



Has 'Teen Mom' Lost Its Original Message?

When MTV began airing its ground-breaking docuseries "16 and Pregnant" in the spring of 2009, many viewers and critics were shocked that a network would seemingly glorify something as controversial as teen pregnancy. Producers defended their decision to put a spotlight on the issue and claimed the show would prevent more young girls from getting pregnant if they saw what it was really like to be a teenage mother.

And it did. "16 and Pregnant," which took an unprecedented look at the lives of six teenage girls who ended up pregnant, didn't shy away from showing viewers the struggles that an unplanned pregnancy can bring. After the first season aired, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy credited the show as being a contributing factor in helping the teen pregnancy rate drop in 2009 for the first time in years.

In the early days of "16 and Pregnant" and its popular spin-offs "Teen Mom" and "Teen Mom 2," MTV strived to keep the show's message strong: an unplanned teen pregnancy will bring heartache and make getting an education extremely difficult, if not impossible. Viewers watched as the "Teen Mom" stars struggled to do their homework with crying infants on their hips and tried to scrape together enough money to buy diapers for their children.

As the popularity of "Teen Mom" and "Teen Mom 2" grew, so did the media's interest in the stars. Soon the girls were appearing on tabloid magazine covers, discussing who they were dating or divorcing, and in the cases of Amber Portwood and Jenelle Evans, their latest legal troubles. As the media's obsession with the moms grew, so did the young women's paychecks. No longer were they struggling to find money to buy diapers, they were buying houses, breast implants and more, all thanks to their MTV salaries.

Unable to hide the fact that its teen mothers were no longer broke, the shows' producers simply incorporated the girls' spending into the plot lines. Soon, it felt like the two spin-offs had drifted away from the original purpose -- to show the trials and tribulations of teenage motherhood -- and became somewhat of a "90210"-esque soap opera. Instead of watching the girls struggle with being young mothers, viewers tuned in each week to see if Evans would ditch her son and get into trouble with a boyfriend. In fact, Evans' son,

Jace, usually ended up being little more than a prop, scooting around in the background while Evans and her mother screamed at each other about Evans' latest antics. In many episodes, it appeared as if Jace had to be fit into the action, because the story line had nothing to do with him or with Evans being a mother. And viewers wanted to know if Leah Messer and Corey Simms would ever get back together; or if Portwood would end up in jail. (By the time the "Teen Mom" series finale aired, Portwood was serving a five-year sentence.)

Though the original "Teen Mom" series has ceased production, the fourth season of "Teen Mom 2" debuted last month -- immediately after the third season ended. In the past, the network ran the seasons with considerable time in between; however, this time, the powers-that-be seemingly decided to burn through the already-filmed episodes as quickly as possible.

A look at the season so far might hint at the reason.

On one of the fourth season's very first episodes, viewers were shocked to see one of the stars, Chelsea Houska, discussing how she failed to use birth control during a hook-up with her ex-boyfriend, Adam Lind. On the same episode, yet another young mom, Leah Messer, found herself pregnant for the third time -- this time, with the baby of a guy she met only months before.

If Houska and Messer, subjects of the show that is meant to prevent unplanned pregnancy, didn't bother to go to MTV's associated www.itsyoursexlife.org to learn about birth control options and pregnancy prevention, how can MTV expect any of its young viewers to do so?

Still, the network believes the overall message is strong.

"Teen birth rates in the U.S. are at historic lows and many experts have cited the 'Teen Mom' franchise as contributing to that decline," an MTV spokesperson told The Clicker. "The show continues to capture the ups and downs these mothers face. And, as young parents, they still struggle with issues young people around the country deal with, including relationships, growing up, finding themselves, and sometimes making mistakes. These issues are amplified by the fact that they have a child."

Of course the girls featured on the show had issues that existed long before they ever appeared on television, but there's little doubt that the public scrutiny that comes from being on the show, as well as the paycheck the job brings, has had an impact.

So, going forward, how might the show deal with that?

Well, later this year, MTV will debut the third "16 and Pregnant" spin-off show, "Teen Mom 3." A source close to the show, who requested anonymity, told The Clicker that the stars of the latest spin-off were chosen carefully, in order to prevent them from becoming a liability to the network, as Evans and Portwood have become.

While "Teen Mom 2" may have strayed from its original purpose, it is still trying to help teens think twice before having unprotected sex.

"'Teen Mom' continues to shine a bright light on the struggles young parents and their children face," Amy Kramer of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy told The Clicker. "Even if critics disagree, teen viewers consistently say that watching the show helps them better understand the challenges associated with teen parenthood."