a judge ruled that no, the mayor doesn’t have the authority to tell residents what size sodas they can buy.

But Bloomberg isn’t telling teens they can’t have babies. (Good luck with that, anyway.) He’s appealing to them to consider the consequences.

As the posters point out: A child born to a teen is twice as likely to drop out of high school as a child born to a mother over age 22. Ninety percent of teen parents do not end up married to each other. Raising a child costs upward of \$10,000 a year. And for you teen dads: Child support is a 21-year obligation.

The good news is that teen births are down 27 percent in New York City over the last decade, mirroring a nationwide trend. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention attributes the decline to less sex and more contraception.

And yes, Bloomberg’s administration has been part of that decline. Sex education is mandatory in public schools, where nurses freely dispense birth control. Still, 9 out of 10 teen pregnancies in the city are unplanned.

God bless the young women who raise those babies. We all know success stories. With support and determination, a teen mother can finish school and support a family. But it’s not easy.

According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy: Two-thirds of families headed by a young, unmarried mother are poor. And 1 in 4 teen mothers will go on public assistance by the time her child is 3 years old. A child born to an unmarried teen mother without a high school diploma is nine times as likely to live in poverty as a child born to an adult married high school grad.

Planned Parenthood’s Morales says the New York poster campaign misunderstands that cycle. “It’s not teen pregnancies that cause poverty, but poverty that causes teen pregnancy,” she told *The New York Times*.

Actually, it’s teen sex that causes teen pregnancy. We’re pretty sure the teens know that. There’s no point in sugar-coating the challenges that follow.